



# LUCKY

by Jen Knox

**I**N less than a year, my sister will be gone. But today, New Year's Day, the four of us kids are still together. We're staying with Grandma Dee in Toledo until Mom, who spent New Year's Eve with a new boyfriend, arrives to evaluate our resolutions and drive us home. Allie rinses her mug as my brothers and I huddle around the kitchen window, gulping down hot chocolate with multi-colored marshmallows.

It snowed all night, fat flakes just sticky enough to cling to the small patches of grass in Grandma's backyard. I figure we could build something small, a badger or an armadillo, but when Myron begs to go outside to play, Grandma Dee insists that we complete our chores first. "You have to earn

your keep around here,” she says with a smile, ruffling my short-cropped hair. I immediately smooth it down with my palm.

Mouths chalky from marshmallow, we march to the business side of Grandma Dee’s duplex. Each room on this side of the house is a funhouse mirror image of the rooms that Grandma Dee lives in. The hardwood floors are uneven and easy to trip over. The ceilings are tinged yellow, and the vents are dusty. The air bites.

There are long tables lining all available walls in the living and dining rooms. Atop them are knitted hats and scarves, old *National Geographic* and *Woman’s Day* magazines, board games, and a plethora of failed attempts at all manner of pottery from Grandma Dee’s community arts classes. The items sit in rows by type and price, below pistachio-colored wallpaper that curls at the corners. Masking tape labels ask for anywhere from twenty-five cents to fifty dollars for the respective oddities.

The kitchen on this side of the house is teeming with baskets. Easter baskets, magazine baskets, decorative baskets, coiled, plaited, and twined. Some are small enough to fit only a hardboiled egg, and one appears large enough to hold Joey, my youngest brother, if he were to curl up like a cat. The price tag dangling from the handle asks for twenty dollars.

Next to the kitchen is a door that hides a set of stairs to a basement that doubles as a bomb shelter. Last time I was down there, one year ago, I unearthed a ten-year-old can of pork and beans and dared Myron to eat the square globule of fat that I had found, with much delight, upon opening the pull-top can. Sure enough, he devoured it. When he puked a few minutes later, Joey laughed, pointing to the empty can when Grandma asked what happened. We haven't been allowed downstairs since.

Grandma raises a finger, half-smiles. "Molly May, I'd like you to help me dust. If you do a good job, you can take your pick of anything under ten dollars." Her eyes are lighter than mine, a honey shade like Mom's, but they aren't as intense. Grandma tries to be mean but isn't deep down even though she can seem that way. Mom is the opposite. They are not related by blood.

"I want something in the kitchen," I say, eyeing the giant basket. Her eyes follow my gaze and crease slightly.

Grandma Dee is Dad's mom. When Dad was alive, she used to call herself Switzerland, and she never got involved when my parents would fight, which was often. Meanwhile, Mom says she's passive-aggressive. She likes to buy us loud and large toys, things that annoy Mom. Last year, she bought my brothers a drum set that made Mom dub Joey and Myron's

band “The Bane of My Existence.” Ultimately, she broke down and sold the set on Craigslist for \$40, giving them \$20 to spend at Toys “R” Us.

“Joey and Myron, you boys go over there and make sure those baskets are in order from smallest to largest. Stack them if you can. Leave that biggest one out for the girl here,” Grandma says.

“What if they fall?” Joey asks as he follows his brother toward the kitchen. Myron is eight, and Joey is six and a half. They do everything together. When Myron pauses, rubbing his chin like an adult as he surveys the room, Joey examines the baskets in front of him and rubs his own chin. They’re kind of cute sometimes. Kind of.

Grandma hands me a duster the same color as our cat, Cream, who is home alone and likely wondering if we’ll ever come back.

“What does Allie have to do?” I ask, knowing the answer.

“Allie’s going to help me in the kitchen. We’re going to make a pecan pie.”

“I can help with that,” I say. This side of the house is cold, as Grandma Dee doesn’t want to pay the heating bill for both sides, and I don’t want to babysit my brothers as they do busywork.

“No need,” Allie says maturely. “You boys be sure you don’t miss any baskets,” she instructs. Allie looks exactly like Mom, which makes it all the more disturbing when they argue. They argue all the time.

“Next time, Molly May,” Grandma Dee says. She means next year, and I hardly believe her. Well, until I remember what Allie told me last night.

Everyone’s hard on me because I look like my father who was, according to Mom, a good Catholic turned deviant. Mom also believes Dad’s now-deceased dog, a German Shepherd, was the spawn of Satan. He didn’t seem that way to me, but I am slightly afraid of dogs, just in case she’s right.

The last time I saw my father, he appeared calm. *Mom* appeared to be possessed by demons. We smelled something burning in the kitchen. Allie and I rushed downstairs to find a singed slab of ham stuck to a pan in the sink. We were startled by my mother’s scream, and we crouched down behind the stairs to watch as she threw pillows, then a chair, at Dad. She appeared to be hitting him when Wolf, Dad’s pup, intervened, running behind her and gripping her calf between his teeth. She turned around, screeching like a bird of prey, which woke up my brothers, too, and they crouched down at the top of the stairs. Allie put her finger to her lips and eyed them in the adult way she did.

Mom's fists began pounding on the dog, digging into its ribs and neck. Deciding it was too much, Allie and I had to run upstairs before anything else happened. We pulled at our brothers' pajama necks to get them to move. All we knew later was that Mom was home, and Dad was gone.

The next morning, I was the first to come downstairs and find Mom still up and on the couch. Cream was settled on Mom's lap, purring, and a towel the color of blended cherries was wrapped around Mom's leg. She cried, holding out her arms, and I hugged her, trying to become a sponge that would absorb all her pain.

Allie was thirteen then; she's fifteen now. I'm a month away from the age she was that day, and sometimes I think about how lucky she is to have had Dad for so many more years. He was a drummer, an artist, an all-around cool guy, she often tells me. I always say "I know," or that I remember, but I don't know or remember. Memories of him are like memories of a sitcom I once watched. Sometimes I think I see him from the car window or in a dream, but his image fades away with a blink.

When we attended his funeral, it felt like we were at anyone's funeral. I cried the expected tears, waiting for the real ones, but I didn't fully believe he was gone. I hadn't gotten the chance to know him, so how could he be gone? Grandma Dee had cried the most; Allie, who was still staring at the

ground as we began to walk away, didn't cry at all. Not one tear. Even Mom shed a tear.

I think about Dad most when watching one of those old TV reruns with too many kids and too few adults, just like our family. There's one I especially like with a smartass grandma and a silly uncle who always causes trouble. There's another one with a token kid who never talks much, like me, and is related to ne'er-do-wells, like my brothers, and the kiss-ass who also happens to be the pretty oldest sister, just like Allie.

Once I get started, I don't mind dusting. I get every crevice; I like to make things shine. My brothers are putting baskets on their heads and pretending Toledo is a warzone, which it might be. I hear siren after siren outside my grandmother's home, still unable to determine which are fire, police, or ambulance. I hear a dog barking, but it seems far enough off.

We're not allowed to walk Grandma's neighborhood alone, not since a kid was abducted near the Dairy Queen. There's an old park that we used to play in that has turned into a hangout for men who wear big coats in the summer. I once asked if those men kept guns in their coats, like in the movies, and Grandma shrugged. "Don't mess with them, they won't mess with you."



The curtains by the front window of this side of the house are gray and heavy. I part them and stick my head through the gap. I look left, then right, realizing the McDonald's is only a block away. It's cold in Toledo, but not as cold as Cleveland, which is home right now and only a few hours away. Whenever it's cold, I want a hot chocolate from McDonald's. I think about ducking out, but as soon as the thought arrives, a wave of paranoia hits. I look down the street for Mom's white truck, knowing she'll be here soon.

"Your father loved you a great deal," Grandma Dee always tells us, but she never tells us more about him. I used to ask; now I don't. She knows neutrality is the only way to keep us coming over, one holiday a year. This year, New Year's Eve. If Grandma were to tell us much more about Dad, my brothers would repeat the stories to Mom, and Mom would find fewer reasons to let us stay here.

The curtain is itching my cheek, so I move it aside and step back. I survey my work; the dishware and silver is shining. I notice that a single saucer is \$100. That much money could get me to Michigan in a Lyft. I know this because Allie figured it out yesterday. The saucer, which has two fat children holding hands in a meadow on one side and a cow on the other, is hideous. I look at the bottom of it and see a dark blue script that

says someone's name. Just as I place it back down, the boys' laughter turns to crying. Myron is fake crying because Joey is really crying. He fell and bumped his elbow.

“My funny bone!”

“It's fine,” I say. “When you hurt yourself, you feel pain at first, but it also makes you strong. Like a superhero. Every time you feel pain, you become stronger.” I say it because someone said it to me. Maybe Dad. Maybe I heard it on a sitcom.

Joey wipes his eyes and takes in a big snotty breath. “Can I go help Allie and Grandma?”

“Ugh,” Myron says. He looks at the pile of baskets, which are more mixed up than ever, and I tell him I'll take care of it.

“Walk your brother next door,” I say. I work quickly to line up the baskets by size. I'm eager to get back to the warm side of the house myself. I can already smell something sweet. As I work, I realize the dog that's barking outside sounds closer. I go out the back door to get to the other side of Grandma Dee's duplex, and see that my brothers made it safe. There's a screen door that sticks, an outside wood door, then another screen and an inside wood door. As I open the screen, I see that the dog is

in the backyard, right next to the concrete slab that Grandma Dee calls her back porch.

The dog is a mix of things, brown with reddish areas around the ears and chest. It has a white patch on its tail that rises like a flame. The tail is wagging, curved like a question mark, and I'm not sure if this means he wants to play or eat me. I think about Cream, her delicate movements. Mom loves cats, always has. Dogs, with their jerky aggressiveness, are to be feared. They cause rifts, sever human relationships, make fathers disappear.

The mutt cannot see me, I realize. It's wagging its tail because it sees a bone that Grandma Dee must have thrown out back. The bone is near the door, and the dog is heading this way, until a squirrel hobbles by, capturing its attention. Grandma Dee likes to feed all walks of city-bound nature. The squirrels in her backyard look like furry tanks because she tosses them an entire batch of oatmeal cookies every Sunday.

My father's dog died with him. They had been walking early in the morning, before my father's shift as a stocker at a megastore, and a drunk driver hadn't seen them. Dad never wore reflective vests like the joggers in our neighborhood. He was wearing a black hoodie when they found him. "He must've looked like a criminal," Mom said. She identified the body and

refused to bury Dad's best friend with him, even though she knew that's what he would've wanted.

The dog I'm watching is running toward a tree now, and makes a few sloppy steps up before scrambling back down. It hops awkwardly, wanting to catch a bushy tailed, overweight squirrel that I'm surprised wasn't caught. It's a scruffy dog, and I wonder if it has a home. I don't see a collar. I open the inner screen door and place my hand on the gold knob to open the wood one. I am looking out through a small, glass window in the door, and I see the dog look my way.

I envision Mom's leg meat pierced by the teeth of Dad's best friend. The bared teeth only disappeared with my father's command. I envision the same dog cowering as she pummeled it, looking to my father for permission to retaliate.

Last night, Allie told me she would be leaving. She said that the only reason she'd stay would be if I needed her. We'd been sleeping in the odd angles that Grandma Dee's fold-out couch demanded, and with our faces close enough that I could feel the warmth of her breath, and feel my brother's foot near my back.

“I have your permission?” she asked again, and again, and all I could do was nod.

I wonder now if it's too late to take it back.

Slowly, I open the door and wonder why the screen is on the inside of one side of the duplex and the outside of the other. Right now, it strikes me as inconvenient. Grandma is just inside that other door, but sometimes my brothers lock it from habit, so I might need to knock. If the dog attacks me, it will have ample time to bite, and the backs of my legs will be facing its teeth. My father is not here to tell it to back off. It will see my mother in me and know I am the enemy.

A tough Midwestern breeze hits, and I open the door. The dog seems unimpressed, and instead of charging, it sits, watching me with a tilted head. I realize I haven't been so close to a dog in years. Whenever Mom sees one, we give it a wide berth. I squint my eyes, edging toward the door, and reach for the handle to the outside screen. This door could be easily knocked down. A strong wind would be all it'd take. The dog whimpers a bit, as though asking me something, and I turn. I realize that I am nearer its bone than it is. I could bend down and pick it up, toss it the dog's way.

A siren sounds, and both the dog and I look toward the alley. Mom will be arriving any minute. If she pulled up now, I have no doubt she'd grab the handgun she keeps in her glove compartment and shoot this dog. She got the gun the day after Dad left, and announced it as a new presence, "the new man in the house," when he called to see how she was. I gulp and take a step, crouching down and slowly reaching for the bone. The dog wags its tail, stands.

My heart swells then. It feels as though it is expanding to fill my ribcage. The bone is dry and splintered, a small chicken bone likely leftover from Christmas. I think about tossing it, but instead hold it out. For some reason, I want to see the dog up close. Slowly, it edges toward me. Its tail stops wagging when someone inside, likely my stupid brother, bangs something.

"Hey, Lucky! Hey, Molly May, that's Lucky. He's harmless," I hear Grandma yelling from the kitchen window. I look up and see her hidden smile. Grandma is always smiling, even though her lips never tilt the slightest bit up. "Better hurry up though. Your Ma will be here soon."

I toss the bone a foot, and Lucky snatches it up, exposing teeth that could tear flesh. But instead of running away, it looks at me for a long time, examining me as though I were a puzzle. Lucky seems to be saying hello

and nice to meet you. I concentrate on those gold-rimmed hazel eyes, reaching out my hand.

Just as I am about to pet it, something rustles behind the house, and Lucky bounds off to chase another squirrel, a lean squirrel. The dog disappears behind a corner. Mom never let me close to Dad's German Shepherd. She made it stay out back, where Dad would sit for hours with his computer and a few cigarettes. He bought the dog sweaters in the winter, and we were only allowed near Wolf when Mom wasn't around. It feels like a lifetime ago.

The doorknob opens easily, and I am smiling. I don't tell my siblings about the dog like I want to because I don't want the subject to come up later with Mom. I look out the window every few minutes though, just to see if Lucky will come back. Grandma Dee asks me to help her with the dishes. And, when alone later, I whisper that she should feed Lucky more bones. I offer to let her keep the giant basket and get him more bones when she sells it.

When Mom arrives, she's in a sleek brown coat with fur around the hood. It's new. I'm tired out. I didn't sleep last night. Then again, to be fair, I never sleep on Grandma's fold-out, and the lack of sleep never hits me till mid-day the next day. My brothers are unfocused, so I help them with

their resolutions. Allie calls Mom a Resolution Nazi. Mom likes to say that we're a goal-driven family. "We're go-getters, and go-getters make clear goals," she says, looking over our shoulders like the worst kind of teacher.

I think about my actual resolutions, my pen tapping to the tune of a commercial for cereal I like. Mom takes small bites of her pie and thanks Grandma. "This is perfect," she says. It's a moment between them, something soft. Grandma's baking can soften the most stubborn of souls, which is why she sells so much on rummage sale days. People come for the free pie and buy her junk to justify seconds.

As soon as Mom's plate is clean, it's back to business. The house smells like sugar and ginger and cloves; we watch as Grandma's neighbor's house is dusted with more snow. The roads will be slick. Mom reviews our resolutions, looking for detail and nuance, searching for honest intent. I never know what to write, but I do know what to avoid, and so I write what I think she'll want to see. I write that I will soon be a faster runner, like Allie, and able to run a full mile. I write that I will get a perfect report card. I write that I will be kind to my brothers and not put Joey in the giant basket and leave him on someone's door because he's been crying too much. I scratch that one out, but Mom can still read it.



I do everything I am supposed to do. I don't say a word, and no one notices. What they don't realize is that something inside of me is alive now. I have a second heartbeat and another set of lungs. Unlike yesterday, or even a few hours ago, I want to find out more about the world. Maybe try to figure out some of what my father knew.

We are heading out to the car, my brothers cramming into the back of Mom's white Ford with tired faces and over-sugared brains, when I see Lucky again. I want to run after him. Mom is telling me about her drive and how she almost ran out of gas and never realized how few stations there were, and how this should be a lesson to us.

"Jason got you all gifts, and we went to a lovely service. I think you'll be very happy. I want to thank you all for slumming it with Grandma Dee," she says.

When she says slumming it, I clear my throat. I am ready to tell her how wrong she is about everything: about dogs, my father, and especially about Grandma Dee, but Allie beats me to it. "We weren't slumming it. We love Grandma Dee," she says firmly. I nod my assent with tight lips. Mom's eyes glaze over us from the rearview, but she doesn't argue.

I grab my sister's hand as we back out of the gravel drive, thinking about what she told me last night. We exchange a glance that calms us both, and I look forward to telling her about Lucky. Maybe she already knows. She knows everything. There is a certain magic that Allie and I share, and it allows not only thoughts but entire philosophies to be communicated between us without a single word. A part of me wants to tell her to stay, but the bigger part knows better.

Allie's hand is cold and strong, and she gives mine a squeeze, rests her head in the crook of my neck so that I can smell her apple shampoo. We keep our eyes on the road, knowing that this silence will only last so long. We look for novelty and find it everywhere. We see it sparkle in the snow, in the footprints near fences and in the narrow emergency lanes of the road. We wonder what it'll be like to take a right turn just because, to make the decision to be kind even when our emotions sting. One day, we'll barely remember what it feels like to ride in the backseat. Right now, I wish this ride would last forever.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jen Knox is a writing coach and community engagement coordinator. Her fiction can be found in *The Best Small Fictions 2017*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Istanbul Review*, *Literary Orphans*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Room Magazine*, *The Santa Fe Writers Project Quarterly*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. She is the author of *After the Gazebo* (Rain Mountain Press) and a forthcoming collection, *The Glass City*, which won the Prize Americana for Prose. [www.jenknox.com](http://www.jenknox.com)

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LF #112

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