

Kaleena Anselm

“Louisa”

People like to say that it is easier to accept death when someone has lived a full life, but I don't think you can ever really be ready to say goodbye to someone that you love. It all basically started at the same time that I did. I never spent much time contemplating what happened in my house before I was born, I just know what I know and every now and again I learn a little something more.

I've lived in the same house for my entire life, a two family with yellow siding, brown shutters and a gray roof that matched the front and back porches. There was always upstairs where I lived with my parents and siblings and “downstairs by aunties” where my mother's two aunts lived with her cousin. I was never really all that close to either of my grandmothers, though they are both still alive, so my great aunts, Rosetta and Louisa were all I ever really had. Rosetta was a very thin old woman with a complexion similar to mine and long thin gray hair that was almost silver. Louisa was bigger with lighter skin and dark, long, thick hair with smooth wrinkled skin that as a child I loved to caress. They'd always sort of reminded me of my sister and me for more reasons than one. It wasn't just their closeness, but the way they had always taken care of us. Rosetta the older of the two, who had always just been Auntie Rosie, had retired and claimed my older sister as her own from the time she was born. It was only fair that I received the same warm welcome when I was born from my Auntie Lou Lou.

Ever since then there were many people who came in and out of my life, godmothers, cousins, a sister, a brother and even a niece. Some I remember all too well and others not, but downstairs seemed to be the one place that no matter how the world inside and outside of our

yellow house kept changing always stayed the same and while some might find that strange I always enjoyed it. Having a constant in my life made everything else seemed easier to get through because no matter who came and left, or came back, I could always go downstairs and everything would be right where it had been the last time, including my aunts, Rosie in her rocking chair and Louisa sitting at a chair at the dinning room table in front of her; the dark green carpet beneath their feet and the television in front of them, always playing the same shows. First came the soaps next Opera and then wheel of fortune and Jeopardy.

When I was young I had sat in front of them watching PBS with the other children they babysat, who also came and went. It was there I met my first best friend and made friends after, none of whom I speak to anymore because let's face it, when you're really young you play with whoever is there. Downstairs was also where I slept every morning when my parents left for work and my siblings went to school. In Auntie Lou Lou's bed with the soft off white comforter and tons of pillows around me; since I refused to at night and instead sat on the edge of my sisters's bed, which eventually was also mine, and watched tv while everybody slept. It was were I spent night after night with my sister playing with our barbies under the dining room table, using the knitted orange, green and yellow cushions on the chairs as places to rest them, when my parents had gone out. Where I watched The Big Comfy Coach and did floor exercises at the same time everyday, in the doorway, and wondered why everyone waited until then to walk into the kitchen when they knew I would be there. All these things are distant, foggy memories now and I remember them fondly, but though the appearance stayed the same downstairs, as I got older and started school, I spent less time down there each day and eventually things really started to change.

I'm not sure how old I was when it happened; I'll say eight because it's what I always say when I can't remember, but it was one of the scariest things I had been through at that point; despite almost drowning and having a dog bite my face which I also remember at eight... I don't know perhaps I was too young to register any of those things, so I simply blocked them out, but what I do know is it started in her room. I have heard the story over and over since, but I don't remember much from when it actually happened. My grandfather, who had also been there all the time, drunk and sleeping on a chair in our creepy basement, had noticed something weird going on with his sister. My Auntie Rosie had had a strict schedule all my life, she had done the same things at the same time everyday, but one day it stopped and for many days after. My grandfather brought it to my mom's attention and so she went downstairs.

First she asked Cousin Addie what was going on, seeing as he lived there, even though he spent most of his time hiding in his room. He told my mother that Auntie Rosie was just praying, but seeing as it had been days my mother went to tape her shoulder and she shrieked...it turned out that she had stopped taking her medication, for about two years I believe, the result was a series of strokes. She had always been the most stubborn person I had ever met, but that was only up until then I guess. She never really recovered and thus was never really herself again, so eventually she ended up in a nursing home, which had she been in her right mind she would have hated us for. We never really had a choice though.

For a few years after that I visited her there with my family. Sometimes she knew who we were and other times she didn't know what was going on at all. I think that's why I reacted the way I did when she died. To me it was as if she had been gone long before her physical death and I remember being more upset when she had gotten sick. Now I was fourteen and more angered

by it than anything else, but I don't really know how to explain that. It was a really stressful time for my mom because they had also always been there for her, even when her own parents weren't and dealing with her grief and the stress of planning a funeral was a lot to handle.

I remember my sister telling me how she had been awake the night it happened, gone to the hospital with my mom and uncle, and when she got home spent the rest of the night crying. I never really understood my feelings, I still don't, but I guess that's when I realized it; that the same way everyone else has to go through that life altering step, the death that really changes them, that my Auntie Lou Lou would be the one who changed things for me. I wasn't ready yet so I pushed the thought far away from me and went on with my life.

The talk about her death started long before it happened, right after my Auntie Rosie's. Everyone thought since they had been so close all their lives it was only a matter of time before they were together in death, they even shared a grave marker, which creepily enough had already had both their names carved into it. However it wasn't until last year that it all started to become a reality. For most of my life My Auntie Lou Lou had had some health issues, I remember as a young child hiding between the wooden tv stand and the white wardrobe in her room, popping out to scare her as she walked in, that is until I learned she had a pace maker and that I could have killed her. However through proper care she had always managed to stay in good health. although in the last few years those issues had started to become more frequent and she had even spent some time in a nursing home for rehab, recovering from broken hips and strained wrists since she refused to use her walker, but had always made it back home.

When I left for college she was doing alright for her age, my mom even told me that she kept asking about me, but eventually something happened. I don't really remember what and

when exactly she went back to the nursing home, but this time she stayed longer than usual.

When I went home for winter break I visited her with my family and I was terrified. None of the things I had been hearing were good, she hadn't been eating, stopped speaking, she wouldn't even open her eyes. We stood in the room as a family helping my mom fill out some paperwork that had to do with life support and feeding tubes, but as we stood talking something happened. She opened her eyes. I can't remember many things that have made me that happy in life because in that moment I was so relieved. She looked at us, talked with me the whole time we were there; It was as if all the fear of death had drifted away from me and I didn't need to be ready. I was filled with hope and optimism, but that was wrong of me.

A few months later in April I got a call from my sister that left me feeling worse than I may have ever felt. She told me that the nursing home had called and told them that Auntie Lou Lou was going to die any day, and I shut down. I spent that night with my housemates crying, telling them everything I could think of about myself and listening as they did the same, and by the end of the night I ended up feeling a little better. That didn't last very long though because the next morning I woke up to a call from my mother. It was short, but she told me that my aunt was gone. My voice was weak as I answered her, but I said ok and I don't really remember what she said after that. After she hung up I rolled over in my bed and I didn't move for the rest of the day. It felt as though someone had ripped my heart out and there wasn't anything I could do. I had lost someone I had always had, someone I didn't know how to be without, and that killed me inside. The more I think about it the more I know I was never going to be ready for it, no matter how old she was or how ready she was herself, I just wasn't. I didn't know what to do with myself after that, some days were ok, others I couldn't get through without crying. I missed a lot

of class leaving me with a lot of work at the end of the semester, which didn't really help much. I still don't think much has changed now. I've had time and it's helped a little, but I still find myself choked up about it whenever she comes to mind because I'm still not ready for her to be gone. However it's a fact and I have to live with it. I just hope that I can live my life in a way that would have made her proud of me because I was hers and she was mine. Some people are uncomfortable having to say they belong to someone, but I've always taken comfort there because it's one of the only places I have ever belonged and she one of the only people who had always been there and always loved me.