Dustin Prestridge
Boy, Betty, Bingo
Creative Nonfiction

On bingo night, everything began at the kitchen table.

The table was older than the house. It was heavy, dark, and scarred in ways that suggested previous owners had used it for activities that required tools.

At the center sat an amber glass ashtray the size of a hubcap. It lived there full time, like a relative who never quite moved out.

Grandma Betty placed her purse on the table first.

Calling it a purse was generous. It was a floral soft sided suitcase that looked like it had seen airport security but never an airplane. She unzipped it slowly, the way a surgeon might open someone who has annoyed them personally, and began removing items one by one.

Coupons in accordion folders thick enough to stop a bullet. Pill bottles that rattled like maracas. A curling iron. Aqua Net. Three bingo dobbers in different colors because luck, apparently, needed options. Two cartons of cigarettes. Rolls of quarters stacked like she was planning to do laundry for an army.

Then came the artifacts.

A broken key. A plastic egg containing several of my childhood teeth. A casino chip from somewhere she had never been. A spool of thread. A mug with no handle.

These were not explained.

I did not ask.

I had already learned there were questions in life you did not want answers to.

She circled the table in her muumuu, cigarette hanging from her lip, inspecting the layout. She did not touch anything yet. She simply looked, making sure the objects had arranged themselves properly.

Satisfied, she returned everything to the bag in an order known only to her. When the zipper closed, she gave the purse a small pat, like you would a dog that had successfully followed instructions.

Now came the transformation.

Makeup was applied with confidence and no apparent fear of escalation. Eyeliner. Eye shadow. More eye shadow. Lipstick, as loud as a fire truck. Her hair, already tall, was teased into a shape that suggested it would be the latest monument to Texas. Aqua Net was deployed in quantities that affected local weather.

“Done. Jacked to Jesus. Say a prayer.”

Then she looked at me.

She kissed my cheek and checked the branding, smeared it with her thumb. Stamp: approved.

“You ready?”

I had been ready since noon.

The purse went out first. It always went out first. It had rank.

Getting down the porch steps required strategy. She descended sideways, protecting the purse like God himself might snatch it. At the car she opened the passenger door and carefully installed it in the seat, adjusting its position so it faced forward. I got in beside it, my feet not quite reaching the floor, aware that if something happened, the purse would be rescued before I was.

The car was enormous. It did not drive so much as move with purpose. The seats smelled like warm vinyl, old candy, and a lifetime of smoking decisions.

She turned the key and struck the lighter in the same motion, as if neither one would start without the other. The engine caught rough. The cigarette caught clean. She took a drag, settled back, and held the wheel.

Now we were going somewhere.

The bingo hall had once been a Kmart, which felt right. Both places specialized in hope, disappointment, and fluorescent lighting. The sign outside glowed heroically. Inside, the air was thick enough to chew.

The room was enormous. Rows of tables filled with people who had come to work. This was not recreation. This was concentration. Dobbers moved with the speed of professional typists. Ashtrays filled without comment. Numbers were called in a steady voice that allowed no argument.

Grandma moved through the crowd like a cruise ship entering harbor. People shifted. Chairs slid. Space happened.

We reached our table. She opened the purse again.

Everything came out faster this time. Cards were arranged with geometric precision. Charms spread across the table like tiny supervisors. She adjusted one card a fraction of an inch, studied it, then, apparently deciding the table was wrong, leaned into it and shifted the whole thing a few inches across the floor.

An aluminum ashtray appeared and settled, quite naturally, on her bosom. This was a thing she could do. The cigarette never made it there. It clung to the corner of her mouth like it had lost confidence, bouncing every time she spoke while the ash stretched longer and longer, defying physics, common sense, and my ability to relax. She picked up two dobbers, one in each hand, and studied her cards.

She slid one card toward me.

“Play that one.”

I tried. I really did. But the numbers came fast and my brain was still processing the ashtray situation.

“N forty three,” the caller said.

Dot. Dot.

The room hummed. Paper. Ink. Coughing. Someone whispering letters like a prayer.

She did not search for numbers. She knew where they were.

I marked my card slowly. One square at a time. Trying not to ruin anything.

Eventually there were no blank spaces left.

I stared at it, unsure whether I had won or accidentally committed fraud.

“I think I’m done,” I said.

She leaned over. Looked once. Then again.

“Well, la da dee,” she said.

Her chair shot backward.

She stood.

Then, before I could process what was happening, she climbed onto the chair.

Then onto the table.

And took off.

Not gracefully. Not even deliberately. She barreled down the length of that table like momentum had made the decision for her, arms out for balance, a dabber still clutched in one hand, muumuu swinging like a flag in high wind.

The whole surface shuddered under her steps. Coffee sloshed. Cards scattered. Someone pulled their dabbers to their chest like valuables during an earthquake.

I slid down my chair by degrees, the way you do when something is technically your fault, until only my eyes cleared the table. This felt like the right amount of involvement.

From my hideout, I could see the backs of her calves, the way her shoes landed on the table. She was someone’s grandmother who had decided this was happening.

“BINGO!” she shouted, already in motion. “BINGO! MY GRAND BABY GOT A BINGO!”

She did not so much dance as celebrate with her entire body at once, hips going one direction, shoulders another, a kind of victory wobble that suggested joy had briefly overridden coordination. The cigarette stayed pinned to the corner of her mouth, flapping with each step while the ash stretched farther and farther, hanging on in a way that made watching it feel like a responsibility.

The entire room stopped.

The caller paused mid number. People froze, dobbers suspended in air. Somewhere, a machine continued spinning because machines do not care about human drama.

They checked the card.

Every number was right.

“We got us a winner,” the caller said.

$500

She climbed down, sat, and calmly began putting everything back into the purse. No celebration. No speech. Just business.

She leaned toward me and said, “Beginner’s luck,” then peeled off a hundred and handed it to me like this was the deal agreed upon.

That was it.

It felt as though I had found something I probably wasn’t supposed to touch, but did anyway.

The night ended the way it began. We drove home under streetlights that passed across the windshield one at a time.

At the house, the purse went back on the kitchen table.

By morning everything would be laid out again.

Not for luck.

For next time.

The purse was big enough. It still had room for one more charm.