

### I WAS ON FIRE.

It's my earliest memory. I was three years old, and we were living in a trailer park in a southern Arizona town whose name I never knew. I was standing on a chair in front of the stove, wearing a pink dress my grandmother had bought for me. Pink was my favorite color. The dress's skirt stuck out like a tutu, and I liked to spin around in front of the mirror, thinking I looked like a ballerina. But at that moment, I was wearing the dress to cook hot dogs, watching them swell and bob in the boiling water as the late-morning sunlight filtered in through the trailer's small kitchenette window.

I could hear Mom in the next room singing while she worked on one of her paintings. Juju, our black mutt, was watching me. I stabbed one of the hot dogs with a fork and bent over and offered it to him. The wiener was hot, so Juju licked at it tentatively, but when I stood up and started stirring the hot dogs again, I felt a blaze of heat on my right side. I turned to see where it was coming from and realized my dress was on fire. Frozen with fear, I watched the yellow-white flames make a ragged brown line up the pink fabric of my skirt and climb my stomach. Then the flames leaped up, reaching my face.

I screamed. I smelled the burning and heard a horrible crackling as the fire singed my hair and eyelashes. Juju was barking. I screamed again.

Mom ran into the room.

"Mommy, help me!" I shrieked. I was still standing on the chair, swatting at the fire with the fork I had been using to stir the hot dogs.

Mom ran out of the room and came back with one of the army-surplus blankets I hated because the wool was so scratchy. She threw the blanket around me to smother the flames. Dad had gone off in the car, so Mom grabbed me and my younger brother, Brian, and hurried over to the trailer next to ours. The woman who lived there was hanging her laundry on the clothesline. She had clothespins in her mouth. Mom, in an unnaturally calm voice, explained what had happened and asked if we

could please have a ride to the hospital. The woman dropped her clothespins and laundry right there in the dirt and, without saying anything, ran for her car.

When we got to the hospital, nurses put me on a stretcher. They talked in loud, worried whispers while they cut off what was left of my fancy pink dress with a pair of shiny scissors. Then they picked me up, laid me flat on a big metal bed piled with ice cubes, and spread some of the ice over my body. A doctor with silver hair and black-rimmed glasses led my mother out of the room. As they left, I heard him telling her that it was very serious. The nurses remained behind, hovering over me. I could tell I was causing a big fuss, and I stayed quiet. One of them squeezed my hand and told me I was going to be okay.

“I know,” I said, “but if I’m not, that’s okay, too.”

The nurse squeezed my hand again and bit her lower lip.

The room was small and white, with bright lights and metal cabinets. I stared for a while at the rows of tiny dots in the ceiling panels. Ice cubes covered my stomach and ribs and pressed up against my cheeks. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a small, grimy hand reach up a few inches from my face and grab a handful of cubes. I heard a loud crunching sound and looked down. It was Brian, eating the ice.

The doctors said I was lucky to be alive. They took patches of skin from my upper thigh and put them over the most badly burned parts of my stomach, ribs, and chest. They said it was called a skin graft. When they were finished, they wrapped my entire right side in bandages.

“Look, I’m a half-mummy,” I said to one of the nurses. She smiled and put my right arm in a sling and attached it to the headboard so I couldn’t move it.

The nurses and doctors kept asking me questions: How did you get burned? Have your parents ever hurt you? Why do you have all these bruises and cuts? My parents never hurt me, I said. I got the cuts and bruises playing outside and the burns from cooking hot dogs. They asked what I was doing cooking hot dogs by myself at the age of three. It was easy, I said. You just put the hot dogs in the water and boil them. It wasn’t

like there was some complicated recipe that you had to be old enough to follow. The pan was too heavy for me to lift when it was full of water, so I’d put a chair next to the sink, climb up and fill a glass, then stand on a chair by the stove and pour the water into the pan. I did that over and over again until the pan held enough water. Then I’d turn on the stove, and when the water was boiling, I’d drop in the hot dogs. “Mom says I’m mature for my age,” I told them, “and she lets me cook for myself a lot.”

Two nurses looked at each other, and one of them wrote something down on a clipboard. I asked what was wrong. Nothing, they said, nothing.

Every couple of days, the nurses changed the bandages. They would put the used bandage off to the side, wadded and covered with smears of blood and yellow stuff and little pieces of burned skin. Then they’d apply another bandage, a big gauzy cloth, to the burns. At night I would run my left hand over the rough, scabby surface of the skin that wasn’t covered by the bandage. Sometimes I’d peel off scabs. The nurses had told me not to, but I couldn’t resist pulling on them real slow to see how big a scab I could get loose. Once I had a couple of them free, I’d pretend they were talking to each other in cheeping voices.

The hospital was clean and shiny. Everything was white—the walls and sheets and nurses’ uniforms—or silver—the beds and trays and medical instruments. Everyone spoke in polite, calm voices. It was so hushed you could hear the nurses’ rubber-soled shoes squeaking all the way down the hall. I wasn’t used to quiet and order, and I liked it.

I also liked it that I had my own room, since in the trailer I shared one with my brother and my sister. My hospital room even had its very own television set up on the wall. We didn’t have a TV at home, so I watched it a lot. Red Buttons and Lucille Ball were my favorites.

The nurses and doctors always asked how I was feeling and if I was hungry or needed anything. The nurses brought me delicious meals three times a day, with fruit cocktail or Jell-O for dessert, and changed the sheets even if they still looked clean. Sometimes I read to them, and they told me I was very smart and could read as well as a six-year-old.

One day a nurse with wavy yellow hair and blue eye makeup was chewing on something. I asked her what it was, and she told me it was

chewing gum. I had never heard of chewing gum, so she went out and got me a whole pack. I pulled out a stick, took off the white paper and the shiny silver foil under it, and studied the powdery, putty-colored gum. I put it in my mouth and was stunned by the sharp sweetness. "It's really good!" I said.

"Chew on it, but don't swallow it," the nurse said with a laugh. She smiled real big and brought in other nurses so they could watch me chew my first-ever piece of gum. When she brought me lunch, she told me I had to take out my chewing gum, but she said not to worry because I could have a new stick after eating. If I finished the pack, she would buy me another. That was the thing about the hospital. You never had to worry about running out of stuff like food or ice or even chewing gum. I would have been happy staying in that hospital forever.

When my family came to visit, their arguing and laughing and singing and shouting echoed through the quiet halls. The nurses made shushing noises, and Mom and Dad and Lori and Brian lowered their voices for a few minutes, then they slowly grew loud again. Everyone always turned and stared at Dad. I couldn't figure out whether it was because he was so handsome or because he called people "pardner" and "goomba" and threw his head back when he laughed.

One day Dad leaned over my bed and asked if the nurses and doctors were treating me okay. If they were not, he said, he would kick some asses. I told Dad how nice and friendly everyone was. "Well, of course they are," he said. "They know you're Rex Walls's daughter."

When Mom wanted to know what it was the doctors and nurses were doing that was so nice, I told her about the chewing gum.

"Ugh," she said. She disapproved of chewing gum, she went on. It was a disgusting low-class habit, and the nurse should have consulted her before encouraging me in such vulgar behavior. She said she was going to give that woman a piece of her mind, by golly. "After all," Mom said, "I am your mother, and I should have a say in how you're raised."

"Do you guys miss me?" I asked my older sister, Lori, during one visit. "Not really," she said. "Too much has been happening."

"Like what?"

"Just the normal stuff."

"Lori may not miss you, honey bunch, but I sure do," Dad said. "You shouldn't be in this antiseptic joint."

He sat down on my bed and started telling me the story about the time Lori got stung by a poisonous scorpion. I'd heard it a dozen times, but I still liked the way Dad told it. Mom and Dad were out exploring in the desert when Lori, who was four, turned over a rock and the scorpion hiding under it stung her leg. She had gone into convulsions, and her body had become stiff and wet with sweat. But Dad didn't trust hospitals, so he took her to a Navajo witch doctor who cut open the wound and put a dark brown paste on it and said some chants and pretty soon Lori was as good as new. "Your mother should have taken you to that witch doctor the day you got burned," Dad said, "not to these heads-up-their-asses med-school quacks."

The next time they visited, Brian's head was wrapped in a dirty white bandage with dried bloodstains. Mom said he had fallen off the back of the couch and cracked his head open on the floor, but she and Dad had decided not to take him to the hospital.

"There was blood everywhere," Mom said, "but one kid in the hospital at a time is enough."

"Besides," Dad said, "Brian's head is so hard, I think the floor took more damage than he did."

Brian thought that was hilarious and just laughed and laughed.

Mom told me she had entered my name in a raffle at a fair, and I'd won a helicopter ride. I was thrilled. I had never been in a helicopter or a plane.

"When do I get to go on the ride?" I asked.

"Oh, we already did that," Mom said. "It was fun."

Then Dad got into an argument with the doctor. It started because Dad thought I shouldn't be wearing bandages. "Burns need to breathe," he told the doctor.

The doctor said bandages were necessary to prevent infection. Dad stared at the doctor. "To hell with infection," he said. He told the doctor that I was going to be scarred for life because of him, but, by God, I wasn't the only one who was going to walk out of there scarred.

Dad pulled back his fist as if to hit the doctor, who raised his hands and backed away. Before anything could happen, a guard in a uniform appeared and told Mom and Dad and Lori and Brian that they would have to leave.

Afterward, a nurse asked me if I was okay. "Of course," I said. I told her I didn't care if I had some silly old scar. That was good, she said, because from the look of it, I had other things to worry about.

A few days later, when I had been at the hospital for about six weeks, Dad appeared alone in the doorway of my room. He told me we were going to check out, Rex Walls-style.

"Are you sure this is okay?" I asked.

"You just trust your old man," Dad said.

He unhooked my right arm from the sling over my head. As he held me close, I breathed in his familiar smell of Vitalis, whiskey, and cigarette smoke. It reminded me of home.

Dad hurried down the hall with me in his arms. A nurse yelled for us to stop, but Dad broke into a run. He pushed open an emergency-exit door and sprinted down the stairs and out to the street. Our car, a beat-up Plymouth we called the Blue Goose, was parked around the corner, the engine idling. Mom was up front, Lori and Brian in the back with Juju. Dad slid me across the seat next to Mom and took the wheel.

"You don't have to worry anymore, baby," Dad said. "You're safe now."

**A FEW DAYS AFTER** Mom and Dad brought me home, I cooked myself some hot dogs. I was hungry, Mom was at work on a painting, and no one else was there to fix them for me.

"Good for you," Mom said when she saw me cooking. "You've got to get right back in the saddle. You can't live in fear of something as basic as fire."

I didn't. Instead, I became fascinated with it. Dad also thought I should face down my enemy, and he showed me how to pass my finger through a candle flame. I did it over and over, slowing my finger with each pass, watching the way it seemed to cut the flame in half, testing to see how much my finger could endure without actually getting burned. I was always on the lookout for bigger fires. Whenever neighbors burned trash, I ran over and watched the blaze trying to escape the garbage can. I'd inch closer and closer, feeling the heat against my face until I got so near that it became unbearable, and then I'd back away just enough to be able to stand it.

The neighbor lady who had driven me to the hospital was surprised that I didn't run in the opposite direction from any fire I saw. "Why the hell would she?" Dad bellowed with a proud grin. "She already fought the fire once and won."

I started stealing matches from Dad. I'd go behind the trailer and light them. I loved the scratching sound of the match against the sandpapery brown strip when I struck it, and the way the flame leaped out of the red-coated tip with a pop and a hiss. I'd feel its heat near my fingertips, then wave it out triumphantly. I lit pieces of paper and little piles of brush and held my breath until the moment when they seemed about to blaze up out of control. Then I'd stomp on the flames and call out the curse words Dad used, like "Dumb-ass sonofabitch!" and "Cocksucker!"

One time I went out back with my favorite toy, a plastic Tinkerbell figurine. She was two inches tall, with yellow hair pulled up in a high ponytail and her hands on her hips in a confident, cocky way that I

admired. I lit a match and held it close to Tinkerbell's face to show her how it felt. She looked even more beautiful in the flame's glow. When that match went out, I lit another one, and this time I held it really close to Tinkerbell's face. Suddenly, her eyes grew wide, as if with fear; I realized, to my horror, that her face was starting to melt. I put out the match, but it was too late. Tinkerbell's once perfect little nose had completely disappeared, and her saucy red lips had been replaced with an ugly, lopsided smear. I tried to smooth her features back to the way they had been, but I made them even worse. Almost immediately, her face cooled and hardened again. I put bandages on it. I wished I could perform a skin graft on Tinkerbell, but that would have meant cutting her into pieces. Even though her face was melted, she was still my favorite toy.

**DAD CAME HOME IN** the middle of the night a few months later and roused all of us from bed.

"Time to pull up stakes and leave this shit-hole behind," he hollered.

We had fifteen minutes to gather whatever we needed and pile into the car.

"Is everything okay, Dad?" I asked. "Is someone after us?"

"Don't you worry," Dad said. "You leave that to me. Don't I always take care of you?"

"'Course you do," I said.

"That's my girl!" Dad said with a hug, then barked orders at us all to speed things up. He took the essentials—a big black cast-iron skillet and the Dutch oven, some army-surplus tin plates, a few knives, his pistol, and Mom's archery set—and packed them in the trunk of the Blue Goose. He said we shouldn't take much else, just what we needed to survive. Mom hurried out to the yard and started digging holes by the light of the moon, looking for our jar of cash. She had forgotten where she'd buried it.

An hour passed before we finally tied Mom's paintings on the top of the car, shoved whatever would fit into the trunk, and piled the overflow on the backseat and the car floor. Dad steered the Blue Goose through the dark, driving slowly so as not to alert anyone in the trailer park that we were, as Dad liked to put it, doing the skedaddle. He was grumbling that he couldn't understand why the hell it took so long to grab what we needed and haul our asses into the car.

"Dad!" I said. "I forgot Tinkerbell!"

"Tinkerbell can make it on her own," Dad said. "She's like my brave little girl. You *are* brave and ready for adventure, right?"

"I guess," I said. I hoped whoever found Tinkerbell would love her despite her melted face. For comfort, I tried to cradle Quixote, our gray and white cat who was missing an ear, but he growled and scratched at my face. "Quiet, Quixote!" I said.

“Cats don’t like to travel,” Mom explained.

Anyone who didn’t like to travel wasn’t invited on our adventure, Dad said. He stopped the car, grabbed Quixote by the scruff of the neck, and tossed him out the window. Quixote landed with a screeching meow and a thud, Dad accelerated up the road, and I burst into tears.

“Don’t be so sentimental,” Mom said. She told me we could always get another cat, and now Quixote was going to be a wild cat, which was much more fun than being a house cat. Brian, afraid that Dad might toss Juju out the window as well, held the dog tight.

To distract us kids, Mom got us singing songs like “Don’t Fence Me In” and “This Land Is Your Land,” and Dad led us in rousing renditions of “Old Man River” and his favorite, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” After a while, I forgot about Quixote and Tinkerbelle and the friends I’d left behind in the trailer park. Dad started telling us about all the exciting things we were going to do and how we were going to get rich once we reached the new place where we were going to live.

“Where are we going, Dad?” I asked.

“Wherever we end up,” he said.

Later that night, Dad stopped the car out in the middle of the desert, and we slept under the stars. We had no pillows, but Dad said that was part of his plan. He was teaching us to have good posture. The Indians didn’t use pillows, either, he explained, and look how straight they stood. We did have our scratchy army-surplus blankets, so we spread them out and lay there, looking up at the field of stars. I told Lori how lucky we were to be sleeping out under the sky like Indians.

“We could live like this forever,” I said.

“I think we’re going to,” she said.

**WE WERE ALWAYS DOING** the skedaddle, usually in the middle of the night. I sometimes heard Mom and Dad discussing the people who were after us. Dad called them henchmen, bloodsuckers, and the gestapo. Sometimes he would make mysterious references to executives from Standard Oil who were trying to steal the Texas land that Mom’s family owned, and FBI agents who were after Dad for some dark episode that he never told us about because he didn’t want to put us in danger, too.

Dad was so sure a posse of federal investigators was on our trail that he smoked his unfiltered cigarettes from the wrong end. That way, he explained, he burned up the brand name, and if the people who were tracking us looked in his ashtray, they’d find unidentifiable butts instead of Pall Malls that could be traced to him. Mom, however, told us that the FBI wasn’t really after Dad; he just liked to say they were because it was more fun having the FBI on your tail than bill collectors.

We moved around like nomads. We lived in dusty little mining towns in Nevada, Arizona, and California. They were usually nothing but a tiny cluster of sad, sunken shacks, a gas station, a dry-goods store, and a bar or two. They had names like Needles and Bouse, Pie, Goffs, and Why, and they were near places like the Superstition Mountains, the dried-up Soda Lake, and the Old Woman Mountain. The more desolate and isolated a place was, the better Mom and Dad liked it.

Dad would get a job as an electrician or engineer in a gypsum or copper mine. Mom liked to say that Dad could talk a blue streak, spinning tales of jobs he’d never had and college degrees he’d never earned. He could get about any job he wanted, he just didn’t like keeping it for long. Sometimes he made money gambling or doing odd jobs. When he got bored or was fired or the unpaid bills piled up too high or the lineman from the electrical company found out he had hot-wired our trailer to the utility poles—or the FBI was closing in—we packed up in the middle of the night and took off, driving until Mom and Dad found another

small town that caught their eye. Then we'd circle around, looking for houses with for-rent signs stuck in the front yard.

Every now and then, we'd go stay with Grandma Smith, Mom's mom, who lived in a big white house in Phoenix. Grandma Smith was a West Texas flapper who loved dancing and cussing and horses. She was known for being able to break the wildest broncs and had helped Grandpa run the ranch up near Fish Creek Canyon, Arizona, which was west of Bullhead City, not too far from the Grand Canyon. I thought Grandma Smith was great. But after a few weeks, she and Dad would always get into some nasty hollering match. It might start with Mom mentioning how short we were on cash. Then Grandma would make a snide comment about Dad being shiftless. Dad would say something about selfish old crones with more money than they knew what to do with, and soon enough they'd be face-to-face in what amounted to a full-fledged cussing contest.

"You flea-bitten drunk!" Grandma would scream.

"You goddamned flint-faced hag!" Dad would shout back.

"You no-good two-bit pud-sucking bastard!"

"You scaly castrating banshee bitch!"

Dad had the more inventive vocabulary, but Grandma Smith could outshout him; plus, she had the home-court advantage. A time would come when Dad had had enough and he'd tell us kids to get in the car. Grandma would yell at Mom not to let that worthless horse's ass take her grandchildren. Mom would shrug and say there was nothing she could do about it, he was her husband. Off we'd go, heading out into the desert in search of another house for rent in another little mining town.

Some of the people who lived in those towns had been there for years. Others were rootless, like us—just passing through. They were gamblers or ex-cons or war veterans or what Mom called loose women. There were old prospectors, their faces wrinkled and brown from the sun, like dried-up apples. The kids were lean and hard, with calluses on their hands and feet. We'd make friends with them, but not close friends, because we knew we'd be moving on sooner or later.

We might enroll in school, but not always. Mom and Dad did most of our teaching. Mom had us all reading books without pictures by the time we were five, and Dad taught us math. He also taught us the things that were really important and useful, like how to tap out Morse code and how we should never eat the liver of a polar bear because all the vitamin

A in it could kill us. He showed us how to aim and fire his pistol, how to shoot Mom's bow and arrows, and how to throw a knife by the blade so that it landed in the middle of a target with a satisfying thwack. By the time I was four, I was pretty good with Dad's pistol, a big black six-shot revolver, and could hit five out of six beer bottles at thirty paces. I'd hold the gun with both hands, sight down the barrel, and squeeze the trigger slowly and smoothly until, with a loud clap, the gun kicked and the bottle exploded. It was fun. Dad said my sharpshooting would come in handy if the feds ever surrounded us.

Mom had grown up in the desert. She loved the dry, crackling heat, the way the sky at sunset looked like a sheet of fire, and the overwhelming emptiness and severity of all that open land that had once been a huge ocean bed. Most people had trouble surviving in the desert, but Mom thrived there. She knew how to get by on next to nothing. She showed us which plants were edible and which were toxic. She was able to find water when no one else could, and she knew how little of it you really needed. She taught us that you could wash yourself up pretty clean with just a cup of water. She said it was good for you to drink unpurified water, even ditch water, as long as animals were drinking from it. Chlorinated city water was for namby-pambies, she said. Water from the wild helped build up your antibodies. She also thought toothpaste was for namby-pambies. At bedtime we'd shake a little baking soda into the palm of one hand, mix in a dash of hydrogen peroxide, then use our fingers to clean our teeth with the fizzing paste.

I loved the desert, too. When the sun was in the sky, the sand would be so hot that it would burn your feet if you were the kind of kid who wore shoes, but since we always went barefoot, our soles were as tough and thick as cowhide. We'd catch scorpions and snakes and horny toads. We'd search for gold, and when we couldn't find it, we'd collect other valuable rocks, like turquoise and garnets. There'd be a cool spell come sundown, when the mosquitoes would fly in so thick that the air would grow dark with them, then at nightfall, it turned so cold that we usually needed blankets.

There were fierce sandstorms. Sometimes they hit without warning, and other times you knew one was coming when you saw batches of dust devils swirling and dancing their way across the desert. Once the wind started whipping up the sand, you could only see a foot in front of your

face. If you couldn't find a house or a car or a shed to hide in when the sandstorm started, you had to squat down and close your eyes and mouth real tight and cover your ears and bury your face in your lap until it passed, or else your body cavities would fill with sand. A big tumbleweed might hit you, but they were light and bouncy and didn't hurt. If the sandstorm was really strong, it knocked you over, and you rolled around like you were a tumbleweed.

When the rains finally came, the skies darkened and the air became heavy. Raindrops the size of marbles came pelting out of the sky. Some parents worried that their kids might get hit by lightning, but Mom and Dad never did, and they let us go out and play in the warm, driving water. We splashed and sang and danced. Great bolts of lightning cracked from the low-hanging clouds, and thunder shook the ground. We gasped over the most spectacular bolts, as if we were all watching a fireworks show. After the storm, Dad took us to the arroyos, and we watched the flash floods come roaring through. The next day the saguaros and prickly pears were fat from drinking as much as they could, because they knew it might be a long, long time until the next rain.

We were sort of like the cactus. We ate irregularly, and when we did, we'd gorge ourselves. Once when we were living in Nevada, a train full of cantaloupes heading east jumped the track. I had never eaten a cantaloupe before, but Dad brought home crates and crates of them. We had fresh cantaloupe, stewed cantaloupe, even fried cantaloupe. One time in California, the grape pickers went on strike. The vineyard owners let people come pick their own grapes for a nickel a pound. We drove about a hundred miles to the vineyards, where the grapes were so ripe they were about to burst on the vine in bunches bigger than my head. We filled our entire car full of green grapes—the trunk, even the glove compartment, and Dad piled stacks in our laps so high we could barely see over the top. For weeks afterward, we ate green grapes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

All this running around and moving was temporary, Dad explained. He had a plan. He was going to find gold.

Everybody said Dad was a genius. He could build or fix anything. One time when a neighbor's TV set broke, Dad opened the back and used a macaroni noodle to insulate some crossed wires. The neighbor couldn't

get over it. He went around telling everyone in town that Dad sure knew how to use his noodle. Dad was an expert in math and physics and electricity. He read books on calculus and logarithmic algebra and loved what he called the poetry and symmetry of math. He told us about the magic qualities every number has and how numbers unlock the secrets of the universe. But Dad's main interest was energy: thermal energy, nuclear energy, solar energy, electrical energy, and energy from the wind. He said there were so many untapped sources of energy in the world that it was ridiculous to be burning all that fossil fuel.

Dad was always inventing things, too. One of his most important inventions was a complicated contraption he called the Prospector. It was going to help us find gold. The Prospector had a big flat surface about four feet high and six feet wide, and it rose up in the air at an angle. The surface was covered with horizontal strips of wood separated by gaps. The Prospector would scoop up dirt and rocks and sift them through the maze of wooden strips. It could figure out whether a rock was gold by the weight. It would throw out the worthless stuff and deposit the gold nuggets in a pile, so whenever we needed groceries, we could go out back and grab ourselves a nugget. At least that was what it would be able to do once Dad finished building it.

Dad let Brian and me help him work on the Prospector. We'd go out behind the house, and I'd hold the nails while Dad hit them. Sometimes he let me start the nails, and then he'd drive them in with one hard blow from the hammer. The air would be filled with sawdust and the smell of freshly cut wood, and the sound of hammering and whistling, because Dad always whistled while he worked.

In my mind, Dad was perfect, although he did have what Mom called a little bit of a drinking situation. There was what Mom called Dad's "beer phase." We could all handle that. Dad drove fast and sang really loud, and locks of his hair fell into his face and life was a little bit scary but still a lot of fun. But when Dad pulled out a bottle of what Mom called "the hard stuff," she got kind of frantic, because after working on the bottle for a while, Dad turned into an angry-eyed stranger who threw around furniture and threatened to beat up Mom or anyone else who got in his way. When he'd had his fill of cussing and hollering and smashing things up, he'd collapse. But Dad drank hard liquor only when we had money, which wasn't often, so life was mostly good in those days.

Every night when Lori, Brian, and I were about to go to sleep, Dad told us bedtime stories. They were always about him. We'd be tucked in our beds or lying under blankets in the desert, the world dark except for the orange glow from his cigarette. When he took a long draw, it lit up just enough for us to see his face.

"Tell us a story about yourself, Dad!" we'd beg him.

"Awww. You don't want to hear another story about me," he'd say.

"Yes, we do! We do!" we'd insist.

"Well, okay," he'd say. He'd pause and chuckle at some memory. "There's many a damned foolhardy thing that your old man has done, but this one was harebrained even for a crazy sonofabitch like Rex Walls."

And then he'd tell us about how, when he was in the air force and his plane's engine conked out, he made an emergency landing in a cattle pasture and saved himself and his crew. Or about the time he wrestled a pack of wild dogs that had surrounded a lame mustang. Then there was the time he fixed a broken sluice gate on the Hoover Dam and saved the lives of thousands of people who would have drowned if the dam had burst. There was also the time he went AWOL in the air force to get some beer, and while he was at the bar, he caught a lunatic who was planning to blow up the air base, which went to show that occasionally, it paid to break the rules.

Dad was a dramatic storyteller. He always started out slow, with lots of pauses. "Go on! What happened next?" we'd ask, even if we'd already heard that story before. Mom giggled or rolled her eyes when Dad told his stories, and he glared at her. If someone interrupted his storytelling, he got mad, and we had to beg him to continue and promise that no one would interrupt again.

Dad always fought harder, flew faster, and gambled smarter than everyone else in his stories. Along the way, he rescued women and children and even men who weren't as strong and clever. Dad taught us the secrets of his heroics—he showed us how to straddle a wild dog and break his neck, and where to hit a man in the throat so you could kill him with one powerful jab. But he assured us that as long as he was around, we wouldn't have to defend ourselves, because, by God, anyone who so much as laid a finger on any of Rex Walls's children was going to get their butts kicked so hard that you could read Dad's shoe size on their ass cheeks.

When Dad wasn't telling us about all the amazing things he had already done, he was telling us about the wondrous things he was going to do. Like build the Glass Castle. All of Dad's engineering skills and mathematical genius were coming together in one special project: a great big house he was going to build for us in the desert. It would have a glass ceiling and thick glass walls and even a glass staircase. The Glass Castle would have solar cells on the top that would catch the sun's rays and convert them into electricity for heating and cooling and running all the appliances. It would even have its own water-purification system. Dad had worked out the architecture and the floor plans and most of the mathematical calculations. He carried around the blueprints for the Glass Castle wherever we went, and sometimes he'd pull them out and let us work on the design for our rooms.

All we had to do was find gold, Dad said, and we were on the verge of that. Once he finished the Prospector and we struck it rich, he'd start work on our Glass Castle.