

A LOT OF OUR NEIGHBORS on North Third Street were kind of weird. A clan of Gypsies lived down the block in a big, falling-apart house with plywood nailed over the porch to create more indoor space. They were always stealing our stuff, and one time, after Brian's pogo stick had disappeared, he saw one of the old Gypsy women bouncing down the sidewalk on it. She wouldn't give it back, so Mom got into a big argument with the head of the clan, and the next day we found a chicken with its throat cut on our doorstep. It was some kind of Gypsy hex. Mom decided, as she put it, to fight magic with magic. She took a ham bone out of the beans and went down to the Gypsies' house, waving it in the air. Standing on the sidewalk, she held up the bone like a crucifix at an exorcism, and called down a curse on the entire Gypsy clan and their house, vowing that it would collapse with the lot of them in it and that the bowels of the earth would open up and swallow them forever if they bothered us again. The next morning Brian's pogo stick was lying in the front yard.

The neighborhood also had its share of perverts. Mostly, they were shabby, hunched men with wheedling voices who hung around on street corners and followed us to and from school, trying to give us boosts when we climbed a fence, offering us candy and loose change if we would go play with them. We called them creeps and hollered at them to leave us alone, but I worried about hurting their feelings because I couldn't help wondering if maybe they were telling the truth, that all they wanted was to be our friends.

At night Mom and Dad always left the front door and the back door and all the windows open. Since we had no air-conditioning, they explained, we needed to let the air circulate. From time to time, a vagrant or a wino would wander through the front door, assuming the house was deserted. When we woke up in the morning, we'd find one asleep in a front room. As soon as we roused them, they shambled off apologetically. Mom always assured us they were just harmless drunks.

Maureen, who was four and had a terrible fear of bogeymen, kept dreaming that intruders in Halloween masks were coming through the open doors to get us. One night when I was almost ten, I was awakened by someone running his hands over my private parts. At first it was confusing. Lori and I slept in the same bed, and I thought maybe she was moving in her sleep. I groggily pushed the hand away.

"I just want to play a game with you," a man's voice said.

I recognized the voice. It belonged to a scraggly guy with sunken cheeks who had been hanging around North Third Street recently. He'd tried to walk us home from school and had given Brian a magazine called *Kids on a Farm*, with pictures of boys and girls wearing only underpants.

"Pervert!" I yelled and kicked at the man's hand. Brian came running into the room with a hatchet he kept by his bed, and the man bolted out the door. Dad was out that night, and when Mom slept, she was dead to the world, so Brian and I ran after the man ourselves. As we got to the sidewalk, lit by the purplish glow from the streetlights, he disappeared around the corner. We searched for him for a few blocks, Brian whacking at the bushes with his hatchet, but we couldn't find him. On our way home, we were slapping each other's hands and pumping our fists in the air, as if we'd won a boxing match. We decided we had been Pervert Hunting, which was just like Demon Hunting except the enemy was real and dangerous instead of being the product of a kid's overactive imagination.

The next day, when Dad came home and we told him what had happened, he said he was going to kill that lowlife sonofabitch. He and Brian and I went out on a serious Pervert Hunt. Our blood up, we searched the streets for hours, but we never did find the guy. I asked Mom and Dad if we should close the doors and windows when we went to sleep. They wouldn't consider it. We needed the fresh air, they said, and it was essential that we refuse to surrender to fear.

So the windows stayed open. Maureen kept having nightmares of men in Halloween masks. And every now and then, when Brian and I were feeling revved up, he'd get a machete and I'd get a baseball bat and we'd go Pervert Hunting, clearing the streets of the creeps who preyed on kids.

Mom and Dad liked to make a big point about never surrendering to fear or to prejudice or to the narrow-minded conformist sticks-in-the-mud



who tried to tell everyone else what was proper. We were supposed to ignore those benighted sheep, as Dad called them. One day Mom went with us kids to the library at the Civic Center. Since the weather was sweltering, she suggested we cool off by jumping into the fountain in front of the building. The water was too shallow to swim in, but we paddled around pretending to be crocodiles until we attracted a small crowd of people who kept insisting to Mom that swimming was forbidden in the fountain.

"Mind your own beeswax," Mom replied. I was feeling kind of embarrassed and started to climb out. "Ignore the fuddy-duddies!" Mom told me, and to make it clear she paid no nevermind to such people or their opinions, she clambered into the fountain and plopped down beside us, sending gallons of water sloshing over the sides.

It never bothered Mom if people turned and stared at her, even in church. Although she thought nuns were killjoys and she didn't follow all the Church's rules word for word—she treated the Ten Commandments more like the Ten Suggestions—Mom considered herself a devout Catholic and took us to mass most Sundays. St. Mary's was the biggest, most beautiful church I had ever seen. It was made of sand-colored adobe and had two soaring steeples, a gigantic circular stained-glass window, and, leading up to the two main doors, a pair of sweeping staircases covered with pigeons. The other mothers dressed up for mass, wearing black lace mantillas on their heads and clutching green or red or yellow handbags that matched their shoes. Mom thought it was superficial to worry about how you looked. She said God thought the same way, so she'd go to church in torn or paint-splattered clothes. It was your inner spirit and not your outward appearance that mattered, she said, and come hymn time, she showed the whole congregation her spirit, belting out the words in such a powerful voice that people in the pews in front of us would turn around and stare.

Church was particularly excruciating when Dad came along. Dad had been raised Baptist, but he didn't like religion and didn't believe in God. He believed in science and reason, he said, not superstition and voodoo. But Mom had refused to have children unless Dad agreed to raise them as Catholics and to attend church himself on holy days of obligation.

Dad sat in the pew fuming and shifting around and trying to bite his tongue while the priest carried on about Jesus resurrecting Lazarus from

the dead and the communicants filed up to eat the body and drink the blood of Christ. Finally, when Dad was unable to stand it any longer, he'd shout out something to challenge the priest. He didn't do it to be hostile. He hollered out his point in a friendly tone: "Yo, Padre!" he'd say. The priest usually ignored Dad and tried to go on with his sermon, but Dad persisted. He'd challenge the priest about the scientific impossibility of the miracles, and when the priest continued to ignore him, he'd get mad and yell out something about Pope Alexander VI's bastard children, or Pope Leo X's hedonism, or Pope Nicholas III's simony, or the murders committed in the name of the Church during the Spanish Inquisition. But what could you expect, he'd say, from an institution run by celibate men who wore dresses. At that point the ushers would tell us we'd have to leave.

"Don't worry, God understands," Mom said. "He knows that your father is a cross we must bear."



CITY LIFE WAS GETTING to Dad. "I'm starting to feel like a rat in a maze," he told me. He hated the way everything in Phoenix was so organized, with time cards, bank accounts, telephone bills, parking meters, tax forms, alarm clocks, PTA meetings, and pollsters knocking on the door and prying into your affairs. He hated all the people who lived in air-conditioned houses with the windows permanently sealed, and drove air-conditioned cars to nine-to-five jobs in air-conditioned office buildings that he said were little more than gussied-up prisons. Just the sight of those people on their way to work made him feel hemmed in and itchy. He began complaining that we were all getting too soft, too dependent on creature comforts, and that we were losing touch with the natural order of the world.

Dad missed the wilderness. He needed to be roaming free in open country and living among untamed animals. He felt it was good for your soul to have buzzards and coyotes and snakes around. That was the way man was meant to live, he'd say, in harmony with the wild, like the Indians, not this lords-of-the-earth crap, trying to rule the entire god-damn planet, cutting down all the forests and killing every creature you couldn't bring to heel.

One day we heard on the radio that a woman in the suburbs had seen a mountain lion behind her house and had called the police, who shot the animal. Dad got so angry he put his fist through a wall. "That mountain lion had as much right to his life as that sour old biddy does to hers," he said. "You can't kill something just because it's wild."

Dad stewed for a while, sucking on a beer, and then he told us all to get in the car.

"Where are we going?" I asked. We hadn't been on a single expedition since we moved to Phoenix. I missed them.

"I'm going to show you," he said, "that no animal, no matter how big or wild, is dangerous as long as you know what you're doing."

We all piled into the car. Dad drove, nursing another beer and cussing

under his breath about that innocent mountain lion and the chickenshit suburbanite. We turned in at the city zoo. None of us kids had ever been to a zoo before, and I didn't really know what to expect. Lori said she thought zoos should be outlawed. Mom, who had Maureen in one arm and her sketch pad under the other, pointed out that the animals had traded freedom for security. She said that when she looked at them, she would pretend not to see the bars.

At the entrance gate, Dad bought our tickets, muttering about the idiocy of paying money to look at animals, and led us down the walk. Most of the cages were patches of dirt surrounded by iron bars, with forlorn gorillas or restless bears or irritable monkeys or anxious gazelles huddled in the corners. A lot of the kids were having fun, gawking and laughing and throwing peanuts at the animals, but the sight of those poor creatures made my throat swell up.

"I've got half a mind to sneak in here some night and free these critters," Dad said.

"Can I help?" I asked.

He mussed my hair. "Me and you, Mountain Goat," he said. "We'll carry out our own animal prison break."

We stopped at a bridge. Below it, in a deep pit, alligators sunned themselves on rocks surrounding a pond. "The biddy who got that mountain lion shot didn't understand animal psychology," Dad said. "If you let them know you're not afraid, they'll leave you alone."

Dad pointed to the biggest, scaliest alligator. "Me and that nasty-looking bastard's going to have us a staring contest." Dad stood on the bridge glowering at the alligator. At first it seemed to be asleep, but then it blinked and looked up at Dad. Dad continued staring, his eyes in a fierce squint. After a minute the alligator thrashed its tail, looked away, and slid into the water. "See, you just have to communicate your position," Dad said.

"Maybe he would have gone for a swim anyway," Brian whispered.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Didn't you see how nervous that gator got? Dad made him do it."

We followed Dad to the lion's den, but the lions were sleeping, so Dad said we should leave them alone. The aardvark was busy Hoovering up ants, and Dad said you shouldn't disturb eating animals, so we passed it by and went on to the cheetah's cage, which was about as big as our liv-



ing room and surrounded by a chain fence. The lone cheetah paced back and forth, the muscles in his shoulders shifting with each step. Dad folded his arms on his chest and studied the cheetah. "He's a good animal—fastest four-footed creature on the planet," he declared. "Not happy about being in this damn cage, but he's resigned to it, and he's no longer angry. Let's see if he's hungry."

Dad took me to the concession stand. He told the lady running it that he had a rare medical condition and couldn't eat cooked meat so he'd like to buy a raw hamburger. "Yeah, right," the salesclerk said. She told Dad the zoo did not allow the sale of uncooked meat, because foolish people tried to feed it to the animals.

"I'd like to feed her lard ass to the animals," Dad muttered. He bought me a bag of popcorn, and we returned to the cheetah cage. Dad squatted outside the fence opposite the cheetah. The animal came closer to the bars and studied him curiously. Dad kept looking at him, but not in the angry-eyed way he had stared down the alligator. The cheetah looked back. Finally, he sat down. Dad stepped over the chain fence and knelt right next to the bars where the cheetah was sitting. The cheetah remained still, looking at Dad.

Dad slowly raised his right hand and put it up against the cage. The cheetah looked at Dad's hand but didn't move. Dad calmly put his hand between the iron bars of the cage and rested it on the cheetah's neck. The cheetah moved the side of his face against Dad's hand, as if asking to be petted. Dad gave the cheetah the kind of hardy, vigorous petting you'd give a big dog.

"Situation under control," Dad said and beckoned us over.

We climbed under the chain fence and knelt around Dad while he petted the cheetah. By then a few people had begun to gather. One man was calling to us to get back behind the chain fence. We ignored him. I knelt close to the cheetah. My heart was beating fast, but I wasn't scared, only excited. I could feel the cheetah's hot breath on my face. He looked right at me. His amber eyes were steady but sad, as if he knew he'd never see the plains of Africa again.

"May I pet him, please?" I asked Dad.

Dad took my hand and slowly guided it to the side of the cheetah's neck. It was soft but also bristly. The cheetah turned his head and put his moist nose up against my hand. Then his big pink tongue unfolded from

his mouth, and he licked my hand. I gasped. Dad opened my hand and held my fingers back. The cheetah licked my palm, his tongue warm and rough, like sandpaper dipped in hot water. I felt all tingly.

"I think he likes me," I said.

"He does," Dad said. "He also likes the popcorn salt and butter on your hand."

There was a small crowd around the cage now, and one particularly frantic woman grabbed my shirt and tried to pull me over the chain. "It's all right," I told her. "My dad does stuff like this all the time."

"He should be arrested!" she shouted.

"Okay, kids," Dad said, "the civilians are revolting. We better ske-daddle."

We climbed over the chain. When I looked back, the cheetah was following us along the side of the cage. Before we could make our way through the crowd, a heavy man in a navy blue uniform came running toward us. He was holding on to the gun and nightstick on his belt, which made him look like he was running with his hands on his hips. He was shouting about regulations and how idiots had been killed climbing into cages and how we all had to leave immediately. He grabbed Dad by the shoulder, but Dad pushed him off and assumed a fighting stance. Some of the men in the crowd clutched Dad's arms, and Mom asked Dad to please do what the guard had ordered.

Dad nodded and held out his hands in a peace gesture. He led us through the crowd and toward the exit, chuckling and shaking his head to let us kids know that these fools were not worth the time it would take to kick their butts. I could hear people around us whispering about the crazy drunk man and his dirty little urchin children, but who cared what they thought? None of them had ever had their hand licked by a cheetah.



IT WAS AROUND this time that Dad lost his job. He said there was nothing to worry about, because Phoenix was so big and growing so fast that he could find another job at a site where they hadn't spread lies about him. Then he got fired from his second job and from his third, and was kicked out of the electricians' union and started doing odd jobs and day work. Whatever money Mom had inherited from Grandma Smith had disappeared, and once again we started scraping by.

I didn't go hungry. Hot lunch at school cost a quarter, and we could usually afford that. When we couldn't and I told Mrs. Ellis, my fourth-grade teacher, that I had forgotten my quarter, she said her records indicated that someone had already paid for me. Even though it seemed awfully coincidental, I didn't want to push my luck by asking too many questions about who this someone was. I ate the hot lunch. Sometimes that lunch was all I had to eat all day, but I could get by just fine on one meal.

One afternoon when Brian and I had come home to an empty fridge, we went out to the alley behind the house looking for bottles to redeem. Down the alley was the delivery bay of a warehouse. A big green Dumpster stood in the parking lot. When no one was looking, Brian and I pushed open the lid, climbed up, and dived inside to search for bottles. I was afraid it might be full of yucky garbage. Instead, we found an astonishing treasure: cardboard boxes filled with loose chocolates. Some of them were whitish and dried-out-looking, and some were covered with a mysterious green mold, but most of them were fine. We pigged out on chocolates, and from then on, whenever Mom was too busy to make dinner or we were out of food, we'd go back to the Dumpster to see if any new chocolate was waiting for us. From time to time, it was.

For some reason, there were no kids Maureen's age on North Third Street. She was too young to run around with me and Brian, so she spent

most of her time riding up and down on the red tricycle Dad had bought for her, and playing with her imaginary friends. They all had names, and she would talk to them for hours. They'd laugh together, carry on detailed conversations, even argue. One day she came home in tears, and when I asked her why she was crying, she said she'd gotten into a fight with Suzie Q., one of the imaginary friends.

Maureen was five years younger than Brian, and Mom said that since she didn't have any allies in the family around her age, she needed special treatment. Mom decided Maureen needed to enroll in preschool, but she said she didn't want her youngest daughter dressed in the thrift-store clothes the rest of us wore. Mom told us we would have to go shoplifting.

"Isn't that a sin?" I asked Mom.

"Not exactly," Mom said. "God doesn't mind you bending the rules a little if you have a good reason. It's sort of like justifiable homicide. This is justifiable pilfering."

Mom's plan was for her and Maureen to go into the dressing room of a store with an armful of new clothes for Maureen to try on. When they came out, Mom would tell the clerk she didn't like any of the dresses. At that point Lori, Brian, and I would create a ruckus to distract the clerk while Mom hid a dress under a raincoat she would be carrying on her arm.

We got three or four nice dresses for Maureen that way, but on one excursion, when Brian and I were pretending to punch each other out and Mom was in the process of slipping a dress under her raincoat, the saleslady turned to Mom and asked if she intended to buy that dress she was holding. Mom had no choice but to pay for it. "Fourteen dollars for a child's dress!" she said as we left the store. "It's highway robbery!"

Dad devised an ingenious way to come up with extra cash. He figured out that when you made a withdrawal from the drive-through window at the bank, it took a few minutes for the transaction to register in the computer. So he would open a bank account, and a week or so later, he would withdraw all the money from a teller inside the bank while Mom withdrew the same amount from the drive-through window. Lori said it sounded outright felonious, but Dad said all he was doing was outsmarting the fat-cat bank owners who shylocked the common man by charging usurious interest rates.

"Wear innocent expressions," Mom told us kids the first time we dropped Dad off in front of the bank.



"Will we have to go to a juvenile-delinquent center if we get busted?" I asked.

Mom assured me it was all perfectly legal. "People overdraw their accounts all the time," she said. "If we get caught, we'll just pay a little overdraft fee." She explained that it was sort of like taking out a loan without all the messy paperwork. But as we drove up to the teller's window, Mom seemed to get edgy and giggled nervously as she passed the withdrawal slip through the bulletproof window. I think she was enjoying the thrill of taking from the rich.

After the woman inside passed us the cash, Mom drove around to the front of the bank. In a minute, Dad strolled out. He climbed into the front of the car, turned around, and, with a wicked grin, held up a stack of bills and riffled them with his thumb.

The reason Dad was having a tough time getting steady work—as he kept trying to tell us—was that the electricians' union in Phoenix was corrupt. It was run by the mob, he said, which controlled all the construction projects in the city, so before he could get a decent job, he had to run organized crime out of town. That required a lot of undercover research, and the best place to gather information was at the bars the mobsters owned. So Dad started spending most of his time in those joints.

Mom rolled her eyes whenever Dad mentioned his research. I began to have my own doubts about what he was up to. He came home in such a drunken fury that Mom usually hid while we kids tried to calm him down. He broke windows and smashed dishes and furniture until he'd spent all his anger; then he'd look around at the mess and at us kids standing there. When he recognized what he'd done, he hung his head in weariness and shame. Then he'd sink to his knees and pitch forward face-first on the floor.

After Dad had collapsed, I would try to pick up the place, but Mom always made me stop. She'd been reading books on how to cope with an alcoholic, and they said that drunks didn't remember their rampages, so if you cleaned up after them, they'd think nothing had happened. "Your father needs to see the mess he's making of our lives," Mom said. But when Dad got up, he'd act as if all the wreckage didn't exist, and no one

discussed it with him. The rest of us had to get used to stepping over broken furniture and shattered glass.

Mom had taught us to pick Dad's pocket when he passed out. We got pretty good at it. Once, after I'd rolled Dad and collected a handful of change, I pried his fingers loose from the bottle in his hand. It was three quarters empty. I stared at the amber liquid. Mom never touched the stuff, and I wondered what Dad found so irresistible. I opened the bottle and sniffed. The awful smell stung my nose, but after working up my courage, I took a swig. It had a hideously thick taste, smoky, and so hot it burned my tongue. I ran to the bathroom, spat it out, and rinsed my mouth.

"I just took a swig of booze," I told Brian. "It's the worst thing I've ever tasted in my life."

Brian grabbed the bottle out of my hand. He emptied it into the kitchen sink, then led me out to the shed and opened up a wooden trunk in the back marked *TOY BOX*. It was filled with empty liquor bottles. Whenever Dad passed out, Brian said, he took the bottle Dad had been drinking, emptied it, and hid it in the trunk. He'd wait until he had ten or twelve, then tote them to a garbage can a few blocks away, because if Dad saw the empty bottles, he would get furious.

"I have a really good feeling about this Christmas," Mom announced in early December. Lori pointed out that the last few months hadn't gone so well.

"Exactly," Mom said. "This is God's way of telling us to take charge of our own fates. God helps those who help themselves."

She had such a good feeling that she'd decided that this year we were going to celebrate Christmas on Christmas Day, instead of a week later.

Mom was an expert thrift-store shopper. She read the labels on the clothes and turned over dishes and vases to study the markings on the bottom. She had no qualms about telling a saleslady that a dress marked at twenty-five cents was worth only a dime, and she usually got it at that price. Mom took us thrift-store shopping for weeks before that Christmas, giving us each a dollar to spend on presents. I got a red glass bud vase for Mom, an onyx ashtray for Dad, a model-car kit for Brian, a book about elves for Lori, and a stuffed tiger with a loose ear that Mom helped me sew back in place for Maureen.



On Christmas morning, Mom took us down to a gas station that sold Christmas trees. She selected a tall, dark, but slightly dried-out Douglas fir. "This poor old tree isn't going to sell by the end of the day, and it needs someone to love it," she told the man and offered him three dollars. The man looked at the tree and looked at Mom and looked at us kids. My dress had buttons missing. Holes were appearing along the seams of Maureen's T-shirt. "Lady, this one's been marked down to a buck," he said.

We carried the tree home and decorated it with Grandma's antique ornaments: ornate colored balls, fragile glass partridges, and lights with long tubes of bubbling water. I couldn't wait to open my presents, but Mom insisted that we celebrate Christmas in the Catholic fashion, getting to the gifts only after we'd attended midnight mass. Dad, knowing that all the bars and liquor stores would be closed on Christmas, had stocked up in advance. He'd popped open the first Budweiser before breakfast, and by the time midnight mass rolled around, he was having trouble standing up.

I suggested that maybe this once, Mom should let Dad off the hook about going to mass, but she said stopping by God's house for a quick hello was especially important at times like this, so Dad staggered and lurched into the church with us. During the sermon, the priest discussed the miracle of Immaculate Conception and the Virgin Birth.

"Virgin, my ass!" Dad shouted. "Mary was a sweet Jewish broad who got herself knocked up!"

The service came to a dead halt. Everyone was staring. The choir had swiveled around in unison and were gaping openmouthed. Even the priest was speechless.

Dad had a satisfied grin on his face. "And Jesus H. Christ is the world's best-loved bastard!"

The ushers grimly escorted us to the street. On the way home, Dad put his arm around my shoulder for support. "Baby girl, if your boyfriend ever gets into your panties and you find yourself in a family way, swear that it was Immaculate Conception and start mouthing off about miracles," he said. "Then just pass around the collection plate come Sunday."

I didn't like Dad when he talked like that, and I tried to move away from him, but he just held me tighter.

Back at home, we tried to calm Dad down. Mom gave him one of his

presents, a brass cigarette lighter from the nineteen twenties in the shape of a Scottish terrier. Dad flicked it a couple of times, swaying back and forth; then he held it up to the light and studied it.

"Let's really light up this Christmas," Dad said and thrust the lighter into the Douglas fir. The dried-out needles caught fire immediately. Flames leaped through the branches with a crackling noise. Christmas ornaments exploded from the heat.

For a few moments, we were too stunned to do anything. Mom called for blankets and water. We were able to put the fire out, but only by knocking down the tree, smashing most of the ornaments, and ruining all our presents. Dad sat on the sofa the whole time, laughing and telling Mom that he was doing her a favor because trees were pagan symbols of worship.

Once the fire was out and the sodden, burned tree lay smoldering on the floor, we all just stood there. No one tried to wring Dad's neck or yell at him or even point out that he'd ruined the Christmas his family had spent weeks planning—the Christmas that was supposed to be the best we'd ever had. When Dad went crazy, we all had our own ways of shutting down and closing off, and that was what we did that night.



I TURNED TEN THAT spring, but birthdays were not a big deal around our house. Sometimes Mom stuck a few candles in some ice cream and we all sang “Happy Birthday.” Mom and Dad might get us a little present—a comic book or a pair of shoes or a package of underwear—but at least as often, they forgot our birthdays altogether.

So I was surprised when, on the day I turned ten, Dad took me outside to the back patio and asked what I wanted most in the world. “It’s a special occasion, seeing as how it puts you into double digits,” he said. “You’re growing up damn fast, Mountain Goat. You’ll be on your own in no time, and if there’s anything I can do for you now, before you’re gone, I want to do it.”

I knew Dad wasn’t talking about buying me some extravagant present, like a pony or a dollhouse. He was asking what he could do, now that I was almost a grown-up, to make my last years as a kid everything I hoped they’d be. There was only one thing I truly wanted, something that I knew would change all our lives, but I was afraid to ask for it. Just thinking about saying the words out loud made me nervous.

Dad saw my hesitation. He knelt so that he was looking up at me. “What is it?” he said. “Ask away.”

“It’s big.”

“Just ask, baby.”

“I’m scared.”

“You know if it’s humanly possible, I’ll get it for you. And if it ain’t humanly possible, I’ll die trying.”

I looked up at the thin swirls of clouds high in the blue Arizona sky. Keeping my eyes fastened on those distant clouds, I took a breath and said, “Do you think you could maybe stop drinking?”

Dad said nothing. He was staring down at the cement patio, and when he turned to me, his eyes had a wounded look, like a dog who’s been kicked. “You must be awfully ashamed of your old man,” he said.

“No,” I said quickly. “It’s just I think Mom would be a lot happier. Plus, we’d have the extra money.”

“You don’t have to explain,” Dad said. His voice was barely a whisper. He stood up and walked into the yard and sat down under the orange trees. I followed and sat down next to him. I was going to take his hand, but before I could reach for it, he said, “If you don’t mind, honey, I think I’d like to sit here by myself for a while.”

In the morning Dad told me that for the next few days, he was going to keep to himself in his bedroom. He wanted us kids to steer clear of him, to stay outside all day and play. Everything went fine for the first day. On the second day, when I came home from school, I heard a terrible groaning coming from the bedroom.

“Dad?” I called. There was no answer. I opened the door.

Dad was tied to the bed with ropes and belts. I don’t know if he had done it himself or if Mom helped him, but he was thrashing about, bucking and pulling at the restraints, yelling “No!” and “Stop!” and “Oh my God!” His face was gray and dripping with sweat. I called out to him again, but he didn’t see or hear me. I went into the kitchen and filled an empty orange-juice jug with water. I sat with the jug next to Dad’s door in case he got thirsty. Mom saw me and told me to go outside and play. I told her I wanted to help Dad. She said there was nothing I could do, but I stayed by the door anyway.

Dad’s delirium continued for days. When I came home from school, I’d get the jug of water, take up my position by the door, and wait there until bedtime. Brian and Maureen played outside, and Lori kept to the far side of the house. Mom painted in her studio. No one talked much about what was going on. One night when we were eating dinner, Dad let out a particularly hideous cry. I looked at Mom, who was stirring her soup as if it were an ordinary evening, and that was when I lost it.

“Do something!” I yelled at her. “You’ve got to do something to help Dad!”

“Your father’s the only one who can help himself,” Mom said. “Only he knows how to fight his own demons.”

After the better part of a week, Dad’s delirium stopped, and he asked us to come talk to him in the bedroom. He was propped up on a pillow,



paler and thinner than I'd ever seen him. He took the water jug I offered him. His hands were shaking so badly that he had trouble holding it, and water dribbled down his chin as he drank.

A few days later, Dad was able to walk around, but he had no appetite, and his hands still trembled. I told Mom that maybe I had made a terrible mistake, but Mom said sometimes you have to get sicker before you can get better. Within a few more days, Dad seemed almost normal, except that he'd become tentative, even kind of shy. He smiled at us kids a lot and squeezed our shoulders, sometimes leaning on us to steady himself.

"I wonder what life will be like now," I said to Lori.

"The same," she said. "He tried stopping before, but it never lasted."

"This time it will."

"How do you know?"

"It's his present to me."

Dad spent the summer recuperating. For days on end, he'd sit under the orange trees reading. By early fall, he had recovered most of his strength. To celebrate his new life on the wagon, and to put some distance between himself and his drinking haunts, he decided that the Walls clan should take a long camping trip to the Grand Canyon. We'd avoid the park rangers and find a cave somewhere along the river. We'd swim and fish and cook our catch over an open fire. Mom and Lori could paint, and Dad and Brian and I could climb the cliffs and study the canyon's geological strata. It would be like old times. We kids didn't need to be going to school, he said. He and Mom could instruct us better than any of those shit-for-brains teachers. "You, Mountain Goat, can put together a rock collection the likes of which has never been seen," Dad told me.

Everyone loved the idea. Brian and I were so excited we did a jig right there on the living room floor. We packed blankets, food, canteens, fishing line, the lavender blanket Maureen took everywhere, Lori's paper and pencils, Mom's easel and canvases and brushes and paints. What couldn't fit in the trunk of the car, we tied to the top. We also took along Mom's fancy archery set, the one made of inlaid fruitwood, because Dad said you never know what wild game we might find in those canyon recesses. He promised Brian and me that we'd be shooting that bow and arrow like a couple of full-blooded Indian kids by the time we came

back. If we ever came back. Hell, we might decide to live in the Grand Canyon permanently.

We started out early the next morning. Once we got north of Phoenix, past all the tract-house suburbs, the traffic thinned, and Dad started going faster and faster. "There ain't no better feeling than being on the move," he said.

We were out in the desert now, the telephone poles snapping past. "Hey, Mountain Goat," he hollered. "How fast do you think I can make this car go?"

"Faster than the speed of light!" I said. I leaned over the front seat and watched the needle on the speedometer creep up. We were doing ninety miles an hour.

"You're gonna see that little needle go all the way off the dial," Dad said.

I could see his leg move as he stepped on the gas. We'd rolled down the windows, and maps and art paper and cigarette ashes were whipping around our heads. The speedometer needle crept past one hundred, the last number on the dial, and pushed into the empty space beyond. The car started shuddering, but Dad didn't let up on the accelerator. Mom covered her head with her arms and told Dad to slow down, but that only made him press on the gas even harder.

Suddenly, there was a clattering noise under the car. I looked back to make sure no important part had fallen off, and saw a cone of gray smoke billowing behind us. Just then white steam that smelled like iron started pouring out from the sides of the hood and blowing past the windows. The shuddering increased, and with a terrible coughing, clunking noise, the car began to slow. Soon it was going at no more than a crawl. Then the engine died altogether. We coasted for a few yards in silence before the car stopped.

"Now you've done it," Mom said.

We kids and Dad got out and pushed the car to the side of the road while Mom steered. Dad lifted the hood. I watched while he and Brian studied the smoking, grease-encrusted engine and discussed the parts by name. Then I went to sit in the car with Mom, Lori, and Maureen.

Lori gave me a disgusted look, as if she thought it was my fault that the car had broken down. "Why do you always encourage him?" she asked.



"Don't worry," I said. "Dad will fix it."

We sat there for a long time. I could see buzzards circling high in the distance, which reminded me of that ingrate Buster. Maybe I should have cut him some slack. With his broken wing and lifetime of eating road-kill, he probably had a lot to be ungrateful about. Too much hard luck can create a permanent meanness of spirit in any creature.

Finally, Dad shut the hood.

"You can fix it, can't you?" I asked.

"Of course," he said. "If I had the proper tools."

We'd have to temporarily postpone our expedition to the Grand Canyon, he told us. Our first priority now was to head back to Phoenix so he could get his hands on the right tools.

"How?" Lori asked.

Hitchhiking was one option, Dad said. But it might be hard finding a car with enough room to accommodate four kids and two adults. Since we were all so athletic, and since none of us were whiners, walking home would be no problem.

"It's almost eighty miles," Lori said.

"That's right," Dad said. If we covered three miles an hour for eight hours a day, we could make it in three days. We had to leave everything behind except Maureen's lavender blanket and the canteens. That included Mom's fruitwood archery set. Since Mom was attached to that archery set, which her father had given her, Dad had Brian and me hide it in an irrigation ditch. We could come back and retrieve it later.

Dad carried Maureen. To keep our spirits up, he called out *hup, two, three, four*, but Mom and Lori refused to march along in step. Eventually, Dad gave up, and it was quiet except for the sound of our feet crunching on the sand and rocks and the wind whipping off the desert. After walking for what seemed like a couple of hours, we reached a motel billboard that we had passed only a minute or so before the car broke down. The occasional car whizzed by, and Dad stuck out his thumb, but none of them stopped. Around midday, a big blue Buick with gleaming chrome bumpers slowed down and pulled onto the shoulder in front of us. A lady with a beauty-parlor hairdo rolled down the window.

"You poor people!" she exclaimed. "Are you okay?"

She asked us where we were going, and when we told her Phoenix, she offered us a ride. The air-conditioning in the Buick was so cold that goose

bumps popped up on my arms and legs. The lady had Lori and me pass around Coca-Colas and sandwiches from a cooler in the foot well. Dad said he wasn't hungry.

The lady kept talking about how her daughter had been driving down the highway and had seen us and, when she got to the lady's house, had told her about this poor family walking along the side of the road. "And I said to her, I said to my daughter, 'Why, I can't leave those poor people out there.' I told my daughter, 'Those poor kids must be dying of thirst, poor things.'"

"We're not poor," I said. She had used that word one too many times.

"Of course you're not," the lady quickly replied. "I didn't mean it that way."

But I could tell that she had. The lady grew quiet, and for the rest of the trip, no one said much. As soon as she dropped us off, Dad disappeared. I waited on the front steps until bedtime, but he didn't come home.



**THREE DAYS LATER**, while Lori and I were sitting at Grandma's old upright piano trying to teach each other to play, we heard heavy, uneven footsteps at the front door. We turned and saw Dad. He tripped on the coffee table. When we tried to help him, he cursed and lurched at us, swinging his fist. He wanted to know where that goddamn sorry-assed mother of ours was, and he got so mad when we didn't tell him that he pulled over Grandma's china closet, sending her fine bone china crashing to the floor. Brian came running in. He tried to grab Dad's leg, but Dad kicked him off.

Dad yanked out the silverware drawer and hurled the forks and spoons and knives across the room, then picked up one of the chairs and smashed it on Grandma's table. "Rose Mary, where the goddamn hell are you, you stinking bitch?" he yelled. "Where is that whore hiding?"

He found Mom in the bathroom, crouched in the tub. As she darted past him, he grabbed her dress, and she started flailing. They fought their way into the dining room, and he knocked her to the floor. She reached into the pile of kitchen utensils that Dad had thrown there, grabbed a butcher knife, and slashed it through the air in front of him.

Dad leaned back. "A knife fight, eh?" He grinned. "Okay, if that's what you want." He picked up a knife, too, tossing it from hand to hand. Then he knocked the knife out of Mom's hand, dropped his own knife, and wrestled her to the floor. We kids pounded on Dad's back and begged him to stop, but he ignored us. At last, he pinned Mom's hands behind her head.

"Rose Mary, you're one hell of a woman," Dad said. Mom told him he was a stinking rotten drunk. "Yeah, but you love this old drunk, don't you?" Dad said. Mom at first said no, she didn't, but Dad kept asking her again and again, and when she finally said yes, the fight disappeared from both of them. Vanished as if it had never existed. Dad started laughing and hugging Mom, who was laughing and hugging him. It was as if they were so happy they hadn't killed each other that they had fallen in love all over again.

I didn't feel like celebrating. After all he'd put himself through, I couldn't believe Dad had gone back to the booze.

With Dad drinking again, and no money coming in, Mom began to talk about moving east, to West Virginia, where Dad's parents lived. Maybe his parents would help keep him in line. If nothing else, they could help us out financially, like Grandma Smith had done from time to time.

We'd love it in West Virginia, she told us. We'd live in the forest in the mountains with the squirrels and the chipmunks. We could meet our grandma and grandpa Walls, who were genuine hillbillies.

Mom made living in West Virginia sound like another great adventure, and pretty soon all us kids had signed on for the trip. Dad hated the idea, however, and refused to help Mom, so she plotted on her own. Since we had never retrieved the car—or any of our stuff—from the failed Grand Canyon expedition, the first thing Mom needed was a set of wheels. She said that God works in mysterious ways, and it just so happened that she had inherited some land in Texas when Grandma died. She waited until she received a check for several hundred dollars from the company that was leasing the drilling rights. Then she went to buy a used car.

A local radio station had a promotional broadcast once a week from a car lot that we passed on our way to school. Every Wednesday the DJs and used-car-salesmen would rave on-air about the incredible deals and the lowest prices around; to prove their point, they'd announce the Piggy Bank Special: some car priced under a thousand dollars that they'd sell to the first lucky caller. Mom set her sights on a Piggy Bank Special. She wasn't taking any chances on being the first caller; she went down with her cash and sat in the dealership office while we kids waited on a park bench across the street, listening to the broadcast on a transistor radio.

The Piggy Bank Special that Wednesday was a 1956 Oldsmobile, which Mom bought for two hundred dollars. We listened as she took to the airwaves to tell the radio audience she knew a heck of a bargain when she saw one.

Mom was not allowed to test-drive the Piggy Bank Special before buying it. The car lurched and stalled several times on the way home. It was impossible to tell whether it was Mom's driving or whether we had bought a lemon.



We kids were not all that thrilled about the idea of Mom driving us cross-country. She didn't have a valid driver's license, for one thing, and she'd always been a terrible driver. If Dad got too drunk, she ended up behind the wheel, but cars never seemed to run right for Mom. Once we were driving through downtown Phoenix and she couldn't get the brakes to work and she had Brian and me stick our heads out the windows and scream, "No brakes! No brakes!" as we rolled through intersections and she looked for something relatively soft to crash into. We ended up plowing into a Dumpster behind a supermarket and walking home.

Mom said that anyone critical of her driving could help with the task. Now that we had a car, she continued, we could leave the next morning. It was October, and we had been in school for just over a month, but Mom said we had no time to tell our teachers we were withdrawing or to get any of our school records. When we enrolled in West Virginia, she'd vouch for our scholastic achievement, and once our new teachers heard us read, they'd realize we were all gifted.

Dad was still refusing to come with us. When we left, he said, he was going to head out into the desert on his own, to become a prospector. I asked Mom if we were going to sell the house on North Third Street or rent it out. "Neither," she said. "It's my house." She explained that it was nice to own something for a change, and she saw no point in selling it just because we were moving. She didn't want to rent it, either, since she was opposed to anyone else living in her house. We'd leave it as it was. To prevent burglars and vandals from breaking in, we'd hang laundry on the clothesline and put dirty dishes in the sink. That way, Mom pointed out, potential intruders would think the house was occupied and would be fooled into believing that the people who lived there might come home any second.

The following morning, we packed up the car while Dad sat in the living room sulking. We tied Mom's art supplies to the roof and filled the trunk with pots and pans and blankets. Mom had bought each of us a warm coat at a thrift store so we'd have something to wear in West Virginia, where it got so cold in the winter that it snowed. Mom said we could each take only one thing, like the time we left Battle Mountain. I wanted to bring my bike, but Mom said it was too big, so I brought my geode.

I ran into the backyard and said goodbye to the orange trees, and then

I ran out front to get in the Oldsmobile. I had to crawl over Brian and sit in the middle because he and Lori had already staked out the window seats. Maureen was in the front seat with Mom, who had started the engine and was practicing her gear shifts. Dad was still in the house, so I leaned over Brian and shouted at the top of my voice. Dad appeared in the doorway, his arms folded across his chest.

"Dad, please come, we need you!" I hollered.

Lori and Brian and Mom and Maureen all chimed in. "We need you!" we shouted. "You're the head of the family! You're the dad! Come on!"

Dad stood there looking at us for a minute. Then he flicked the cigarette he was smoking into the yard, closed the front door, loped over to the car, and told Mom to move aside—he was driving.