

DB Cox

Lucky

On Sunday mornings we'd march to the church. The preacher would tell us how Jesus loved the little children and we'd sing this tune:

*"Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world
Red and yellow, black and white
They are precious in his sight..."*

Sometimes, after church, our grandfather would drive down in his Hudson and take us for a ride. It was the only time we got to go off the grounds of the Kelly Ridge Home for Girls. Darcy and I would take turns sitting next to Grandfather. We'd listen to songs on the radio and I'd admire that old fedora he always wore. I wondered why there were no songs about my grandfather.

My name is Lucy, but my twin sister, Darcy, has always called me Lucky. When she was little she had trouble saying my name. It always came out sounding like Lucky. My parents thought it was cute, so the nickname stuck.

Kelly Ridge Home for Girls is a place for young girls who have been abandoned, abused, or neglected. It used to be called Kelly Ridge Orphanage, but I guess the word "Home" is a kinder-sounding word.

Here, you grow up crowded—crowded into the same bedroom—crowded into the same bathroom—crowded into the same dining room. You even end up wearing other kids' clothes, or you see one of your favorite old shirts, years after you last wore it, on some other girl's back.

We came here in 1945 when we were six years old. For the last seven years, we have lived in this strange world of cast-off children—kids who no longer believe in humans and don't have a reason to believe in Gods. We work. We play. We stay busy to forget. We no longer question or expect. We have learned that silence is a response.

When we were younger, Darcy and I would make wild plans to run away—slip into the night and head for home. We would pretend we were serious, but we knew it was just a game. There was nothing to run toward except an empty box of bad times.

Our mother: Voices in her head—drip, drip, dripping like a broken faucet—louder and louder—until she ran for the door like the house was on fire.

Our father: Sleeping alone behind closed doors—lost in drunken dreams—an imagined world where everything was still in its place.

I can barely remember their faces—no photo smiles frozen in place—the sound of voices fading to gray.

Mother never looked back, but I've never blamed her. Back then her fear was the same as mine. I hope she was able to turn herself into something brand new and beautiful again.

Three months after our mother left, Darcy and I, both five years old, found our father in his bedroom swinging from an electric cord—face as black as the socks on his feet.

I covered Darcy's eyes with my hands, led her out of the room, and closed the door. She didn't say a word. She just stood there with her back against the living room wall. When I asked her if she was okay, she whispered, "Please don't talk."

I called my grandfather. I held Darcy until he came with the police and an ambulance.

Neither of us cried at the funeral. We just sat with grandfather staring straight ahead while a stranger said nice things about our father.

Last night Darcy woke up screaming. She was yelling, "Please daddy. Please daddy. I promise. I'll do anything you say."

When Darcy wakes up afraid she has to know where she is. She needs to see right away. So, when I heard her cry out, I hurried to turn on the lights.

When I got to her bed, she had her hands in front of her face. I hugged her close and watched her hands shake. When she calmed down, she rested her cheek against my arm, looked up at me and said, "Lucky, tell me a story. Tell me about the house where we will live."

"Close your eyes and I'll tell you the story."

Someday, when we leave this place, we're going to find a house—a perfect house where we will live forever. It will be a big, white house in an open space—a place with wide windows that are easy to see through—windows with clear panes where no secrets can hide. The front door will always be unlocked and it will open onto a clean street that leads to a park where we can take our Golden Retriever to play in the evening...

I watch for most of the night while she sleeps, warm and quiet, in my arms.

"Starlings are mean, ugly birds," said Darcy, "and they can't sing like a redbird."

We are standing off to the side of the road watching a bird that's been hit by a car. It's on its back, squawking, in the middle of the street. One wing is broken and the other is flapping like crazy in a hopeless struggle to fly. The injured starling can only spin round and round in a small circle.

The bird, finally exhausted from his effort, stops fighting and becomes still. His head is pushed to one side against the pavement. One dark, terrified eye is staring up at me. He seems to be waiting for someone to do something.

I strip off my T-shirt and walk into the street. I throw the shirt over the bird, cup my hands around the fluttering lump, and scoop it off the pavement.

I carry the bird across the yard and back to our cottage. I walk upstairs to the bathroom and turn on the water in the bathtub. Holding the shirt with my left hand, I push the rubber stopper into drain. When the tub is full, I turn off the water, kneel down, and push the shirt all the way under.

The starling is still trying to fly, beating its one good wing against the cloth. When the bird stops moving, I lift the shirt out of the water, walk downstairs, and out the backdoor.

There's a metal trashcan sitting next to the storage shed. I walk over, open the shirt, and let the dead bird fall into the can. The body gives a small quiver—one last denial of the facts. I drop my shirt over the ugly bird.

Like always, Darcy just follows along—asking nothing—saying nothing. She never questions anything I do.

Sometimes, the older girls ask, “What’s wrong with her? Why is she always following you around?”

But they really don't want to know.

The first time I saw my father hit my mother we were all sitting at the kitchen table having dinner. They were arguing. I don't remember what it was about. I guess it must have been pretty important. As they shouted back and forth, they started to seem like strangers to me.

When it happened, it was so fast, I'm not sure if I actually saw it. There was the sudden crack of my father's hand against my mother's face, and I found myself standing up—hands flat on the tabletop. Darcy didn't move. She just sat there with her head down—eyes locked on her plate.

Then I saw my father's face change as he looked first at me, then at Darcy, then back at me. He looked confused and scared. His eyes seemed to be asking for something. What? At the time, I didn't know. But now, I believe my father was asking to be rescued. He wanted someone to save him. He wanted me to save him.

But how can you reach inside the walls of a person's soul?

Our mother sat at the table, blood coming from the corner of her mouth, wiping at her eyes with a wrinkled napkin. She had already started to disappear.

Our grandfather died this past July, of Alzheimer's Disease. He spent his last years in the County Home. One time the preacher took us to visit him, but he didn't know who we were. He just sat there with the others in the "day room" staring at the screen of a silent television.

They all looked like they were expecting something to change.

On the way back to the campus Darcy and I sat in the backseat of the preacher's car holding hands and crying silently for our grandfather. We never went to see him again. And when he passed away, we didn't go to the funeral.

By then, he had been gone for a long time.

We loved our grandfather and he loved us. He was our last connection to the outside world.

In a few years, my sister and I will have to leave this place—this tiny world where all of the decisions are made for us. Orphanages only protect children until they turn eighteen. They call it "aging out." If you haven't been adopted by then, ready or not, you have to hit the streets—no place to call home—nothing and nobody to fall back on.

Lately I've started to worry about what this means for Darcy and me. I know that whatever we do we'll have to do it together. As long as I have Darcy to love and protect, I am alive.

Downstairs in our cottage there's an old piano that nobody plays. Sometimes late at night when I'm feeling afraid about the future I slip down to the living room. I sit in front of the long row of keys and bend my right ear toward the strings. I hit the lowest note and push the pedal to the floor. Then I close my eyes and listen as the note rings out its one-tone song and I think about that tune we used to sing in Sunday School: "Jesus loves the little children..."

I wonder if there really is a Jesus. And if he loves us now, will he still love us when we "age out?" When we're no longer children, will we still be precious in his sight?

DB Cox is a blues musician/writer from South Carolina. His poems and short stories have been published extensively in the small press in the US and abroad. He has published six books of poetry. Studio Books recently published his collection of short stories called *Unaccustomed Mercy*, which is available in EBook form at the Amazon Kindle Store. He has been nominated numerous times for the Pushcart Prize.