

III

WELCH

BACK IN BATTLE MOUNTAIN, we had stopped naming the Walls family cars, because they were all such heaps that Dad said they didn't deserve names. Mom said that when she was growing up on the ranch, they never named the cattle, because they knew they would have to kill them. If we didn't name the car, we didn't feel as sad when we had to abandon it.

So the Piggy Bank Special was just the Oldsmobile, and we never said the name with any fondness or even pity. That Oldsmobile was a clunker from the moment we bought it. The first time it conked out, we were still an hour shy of the New Mexico border. Dad stuck his head under the hood, tinkered with the engine, and got it going, but it broke down again a couple of hours later. Dad got it running—"More like limping," he said—but it never went any faster than fifteen or twenty miles an hour. Also, the hood kept popping up, so we had to tie it down with a rope.

We steered clear of tollbooths by taking two-lane back roads, where we usually had a long line of drivers behind us, honking in exasperation. When one of the Oldsmobile's windows stopped rolling up in Oklahoma, we taped garbage bags over it. We slept in the car every night, and after arriving late in Muskogee and parking on an empty downtown street, we woke up to find a bunch of people surrounding the car, little kids pressing their noses against the windows and grown-ups shaking their heads and grinning.

Mom waved at the crowd. "You know you're down and out when Okies laugh at you," she said. With our garbage-bag-taped window, our roped-down hood, and the art supplies tied to the roof, we'd out-Okied the Okies. The thought gave her a fit of the giggles.

I pulled a blanket over my head and refused to come out until we were beyond the Muskogee city limits. "Life is a drama full of tragedy and comedy," Mom told me. "You should learn to enjoy the comic episodes a little more."

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It took us a month to cross the country. We might as well have been traveling in a Conestoga wagon. Mom also kept insisting that we make scenic detours to broaden our horizons. We drove down to see the Alamo—"Davy Crockett and James Bowie got what was coming to them," Mom said, "for stealing this land from the Mexicans"—and over to Beaumont, where the oil rigs bobbed like giant birds. In Louisiana, Mom had us climb up on the roof of the car and pull down tufts of Spanish moss hanging from the tree branches.

After crossing the Mississippi, we swung north toward Kentucky, then east. Instead of the flat desert edged by craggy mountains, the land rolled and dipped like a sheet when you shook it clean. Finally, we entered hill country, climbing higher and deeper into the Appalachian Mountains, stopping from time to time to let the Oldsmobile catch its breath on the steep, twisting roads. It was November. The leaves had turned brown and were falling from the trees, and a cold mist shrouded the hillsides. There were streams and creeks everywhere, instead of the irrigation ditches you saw out west, and the air felt different. It was very still, heavier and thicker, and somehow darker. For some reason, it made us all grow quiet.

At dusk, we approached a bend where hand-painted signs advertising auto repairs and coal deliveries had been nailed to trees along the roadside. We rounded the bend and found ourselves in a deep valley. Wooden houses and small brick buildings lined the river and rose in uneven stacks on both hillsides.

"Welcome to Welch!" Mom declared.

We drove along dark, narrow streets, then stopped in front of a big, worn house. It was on the downhill side of the street, and we had to descend a set of stairs to get to it. As we clattered onto the porch, a woman opened the door. She was enormous, with pasty skin and about three chins. Bobby pins held back her lank gray hair, and a cigarette dangled from her mouth.

"Welcome home, son," she said and gave Dad a long hug. She turned to Mom. "Nice of you to let me see my grandchildren before I die," she said without a smile.

Without taking the cigarette out of her mouth, she gave us each a quick, stiff hug. Her cheek was tacky with sweat.

"Pleased to meet you, Grandma," I said.

"Don't call me Grandma," she snapped. "Name's Erma."

"She don't like it none 'cause it makes her sound old," said a man who appeared beside her. He looked fragile, with short white hair that stood straight up. His voice was so mumbly I could hardly understand him. I didn't know if it was his accent or if maybe he wasn't wearing his dentures. "Name's Ted, but you can call me Grandpa," he went on. "Don't bother me none being a grandpa."

Behind Grandpa was a ruddy-faced man with a wild swirl of red hair pushing out from under his baseball cap, which had a Maytag logo. He wore a red-and-black-plaid coat but had no shirt on underneath it. He kept announcing over and over again that he was our uncle Stanley, and he wouldn't stop hugging and kissing me, as though I was someone he truly loved and hadn't seen in ages. You could smell the whiskey on his breath, and when he talked, you could see the pink ridges of his toothless gums.

I stared at Erma and Stanley and Grandpa, searching for some feature that reminded me of Dad, but I saw none. Maybe this was one of Dad's pranks, I thought. Dad must have arranged for the weirdest people in town to pretend they were his family. In a few minutes he'd start laughing and tell us where his real parents lived, and we'd go there and a smiling woman with perfumed hair would welcome us and feed us steaming bowls of Cream of Wheat. I looked at Dad. He wasn't smiling, and he kept pulling at the skin of his neck as if he were itchy.

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We followed Erma and Stanley and Grandpa inside. It was cold in the house, and the air smelled of mold and cigarettes and unwashed laundry. We huddled around a potbellied cast-iron coal stove in the middle of the living room and held out our hands to warm them. Erma pulled a bottle of whiskey from the pocket of her housedress, and Dad looked happy for the first time since we'd left Phoenix.

Erma ushered us into the kitchen, where she was fixing dinner. A bulb dangled from the ceiling, casting harsh light on the yellowed walls, which were coated with a thin film of grease. Erma stuck a curved steel handle into an iron disk on top of an old coal cooking stove, lifted it, and with her other hand grabbed a poker from the wall and jabbed at the hot orange coals inside. She stirred a potful of green beans stewing in fatback and

poured in a big handful of salt. Then she set a tray of Pillsbury biscuits on the kitchen table and ladled out a plate of the beans for each of us kids.

The beans were so overcooked that they fell apart when I stuck my fork in them and so salty that I could barely force myself to swallow. I pinched my nose closed, which was the way Mom had taught us to get down things that had gone a little bit rotten. Erma saw me and slapped my hand away. “Beggars can’t be choosers,” she said.

There were three bedrooms upstairs, Erma said, but no one had been to the second floor in nigh on ten years, because the floorboards were rotted through. Uncle Stanley volunteered to give us his room in the basement and sleep on a cot in the foyer while we were there. “We’ll only be staying a few days,” Dad said, “until we find a place of our own.”

After dinner, Mom and us kids went down into the basement. It was a big dank room, with cinder-block walls and a green linoleum floor. There was another coal stove, a bed, a pullout couch where Mom and Dad could sleep, and a chest of drawers painted fire-engine red. It held hundreds of dog-eared comic books—Little Lulu, Richie Rich, Beetle Bailey, Archie and Jughead—that Uncle Stanley had collected over the years. Under the chest of drawers were jugs of genuine moonshine.

We kids climbed into Stanley’s bed. To make it less crowded, Lori and I lay down with our heads at one end, and Brian and Maureen lay down with theirs at the other. Brian’s feet were in my face, so I grabbed him by the ankles and started chewing on his toes. He laughed and kicked and started chewing on my toes in retaliation, and that made me laugh. We heard a loud *thunk thunk thunk* from above.

“What’s that?” Lori asked.

“Maybe the roaches here are bigger than in Phoenix,” Brian said. We all laughed and heard the *thunk thunk thunk* again. Mom went upstairs to investigate, then came down and explained that Erma was hitting the floor with a broom handle to signal that we were making too much noise. “She asked that you kids don’t laugh while you’re in her house,” Mom said. “It gets on her nerves.”

“I don’t think Erma likes us very much,” I said.

“She’s just an old woman who’s had a tough life,” Mom said.

“They’re all sort of weird,” Lori said.

“We’ll adapt,” Mom said.

Or move on, I thought.

THE NEXT DAY WAS Sunday. When we got up, Uncle Stanley was leaning against the refrigerator and staring intently at the radio. It made strange noises, not static but a combination of shrieking and wailing. “That there’s tongues,” he said. “Only the Lord can understand it.”

The preacher started talking in actual English, more or less. He spoke with a hillbilly accent so thick it was almost as hard to understand as the tongues. He asked all them good folk out there who’d been helped by this here channeling of the Lord’s spirit to send contributions. Dad came into the kitchen and listened. “It’s the sort of soul-curdling voodoo,” he said, “that turned me into an atheist.”

Later that day, we got into the Oldsmobile, and Mom and Dad took us for a tour of the town. Welch was surrounded on all sides by such steep mountains that you felt like you were looking up from the bottom of a bowl. Dad said the hills around Welch were too steep for cultivating much of anything. Couldn’t raise a decent herd of sheep or cattle, couldn’t even till crops except maybe to feed your family. So this part of the world was left pretty much alone until around the turn of the century, when robber barons from the North laid a track into the area and brought in cheap labor to dig out the huge fields of coal.

We stopped under a railroad bridge and got out of the car to admire the river that ran through the town. It moved sluggishly, with barely a ripple. The river’s name, Dad said, was the Tug. “Maybe in the summer we can go fishing and swimming,” I said. Dad shook his head. The county had no sewer system, he explained, so when people flushed their johns, the discharge went straight into the Tug. Sometimes the river flooded and the water rose as high as the treetops. Dad pointed to the toilet paper up in the branches along the river’s banks. The Tug, Dad said, had the highest level of fecal bacteria of any river in North America.

“What’s fecal?” I asked.

Dad watched the river. “Shit,” he said.

Dad led us along the main road through town. It was narrow, with old

brick buildings crowding in close on both sides. The stores, the signs, the sidewalks, the cars were all covered with a film of black coal dust, giving the town an almost monochromatic look, like an old hand-tinted photograph. Welch was shabby and worn out, but you could tell it had once been a place on its way up. On a hill stood a grand limestone courthouse with a big clock tower. Across from it was a handsome bank with arched windows and a wrought-iron door.

You could also tell that the people of Welch were still trying to maintain some pride of place. A sign near the town's only stoplight announced that Welch was the county seat of McDowell County and that for years, more coal had been mined in McDowell County than any comparable spot in the world. Next to it, another sign boasted that Welch had the largest outdoor municipal parking lot in North America.

But the cheerful advertisements painted on the sides of buildings like the Tic Toc diner and the Pocahontas movie theater were faded and nearly illegible. Dad said bad times had come in the fifties. They hit hard and stayed. President John F. Kennedy had come to Welch not long after he was elected and personally handed out the nation's first food stamps here on McDowell Street, to prove his point that—though ordinary Americans might find it hard to believe—starvation-level poverty existed right in their own country.

The road through Welch, Dad told us, led only farther up into the wet, forbidding mountains and on to other dying coal towns. Few strangers passed through Welch these days, and almost all who did came to inflict one form of misery or another—to lay off workers, to shut down a mine, to foreclose on someone's house, to compete for the rare job opening. The townspeople didn't care much for outsiders.

The streets were mostly silent and deserted that morning, but every now and then we'd pass a woman wearing curlers or a group of men in T-shirts with motor-oil decals, loitering in a doorway. I tried to catch their eyes, to give them a nod and a smile to let them know we had only good intentions, but they never nodded or spoke a word or even glanced our way. As soon as we passed, however, I could feel eyes following us up the street.

Dad had brought Mom to Welch for a brief visit fifteen years earlier, right after they were married. "Gosh, things have gone downhill a little bit since we were here last," she said.

Dad gave a short snort of a laugh. He looked at her like he was about to say *What the hell did I tell you?* Instead he just shook his head.

Suddenly, Mom grinned broadly. "I'll bet there aren't any other artists living in Welch," she said. "I won't have any competition. My career could really take off here."

THE NEXT DAY MOM took Brian and me to Welch Elementary, near the outskirts of town. She marched confidently into the principal's office with us in tow and informed him that he would have the pleasure of enrolling two of the brightest, most creative children in America in his school.

The principal looked at Mom over his black-rimmed glasses but remained seated behind his desk. Mom explained that we'd left Phoenix in a teensy bit of a hurry, you know how that goes, and unfortunately, in all the commotion, she forgot to pack stuff like school records and birth certificates.

"But you can take my word for it that Jeannette and Brian are exceptionally bright, even gifted." She smiled at him.

The principal looked at Brian and me, with our unwashed hair and our thin desert clothes. His face took on a sour, skeptical expression. He focused on me, pushed his glasses up his nose, and said something that sounded like "Wuts et tahm sebm?"

"Excuse me?" I said.

"*Et tahm sebm!*" he said louder.

I was completely bewildered. I looked at Mom.

"She doesn't understand your accent," Mom told the principal. He frowned. Mom turned to me. "He's asking you what's eight times seven."

"Oh!" I shouted. "Fifty-six! Eight times seven is fifty-six!" I started spouting out all sorts of mathematical equations.

The principal looked at me blankly.

"He can't make out what you're saying," Mom told me. "Try to talk slowly."

The principal asked me a few more questions I couldn't understand. With Mom translating, I gave answers that he couldn't understand. Then he asked Brian some questions, and they couldn't understand each other, either.

The principal decided that Brian and I were both a bit slow and had

speech impediments that made it difficult for others to understand us. He placed us both in special classes for students with learning disabilities.

"You'll have to impress them with your intelligence," Mom said as Brian and I headed off to school the next day. "Don't be afraid to be smarter than they are."

It had rained the night before our first day of school. When Brian and I stepped off the bus at Welch Elementary, our shoes got soaked in the water that filled the muddy tire ruts left by the school buses. I looked around for the playground equipment, figuring I could win some new friends with the fierce tetherball skills I'd picked up at Emerson, but I didn't see a single seesaw or jungle gym, not to mention any tetherball poles.

It had been cold ever since we arrived in Welch. The day before, Mom had unpacked the thrift-shop coats she'd bought us in Phoenix. When I'd pointed out that all the buttons had been torn from mine, she said that minor flaw was more than offset by the fact that the coat was imported from France and made of 100-percent lamb's wool. As we waited for the opening bell, I stood with Brian at the edge of the playground, my arms crossed to keep my coat closed. The other kids stared at us, whispering among themselves, but they also kept their distance, as if they hadn't decided whether we were predators or prey. I had thought West Virginia was all white hillbillies, so I was surprised by how many black kids there were. I saw one tall black girl with a strong jaw and almond eyes smiling at me. I nodded and smiled back, then I realized there was something malicious in her smile. I locked my arms tighter across my chest.

I was in the fifth grade, so my day was divided into periods, with different teachers and classrooms for each. For the first period, I had West Virginia history. History was one of my favorite subjects. I was coiled and ready to raise my hand as soon as the teacher asked a question I could answer, but he stood at the front of the room next to a map of West Virginia, with all fifty-five counties outlined, and spent the entire class pointing to counties and asking students to identify them. In my second period, we passed the hour watching a film of the football game that Welch High had played several days earlier. Neither of those teachers

introduced me to the class; they seemed as uncertain as the kids about how to act around a stranger.

My next class was English for students with learning disabilities. Miss Caparossi started out by informing the class that it might surprise them to learn some people in this world thought they were better than other people. "They're convinced they're so special that they don't need to follow the rules other people have to follow," she said, "like presenting their school records when they enroll in a new school." She looked at me and raised her eyebrows meaningfully. "Who thinks that's not fair?" she asked the class.

All the kids except me raised their hands.

"I see our new student doesn't agree," she said. "Perhaps you'd like to explain yourself?"

I was sitting in the second-to-last row. The students in front of me swiveled their heads around to stare. I decided to dazzle them with the answer from the Ergo Game.

"Insufficient information to draw a conclusion," I said.

"Oh, really?" Miss Caparossi asked. "Is that what they say in a big city like Phoenix?" She pronounced it "Feeeeenix." Then she turned to the class and said in a high, mocking voice, "Insufficient information to draw a conclusion."

The class laughed violently.

I felt something sharp and painful between my shoulder blades and turned around. The tall black girl with the almond eyes was sitting at the desk behind me. Holding up the sharp pencil she had jabbed into my back, she smiled the same malicious smile I'd seen in the playground.

I looked for Brian in the cafeteria at lunchtime, but fourth-graders were on a different schedule, so I sat by myself and bit into the sandwich Erma had made for me that morning. It was tasteless and greasy. I pulled apart the two slices of Wonder bread. Inside was a thin smear of lard. That was it. No meat, no cheese, not even a slice of pickle. Even so, I chewed slowly, staring intently at my bite marks in the bread to delay as long as possible the moment I would have to leave the cafeteria and go out to the playground. When I was the last student left in the cafeteria, the janitor, who was putting the chairs on the tabletops so the floor could be mopped, told me it was time to go.

Outside, a thin mist hung in the still air. I pulled the sides of my lamb's wool coat together. Three black girls, led by the one with the almond eyes, started moving toward me as soon as they saw me. A half-dozen other girls followed. Within moments, I was surrounded.

"You think you better than us?" the tall girl asked.

"No," I said. "I think we're all equal."

"You think you as good as me?" She punched at me. When, instead of raising my hands in defense, I kept clutching my coat closed, she realized it had no buttons. "This girl ain't got no buttons on her coat!" she shouted. That seemed to give her the license she needed. She pushed me in the chest, and I fell backward. I tried to get up, but all three girls started kicking me. I rolled away into a puddle, shouting for them to quit and hitting back at the feet coming at me from all sides. The other girls had closed in a circle around us and none of the teachers could see what was going on. There was no stopping those girls until they'd had their fill.

WHEN WE ALL GOT home that afternoon, Mom and Dad were eager to hear about our first day.

"It was good," I said. I didn't want to tell Mom the truth. I was in no mood to hear one of her lectures about the power of positive thinking.

"See?" she said. "I told you you'd fit right in."

Brian shrugged off Mom and Dad's questions, and Lori didn't want to talk about her day at all.

"How were the other kids?" I asked her later.

"Okay," she said, but she turned away, and that was the end of the conversation.

The bullying continued every day for weeks. The tall girl, whose name was Dinitia Hewitt, watched me with her smile while we all waited on the asphalt playground for classes to start. At lunch, I ate my lard sandwiches with paralytic slowness, but sooner or later, the janitor started putting the chairs up on the tables. I walked outside trying to hold my head high, and Dinitia and her gang surrounded me and it began.

As we fought, they called me poor and ugly and dirty, and it was hard to argue the point. I had three dresses to my name, all hand-me-downs or from a thrift store, which meant each week I had to wear two of them twice. They were so worn from countless washings that the threads were beginning to separate. We were also always dirty. Not dry-dirty like we'd been in the desert, but grimy-dirty and smudged with oily dust from the coal-burning stove. Erma allowed us only one bath a week in four inches of water that had been heated on the kitchen stove and that all of us kids had to share.

I thought of discussing the fighting with Dad, but I didn't want to sound like a whiner. Also, he'd rarely been sober since we had arrived in Welch, and I was afraid that if I told him, he'd show up at school snockered and make things even worse.

I did try to talk to Mom. I couldn't bring myself to tell her about the beatings, fearing that if I did, she'd try to butt in and she'd also only make things worse. I did say that these three black girls were giving me a hard time because we were so poor. Mom told me I should tell them there was nothing wrong with being poor, that Abraham Lincoln, the greatest president this country had ever seen, came from a dirt-poor family. She also said I should tell them Martin Luther King, Jr., would be ashamed of their behavior. Even though I knew these high-minded arguments would get me nowhere, I tried them anyway—*Martin Luther King would be ashamed!*—and they made the three girls shriek with laughter as they pushed me to the ground.

Lying in Stanley's bed at night with Lori, Brian, and Maureen, I concocted revenge scenarios. I imagined myself like Dad in his air force days, whupping the entire lot of them. After school, I'd go out to the woodpile next to the basement and practice karate chops and dropkicks on the kindling while laying down some pretty wicked curse words. But I also kept thinking about Dinitia, trying to make sense of her. I hoped for a while to befriend her. I'd seen Dinitia smile a few times with genuine warmth, and it transformed her face. With a smile like that, she had to have some good in her, but I couldn't figure out how to get her to shine it my way.

About a month after I'd started school, I was walking up some steps to a park at the top of the hill when I heard a low, furious barking coming from the other side of the World War I memorial. I ran up the stairs and saw a big, lathered-up mongrel cornering a little black kid of about five or six against the monument. The kid kept giving kicks at the dog as it barked and lunged at him. The kid was looking over at the tree line on the far side of the park, and I could tell he was calculating the chances of making it over there.

"Don't run!" I shouted.

The boy looked up at me. So did the dog, and in that instant, the kid took off in a hopeless dash for the trees. The dog bounded after him, barking, then caught up with him and snapped at his legs.

Now, there are mad dogs and wild dogs and killer dogs, and any one of them would go for your throat and hold on until you or it was dead,

but I could tell this dog was not truly bad. Instead of tearing into the kid, it was having fun terrifying him, growling and pulling on his pant leg but doing no real damage. It was just a mutt who had been kicked around too much and was happy to find a creature who was afraid of it.

I picked up a stick and raced toward them. "Go on, now!" I shouted at the dog. When I raised the stick, it whimpered and slunk off.

The dog's teeth had not broken the boy's skin, but his pant leg was torn, and he was trembling as if he had palsy. I offered to take him home, and I ended up carrying him piggyback. He was feather-light. I couldn't get a word out of him except the most minimal directions—"up there," "that way"—in a voice I could hardly hear.

The houses in the neighborhood were old but freshly painted, some in bright colors like lavender or kelly green. "This here," the boy whispered when we came to a house with blue shutters. It had a neat yard but was so small that dwarves could have lived there. When I put the kid down, he dashed up the steps and through the door. I turned to go.

Dinitia Hewitt was standing on the porch across the street, looking at me curiously.

The next day when I went out to the playground after lunch, the gang of girls started toward me, but Dinitia hung back. Without their leader, the others lost their sense of purpose and stopped short of me. The following week, Dinitia asked me for help on an English assignment. She never said she was sorry for the bullying, or even mentioned it, but she thanked me for bringing her neighbor home that night, and I figured that her request for help was as close to an apology as I would get. Erma had made it clear how she felt about black people, so instead of inviting Dinitia to our house to work on her assignment, I suggested that on the upcoming Saturday, I'd go to hers.

That day I was leaving the house at the same time as Uncle Stanley. He never had the wherewithal to learn to drive, but someone from the appliance store where he worked was picking him up. He asked if I wanted a ride, too. When I told him where I was headed, he frowned.

Stanley didn't want his friend to drive me there, so I walked. When I got back home later in the afternoon, the house was empty except for

Erma, who never set foot outside. She stood in the kitchen, stirring a pot of green beans and taking swigs from the bottle of hooch in her pocket.

"So, how was it?" she asked.

Erma was always going on about "the n-word." Her and Grandpa's house was on Court Street, on the edge of the black neighborhood. It galled her when they started moving into that section of town, and she always said it was their fault that Welch had gone downhill. When you were sitting in the living room, where Erma always kept the shades drawn, you could hear groups of black people walking into town, talking and laughing. "I don't want to hear that n-word," Erma always muttered. "The reason I have not gone out of this house in fifteen years is because I do not want to see or be seen by a nigger." Mom and Dad had always forbidden us to use that word. It was much worse than any curse word, they told us. But since Erma was my grandmother, I never said anything when she used it.

Erma kept stirring the beans. "Keep this up and people are going to think you're a nigger lover," she said.

She gave me a serious look, as if imparting a meaningful life lesson I should ponder and absorb. She unscrewed the cap from her bottle of hooch and took a long, contemplative swallow.

As I watched her drinking, I felt this pressure building in my chest and I had to let it out. "You're not supposed to use that word," I said.

Erma's face went slack with astonishment.

"Mom says they're just like us," I continued, "except they have different complexions."

Erma glared at me. I thought she was going to backhand me, but instead she said, "You ungrateful little shit. I'll be damned if you're eating my food tonight. Get your worthless ass down to the basement."

Lori gave me a hug when she heard I'd told off Erma. Mom was upset, though. "We may not agree with all of Erma's views," she said, "but we have to remember that as long as we're her guests, we have to be polite."

That didn't seem like Mom. She and Dad happily railed against anyone they disliked or disrespected: Standard Oil executives, J. Edgar Hoover, and especially snobs and racists. They'd always encouraged us to be outspoken about our opinions. Now we were supposed to bite our

tongues. But she was right; Erma would boot us. Situations like these, I realized, were what turned people into hypocrites.

"I hate Erma," I told Mom.

"You have to show compassion for her," Mom said. Erma's parents had died when she was young, Mom explained, and she had been shipped off to one relative after another who had treated her like a servant. Scrubbing clothes on a washboard until her knuckles bled—that was the preeminent memory of Erma's childhood. The best thing Grandpa did for her when they got married was buy her an electric washing machine, but whatever joy it had once given her was long gone.

"Erma can't let go of her misery," Mom said. "It's all she knows." She added that you should never hate anyone, even your worst enemies. "Everyone has something good about them," she said. "You have to find the redeeming quality and love the person for that."

"Oh yeah?" I said. "How about Hitler? What was his redeeming quality?"

"Hitler loved dogs," Mom said without hesitation.

IN LATE WINTER, Mom and Dad decided to drive the Oldsmobile back to Phoenix. They said they were going to fetch our bikes and all the other stuff we'd had to leave behind, pick up copies of our school records, and see if they could rescue Mom's fruitwood archery set from the irrigation ditch alongside the road to the Grand Canyon. We kids were to remain in Welch. Since Lori was the oldest, Mom and Dad said she was in charge. Of course, we were all answerable to Erma.

They left one morning during a thaw. I could tell by the high color in Mom's cheeks that she was excited about the prospect of an adventure. Dad was also clearly itching to get out of Welch. He had not found a job, and we were dependent on Erma for everything. Lori had suggested that Dad go to work in the mines, but he said the mines were controlled by the unions, and the unions were controlled by the mob, and the mob had blackballed him for investigating corruption in the electricians' union back in Phoenix. Another reason for him to return to Phoenix was to gather his research on corruption, because the only way he could get a job in the mines was by helping reform the United Mine Workers of America.

I wished we were all going together. I wanted to be back in Phoenix, sitting under the orange trees behind our adobe house, riding my bike to the library, eating free bananas in a school where the teachers thought I was smart. I wanted to feel the desert sun on my face and breathe in the dry desert air and climb the steep rock mountains while Dad led us on one of the long hikes that he called geological survey expeditions.

I asked if we could all go, but Dad said he and Mom were making a quick trip, strictly business, and we kids would only get in the way. Besides, he couldn't go taking us out of school in the middle of the year. I pointed out that it had never bothered him before. Welch wasn't like those other places we had lived, he said. There were rules that had to be followed, and people didn't take it kindly when you flouted them.

"Do you think they'll come back?" Brian asked as Mom and Dad drove off.

"Of course," I said, though I had been wondering the same thing. These days we seemed more of an inconvenience than we used to be. Lori was already a teenager, and in a couple of years, Brian and I would be, too. They couldn't toss us into the back of a U-Haul or put us in cardboard boxes at night.

Brian and I started running after the Oldsmobile. Mom turned once and waved, and Dad stuck his hand out the window. We followed them all the way down Court Street, where they picked up speed and then turned the corner. I had to believe they'd come back, I told myself. If I didn't believe, then they might not return. They might leave us forever.

Erma reached over to slap me, but Lori caught her hand. "Let's all calm down," Lori said in the same voice she used when Mom and Dad got carried away, arguing. "Everybody. Calm down."

Erma jerked her hand out of Lori's grasp and slapped her so hard that Lori's glasses went flying across the room. Lori, who had turned thirteen, slapped her back. Erma hit Lori again, and this time Lori struck Erma a blow in the jaw. Then they flew at each other, tussling and flailing and pulling hair, locked together, with Brian and me cheering on Lori until we woke up Uncle Stanley, who staggered into the room and pushed them apart.

Erma relegated us to the basement after that. A door in the basement led directly outside, so we never went upstairs. We weren't even allowed to use Erma's bathroom, which meant we either had to wait for school or go outside after dark: Uncle Stanley sometimes sneaked down beans he'd boiled for us, but he was afraid if he stayed talking, Erma would think he'd taken our side and get mad at him, too.

The following week, a storm hit. The temperature dropped, and a foot of snow fell on Welch. Erma wouldn't let us use any coal—she said we didn't know how to operate the stove and would burn the house down—and it was so cold in the basement that Lori, Brian, Maureen, and I were glad we all shared one bed. As soon as we got home from school, we'd climb under the covers with our clothes on and do our homework there.

We were in bed the night Mom and Dad came back. We didn't hear the sound of the car pulling up. All we heard was the front door opening upstairs, then Mom and Dad's voices and Erma beginning the long narrative of her grievances against us. That was followed by the sound of Dad stomping down the stairs into the basement, furious at all of us, me for back-talking Erma and making wild accusations, and Lori even more for daring to strike her own grandmother, and Brian for being such a pussy and starting the whole thing. I thought Dad would come around to our side once he'd heard what had happened, and I tried to explain.

"I don't care what happened!" he yelled.

"But we were just protecting ourselves," I said.

“Brian’s a man, he can take it,” he said. “I don’t want to hear another word of this. Do you hear me?” He was shaking his head, but wildly, almost as if he thought he could keep out the sound of my voice. He wouldn’t even look at me.

After Dad had gone back upstairs to tie into Erma’s hooch and we kids were all in bed, Brian bit my toe to try to make me laugh, but I kicked him away. We all lay there in the silent darkness.

“Dad was really weird,” I said, because someone had to say it.

“You’d be weird, too, if Erma was your mom,” Lori said.

“Do you think she ever did something to Dad like what she did to Brian?” I asked.

No one said a thing.

It was gross and creepy to think about, but it would explain a lot. Why Dad left home as soon as he could. Why he drank so much and why he got so angry. Why he never wanted to visit Welch when we were younger. Why he at first refused to come to West Virginia with us and only at the last possible moment overcame his reluctance and jumped into the car. Why he was shaking his head so hard, almost like he wanted to put his hands over his ears, when I tried to explain what Erma had been doing to Brian.

“Don’t think about things like that,” Lori told me. “It’ll make you crazy.”

And so I put it out of my mind.

MOM AND DAD TOLD us how they’d made it to Phoenix only to find that Mom’s laundry-on-the-clothesline ploy hadn’t kept out intruders. Our house on North Third Street had been looted. Pretty much everything was gone, including, of course, our bikes. Mom and Dad had rented a trailer to carry back what little was left—Mom said those foolish thieves had overlooked some good stuff, such as a pair of Grandma Smith’s riding breeches from the thirties that were of the highest quality—but the Oldsmobile’s engine had seized up in Nashville, and they’d had to abandon it along with the trailer and Grandma Smith’s riding breeches and take the bus the rest of the way to Welch.

I thought that once Mom and Dad returned, they’d be able to make peace with Erma. But she said she could never forgive us kids and didn’t want us in her house any longer, even if we stayed in the basement and kept as quiet as church mice. We were banished. That was the word Dad used. “You did wrong,” he said, “and now we’ve all been banished.”

“This isn’t exactly the Garden of Eden,” Lori said.

I was more upset about the bike than I was about Erma banishing us. “Why don’t we just move back to Phoenix?” I asked Mom.

“We’ve already been there,” she said. “And there are all sorts of opportunities here that we don’t even know about.”

She and Dad set out to find us a new place to live. The cheapest rental in Welch was an apartment over a diner on McDowell Street that cost seventy-five dollars a month, which was out of our price range. Also, Mom and Dad wanted outdoor space we could call our own, so they decided to buy. Since we had no money for a down payment and no steady income, our options were pretty limited, but within a couple of days, Mom and Dad told us they had found a house we could afford. “It’s not exactly palatial, so there’s going to be a lot of togetherness,” Mom said. “And it’s on the rustic side.”

“How rustic?” Lori asked.

Mom paused. I could see her debating how to phrase her answer. "It doesn't have indoor plumbing," she said.

Dad was still looking for a car to replace the Olds—our budget was in the high two figures—so that weekend we all hiked over for our first look at the new place. We walked down the valley through the center of town and around a mountainside, past the small, tidy brick houses put up after the mines were unionized. We crossed a creek that fed into the Tug River and started up a barely paved one-lane road called Little Hobart Street. It climbed through several switchbacks and, for a stretch, rose at an angle so steep you had to walk on your toes; if you tried walking flatfooted, you stretched your calves till they hurt.

The houses up here were shabbier than the brick houses lower down in the valley. They were made of wood, with lopsided porches, sagging roofs, rusted-out gutters, and balding tar paper or asphalt shingles slowly but surely parting from the underwall. In almost every yard, a mutt or two was chained to a tree or to a clothesline post, and they barked furiously as we walked by. Like most houses in Welch, these were heated by coal. The more prosperous families had coal sheds; the poorer ones left their coal in a pile out front. The porches were every bit as furnished as the insides of most houses, with rust-stained refrigerators, folding card tables, hook rugs, couches or car seats for serious porch-sitting, and maybe a battered armoire with a hole cut in the side so the cat would have a cozy place to sleep.

We followed the road almost to the end, where Dad pointed up at our new house.

"Well, kids, welcome to Ninety-three Little Hobart Street!" Mom said. "Welcome to home sweet home."

We all stared. The house was a dinky thing perched high up off the road on a hillside so steep that only the back of the house rested on the ground. The front, including a drooping porch, jutted precariously into the air, supported by tall, spindly cinder-block pillars. It had been painted white a long time ago, but the paint, where it hadn't peeled off altogether, had turned a dismal gray.

"It's good we raised you young 'uns to be tough," Dad said. "Because this is not a house for the faint of heart."

Dad led us up the lower steps, which were made of rocks slapped together with cement. Because of settling and erosion and downright slipshod construction, they tilted dangerously toward the street. Where the stone steps ended, a rickety set of stairs made from two-by-fours—more like a ladder than a staircase—took you up to the front porch.

Inside were three rooms, each about ten feet by ten feet, facing onto the front porch. The house had no bathroom, but underneath it, behind one of the cinder-block pillars, was a closet-sized room with a toilet on a cement floor. The toilet wasn't hooked up to any sewer or septic system. It just sat atop a hole about six feet deep. There was no running water indoors. A water spigot rose a few inches above the ground near the toilet, so you could get a bucket and tote water upstairs. While the house was wired for electricity, Dad confessed that we could not at the moment afford to have it turned on.

On the upside, Dad said, the house had cost only a thousand dollars, and the owner had waived the down payment. We were supposed to pay him fifty dollars a month. If we could make the payments on time, we'd own the place outright in under two years.

"Hard to believe that one day this will all be ours," said Lori. She was developing what Mom called a bit of a sarcastic streak.

"Count your blessings," Mom said. "There are people in Ethiopia who would kill for a place like this." She pointed out that the house did have some attractive features. For example, in the living room was a cast-iron potbellied coal stove for heating and cooking. It was big and handsome, with heavy bear-claw feet, and she was certain it was valuable, if you took it to a place where people appreciated antiques. But since the house had no chimney, the stovepipe vented out a back window. Someone had replaced the glass in the upper part of the window with plywood, and wrapped tinfoil around the opening to keep the coal smoke from leaking into the room. The tinfoil had not done its job too well, and the ceiling was black with soot. Someone—probably the same someone—had also made the mistake of trying to clean the ceiling in a few spots, but had ended up only smudging and smearing the soot, creating whitish patches that made you realize how black the rest of the ceiling was.

"The house itself isn't much," Dad apologized, "but we won't be living in it long." The important thing, the reason he and Mom had decided to

acquire this particular piece of property, was that it came with plenty of land to build our new house. He planned to get to work on it right away. He intended to follow the blueprints for the Glass Castle, but he had to do some serious reconfiguring and increase the size of the solar cells to take into account that since we were on the north face of the mountain, and enclosed by hills on both sides, we'd hardly ever get any sun.

We moved in that afternoon. Not that there was much to move. Dad borrowed a pickup from the appliance store where Uncle Stanley worked, and brought back a sofa bed that a friend of Grandpa's was throwing out. Dad also scavenged a couple of tables and chairs, and he built some makeshift closets—which were actually kind of nifty—by hanging lengths of pipe from the ceiling with wires.

Mom and Dad took over the room with the stove, and it became a combined living room, master bedroom, art studio, and writer's study. We put the sofa bed there, though once we opened it, it never went back to being a sofa. Dad built shelves all along the upper walls to store Mom's art supplies. She set up her easel under the stovepipe, right next to the back window, because she said it got natural sunlight—which it did, relatively speaking. She put her typewriters under another window, with shelves for her manuscripts and works in progress, and she immediately started thumbtacking index cards with story ideas to the walls.

We kids all slept in the middle room. At first we shared one big bed that had been left by the previous owner, but Dad decided we were getting a tad old for that. We were also too big to sleep in cardboard boxes, and there wasn't enough room on the floor for them, anyway, so we helped Dad build two sets of bunk beds. We made the frames with two-by-fours; then we drilled holes in the sides and threaded ropes through. For mattresses, we laid cardboard over the ropes. When we finished, our bunk beds looked sort of plain, so we spray-painted the sides with ornate red and black curlicues. Dad came home with a discarded four-drawer dresser, one drawer for each of us. He also built each of us a wooden box with sliding doors for personal stuff. We nailed them on the wall above our beds, and that was where I kept my geode.

The third room at 93 Little Hobart Street, the kitchen, was in a category all its own. It had an electric stove, but the wiring was not exactly

up to code, with faulty connectors, exposed lines, and buzzing switches. "Helen Keller must have wired this damn house," Dad declared. He decided it was too convoluted to bother fixing.

We called the kitchen the loose-juice room, because on the rare occasions that we had paid the electricity bill and had power, we'd get a wicked electric shock if we touched any damp or metallic surface in the room. The first time I got zapped, it knocked my breath out and left me twitching on the floor. We quickly learned that whenever we ventured into the kitchen, we needed to wrap our hands in the driest socks or rags we could find. If we got a shock, we'd announce it to everyone else, sort of like giving a weather report. "Big jolt from touching the stove today," we'd say. "Wear extra rags."

One corner of the kitchen ceiling leaked like a sieve. Every time it rained, the plasterboard ceiling would get all swollen and heavy, with water streaming steadily from the center of the bulge. During one particularly fierce rainstorm that spring, the ceiling grew so fat it burst, and water and plasterboard came crashing down onto the floor. Dad never repaired it. We kids tried patching the roof on our own with tar paper, tinfoil, wood, and Elmer's glue, but no matter what we did, the water found its way through. Eventually we gave up. So every time it rained outside, it rained in the kitchen, too.

At first Mom tried to make living at 93 Little Hobart Street seem like an adventure. The woman who had lived there before us left behind an old-fashioned sewing machine that you operated with a foot treadle. Mom said it would come in handy because we could make our own clothes even when the electricity was turned off. She also claimed you didn't need patterns to sew, you could get creative and wing it. Shortly after we moved in, Mom, Lori, and I measured one another and tried to make our own dresses.

It took forever, and they came out baggy and lopsided, with sleeves that were different lengths and armholes in the middle of our backs. I couldn't get mine over my head until Mom snipped out a few stitches. "It's stunning!" she said. But I told her I looked like I was wearing a big pillowcase with elephant trunks sticking out of the sides. Lori refused to wear hers outdoors, or even indoors, and Mom had to agree that sewing

wasn't the best use of our creative energy—or our money. The cheapest cloth we could find cost seventy-nine cents a yard, and you needed more than two yards for a dress. It made more sense to buy thrift-store clothes, and they had the armholes in the right places.

Mom also tried to make the house cheerful. She decorated the living room walls with her oil paintings, and soon every square inch was covered, except for the space above her typewriter reserved for index cards. We had vivid desert sunsets, stampeding horses, sleeping cats, snow-covered mountains, bowls of fruit, blooming flowers, and portraits of us kids.

Since Mom had more paintings than we had wall space, Dad nailed long shelf brackets to the wall, and she hung one picture in front of another until they were three or four deep. Then she'd rotate the paintings. "Just a little redecorating to perk the place up," she'd say. But I believed she thought of her paintings as children and wanted them to feel that they were all being treated equally.

Mom also built rows of shelves in the windows and arranged brightly colored bottles to catch the light. "Now it looks like we have stained glass," she announced. It did, sort of, but the house was still cold and dank. Every night for the first few weeks, lying on my cardboard mattress and listening to the sound of rainwater dripping in the kitchen, I dreamed of the desert and the sun and the big house in Phoenix with the palm tree in the front and the orange trees and oleanders in the back. We had owned that house outright. Still owned it, I kept thinking. It was ours, the one true home we'd ever had.

"Are we ever going home?" I asked Dad one day.

"Home?"

"Phoenix."

"This is home now."

SEEING AS HOW WELCH was our new home, Brian and I figured we'd make the best of it. Dad had shown us the spot near the house where we were going to put the foundation and basement for the Glass Castle. He'd measured it off and marked it with stakes and string. Since Dad was hardly ever home—he was out making contacts and investigating the UMW, he told us—and never got around to breaking ground, Brian and I decided to help. We found a shovel and pickax at an abandoned farm and spent just about every free minute digging a hole. We knew we had to dig it big and deep. "No point in building a good house unless you put down the right foundation," Dad always said.

It was hard work, but after a month we'd dug a hole deep enough for us to disappear in. Even though we hadn't squared the edges or smoothed the floor, we were still pretty darn proud of ourselves. Once Dad had poured the foundation, we could help him on the frame.

But since we couldn't afford to pay the town's trash-collection fee, our garbage was really piling up. One day Dad told us to dump it in the hole.

"But that's for the Glass Castle," I said.

"It's a temporary measure," Dad told me. He explained that he was going to hire a truck to cart the garbage to the dump all at once. But he never got around to that, either, and as Brian and I watched, the hole for the Glass Castle's foundation slowly filled with garbage.

Around that time, probably because of all the garbage, a big, nasty-looking river rat took up residence at 93 Little Hobart Street. I first saw him in the sugar bowl. This rat was too big to fit into an ordinary sugar bowl, but since Mom had a powerful sweet tooth, putting at least eight teaspoons in a cup of tea, we kept our sugar in a punch bowl on the kitchen table.

This rat was not just eating the sugar. He was bathing in it, wallowing in it, positively luxuriating in it, his flickering tail hanging over the side of the bowl, flinging sugar across the table. When I saw him, I froze, then backed out of the kitchen. I told Brian, and we opened the kitchen