

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

door cautiously. The rat had climbed out of the sugar bowl and leaped up onto the stove. We could see his teeth marks on the pile of potatoes, our dinner, on a plate on the stove. Brian threw the cast-iron skillet at the rat. It hit him and clanged on the floor, but instead of fleeing, the rat hissed at us, as if we were the intruders. We ran out of the kitchen, slammed the door, and stuffed rags in the gap beneath it.

That night Maureen, who was five, was too terrified to sleep. She kept on saying that the rat was coming to get her. She could hear it creeping nearer and nearer. I told her to stop being such a wuss.

"I really do hear the rat," she said. "I think he's close to me."

I told her she was letting fear get the best of her, and since this was one of those times that we had electricity, I turned on the light to prove it. There, crouched on Maureen's lavender blanket, a few inches away from her face, was the rat. She screamed and pushed off her covers, and the rat jumped to the floor. I got a broom and tried to hit the rat with the handle, but it dodged me. Brian grabbed a baseball bat, and we maneuvered it, hissing and snapping, into a corner.

Our dog, Tinkle, the part-Jack Russell terrier who had followed Brian home one day, caught the rat in his jaws and banged it on the floor until it was dead. When Mom ran into the room, Tinkle was strutting around, all pumped up like the proud beast-slayer that he was. Mom said she felt a little sorry for the rat. "Rats need to eat, too," she pointed out. Even though it was dead, it deserved a name, she went on, so she christened it Rufus. Brian, who had read that primitive warriors placed the body parts of their victims on stakes to scare off their enemies, hung Rufus by the tail from a poplar tree in front of our house the next morning. That afternoon we heard the sound of gunshots. Mr. Freeman, who lived next door, had seen the rat hanging upside down. Rufus was so big, Mr. Freeman thought he was a possum, went and got his hunting rifle, and blew him clean away. There was nothing left of Rufus but a mangled piece of tail.

After the Rufus incident, I slept with a baseball bat in my bed. Brian slept with a machete in his. Maureen could barely sleep at all. She kept dreaming that she was being eaten by rats, and she used every excuse she could to spend the night at friends' houses. Mom and Dad shrugged off the

Rufus incident. They told us that we had done battle with fiercer adversaries in the past, and we would again someday.

"What are we going to do about the garbage pit?" I asked. "It's almost filled up."

"Enlarge it," Mom said.

"We can't keep dumping garbage out there," I said. "What are people going to think?"

"Life's too short to worry about what other people think," Mom said. "Anyway, they should accept us for who we are."

I was convinced that people might be more accepting of us if we made an effort to improve the way 93 Little Hobart Street looked. There were plenty of things we could do, I felt, that would cost almost nothing. Some people around Welch cut tires into two semicircles, painted them white, and used them as edging for their gardens. Maybe we couldn't afford to build the Glass Castle quite yet, but certainly we could put painted tires around our front yard to spruce it up. "It would make us fit in a little bit," I pleaded with Mom.

"It sure would," Mom said. But when it came to Welch, she had no interest in fitting in. "I'd rather have a yard filled with genuine garbage than with trashy lawn ornaments."

I kept looking for other ways to make improvements. One day Dad brought home a five-gallon can of house paint left over from some job he'd worked on. The next morning I pried the can open. It was nearly full of bright yellow paint. Dad had brought some paintbrushes home, too. A layer of yellow paint, I realized, would completely transform our dingy gray house. It would look, at least from the outside, almost like the houses other people lived in.

I was so excited by the prospect of living in a perky yellow home that I could barely sleep that night. I got up early the next day and tied my hair back, ready to begin the housepainting. "If we all work together, we can get it done in a day or two," I told everyone.

But Dad said 93 Little Hobart Street was such a dump that we shouldn't waste time or energy on it that we could be devoting to the Glass Castle. Mom said she thought bright yellow houses were tacky. Brian and Lori said we didn't have the ladders and scaffolding we needed.

Dad was making no visible progress on the Glass Castle, and I knew that the can of yellow paint would sit on the porch unless I undertook the

job myself. I'd borrow a ladder or make one, I decided. I was certain that once everyone saw the amazing transformation of the house begin, they'd all join in.

Out on the porch, I opened the can and stirred the paint with a stick, blending in the oil that had risen to the surface until the paint, which was the color of buttercups, had turned creamy. I dipped in a fat brush and spread the paint along the old clapboard siding in long, smooth strokes. It went on bright and glossy and looked even better than I had hoped. I started on the far side of the porch, around the door that went into the kitchen. In a few hours, I had covered everything that could be reached from the porch. Parts of the front were still unpainted, and so were the sides, but I had used less than a quarter of the paint. If everyone else helped, we could paint all the areas I couldn't reach, and in no time we would have a cheerful yellow house.

But neither Mom nor Dad nor Brian nor Lori nor Maureen was impressed. "So part of the front of the house is yellow now," Lori said. "That's really going to turn things around for us."

I was going to have to finish the job myself. I tried to make a ladder from bits of scrap wood, but it kept collapsing whenever I put my weight on it. I was still trying to build a sturdy ladder when, during a cold snap a few days later, my can of paint froze solid. When it got warm enough for the paint to thaw, I opened the can. During the freeze, the chemicals had separated and the once-smooth liquid was as lumpy and runny as curdled milk. I stirred it as hard as I could and kept stirring even after I knew the paint was ruined, because I also knew that we'd never get more, and instead of a freshly painted yellow house, or even a dingy gray one, we now had a weird-looking half-finished patch job—one that announced to the world that the people inside the house wanted to fix it up but lacked the gumption to get the work done.

LITTLE HOBART STREET led up into one of those hollows so deep and narrow that people joked you had to pipe in the sunlight. The neighborhood did have lots of kids—Maureen had real friends for the first time—and we all tended to hang out at the National Guard armory at the foot of the hill. The boys played tackle football on the training field. Most of the girls my age spent their afternoons sitting on the brick wall surrounding the armory, combing their hair and touching up their lip gloss and pretending to get all indignant but secretly loving it if a crew-cut reservist wolf-whistled at them. One of the girls, Cindy Thompson, made a special effort to befriend me, but it turned out that what she really wanted was to recruit me for the junior Ku Klux Klan. Neither putting on makeup nor wearing a sheet had much appeal for me, so I played football with the boys, who would waive their guys-only rule and let me join a team if they were short a player.

The better-off folk of Welch had not exactly flocked to our part of town. A few miners lived along the street, but most of the grown-ups didn't work at all. Some of the moms had no husbands, and some of the dads had black lung. The rest were either too distracted by their troubles or just plain unmotivated, so pretty much everyone grudgingly accepted some form of public aid. Although we were the poorest family on Little Hobart Street, Mom and Dad never applied for welfare or food stamps, and they always refused charity. When teachers gave us bags of clothes from church drives, Mom made us take them back. "We can take care of our own," Mom and Dad liked to say. "We don't accept handouts from anyone."

If things got tight, Mom kept reminding us that some of the other kids on Little Hobart Street had it tougher than we did. The twelve Grady kids had no dad—he'd either died in a mine cave-in or run off with a whore, depending on whom you listened to—and their mom spent her days in bed suffering from migraines. As a result, the Grady boys ran completely wild. It was hard to tell them apart, because they all wore blue

jeans and torn T-shirts and had their heads shaved bald to keep away lice. When the oldest boy found their dad's old pump-action shotgun under their mom's bed, he decided to get in some target practice on Brian and me, firing buckshot at us as we ran for our lives through the woods.

And then there were the Halls. All six of the Hall children had been born mentally retarded, and although they were now middle-aged, they all still lived at home with their mom and dad. When I was friendly to the oldest, Kenny Hall, who was forty-two, he developed a powerful crush on me. The other kids in the neighborhood teased Kenny by telling him that if he gave them a dollar or stripped down to his skivvies and showed them his wanker, they'd arrange for me to go on a date with him. On a Saturday night, if he'd been set up like that, he'd come stand on the street in front of our house, sobbing and hollering about me not keeping our date, and I'd have to go down and explain to him that the other kids had played a trick on him and that, although he did have many admirable qualities, I had a policy against dating older men.

The family who had it the toughest on Little Hobart Street, I would have to say, was the Pastors. The mother, Ginnie Sue Pastor, was the town whore. Ginnie Sue Pastor was thirty-three years old and had eight daughters and one son. Their names all ended with Y. Her husband, Clarence Pastor, had black lung and sat on the front porch of their huge sagging house all day long, but he never smiled or waved at passersby. Just sat there like he was frozen. Everyone in town said he'd been impotent for years and none of the Pastor kids was his.

Ginnie Sue Pastor pretty much kept to herself. At first I wondered if she lay around in a lacy negligee all day, smoking cigarettes and waiting for gentlemen callers. Back in Battle Mountain, the women lounging on the front porch of the Green Lantern—I'd long since figured out what they really did—wore white lipstick and black mascara and partially unbuttoned blouses that showed the tops of their brassieres. But Ginnie Sue Pastor didn't look like a whore. She was a blowsy woman with dyed yellow hair, and from time to time we saw her out in the front yard, chopping wood or filling a scuttle from the coal pile. She usually wore the same kinds of aprons and canvas farm coats worn by the rest of the women on Little Hobart Street. She looked like any other mom.

I also wondered how she did her whoring with all those kids to look after. One night I saw a car pull up in front of the Pastor house and blink

its headlights twice. After a minute, Ginnie Sue came running out the door and climbed into the front seat. Then the car drove off.

Kathy was Ginnie Sue Pastor's oldest daughter. The other kids treated her like a total pariah, crowing that her mother was a "hoor" and calling her "lice girl." Truth was, she did have a pretty advanced case of head lice. She kept trying to befriend me. One afternoon on the way home from school, when I told her we'd lived for a while in California, she lit up. She said her mama had always wanted to go there. She asked if maybe I'd come over to her place and tell her mama all about life in California.

Of course I went. I'd never gotten inside the Green Lantern, but now I'd get an up-close look at a genuine prostitute. There were lots of things I wanted to know: Was whoring easy money? Was it ever any fun, or was it just gross? Did Kathy and her sisters and her father all know Ginnie Sue Pastor was a whore? What did they think of it? I didn't plan on flat out asking these questions, but I did think that by getting inside the Pastors' house and meeting Ginnie Sue, I'd come away with some idea of the answers.

Clarence Pastor, sitting on the porch, ignored Kathy and me as we walked by. Inside, there were all these tiny rooms connected together like boxcars. Because of the way the house was settling on the eroding hillside, the floors and ceilings and windows tilted at different angles. There were no paintings on the walls, but the Pastors had taped up pictures of smartly dressed women torn from Sears Roebuck catalogs.

Kathy's little sisters scampered around noisily, half dressed. None of them looked alike; one was redheaded, one a blonde, one had black hair, and there were all different shades of brown. Sweet Man, the youngest, crawled along the living room floor, sucking on a fat dill pickle. Ginnie Sue Pastor sat at the table in the kitchen. At her elbow was the carcass of a big expensive roaster, the kind we could hardly ever afford. She had a tired, lined face, but her smile was cheerful and open. "Pleased to meet you," she said to me, wiping her hands on her shirttail. "We ain't used to getting visitors."

Ginnie Sue offered us seats at the table. She had heavy breasts that swayed when she moved, and her blond hair was dark at the roots. "You-all help me with this bird, and I'll fix you a couple of Ginnie Sue's special chicken rolls." She turned to me. "You know how to pick a chicken clean?"

"I sure do," I said. I hadn't had anything to eat all day.

"Well, show me, then," Ginnie Sue said.

I went for a wing first, pulling apart the spindly double bones and getting all the meat trapped there. Then I set to work on the leg and thigh bones, snapping them at the joints and peeling off the tendons and digging out the marrow. Kathy and Ginnie Sue were also working on the bird, but soon they stopped to watch me. From the tail, I pulled that nice piece of meat that everybody misses. I turned the carcass upside down and scraped off the jellied fat and meat flecks with my fingernails. I stuck my arm elbow-deep into the bird to excavate any meat clinging to the rib cage.

"Girl," Ginnie Sue said, "in all my days, I have never seen no one pick a chicken clean like you."

I held up the spear-shaped cartilage in the breast bone, which most people don't eat, and bit down with a satisfying crunch.

Ginnie Sue scraped the meat into a bowl, mixed it with mayonnaise and Cheez Whiz, then crushed a handful of potato chips and added them. She spread the mixture onto two slices of Wonder bread, then rolled each slice into a cylinder and passed them to us. "Birds in a blanket," she said. They tasted great.

"Mama, Jeannette lived in California," Kathy said.

"That so?" Ginnie Sue said. "Live in California and be a stewardess, that was my dream." She sighed. "Never got beyond Bluefield."

I told her and Kathy about life in California. It quickly became clear they had no interest in desert mining towns, so I told them about San Francisco and then about Las Vegas, which wasn't exactly in California, but they didn't seem to care. I made the days we had spent there seem like years, and the showgirls I'd seen from a distance seem like close friends and neighbors. I described the glittering casinos and the glamorous high rollers, the palm trees and the swimming pools, the hotels with ice-cold air-conditioning and the restaurants where hostesses with long white gloves lit flaming desserts.

"It don't get no better than that!" Ginnie Sue said.

"No, ma'am, it sure don't," I told her.

Sweet Man came in crying, and Ginnie Sue picked him up and let him suck some mayonnaise off her finger. "You did good on that bird," Ginnie Sue told me. "You strike me as the kind of girl who's one day going

to be eating roast chicken and those on-fire desserts just as much as you want." She winked.

It was only on the way home that I realized I hadn't gotten answers to any of my questions. While I was sitting there talking to Ginnie Sue, I'd even forgotten she was a whore. One thing about whoring: It put a chicken on the table.

WE FOUGHT A LOT in Welch. Not just to fend off our enemies but to fit in. Maybe it was because there was so little to do in Welch; maybe it was because life there was hard and it made people hard; maybe it was because of all the bloody battles over unionizing the mines; maybe it was because mining was dangerous and cramped and dirty work and it put all the miners in bad moods and they came home and took it out on their wives, who took it out on their kids, who took it out on other kids. Whatever the reason, it seemed that just about everyone in Welch—men, women, boys, girls—liked to fight.

There were street brawls, bar stabbings, parking-lot beatings, wife slappings, and toddler whalings. Sometimes it was simply a matter of someone throwing a stray punch, and it would all be over before you knew it had started. Other times it would be more like a twelve-round prizefight, with spectators cheering on the bloody, sweating opponents. Then there were the grudges and feuds that went on for years, a couple of brothers beating up some guy because back in the fifties his father had beaten up their father, a woman shooting her best friend for sleeping with her husband and the best friend's brother then stabbing the husband. You'd walk down McDowell Street, and half the people you passed seemed to be nursing an injury sustained in local combat. There were shiners, split lips, swollen cheekbones, bruised arms, scraped knuckles, and bitten earlobes. We had lived in some pretty scrappy places back in the desert, but Mom said Welch was the fightingest town she'd ever seen.

Brian and Lori and Maureen and I got into more fights than most kids. Dinitia Hewitt and her friends were only the first in a whole line of little gangs who did battle with one or more of us. Other kids wanted to fight us because we had red hair, because Dad was a drunk, because we wore rags and didn't take as many baths as we should have, because we lived in a falling-down house that was partly painted yellow and had a

pit filled with garbage, because they'd go by our dark house at night and see that we couldn't even afford electricity.

But we always fought back, usually as a team. Our most spectacular fight, and our most audacious tactical victory—the Battle of Little Hobart Street—took place against Ernie Goad and his friends when I was ten and Brian was nine. Ernie Goad was a pug-nosed, thick-necked kid who had little eyes set practically on the sides of his head, like a whale. He acted as if it was his sworn mission to drive the Walls family out of town. It started one day when I was playing with some other kids on the tank parked next to the armory. Ernie Goad appeared and began throwing rocks at me and yelling that the Wallses should all leave Welch because we were stinking it up so bad.

I threw a couple of rocks back and told him to leave me alone.

"Make me," Ernie said.

"I don't make garbage," I shouted. "I burn it." This was usually a fool-proof comeback, making up in scorn what it lacked in originality, but on this occasion it backfired.

"Y'all Wallses don't burn garbage!" Ernie yelled back. "Y'all throw it in a hole next to your house! You live in it!"

I tried to think of a comeback to his comeback, but my mind seized up because what Ernie had said was true: We did live in garbage.

Ernie stuck his face in mine. "Garbage! You live in garbage 'cause you *are* garbage!"

I shoved him good and hard, then turned to the other kids, hoping for backup, but they were easing away and looking down, as if they were ashamed to have been caught playing with a girl who had a garbage pit next to her house.

That Saturday, Brian and I were reading on the sofa bed when one of the windowpanes shattered and a rock landed on the floor. We ran to the door. Ernie and three of his friends were pedaling their bikes up and down Little Hobart Street, whooping madly. "Garbage! Garbage! Y'all are a bunch of garbage!"

Brian went out on the porch. One of the kids hurled another rock that hit Brian in the head. He staggered back, then ran down the steps, but

Ernie and his friends pedaled away, shrieking. Brian came back up the stairs, blood trickling down his cheek and onto his T-shirt and a pump knot already swelling up above his eyebrow. Ernie's gang returned a few minutes later, throwing stones and shouting that they had actually seen the pigsty where the Walls kids lived and that they were going to tell the whole school it was even worse than everyone said.

This time both Brian and I chased after them. Even though they outnumbered us, they were enjoying the game of taunting us too much to make a stand. They rode down to the first switchback and got away.

"They'll be back," Brian said.

"What are we going to do?" I asked.

Brian sat thinking, then told me he had a plan. He found some rope under the house and led me up to a clearing in the hillside above Little Hobart Street. A few weeks earlier, Brian and I had dragged an old mattress up there because we were thinking of camping out. Brian explained how we could make a catapult, like the medieval ones we'd read about, by piling rocks on the mattress and rigging it with ropes looped over tree branches. We quickly assembled the contraption and tested it once, jerking back on the ropes at the count of three. It worked—a minor avalanche of rocks rained onto the street below. It was, we were convinced, enough to kill Ernie Goad and his gang, which was what we fully intended to do: kill them and commandeer their bikes, leaving their bodies in the street as a warning to others.

We piled the rocks back on the mattress, rerigged the catapult, and waited. After a couple of minutes, Ernie and his gang reappeared at the switchback. Each of them rode one-handed and carried an egg-sized rock in his throwing hand. They were proceeding single file, like a Pawnee war party, a few feet apart. We couldn't get them all at once, so we aimed for Ernie, who was at the head of the pack.

When he came within range, Brian gave the word, and we jerked back on the ropes. The mattress shot forward, and our arsenal of rocks flew through the air. I heard them thud against Ernie's body and clatter on the road. He screamed and cursed as his bike skidded. The kid behind Ernie ran into him, and they both fell. The other two turned around and sped off. Brian and I started hurling whatever rocks were at hand. Since they were downhill, we had a good line of fire and scored several direct hits,

the rocks dinging off their bikes, nicking the paint and denting the fenders.

Then Brian yelled, "Charge!" and we came barreling down the hill. Ernie and his friend jumped back on their bikes and furiously pedaled off before we could reach them. As they disappeared around the bend, Brian and I did a victory dance in the rock-strewn street, giving our own war whoops.

AS THE WEATHER warmed, a sort of rough beauty overtook the steep hillsides around Little Hobart Street. Jack-in-the-pulpits and bleeding hearts sprouted wild. White Queen Anne's lace and purple phlox and big orange daylilies blossomed along the road. During the winter you could see abandoned cars and refrigerators and the shells of deserted houses in the woods, but in the spring the vines and weeds and moss grew over them, and in no time they disappeared altogether.

One benefit of summer was that each day we had more light to read by. Mom really piled up on books. She came home from the Welch public library every week or two with a pillowcase full of novels, biographies, and histories. She snuggled into bed with them, looking up from time to time, saying she was sorry, she knew she should be doing something more productive, but like Dad, she had her addictions, and one of them was reading.

We all read, but I never had the feeling of togetherness I'd had in Battle Mountain when we all sat around in the depot with our books. In Welch, people drifted off to different corners of the house. Once night came, we kids all lay in our rope-and-cardboard beds, reading by flashlight or a candle we'd set on our wooden boxes, each of us creating our own little pool of dim light.

Lori was the most obsessive reader. Fantasy and science fiction dazzled her, especially *The Lord of the Rings*. When she wasn't reading, she was drawing orcs or hobbits. She tried to get everyone in the family to read the books. "They transport you to a different world," she'd say.

I didn't want to be transported to another world. My favorite books all involved people dealing with hardships. I loved *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Lord of the Flies*, and especially *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. I thought Francie Nolan and I were practically identical, except that she had lived fifty years earlier in Brooklyn and her mother always kept the house clean. Francie Nolan's father sure reminded me of Dad. If Francie saw the good in her father, even though most people considered him a shiftless

drunk, maybe I wasn't a complete fool for believing in mine. Or trying to believe in him. It was getting harder.

One night that summer, when I was lying in bed and everyone else was asleep, I heard the front door open and the sound of someone muttering and stumbling around in the darkness. Dad had come home. I went into the living room, where he was sitting at the drafting table. I could see by the moonlight coming through the window that his face and hair were matted with blood. I asked him what had happened.

"I got in a fight with a mountain," he said, "and the mountain won."

I looked at Mom asleep on the sofa bed, her head buried under a pillow. She was a deep sleeper and hadn't stirred. When I lit the kerosene lamp, I saw that Dad also had a big gash in his right forearm and a cut on his head so deep that I could see the white of his skull. I got a toothpick and tweezers and picked the rocky grit out of the gash. Dad didn't wince when I poured rubbing alcohol on the wound. Because of all his hair, I had no way to put on a bandage, and I told Dad I should shave the area around the cut. "Hell, honey, that would ruin my image," he said. "A fellow in my position's got to look presentable."

Dad studied the gash on his forearm. He tightened a tourniquet around his upper arm and told me to fetch Mom's sewing box. He fumbled around in it for silk thread but, unable to find any, decided that cotton would be fine. He threaded a needle with black thread, handed it to me, and pointed at the gash. "Sew it up," he said.

"Dad! I can't do that."

"Oh, go ahead, honey," he said. "I'd do it myself, except I can't do diddly with my left hand." He smiled. "Don't worry about me. I'm so thoroughly pickled, I won't feel a thing." Dad lit a cigarette and placed his arm on the table. "Go ahead," he said.

I pressed the needle up against Dad's skin and shuddered.

"Go ahead," he said again.

I pushed the needle and felt a slight tug when it pierced the skin. I wanted to close my eyes, but I needed to see. I pushed a little harder and felt the resistance of Dad's flesh. It was like sewing meat. It was sewing meat.

"I can't, Dad, I'm sorry, I just can't do it," I said.

"We'll do it together," Dad said.

Using his left hand, he guided my fingers as they pushed the needle all the way in through his skin and out the other side. A few droplets of blood appeared. I pulled the needle out and then gave the thread a gentle jerk to tighten it. I tied the two ends of the thread together, like Dad told me to, and then, to put in a second stitch, did it again. The gash was pretty big and could have used a few more stitches, but I couldn't bring myself to stick that needle in Dad's arm one more time.

We both looked at the two dark, slightly sloppy stitches.

"That's some fine handiwork," Dad said. "I'm mighty proud of you, Mountain Goat."

When I left the house the next morning, Dad was still asleep. When I came home in the evening, he was gone.

DAD HAD TAKEN TO disappearing for days at a time. When I asked him where he'd been, his explanations were either so vague or so improbable that I stopped asking. Whenever he did come home, he usually brought a bag of groceries in each arm. We'd gobble deviled-ham sandwiches with thick slices of onion while he told us about the progress of his investigation into the UMW and his latest moneymaking schemes. People were always offering him jobs, he'd explain, but he wasn't interested in work for hire, in saluting and sucking up and brownnosing and taking orders. "You'll never make a fortune working for the boss man," he said. He was focused on striking it rich. There might not be gold in West Virginia, but there were plenty of other ways to make your pile. For instance, he was working on a technology to burn coal more efficiently, so that even the lowest-grade coal could be mined and sold. There was a big market for that, he said, and it was going to make us rich beyond our dreams.

I listened to Dad's plans and tried to encourage him, hoping that what he was saying was true but also pretty certain it wasn't. Money would come in—and with it, food—on the rare occasion that Dad landed an odd job or Mom received a check from the oil company leasing the drilling rights on her land in Texas. Mom was always vague about how big the land was and where exactly it was, and she refused to consider selling it. All we knew was that every couple of months, this check would show up and we'd have plenty of food for days at a time.

When the electricity was on, we ate a lot of beans. A big bag of pinto beans cost under a dollar and would feed us for days. They tasted especially good if you added a spoonful of mayonnaise. We also ate a lot of rice mixed with jack mackerel, which Mom said was excellent brain food. Jack mackerel was not as good as tuna but was better than cat food, which we ate from time to time when things got really tight. Sometimes Mom popped up a big batch of popcorn for dinner. It had lots of fiber, she pointed out, and she had us salt it heavily because the iodine would keep

us from getting goiters. "I don't want my kids looking like pelicans," she said.

Once, when an extra-big royalty check came in, Mom bought us a whole canned ham. We ate off it for days, cutting thick slices for sandwiches. Since we had no refrigerator, we left the ham on a kitchen shelf. After it had been there for about a week, I went to saw myself a slab at dinnertime and found it crawling with little white worms.

Mom was sitting on the sofa bed, eating the piece she'd cut. "Mom, that ham's full of maggots," I said.

"Don't be so picky," she told me. "Just slice off the maggoty parts. The inside's fine."

Brian and I became expert foragers. We picked crab apples and wild blackberries and pawpaws during the summer and fall, and we swiped ears of corn from Old Man Wilson's farm. The corn was tough—Old Man Wilson grew it as feed for his cattle—but if you chewed it enough, you could get it down. Once we caught a wounded blackbird by throwing a blanket over it and figured we could make a blackbird pie, like in the nursery rhyme. But we couldn't bring ourselves to kill the bird, and anyway, it looked too scrawny to eat.

We'd heard of a dish called poke salad, and since a big patch of poke-weed grew behind our house, Brian and I thought we'd give it a try. If it was any good, we'd have a whole new supply of food. We first tried eating the pokeweed raw, but it was awfully bitter, so we boiled it—singing "Poke Salad Annie" in anticipation—but it still tasted sour and stringy, and our tongues itched for days afterward.

One day, hunting for food, we climbed through the window of an abandoned house. The rooms were tiny, and it had dirt floors, but in the kitchen we found shelves lined with rows of canned food.

"Bo-nanza!" Brian cried out.

"Feast time!" I said.

The cans were coated with dust and starting to rust, but we figured the food was still safe to eat, since the whole point of canning was to preserve. I passed a can of tomatoes to Brian, who took out his pocketknife. When he punctured the tin, the contents exploded in his face, covering us with a fizzy brown juice. We tried a few more, but they exploded, too, and

we walked home without having eaten anything, our shirts and faces stained with rotten tomatoes.

When I started sixth grade, the other kids made fun of Brian and me because we were so skinny. They called me spider legs, skeleton girl, pipe cleaner, two-by-four, bony butt, stick woman, bean pole, and giraffe, and they said I could stay dry in the rain by standing under a telephone wire.

At lunchtime, when other kids unwrapped their sandwiches or bought their hot meals, Brian and I would get out books and read. Brian told everyone he had to keep his weight down because he wanted to join the wrestling team when he got to high school. I told people that I had forgotten to bring my lunch. No one believed me, so I started hiding in the bathroom during lunch hour. I'd stay in one of the stalls with the door locked and my feet propped up so that no one would recognize my shoes.

When other girls came in and threw away their lunch bags in the garbage pails, I'd go retrieve them. I couldn't get over the way kids tossed out all this perfectly good food: apples, hard-boiled eggs, packages of peanut-butter crackers, sliced pickles, half-pint cartons of milk, cheese sandwiches with just one bite taken out because the kid didn't like the pimentos in the cheese. I'd return to the stall and polish off my tasty finds.

There was, at times, more food in the wastebasket than I could eat. The first time I found extra food—a bologna-and-cheese sandwich—I stuffed it into my purse to take home for Brian. Back in the classroom, I started worrying about how I'd explain to Brian where it came from. I was pretty sure he was rooting through the trash, too, but we never talked about it.

As I sat there trying to come up with ways to justify it to Brian, I began smelling the bologna. It seemed to fill the whole room. I became terrified that the other kids could smell it, too, and that they'd turn and see my overstuffed purse, and since they all knew I never ate lunch, they'd figure out that I had pinched it from the trash. As soon as class was over, I ran to the bathroom and shoved the sandwich back in the garbage can.

Maureen always had plenty to eat, since she had made friends throughout the neighborhood and would show up at their houses around dinner-time. I had no idea what Mom and Lori were doing to fend for themselves. Mom, weirdly, was getting heavier. One evening when Dad was away and we had nothing to eat and we were all sitting around the living room try-

ing not to think of food, Mom kept disappearing under the blanket on the sofa bed. At one point Brian looked over.

"Are you chewing something?" he asked.

"My teeth hurt," Mom said, but she was getting all shifty-eyed, glancing around the room and avoiding our stares. "It's my bad gums. I'm working my jaw to increase the circulation."

Brian yanked the covers back. Lying on the mattress next to Mom was one of those huge family-sized Hershey chocolate bars, the shiny silver wrapper pulled back and torn away. She'd already eaten half of it.

Mom started crying. "I can't help it," she sobbed. "I'm a sugar addict, just like your father is an alcoholic."

She told us we should forgive her the same way we always forgave Dad for his drinking. None of us said a thing. Brian snatched up the chocolate bar and divided it into four pieces. While Mom watched, we wolfed them down.

WINTER CAME HARD that year. Just after Thanksgiving, the first big snow started with fat wet flakes the size of butterflies. They floated down lazily but were followed by smaller, drier flakes that kept coming for days. At first I loved winter in Welch. The blanket of snow hid the soot and made the entire town seem clean and cozy. Our house looked almost like all the others along Little Hobart Street.

It was so cold that the youngest, most fragile branches snapped in the frigid air, and very quickly, I started feeling it. I still had only my thin wool coat with the buttons missing. I felt almost as cold in the house; while we had the coal stove, we had no coal. There were forty-two coal retailers listed in the Welch phone book. A ton of coal, which would last most of the winter, cost about fifty dollars—including delivery—or even as little as thirty dollars for the lower-grade stuff. Mom said she was sorry, but there was no room in our budget for coal. We'd have to devise other ways to stay warm.

Pieces of coal were always falling off the trucks when they made their deliveries, and Brian suggested that he and I get a bucket and collect some. We were walking along Little Hobart Street, picking up pieces of coal, when our neighbors the Noes drove by in their station wagon. The Noe girls, Karen and Carol, were sitting in the backward-facing jump seat, looking out the rear window. "We're working on our rock collection!" I shouted.

The pieces we found were so small that after an hour we'd filled only half the bucket. We needed at least a bucket to keep a fire going for one evening. So while we made occasional coal-collecting expeditions, we used mostly wood. We couldn't afford wood any more than we could afford coal, and Dad wasn't around to chop and split any, which meant it was up to us kids to gather dead branches and logs from the forest.

Finding good, dry wood was a challenge. We trekked along the mountainside, looking for pieces that weren't waterlogged or rotten, shaking the snow off branches. But we went through the wood awfully quickly,

and while a coal fire burns hot, a wood fire doesn't throw off much heat. We all huddled around the potbellied stove, wrapped in blankets, holding out our hands toward the weak, smoky heat. Mom said we should be thankful because we had it better than pioneers, who didn't have modern conveniences like window glass and cast-iron stoves.

One day we got a roaring fire going, but even then we could still see our breath, and there was ice on both sides of the windows. Brian and I decided we needed to make the fire even bigger and went out to collect more wood. On the way back, Brian stopped and looked at our house. "There's no snow on our roof," he said. He was right. It had completely melted. "Every other house has snow on its roof," he said. He was right about that, too.

"This house doesn't have a lick of insulation," Brian told Mom when we got back inside. "All the heat's going right through the roof."

"We may not have insulation," Mom said as we all gathered around the stove, "but we have each other."

It got so cold in the house that icicles hung from the kitchen ceiling, the water in the sink turned into a solid block of ice, and the dirty dishes were stuck there as if they'd been cemented in place. Even the pan of water that we kept in the living room to wash up in usually had a layer of ice on it. We walked around the house wearing our coats and wrapped in blankets. We wore our coats to bed, too. There was no stove in the bedroom, and no matter how many blankets I piled on top of myself, I still felt cold. I lay awake at night, rubbing my feet with my hands, trying to warm them.

We fought over who got to sleep with the dogs—Tinkle, the Jack Russell terrier, and Pippin, a curly-haired mutt who had wandered down through the woods one day—because they kept us warm. They usually ended up in a heap with Mom, because she had the bigger body, and they were cold, too. Brian had bought an iguana at G. C. Murphy, the five-and-dime on McDowell Street, because it reminded him of the desert. He named the lizard Iggy and slept with it against his chest to keep it warm, but it froze to death one night.

We had to leave the faucet under the house dripping or the water froze in the pipe. When it got really cold, the water froze anyway, and we'd wake up to find a big icicle hanging from the faucet. We tried to thaw the pipe by running a burning piece of wood along it, but it would

be frozen so solid there was nothing to do but wait for the next warm spell. When the pipe froze like that, we got our water by melting snow or icicles in the tin pan on the potbellied stove.

A couple of times when there wasn't enough snow on the ground, Mom sent me next door to borrow a pail of water from Mr. Freeman, a retired miner, who lived in the house with his grown son and daughter, Peanut and Prissy. He never turned me down outright, but he would look at me for a minute in silence, then shake his head and disappear into the house. When he passed out the bucket, he would give me another disgusted head-shake, even after I assured him that he could have as much water from us as he wanted come spring.

"I hate winter," I told Mom.

"All seasons have something to offer," she said. "Cold weather is good for you. It kills the germs."

That seemed to be true, because none of us kids ever got sick. But even if I'd woken up one morning with a raging fever, I never would have admitted it to Mom. Being sick might have meant staying home in our freezing house instead of spending the day in a toasty classroom.

Another good thing about the cold weather was that it kept odors to a minimum. By New Year's we had washed our clothes only once since that first November snowfall. In the summer, Mom had bought a wringer washing machine like the one we'd had in Phoenix, and we kept it in the kitchen. When we had electricity, we washed the clothes and hung them on the front porch to dry. Even when the weather was warm, they'd have to stay out there for days, because it was always so damp in that hollow on the north side of the mountain. But then it got cold, and the one time we did our laundry, it froze on the porch. We brought the clothes inside—the socks had hardened into the shape of question marks, and the pants were so stiff you could lean them against the wall—and we banged them against the stove, trying to soften them up. "At least we don't need to buy starch," Lori said.

Even with the cold, by January we were all so rank that Mom decided it was time to splurge: We would go to the Laundromat. We loaded our dirty clothes into pillowcases and lugged them down the hill and up Stewart Street.

Mom put the loaded bag on her head, the way women in Africa do, and tried to get us to do the same. She said it was better for our posture and easier on our spines, but there was no way we kids were going to be caught dead walking through Welch with laundry bags on our heads. We followed Mom with our bags over our shoulders, rolling our eyes when we passed people to show we agreed with them: The lady with the bag on her head looked pretty peculiar.

The Laundromat, with its windows completely steamed up, was as warm and damp as a Turkish bath. Mom let us put the coins in the washers, then we climbed up and sat on them. The heat from the rumbling machines warmed our behinds and spread up through our bodies. When the wash was done, we heaved the armfuls of wet clothes into the dryers and watched them tumbling around as if they were on some fun carnival ride. Once the cycle was over, we pulled out the scorching-hot clothes and buried our faces in them. We spread them on the tables and folded them carefully, lining up the sleeves of the shirts and the seams on the pants and balling the paired-up socks. We never folded our clothes at home, but that Laundromat was so warm and cozy, we were looking for any excuse to extend our stay.

A warm spell in January seemed like good news, but then the snow started melting, and the wood in the forest became totally soaked. We couldn't get a fire to do anything but sputter smoke. If the wood was wet, we'd douse it with the kerosene that we used in the lamps. Dad was disdainful of a fire starter like kerosene. No true frontiersman would ever stoop to use it. It wasn't cheap, and since it didn't burn hot, it took a lot to make the wood catch fire. Also, it was dangerous. Dad said that if you got sloppy with kerosene, it could explode. But still, if the wood was wet and didn't want to catch and we were all freezing, we would pour a little kerosene on it.

One day Brian and I climbed the hillside to try to find some dry wood while Lori stayed in the house, stoking the fire. As Brian and I were shaking the snow off some promising branches, we heard a loud boom from the house. I turned and saw flames leap up inside the windows.

We dropped our wood and ran back down the hill. Lori was lurching around the living room, her eyebrows and bangs all singed off and the smell of burned hair in the air. She had used kerosene to try to get the

fire going better, and it had exploded, just like Dad had said it would. Nothing in the house except Lori's hair had caught on fire, but the explosion had blown back her coat and skirt, and the flames had scorched her thighs. Brian went out and got some snow, and we packed it on Lori's legs, which were dark pink. The next day she had blisters the length of her thighs.

"Just remember," Mom said after examining the blisters, "what doesn't kill you will make you stronger."

"If that was true, I'd be Hercules by now," Lori said.

Days later, when the blisters burst, the clear liquid inside ran down to her feet. For weeks, the fronts of her legs were open sores, so sensitive that she had trouble sleeping under blankets. But by then the temperature had fallen again, and if she kicked off the blankets, she froze.

One day that winter, I went to a classmate's house to work on a school project. Carrie Mae Blankenship's father was an administrator at the McDowell County hospital, and her family lived in a solid brick house on McDowell Street. The living room was decorated in shades of orange and brown, and the plaid pattern of the curtains matched the couch upholstery. On the wall was a framed photo of Carrie Mae's older sister in her high school graduation gown. It was lit with its own tiny lamp, just like in a museum.

There was also a small plastic box on the wall near the living room door. A row of tiny numbers ran along the top, under a lever. Carrie Mae's father saw me studying the box while she was out of the room. "It's a thermostat," he told me. "You move the lever to make the house warmer or cooler."

I thought he was pulling my leg, but he moved the lever, and I heard a muffled roar kick on in the basement.

"That's the furnace," he said.

He led me over to a vent in the floor and had me hold my hand above it and feel the warm air wafting upward. I didn't want to say anything to show how impressed I was, but for many nights afterward, I dreamed that we had a thermostat at 93 Little Hobart Street. I dreamed that all we had to do to fill our house with that warm, clean furnace heat was to move a lever.

ERMA DIED DURING the last hard snowfall at the end of our second winter in Welch. Dad said her liver simply gave out. Mom took the position that Erma drank herself to death. "It was suicide every bit as much as if she had stuck her head in the oven," Mom said, "only slower."

Whatever the cause, Erma had made detailed preparations for the occasion of her death. For years she had read *The Welch Daily News* only for the obituaries and black-bordered memorial notices, clipping and saving her favorites. They provided inspiration for her own death announcement, which she'd worked and reworked. She had also written pages of instructions on how she wanted her funeral conducted. She had picked out all the hymns and prayers, chosen her favorite funeral home, ordered a lavender lace nightgown from JCPenney that she wanted to be buried in, and selected a two-toned lavender casket with shiny chrome handles from the mortician's catalog.

Erma's death brought out Mom's pious side. While we were waiting for the preacher, she took out her rosary and prayed for Erma's soul, which she feared was in jeopardy since, as she saw it, Erma had committed suicide. She also tried to make us kiss Erma's corpse. We flat out refused, but Mom went up in front of the mourners, genuflected with a grand sweep, and then kissed Erma's cheek so vigorously that you could hear the puckering sound throughout the chapel.

I was sitting next to Dad. It was the first time in my life I'd ever seen him wearing a necktie, which he always called a noose. His face was tight and closed, but I could tell he was distraught. More distraught than I'd ever seen him, which surprised me, because Erma had seemed to have some sort of an evil hold over Dad, and I thought he'd be relieved to be free of it.

As we walked home, Mom asked us kids if we had anything nice to say about Erma now that she had passed. We took a couple of steps in silence, then Lori said, "Ding-dong, the witch is dead."

Brian and I started snickering. Dad wheeled around and gave Lori

such a cold, angry look that I thought he might wallop her. "She was my mother, for God's sake," he said. He glared at us. "You kids. You make me ashamed. Do you hear me? Ashamed!"

He turned down the street to Junior's bar. We all watched him go. "You're ashamed of us?" Lori called after him.

Dad just kept walking.

Four days later, when Dad still hadn't come home, Mom sent me to go find him. "Why do I always have to get Dad?" I asked.

"Because he likes you the best," she said. "And he'll come home if you tell him to."

The first step in tracking down Dad was going next door to the Freemans, who let us use their phone if we paid a dime, and calling Grandpa to ask if Dad was there. Grandpa said he had no idea where Dad was.

"When y'all gonna get your own telephone?" Mr. Freeman asked after I hung up.

"Mom disapproves of telephones," I said as I placed the dime on his coffee table. "She thinks they're an impersonal means of communication."

My first stop, as always, was Junior's. It was the fanciest bar in Welch, with a picture window, a grill that served hamburgers and french fries, and a pinball machine.

"Hey!" one of the regulars called out when I walked in. "It's Rex's little girl. How ya doin', sweetheart?"

"I'm fine, thank you. Is my dad here?"

"Rex?" He turned to the man next to him. "Where's that old polecat Rex?"

"I seen him this morning at the Howdy House."

"Honey, you look like you could use a rest," the bartender said. "Sit down and have a Coca-Cola on the house."

"No, thank you. I've got kites to fly and fish to fry."

I went to the Howdy House, which was a notch below Junior's. It was smaller and darker, and the only food it served was pickled eggs. The bartender told me Dad had gone to the Pub, which was a notch below the Howdy House—almost pitch black, with a sticky bar top and no food at all. There he was, in the midst of a few other regulars, telling one of his air force stories.

When Dad saw me, he stopped talking and looked at me the way he did every time I had to track him down in a bar. It was always an awkward moment for us both. I didn't want to be fetching him any more than he wanted his ragamuffin daughter summoning him home like a wayward schoolboy. He looked at me in this cold, strange way for just a moment, then broke into a hearty grin.

"Hey, Mountain Goat!" he shouted. "What the hell are you doing in this dive?"

"Mom says you have to come home," I said.

"She does, does she?" He ordered a Coca-Cola for me and another shot of whiskey for himself. I kept telling Dad it was time to go, but he kept putting me off and ordering more shots, as if he had to gulp a whole bunch of them down before he could face home. He staggered off to the bathroom, came back, ordered one for the road, slammed the shot glass down on the bar, and walked to the door. He lost his footing trying to open it and sprawled on the floor. I tried to help him up, but he kept falling over.

"Honey, you ain't getting him nowhere like that," a man behind me said. "Here, let me give you a lift home."

"I'd appreciate that, sir," I said. "If it's not out of your way."

Some of the other regulars helped the man and me load Dad into the bay of the man's pickup. We propped Dad up against a tool chest. It was late afternoon in early spring, the light was beginning to fade, and people on McDowell Street were locking up their shops and heading home. Dad started singing one of his favorite songs.

*Swing low, sweet chariot
Coming for to carry me home.*

Dad had a fine baritone, with strength and timbre and range, and despite being tanked, he sang that hymn like the roof-raiser it is.

*I looked over Jordan, and what did I see
Coming for to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me
Coming for to carry me home.*

I climbed in next to the driver. On the way home—with Dad still singing away in the back, extending the word "low" so long he sounded like a mooing cow—the man asked me about school. I told him I was studying hard because I wanted to become either a veterinarian or a geologist specializing in the Miocene period, when the mountains out west were formed. I was telling him how geodes were created from bubbles in lava when he interrupted me. "For the daughter of the town drunk, you sure got big plans," he said.

"Stop the truck," I said. "We can make it on our own from here."

"Aw, now, I didn't mean nothing by that," he said. "And you know you ain't getting him home on your own."

Still, he stopped. I opened the pickup's tailgate and tried to drag Dad out, but the man was right. I couldn't do it. So I climbed back in next to the driver, folded my arms across my chest, and stared straight ahead. When we reached 93 Little Hobart Street, he helped me pull Dad out.

"I know you took offense at what I said," the man told me. "Thing is, I meant it as a compliment."

Maybe I should have thanked him, but I just waited until he drove off, and then I called Brian to help me get Dad up the hill and into the house.

A couple of months after Erma died, Uncle Stanley fell asleep in the basement while reading comic books and smoking a cigarette. The big clapboard house burned to the ground, but Grandpa and Stanley got out alive, and they moved into a windowless two-room apartment in the basement of an old house around the hill. The drug dealers who'd lived there before had spray-painted curse words and psychedelic patterns on the walls and the ceiling pipes. The landlord didn't paint over them, and neither did Grandpa and Stanley.

Grandpa and Uncle Stanley did have a working bathroom, so every weekend some of us went over to take a bath. One time I was sitting next to Uncle Stanley on the couch in his room, watching *Hee Haw* and waiting for my turn in the tub. Grandpa was off at the Moose Lodge, where he spent the better part of every day; Lori was taking her bath; and Mom was at the table in Grandpa's room working on a crossword puzzle. I felt Stanley's hand creeping onto my thigh. I looked at him, but he was

staring at the *Hee Haw* Honeys so intently that I couldn't be sure he was doing it on purpose, so I knocked his hand away without saying anything. A few minutes later, the hand came creeping back. I looked down and saw that Uncle Stanley's pants were unzipped and he was playing with himself. I felt like hitting him, but I was afraid I'd get in trouble the way Lori had after punching Erma, so I hurried out to Mom.

"Mom, Uncle Stanley is behaving inappropriately," I said.

"Oh, you're probably imagining it," she said.

"He groped me! And he's wanking off!"

Mom cocked her head and looked concerned. "Poor Stanley," she said. "He's so lonely."

"But it was gross!"

Mom asked me if I was okay. I shrugged and nodded. "Well, there you go," she said. She said that sexual assault was a crime of perception. "If you don't think you're hurt, then you aren't," she said. "So many women make such a big deal out of these things. But you're stronger than that." She went back to her crossword puzzle.

After that, I refused to go back to Grandpa's. Being strong was fine, but the last thing I needed was Uncle Stanley thinking I was coming back for more of his fooling around. I did whatever it took to wash myself at Little Hobart Street. In the kitchen, we had an aluminum tub you could fit into if you pulled your legs up against your chest. By then the weather was warm enough to fill the tub with water from the tap under the house and bathe in the kitchen. After the bath, I crouched by the side of the tub and dipped my head in the water and washed my hair. But lugging all those buckets of water up to the house was hard work, and I would put off bathing until I was feeling pretty gamy.

In the spring, the rains came, drenching the valley for days in sheets of falling water. The water ran down the hillside gullies, pulling rocks and small trees with it, and spilled across the roads, tearing off chunks of asphalt. It gushed into the creeks, which swelled up and turned a foaming light brown, like a chocolate milk shake. The creeks emptied into the Tug, which overflowed its banks and flooded the houses and stores along McDowell Street. Mud was four feet deep in some houses, and folks' pickups and mobile homes were swept away. Over in Buffalo Creek Hol-

low, a mine impoundment gave way, and a wave of black water thirty feet high killed 126 people. Mom said that this was how nature took her revenge on men who raped and pillaged the land, ruining nature's own drainage system by clear-cutting forests and strip-mining mountains.

Little Hobart Street was too high up in the hollow to get any flooding, but the rain washed parts of the road into the yards of the people who lived below us. The water also ate away some of the soil from around the pillars holding up our house, making it even more precarious. The hole in the kitchen ceiling widened, and then the ceiling on Brian and Maureen's side of the bedroom started leaking. Brian had the top bunk, and when it rained, he'd spread a tarp over himself to keep the dripping water off.

Everything in the house was damp. A fine green mold spread over the books and papers and paintings that were stacked so high and piled so deep you could hardly cross the room. Tiny mushrooms sprouted up in corners. The moisture ate away at the wooden stairs leading up to the house, and climbing them became a daily hazard. Mom fell through a rotted step and went tumbling down the hillside. She had bruises on her legs and arms for weeks. "My husband doesn't beat me," she'd say when anyone stared at them. "He just won't fix the stairs."

The porch had also started to rot. Most of the banisters and railing had given way, and the floorboards had turned spongy and slick with mold and algae. It became a real problem when you had to go down under the house to use the toilet at night, and each of us had slipped and fallen off the porch at least once. It was a good ten feet to the ground.

"We have to do something about the porch situation," I told Mom. "It's getting downright dangerous to go to the bathroom at night." Besides, the toilet under the house was now totally unusable. It had overflowed, and you were better off digging yourself a hole in the hillside somewhere.

"You're right," Mom said. "Something has to be done."

She bought a bucket. It was made of yellow plastic, and we kept it on the floor in the kitchen, and that was what we used whenever we had to go to the bathroom. When it filled up, some brave soul would carry it outside, dig a hole, and empty it.

ONE DAY WHILE Brian and I were out scrounging around on the edge of our property, he picked up a piece of rotting lumber, and there among the pill bugs and night crawlers was a diamond ring. The stone was big. At first we thought it was just neat junk, but we spit-polished it and scratched glass with it like Dad had shown us, and it seemed real. We figured it must have belonged to the old lady who had lived there. She had died before we moved in. Everyone had said she was a little loopy.

"What do you think it's worth?" I asked Brian.

"Probably more than the house," he said.

We figured we could sell it and buy food, pay off the house—Mom and Dad kept missing the monthly payments, and there was talk that we were going to be evicted—and maybe still have enough left over for something special, like a new pair of sneakers for each of us.

We brought the ring home and showed it to Mom. She held it up to the light, then said we needed to have it appraised. The next day she took the Trailways bus to Bluefield. When she returned, she told us it was in fact a genuine two-carat diamond.

"So what's it worth?" I asked.

"That doesn't matter," Mom said.

"How come?"

"Because we're not selling it."

She was keeping it, she explained, to replace the wedding ring her mother had given her, the one Dad had pawned shortly after they got married.

"But Mom," I said, "that ring could get us a lot of food."

"That's true," Mom said, "but it could also improve my self-esteem. And at times like these, self-esteem is even more vital than food."

Mom's self-esteem did need some shoring up. Sometimes, things just got to her. She retreated to her sofa bed and stayed there for days on end, cry-

ing and occasionally throwing things at us. She could have been a famous artist by now, she yelled, if she hadn't had children, and none of us appreciated her sacrifice. The next day, if the mood had passed, she'd be painting and humming away as if nothing had happened.

One Saturday morning not long after Mom started wearing her new diamond ring, her mood was on an upswing, and she decided we'd all clean the house. I thought this was a great idea. I told Mom we should empty out each room, clean it thoroughly, and put back only the things that were essential. That was the one way, it seemed to me, to get rid of the clutter. But Mom said my idea was too time-consuming, so all we ended up doing was straightening piles of paper into stacks and stuffing dirty clothes into the chest of drawers. Mom insisted that we chant Hail Marys while we worked. "It's a way of cleansing our souls while we're cleaning house," she said. "We're killing two birds with one stone."

The reason she had become a tad moody, she said later that day, was that she hadn't been getting enough exercise. "I'm going to start doing calisthenics," she announced. "Once you get your circulation going, it changes your entire outlook on life." She leaned over and touched her toes.

When she came up, she said she was feeling better already, and went down for another toe touch. I watched from the writing desk with my arms folded across my chest. I knew the problem was not that we all had poor circulation. We didn't need to start doing toe touches. We needed to take drastic measures. I was twelve by now, and I had been weighing our options, doing some research at the public library and picking up scraps of information about how other families on Little Hobart Street survived. I had come up with a plan and had been waiting for the opportunity to broach it to Mom. The moment seemed ripe.

"Mom, we can't go on living like this," I said.

"It's not so bad," she said. Between each toe touch, she was reaching up into the air.

"We haven't had anything to eat but popcorn for three days," I said.

"You're always so negative," she said. "You remind me of my mother—criticize, criticize, criticize."

"I'm not being negative," I said. "I'm trying to be realistic."

"I'm doing the best I can under the circumstances," she said. "How come you never blame your father for anything? He's no saint, you know."

"I know," I said. I ran a finger along the edge of the desk. Dad was

always parking his cigarettes there, and it was ribbed with a row of black cigarette burns, like a decorative border. "Mom, you have to leave Dad," I said.

She stopped doing her toe touches. "I can't believe you would say that," she said. "I can't believe that you, of all people, would turn on your father." I was Dad's last defender, she continued, the only one who pretended to believe all his excuses and tales, and to have faith in his plans for the future. "He loves you so much," Mom said. "How can you do this to him?"

"I don't blame Dad," I said. And I didn't. But Dad seemed hell-bent on destroying himself, and I was afraid he was going to pull us all down with him. "We've got to get away."

"But I can't leave your father!" she said.

I told Mom that if she left Dad, she'd be eligible for government aid, which she couldn't get now because she had an able-bodied husband. Some people at school—not to mention half the people on Little Hobart Street—were on welfare, and it wasn't so bad. I knew Mom was opposed to welfare, but those kids got food stamps and clothing allowances. The state bought them coal and paid for their school lunches.

Mom wouldn't hear of it. Welfare, she said, would cause irreparable psychological damage to us kids. "You can be hungry every now and then, but once you eat, you're okay," she said. "And you can get cold for a while, but you always warm up. Once you go on welfare, it changes you. Even if you get off welfare, you never escape the stigma that you were a charity case. You're scarred for life."

"Fine," I said. "If we're not charity cases, then get a job." There was a teacher shortage in McDowell County, just like there had been in Battle Mountain. She could get work in a heartbeat, and when she had a salary, we could move into a little apartment in town.

"That sounds like an awful life," Mom said.

"Worse than this?" I asked.

Mom turned quiet. She seemed to be thinking. Then she looked up. She was smiling serenely. "I can't leave your father," she said. "It's against the Catholic faith." Then she sighed. "And anyway, you know your mom. I'm an excitement addict."

MOM NEVER TOLD Dad that I'd urged her to leave him. That summer he still thought of me as his biggest supporter, and given that there was so little competition for the job, I probably was.

One afternoon in June, Dad and I were sitting out on the porch, our legs dangling over the side, looking down at the houses below. That summer, it was so hot I could barely breathe. It seemed hotter than Phoenix or Battle Mountain, where it regularly climbed above a hundred degrees, so when Dad told me it was only ninety degrees, I said the thermometer must be broken. But he said no, we were used to dry desert heat, and this was humid heat.

It was a lot hotter, Dad pointed out, down in the valley along Stewart Street, which was lined with those cute brick houses that had their neat, square lawns and corrugated aluminum breezeways. The valleys trapped the heat. Our house was the highest on the mountainside, which made it, ergo, the coolest spot in Welch. In case of flooding—as we had seen—it was also the safest. "You didn't know I put a lot of thought into where we should live, did you?" he asked me. "Real estate's about three things, Mountain Goat. Location. Location. Location."

Dad started laughing. It was a silent laugh that made his shoulders shake, and the more he laughed, the funnier it seemed to him, which made him laugh even harder. I had to start laughing, too, and soon we were both hysterical, lying on our backs, tears running down our cheeks, slapping our feet on the porch floor. We'd get too winded to laugh any further, our sides cramping with stitches, and we'd think our fit was over, but then one of us would start chuckling, and that would get the other going, and again we'd both end up shrieking like hyenas.

The main source of relief from the heat for the kids in Welch was the public swimming pool, down by the railroad tracks near the Esso station. Brian and I had gone swimming once, but Ernie Goad and his

friends were there, and they started telling everybody that we Wallises lived in garbage and would stink up the pool water something awful. This was Ernie Goad's opportunity to take revenge for the Battle of Little Hobart Street. One of his friends came up with the phrase "health epidemic," and they were going on to the parents and lifeguards that we needed to be ejected to prevent an outbreak at the pool. Brian and I decided to leave. As we were walking away, Ernie Goad came up to the chain-link fence. "Go on home to the garbage dump!" he shouted. His voice was shrill with triumph. "Go on, now, and don't come back!"

A week later, with the heat still holding, I ran into Dinitia Hewitt downtown. She had just come from the pool and had her wet hair pulled back under a scarf. "Brother, that water felt good," she said, drawing out the word "good" so it sounded like it had about fifteen Os in it. "Do you ever go swimming?"

"They don't like us to go there," I said.

Dinitia nodded, even though I hadn't explained. Then she said, "Why don't you come swimming with us in the morning?"

By "us" I knew she meant the other black people. The pool was not segregated, anyone could swim at any time—technically, at least—but the fact was that all the black people swam in the morning, when the pool was free, and all the white people swam in the afternoon, when admission was fifty cents. No one had planned this arrangement, and no rules enforced it. That was just the way it was.

I surely wanted to get back in that water, but I couldn't help but feel that if I took Dinitia up on her offer, I'd be violating some sort of taboo. "Wouldn't anybody get mad?" I asked.

"'Cause you're white?" she asked. "Your own kind might, but we won't. And your own kind won't be there."

The next morning I met Dinitia in front of the pool entrance, my thrift-shop one-piece rolled inside my frayed gray towel. The white girl clerking the entrance booth gave me a surprised look when we passed through the gate, but she said nothing. The women's locker room was dark and

smelled of Pine-Sol, with cinder-block walls and a wet cement floor. A soul tune was blasting out of an eight-track tape player, and all the black women packed between the peeling wooden benches were singing and dancing to the music.

In the locker rooms I'd been in, the white women always seemed embarrassed by their nakedness and wrapped towels around their waists before slipping off their underpants, but here most of the women were buck-naked. Some of them were skinny, with angular hips and jutting collarbones. Others had big pillowy behinds and huge swinging breasts, and they were bumping their butts together and pushing their breasts up against each other as they danced.

As soon as the women saw me, they stopped dancing. One of the naked ones came over and stood in front of me, her hands on her hips, her breasts so close I was terrified her nipples were going to touch me. Dinitia explained that I was with her and that I was good people. The women looked at one another and shrugged.

I was going on thirteen and self-conscious, so I planned to slip my bathing suit on underneath my dress, but I worried this would only make me more conspicuous, so I took a deep breath and stepped out of my clothes. The scar on my ribs was about the size of my outstretched hand, and Dinitia noticed it immediately. I explained that I had gotten it when I was three, and that I'd been in the hospital for six weeks getting skin grafts, and that was why I never wore a bikini. Dinitia ran her fingers lightly over the scar tissue. "It ain't so bad," she said.

"Hey, 'Nitia!" one of the women shouted. "Your white friend's got a red bush coming in!"

"What did you expect?" Dinitia asked.

"That's right," I said. "Collar got to match the cuffs."

It was a line I'd heard Dinitia use. She smiled at it, and the women all shrieked with laughter. One of the dancers bumped her hip up against me. I felt welcome enough to give a saucy bump back.

Dinitia and I stayed in the pool all morning, splashing, practicing the backstroke and the butterfly. She flailed around in the water almost as much as I did. We stood on our hands and stuck our legs out of the water, did underwater twists, and played Marco Polo and chicken with the other kids. We climbed out to do cannonballs and watermelons off the side, making big geyserlike splashes intended to drench as many

people sitting poolside as possible. The blue water sparkled and churned white with foam. By the time the free swim was over, my fingers and toes were completely wrinkled, and my eyes were red and stinging from the chlorine, which was so strong it wafted up from the pool in a vapor you could practically see. I'd never felt cleaner.

THAT AFTERNOON I WAS alone in the house, still enjoying the itchy, dry feeling of my chlorine-scoured skin and the wobbly-bone feeling you get from a lot of exercise, when I heard a knock on the door. The noise startled me. Almost no one ever visited us at 93 Little Hobart Street. I opened the door a few inches and peered out. A balding man carrying a file folder under his arm stood on the porch. Something about him said government—a species Dad had trained us to avoid.

"Is the head of the household in?" he asked.

"Who wants to know?" I said.

The man smiled the way you do to sugarcoat bad news. "I'm with child welfare, and I'm looking for either Rex or Rose Mary Walls," he said.

"They're not here," I said.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Twelve."

"Can I come in?"

I could see he was trying to peer behind me into the house. I pulled the door all the way closed except for a crack. "Mom and Dad wouldn't want me to let you in," I said. "Until they talk to their attorney," I added to impress him. "Just tell me what it is you're after, and I'll pass on the message."

The man said that someone whose name he was not at liberty to disclose had called his office recommending an inquiry into conditions at 93 Little Hobart Street, where it was possible that dependent children might be living in a state of neglect.

"No one's neglecting us," I said.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure, mister."

"Dad work?"

"Of course," I said. "He does odd jobs. And he's an entrepreneur. He's developing a technology to burn low-grade bituminous coal safely and efficiently."