

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."

"And your mother?"

"She's an artist," I said. "And a writer and a teacher."

"Really?" The man made a note on a pad. "Where?"

"I don't think Mom and Dad would want me talking to you without them here," I said. "Come back when they're here. They'll answer your questions."

"Good," the man said. "I will come back. Tell them that."

He passed a business card through the crack in the doorway. I watched him make his way down to the ground. "Careful on those stairs now," I called. "We're in the process of building a new set."

After the man left, I was so furious that I ran up the hillside and started hurling rocks—big rocks that it took two hands to lift—into the garbage pit. Except for Erma, I had never hated anyone more than I hated that child-welfare man. Not even Ernie Goad. At least when Ernie and his gang came around yelling that we were trash, we could fight them off with rocks. But if the child-welfare man got it into his head that we were an unfit family, we'd have no way to drive him off. He'd launch an investigation and end up sending me and Brian and Lori and Maureen off to live with different families, even though we all got good grades and knew Morse code. I couldn't let that happen. No way was I going to lose Brian and Lori and Maureen.

I wished we could do the skedaddle. For a long time Brian, Lori, and I had assumed we would leave Welch sooner or later. Every couple of months we'd ask Dad if we were going to move on. He'd sometimes talk about Australia or Alaska, but he never took any action, and when we asked Mom, she'd start singing some song about how her get up and go had got up and went. Maybe coming back to Welch had killed the idea Dad used to have of himself as a man going places. The truth was, we were stuck.

When Mom got home, I gave her the man's card and told her about his visit. I was still in a lather. I said that since neither she nor Dad could be bothered to work, and since she refused to leave Dad, the government was going to do the job of splitting up the family for her.

I expected Mom to come back with one of her choice remarks, but she listened to my tirade in silence. Then she said she needed to consider

her options. She sat down at her easel. She had run out of canvases and had begun painting on plywood, so she picked up a piece of wood, got out her palette, squeezed some paints onto it, and selected a brush.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm thinking," she said.

Mom worked quickly, automatically, as if she knew exactly what it was she wanted to paint. A figure took shape in the middle of the board. It was a woman from the waist up, with her arms raised. Blue concentric circles appeared around the waist. The blue was water. Mom was painting a picture of a woman drowning in a stormy lake. When she was finished, she sat for a long time in silence, staring at the picture.

"So what are we going to do?" I finally asked.

"Jeannette, you're so focused it's scary."

"You didn't answer my question," I said.

"I'll get a job, Jeannette," she snapped. She threw her paintbrush into the jar that held her turpentine and sat there looking at the drowning woman.

QUALIFIED TEACHERS were so scarce in McDowell County that two of the teachers I'd have at Welch High School had never been to college. Mom was able to land a job by the end of the week. We spent those days frantically trying to clean the house in anticipation of the return of the child-welfare man. It was a hopeless task, given all the stacks of Mom's junk and the hole in the ceiling and the disgusting yellow bucket in the kitchen. However, for some reason he never came back.

Mom's job was teaching remedial reading in an elementary school in Davy, a coal-mining camp twelve miles north of Welch. Since we still had no car, the school's principal arranged for Mom to get a ride with another teacher, Lucy Jo Rose, who had just graduated from Bluefield State College and was so fat she could barely squeeze behind the steering wheel of her brown Dodge Dart. Lucy Jo, whom the principal had more or less ordered to perform this service, took an instant dislike to Mom. She refused to say much during the trip, instead playing Barbara Mandrell tapes and smoking filter-tip Kools the entire time. As soon as Mom got out of the car, Lucy Jo made a big show of spraying Mom's seat with Lysol. Mom, for her part, felt that Lucy Jo was woefully uninformed. When Mom mentioned Jackson Pollock once, Lucy Jo said that she had Polish blood and therefore did not appreciate Mom using derogatory names for Polish people.

Mom had the same problems she'd had in Battle Mountain with organizing her paperwork and disciplining her students. At least one morning a week, she'd throw a tantrum and refuse to go to work, and Lori, Brian, and I would have to get her collected and down to the street where Lucy Jo waited with a scowl, blue smoke chugging up out of the Dart's rusted-through tailpipe.

But at least we had money. While I'd been bringing in a little extra cash babysitting, Brian was cutting other people's weeds, and Lori had a paper route, it didn't add up to much. Now Mom got paid about seven hundred dollars a month, and the first time I saw her gray-green pay-

check, with its detachable stub and automated signatures, I thought our troubles were over. On paydays, Mom took us kids down to the big bank across from the courthouse to cash the check. After the cashier gave her the money, Mom went into a corner of the bank and stuffed it into a sock she'd safety-pinned to her bra. Then we all scurried around to the power company and the water authority and the landlord, paying off our bills with tens and twenties. The clerks averted their eyes as Mom fished the sock out of her bra, explaining to everyone within earshot that this was her way of making sure she was never pickpocketed.

Mom also bought some electric heaters and a refrigerator on layaway, and we'd go to the appliance store and put down a few dollars every month, figuring they'd be ours by wintertime. Mom always had at least one "extravagance" on layaway, something we really didn't need—a tasseled silk throw or a cut crystal vase—because she said the surest way to feel rich was to invest in quality nonessentials. After that, we'd go to the grocery store at the bottom of the hill and stock up on staples such as beans and rice, powdered milk, and canned goods. Mom always bought the dented cans, even if they weren't marked down, because she said they needed to be loved, too.

At home, we'd empty Mom's purse onto the sofa bed and count the remaining money. There'd be hundreds of dollars, more than enough to cover our expenses until the end of the month, I thought. But month after month, the money would disappear before the next paycheck arrived, and once more I'd find myself rooting in the garbage at school for food.

Toward the end of one month that fall, Mom announced that we had only one dollar for dinner. That was enough to buy one gallon of Neapolitan ice cream, which she said was not only delicious but had lots of calcium and would be good for our bones. We brought the ice cream home, and Brian pulled apart the carton and cut the block into five even slices. I called dibs on first choice. Mom told us to savor it because we had no money for dinner the next night.

"Mom, what happened to it all?" I asked as we ate our ice-cream slices.

"Gone, gone, gone!" she said. "It's all gone."

"But where?" Lori asked.

"I've got a houseful of kids and a husband who soaks up booze like a sponge," Mom said. "Making ends meet is harder than you think."

It couldn't be that hard, I thought. Other moms did it. I tried quizzing her. Was she spending the money on herself? Was she giving it to Dad? Was Dad stealing it? Or did we go through it quickly? I couldn't get an answer. "Give us the money," I said. "We'll work out a budget and stick to it."

"Easy for you to say," Mom replied.

Lori and I did work out a budget, and we included a generous allowance for Mom to cover luxuries such as extra-large Hershey bars and cut crystal vases. If we kept to our budget, we believed, we could afford new clothes and shoes and coats, and buy a ton of coal at the cheaper off-season price. Eventually, we could install insulation, run a water pipe into the house, and maybe even add a water heater. But Mom never turned the money over to us. So even though she had a steady job, we were living pretty much like we had before.

I'D STARTED SEVENTH grade that fall, which meant attending Welch High School. It was a big school, near the top of a hill looking down on the town, with a steep road leading up. Kids were bused in from way up in the hollows and from coal camps such as Davy and Hemphill that were too small to have their own high school. Some of the kids looked as poor as me, with home-cut hair and holes in the toes of their shoes. I found it a lot easier to fit in than at Welch Elementary.

Dinitia Hewitt was there, too. That summer morning I'd spent swimming with Dinitia at the public pool was the happiest time I'd had in Welch, but she never invited me back, and even though it was a public pool, I didn't feel I could go to the free swim unless I had an invitation from her. I saw her again only when school started, and neither of us ever mentioned that day at the pool. I guess we both knew that, given the way people in Welch thought about mixing, it would be too weird for us to try to be close friends. During lunch, Dinitia hung out with the other black kids, but we had a study hall together and passed notes to each other there.

By the time she got to Welch High, Dinitia had changed. The spark had gone out of her. She started drinking malt ale during school. She'd fill a soda can with Mad Dog 20/20 and carry it right into class. I tried to find out what was wrong, but all I could pry from her was that her mother's new boyfriend had moved in with them, and the fit was a little tight.

One day just before Christmas, Dinitia passed me a note in study hall asking for girls' names that began with D. I wrote down as many as I could think of—Diane, Donna, Dora, Dreama, Diandra—and then wrote, *Why?* She passed a note back saying, *I think I'm pregnant.*

After Christmas, Dinitia did not return to school. When a month had gone by, I walked around the mountain to her house and knocked on the door. A man opened it and stared at me. He had skin like an iron skillet and nicotine-yellow eyes. He left the storm door shut, so I had to speak through the screen.

"Is Dinitia home?" I asked.

“Why you want to know?”

“I want to see her.”

“She don’t want to see you,” he said and shut the door.

I saw Dinitia around town once or twice after that, and we waved but never spoke again. Later, we all learned she’d been arrested for stabbing her mother’s boyfriend to death.

The other girls talked endlessly among themselves about who still had their cherry and how far they would let their boyfriend go. The world seemed divided into girls with boyfriends and girls without them. It was the distinction that mattered the most, practically the only one that did matter. But I knew that boys were dangerous. They’d say they loved you, but they were always after something.

Even though I didn’t trust boys, I sure did wish one would show some interest in me. Kenny Hall, the old guy down the street who was still pinning away for me, didn’t count. If any boy was interested in me, I wondered if I’d have the wherewithal to tell him, when he tried to go too far, that I was not that kind of girl. But the truth was, I didn’t need to worry much about fending off advances, seeing how—as Ernie Goad told me on every available occasion—I was pork-chop ugly. And by that he meant so ugly that if I wanted a dog to play with me, I’d have to tie a pork chop around my neck.

I had what Mom called distinctive looks. That was one way of putting it. I was nearly six feet tall, pale as a frog’s underbelly, and had bright red hair. My elbows were like flying wedges and my knees like tea saucers. But my most prominent feature—my worst—was my teeth. They weren’t rotten or crooked. In fact, they were big, healthy things. But they stuck straight out. The top row thrust forward so enthusiastically that I had trouble closing my mouth completely, and I was always stretching my upper lip to try to cover them. When I laughed, I put my hand over my mouth.

Lori told me I had an exaggerated view of how bad my teeth looked. “They’re just a little bucked,” she’d say. “They have a certain Pippi Longstockingish charm.” Mom told me my overbite gave my face character. Brian said they’d come in handy if I ever needed to eat an apple through the knothole in a fence.

What I needed, I knew, was braces. Every time I looked in the mirror, I longed for what the other kids called a barbed-wire mouth. Mom and Dad had no money for braces, of course—none of us kids had ever even been to the dentist—but since I’d been babysitting and doing other kids’ homework for cash, I resolved to save up until I could afford braces myself. I had no idea how much they cost, so I approached the only girl in my class who wore braces and, after complimenting her orthodontia, casually asked how much it had set her folks back. When she said twelve hundred dollars, I almost fell over. I was getting a dollar an hour to babysit. I usually worked five or six hours a week, which meant that if I saved every penny I earned, it would take about four years to raise the money.

I decided to make my own braces.

I went to the library and asked for a book on orthodontia. The librarian looked at me kind of funny and said she didn’t have one, so I realized I’d have to figure things out as I went along. The process involved some experimentation and several false starts. At first I simply used a rubber band. Before going to bed, I would stretch it all the way around the entire set of my upper teeth. The rubber band was small but thick and had a good, tight fit. But it pressed down uncomfortably on my tongue, and sometimes it would pop off during the night and I’d wake up choking on it. Usually, however, it stayed on all night, and in the morning my gums would be sore from the pressure on my teeth.

That seemed like a promising sign, but I began to worry that instead of pushing my front teeth in, the rubber band might be pulling my back teeth forward. So I got some larger rubber bands and wore them around my whole head, pressing against my front teeth. The problem with this technique was that the rubber bands were tight—they had to be, to work—so I’d wake up with headaches and deep red marks where the rubber bands had dug into the sides of my face.

I needed more advanced technology. I bent a metal coat hanger into a horseshoe shape to fit the back of my head. Then I curled the two ends outward, so when the coat hanger was around my head, the ends angled away from my face and formed hooks to hold the rubber band in place. When I tried it on, the coat hanger dug into the back of my skull, so I used a Kotex sanitary napkin for padding.

The contraption worked perfectly, except that I had to sleep flat on my back, which I always had trouble doing, especially when it was cold: I liked to snuggle down into the blankets. Also, the rubber bands still popped off in the middle of the night. Another drawback was that the device took a lot of time to put on properly. I'd wait until it was dark so no one else would see it.

One night I was lying in my bunk wearing my elaborate coat-hanger braces when the bedroom door opened. I could make out a dim figure in the darkness. "Who's there?" I called out, but because I had my braces on, it came out sounding like "Phoof der?"

"It's your old man," Dad answered. "What's with the mumbling?" He came over to my bunk, held up his Zippo, and flicked it. A flame shot up. "What the Sam Hill's that on your head?"

"My brafef," I said.

"Your what?"

I took off the contraption and explained to Dad that, because my front teeth stuck out so badly, I needed braces, but they cost twelve hundred dollars, so I had made my own.

"Put them back on," Dad said. He studied my handiwork intently, then nodded. "Those braces are a goddamn feat of engineering genius," he said. "You take after your old man."

He took my chin and pulled my mouth open. "And I think they're by God working."

THAT YEAR I STARTED working for the school newspaper, *The Maroon Wave*. I wanted to join some club or group or organization where I could feel I belonged, where people wouldn't move away if I sat down next to them. I was a good runner, and I thought of going out for the track team, but you had to pay for your uniform, and Mom said we couldn't afford it. You didn't have to buy a uniform or a musical instrument or pay any dues to work on the *Wave*.

Miss Jeanette Bivens, one of the high school English teachers, was the *Wave's* faculty adviser. She was a quiet, precise woman who had been at Welch High School so long that she had also been Dad's English teacher. She was the first person in his life, he once told me, who'd showed any faith in him. She thought he was a talented writer and had encouraged him to submit a twenty-four-line poem called "Summer Storm" to a statewide poetry competition. When it won first prize, one of Dad's other teachers wondered aloud if the son of two lowlife alcoholics like Ted and Erma Walls could have written it himself. Dad was so insulted that he walked out of school. It was Miss Bivens who convinced him to return and earn his diploma, telling him he had what it took to be somebody. Dad had named me after her; Mom suggested adding the second N to make it more elegant and French.

Miss Bivens told me that as far as she could remember, I was the only seventh-grader who'd ever worked for the *Wave*. I started out as a proofreader. On winter evenings, instead of huddling around the stove at 93 Little Hobart Street, I'd go down to the warm, dry offices of *The Welch Daily News*, where *The Maroon Wave* was typeset, laid out, and printed. I loved the newsroom's purposeful atmosphere. Teletype machines clattered against the wall as spools of paper carrying news from around the world piled up on the floor. Banks of fluorescent lights hung down eighteen inches above the slanted, glass-topped desks where men wearing green eyeshades conferred over stacks of copy and photographs.

I'd take the *Wave* galleys and sit at one of the desks, my back firm, a pencil behind my ear, studying the pages for typos. The years I'd spent helping Mom check spelling on her students' homework had given me lots of practice for this line of work. I'd make corrections with a light blue felt marker that couldn't be picked up by the camera that photographed the pages for printing. The typesetters would retype the lines I'd corrected and print them out. I'd run the corrected lines through the hot-wax machine that made the back side sticky, then cut out the lines with an X-Acto knife and fit them over the original lines.

I tried to remain inconspicuous in the newsroom, but one of the typesetters, a crabbed, chain-smoking woman who always wore a hairnet, took a dislike to me. She thought I was dirty. When I walked by, she'd turn to the other typesetters and say loudly, "Y'all smell something funny?" Just like Lucy Jo Rose had done to Mom, she took to spraying disinfectant and air freshener in my general direction. Then she complained to the editor, Mr. Muckenfuss, that I might have head lice and could infect the entire staff. Mr. Muckenfuss conferred with Miss Bivens, and she told me that as long as I kept clean, she'd fight for me. That was when I started going back to Grandpa and Uncle Stanley's apartment for a weekly bath, though when I was there, I made sure to give Uncle Stanley a wide berth.

Whenever I was at the *Daily News*, I watched the editors and reporters at work in the newsroom. They kept a police scanner on all the time, and when an accident or fire or crime was called in, an editor would send a reporter to find out what had happened. He'd come back a couple of hours later and type up a story, and it would appear in the next day's paper. This appealed to me mightily. Until then, when I thought of writers, what first came to mind was Mom, hunched over her typewriter, clattering away on her novels and plays and philosophies of life and occasionally receiving a personalized rejection letter. But a newspaper reporter, instead of holing up in isolation, was in touch with the rest of the world. What the reporter wrote influenced what people thought about and talked about the next day; he knew what was really going on. I decided I wanted to be one of the people who knew what was really going on.

When my work was done, I read the stories on the wire services. Because we never subscribed to newspapers or magazines, I'd never

known what was going on in the world, except for the skewed version of events we got from Mom and Dad—one in which every politician was a crook, every cop was a thug, and every criminal had been framed. I began to feel like I was getting the whole story for the first time, that I was being handed the missing pieces to the puzzle, and the world was making a little more sense.

AT TIMES I FELT LIKE I was failing Maureen, like I wasn't keeping my promise that I'd protect her—the promise I'd made to her when I held her on the way home from the hospital after she'd been born. I couldn't get her what she needed most—hot baths, a warm bed, steaming bowls of Cream of Wheat before school in the morning—but I tried to do little things. When she turned seven that year, I told Brian and Lori that she needed a special birthday celebration. We knew Mom and Dad wouldn't get her presents, so we saved for months, went to the Dollar General Store, and bought her a toy set of kitchen appliances that were pretty realistic: The agitator in the washing machine twisted around, and the refrigerator had metal shelves inside. We figured when she was playing, she could at least pretend to have clean clothes and regular meals.

"Tell me again about California," Maureen said after she opened the presents. Although she had been born there, she couldn't remember it. She always loved hearing our stories about life in the California desert, so we told them to her again, about how the sun shone all the time and it was so warm that we ran around barefoot even in the dead of winter, about how we ate lettuce in the farm fields and picked carloads of green grapes and slept on blankets under the stars. We told her that she was blond because she'd been born in a state where so much gold had been mined, and she had blue eyes the color of the ocean that washed onto California's beaches. "That's where I'm going to live when I grow up," Maureen said.

Although she longed for California, the magical place of light and warmth, she seemed happier than the rest of us kids in Welch. She was a storybook-beautiful girl, with long blond hair and startling blue eyes. She spent so much time with the families of her friends that she often didn't seem like a member of our family. A lot of her friends were Pentecostals whose parents held that Mom and Dad were disgracefully irresponsible and took it upon themselves to save Maureen's soul. They took her up

like a surrogate daughter and brought her with them to revival meetings and to snake-handling services over in Jolo.

Under their influence, Maureen developed a powerful religious streak. She got baptized more than once and was all the time coming home proclaiming that she'd been born again. Once she insisted that the devil had taken the form of a hoop snake with its tail in its mouth, and had rolled after her down the mountain, hissing that it would claim her soul. Brian told Mom we needed to keep Maureen away from those nutty Pentecostals, but Mom said we all came to religion in our individual ways and we each needed to respect the religious practices of others, seeing as it was up to every human being to find his or her own way to heaven.

Mom could be as wise as a philosopher, but her moods were getting on my nerves. At times she'd be happy for days on end, announcing that she had decided to think only positive thoughts, because if you think positive thoughts, then positive things will happen to you. But the positive thoughts would give way to negative thoughts, and the negative thoughts seemed to swoop into her mind the way a big flock of black crows takes over the landscape, sitting thick in the trees and on the fence rails and lawns, staring at you in ominous silence. When that happened, Mom would refuse to get out of bed, even when Lucy Jo showed up to drive her to school, honking impatiently.

One morning toward the end of the school year, Mom had a complete meltdown. She was supposed to write up evaluations of her students' progress, but she'd spent every free minute painting, and now the deadline was on her and the evaluations were unwritten. The remedial reading program was going to lose its funding, and the principal would be either furious or just plain disgusted. Mom couldn't bear to face the woman. Lucy Jo, who'd been waiting for Mom in the Dart, drove off without her, and Mom lay wrapped up in blankets on the sofa bed, sobbing about how much she hated her life.

Dad wasn't there, and neither was Maureen. Brian, typically, started doing an impersonation of Mom carrying on and sobbing, but no one was laughing, so he picked up his books and walked out of the house. Lori sat next to Mom on the bed, trying to console her. I just stood in the doorway with my arms crossed, staring at her.

It was hard for me to believe that this woman with her head under the blankets, feeling sorry for herself and boohooing like a five-year-old, was my mother. Mom was thirty-eight, not young but not old, either. In twenty-five years, I told myself, I'd be as old as she was now. I had no idea what my life would be like then, but as I gathered up my schoolbooks and walked out the door, I swore to myself that it would never be like Mom's, that I would not be crying my eyes out in an unheated shack in some godforsaken holler.

I walked down Little Hobart Street. It had rained the night before, and the only sound was the gurgle of the runoff pouring down through the eroded gullies on the hillside. Thin streams of muddy water flowed across the road, seeping into my shoes and soaking my socks. The sole of my right shoe had come loose and flapped with each step.

Lori caught up with me, and we walked for a while in silence. "Poor Mom," Lori finally said. "She's got it tough."

"No tougher than the rest of us," I said.

"Yes, she does," Lori said. "She's the one who's married to Dad."

"That was her choice," I said. "She needs to be firmer, lay down the law for Dad instead of getting hysterical all the time. What Dad needs is a strong woman."

"A caryatid wouldn't be strong enough for Dad."

"What's that?"

"Pillars shaped like women," Lori said. "The ones holding up those Greek temples with their heads. I was looking at a picture of some the other day, thinking, Those women have the second toughest job in the world."

I disagreed with Lori. I thought a strong woman would be able to manage Dad. What he needed was someone who was focused and determined, someone who would set ultimatums and stick to them. I figured I was strong enough to keep Dad in line. When Mom told me I was so focused it was scary, I know she didn't mean it as a compliment, but I took it that way.

My chance to prove that Dad could be managed came that summer, once school was out. Mom had to spend eight weeks up in Charleston, taking college courses to renew her teaching certificate. Or so she said. I

wondered if she was looking for a way to get away from us all for a while. Lori, because of her good grades and art portfolio, had been accepted into a government-sponsored summer camp for students with special aptitudes. That left me, at thirteen, the head of the household.

Before Mom left, she gave me two hundred dollars. That was plenty, she said, to buy food for Brian and Maureen and me for two months and pay the water and electricity bills. I did the math. It came out to twenty-five dollars a week, or a little over three-fifty a day. I worked up a budget and calculated that we could indeed squeak by if I made extra money babysitting.

For the first week, everything went according to plan. I bought food and made meals for Brian, Maureen, and me. It had been almost a year since the welfare man had scared us into cleaning the house, and it was once again an unholy mess. Mom would have had a fit if I had thrown anything out, but I spent hours straightening up and trying to organize the huge stacks of junk.

Dad usually stayed out at night until we were in bed, and he would still be asleep when we got up and left in the morning. But one afternoon about a week after Mom had gone to Charleston, he caught me alone in the house.

"Hon, I need some money," he said.

"For what?"

"Beer and cigarettes."

"I've got sort of a tight budget, Dad."

"I don't need much. Just five dollars."

That was two days' worth of food. A half gallon of milk, a loaf of bread, a dozen eggs, two cans of jack mackerel, a small bag of apples, and some popcorn. And Dad wasn't even doing me the honor of pretending he needed the money for something useful. He also didn't argue or wheedle or cajole or ratchet the charm way up. He simply waited for me to fork over the cash, as if he knew I didn't have it in me to say no. And I didn't. I took out my green plastic change purse and pulled out a crumpled five and passed it over slowly.

"You're a doll," Dad said and gave me a kiss.

I pulled my head back. Giving him that money pissed me off. I was mad at myself but even madder at Dad. He knew I had a soft spot for him the way no one else in the family did, and he was taking advantage of it.

I felt used. The girls at school always talked about how this or that guy was a user and how such and such a girl got used, and now I understood, from deep inside, the meaning of that word.

When Dad asked me for another five bucks a few days later, I gave it to him. It made me feel sick thinking I was now ten dollars off budget. In a few more days, he asked for twenty.

"Twenty dollars?" I couldn't believe Dad was pushing me this far. "Why twenty?"

"Goddammit, since when do I have to explain myself to my children?" Dad asked. In the next breath, he told me that he had borrowed a friend's car and needed to buy gas so he could drive to Gary for a business meeting. "I need money to make money. I'll pay you back." He looked at me, defying me to disbelieve him.

"I've got bills piling up," I said. I heard my voice growing shrill, but I couldn't control it. "I've got kids to feed."

"Don't you worry about food and bills," Dad said. "That's for me to worry about. Okay?"

I put my hand in my pocket. I didn't know if I was reaching for my money or trying to protect it.

"Have I ever let you down?" Dad asked.

I'd heard that question at least two hundred times, and I'd always answered it the way I knew he wanted me to, because I thought it was my faith in Dad that had kept him going all those years. I was about to tell him the truth for the first time, about to let him know that he'd let us all down plenty, but then I stopped. I couldn't do it. Dad, meanwhile, was saying he was not asking me for the money; he was telling me to give it to him. He needed it. Did I think he was a liar when he said he'd get it back to me?

I gave him the twenty dollars.

That Saturday, Dad told me that to pay me back, he had to earn the money first. He wanted me to accompany him on a business trip. He said I needed to wear something nice. He went through my dresses hanging from the pipe in the bedroom and picked out one with blue flowers that buttoned up the front. He had borrowed a car, an old pea-green Plymouth with a broken passenger-side window, and we drove through the mountains to a nearby town, stopping at a roadside bar.

The place was dark and as hazy as a battlefield from the cigarette smoke. Neon signs for Pabst Blue Ribbon and Old Milwaukee glowed on the walls. Gaunt men with creased cheeks and women with dark red lipstick sat along the bar. A couple of guys wearing steel-toed boots played pool.

Dad and I took seats at the bar. Dad ordered Buds for himself and me, even though I told him I wanted a Sprite. After a while, he got up to play pool, and no sooner had he left his stool than a man came over and sat on it. He had a black mustache that curved around the sides of his mouth and coal grime under his fingernails. He poured salt in his beer, which Dad said some guys did because they liked to make extra foam.

"Name's Robbie," he said. "That your man there?" He gestured toward Dad.

"I'm his daughter," I said.

He took a lick of foam and started asking me about myself, leaning in close as he talked. "How old are you, girl?"

"How old do you think?" I asked.

"About seventeen."

I smiled, putting my hand over my teeth.

"Know how to dance?" he asked. I shook my head. "Sure you do," he said and pulled me off the stool. I looked over at Dad, who grinned and waved.

On the jukebox, Kitty Wells was singing about married men and honky-tonk angels. Robbie held me close, with his hand on the small of my back. We danced to a second song, and when we sat down again on the stools facing the pool table, our backs against the bar, he slid his arm behind me. That arm made me tense but not entirely unhappy. No one had flirted with me since Billy Deel, unless you counted Kenny Hall.

Still, I knew what Robbie was after. I was going to tell him I wasn't that sort of girl, but then I thought he would say I was getting ahead of myself. After all, the only thing he'd done was dance me slow and put his arm around me. I caught Dad's eye. I expected him to come barreling across the room and whock Robbie with a pool cue for getting fresh with his daughter. Instead, he hollered to Robbie, "Do something worthwhile with those damned hands of yours. Get over here and play me a game of pool."

They ordered whiskeys and chalked their cues. Dad held back at first

and lost some money to Robbie, then started upping the stakes and beating him. After every game, Robbie wanted to dance with me again. It went on that way for a couple of hours, with Robbie getting sloppy drunk, losing to Dad, and groping me when we danced or sat at the bar between games. All Dad said to me was "Keep your legs crossed, honey, and keep 'em crossed tight."

After Dad had taken him for about eighty bucks, Robbie started muttering angrily to himself. He snapped down the cue chalk, sending up a puff of blue powder, and missed a final shot. He flung his cue on the table and announced he'd had enough, then sat down next to me. His eyes were bleary. He kept saying he couldn't believe that old fart had beat him out of eighty bucks, as if he couldn't decide whether he was pissed off or impressed.

Then he told me he lived in an apartment over the bar. He had a Roy Acuff record that wasn't on the jukebox, and he wanted us to go upstairs and listen to it. If all he wanted to do was dance some more and maybe kiss a little, I could handle that. But I had the feeling he thought he was entitled to something in return for losing so much money.

"I'm not sure," I said.

"Aw, come on," he said and shouted at Dad, "I'm going to take your girl upstairs."

"Sure," Dad said. "Just don't do anything I wouldn't do." He pointed his pool cue at me. "Holler if you need me," he said and winked at me as if to say he knew I could take care of myself, that this was just a part of my job.

So, with Dad's blessing, I went upstairs. Inside the apartment, we pushed through a curtain made from strands of beer-can pull tabs linked together. Two men sat on a couch watching wrestling on television. When they saw me, they grinned wolfishly at Robbie, who put on the Roy Acuff record without turning down the television. He pressed me to him and started dancing again, but I knew this was not going in a direction I wanted, and I resisted him. His hands dropped down. He squeezed my bottom, pushed me onto the bed, and began kissing me. "All right!" one friend said, and the other yelled, "Get it on!"

"I'm not that kind of girl," I said, but he ignored me. When I tried rolling away, he pinned back my arms. Dad had said to holler if I needed him, but I didn't want to scream. I was so angry at Dad that I couldn't

bear the idea of him rescuing me. Robbie, meanwhile, was saying something about me being too bony to screw.

"Yeah, most guys don't like me," I said. "Besides being skinny, I got these scars."

"Oh, sure," he said. But he paused.

I rolled off the bed, quickly unbuttoned my dress at the waist, and pulled it open to show him the scar on my right side. For all he knew, my entire torso was one giant mass of scar tissue. Robbie looked uncertainly at his friends. It was like seeing a gap in a fence.

"I think I hear Dad calling," I said, then made for the door.

In the car, Dad took out the money he'd won and counted off forty dollars, which he passed to me.

"We make a good team," he said.

I felt like throwing the money at him, but we kids needed it, so I put the bills in my purse. We hadn't scammed Robbie, but we'd worked him in a way that felt downright sleazy, and I'd ended up in a tight spot. If Robbie had been set up by Dad, so had I.

"You upset about something, Mountain Goat?"

For a moment I considered not telling Dad. I was afraid there'd be bloodshed, since he was always going on about how he'd kill anyone who laid a finger on me. Then I decided I wanted to see the guy pummeled. "Dad, that creep attacked me when we were upstairs."

"I'm sure he just pawed you some," Dad said as we pulled out of the parking lot. "I knew you could handle yourself."

The road back to Welch was dark and empty. The wind whistled through the broken window on my side of the Plymouth. Dad lit a cigarette. "It was like that time I threw you into the sulfur spring to teach you to swim," he said. "You might have been convinced you were going to drown, but I knew you'd do just fine."

THE NEXT EVENING Dad disappeared. After a couple of days, he wanted me to go out with him again to some bar, but I said no. Dad got ticked off and said that if I wasn't going to team up with him, the least I could do was stake him some pool-shooting money. I found myself forking over a twenty, and then another in a few days.

Mom had told me to expect a check in early July for the lease on her Texas land. She also warned me that Dad would try to get his hands on it. Dad actually waited at the foot of the hill for the mailman and took it from him on the day it arrived, but when the mailman told me what had happened, I ran down Little Hobart Street and caught Dad before he got into town. I told him Mom had wanted me to hide the check until she returned. "Let's hide it together," Dad said and suggested we stash it in the 1933 *World Book Encyclopedia* Mom got free from the library—under "currency."

The next day when I went to rehide the check, it was gone. Dad swore he had no idea what happened to it. I knew he was lying, but I also knew if I accused him, he'd deny it and there'd be a loud yelling match that wouldn't do me any good. For the first time, I had a clear idea of what Mom was up against. Being a strong woman was harder than I had thought. Mom still had more than a month in Charleston; we were about to run out of grocery money; and my babysitting income wasn't making up the difference.

I had seen a help-wanted sign in the window of a jewelry store on McDowell Street called Becker's Jewel Box. I put on a lot of makeup, my best dress—it was purple, with tiny white dots and a sash that tied in the back—and a pair of Mom's high heels, since we wore the same size. Then I walked around the mountain to apply for the job.

I pushed open the door, jangling the bells hanging overhead. Becker's Jewel Box was a fancy store, the kind of place I never had occasion to go into, with a humming air conditioner and buzzing fluorescent lights. Locked glass display cases held rings and necklaces and brooches, and a

few guitars and banjos hung on the pine-board-paneled walls to diversify the merchandise. Mr. Becker was leaning on the counter with his fingers interlocked. He had a stomach so big that his thin black belt reminded me of the equator circling the globe.

I was afraid that Mr. Becker wouldn't give me the job if he knew I was only thirteen, so I told him I was seventeen. He hired me on the spot for forty dollars a week, in cash. I was thrilled. It was my first real job. Babysitting and tutoring and doing other kids' homework and mowing lawns and redeeming bottles and selling scrap metal didn't count. Forty dollars a week was serious money.

I liked the work. People buying jewelry were always happy, and even though Welch was a poor town, Becker's Jewel Box had plenty of customers: older miners buying their wives a mother's pin, a brooch with a birthstone for each of her children; teenage couples shopping for engagement rings, the girl giggling with excitement, the boy acting proud and manly.

During the slow spells, Mr. Becker and I watched the Watergate hearings on a little black-and-white TV. Mr. Becker was captivated by John Dean's wife, Maureen, who sat behind her husband when he was testifying and wore elegant clothes and pulled her blond hair back in a tight bun. "Hot damn, that's one classy broad," Mr. Becker would say. Sometimes, after watching Maureen Dean, Mr. Becker got so randy that he came behind me while I was cleaning the display case and rubbed up against my backside. I'd pull his hands off and walk away without saying a word, and that horndog would return to the television as if nothing had happened.

When Mr. Becker went across the street to the Mountaineer Diner for lunch, he always took the key to the display case that held the diamond rings. If customers came in wanting to look at the rings, I had to run across the street to get him. Once he forgot to take the key, and when he returned, he made a big point of counting the rings in front of me. It was his way of letting me know he didn't trust me in the slightest. One day after Mr. Becker had come back from lunch and ostentatiously checked the display cases, I was so furious that I looked around to see if there was anything in the entire darn store worth stealing. Necklaces, brooches,

banjos—none of them did anything for me. And then the watch display caught my eye.

I had always wanted a watch. Unlike diamonds, watches were practical. They were for people on the run, people with appointments to keep and schedules to meet. That was the kind of person I wanted to be. Dozens of watches ticked away in the counter behind the cash register. There was one in particular that made me ache. It had four different-colored bands—black, brown, blue, and white—so you could change your watchband to match your outfit. It had a price tag of \$29.95, ten dollars short of a week's salary. But if I wanted, it could be mine in an instant, and for free. The more I thought about that watch, the more it called to me.

One day the woman who worked at the store Mr. Becker owned in War stopped by. Mr. Becker wanted her to give me some beauty tips. While she was showing me her different makeup applicators, the woman, who had stiff platinum hair and eyelashes tarred in mascara, told me I must be earning a truckload in commissions. When I asked her what she meant, she said that in addition to her forty-dollar-a-week salary, she made 10 percent on every sale. Her commissions were sometimes double her salary. "Hell, welfare'll get you more than forty bucks a week," she said. "If you're not getting commissions, Becker's stiffing you."

When I asked Mr. Becker about commissions, he said they were for salespeople and I was just an assistant. The next day, when Mr. Becker went off to the Mountaineer, I opened the display case and took out the four-band watch. I slipped it into my handbag and rearranged the remaining watches to cover the gap. I had made plenty of sales on my own when Mr. Becker was busy. Since he hadn't paid me any commissions, I was only taking what I was owed.

When Mr. Becker came back from lunch, he studied the diamond-ring display like he always did, but he didn't even glance at the watches. Walking home that evening with the watch hidden in my purse, I felt light and giddy. After dinner, I climbed into my bunk bed, where no one could see me, and tried on the watch with each of the bands, gesturing the way I figured rich people did.

Wearing the watch to work was out of the question, of course. I also realized that I could run into Mr. Becker in town at any time, so I decided that until school started, I'd put the watch on only at home. Then I began

to wonder how I'd explain the watch to Brian and Lori and Mom and Dad. I also worried that Mr. Becker might see something thieflike in my expression. Sooner or later, he'd discover the missing watch and would question me, and I'd have to lie convincingly, which I wasn't very good at. If I wasn't convincing, I'd be sent off to a reform school with people like Billy Deel, and Mr. Becker would have the satisfaction of knowing he'd been right all along not to trust me.

I wasn't about to give him that satisfaction. The next morning I took the watch out of the wooden box where I kept my geode, put it in my purse, and brought it back to the store. All morning I nervously waited for Mr. Becker to leave for lunch. When he was finally gone, I opened the display case, slipped the watch inside, and rearranged the other watches around it. I moved fast. The week before, I had stolen the watch without breaking a sweat. But now I was terrified that someone would catch me putting it back.

IN LATE AUGUST, I was washing clothes in the tin pan in the living room when I heard someone coming up the stairs singing. It was Lori. She burst into the living room, duffel bag over her shoulder, laughing and belting out one of those goofy summer-camp songs kids sing at night around the fire. I'd never heard Lori cut loose like this before. She positively glowed as she told me about the hot meals and the hot showers and all the friends she'd made. She'd even had a boyfriend who kissed her. "Everyone assumed I was a normal person," she said. "It was weird." Then she told me that it had occurred to her that if she got out of Welch, and away from the family, she might have a shot at a happy life. From then on, she began looking forward to the day she'd leave Little Hobart Street and be on her own.

A few days later, Mom came home. She seemed different, too. She had lived in a dorm on the university campus, without four kids to take care of, and she had loved it. She'd attended lectures and she'd painted. She'd read stacks of self-help books, and they had made her realize that she'd been living her life for other people. She intended to quit her teaching job and devote herself to her art. "It's time I did something for myself," she said. "It's time I started living my life for me."

"Mom, you spent the whole summer renewing your certificate."

"If I hadn't done that, I never would have had this breakthrough."

"You can't quit your job," I said. "We need the money."

"Why do I always have to be the one who earns the money?" Mom asked. "You have a job. You can earn money. Lori can earn money, too. I've got more important things to do."

I thought Mom was having another tantrum. I assumed that come opening day, she'd be off in Lucy Jo's Dart to Davy Elementary, even if we had to cajole her. But on that first day of school, Mom refused to get out of bed. Lori, Brian, and I pulled back the covers and tried to drag her out, but she wouldn't budge.

I told her she had responsibilities. I told her child welfare might come down on us again if she wasn't working. She folded her arms across her chest and stared us down. "I'm not going to school," she said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I'm sick."

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"My mucus is yellow," Mom said.

"If everyone who had yellow mucus stayed home, the schools would be pretty empty," I told her.

Mom's head snapped up. "You can't talk to me like that," she said. "I'm your mother."

"If you want to be treated like a mother," I said, "you should act like one."

Mom rarely got angry. She was usually either singing or crying, but now her face twisted up with fury. We both knew I had crossed a line, but I didn't care. I'd also changed over the summer.

"How dare you?" she shouted. "You're in trouble now—big trouble. I'm telling your dad. Just you wait until he comes home."

Mom's threat didn't worry me. The way I saw it, Dad owed me. I'd looked after his kids all summer, I'd kept him in beer and cigarette money, and I'd helped him fleece that miner Robbie. I figured I had Dad in my back pocket.

When I got home from school that afternoon, Mom was still curled up on the sofa bed, a small pile of paperbacks next to her. Dad was sitting at the drafting table, rolling a cigarette. He beckoned to me to follow him into the kitchen. Mom watched us go.

Dad closed the door and looked at me gravely. "Your mother claims you back-talked her."

"Yes," I said. "It's true."

"Yes, sir," he corrected me, but I didn't say anything.

"I'm disappointed in you," he went on. "You know damn good and well that you are to respect your parents."

"Dad, Mom's not sick, she's playing hooky," I said. "She has to take her obligations more seriously. She has to grow up a little."

"Who do you think you are?" he asked. "She's your mother."

"Then why doesn't she act like one?" I looked at Dad for what felt like a very long moment. Then I blurted out, "And why don't you act like a dad?"

I could see the blood surge into his face. He grabbed me by the arm. "You apologize for that comment!"

"Or what?" I asked.

Dad shoved me up against the wall. "Or by God I'll show you who's boss around here."

His face was inches from mine. "What are you going to do to punish me?" I asked. "Stop taking me to bars?"

Dad drew back his hand as if to smack me. "You watch your mouth, young lady. I can still whip your butt, and don't think I won't."

"You can't be serious," I said.

Dad dropped his hand. He pulled his belt out of the loops on his work pants and wrapped it a couple of times around his knuckles.

"Apologize to me and to your mother," he said.

"No."

Dad raised the belt. "Apologize."

"No."

"Then bend over."

Dad was standing between me and the door. There was no way out except through him. But it never occurred to me to either run or fight. The way I saw it, he was in a tighter spot than I was. He had to back down, because if he sided with Mom and gave me a whipping, he would lose me forever.

We stared at each other. Dad seemed to be waiting for me to drop my eyes, to apologize and tell him I was wrong so we could go back to being like we were, but I kept holding his gaze. Finally, to call his bluff, I turned around, bent over slightly, and rested my hands on my knees.

I expected him to turn and walk away, but there were six stinging blows on the backs of my thighs, each accompanied by a whistle of air. I could feel the welts rising even before I straightened up.

I walked out of the kitchen without looking at Dad. Mom was outside the door. She'd been standing there, listening to everything. I didn't look at her, but I could see from the corner of my eye her triumphant expression. I bit my lip so I wouldn't cry.

As soon as I got outside, I ran up into the woods, pushing tree branches and wild grape vines out of my face. I thought I'd start crying now that I was away from the house, but instead, I threw up. I ate some wild mint to get rid of the taste of bile, and I walked for what felt like hours through the silent hills. The air was clear and cool, and the forest floor was thick with leaves that had fallen from the buckeyes and poplars. Late in the afternoon, I sat down on a tree trunk, leaning forward because the backs of my thighs still stung. All through the long walk, the pain had kept me thinking, and by the time I reached the tree trunk, I had made two decisions.

The first was that I'd had my last whipping. No one was ever going to do that to me again. The second was that, like Lori, I was going to get out of Welch. The sooner, the better. Before I finished high school, if I could. I had no idea where I would go, but I did know I was going. I also knew it would not be easy. People got stuck in Welch. I had been counting on Mom and Dad to get us out, but I now knew I had to do it on my own. It would take saving and planning. I decided the next day I'd go to G. C. Murphy and buy a pink plastic piggy bank I'd seen there. I'd put in the seventy-five dollars I had managed to save while working at Becker's Jewel Box. It would be the beginning of my escape fund.

THAT FALL, TWO GUYS showed up in Welch who were different from anyone I'd ever met. They were filmmakers from New York City, and they'd been sent to Welch as part of a government program to bring cultural uplift to rural Appalachia. Their names were Ken Fink and Bob Gross.

At first, I thought they were joking. Ken Fink and Bob Gross? As far as I was concerned, they might as well have said their names were Ken Stupid and Bob Ugly. But Ken and Bob weren't joking. They didn't think their names were funny at all, and they didn't smile when I asked if they were putting me on.

Ken and Bob both talked so fast—their conversation filled with references to people I'd never heard of, like Stanley Kubrick and Woody Allen—that it was sometimes hard to follow them. Although they had no sense of humor about their names, Ken and Bob did like to joke a lot. It wasn't the sort of Welch High humor I was used to—Polack jokes and guys cupping their hand under their armpit to make fart noises. Ken and Bob had this smart, competitive way of joking where one would make a wisecrack and the other would have a comeback and the first would have a retort to the comeback. They could keep it up until my head spun.

One weekend Ken and Bob showed a Swedish film in the school auditorium. It was shot in black and white, and had subtitles and a plot heavy on symbolism, so fewer than a dozen people came, even though it was free. Afterward, Lori showed Ken and Bob some of her illustrations. They told her she had talent and said if she was serious about becoming an artist, she needed to go to New York City. It was a place of energy and creativity and intellectual stimulation the likes of which we'd never seen. It was filled with people who, because they were such unique individuals, didn't fit in anywhere else.

That night Lori and I lay in our rope beds and discussed New York City. The things I had heard always made it sound like a big, noisy place

with a lot of pollution and mobs of people in suits elbowing one another on the sidewalks. But Lori began to see New York as a sort of Emerald City—this glowing, bustling place at the end of a long road where she could become the person she was meant to be.

What Lori liked most about Ken and Bob's description was that the city attracted people who were different. Lori was about as different as it was possible to be in Welch. While almost all the other kids wore jeans, Converse sneakers, and T-shirts, she showed up at school in army boots, a white dress with red polka dots, and a jean jacket with dark poetry she'd painted on the back. The other kids threw bars of soap at her, pushed one another into her path, and wrote graffiti about her on the bathroom walls. In return, she cursed them out in Latin.

At home she read and painted late into the night, by candlelight or kerosene lamp if the electricity was turned off. She liked Gothic details: mist hanging over a silent lake, gnarled roots heaving up from the earth, a solitary crow in the branches of a bare tree on the shoreline. I thought Lori was amazing, and I had no doubt she would become a successful artist, but only if she could get to New York. I decided I wanted to go there, too, and that winter we came up with a plan. Lori would leave by herself for New York in June, after she graduated. She'd settle in, find a place for us, and I'd follow her as soon as I could.

I told Lori about my escape fund, the seventy-five dollars I'd saved. From now on, I said, it would be our joint fund. We'd take on extra work after school and put everything we earned into the piggy bank. Lori could take it to New York and use it to get established, so that by the time I arrived, everything would be set.

Lori had always made very good posters, for football rallies, for the plays the drama club put on, and for candidates running for student council. Now she started doing commissioned posters for a dollar-fifty apiece. She was too shy to solicit orders, so I did it for her. Lots of kids at Welch High wanted customized posters to hang on their bedroom walls—of their boyfriend's or girlfriend's name, of their car or their astrological sign or their favorite band. Lori designed the names in big fat overlapping three-dimensional letters like the kind on rock albums, then painted them in Day-Glo colors, outlined in india ink so the letters popped, and surrounded them with stars and dots and squiggly lines that made the letters seem like they were moving. The posters were so good

that word of mouth spread, and soon Lori had such a backlog of orders that she was up working until one or two every morning.

I made money babysitting and doing other kids' homework. I did book reports, science essays, and math. I charged a dollar per assignment and guaranteed at least an A- or the customer was entitled to a full refund. After school, I babysat for a dollar an hour and could usually do the homework then. I also tutored kids for two dollars an hour.

We told Brian about the escape fund, and he pitched in, even though we hadn't included him in our plans because he was only in the seventh grade. He mowed lawns or chopped wood or cut hillside weeds with a scythe. He worked after school until the sun went down and all day Saturday and Sunday and came home with his arms and face scratched from the brush he'd cleared. Without looking for thanks or praise, he quietly added his earnings to the pig, which we named Oz.

We kept Oz on the old sewing machine in the bedroom. Oz had no plugged hole on the bottom, and the slot on the top was too narrow to work bills out, even if you used a knife, so once you'd put money into Oz, it stayed there. We tested it to make sure. We couldn't count the money, but because Oz was translucent, we could see our cash accumulating inside when we held him up to the light.

One day that winter, when I came home from school, a gold Cadillac Coupe DeVille was parked in front of the house. I wondered if the welfare agency had found some millionaires to be our foster parents and they had arrived to take us away, but Dad was inside the house, twirling a set of keys on his finger. He explained that the Cadillac was the new official Walls family vehicle. Mom was carrying on about how it was one thing to live in a three-room shack with no electricity, since there was a certain dignity in poverty, but to live in a three-room shack and own a gold Cadillac meant you were bona fide poor white trash.

"How'd you get it?" I asked Dad.

"One helluva good poker hand," he said, "and an even better bluff."

We'd owned a couple of cars since we'd been in Welch, but they were true buckets of bolts, with shuddering engines and cracked windshields, and as we drove along, we could see the blur of the asphalt through the rusted-out floor panels. Those cars never lasted more than a couple of

months, and like the Oldsmobile we'd driven from Phoenix, we never named them, much less got them registered and inspected. The Coupe DeVille actually had an unexpired inspection sticker. It was such a beauty that Dad declared the time had come to revive the tradition of naming our cars. "That there Caddy," he said, "strikes me as Elvis."

It crossed my mind that Dad ought to sell Elvis and use the money to install an indoor toilet and buy us all new clothes. The black leather shoes I had bought for fifty cents at the Dollar General Store were held together with safety pins, which I'd tried to blacken with a Magic Marker so you wouldn't notice them. I'd also used Magic Markers to make colored blotches on my legs that I hoped would camouflage the holes in my pants. I figured that was less noticeable than if I sewed on patches. I had one blue pair and one green pair, so my legs, when I took my pants off, were covered with blue and green spots.

But Dad loved Elvis too dearly to consider selling it. And the truth was, I loved Elvis almost as much. Elvis was as long and sleek as a racing yacht. It had air-conditioning, gold shag upholstery, windows that went up and down with the push of a button, and a working turn signal, so Dad didn't have to stick his arm out. Every time we drove through town in Elvis, I'd nod graciously and smile at the people on the sidewalk, feeling like an heiress. "You've got true noblesse oblige, Mountain Goat," Dad would say.

Mom grew to love Elvis, too. She hadn't gone back to teaching and instead spent her time painting, and on the weekends we began to drive to craft fairs all throughout West Virginia: shows where bearded men in overalls played dulcimers and women in granny dresses sold corncob back scratchers and coal sculptures of black bears and miners. We filled Elvis's trunk with Mom's paintings and tried to sell them at the fairs. Mom also drew pastel portraits on the spot for anyone willing to pay eighteen dollars, and every now and then she got a commission.

We all slept in Elvis on those trips, because a lot of times we made only enough to pay for the gas, or not even that. Still, it felt good to be on the move again. Our trips in Elvis reminded me how easy it was to pick up and move on when the urge struck. Once you'd resolved to go, there was nothing to it at all.

AS SPRING APPROACHED and the day of Lori's graduation drew closer, I lay awake at night, thinking about her life in New York City. "In exactly three months," I said to her, "you'll be living in New York." The following week, I said, "In exactly two months and three weeks, you'll be living in New York."

"Would you please shut up," she said.

"You're not nervous, are you?" I asked.

"What do you think?"

Lori was terrified. She was not sure what she was supposed to do once she got to New York. That had always been the vaguest part of our escape plan. Back in the fall, I'd had no doubt that she could get a scholarship to one of the city's universities. She'd been a finalist for a National Merit Scholarship, but she'd had to hitchhike into Bluefield to take the test, and she got rattled when the trucker who picked her up put the moves on her; she arrived nearly an hour late and botched the test.

Mom, who supported Lori's New York plans and kept saying she wished she were going to the big city herself, suggested that Lori apply to the Cooper Union art school. Lori put together a portfolio of her drawings and paintings, but just before the submissions deadline, she spilled a pot of coffee on them, which made Mom wonder aloud if Lori had a fear of success.

Then Lori heard about a scholarship sponsored by a literary society for the student who created the best work of art inspired by one of the geniuses of the English language. She decided to make a clay bust of Shakespeare. She worked on it for a week, using a sharpened Popsicle stick to shape the slightly bulging eyes and the goatee and earring and longish hair. When it was finished, it looked exactly like Shakespeare.

That night we were all sitting at the drafting table watching Lori put the final touches on Shakespeare's hair when Dad came home drunk. "That does indeed resemble old Billy," Dad said. "Only thing is, as I been telling you, he was a goddamn fake."

For years, every time Mom brought out Shakespeare's plays, Dad would carry on about how they'd been written not by William Shakespeare of Avon but by a bunch of people, including someone named the Earl of Oxford, because no single person in Elizabethan England could have had Shakespeare's thirty-thousand-word vocabulary. All this bunk about little Billy Shakespeare, Dad would say, the great genius despite his grammar-school education, his small Latin and less Greek, was a lot of sentimental mythology.

"You're helping perpetuate this fraud," he told Lori.

"Dad, it's just a bust," Lori said.

"That's the problem," Dad said.

He studied the sculpture, then suddenly reached over and smeared off Shakespeare's mouth with his thumb.

"What the hell are you doing?" Lori cried out.

"It's no longer *just* a bust," Dad said. "Now it has symbolic value. You can call it *Mute Bard*."

"I spent days on that," Lori shouted. "And you've ruined it!"

"I elevated it," Dad said. He told Lori he would help her write a paper that would demonstrate that Shakespeare's plays had multiple authors, like Rembrandt's paintings. "By God, you'll set the literary world on edge," he said.

"I don't want to set the world on edge!" Lori screamed. "I just want to win a stupid little scholarship!"

"Goddammit, you're in a horse race, but you're thinking like a sheep," Dad said. "Sheep don't win horse races."

Lori didn't have the spirit to rework the bust. The next day she smushed the clay into a big glob and left it on the drafting table. I told Lori that if she hadn't been accepted into an art school by the time she graduated, she should go to New York anyway. She could support herself with the money we'd saved up until she found a job, and then she could apply to a school. That became our new plan.

Everyone was mad at Dad, which gave him a case of the sulks. He said he didn't know why he even bothered to come home anymore, since he no longer got the slightest bit of appreciation for his ideas. He insisted he wasn't trying to keep Lori from leaving for New York, but if she had the

sense that God gave a goose, she would stay put. "New York is a sorry-ass sinkhole," he said more than once, "filled with faggots and rapists." She'd get mugged and find herself on the streets, he warned, forced into prostitution and winding up a drug addict like all those runaway teenagers. "I'm only telling you this because I love you," he said. "And I don't want to see you hurt."

One evening in May, when we'd been saving our money for almost nine months, I came home with a couple of dollars I'd made babysitting and went into the bedroom to stash them in Oz. The pig was not on the old sewing machine. I began looking through all the junk in the bedroom and finally found Oz on the floor. Someone had slashed him apart with a knife and stolen all the money.

I knew it was Dad, but at the same time, I couldn't believe he'd stoop this low. Lori obviously didn't know yet. She was in the living room humming away as she worked on a poster. My first impulse was to hide Oz. I had this wild thought that I could somehow replace the money before Lori discovered it was missing. But I knew how ridiculous that was; three of us had spent the better part of a year accumulating the money. It would be impossible for me to replace it in the month before Lori graduated.

I went into the living room and stood beside her, trying to think of what to say. She was working on a poster that said TAMMY! in Day-Glo colors. After a moment, she looked up. "What?" she said.

Lori could tell by my face that something was wrong. She stood up so abruptly she knocked over a bottle of india ink, and ran into the bedroom. I braced myself, expecting to hear a scream, but there was only silence and then a small, broken whimpering.

Lori stayed up all night to confront Dad, but he didn't come home. She skipped school the following day in case he returned, but Dad was AWOL for three days before we heard him climbing the rickety staircase to the porch.

"You bastard!" Lori shouted. "You stole our money!"

"What the goddamn hell are you talking about?" Dad asked. "And watch your language." He leaned against the door and lit a cigarette.

Lori held up the slashed pig and threw it as hard as she could at Dad,

but it was empty and nearly weightless. It struck his shoulder lightly, then bounced to the floor. He bent down carefully, as if the floor beneath him could shift at any moment, picked up our ravaged piggy bank, and turned it over in his hands. "Someone sure as hell gutted old Oz, didn't they?" He turned to me. "Jeannette, do you know what happened?"

He was actually half grinning at me. After the whipping, Dad had jacked up the charm with me, and even though I was planning to leave, he could make me laugh when he tried, and he still considered me an ally. But now I wanted to knock him over the head. "You took our money," I said. "That's what happened."

"Well, don't that beat all," Dad said. He started going on about how a man comes home from slaying dragons, trying to keep his family safe, and all he wants in return for his toil and sacrifice is a little love and respect, but it seemed these days that was just too damn much to ask for. He said he didn't take our New York money, but if Lori was hell-bent on living in that cesspool, he'd finance her trip himself.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a few wadded dollar bills. We just stared at him, so he let the crumpled money fall to the floor. "Suit yourself," he said.

"Why are you doing this to us, Dad?" I asked. "Why?"

His face tightened with anger, then he staggered to the sofa bed and passed out.

"I'll never get out of here," Lori kept saying. "I'll never get out of here."

"You will," I said. "I swear it." I believed she would. Because I knew that if Lori never got out of Welch, neither would I.

I went back to G. C. Murphy the next day and stared at the shelf of piggy banks. They were all either plastic or porcelain or glass, easily broken. I studied a collection of metal boxes with locks and keys. The hinges were too flimsy. Dad could pry them apart. I bought a blue change purse. I wore it on a belt under my clothes at all times. When it got too full, I put the money in a sock that I hid in a hole in the wall below my bunk.

We started saving again, but Lori felt too defeated to paint much, and the money didn't come as quickly. A week before school was out, we had only \$37.20 in the sock. Then one of the women I'd been babysitting for, a teacher named Mrs. Sanders, told me she and her family were moving

back to their hometown in Iowa and asked if I wanted to spend the summer with them there. If I came along and helped look after her two toddlers, she said she'd pay me two hundred dollars at the end of the summer and buy me a bus ticket back to Welch.

I thought about her offer. "Take Lori instead of me," I said. "And at the end of the summer, buy her a bus ticket to New York City."

Mrs. Sanders agreed.

Low-lying pewter-colored clouds rested on the mountaintops around Welch on the morning of Lori's departure. They were there most mornings, and when I noticed them, they reminded me of how isolated and forgotten the town was, a sad, lost place adrift in the clouds. The clouds usually burned away by midmorning, when the sun climbed above the steep hills, but some days, like the one Lori left, they clung to the mountains, and a fine mist formed in the valley that turned your hair and face damp.

When the Sanders family pulled up in their station wagon, Lori was ready. She had packed her clothes, her favorite books, and her art supplies in a single cardboard box. She hugged all of us except Dad—she had refused to speak a word to him since he plundered Oz—promised to write, and climbed into the station wagon.

We all stood watching as the car disappeared down Little Hobart Street. Lori never once looked back. I took that as a good sign. When I climbed the staircase to the house, Dad was standing on the porch, smoking a cigarette.

"This family is falling apart," he said.

"It sure is," I told him.

THAT FALL, WHEN I was going into the tenth grade, Miss Bivens made me news editor of *The Maroon Wave*. After working as a proof-reader in the seventh grade, I'd started laying out pages in the eighth grade, and in the ninth grade I began reporting and writing articles and taking photographs. Mom had bought a Minolta camera to take pictures of her pictures, so she could send them to Lori, who could show them around art galleries in New York. When Mom wasn't using it, I wore the Minolta everywhere, because you never knew when you'd see something newsworthy. What I loved most about calling myself a reporter was that it gave me an excuse to show up anyplace. Since I'd never made a lot of friends in Welch, I hardly ever went to the school's football games or dances or rallies. I felt awkward sitting by myself when everyone else was with friends. But when I was working for the *Wave*, I had a reason to be there. I was on assignment, a member of the working press, with my notepad in hand and the Minolta around my neck.

I began going to just about every extracurricular event at the school, and the kids who shunned me before now accepted me and even sought me out, posing and clowning in hopes of getting their picture in the paper. As someone who could make them famous among their peers, I was no longer a person to be trifled with.

Even though the *Wave* came out only once a month, I worked on it every day. Instead of hiding in the bathroom during lunch hour, I spent it in Miss Bivens's classroom, where I wrote my articles, edited the stories written by other students, and counted the letters in headlines to make sure they fit the columns. I finally had a good excuse for why I never ate lunch. "I'm on deadline," I'd say. I also stayed after school to develop my photographs in the darkroom, and that had a hidden benefit. I could sneak into the cafeteria once everyone had left and dig through the garbage pails. I'd find industrial-sized cans of corn that were nearly full and huge containers of cole slaw and tapioca pudding. I no longer had