



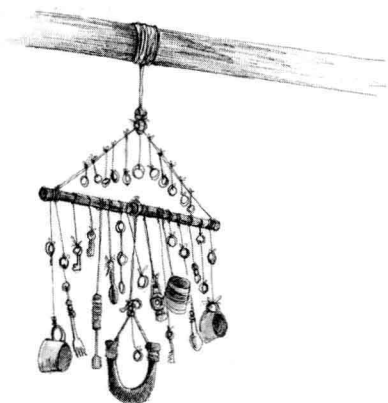


# power of lucky

by **susan patron**

with illustrations by **matt phelan**

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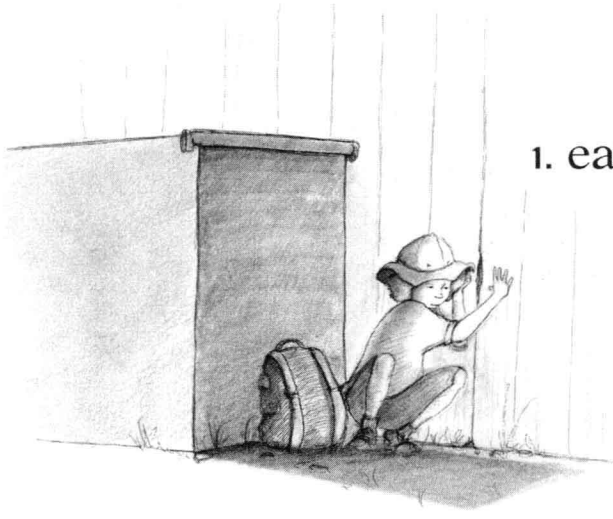
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**for René**

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## 1. eavesdropping

Lucky Trimble crouched in a wedge of shade behind the Dumpster. Her ear near a hole in the paint-chipped wall of Hard Pan's Found Object Wind Chime Museum and Visitor Center, she listened as Short Sammy told the story of how he hit rock bottom. How he quit drinking and found his Higher Power. Short Sammy's story, of all the rock-bottom stories Lucky had heard at twelve-step anonymous meetings—alcoholics, gamblers, smokers, and overeaters—was still her favorite.

1

Sammy told of the day when he had drunk half a gallon of rum listening to Johnny Cash all morning in his parked '62 Cadillac, then fallen out of the car when he saw a rattlesnake on the passenger seat biting his dog, Roy, on the scrotum.

Lucky balanced herself with a hand above the little hole that Short Sammy's voice was coming out of. With her other hand, she lifted the way-too-curly hair off her neck. She noticed two small black birds nearby, panting like dogs from the heat, their beaks open, their feathers puffed up. She put her ear to the

hole because Sammy's voice always got low and soft when he came to the tragical end of the story.

But Short Sammy didn't head right to the good part. To stretch it out and get more suspense going for the big ending, he veered off and told about the old days when he was broke and couldn't afford to buy rum, so he made homemade liquor from cereal box raisins and any kind of fruit he could scrounge up. This was the usual roundabout way he talked, and Lucky had noticed that it made people stay interested, even if the story got quite a bit longer than if someone else had been telling it.

2 She stood up, her neck and the backs of her knees sweating, and mashed wads of hair up under the edges of her floppy hat. She carefully angled an old lawn chair with frayed webbing into her wedge of shade, and made sure the chair wouldn't break by easing herself onto it. Flies came, the little biting ones; she fanned them away with her plastic dustpan. Heat blasted off the Dumpster.

There was a little silence, except for the wobbly ticking noise of the ceiling fan inside and people shifting in their folding metal chairs. She was pretty sure they had already heard the story of Short Sammy hitting rock bottom before, as she had, and that they loved the pure glory and splendiferousness of it as much as she did—even though it was hard to imagine Short Sammy being drunk. Short Sammy's voice sounded like it could barely stand to say what came next.

“That Roy, man,” said Sammy, who called everyone “man,”

even people like Lucky who were not men. “He was one brave dog. He killed that snake even though it bit him in the place where it hurts the worst for a male. And there I am, trying to get away, falling out of the Cad. I break a tooth, I cut my cheek, I give myself a black eye, I even sprain my ankle, but I’m so drunk, man, I don’t even know I’m messed up—not till much later. Then I pass out.

“Next day I wake up on the ground, sand in my mouth, and it feels like death. I mean, it’s like I *died*, man, but at the same time, like I’m too sick and ashamed to be dead. There’s a mangled rattlesnake under the car, there’s blood, lots of blood—I don’t even know if it’s my blood or Roy’s or the snake’s. Roy’s gone. I call him—nothing. I figure maybe after saving my stupid life he went off to die alone somewhere. It’s probably like a hundred degrees in the shade, man, about as hot as it is now, but I’m so cold I can’t stop shivering.”

Lucky’s hands smelled metallic, like the thin arms of the lawn chair; they felt sticky. She pushed her hat back from her forehead; air cooled the sweat there.

“I make this deal with myself,” Sammy continued. “The deal is if Roy is okay I’ll quit drinking, join AA, get clean.”

Lucky edged her bare leg away from a rough, poking strand of chair webbing. Each time Short Sammy came to this part in his story, Lucky thought of what kind of deal *she* would make with *herself* if she hit rock bottom. Like, let’s say she didn’t know if her dog, HMS Beagle, was alive or dead; she would have to do something really hard and drastic as her end of the bargain. Or,



let's say that her Guardian just gave up and quit because Lucky did something terrible. The difference between a Guardian and an actual mom is that a mom can't resign. A mom has the job for life. But a Guardian like Brigitte could probably just say, "Well, that's about it for *this* job. I'm going back to France now. *Au revoir*." There poor Lucky would be, standing alone in the kitchen trailer, at rock bottom. Then she would have to search for her own Higher Power and do a fearless and searching moral inventory of herself, just like Short Sammy and all the other anonymous people had had to do.

Short Sammy went on, "Then my wife drives up. Man, I didn't even know she'd gone. I'm still kind of laying there on the ground. She gets out of her car, but she doesn't say one word about how messed up I am.

4 "All she says is, 'I took Roy to the vet's in Sierra City.' She's talking real calm, almost like she's not mad or anything. She says, 'Fifty miles from here, and I drove it in, like, maybe half an hour. That was the worst drive of my life, Sammy, thanks to you. But Roy's okay because I got him there in time for the antivenom to work.'

"Then she goes into the house and comes out with her suitcases that she must have packed the night before, and Roy's food dish and water bowl. That killed me, her taking his food dish and water bowl. All she says to me is, 'Don't call me.' *That*, man, was rock bottom. So I threw down the shovel. And here I am."

There was clapping, and Lucky knew that pretty soon they would pass a hat around for people to put money in. It

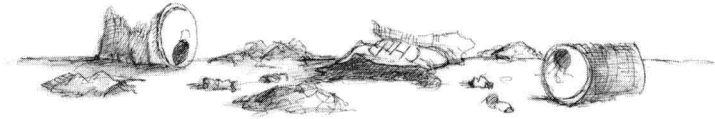
was a little disappointing that today nobody had explained how exactly they had found their Higher Power, which was what Lucky was mainly interested in finding out about.

She didn't get why finding it was so *hard*. The anonymous people often talked about getting control of their lives through their Higher Power. Being ten and a half, Lucky felt like she had no control over her life—partly because she wasn't grown up yet—but that if she found her Higher Power it would guide her in the right direction.

Chairs scraped as everyone stood up. Now they would all say a little prayer together, which Lucky liked because there was no church or synagogue or anything in Hard Pan, California, so the Found Object Wind Chime Museum and Visitor Center was the closest they got to one. That meant the end of the meeting and time for her to disappear quick. She'd finished her job of clearing trash from the patio in front—smashed beer cans and candy wrappers from yesterday's Gamblers Anonymous meeting. It wasn't likely that anyone would be coming back to the Dumpster behind the museum, but someone *might*. She had to hurry, but she had to hurry *slowly*, in order not to make a sound.

She stashed her dustpan and rake beside the wall and left the aluminum lawn chair hidden behind the Dumpster. Tomorrow, Saturday, would be her day off. Then on Sunday afternoon, before the Smokers Anonymous meeting, she would again clean up the museum's little patio. The patio was where

the anonymous people sat around talking after their meetings. All the anonymous people left lots of litter, and each group could not bear to see the butts or the cans or the candy wrappers of



6 the group that met before it. The reason was that they were in recovery. The recovering alcoholics hated to see or smell beer cans left by the recovering smokers and gamblers; the recovering smokers could not stand cigarette butts left by the recovering drinkers, and the recovering overeaters hated to see candy wrappers left by the recovering drinkers, smokers, and gamblers. Which meant that Lucky had a job—a great job—and except for Dot's kitchen-and-back-porch Baubles 'n' Beauty Salon and the Captain's mail-sorting job at the post office, it was the only *paying* job in town.

Wrestling with the straps of her survival kit backpack, which she had with her at all times, then jogging down the dry streambed toward home, Lucky thought of a question that Short Sammy's story had lodged into one of her brain crevices. She figured she had so *many* crevices and wrinkles, almost all of them filled with questions and anxious thoughts, that if you were to take her brain and flatten it out, it would cover a huge space, like maybe a king-size bed.

The question of Short Sammy's dog's scrotum settled into

one certain brain crevice as she picked her way among the weedy bushes of the dry wash. Even though Lucky could ask Short Sammy almost anything and he wouldn't mind, she could never ask about the story of Roy, since she had *overheard* it. If she asked about Roy, then he would know that she'd been eavesdropping at the anonymous twelve-step meetings.

Scrotum sounded to Lucky like something green that comes up when you have the flu and cough too much. It sounded medical and secret, but also important, and Lucky was glad she was a girl and would never have such an aspect as a scrotum to her own body. Deep inside she thought she *would* be interested in *seeing* an actual scrotum. But at the same time—and this is where Lucky's brain was very complicated—she definitely did *not* want to see one.

A little breeze had come up by the time she got home to the half circle of trailers. First was her little shiny aluminum canned-ham trailer, where she and HMS Beagle slept. Next, the long kitchen–dining room–bathroom trailer, and last, Brigitte's Westcraft bedroom trailer. Instead of having wheels and being hooked up to cars to tow them around, the three trailers were mounted on concrete blocks; plus they were anchored to the ground with metal cables to keep from being blown over in windstorms. The best part was that you could walk from Lucky's canned ham to Brigitte's Westcraft without ever going outside, because passageways had been cut where the trailers' ends touched, and sheets of metal had been shaped and soldered together to join all three trailers, so not even a mouse would be able to find a crack or an opening anywhere.

HMS Beagle bounded out from under the kitchen trailer to smell her and find out where she had been. “HMS” stands for “His Majesty’s Ship,” and the actual original HMS *Beagle* was a beautiful ship that took the scientist Charles Darwin all around the world on exciting discoveries. Lucky’s dog—who was neither a ship nor a beagle—got her name because of always being with Lucky on *her* scientific adventures. Also, HMS Beagle was beautiful, with very short brown fur, little dog-eyebrows that moved when she was thinking, and big ear flaps that you could see the veins inside of if you held them up to the light.

8 A breeze rattled the found object wind chimes at the Found Object Wind Chime Museum and Visitor Center, and the high desert air carried that sound in front of it, all the way across town, down to the three trailers at the very end of Hard Pan. Just the sound of those chimes made Lucky feel cooler. But she still had doubts and anxious questions in all the crevices of her brain, especially about how to find her Higher Power.

If she could only find it, Lucky was pretty sure she’d be able to figure out the difference between the things she could change and the things she couldn’t, like in the little prayer of the anonymous people. Because sometimes Lucky wanted to change everything, all the bad things that had happened, and sometimes she wanted everything to stay the same forever.

## 2. brigitte

Brigitte's old leather sandals were on the step outside the kitchen trailer, which was why HMS Beagle had been waiting in her dug-out hollow underneath. Lucky and HMS Beagle both knew the shoes on the step meant that Brigitte had just mopped the floor and she didn't want sand tracked in by the dog. Inside, Brigitte stood barefoot at the far end, feeding dirty towels into the washer and talking French on the phone.

9

Lucky dropped her survival kit backpack on the floor by the built-in table; the trailer smelled of Mrs. Murphy's floor wax and hard-boiled eggs and the sprig of wild sage in a little vase over the sink. Brigitte always cleaned floors barefoot. Lucky noticed that Brigitte's feet seemed to be filled with many more bones than other people's feet; she had sharp, jutting-out ankle bones and toes that were almost like fingers.

If Brigitte were ever to have a child, that child's feet would not look at all like Lucky's sturdy, wide feet with their short, stubby toes. That child would also have very good posture, Lucky thought, squaring her hunched-in shoulders. Brigitte turned, pointed to the fridge with her chin, and said, "There is

cold tea, *mon chou*; I am talking to my mother.” She smiled and shook her head in a tiny, quick way and raised one shoulder, which meant that she promised she’d be off the phone soon.

Yep, Lucky thought as she tossed her hat onto the backpack, already forgetting to work on her posture, probably the thing Brigitte would like most would be to go home to France and have a French baby with bony French feet like her own. She would call her French baby something lovely and tender instead of *mon chou*, which means “my cabbage,” or *ma puce*, which means “my flea.”

Lucky poured sun tea from a jar into a plastic glass and stood gulping it under the ceiling fan. The great thing about sun

tea is that you don’t have to boil water and heat up the whole kitchen to make it—all you do is leave a jar of water with two tea bags in a sunny place. She raked her hair with one hand—hair that felt crusty from sweat and weirdly overcurly from a perm that would take *at least* two weeks to start looking normal. Dot *never* got it to look like the

magazine picture. Instead of making it go out at the sides in a wedge, in a very original, cute way like the hair of the girl in the picture, Dot permed and cut it so that it looked like some kind of mushroom-colored garden hedge.

Brigitte laughed into the phone. She poured Tide into



the washer and closed the lid. Lucky knew for a fact that Brigitte's mother was working on a secret, sinister plan to lure Brigitte back to France. Even though Lucky had never met Brigitte's mother, she did not like her one bit; she imagined her as looking like Brigitte but more stringy and tough, with bangs and hair in a barrette at her neck, but the hair gray instead of blond. The mother would never walk on the backs of her shoes or make noises when she sucked ice cubes. She would be strict and formal, like a school principal or the wife of the President of the United States. Lucky stayed directly under the ceiling fan, sucking an ice cube, making slurping noises, and wishing she understood French.

Probably the old mother was right now working on her plot to make Brigitte so sad and lonely that she would go back to France and stop being Lucky's Guardian. She wanted all her grown-up children—Brigitte and her sisters—to live near her in Paris, which Lucky considered very selfish. Lucky was sure the old lady's plan was working, because she sent little packages that made Brigitte cry.

The sad thing in the package last week had been a plastic tube like a toothpaste tube, except with a yellow cap, and instead of Colgate or Crest wording on it there was a beautiful little painting of a picnic basket and a loaf of French bread on a green, grassy place. It turned out to be a tube of mustard. When she opened the package, Brigitte had been sitting at the Formica table. She held the tube in her hand and smiled,



but looked sad at the same time. She unscrewed the cap and squeezed a little dab onto her finger and smelled it and tasted it. Then she cried, which Lucky *hated*, and told Lucky it was because it reminded her so much of home.

Lucky sighed, put down the glass, and slid into the dinette seat. Once she finally got off the phone, Brigitte said, “First, *maman* send you a *bisou*, a big kiss, okay? Second, please put your backpack over there beside you on the seat so I do not trip on it.” Brigitte unloaded several little Tupperware containers from the fridge. The kitchen trailer was so narrow that she didn’t have to take any steps to do this—the counter, sink, stove, and fridge were all reachable from the same spot. “It is too hot to cook, so we have a cold salad for dinner—tuna, eggs, green beans, tomatoes, olives.”

12

Lucky hoisted her backpack off the floor and plopped it beside her on the banquette. “Do we have those olives I like?” she asked. She hated the strong salty wrinkled black ones.

Brigitte surveyed the many glass jars in the door of the fridge. “*Non*,” she said. “And it is too bad, because the little olives from Nice would be better, you are right. Sometimes we just have to make it do.”

“Make do,” Lucky corrected.

Brigitte sighed and nodded. “Make do,” she agreed.