The Glass Castle

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JEANNETTE WALLS

Born in Phoenix, Arizona, Jeannette Walls spent a tumultuous childhood, along with her brother and sisters, as her independent and eccentric parents wandered around the American Southwest, before the family settled in Welch, West Virginia when she was a teenager. Walls ultimately followed her sister Lori to New York in 1977, when she was 17, where she graduated from Barnard College. She subsequently became the author of *New York* magazine's "Intelligencer" column, and, later, a well-known gossip columnist, writing for outlets like Esquire and MSNBC.com. She has written two novels other than *The Glass Castle*, and currently lives with her second husband, John Taylor, in Virginia.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Much of the abject poverty depicted in *The Glass Castle*, especially in Welch, is a product of the shift of much of the United States away from a manufacturing and industrial economy during the second half of the twentieth century. Towns like Welch no longer had a thriving economic center and fell into desolation as a result. References to welfare throughout the memoir can be traced to various laws put in place after the Great Depression, including the Social Security Act of 1935, as well as Lyndon Johnson's Great Society reforms in the 1960s. However, while these laws created a "safety net" for people in poverty they also made it increasingly difficult for people to simply choose to "live outside the system," as the Walls family finds out.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"This is the age of the memoir," William Zinsser wrote in his 1998 book on the genre. Critics argue about when the precipitous rise in memoir writing began—some have pegged it on William Styron's *Darkness Visible*, his 1990 book about struggling with depression, or on Frank McCourt's 1996 *Angela's Ashes*, about growing up impoverished with an alcoholic father in Ireland and New York. Like Styron, Walls was already well-known when she wrote *The Glass Castle*; like McCourt, she was not yet known as a writer, and catapulted to fame with the memoir's publication. *The Glass Castle* also recalls Mary Karr's 1995 *The Liars' Club*, which concerns yet another difficult childhood beset by abusive, alcoholic relatives. Indeed, some critics have complained about the preponderance of "misery memoirs" that recount a painful childhood and the author's attempts to overcome it—though others have praised the honesty and transparency of the genre. Apart from the genre itself, *The Glass Castle* also retains parallels with Jack Kerouac's Beat Generation novel, *On the Road*, another book whose characters wander across America, looking for their big break and struggling to find it.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Glass Castle*
- **When Written:** around 2005
- **Where Written:** United States (Virginia)
- **When Published:** 2005
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** American Southwest; Welch, West Virginia; New York City
- **Climax:** Jeannette escapes from her family and childhood by moving to New York: As she leaves the bus station she tells herself she'll never return to Welch, West Virginia again.
- **Antagonist:** Sometimes, Mom and Dad; other times, the American economic and political "system"; also, the various bullies and perverts of Jeannette's childhood
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

What's the Dish? Before writing a memoir, Walls had already published one book, entitled *Dish: The Inside Story of the World of Gossip*, which delves into the historical and cultural context of gossip and relies upon her years as a gossip columnist.

Based on a Bestseller. *The Glass Castle* spent 100 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list when it came out in 2005, and in 2017 it was adapted into a movie starring Brie Larson.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Glass Castle opens with Jeannette Walls, a successful gossip columnist living on Park Avenue, one of New York City's most prestigious addresses, in a taxi on the way to a party. Gazing out the window, she catches sight of her mother, Rose Mary Walls, rifling through a dumpster for something to eat.

In the next section, we begin to learn, little by little, the roots of the family's current situation. Part 2 begins with Jeannette's earliest memory as a three-year-old in southern Arizona: her dress catches on **fire** as she cooks hot dogs on the stove on her own. She's in the hospital for six weeks, even though Mom and Dad are dismissive of modern medicine. In fact, they're

suspicious of any institution—they prefer to be "self-sufficient" rather than follow anyone else's rules. Jeannette will continue to be fascinated by fire—especially after Dad explains to her its relationship to the balance between order and turbulence in the laws of physics.

Dad is brilliant in math and physics and possesses a sharp engineering acumen, but he prefers to stick to odd jobs rather than submit to the rules of a manager. Mom, in turn, is curious and open-minded, though often considers her children a distraction from her artistic interests. The family never spends more than a few months in one place before Dad announces, usually in the middle of the night, that the family is leaving. The kids—Lori, the oldest, Jeannette, and Brian (Maureen is born later) can only take a few possessions. This makes the kids guard their favorite things closely, like Jeannette's rock collection.

Mom and Dad are often on the run from bill collectors, and hold some wild conspiracy theories about government corruption. They prefer to live in the most isolated towns in the desert of the American Southwest. Dad makes money playing poker, too, though it never lasts long. While Jeannette is young, she enjoys this lifestyle: she and her siblings are free to explore and rarely enroll in school. Dad regales the kids with stories of his adventures in the Air Force and wrestling enemies around multiple states. He also delights them with the intricate architectural blueprints of the palace he's planning to built in the desert: the **Glass Castle**. Dad does drink too much sometimes, but initially this doesn't seem to hurt anyone, and it's more than made up for by his enchanting stories.

Things begin to change once the family settles in Battle Mountain, Nevada for almost a year. The kids start to get into trouble—Lori even shoots at a boy, Billy Deel, who's been rejected by Jeannette and comes to the house with a BB gun in revenge. And Dad spends more and more time out of the house, either at the Owl Club, a bar, or at the Green Lantern, which Jeannette will only later learn is a whorehouse. In order to eat, the kids increasingly have to resort to measures like looking for cans and bottles to sell. Brian and Lori are quicker than Jeannette, who is Dad's favorite, to lose faith in Dad because of his drinking.

Things start to look up for awhile in Phoenix, where, after Mom's mother, Grandma Smith, dies, the family moves into her large old house. Dad stops drinking for a few months after Jeannette asks him to do so as her birthday present—but it doesn't last long, and soon his drinking is worse than ever.

Against Dad's wishes, Mom decides to move the family to Welch, West Virginia, where he's from. Jeannette is sorry to leave Phoenix, which is as close to a home as she's ever known. Welch is an old coal-mining town that has seen far better days, and Erma, Dad's mom, is cranky and unpleasant, while Jeannette's Uncle Stanley makes sexual advances towards her. Jeannette's teachers at school don't seem to appreciate her intelligence or interest in learning, and the other kids make fun of her for being poor and from elsewhere.

It's in Welch where the adventurous lifestyle of the Walls family starts to disintegrate into squalor and dysfunction. Dad spends more and more time drinking outside the house, and is almost never home. Mom isn't interested in finding a way to feed the kids or keep the house clean either, preferring to spend time on her various art projects as Jeannette and her siblings forage for food and fend for themselves. Their house on Little Hobart Street is dank, rotting, and literally falling apart. It lacks electricity or running water. Jeannette's illusions about her father and her family's ability to create a better life for itself are almost definitively ruined after she and Brian spend weeks digging a foundation pit for the **Glass Castle** behind the house—and Dad tells them to fill it with garbage, since they can't afford the trash collection fee.

After Lori comes back from a government-sponsored summer camp, she and Jeannette realize that they can escape Welch and their dysfunctional family. They begin an escape fund for Lori to move to New York City and start art school, continuing even after Dad steals the money for drinking and gambling. After Lori graduates from high school, she moves and works in a German restaurant in New York while she saves up for school.

Jeannette, meanwhile, has discovered a passion for journalism by working on the school newspaper. After eleventh grade, she joins Lori in New York. She gets an internship and then a job at a newspaper and ends up enrolling in Barnard College, while she and Lori convince Brian to move to New York, and finally bring Maureen as well.

Mom and Dad refuse to really accept that their kids have abandoned them. They call Jeannette one day a few years after her move to announce that they've moved to New York as well, so that the whole family can live together. While Lori and Brian allow their parents to live with them for awhile, Dad's drinking and Mom's hoarding habits become too much. As usual, Mom and Dad have too much trouble submitting to anyone's authority for too long. In New York, this means that before long, they're homeless—and refuse to accept the kids' help.

Jeannette graduates from Barnard, gets a job at a magazine, and moves in with her rich boyfriend Eric on Park Avenue. Meanwhile, her own parents are thrilled to have found a tenement where they can squat on the Lower East Side. It takes time, but Jeannette slowly comes to understand that home can mean different things for different people. Dad's death, ultimately, helps her to understand that though she's "escaped" from her past, she hasn't yet found a home where she belongs herself—she divorces Eric and moves out of Park Avenue. The memoir ends with a flash-forward to five years later, when she's happily married to a writer and living in a country farmhouse—the first place she's owned. Mom is, by this time, still in the tenement, but the city is about to sell the plots to the squatters for a dollar each. Jeannette's attitude toward her

parents continues to be deeply ambivalent—they are creative and adventurous but also wildly irresponsible. She has suffered a great deal through her childhood because of them, but her turbulent process of growing up has also shaped her into the person she's become.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jeannette Walls – Daughter of Rex and Rose Mary Walls, and the second oldest of four siblings in the Walls family. Jeannette is practical, rational, and thoughtful. Unlike Mom, she enjoys adhering to rules—though she is always up for an adventure as well. Unlike Dad, when she commits to doing something, she follows through. Along with her older sister, Lori, Jeannette often takes on the role of parent when her own parents act more like children. But for much of the memoir, Jeanette adores and idealizes her father, and struggles to reconcile this idealized image with Dad's reckless choices and mistakes. Ultimately she comes to the conclusion that she must escape her family and she moves to New York. She never entirely condemns her parents, but as an adult her relationship with them remains deeply ambivalent.

Rex Walls – Father to Jeannette and her siblings, and the son of Erma and Grandpa Walls. He is primarily referred to as Dad in the narrative. Originally from Welch, West Virginia, Dad left at the age of 17 believing he would never return, but ends up moving back with his family after he fails to stop drinking in Phoenix. Dad is clearly very smart, well-versed in engineering, mathematics, and various scientific theories. When he wants to, he never has trouble finding a job. But he prefers the life of a wanderer, never submitting to someone else's authority, and staying close to nature where he feels far freer. This makes him alternately a fantastic dad, and an incredibly irresponsible one. Once the family settles in Welch, Dad seems to embrace irresponsibility and spends his days drinking and gambling. However, he continues to want to be self-sufficient, and never accepts charity from others—even his kids.

Rose Mary Walls – Mother to Jeannette and her siblings, and the daughter of Grandma Smith from Phoenix. She is primarily referred to as Mom in the narrative. Mom originally wanted to be an artist, but her mother convinced her to get a teaching certificate in case that didn't work out. She spends much of her time immersed in various artistic projects, though never ones that can support the family. Whenever she is forced to take a job teaching, she becomes bitter and hostile. At times, Mom treats her children as peripheral to her life, considering them a distraction and refusing even to ensure they get enough to eat. But Mom can also be emotionally wise and compassionate: she always takes the side of the victim. As a result, the reader feels just as ambivalently towards Mom (and Dad) as Jeannette does.

Lori Walls – The eldest of the Walls children. Lori is usually absent from the adventures of Jeannette and Brian, but is cool and calm in the face of crisis, as when she takes Dad's pistol to defend the siblings again Billy Deel, who has showed up with a BB gun to get revenge on Jeanette for spurning him. An avid reader and extremely intelligent, Lori stands a bit apart from the rest of the family; at school, too, she dresses and acts differently. From an early age, she decides she wants to be an artist, and as the first of the siblings to move to New York, she pursues this dream by working at a German restaurant in the city to save up money.

Brian Walls – Brother of Jeannette, Lori, and Maureen, and the third-oldest sibling after Jeannette. Brian is the closest to Jeannette for much of their childhood: they play together, forage for food together, and defend themselves from other kids with each other's help. Brian is intensely loyal: as a young child, he hides in the bushes at one point to help Jeannette fight back against three older girls, and from seventh grade, he mows lawns to contribute to Jeannette and Lori's escape fund even though he's too young to leave.

Maureen Walls – The youngest of the Walls siblings. Maureen's character is not as well developed as that of the other siblings. Seven years younger than Jeannette, she is a baby for much of Jeannette's childhood and misses out on the adventures and disasters that the rest of the family has lived together. Later, in Welch, she spends time at her friends' houses, where she finds the responsible adults and warm meals that are absent at the Walls household. However, Maureen turns out to be the only Walls sibling with serious mental and emotional difficulties. She spends time at a psychiatric hospital before moving to California.

Miss Jeanette Bivens – Jeannette's teacher at Welch High School and her namesake. Miss Bivens was also Dad's teacher when he was in school, and was the first person to really believe in him, he says. Miss Bivens is also the faculty advisor for the school newspaper that Jeannette edits. She is a consistent source of support and encouragement for Jeannette.

Grandma Smith – Mom's mother who lived in Phoenix until her death. The reader sees Grandma Smith only through Jeannette's flashbacks; when the family actually moves to Phoenix as part of the linear narrative, it's because Grandma Smith has just died. But Grandma Smith, a flapper-turned-schoolteacher who nagged Mom but spoiled Jeannette by combing her hair and letting her try on perfumes, makes it easier to understand both Mom's and Jeannette's characters. Mom rebelled against her mother, but Jeannette—in rebelling against Mom—embraces many of Grandma Smith's traits and values.

Erma Walls – Dad's mother, she lives in Welch, West Virginia. Jeannette catches her sexually abusing Brian, leading the kids

to question whether Dad suffered the same. Erma is cold and bitter, but Mom asks the kids to have more empathy towards her, since she had a difficult childhood being shuttled around between various relatives.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Uncle Stanley – Dad's brother, he lives in Welch, West Virginia with Erma and Grandpa Walls. While Jeanette and her family are living in Welch, Uncle Stanley attempts to sexually assault her. She escapes but, subsequently, avoids their home as much as possible.

Grandpa Walls – Erma's husband and Dad's father, he lives in Welch, West Virginia with his wife and Uncle Stanley.

Mary Charlene Walls –The second daughter that Mom gave birth to after Lori, who lived only to the age of nine months.

Miss Page – Jeannette's second-grade teacher in Battle Mountain, who is suspicious of the advanced math that Dad has taught Jeannette, and makes Jeanette re-do the homework in the precise way she expects and defined.

Carla – A friend of Jeannette's in Battle Mountain whose family, unlike Jeannette's, uses a No-Pest Strip to catch insects.

Ginger – A prostitute at the Green Lantern whorehouse in Battle Mountain, Nevada whom Dad goes to visit.

Billy Deel – A teenager who is neighbors with the Walls family in Battle Mountain, and who has a crush on Jeannette that turns violent. Lori defends Jeanette from Billy by threatening him with a gun.

Gypsies – The family's neighbors in Phoenix, one of whom steals Brian's pogo stick.

Lady in blue Buick – A well-coiffed woman who picks up the Walls family after their car breaks down on the way to the Grand Canyon.

Welch Elementary principal – The principal at the elementary school in Welch. He can't understand Jeannette's accent the first day she arrives (nor can she understand his), so he enrolls her with students who have learning disabilities.

Miss Caparossi – Jeannette's first teacher in Welch, who goads the other students into making fun of her.

Mr. Freeman – The Walls family's next-door neighbor in Welch.

Cindy Thompson – Jeannette's classmate, who tries to recruit her for the Ku Klux Klan.

Dinitia Hewitt – Initially the leader of a group that bullies Jeannette at school in Welch, but who later becomes her friend.

Eric – Jeannette's first husband. He is wealthy, lives on Park Avenue, and is extremely organized.

Ginnie Sue Pastor – The town prostitute in Welch, and also the mother of nine children.

Clarence Pastor – Ginnie Sue's husband.

Kathy Pastor – Ginnie Sue's oldest daughter.

Carrie Mae Blankenship – Jeannette's classmate, whose father is a hospital administrator, and whose home is equipped with a thermostat, which fascinates Jeannette.

Ernie Goad – A kid who lives in Welch and torments Brian and Jeannette for living in "garbage."

Lucy Jo Rose – A woman who works with Mom as a teacher outside Welch and drives Mom to school most days.

Kenny Hall – A 42-year-old mentally challenged man in Welch who has a crush on Jeannette, for which the other kids make fun of him.

Mike Armstrong – Jeannette's boss at *The Phoenix* newspaper in New York who convinces her to go to college.

Professor Fuchs – Jeannette's favorite college professor. When Professor Fuchs grows distressed at something Jeannette says in class about homeless people, Jeannette feels that she can't reveal her true background and her own experience with poverty and homelessness.

Robbie – A friend of Dad's from a bar in Welch who tries to seduce Jeannette.

Mr. Becker – Owner of Becker's Jewel Box in Welch, where Jeannette works part-time.

Mrs. Sanders – A teacher for whom Jeannette babysits, and who, in a plan hatched by Jeanette, hires Lori to babysit for her children as she travels with them for the summer. She then buys Lori a return train ticket to New York, rather than Welch.

Chuck Yeager – The first airplane pilot to fly faster than the speed of sound, who gives a speech at Welch High and whom Jeannette interviews for the school newspaper.

Miss Katona – The guidance counselor at Welch High.

Evan –A friend of Lori's in New York.

Ken Fink and Bob Gross – Two filmmakers who come to Welch from New York City and who tell Lori she needs to go to New York in order to make it as an artist.

Mike Armstrong – Jeannette's boss at *The Phoenix* in New York who convinces her to go to college.

Professor Fuchs – Jeannette's favorite college professor. When she grows distressed at something Jeannette says in class about homeless people, Jeannette feels that she can't reveal who she really is.

Eric – Jeannette's first husband. Lives on Park Avenue and is extremely organized.

John – Jeannette's second husband, with whom she owns a house in the country and has a happy marriage.

Jessica – John's daughter from his first marriage.

Veronica – Brian's daughter.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

GROWING UP, ILLUSION, AND DISILLUSION

The Glass Castle is the story of Jeannette Walls's development from childhood into adulthood. It's a story, therefore, of her growing up—a *bildungsroman*. Walls presents growing up as a process of recognizing one's childhood illusions as just that—illusions—and instead coming to see "how things really are." Growing up, then, as Walls describes it, involves *disillusionment*, the loss or recognition of the non-reality of childhood dreams and ideas. This process of disillusionment is one that the symbol of the **Glass Castle** itself captures: though Dad tinkers with blueprints and floor plans for this fantastical family home for years, and Jeannette herself fantasizes about living in it once it is built, she only slowly comes to realize that the idea itself was never more than a dream based on her own illusions about her father.

However, while *The Glass Castle* is a story of Jeannette's growing up and gradual understanding of the world, it does not precisely follow the classic form of a bildungsroman, in which the main character usually follows a path (however meandering) toward attaining some kind of wisdom and clarity about the world. Instead, Jeannette adopts her own, new dreams *in reaction* to those of her parents, even as we understand her parents' illusions as themselves products of *their* parents' ways of being. The book thus suggests that growing up might be less of a path toward knowledge—toward grasping reality—than a cycle of children's disillusionment with their parents' dreams, and their replacement of such dreams with illusions of their own.

HOME

Constantly on the run from bill collectors or minor run-ins with the law, Jeannette's family finds shelter in houses and towns across the country, while Jeannette continues to seek the one place where she can feel most "at home." In *The Glass Castle*, this search mirrors Jeannette's process of growing up: Jeannette idealizes her grandmother's house in Phoenix, for example, as well as her father's plans for the **Glass Castle**. Yet part of her process of maturing involves understanding that a home is not an ideal. It is something she must work to forge rather than relying on romantic models. It is something she must help to build herself.

However, the book resists settling on any one definition of home. A home is not only a physical place, like Jeannette's Park Avenue apartment in New York. Jeanette discovers that a home can also be – or perhaps even must also involve – a community, such as her school newspaper or her parents' group of New York squatters. Jeannette must come to terms with her parents' "home" even if it is not what she wants for herself. *The Glass Castle* seems to suggest, then, that home is a constantly shifting category rather than being a fixed place, and that the search for it differs between different people—or even for the same person at different moments in his or her development.

POSSESSIONS AND OWNERSHIP

Ultimately Jeannette links her own sense of home to ownership, investing in a country home with her husband. The importance—but also danger—of ownership recurs often throughout the memoir. In *The Glass Castle*, physical objects often become symbolically significant, standing in for a character's personality or dreams, from Jeannette's rock collection that signify her desire for order to Brian's army soldiers that foreshadow his eventual choice of career. These possessions also provide markers of consistency for the siblings while everything around them is changing, giving them a certain sense of pride and satisfaction. At times, *The Glass Castle* reveals, the simple fact of owning *something* can make up for or render irrelevant even major material wants.

But the book also articulates a tension between ownership as productive or destructive. As Jeannette grows up and starts to want and embrace a comfortable life, her desires clash with Mom's disapproval of materialism, and through this conflict the book questions whether ownership can really give Jeanette, or anyone, what they're looking for. *The Glass Castle* walks a fine line between acknowledging that material possessions can be powerful tools of identity, comfort, and power, and admitting that the lack of material possessions is not the only thing holding Jeannette back from a better life.

ORDER AND TURBULENCE

The hazy point at which fire and smoke reaches into the air fascinates Dad, who calls it "a place where no rules apply, or at least they haven't figured 'em out yet." It is this intermediate realm that the family inhabits, that Jeanette's parents seek to inhabit, where the rules are grey and they can therefore define their own way of living and being. For a time, living "on the edge" seems to work for them. But once they settle down for good in West Virginia, their more "orderly" lifestyle leads, ironically, to greater turbulence. At the same time, order means different things for different people in the book, based on their particular characteristics: what Jeannette understands as disorder, for instance, Mom sees as

"adventure."

Even as Jeannette attempts to establish her own kind of order against her parents' turbulent lifestyle, the book suggests at times that order and turbulence may work in tandem rather than in opposition. As Mom tells Jeannette about a certain gnarled tree in the desert, "It's the **Joshua tree's** struggle that gives it its beauty." Jeannette's childhood turbulence, if not always what she desired, therefore becomes deeply influential in helping her to figure out what kind of order suits her best.

RESPONSIBILITY, SELF-SUFFICIENCY, AND NON-CONFORMITY

To whom and to what should one be responsible? While Mom and Dad clearly shirk much of their responsibility as parents, the book reveals that they are actually acting in accordance with their non-conformist beliefs—which they see as a higher responsibility. In some cases, the book equates responsibility with self-sufficiency, as Mom and Dad encourage Jeannette and her siblings to look out for themselves rather than rely on anyone else. On the other hand, her parents take pride in their willingness to live outside the "system," pledging responsibility to an *ideal* rather than to specific people, and the result of this insistence on radical self-sufficiency can be seen as a profound *lack* of responsibility, such as teaching children to swim by throwing them in the water, refusing to take sick children to the doctor. In contrast, the adult Jeannette struggles with whether her instinct to ignore or lie about her "embarrassing" family represents a lack of moral responsibility—Jeanette senses that she has a responsibility founded in her direct relationship to her parents, rather than responsibility based on an abstract ideal.

In either case, *The Glass Castle* suggests that it is possible to both take responsibility for one's own actions, and understand how these actions can stem from deeper, more systemic issues. Jeannette ultimately chooses a more material and less idealistic notion of responsibility than her parents, but she also continues to try to understand why they seem unable to take responsibility for their own actions, or to what they do feel responsible that makes them act the way they do.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

GLASS CASTLE

As the title of the memoir, this symbol could easily sum up most of the tensions in and interests of the book. The Glass Castle symbolizes the illusions that Jeannette must release in order to fully mature. For years, Dad has, with the kids, made blueprints and floor plans for a magnificent transparent palace built in the desert and relying on solar panels for electricity. The Glass Castle epitomizes how Dad would like to live, self-sufficiently and sustainably, without submitting to a system or authority. In Welch, Brian and Jeannette even dig a foundation pit for the palace. The illusion is, for Jeannette, definitively burst once Dad tells her to fill up the pit with garbage: the very idea, the dream itself, has become no more than a receptacle for trash. Dad's flimsy attempts to revive the dream, by showing Jeannette new floor plans when she's about to leave for New York, only confirm for her that she must definitively let go of the idea of the Glass Castle. But as sobering as this symbol is, by choosing it as the book's title Walls pays homage to Dad's magnificent dreams and illusions, as unrealistic and broken as they might be.

FIRE

Fire is present in *The Glass Castle* from one of the very first scenes, when Jeannette accidentally lights herself on fire while making hot dogs as a three-year-old. Fire is both a source of heat and light and a force for destruction. From the family's San Francisco apartment to Uncle Stanley's house in Welch, the shells of burned-down homes strew the pages of the memoir. But Jeannette is fascinated by fire, perhaps precisely because of its power to do both good and harm. When she's younger, that fascination edges towards a worrying pyromania. By the time she's older, though, Jeannette can appreciate the complexity of fire on a more intellectual level. As Dad tells her, the place at which fire melts into air is the unknown border between order and turbulence. Fire, then, stands for the ambivalence of this unknown factor, as Jeannette can never fully know whether her tumultuous childhood and dysfunctional family has done more good than harm.

THE JOSHUA TREE

Mom is enthralled by the Joshua tree she sees in the desert, which has grown in the direction of the wind rather than standing up straight. The Joshua tree symbolizes the strength and beauty that can arise from dysfunction. As Mom tells Jeannette, the tree's struggle is what gives the tree its beauty. This symbol can be applied to Jeannette's need to surmount incredible difficulties in the process of growing up. It suggests that Jeannette's childhood was not in vain, and that she would not be the person she is today without these struggles. However, the Joshua tree also reminds us how different people can see the same image or event in very different ways: for Jeannette, who as a child does not (understandably) see the need for such struggles, the tree is ugly rather than beautiful.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *The Glass Castle* published in 2006.

Part 1 Quotes

"You want to help me change my life?" Mom asked. "I'm fine. You're the one who needs help. Your values are all confused."

Related Characters: Rose Mary Walls (speaker), Jeannette Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Having caught a glimpse of her mother rifling through a dumpster in New York City, Jeannette has invited her to dinner and shared that she's worried about her. In turn, Jeannette's mother brushes off her concerns and turns the tables, suggesting that Jeannette is actually the one with a problem in this situation. Jeannette's mother has explained her actions by the fact that Americans don't recycle enough, but she is more propelled by a combination of necessity and a blasé attitude towards what others may think.

Indeed, Jeannette's mother would most likely not be relying on a dumpster if she had other means by which to feed herself. But as this is the case, she develops a subtle worldview created around the superiority of such a lifestyle - something that Jeannette describes as typical of her childhood. According to this worldview, it is defensible and even desirable to actively choose to do what others may look down upon, especially if this means that Jeannette's mother does not need to rely on anyone else. Her critique of Jeannette is part of this ethos as well, as she claims that the lack of money or possessions is morally liberating. It is Jeannette, then, because she cares about what others think and values material possessions, who becomes the weaker and less self-sufficient of the two (at least according to her mother).

Part 2 Quotes

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.

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Having suffered serious burns from a cooking accident, three-year-old Jeannette is in the hospital for an extended stay, but instead of being upset or frightened, she considers this a luxurious vacation. A nurse has given Jeannette a stick of gum, which she adores: when she worries that she'll have to throw it out to eat lunch, the nurse offers to give her as many as she'd like. Such an offer is entirely alien to Jeannette's experiences with her family at home, where food is often difficult to come by and scarcity is the norm, from toys to basic necessities. Before her stay at the hospital, she had considered this state of affairs normal, but now she begins to realize that a home need not be this way. For Jeannette, the hospital is a place of calm, order, and endless supply. In many ways, the hospital represents the period of worry-free childhood that Jeannette has never had, and that she only now begins to glimpse.

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.

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker), Rex Walls

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

In an extended period of background exposition, Jeannette shares a series of anecdotes about her father's propensity to talk about himself and his various impressive feats. Here Jeannette connects her dad's former triumphs with his dreams for the future, some of which seem just as fanciful and marvelous - but also even more appealing to his children. Rex Walls does like to talk, but the Glass Castle does not seem to Jeannette to be mere empty words: they are fleshed out by the great level of detail that he includes,

from the engineering necessities to the architectural blueprints.

The Glass Castle is not just appealing to Jeannette because it will be a beautiful, impressive building for the family to live in. It also foretells a time when the family will be able to stop moving around, when they'll settle into a more stable life together in a place less transient than the various apartments and houses where they have been staying before. Rex Walls also possesses the ability to enchant his children by making them feel like a crucial part of his projects, rather than mere appendages. By involving them in the plans for the Glass Castle, Jeannette's father helps to maintain their illusions about an exciting, fruitful future for the family.

I wondered if the fire had been out to get me. I wondered if all fire was related, like Dad said all humans were related, if the fire that burned me that day while I cooked hot dogs was somehow connected to the fire I had flushed down the toilet and the fire burning at the hotel. I didn't have the answers to those questions, but what I did know was that I lived in a world that at any moment could erupt into fire. It was the sort of knowledge that kept you on your toes.

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Jeannette's family has been staying at a run-down hotel in San Francisco - until it burns down one night and her father has to carry her outside before returning to fight the flames. Since her accident and hospital stay, Jeannette has been fascinated by fire, alternately attracted to and repelled by or afraid of its power. Although Jeannette is not sure if there is a real connection between her various experiences with fire, she does seem to be able to see parallels between these experiences. In particular, fires seem to develop whenever Jeannette finds herself and her family lacking stability, or at least a relatively greater lack of stability than usual. Fires begin outside human control, spreading according to their own logic. This inability to foretell or prevent such dangerous events thus serves to remind Jeannette of her inability to predict or control what happens in her life in general. All she can do is remain alert so that she won't be caught entirely off guard when the unexpected does happen.

Mom frowned at me. "You'd be destroying what makes it special," she said. "It's the Joshua tree's struggle that gives it its beauty."

Related Characters: Rose Mary Walls (speaker), Jeannette Walls

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

The family has settled into their new life, with Dad working at a gypsum mine and Mom spending her time painting and writing illustrated short stories. Again and again she returns to paint the Joshua tree, whose gnarled branches she finds captivating and beautiful. From the start, Jeannette has been dubious about the Joshua tree's beauty, finding it gnarled and unpleasant-looking. Here, Jeannette goes so far as to imagine that she'll replant one of the tree's saplings in the ground and tend to it so that it grows up straight rather than twisted. Mom, however, couldn't think less of this idea.

Their two opposite opinions on beauty and struggle stem from their quite distinct philosophies of how to live. Mom has always embraced excitement, change, and instability. She does not only find these things interesting: for her they are almost ethical values, directly related to her artistic sensibility and search for new and unusual instances of beauty. But Jeannette has grown up with the constant anxiety that stems from not being able to enjoy a stable, worry-free childhood. For her, change and uncertainty should be fought rather than embraced as objects of beauty. The Joshua Tree gives Jeannette a physical, objective reminder of the vast distance between the way her mother thinks and her own mentality, a gap of which she will only grow more aware as time goes on.

We laughed about the all the kids who believed in the Santa myth and got nothing for Christmas but a bunch of cheap plastic toys. "Years from now, when all the junk they got is broken and long forgotten," Dad said, "you'll still have your stars.

Related Characters: Rex Walls (speaker), Jeannette Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Jeannette's parents have little interest in maintaining the illusion that Santa Claus exists. Instead, for Christmas, Dad has taken Jeannette and her siblings outside to the Arizona desert, where he has told them to choose a star for their present. After each one chooses, Dad explains the significance of each star. For Jeannette and her siblings the lack of normal Christmas presents is not disappointing but rather a marker of their family's superiority. They feel special to have been able to have Christmas presents that few other kids have.

At other times, the Walls parents' decisions are frustrating for the kids, but here we have a glimpse of the elements of the family's life that could be truly enchanting for a child. Of course, their parents could not afford the "cheap plastic toys" that other kids receive for Christmas in any case. But Dad in particular possesses the remarkable skill of making scarcity into an adventure, poverty into something magical. By scorning cheap toys and ephemeral possessions, Dad underlines the superiority of the family's questionable choices, but he also embraces a true attitude of wonder towards the natural world, inculcating this sense in the children as well.

> [Dad] pointed to the top of the fire, where the snapping yellow flames dissolved into an invisible shimmery heat that made the desert beyond seem to waver, like a mirage. Dad told us that zone was known in physics as the boundary between turbulence and order. "It's a place where no rules apply, or at least they haven't figured 'em out yet," he said.

Related Characters: Rex Walls (speaker), Jeannette Walls, Brian Walls

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Once again, Jeannette has had a close call with fire, this time because she and Brian have been playing "lab" in an abandoned shed and have accidentally burned it down. As is often the case for her father, he does not get angry at the danger they put themselves in or at their independence. Looking at the fire seems to awaken in Dad his general fascination for nature and physics, one that is nurtured by his own profound scientific knowledge. For Dad, the mirage that locates the boundary between turbulence and order is intellectually fascinating, appealing in its status as a no-man's-land without rules or regulations.

Jeannette understands this fascination as going deeper than a mere intellectual interest. For her, Dad is always drawn to the border between order and turbulence in life as well: he is constantly testing this border, trying to see what happens if he acts in one way or another. The problem, of course, is that by definition one cannot know what will happen in this boundary - one cannot apply known rules or theories - so that the family is always teetering on the edge, not entirely without order but never safely within the realm of order either.

> Dad kept telling me that he loved me, that he never would have let me drown, but you can't cling to the side your whole life, that one lesson every parent needs to teach a child is "If you don't want to sink, you better figure out how to swim."

Related Characters: Rex Walls (speaker), Jeannette Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Dad has brought the kids to a natural sulfur spring one winter day. Jeannette, having never learned to swim, is frightened by the water, and as she cautiously wades in Dad suddenly grabs her and throws her in again and again. Gasping and thrashing around in the water, Jeannette is terrified, but finally she manages to keep her head above water. Only then does Dad remind her that she would never be in danger around him, but that caution and worry would never get her far in life.

Dad's lesson, a literal affair of "sink-or-swim," also applies to his views on parenting and on life affairs in general. By throwing yourself into the most frightening and difficult challenges, he claims, you'll be forced to learn how to act and how to navigate in any situation. Dad believes he is encouraging Jeannette to become self-sufficient, to learn to rely on herself for whatever might come her way. Jeannette,

of course, would not have preferred to learn this lesson in such a dramatic fashion. She would probably not agree that Dad's lesson is the best way to learn responsibility. Nonetheless, the experience does at the very least show her that, as she grows up, she may well have to deal with frightening and dangerous situations not too different from her experience of learning to swim.

"I swear, honey, there are times when I think you're the only one around who still has faith in me," [Dad] said. "I don't know what I'd do if you ever lost it." I told him that I would never lose faith in him. And I promised myself I never would.

Related Characters: Rex Walls (speaker), Jeannette Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78-79

Explanation and Analysis

Lori and Brian have begun to turn against Dad, arguing that he spends more money on alcohol than he does on basic necessities for the family. Jeannette cannot bring herself to agree with them, at least out loud. She still loves to spend time with Dad, and feels privileged that he shows her his charts and graphs for his various research projects - projects about which Lori and Brian are increasingly skeptical. Still, Jeannette continues to embrace the chance to develop a special relationship with her father. She is proud to be able to have faith that he'll lead the family to better times, especially since he confides that she is the only one who continues to trust him.

However, it is clear that even Jeannette is beginning to doubt her own confidence. She has to promise herself that she won't lose faith in her father, suggesting that the possibility is at least present. For the moment, however, Jeannette continues to cling to the memory of her father's exciting plans and marvelous ideas, fearing that once she gives up those ideals she will be left only with a bleak reality.

"I wonder what life will be like now," I said to Lori.
"The same," she said. "[Dad] tried stopping before, but it never lasted."
"This time it will."
"How do you know?"
"It's his present to me."

Related Characters: Lori Walls, Jeannette Walls (speaker), Rex Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

Jeannette has asked Dad to give up drinking as his birthday present to her, a request that deeply upsets him, as he realizes that Jeannette must be deeply ashamed of him. Now he has barricaded himself away in a committed attempt to rid himself of his addiction. Lori, however, is far more skeptical than Jeannette about the possibility of Dad truly getting sober. She prefers to judge the chances on the basis of experience: having failed to see a noticeable change in Dad's actions, she doesn't want to get her hopes up about this new commitment. A few years older than Jeannette, Lori has learned to only rely on herself rather than on others so as not to be disappointed again and again.

In some ways, Jeannette has begun to share Lori's skepticism - indeed, she has at least come to terms with the reality of Dad's drinking. But she is convinced that Dad's love for her is such that this time he tries to give up will be different. Jeannette doesn't really see Dad's addiction as a disease, but rather as something under his control, which, if he only wants or tries hard enough, he'll be able to conquer. Part of her illusions thus rests on this innocent view of adult problems.

Part 3 Quotes

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

Related Characters: Rose Mary Walls (speaker), Erma Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

Deciding that the kids are making too much noise downstairs, Erma thumps loudly on the ceiling above them. She has been cranky and unpleasant since their arrival, and Jeannette immediately dislikes her. But Mom, in what is a rare occasion for her, chastises Jeannette and asks her not

to judge Erma, who has suffered a good amount in her life. Mom exhibits, here as elsewhere, a compassion stemming from the creative capacity to imagine other people's experiences. Her suggestion also stems from her desire to see certain situations differently from how others choose to see them, often putting a more positive light on what others might consider ugly or unpleasant. Although Jeannette's mother is often portrayed as relatively immature, this is an instance at which her natural optimism and empathy is shown to be wise.

"Are we ever going home?" I asked Dad one day.
"Home?"
"Phoenix."
"This is home now."

Related Characters: Rex Walls, Jeannette Walls (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

The family has moved into a sad, run-down home in a downtrodden neighborhood, and although Mom tries to make an adventure out of the small daily challenges of living in such a place, Jeannette can no longer bring herself to acquiesce enthusiastically to these kinds of games. Dad has even suggested that he will return to the Glass Castle blueprints, but Jeannette remains skeptical. She can only understand their current situation as something temporary, rather than a new "home" as Dad calls it.

After years of wandering around from place to place, Jeannette had found that the family's life in Vienna represented real security and stability. Looking back, she now realizes that when she thinks of what "home" means to her, she thinks of Phoenix more than anywhere else. Dad, on the other hand, suggests that wherever the family is now living counts as home. In either case, it does make more sense for him to accept West Virginia as the family's new home, since it is where he himself comes from; but he also seems more than anything resigned to their new situation.

Instead of a freshly painted yellow house, or even a dingy gray one, we now had a weird-looking half-finished patch job—one that announced to the world that the people inside the house wanted to fix it up but lacked the gumption to get the work done.

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

Jeannette has been trying to think up ways to make the house more cheery and pleasant-looking. Armed with a paint can that Dad brought home from work, she paints the parts of the house that she can access without a ladder. But by the time she manages to create a makeshift ladder, the paint has frozen and re-melted and is now unusable. Worse, the house looks even dingier than it did before.

Jeannette is the member of the family who cares the most about the small, symbolic niceties of home life that Mom and Dad care little for. But in addition, for Jeannette, the half-painted house is emblematic of the missed chances and half-baked plans that have defined the family's decisions over the years. Desire and idealism are never lacking - Jeannette herself has often been enthusiastic about Dad's unrealistic projects, for instance - but somehow the end result never aligns with the expectations. As a result of nonchalance, apathy, or lack of drive, projects remain on hold and improvements fail to materialize more often than not.

She was keeping [the wedding ring], she explained, to replace the wedding ring her mother had given her, the one Dad had pawned shortly after they got married.
"But Mom," I said, "that ring could get us a lot of food."
"That's true," Mom said, "but it could also improve my self-esteem. And at times like these, self-esteem is even more vital than food."

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls, Rose Mary Walls (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 186

Explanation and Analysis

While exploring, Brian and Jeannette have found a diamond ring, which turns out to be valuable. They have spent a difficult winter, hungry, cold, and lacking in basic necessities, and Jeannette and Brian can't imagine why their mother wouldn't take the ring to the pawnshop to be exchanged for money that could help them. But Mom doesn't see things

that way: for her, its power stems from its capacity to replace an important possession, one that was already lost in exchange for cash.

In general, Mom is scornful of other people's tendency to collect and adore their possessions. Here, though, she is the one to claim the importance of owning a material object above other things. The contradiction can potentially be explained by Mom's usual propensity to value what others do not value and to make decisions that others might find bizarre. Usually, a desire to hold on to a valuable diamond ring would be considered socially appropriate; at this moment, though, when the ring is found among garbage, possesses little sentimental value, and could be exchanged for money to feed a family, Mom's decision begins to look much more non-conforming, even irrational.

> 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.

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

Jeannette's earliest associations of what it means to be a "writer" have been with her mother's attempts at writing stories, shutting herself up by herself and receiving rejection letter after rejection letter. Now she sees an alternative glimpse of what being a writer could look like. Rather than spending time alone in one's head, a reporter can go out into the world and become a reliable source on "what was really going on." Jeannette's early experiences at the school newspaper show her that her desire for stability and expertise need not be continually frustrated in her family life, but can be applied to other spheres instead. In addition, this is one of the first moments at which Jeannette is able to picture a way out of her stressful family situation. It is one of the first times when she thinks about what she would like to do in life independently of her parents, based on her own knowledge and skills.

> 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.

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204-205

Explanation and Analysis

Part of Jeannette's job at the student newspaper involves going down to the local newspaper offices to print out the galleys. When she's finished, she reads the other newspapers lying around the office, a habit that becomes a true revelation for her. This is the first time that Jeannette gains access to the outside world in a way that is not influenced by her parents. Dad, of course, has always excelled at telling exciting, alluring stories that enrapture his children, while Mom has her own position on certain world affairs. The world view that they share is one largely painted in black and white, as well as one in which any authority figure is immediately suspect. As a result, it only makes sense that they continually flee the authorities and fail to settle down.

Rather than encouraging her to consider her parents' views as outright lies, Jeannette's newspaper reading allows her to fill in what had been left out from her parents' opinions and develop a more nuanced understanding of what really happens in the world. This is another case of Jeannette beginning to grasp her own relation to those around her, one that is independent of her close-knit but often anxiety-inducing family, and one that suggests a different way of life for her in the future.

> 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.

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

Jeannette's first "real" job is as an assistant at Mr. Becker's jewelry store. She enjoys the work since she gets to see customers who are usually happy, pleased to be buying something special. But for herself, jewelry is too decorative, too frivolous - it serves no purpose other than ornamentation. Jeannette is instead drawn to the watches, not just as another kind of accessory, but as highly symbolic objects that suggest a different way of life for her. Watches, to Jeannette, belong to people for whom time is scarce and important, people who have responsibilities and appointments and who keep to them rather than giving them up or forgetting about them.

Mom might say that Jeannette's fascination with watches is a troubling sign of obsession with ownership, but for Jeannette material objects have always been more significant in terms of what they represent, in terms of their aspirational quality as standing in for the kind of person she might become. In addition to her time at the student newspaper, Jeannette's job at the jewelry store begins to paint a different kind of a picture for her future.

"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."

Related Characters: Rose Mary Walls (speaker), Jeannette Walls, Lori Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

Lori and Mom have both returned from their summers away at the same time, both captivated and excited by the time spent developing their own artistic capacities. The book implies that, for all Lori's frustrations with her parents, there are some things she shares with Mom too. However, it is certainly troubling that Mom has a similarly self-absorbed reaction to a teenage girl, who lacks the responsibilities and tasks of a mother of three. Mom seems to refuse to accept that she does indeed have such responsibilities. Instead, she seems to be jealous of her daughters' own paths towards independence, and to want similar things for herself, even at the expense of taking care of her children. The artistic projects that Mom wants to pursue are "more important," in her mind, than the necessary but, to her, boring tasks of raising a family.

"Who do you think you are?" [Dad] 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?"

Related Characters: Rex Walls, Jeannette Walls (speaker), Rose Mary Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219-220

Explanation and Analysis

Mom has refused to go to school on the first day, and after begging and cajoling her, Jeannette finally grows angry and claims that Mom isn't acting like a mother. Mom tells Dad when he gets home, and in this confrontation Jeannette, for the first time, explicitly shares her disillusionment with and anger towards her father for all that he led her to expect, and all that he did to disappoint her.

In the past, Jeannette has continued to cling to a sense that Dad was well-intentioned, and his disappointing actions redeemable, even if she has long since had to give up the idea that all his wild stories and enchanting illusions had any substance. Now, she goes a step further, suggesting that both her parents' inability to come through for their children are not just signs of their bohemian sensibility, but proof that they don't know how to be good parents. Jeannette has had to take on many of the responsibilities usually embraced by parents, and this outburst reflects the frustration Jeannette feels at this switching of roles.

I stared at the plans. "Dad," I said, "you'll never build the Glass Castle."
"Are you saying you don't have faith in your old man?"
"Even if you do, I'll be gone." [...] "As soon as I finish classes, I'm getting on the next bus out of here. If the buses stop running, I'll hitchhike. I'll walk if I have to. Go head and build the Glass Castle, but don't do it for me."

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker), Rex Walls

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

Jeannette has told her parents that she'll be following Lori to New York, and Dad has grown silent and sullen. Finally, he spreads out the old plans of the Glass Castle. Though he doesn't say anything explicitly to Jeannette, it is suggested that he is making one final attempt to enchant Jeannette into staying, by recalling their old exciting projects and the adoration that Jeannette once held for him. Jeannette is only incredulous at this attempt, which leaves her entirely cold. The Glass Castle, once a cherished idea for her, has come to be no more than a symbol for empty promises and castles built in the air.

On the one hand, Jeannette officially stakes her position on Dad's inability to ever really go through with these plans and create a beautiful, sustainable home for his family. But in addition, her claims on what she will do to get out of Welch reflect an alternative idea of how to make sure that plans get done and dreams for the future fulfilled. She has committed to going to New York and has made everything possible to do so - something that can only be negatively contrasted with the way Dad makes plans for the future.

❝ I wondered if [Dad] was remembering how he, too, had left Welch full of vinegar at age seventeen and just as convinced as I was now that he'd never return. I wondered if he was hoping that his favorite girl would come back, or if he was hoping that, unlike him, she would make it out for good.

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker), Rex Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

As Jeannette looks out the window of her bus to New York, some of her anger and frustration at her parents, especially at Dad, begins to dissipate, and instead she begins to ask herself about Dad's own past and the possible parallels between their lives. After having wandered around the country for years, the Walls family had settled back into Dad's hometown, a return that was obviously frustrating and painful for him, as it underlined how little his dreams and ideas for the future resulted in any different kind of life or home for himself.

In some ways, Jeannette's realization about the parallels between Dad's departure and her own is sobering, because it suggests that as much as Jeannette wants to escape Welch for good, there is no guarantee that she will succeed. But she also takes this as a challenge to undertake a different path than that of her father. At the same time, she dares to hope that Dad does want something different for her, even if he made several half-hearted-seeming attempts to keep her home.

Part 4 Quotes

❝ "You can't just live like this," I said.
"Why not?" Mom said. "Being homeless is an adventure."

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker), Rose Mary Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

Now that all three of the children are in New York, Mom and Dad have moved there as well - but after a series of typically disastrous events, they find themselves homeless and refuse to take help from their children. As they gather at Lori's apartment once a month, Mom shares some of the tips that they've learned from their new "adventure" as homeless people in Manhattan, from the soup kitchen's open hours to the various free events taking place all over the city. This conversation between Jeannette and Mom recapitulates the deep gap between the ways that they both see the world. Mom tends to idealize suffering and poverty, considering it a more artistically appealing life path, not to mention one that is even more valuable since others wouldn't consider it so. For Jeannette, of course, it is maddening that Mom and Dad won't settle down, ask for help, or develop a sustainable life for themselves.

"I think that maybe sometimes people get the lives they want."

"Are you saying homeless people want to live on the street?" Professor Fuchs asked. "Are you saying they don't want warm beds and roofs over their heads?"

"Not exactly, I said. I was fumbling for words. "They do. But if some of them were willing to work hard and make compromises, they might not have ideal lives, but they could make ends meet."

Professor Fuchs walked around from behind her lectern. "What do you know about the lives of the underprivileged?" she asked. She was practically trembling with agitation. "What do you know about the hardships and obstacles that the underclass faces?"

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker), Professor Fuchs

Related Themes:

Page Number: 256-257

Explanation and Analysis

This moment is a devastating but also highly significant point in the process of Jeannette's growing up and attempting to negotiate the difficult relationships between her family life and past and the new life she is trying to create. Here, Jeannette "fumbles for words" while trying to make a point about homelessness that stems from her own personal experience. Professor Fuchs, not knowing anything about Jeannette other than the fact that she is a student at an elite college, assumes that Jeannette is simply being naive or even callous about the real challenges faced by the poor.

Of course, the reality of homelessness is more complex than the idea of either saints crippled by poverty or lazy people who deserve to be homeless; but without sharing where she comes from and what exactly she has witnessed, it proves impossible for Jeannette to explain what she means. As a result, she realizes that she and her favorite professor are speaking from worlds apart, as Jeannette's own personal emphasis on responsibility - one that she has developed by necessity because of her family - clashes with a sociological, structural view on where poverty comes from. Even while taking excellent classes with rigorous professors, Jeannette thus still struggles to articulate what it meant to grow up in a family like her own, and how to explain it through available social frameworks.

I actually live on Park Avenue, I kept telling myself as I hung my clothes in the closet Eric had cleared out for me. Then I started thinking about Mom and Dad. When they had moved into their squat—a fifteen-minute subway ride south and about half a dozen worlds away—it seemed as if they had finally found the place where they belonged, and I wondered if I had done the same.

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker), Rose Mary Walls, Rex Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 268

Explanation and Analysis

Jeannette has moved in with her boyfriend, Eric, around the same time that her parents have moved into a squat - not physically far away from Park Avenue, but certainly in another world. Jeannette has spent much of the book dreaming about a place she could call home, whether that means the Glass Castle of her childhood, a yellow-painted house, or simply a place of order and stability. Now, though, she has a more serious view of what it means to establish a home and ownership over a place. Jeannette isn't entirely sure that the apartment on Park Avenue is where she really belongs - indeed, she seems to wonder whether her parents haven't done a better job at finding a home that truly fits their sensibilities. She might have succeeded by the standards of society around her, the standards of material success, but Jeannette's search is not yet over.

I also hoped that Maureen had chosen California because she thought that was her true home, the place where she really belonged, where it was always warm and you could dance in the rain, pick grapes right off the vines, and sleep outside at night under the stars.

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker), Maureen Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

Maureen, recently released from a year-long stay at a psychiatric hospital, has decided to leave for California. Here Jeannette implicitly recalls Maureen's childhood fascination with the state. As the youngest in the family, she

cannot recall when the Walls lived in California, so she would always ask Jeannette, Lori, and Brian to tell her about it. Now Jeannette imagines that Maureen's desire for such stories was not just a childhood dream.

As Jeannette is trying to figure out where she belongs, and where she might settle down - around the same time that her parents seem to have settled into a routine at least slightly more stable than the norm - she wonders how such a process will play out for the rest of her family. All the Walls children are deeply affected by the kind of childhood they experienced, even if they all reacted in different ways. It is up to each of them to deal with the legacy of how their parents raised them, and to determine what comes next.

"Hey," [Dad] said. He winked and pointed his finger at me "Have I ever let you down?"
He started chuckling because he knew there was only one way I could ever answer that question. I just smiled. And then I closed the door.

Related Characters: Rex Walls, Jeannette Walls (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

Dad has just shared with Jeannette that he has cancer, after inviting her to the tenement where he lives with Mom: it's been a long time since they've seen each other. This, his parting statement to his daughter depends for its dark humor and irony on the long history of grand illusions and exciting plans that Dad had fed his children for years. Both of them know, of course, that Dad has let her down plenty of times - although at few of those times has Jeannette seemed as calm and controlled as she is now.

Indeed, the fact that Jeannette and her father can laugh about his broken promises, even at a moment of pain like this one, underlines how much Jeannette has been able to gain distance from the acute struggles of her childhood. When she was younger, she was at first enraptured by her father, and then went through a process of deep disillusionment. Now she seems to accept Dad for who he is, as someone who has failed to be a fully responsible father, but who retains a sparkling personality and great charisma, and who is aware of his own failings. Jeannette and Dad have not exactly grown closer as a result of this self-awareness, but she does understand enough to no longer be bitter.

A year after Dad died, I left Eric. He was a good man, but not the right one for me. And Park Avenue was not where I belonged.

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

Dad's death leads to a period in Jeannette's life of serious contemplation and questioning about the direction her life is going. She feels restless and ill at ease, never quite sure what is wrong. Finally she does make a major move, breaking up with Eric and moving out of the beautiful apartment where he lived, an apartment that had symbolized at least in a material sense how far she had come from the run-down shack in Welch. Jeannette describes the end of her relationship with Eric as a matter of compatibility, rather than claiming that one or the other did something wrong. For her, this is what home has come to mean: a personal, idiosyncratic feeling of attachment to a certain milieu, which isn't necessarily tied to external signs of success or pleasure.

I liked to go for long walks at night. I often walked west toward the river. The city lights obscured the stars, but on clear nights, I could see Venus on the horizon, up over the dark water, glowing steadily.

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

Jeannette's feelings of restlessness and uncertainty, acute since her father's death, have faded, especially since she has left Eric and the Park Avenue apartment. However, what remains of that time is her propensity to go on long walks. While growing up, Jeannette had never lived in a city, and she always used to be able to see the stars - a capacity that she now has to actively go in search of. But for Jeannette, the rare ability to see Venus is precious for the way in which

it reminds her of her father and of the long-ago Christmas present that he gave to her.

At the time, Jeannette had rejoiced in having a gift far more special than the silly, easily broken objects that the other kids at school desired. Now she is reminded of the magical side of Dad's character, the way he made ordinary life and even poverty seem special and unique. As Jeannette is still attempting to determine where she belongs, Venus serves also as a means of continuity between the past and the present, between her childhood and her life now.

Part 5 Quotes

"Grandma Walls is different from your other grandma," I told [Veronica].
"Way different," Veronica said.
John's daughter, Jessica, turned to me and said, "But she laughs just like you do."

Related Characters: Veronica, Jessica, Jeannette Walls (speaker), Rose Mary Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 287

Explanation and Analysis

For most of the book, Jeannette has emphasized just how different she and her mother are. They grow excited about different things, are annoyed by different things, and in particular Jeannette's love of order and stability has long clashed with her mother's endless search for adventure and here easygoing attitude towards parenting.

Jessica, though, has a slightly different view. Noticing how Jeannette and Rose Mary have an identical laugh, she shows how someone outside the family, with little knowledge of the internal family dynamics, can still pick up on certain elements of continuity. That Jeannette mentions this conversation suggests that she is acknowledging that her childhood wish to be nothing if not opposite from her mother might be just that, a child's desire. Now, she is more willing to recognize that parallels can exist, and that fact does not mean Jeannette is condemned to the same kind of life as her mother.

"We should drink a toast to Rex," John said.
Mom stared at the ceiling, miming perplexed thought. "I've got it." She held up her glass. "Life with your father was never boring."

Related Characters: John, Rose Mary Walls (speaker), Rex Walls

Related Themes:

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

Here Jeannette's mother acknowledges something that the entire family knows to be true, and that the reader will by this point recognize as obvious as well. Rose Mary does, of course, put a more positive spin on Dad's mode of parenting and of life in general by calling it "never boring." By doing so she skates over some of the more unpleasant and even dangerous elements of this life, including Dad's drinking and his irresponsibility with money. Of course, Rose Mary Walls was not exempt from some of these examples of irresponsibility either, and in any case, the toast is a chance to celebrate and remember Dad's life. In addition, of course, emphasizing the excitement that Dad brought to everything allows the family to remember what was so appealing about his attitude towards life.

A wind picked up, rattling the windows, and the candle flames suddenly shifted, dancing along the border between turbulence and order.

Related Characters: Jeannette Walls (speaker), Rex Walls

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

As Jeannette ends her chronicle of her childhood and emergence from the wild uncertainties of her youth, she returns to the symbols that structured her childhood. Even the smallest of events like the flickering of candle flames can be a reminder of both a specific moment from her youth and a broader means of coming to terms with her relationship to her family and to her past. Dad had once told Jeannette all about the physical boundary between order and turbulence according to physics, an idea that fascinated him. The anecdote thus reminds Jeannette of the way in which her father often encouraged her to learn and to be curious about the world around her.

But also, of course, this boundary is one that, in a more metaphorical sense, Jeannette and her family were always

skirting over the course of her childhood. Having grown up and lost many of her childhood illusions, especially about her father, Jeannette still is eager to remember much of what Dad taught her, and to remain attached in some way to her past.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1: A WOMAN ON THE STREET

While sitting in a taxi on the way to a party in New York one windy March evening, Jeannette Walls catches a glimpse of her mother, Rose Mary Walls (Mom) rifling through a dumpster for something to eat. Although Mom's hair is unkempt and her skin parched and raw, her exuberance in going through the dumpster reminds Jeannette of how she was when Jeannette was a child.

Jeannette's lifestyle clearly contrasts with her mother's, as the juxtaposition of the New York taxi and the dumpster makes clear. While Mom looks as you might expect a homeless person to look, her "exuberance" points to something more complicated, some enjoyment of her situation. That Mom was like this when Jeanette was a child indicates that Mom's unconventionality extended to motherhood as well.

Since she is only two blocks away from the party, Jeannette worries that Mom will see her and begin to talk to her, and that a fellow party guest will see them together. Jeannette asks the driver to take her home to her apartment on Park Avenue.

Jeannette cannot handle having her two worlds collide. She feels deep shame about her mother and does not want anyone in her current social circle to find out about her mother (or, by extension, her past).

Back home, surrounded by her vases, old books, and Persian rugs (though not her husband, who often works late), Jeannette feels self-loathing, wondering how she can help her parents. They have refused material help before, but as Jeannette looks around her apartment, she feels uncomfortable being surrounded by nice things while her parents are homeless downtown. She decides to invite Mom to dinner.

While her mother collects refuse from a dumpster, Jeanette is clearly wealthy and has actual collectibles. Yet these objects, which Jeanette the narrator is careful to describe, make her feel worse. This suggests that even as Jeanette feels ashamed of her mother, she also feels ashamed at how she has abandoned her parents. Inviting Mom to dinner is the only way she can think of to take on some kind of responsibility for her parents' situation.

Since Mom doesn't have a phone, Jeannette has to leave a message at a friend of Mom's and wait a few days for her to return her call. When she does, Mom suggests they meet at her favorite Chinese restaurant.

Today people are assumed to be immediately reachable, but Mom is both unwilling and unable to conform to this modern-day standard.

When they meet, Mom seems excited to see Jeannette. She also immediately drops the packets of sauce and dried noodles into her purse to eat later. At the same time, she starts telling Jeannette about a Picasso retrospective she'd seen recently. For her, he's overrated, and Cubism is "gimmicky."

Mom's contradictions immediately jump out: she can speak intelligently about modern art and culture even as she hoards food since she cannot be sure when she'll eat again.

Jeannette interrupts Mom to say that she's worried about her, and asks if she can help. Mom replies that she needs nothing—except perhaps an electrolysis treatment, she adds jokingly—and that it's Jeannette whose values are muddled. Jeannette mentions she saw Mom picking through a dumpster, and Mom replies that Americans just don't recycle enough.

Even as Jeannette worries about Mom, Mom worries about Jeanette *and her embrace of "materialistic" values. Suddenly Mom's homelessness seems not just a financial situation but a result of a kind of philosophy or moral system. For Mom, eating from a dumpster is just a kind of maverick environmentalism.*

Jeannette admits she was later ashamed that she didn't say hello. Mom, though she doesn't seem upset, chastises her for being embarrassed by her parents—she should accept them as they are, Mom says. When Jeannette asks how she is supposed to tell her friends about her homeless parents, "Just tell the truth," Mom replies.

The difference between Mom's and Jeannette's values is similarly apparent here. In the ending to this short opening section, we also get Jeannette's motivations behind writing this memoir—taking Mom's advice and telling the whole truth, both revealing the background and family she has hidden from the world and, in doing so, accepting it.

PART 2: THE DESERT

Jeannette recalls her earliest memory, at the age of three, as being on **fire**. Living in a trailer somewhere in southern Arizona (she can't recall which town), she is cooking hot dogs while wearing a pink dress with a stiff tutu-like skirt, bought for her by her grandmother. She leans over to offer a hot dog to her dog Juju, but when standing back up she realizes that her dress has caught fire.

Mom and Dad's parenting style is unusual, to be sure. Already we see the contrast between their itinerant lifestyle—Jeannette loses track of the towns where they live—and the stability and comfort symbolized by the dress bought by Grandma Smith. And in the fire we see the dangerous tension between those things

Jeannette screams for her mother's help and Mom rushes into the room, throwing an army-surplus blanket around her. She then grabs Jeannette and her younger brother, Brian, rushes to the trailer next door, and asks to borrow her neighbor's car to get to the hospital, since Dad has gone somewhere with theirs.

While Mom is carefree, she also keeps her head in an emergency, relying creatively on limited tools—like the army surplus blankets that are often all the family has for bedding. That Dad is not around hints at what will be a growing pattern later in the book.

At the hospital, the nurses cut off Jeannette's beautiful pink dress and tell Mom that Jeannette's condition is serious, but that she will live. The doctors complete a skin graft and wrap her body in bandages, which she says make her feel like a mummy.

While initially terrified, Jeannette adapts quickly to her new situation, even making jokes (a way to deal with disaster that, as we'll see, she learns from Dad).

The nurses and doctors begin to ask Jeanette about how the burn took place, whether her parents have ever hurt her, and why a three-year-old would be cooking hot dogs. Jeannette responds matter-of-factly to each question: Mom believes she is mature for her age and often lets her cook for herself. The nurses still seem suspicious, making notes on their clipboard even while reassuring Jeannette that nothing is wrong.

For Jeannette, the way she and her family live is normal—it's all she's ever known. In the hospital is the first time she begins to understand that the way her parents are raising her isn't necessarily the only way. Notice how her parent's idea of giving Jeanette responsibility is mainstream society's idea of parental recklessness.

Jeannette notices how clean, calm, and quiet the hospital is—far different from what she is used to. She enjoys having her own room and three meals a day, including dessert. The nurse even gives Jeanette her very first stick of chewing gum, and when she worries that she will have to throw it out to eat lunch, the nurse tells her she can have as many sticks as she'd like. Jeannette marvels that nothing ever seems to run out at the hospital.

Jeannette's childhood is largely defined by poverty and lack, though before the hospital she certainly would not have thought that anything was amiss. The hospital provides an alternative to both the material lacks at home, and the general atmosphere of loudness and turbulence.

Jeannette's family—Mom, Dad, Brian, and Jeannette's older sister Lori— comes to visit, loudly interrupting the hospital's calm. Mom is unhappy that Jeannette has tried chewing gum, calling it a "vulgar" and low-class habit.

The disorder of home life comes to interrupt Jeannette's new normal. Though the family is obviously poor, Mom makes clear distinctions between certain kinds of "low-class" behavior and others. The Walls are not simply poor—though they are poor. Their poverty again is connected to a kind of alternative life philosophy.

On the family's next visit to see Jeanette in the hospital, Dad tells Jeannette a story she knows well, about when Lori was stung by a scorpion. Since Dad didn't trust hospitals, he took her to a Navajo witch doctor who cured it through chants and pastes. Dad thinks Mom should have done the same for Jeannette.

For Mom and Dad, modern hospitals, with their sterilized machines and technology, symbolize everything that is wrong with modern society. Until now, they've been able to simply choose their own alternatives.

The next time they visit, Brian's head is wrapped in a bandage from falling off the couch and hitting his head. Mom and Dad decided not to take him to the hospital—one kid was enough. Dad begins to argue with the doctor about Jeannette's bandages, saying the wounds need to "breathe." When he threatens to hit the doctor, the family is asked to leave.

Mom and Dad are suspicious of specialist medicine and rely on what they might call a more intuitive approach to dealing with problems. At the same time, their family life seems full of craziness. Dad in particular reveals the trouble he has fitting in with and following the rules of modern society.

Several days later, Dad arrives and tells Jeannette to trust him: they are going to "check out, Rex Walls-style." He takes her in his arms and runs down the hall, out of the hospital, and into the car where the rest of the family is waiting with the engine running. Dad reassures Jeannette that only now, having left the hospital, is she safe.

Even "checking out" of a hospital becomes a dramatic affair in the Walls family. In this case, they aren't checking out at all. While this may not be evident to young Jeanette, Dad's dramatics are hiding the fact that they are running out, and leaving town, in order to avoid paying the hospital bills.Dad frames this act as one of "saving" Jeanette, which he no doubt believes.

A few days after that, Jeannette decides to cook hot dogs again, and Mom praises her for getting "right back in the saddle."

In some ways, Jeanette really is more self-sufficient than other kids. At the same time, letting your child who was nearly killed in a hot dog cooking accident cook hot dogs again seems irresponsible.

Following the accident, Jeannette becomes fascinated with **fire**, passing her finger through a candle flame, watching her neighbors burn trash, and stealing matches from Dad to light behind the family's trailer—she enjoys waiting just until the fire seems about to go out of control before stamping it out. Once, she accidentally melts off her plastic doll Tinkerbell's face. Jeannette imagines giving the doll a skin graft like the one the doctors performed on her.

Though Jeannette is attracted to order, she also retains a fascination for the borderline between order and turbulence, here symbolized by fire. Even so, her playing with fire is one way in which she can exert control over a situation that might seem uncontrollable—a situation—the beauty of being perched on the edge of chaos—that also defines her childhood more broadly.

A few months after this event, Dad arrives home in the middle of the night and announces that the family is leaving in fifteen minutes, and should take only the essentials. Jeannette asks if anything is wrong: when Dad responds by rhetorically asking, "Don't I always take care of you," Jeannette agrees that he does.

Jeannette adores and looks up to her father: she trusts that there is some kind of sense or system behind his crazy plans. She is a child. She trusts her Dad.

In the family car (christened the Blue Goose), the family's cat Quixote begins to protest by growling and scratching. Dad, who says the family adventure isn't open to anyone who doesn't like to travel, and throws Quixote out the window. Jeannette begins to cry but Mom tells her not to be sentimental—it will be far more fun for Quixote to be a "wild" cat.

Dad does not always seem to think through his actions, and Mom goes along—in fact, often acts impulsively herself. In particular, Mom embraces the idea of "adventure," even applying it to a house cat. Don Quixote is a famous madman of literature whose madness gave him a kind of romance and nobility along with making him ridiculously silly. Don Quixote's wild ideas are not so different from Dad's illusions.

That night, they sleep under the stars, and when Jeannette tells Lori that they could live like this forever, Lori responds, "I think we're going to."

While Jeannette is still enraptured by their exciting lifestyle, her older sister is beginning to grow weary of it.

According to Jeannette, Dad is sure FBI agents are after him, though Mom says that the FBI just sounds more exciting than the real chasers—bill collectors.

Though Mom embraces the wild life too, even she can see through some of Dad's illusions.

We learn that the family has moved around between Nevada, Arizona, and California—the more remote the better—and Dad has a knack for getting any kind of job, like an electrician or mining engineer. Once he quits, is fired, or begins to have too many unpaid bills, the family moves again—always leaving in the middle of the night.

Both remarkably resourceful and often impatient or impetuous, Dad reveals himself to be a wanderer at heart—always on the lookout for the next great project, but never seriously considering that any one move will last or doing anything to make it last.

Once in awhile, the family stays with Mom's mom, Grandma Smith, in her large house in Phoenix. Although Jeannette adores Grandma Smith, the stay never lasts long until her grandmother gets into an argument with Dad about his inability to hold down a job, and the family must pack up again.

Grandma Smith's home symbolizes order and stability for Jeannette, who will come to look back longingly on the times she has spent there. Where Jeannette feels order and comfort, though, Dad only sees dry and sterile nagging, only feels hemmed in.

The kids rarely enroll in school, but Mom teaches them to read early on, as well as how to find water and survive on plants in the desert, while Dad teaches them math, Morse code, and pistol shooting.

Though they balk at participating in the "system," Mom and Dad take responsibility for educating their kids in their own way.

In the desert, the siblings catch scorpions and snakes, hunt for gold, and collect rocks. They let themselves be knocked around by sandstorms when they can't find anywhere to hide from them. Unlike other parents, Mom and Dad allow them to splash and dance outside in the thunderstorms, watching the lightning bolts as if they were fireworks.

In many ways, the Walls children adore the freedom that they are granted and have amazing life experiences thanks to Mom and Dad's parenting quirks—even as these quirks often walk a fine line between adventure and recklessness.

Jeannette says that like the cactus, the family eats sporadically but fills up when they can. They grab a crate of cantaloupes that have fallen off a train, for instance. When the grape pickers in California go on strike, the family drives a hundred miles to the vineyards, where they are able to pick their own grapes and pile them into the car. For the next few weeks, they eat them for every meal.

This anecdote underlines the scrappy resourcefulness with which the Walls family confronts its precarious situation. Surrounded by nature, Jeannette naturally turns to the cactus as an apt metaphor for the family's simultaneous independence and reliance on others.

Dad confides that his true ambition is to find gold to support his family—this is the real reason they move around so much. Jeannette believes him since Dad is an excellent fixer-upper. He is also an expert in math and physics, although his real love is for any kind of energy. To aid him in his search for gold, Dad invents a device called the Prospector, an angled wooden contraption to sort gold nuggets from stones and silt.

Dad's various skills and talents prove dazzling to young Jeannette, for whom Dad's claims cannot possibly be false or disingenuous. Rather than getting a regular job, Dad decides on the most wild, improbable path of making money. Jeannette, meanwhile, is unable to separate out the "gold" of Dad's claims from the groundless "silt."

Jeannette acknowledges that while Dad is "perfect," things can turn frightening once he embarks on a drinking episode. But he is scariest when he drinks the "hard stuff," as Mom calls it, and since he can only afford that when the family has money, his drinking is not too often an issue.

Here we get a hint at Dad's alcoholism which will later become a major issue in Jeannette's childhood. At this point, though, we see such episodes from a child's eye: Jeannette still finds her dad "perfect" despite his occasional scariness. As a child, she still has illusions about him.

Dad's bedtime stories are always about his own adventures. A marvelous storyteller, he keeps the kids enraptured with tales about an emergency landing in a cattle pasture while he was in the Air Force, or about wrestling a pack of wild dogs, or rescuing thousands of people by fixing a broken gate at the Hoover Dam.

Dad is always the hero of his own story. When adventure may not exist in real life, he is happy to dream it up, constructing a narrative that casts a glow over the kids' otherwise precarious childhood.

Dad also returns again and again to the story of what he plans to do once he finds gold: build the **Glass Castle** in the desert, which would harness the sun's energy and draw on Dad's engineering know-how. Sometimes he takes out blueprints of the house that he has created, and the kids work on the floor plans for their own rooms.

The Glass Castle, the fantastical Walls family future home, is the memoir's central symbol. Jeannette as a child shares her father's dream of building it, and at this point the dream seems attainable, as evidenced by the blueprints and floor plans.

Though the one thing Dad doesn't enjoy talking about is his past as a youth in Welch, West Virginia, he does love to retell how he met Mom, when he was in the Air Force and Mom was back home with her parents near Fish Creek Canyon in Arizona. There, he and his fellow Air Force pilots were debating whether to jump from a cliff into a lake, when Mom shows up with a friend and dives right into the water. Dad jumps in afterward so as not to let her escape.

Dad's reluctance to talk about his childhood, coupled with his eagerness to tell stories, suggests that he hopes to escape his own past by constructing an alternative to it. This particular story replaces Dad as the hero with Mom, and creates an origin myth that will serve as the basis for all their subsequent adventures.

Jeannette tells us that Dad left the Air Force because he wanted to strike gold; then Lori was born and a second daughter, Mary Charlene, who died at nine months old, followed by Jeannette and Brian. While Mary Charlene's death doesn't seem to trouble Mom much—God saw fit to take her away, she says—any mention of Mary Charlene makes Dad somber and stony. Mom says that her death was when Dad started drinking and having trouble holding down a job.

Mom doesn't seem to worry about the same things that other mothers do (recall her attitude to three-year-old Jeannette cooking even after the fire). While Dad is similarly carefree, here we get a glimpse of a darker side to him—as well as how past events can impact a person's actions and character.

On the way to Las Vegas, where Dad has decided to move to make some money gambling, Mom and Dad stop at the Bar None Bar for hours and leave the three kids outside. Jeannette asks Lori how many places they've lived, and Lori asks what she means by living somewhere: "If you spend one night in some town, did you live there? What about two nights? Or a whole week?" Jeannette decides that it counts if you unpack everything. Her most vivid memories, however, are of the inside of the family's cars, and as the sisters count they eventually lose track.

Without putting down roots anywhere, the Walls parents seem to want to avoid the task of constructing a permanent home. As a result, the young Jeannette and Lori are confused as to what even defines a home. Here, they imagine it as a physical place characterized by length of time spent in it, and ultimately decide that this kind of home is foreign to them.

When Mom and Dad finally come back, Dad continues to drive while drinking beer in the other hand. At one sharp curve, the door opens and Jeannette falls out of the car. Scratched and bloody, initially just shocked but then upset, she waits for her parents by the railroad tracks. At last she sees the car (this one is called the Green Caboose) returning for her. Dad cleans Jeannette up and calls her bloody nose a "snot locker," which the whole family laughs about for the rest of the trip.

The darker side of Mom and Dad's sense of adventure emerges here. Jeannette thinks it's entirely plausible that her parents could just decide to leave her behind, since she isn't up to the adventure. When they do return, Dad retakes the role of responsible father, and again shows a knack for turning a frightening situation into a funny one with his jokes. They are always on the edge between fun and recklessness, chaos and adventure.

In Las Vegas, where the family stays for a month, the kids play in the casinos while Mom and Dad are playing blackjack. Dad makes lots of money and the kids get new clothes and eat chicken-fried steaks at air-conditioned restaurants. A few days later, though, Dad says that the casino owners have realized he has a system, and the family has to "skedaddle," as Dad likes to say.

Dad's skills would not exactly be at home on a resume, but they're often enough to support the family and even sometimes give the kids coveted treats. Fleeing despite his success at the casinos, Dad reveals his suspicion of the "system" to be partly fantasy but also based on the reactions of mainstream authorities or powers to his own very real actions.

They head to San Francisco, where they stay in a hotel off the beaten path that Dad calls a "flophouse," but which Mom says has "character."

Mom tends to see beauty where others see only the bleak or grim—a quality that both helps her survive and at times verges on the delusional.

A few days later, Jeannette wakes up in the middle of the night to the sound of **fire**. Dad rushes into the children's bedroom and carries them outside before helping to fight the fire. Jeannette wonders if this fire is connected to the one that burned her when she was three, and concludes that in her life, a fire could erupt at any moment.

Fire is a potent symbol of the delicate balance between order and turbulence in Jeannette's life. Within this framework, Dad serves here as the knight in shining armor—yet it is Dad who put the children in the position of being in a house that was likely to burn down. He saved them from danger; yet he put them in danger.

After the hotel burns down, the family spends a few days living on the beach, until a policeman tells them it is illegal to sleep there. Jeannette thinks that the policeman is nice enough, but Dad calls him the "gestapo" and says that it's far better for the family to move from the city back to the desert, even though they've lost the money Dad made from gambling.

Jeannette is beginning to explicitly question her parents' flouting of the "system." While Dad is disgusted with anyone in a position of official authority, Jeannette grasps that there is a different set of rules her family has simply chosen not to adhere to.

On the way from San Francisco to the Mojave Desert, Mom sees an ancient **Joshua tree** in a spot between the desert and the mountain and asks Dad to pull over. The tree has grown in the direction of the wind, leaning forward instead of growing upright toward the sky, but its sturdy roots have prevented it from tipping over. Though Jeannette finds the tree ugly, Mom adores it, and stops to make a painting of it.

Again, Mom manages to find interest and beauty in what others simply don't notice. Others might find the Joshua tree gnarled and ugly—Jeannette, for instance, sees it as "imperfect"—but for Mom this makes the tree worth treasuring. Mom's life philosophy holds the "imperfect" up as the true beauty, and she prizes beauty above stability, comfort, etc.

Leaving her and the kids, Dad continues driving to explore the area and comes across a town called Midland, made up only of a cluster of dilapidated houses and trailers. Seeing a for-rent sign on one of them, he decides that this place will do for the family's next stay.

The way the family chooses where to live is often entirely arbitrary. Though one place is as good as another, they do tend to trend towards the isolated and run-down.

In Midland, Jeannette is afraid of the coyotes and other animals in the desert, and one night becomes sure that there is a monster under her bed. Dad tells Jeannette (though he calls her "Mountain Goat," because when they climb mountains together she never falls down) that it must be Demon, whom he's been chasing after for years. The two look for Demon throughout the whole house, and Dad tells her a long story about the time he fought Demon by hand and saved an entire town.

It's understandable why Jeannette holds her father in such high esteem. Dad's stories may verge on the fantastical, but his ability to cook up tales also enables him to reassure Jeannette in creative, exciting ways, like this hunt for "Demon." Dad's nickname for Jeannette further underlines their unique bond and Dad's conviction that Jeannette is on his side.

Since Dad threw the cat Quixote out the window, the family has collected a number of others. One day, when they have become too numerous to take care of, Dad places some of them into a sack, loads them into the car, and drives off to a pond to throw them in. Jeannette begins to cry, and Mom comforts her by saying that the cats should be grateful for the extra time the family has given them to live.

Mom and Dad can be both unusually altruistic and coolly pragmatic—indeed, they seem not to see any contradiction between the two. Their attitude towards the cats is an extreme example of their loose interpretation of "responsibility"—one that Jeannette already is intuitively unable to grasp.

While Dad has secured a job digging out gypsum at the town's mine, Mom works on paintings, sketches, and sculptures while also writing and illustrating stories (spell-checked by seven-year-old Lori). The kids often accompany her to paint the **Joshua tree** again and again. When Jeannette announces a plan to dig up a small sapling and replant it so that it grows straight up rather than gnarled, Mom rebukes her, saying, "It's the Joshua tree's struggle that gives it its beauty.

In Midland, the family seems to have reached a kind of stability, where their dreams—Dad's to make money, Mom's to become an artist—seem finally attainable. Mom's opinion of the Joshua tree reflects her notion of turbulence as necessary and important, in art and in life, whereas Jeannette sees such struggle as needlessly painful.

Jeannette recounts how she never believed in Santa Claus, since Mom and Dad couldn't afford presents; instead they told the kids about the other parents' deception.

Jeannette's parents often find ways to mask their poverty with games and stories, but they also sincerely believe in their own version of life—they think other people value the wrong things; live the wrong way.

Before this year's Christmas, in Midland, Dad is fired from the gypsum mine after arguing with the foreman.

Dad's loathing of authority doesn't fit well in a workplace.

On Christmas Eve, he takes each kid out into the desert to look at the stars—one of Dad's favorite scientific topics. Wealthy apartment owners in cities, he says, miss out because of how polluted the air is.

There are other ways to define wealth, Dad believes, than fancy apartments and sophisticated city life.

Dad tells Jeannette to choose a star for her Christmas present. She picks the one shining the brightest, which turns out to be not a star but a planet, Venus. It only looks brighter because it's closer.

Dad is pragmatic (since a star costs nothing) but his gift is in many ways priceless. Jeannette will be able to see Venus wherever the family wanders.

That night, Dad explains the significance of the stars each kid has chosen: Betelgeuse, a soon-to-be supernova, Rigel, a star in Orion, and Venus, a much hotter version of Earth. They all laugh about the kinds of Christmas presents other kids' get, which are bound to end up unused or broken.

Dad's scientific knowledge makes his gift even more special for the kids. Venus will become a touchstone for Jeannette, who will use it to orient herself when feeling uneasy or out of sorts. And in many ways the Walls critique of mainstream gift giving is right on, with the giving of things given primacy over actual connection.

One day the family departs Midland for a larger town, Blythe, California, where Mom, who is pregnant, can give birth. On the way, Mom and Dad start arguing about how many months Mom has been pregnant for—she claims that she has carried her children up to fourteen months, and Dad calls that "bullshit." They start yelling at each other until Mom reaches over to the driver's seat, slams the brakes, and races out of the car. Dad drives into the desert, following and cursing at her until he has her cornered against the rocks. He grabs her and throws her back into the car.

Mom and Dad do concede that they can't be completely self-sufficient, such as in childbirth. While Dad is a non-conformist, he does believe in the laws of science as strongly as Mom believes in art. All of this seems humorous, but Mom and Dad aren't joking. Their tempers combined with their unconventional ideas mean that things can turn dangerous and violent quickly and unexpectedly.

By the time they get to Blythe, Mom and Dad have made up. They find a place to rent in the "LBJ Apartments" with mostly Latin American migrant worker families. Mom tells Jeannette that the initials stand for the current president, a "crook."

As quickly as things spin out of control, they can also settle back into normal—normal meaning constant searches for apartments and Mom's suspicion of the "system."

In Blythe, Jeannette is now obliged to wear shoes and attend school, where she makes few friends because of her advanced reading ability and eagerness to raise her hand in class.

Jeannette has missed out on much of the social cues needed to get along in grade school, though it's also worth noting that Jeanette's lack of schooling hasn't affected her negatively in terms of academics. Mom's unorthodox teaching has worked.

One day, four Mexican girls follow Jeannette home and beat her up. When she gets home, she tells Dad that there were six of them and she fought back hard.

With Dad's example to guide her, Jeannette thinks fighting tooth and nail is laudable and not fighting back shameful.

The next day Brian waits in hiding for the girls to attack again, and the two siblings fight them off as best they can.

The Walls children, lacking long-term friends outside the home, have to stick together. They will continue to stick together, even as they grow up and their primary antagonists shift from people outside their family to their own Mom and Dad.

Mom gives birth two months after arriving in Blythe. Jeannette, five at the time, is deemed mature enough to hold the baby, and promises to protect her.

Mom again trusts Jeannette at surprisingly young ages. Jeannette's promise to take responsibility for the baby will return to haunt her in later chapters.

Mom doesn't want to name the baby before studying it for weeks. Jeannette suggests Rosita after a girl at school, but Mom calls that name too "Mexican." She eventually decides on Maureen.

Though Mom claims not to be prejudiced, she does stick to a certain hierarchy in which the Hispanic families around them are not in the same category.

A few months after the birth, police try to pull over Dad as he is driving the family because the brake lights of the car aren't working. Since he has no registration, insurance, or legitimate license plate, he attempts to evade the police, careening around the city with the family before hiding in a garage. They abandon the car there.

While not a major city, Blythe is a big enough town that Dad can't last that long outside the system before he's forced to pay its dues, or else give something up—this won't be their last abandoned car.

The next day Dad decides it's time to leave Blythe, this time for a Nevada town called Battle Mountain that supposedly is full of undiscovered gold.

This move accomplishes two things: it gets Dad out of "civilization," and brings him a bit closer to his grand plan to become rich.

The family rents a U-Haul and Mom tells the kids to keep quiet—it's illegal for them to ride in the back. After a few hours, it becomes cold and the kids grow uncomfortable. Then the back doors of the truck swing open, and the kids have to cling onto the furniture, until a car behind starts honking enough for Dad to pay attention and stop to lock the doors.

There has been a fine balance between Mom and Dad being maverick parents with their own way of doing things and being recklessly irresponsible in providing for the safety of their children. This is obviously one of the latter, when they make choices based on their poverty that nearly kill their kids.

Battle Mountain, originally a mining town, is mainly composed of one main street with a single streetlight. The family moves into an old railroad depot with converted offices, waiting rooms, and ticket booths. The family can't afford furniture, so they drag large industrial spools from the railroad tracks to turn into tables and chairs. Cardboard boxes become their beds, which the kids think of as an adventure.

Their new home reflects both their poverty and their creativity. Mom's language has permeated the kids' thoughts about their life, and they are still young enough to embrace the adventure.

Mom decides to buy a piano for the house, for which Dad creates a pulley system to bring into the house with a pickup. But Mom panics and hurtles forward, dragging the piano into the backyard—where they decide to keep it. Meanwhile, Dad gets a new job as an electrician in a mine, which leaves his afternoons free for cards and logic games. The kids' favorite way to pass the time is by exploring in the desert and finding mineral deposits like silver and barite. Mom and Dad teach them how to identify each mineral.

Mom may be poor, but she thinks art is important. The families dance on the knife's edge of chaos and fun applies even to getting a piano into the house, and when things go wrong Mom and Dad just improvise. Meanwhile, it's clear why the kids might find their non-conformist father so fun and amazing, and the kids joy in their life and interest in science suggests that their unconventional upbringing has some merits.

If there's enough money, the family goes to the Owl Club on Sundays. Dad dismisses its slot machines as being for "suckers"—he prefers poker and pool. Everyone at the Owl Club's bar recognizes Dad.

Dad often uses his obvious intelligence to other ends than a career—poker and pool are largely games of skill, and it works out well that they are often played at bars.

The kids order hamburgers, milk shakes, and onion rings—always so much that they have trouble walking home.

Jeannette describes each food item carefully, making clear how precious abundant food is for her.

At the commissary each week, Mom buys basics like flour, onions, and potatoes, rather than prepared foods like other "brainwashed" Americans.

Mom's non-conformist ideals are in some ways ahead of the times, prefiguring today's natural-food craze.

Instead of drinking, Dad stays home with the family, and after dinner everyone reads together with a dictionary nearby in case the kids need to look up words.

The early days at Battle Mountain are a glimpse at what a normal, stable life could look like for the Walls, and shows the family's general intelligence.

While Mom reads literature like Dickens and Faulkner, Dad reads science and math books and biographies.

Their reading choices reflect Mom's and Dad's distinct personalities and interests.

Jeannette is enrolled in second grade with a teacher named Miss Page, but already knows most of what is taught. Dad makes her do her math homework in binary numbers as a challenge. One day she forgets to translate them back into Arabic numbers, and Miss Page, who disapproves, makes her stay late to redo the task.

Here, Dad's unconventional parenting is favorably contrasted to Miss Page's attitude, which is close-minded and anti-intellectual.

Jeannette meets other kids around the "Tracks" whose families are just as poor—here, money doesn't matter.

Rather than the discomfort of dealing with class differences, this homogeneity is a relief.

Jeannette starts a rock collection from what she finds in the desert, with granite, obsidian, turquoise, and what they think is gold—but is only fool's gold. She sometimes has rock sales but charges six hundred dollars per rock; her only customer is Dad, and she lets him have the rock on credit.

Jeanette's rock collection attests to her interest in order, in contrast to her parents. Though the kid's mistaking fool's gold for gold has some resonance in their belief of things like the Glass Castle. Dad buying the rocks on credit is a fun joke, and yet mirrors how he often gets by without paying for things.

Jeannette also likes going to the dump with Brian, where they collect batteries, oil drums, and paint cans for science experiments in the "lab," an abandoned shed. One day they drop matches into these instruments and the shed catches on **fire**. Jeannette escapes and finds Dad, who pulls out Brian.

Jeannette and Brian seem to have inherited some aspects of their father's fascination with science. Their "lab" is only possible, though, since no adults are around, and nearly leads to disaster.

Afterward, Dad seems not mad but contemplative. He points to the **fire** and shows Brian and Jeannette the point at which the flames melt into a shimmery heat. In physics, he says, this is the boundary between turbulence and order: "a place where no rules apply, or at least they haven't figured 'em out yet."

Instead of a gift or household feature, Dad's scientific knowledge is now employed in the guise of advice or lesson. This place with no rules—or discovered rules—is an apt metaphor also for the Walls family itself.

When the kids want money, they find beer cans and bottles or scrap metal to be redeemed for a few cents, then money in hand go to the candy store next to the Owl Club, where they linger until the owner yells at them to leave. Brian usually settles on SweeTarts and Jeannette on Sugar Daddies, since, though she loves chocolate, it doesn't last long enough.

Jeannette and her siblings find ingenious ways to make pocket money, though the possibilities money offers are so novel that it's difficult to make a choice. As usual, Jeannette's detailed descriptions of food or toys reveal how precious they are to her.

On their way home, they sneak past the Green Lantern, which Mom calls a "cathouse," though Jeannette only sees women in short dresses, and men ducking inside. Mom only says that "bad things" happen there.

Here a line can be drawn between the perspective of Jeannette, the protagonist and narrator, who has no idea what a "cathouse" is, and Walls the author, who wants the reader to know.

One day Jeannette dares Brian to talk to one of the women on the porch. He tells Jeannette that the woman said all that happens in the Green Lantern is that women are nice to the men that enter. He thinks the woman was nice, and afterwards always waves to the woman he spoke to and the others.

We're not sure if Jeannette is getting the whole story about what Brian talked about, but in any case his conversation doesn't clear up what the women do in the Green Lantern.

The Walls' house is always filled with stray animals and pets. The pets are only given leftovers to eat rather than pet food in order to promote "self-sufficiency," as Mom says. She also refuses to kill flies in order to allow nature to "take its course," rather than buying a No-Pest Strip like Jeannette's friend's Carla's family.

Mom loves "self-sufficiency," applying it to pets as well as humans. Her desire to keep things natural often causes her to give up larger issues of cleanliness and order.

That winter, Dad brings the family to the "Hot Pot," a natural sulfur spring. Jeannette is unused to large bodies of water and they frighten her. As Jeannette wades in, Dad suddenly drags her out further and then pushes her away. After flailing around, Dad grabs her back, but then throws her back in multiple times, Jeannette bobbing and gasping, until she can swim on her own. He explains afterward that he was teaching a lesson—sink or swim.

Dad's swimming "lessons" once again blur the line between promoting self-sufficiency (in swimming and in life) and reckless endangerment or psychological cruelty.

One day, Jeannette arrives home from exploring to learn from Lori that Dad has lost his job. Dad, though, claims he just wants to devote his time to looking for gold.

As usual, we hear a different story from Dad than from others; his, though, is usually consistent with what he describes as his grand plans.

The family now has less money for food, though sometimes Dad comes home with money from odd jobs, or returns with vegetables in his arms. Soon, though, Dad begins to disappear, and Jeannette wonders if he is ashamed at not being able to provide for the family.

Despite the loss of his job, Dad doing what he can to bring home food suggests that Dad wants to be a responsible father who takes care of his family. Jeanette's psychological guess about her father seems pretty astute, and shows her growing maturity and begins to puncture the grand stories Dad spins about himself.

Jeannette begins to steal inconspicuous pieces of food from other kids' lunch boxes at schools. One day, Lori and Jeannette eat a stick of margarine mixed with sugar. Mom gets mad, saying she needed it for bread, but Jeannette tells her that they have no flour and no money to pay the gas company. She complains that she was hungry—in doing so she breaks the family's unspoken rule, to pretend everything is an adventure.

As the children grow up and understand more, they cease to be as willing (or to be as able) to go along with their parents' sense of their poor life as an adventure. Hunger isn't fun. Hunger isn't an adventure. Jeanette knows that she is stealing just to avoid being hungry.

Mom turns red and yells at Jeannette not to blame her. That night, she gets into a fight with Dad, accusing him of spending all his time at the Owl Club. Dad suggests Grandma Smith loan them money to leach gold out of rock with cyanide. Mom says they should just go live in Phoenix with her mother, in that case. Mom says she is tired of Dad's dreams, illusions, and empty promises. This argument, unusually, goes on and on and gets louder and louder. Neighbors begin to gather outside the house.

The cracks in Mom and Dad's marriage begin to show. Mom's anger and refusal to be blamed means she thinks Dad is the one to blame, and for the first time Mom reveals her thoughts about Dad's promises and dreams—that they are just empty promises. The argument about Grandma Smith is an argument about being dependent. Mom is saying that if they're borrowing money from Grandma then they might as well just give in and live with her. But this also raises the point in the readers—and probably Jeanette and her siblings mind—that they've been stealing food to eat when they could have gone to live with Grandma Smith all this time.

Suddenly, Mom appears from the second-floor window, upside down and held by the ankles by Dad. The crowd starts to laugh, and the Walls children, who feel ashamed, run up and help drag her back in. They all try to comfort their parents.

Again, Mom and Dad's arguments can turn violent and dramatic on a dime; since they live in a small town, all this drama takes place essentially in the open.

The next day, Mom applies to a job at the Battle Mountain Intermediate School, and is immediately hired and assigned to Lori's class. She is against rules and doesn't care how her students act or work. The administrators are suspicious, but many students start performing much better.

Mom's job will leave her no longer helpless as the stay-at-home half of the couple. She brings her household philosophies right with her to the schoolroom, where they seem to work on some children.

But Mom hates teaching, mainly because *her* mother was a teacher and "lacked faith" in Mom's artistic ability. She worries she is giving up on her dream.

We see in part why Mom clings so hard to her desire to be an artist, as well as her loathing of all that is normal and conformist.

The school principal, Miss Beatty, especially disapproves of Mom's teaching tactics. Afraid Mom will be fired, Lori, Brian, and Jeannette start helping out with classroom tasks and homework grading.

Jeannette, Lori, and Brian are older than their age, aware of adult money problems and able to pitch in to deal with them.

Lori corrects Mom's spelling—she loves reading and writing and, according to Jeannette, is brilliant.

Lori's smarts will become a common theme in later sections.

With Mom's new job, the family now has food at home, at least until the end of the month. But Dad demands that Mom turn the money over to him, and she can't seem to say no, though she tries various tactics to hide her paychecks from him. On one payday, Dad sees through Mom's ruse and takes the family to the Owl Club, where he orders expensive steaks for everyone.

Though not stated outright, it is hinted here that Dad is taking the families money to go drink. So Mom and Dad have a non-conformist philosophy that contributes to their poverty, but Dad is also emerging as an alcoholic who drinks away the family's money. Then he atones through flashy behavior, like buying steaks.

Another day, Dad asks Brian and Jeannette why they're not carrying lunch bags to school. When they say there's no food in the house, Dad acts shocked. Later he brings a large bag of food into the cafeteria and says to them, "Have I ever let you down?" Brian whispers, "Yes," though Dad doesn't hear him.

Brian, for his part, is beginning to doubt Dad's beguiling narrative. Dad will repeat this question often, but at this moment Brian feels he must respond with the truth, though he can't bring himself to say it loud enough at this point for his father to hear.

Lori and Brian agree that Dad spends more money on alcohol than on family necessities, but Jeannette defends his research on cyanide. She spends more time with Dad than they do, and he shows her his graphs and charts he'll use to find gold. She has promised him (and herself) not to lose faith in him.

Letting go of one's illusions doesn't necessarily have to do with age—Brian is younger than Jeannette, after all. Jeannette uses her unique relationship with Dad to justify, and rationalize, her faith in him.

A few months after Mom takes the teaching job, Brian and Jeannette pass the Green Lantern and a woman smoking a cigarette—Ginger—calls out to Brian. He tells Jeannette that for his birthday, Dad had let him pick out a Sad Sack comic book before having dinner with Ginger at the Nevada Hotel. Afterward, they went upstairs, and Dad and Ginger went into a bedroom while Brian stayed outside to read.

Again, we see this scene from a child's perspective—Dad may not be paying enough attention to Brian on his birthday, but the Jeannette recounting the story has little sense that Dad has done something wrong. Nevertheless, the Green Lantern continues to symbolize the mysteries of adult life for both Jeannette and Brian.

Brian clearly dislikes Ginger so much that Jeannette suspects there is more to the story. She asks Brian if he learned what the women do in the Green Lantern, but he stares off into the distance and doesn't answer her question.

Growing up takes place at different speeds and on different registers. While Brian has probably begun to suspect Dad's infidelity, Jeannette is not yet able to. The reader, of course, knows what's going on and Dad continues to seem less charming and more manipulative and destructive.

The family stays in Battle Mountain for nearly a year, and even if people tend to make fun of it for being ugly and desolate, Jeannette considers it her first real home. She thinks her family's days on the road have ended.

At this point, it is length of time and familiarity rather than anything else that define a home for Jeannette. She is still innocent and childish in her believe that the family will stay settled in this place.

Just after Jeannette turns eight, she meets a new neighbor, Billy Deel, who is three years older. Billy has a reputation for killing neighborhood animals, and he's spent time as a juvenile delinquent for stealing. Billy claims to other kids that Jeannette is his girlfriend, and though she denies it, she's secretly pleased.

Despite her embrace of order and stability, Jeannette cannot resist being attracted to someone who personifies the opposite—though this attraction is certainly ambivalent.

One day, Billy takes her inside his house to show her something "funny." Inside there is no furniture, just a room with two mattresses and a TV. Billy points out his father, passed out on one of the mattresses, and laughs that his father has wet himself.

Though Billy's household situation does not differ much from Jeannette's, his attitude towards his father is entirely unlike Jeannette's towards Dad.

Jeannette is upset and says that you should never laugh at your own father. Billy responds that Jeannette's father is no better than his—just a drunk. Though Jeannette thinks of the **Glass Castle** and her Christmas star, she knows these things won't convince Billy Deel of anything.

This is the first time Jeannette is brutally confronted with another narrative concerning her father, and the first time she realizes that her father's stories won't translate easily to the world aside their family (and therefore perhaps that it is her family's—or her—perspective that is wrong).

At dinner back with her family, Jeannette makes fun of Billy's dad and their run-down house, but Mom tells Jeannette to show more compassion—people aren't born that way, but become delinquent if they're unloved as children.

Mom's attitude is fraught with significance for her, Dad, and the children, each of whom is profoundly affected by what they've experienced as children.

As a result, Jeannette tells Billy she'll be his friend but not girlfriend. A week later, Billy comes up to her while playing with other kids and gives her a turquoise and silver ring, which used to be his mom's. She says she'll keep it but not wear it.

Whether with Dad or others, Jeannette would rather appease than confront. She is also clearly torn between her desire not to lead Billy on, and her attraction to pretty things.

A few weeks later, while playing hide-and-seek, Billy crawls into Jeannette's hiding place, an abandoned shed. He asks if she knows what they do in the Green Lantern, and says they start by kissing. He tries to kiss her, and though she resists he manages to get on top of her and pull on her shorts. Jeannette bites him on the ear and he hits her in the nose, making enough noise that the other kids run to open the shed. Billy claims he kissed Jeannette but she denies it.

The Green Lantern reemerges as a motif vaguely suggesting adult activities, though Jeannette cannot yet grasp what they are. Here, though, the motif becomes concrete and even violent. While Jeannette might not understand the implications of Billy's actions, she is quick-witted enough to know how to fight against them.

The following day, Jeannette goes to Billy's house and finds him in the driver's seat of an abandoned car in the back. She tells him she will no longer be his friend or keep his ring. She drops the ring in his lap, but as she turns to leave Billy throws it at her and shouts that he raped her.

For Jeannette, Billy has betrayed their friendship severely enough to discount the ring that she so coveted. Billy, for his part, is acutely aware of the power of words to harm, even if his understanding of them is only partial.

Jeannette responds only, "Big deal!" When she returns home, she looks up the word in the dictionary, but still doesn't quite grasp the meaning. She knows only that it means nothing good, and doesn't want to ask Dad.

Mom and Dad's desire to let the kids figure things out on their own, including unfamiliar words or situations, doesn't seem to work as well in Jeannette's new drama.

The day after that, Billy comes to meet Lori, Brian, and Jeannette at her house and calls out Jeannette's name. Lori tries to tell him to leave but sees that he has a gun, though Brian says it must be just a BB gun. Billy says to Jeannette, "I told you you'd be sorry," and starts shooting at each of them.

An adolescent crush with adult overtones has now become a fully blown crisis. Notably, adults have been absent from all these scenes, leaving the kids to fend for themselves.

Lori, as the oldest, runs upstairs and comes down with Dad's real pistol. Billy goads her into shooting, and she pulls the trigger in his general direction. When Jeannette opens her eyes, he has disappeared, and the three of them run after Billy, who is tearing along the railroad tracks. They shoot after each other a few more times before Billy races away down the tracks.

Lori's coldblooded calm comes in handy once again, and is mimicked by the straightforward, matter-of-fact tone that Walls adopts and that contrasts sharply with the intensity of the action she describes.

It isn't long before a police car with Mom and Dad inside parks outside the house. Dad asks them what's happened, and Jeannette says they acted in self-defense—Dad had always told her that was justifiable.

Without her parents present to lay down rules, Jeannette has still adopted some of her parents' worldview and knows how to apply it when it suits her.

The policeman said that the neighbors had reported kids shooting at each other, but he doesn't seem interested in hearing about the details. He says that the entire family must show up at the courthouse the next day with Billy's family.

What to Jeannette is a subtle, complex story that needs to be fleshed out, is to the policeman just another example of lawless adolescents. The Walls' world and the "system" clash once again.

Mom and Dad spend the rest of the day whispering together upstairs. That night, they come down to tell the kids that they're leaving for Phoenix immediately.

Once again, Mom and Dad avoid facing interaction with the "system" by running away.

Jeannette runs to get her rock collection, since Dad has told the kids they can only bring one thing each. Lori counters that the collection is more than one thing—in that logic, she could bring her entire book collection rather than just one book. Dad agrees, saying that the rocks are too heavy. He's not in the mood for an intellectual debate like usual.

With only a few material possessions, the Walls kids are profoundly attached to them, and find it difficult to let go each time they must pick up and move again. Dad's quick agreement with Lori attests to just how serious this situation is for the family.

On the way to Phoenix, Jeannette reminisces about her trips to Grandma Smith's white house in Phoenix, where she assumes they're heading. It has green shutters, Persian carpets, and a grand piano, and Grandma Smith would brush and cut Jeannette's hair as she smelled the bottles of perfumes.

The way Jeannette describes Grandma Smith's house suggests calm, order, and cleanliness—a kind of lifestyle and, importantly, a kind of home she hasn't found with her parents.

Grandma Smith, though once a flapper, became a teacher after she had children and taught in the same one-room schoolhouse where Mom went—which Mom hated. Mom also never liked all Grandma Smith's rules, like about cooking, dressing, managing money, and more.

We can see echoes of Grandma Smith, as well as ways Mom would rebel against her, in Mom's own character.

Jeannette, on the other hand, is Grandma Smith's favorite grandchild, and loves all the rules, such as having to wash and comb her hair before breakfast.

Meanwhile, Jeannette's love of rules constitutes a reaction to her own mother.

On the way to Phoenix, Jeannette asks if the family is going to stay with Grandma Smith. Mom says no—that Grandma Smith has died. Though "officially" from leukemia, Mom claims it was actually radioactive poisoning from the government's nuclear bomb testing.

In a moment, Jeannette's idealized vision of the life to which she's heading disintegrates. That her parents never told her this is shocking, cruel, and unthinking. Meanwhile, Mom's conspiracy theories continue to assume a corrupt, secretive government.

Mom is surprised when Jeannette gets upset. They're going to Phoenix to live in Grandma Smith's house, she says. Mom will start an art studio and use her inheritance to buy supplies. Mom tells Jeannette it'll be an adventure. She calls herself an "excitement addict."

As we saw with Mary Charlene, Mom doesn't seem to be affected by death like others are. Her incorrigible optimism can be both admirable and, as in this case, astounding.

The house is enormous, with fourteen rooms (the kids count them) and orange and palm trees out back. Their neighbors are Mexicans and native Americans who have divided their houses into apartments, after the white residents moved into the suburbs.

Grandma Smith's house ad its surroundings testify to a changing American landscape, though the fact that the Wallses can inherit this house despite their poverty speaks to their enduring racial privilege.

The kids enroll in a public school called Emerson, in a well-off neighborhood full of banana trees—when in season, the kids eat them free for lunch. They all are enrolled in gifted reading classes.

Jeannette's mention of the banana trees is a detail that reflects her idea of Phoenix as paradise, including her status as a gifted student at school.

When the kids have their first eye and ear exams, the nurse tells Mom that Lori needs glasses. Mom initially refuses, saying glasses are like crutches and eyes just need exercise, but Emerson requires Lori get them to be able to enroll, so she caves in. When Lori's glasses arrive, she announces that she can see each leaf on a tree several dozen feet away. When Jeannette responds that she can also see them, Lori bursts into tears.

There have been moments when the narrative has shown how Mom or Dad's non-conformist ideas were valid, or even better than mainstream practices. Not here. Mom's ideas about eyes and self-sufficiency are not only buts, they have deprived her eldest daughter of the ability to see the world clearly. Lori bursting into tears may be partly in joy about what she can now see, but is also about realizing what her parents ideas have forced her to endure. Note how, before glasses, Lori hadn't known what she'd been missing—a metaphor that one could apply to the Walls kids' understanding of their own childhoods.

Later, though, Lori starts drawing and painting the details on the house and landscapes on the desert. She decides to follow Mom's footsteps and become an artist.

On one hand, Lori decides to follow her mother's path. On the other, had Mom not been forced to get her glasses, Lori would never have had the chance.

Mom begins to set up her art studio and uses much of her inheritance to buy oil paints, acrylics, silk screens, pastels, and more materials. The kids pore over old magazines to find possible subject material to cut out and paste into Mom's reference binder.

Mom's use of money is cavalier, reckless. Yet her exuberant pursuit of her passions is also exciting, even for the kids.

Mom also writes stories and plays. While she never has anything accepted, she sometimes receives personalized rejection letters, which she pins up on the wall.

Like any struggling artist, Mom perseveres through rejection—one quality that Walls seems to accept as admirable in her mother. Yet one can also ask whether Mom's dreams are any more realistic than Dad's.

Dad gets a job as an electrician and, as part of a union, makes good, steady money. After his first payday, he buys three new bicycles for Lori, Brian, and Jeannette—their first. Jeannette marvels at the seat, purple color, and chrome handlebars with tassels hanging off.

Jeannette has a habit of describing her favorite possessions down to the last intricate detail, as if still marveling that she owns them. Dad's choice to spend money on the kids is, at least here, contrasted with Mom's choice to spend her money on herself.

The kids spend many hours with Lori as navigator (with a map procured from a gas station) biking down central Avenue to Woolworth's, to Phoenix university where they play tennis, and to the Civic Center to read.

Recall the Wallses' activities with other kids in Battle Mountain—the mere change of home has transformed the way they spend their free time.

They also love answering the telephone at home—also the first one they've owned—using the electric washing machine, and playing with Grandma Smith's old record player. Mom and Dad dance to old albums, from gospel music to opera.

With detail piled upon detail, the description of the Walls family's time in Phoenix grows increasingly idyllic, even as it is structured around "things" like appliances and games.

Nevertheless, the house begins to be infested with cockroaches thanks to Mom's lack of interest in cleaning. Mom doesn't want to poison the family with chemical roach spray, so at night the family hides in wait with shoes and attacks the roaches in the kitchen. Termites also start to chew through the wood, which Dad fixes by hammering his beer cans shut and nailing them over each hole.

Even a fancy inherited home won't solve all the family's problems. Mom and Dad's irresponsibility turns even this nice home into an infested mess. Dad then "solves" these problems with his handy-man ingenuity, but this is really only treating the symptoms as opposed to the disease.

The neighborhood is also filled with creepy old men, though Jeannette sometimes feels sorry for them for lacking friends, and with homeless people who wander into the unlocked house at night, since the doors and windows are left open for ventilation. Mom claims they're harmless. One night, Jeannette awakens to feel someone rubbing his hand over her private parts. She screams and kicks at him. Brian runs into the room with a hatchet, and the man escapes. Mom is asleep and Dad not home, and though Brian and Jeannette follow for a few blocks, they never find him. They decide they've been Pervert Hunting, or "real" Demon Hunting.

Mom and Dad's behavior begins to seem less and less non-conformist and more and more reckless. They are absolutely endangering their children, as Jeannette's experience shows. The Walls siblings, unlike their parents, are nearly always close by and available when disaster strikes. Jeannette and Brian's decision to call their chase "Pervert Hunting" or to change Dad's "Demon Hunting" stories to "real" Demon hunting underlines how their childhood games have grown into actions with much higher stakes.

When Dad returns, he swears he'll kill the intruder, but fails to find him. In any case, he and Mom refuse to close the doors and windows, which to them amounts to "capitulating", or giving in, to fear.

While not uncaring about their children, Mom and Dad choose to show their care in odd or reckless ways—here, by elevating courage over fear without taking steps to prevent harm.

Refusing to capitulate is a common theme for Mom and Dad, who encourage the kids never to conform. Once, Mom accompanies them to the Phoenix library and encourages them to jump into a fountain in front. A group of people gathers, telling Mom that swimming in the fountain isn't allowed, but she tells the kids to continue and even jumps in herself.

Mom and Dad's desire not to give in to other people's rules is closely related to their refusal to conform. Often, this can mean not just sticking to one's own morals but also deliberately acting in a certain way merely because other people aren't.

Mom considers herself to be Catholic and usually goes to Mass, although she thinks nuns are "killjoys," and makes a point of going to church in torn-up clothes rather than the other dressed-up mothers.

This non-conformity is particularly evident with Mom's church clothes. But she has an ambivalent rather than antagonistic relationship to the Church.

Dad, on the other hand, believes in "science and reason" rather than God. When he comes to church, as Mom orders him to on holy days, he sometimes shouts out challenges to the priest during his sermon until the family is asked to leave.

Though a free spirit in so many ways, Dad does often surrender to one person: his wife. Nevertheless, he can't shut down the inquisitive, combative part of his personality even in Mass.

Dad soon grows restless in Phoenix, with its trappings of urban life like tax forms, meetings, and air-conditioned cars, which make him feel "itchy." He believes humans were meant to live in the wild.

The same qualities that make Phoenix safe and pleasant for the kids to play in make it banal and colorless for Dad. He hates the "hoops" of mainstream life.

One day, he hears on the radio that a woman shot a mountain lion outside her house. Fuming, Dad drives the kids to the city zoo. They make their way to the cheetah's cage and Dad ducks under the fence and kneels by the bars until he can pet the cheetah. The kids all follow him under the fence to pet him too. Once a large enough crowd gathers, Dad gestures at the kids to leave. A man in a uniform runs over and, looking livid, grabs Dad by the shoulder. Dad makes as if to fight, but when Mom asks him to listen to the guard, he leads the kids out the exit. Jeannette hears people whispering about the drunk and his dirty children, but is thrilled enough at having pet a cheetah that she doesn't care.

For Dad, a city zoo is the ideal, emblematic examples of how humans and the wild are artificially separated. Showing the kids how harmless cheetahs are is part of his point—as well as being a stunt to draw attention, which he often can't resist. At the same time, is it really not dangerous to pet the cheetahs? It's hard to tell whether Dad really would have fought the guard—or if he puts on a great act. Jeannette, for her part, is enraptured by the extraordinary experience her father has given her, just like she was enthralled by his gift of stars.

Not long after, Dad gets fired from his electrician's job, and then another and another, until he is left only with odd jobs. Jeannette usually can afford school lunch for a quarter, though when she can't her teacher takes care of it for her. One day she and Brian hunt behind their house for bottles to cash in. They dive into a dumpster and find boxes of chocolates—they eat all of them. They return now and then and more often than not find more.

When Dad isn't happy—in this case, with city life—he deals with it obliquely, simply letting things slowly unravel. Meanwhile, Jeanette is once again left scrounging for food, though the support she receives from teachers suggests the benefit of the "system" in the form of a social safety net. Note how Mom and Dad would never accept such "charity" from the teachers.

Maureen, the youngest, doesn't have neighbors her age and spends much of her time alone. Mom decides she needs to be treated specially as a result, and since they don't have enough money for nice preschool clothes, she tells the kids they'll have to shoplift. They all enter the dressing room with several new dresses, and Mom reemerges with one tucked under a raincoat, while Brian, Lori, and Jeannette make noise to distract the shop employee.

Mom's ethical code differs widely from the standards of right and wrong taught at school. She usually chooses the side of whoever the victim might be, even if that means breaking the law. That she cheerfully includes the kids in this theft again points to her non-conformity but also her recklessness.

Dad, for his part, raises funds by depositing money in a bank account and, a week later, withdrawing all the funds from a teller inside the bank while Mom simultaneously takes out the money through the drive-through. He tells Lori, who objects, that he is simply getting back at the rich bank owners who swindle regular folks with massive interest rates.

Dad's non-conformist moral system is comparable to Mom's in that he is for the "regular folks" against society's leaders, and considers laws more as suggestions as long as no one's hurt in the process. He describes his theft as if he is a kind of Robin Hood.

Dad claims that the electricians' union in Phoenix is corrupt, run by the mob. This is why he hasn't been able to hold down a job, so he must work undercover at the mobsters' bars, which become his new regular haunts.

Hints, here, of how Dad will increasingly turn his savvy intelligence to supporting his drinking habit. He does seem to half-believe his own stories, but so do many addicts.

Mom doesn't buy into Dad's story, and after seeing him come home repeatedly drunk, angry, and breaking things, Jeannette begins to question his narrative too.

Jeannette, as she gets older, is beginning to lose her carefully guarded illusions about her father, which no longer seem to mesh with reality.

Sometimes, when he passes out, Jeannette picks his pocket, as Mom taught her to do. Once she tries the liquid in a small bottle, which she finds awful. Brian takes the bottle, empties it, and puts it into a box marked "Toy Box." Every so often, he tells Jeannette, he'll empty them in the garbage a few blocks away so that Dad doesn't see the empty bottles.

The family, unable to confront Dad directly, resorts to dealing with his alcoholism obliquely. Jeannette and Brian find themselves becoming nearly as secretive in combating Dad's drinking as Dad himself is about his drinking.

That Christmas, Mom decides to splurge and give the kids their best Christmas ever. She takes them shopping, giving them a dollar each for presents. On Christmas morning, she buys the family a Douglas fir, which the man sells her for only a dollar when he sees the kids' run-down outfits.

Jeannette is becoming acutely aware of how she and her family come across to outsiders, though also of how that perception can be taken advantage of and used to benefit the family.

Dad has stocked up on liquor in advance and by the time they leave for midnight mass, he's fully drunk. Mom says this is precisely the kind of situation when it's important to say hello to God, so she drags him along. During the sermon, Dad yells a vulgar comment about Mary's virginity, and the ushers lead the family out.

It's difficult to know why Mom insists on bringing Dad to mass, even though she must have a good idea of what might happen—whether it's her exuberant optimism, her desire for the family to be together, or a more sinister wish for him to fully and finally embarrass himself.

Back home, Mom gives Dad his present—a lighter—and he hurls it, lit, into the Christmas tree. Only after the tree is ruined, ornaments and presents destroyed, do they manage to put out the fire. No one yells at Dad—they've all found their own ways to cope on their own with his "crazy" ways, as Jeannette says.

A new low point has been reached in Jeannette's attitude towards her father, when he ruins the Christmas they'd all been planning and waiting for.

When Jeannette turns ten that spring, Dad asks what she wants most in the world—surprising her, since the family usually doesn't do much for birthdays. She hesitates, but he insists, and she eventually, with her eyes fixed on a distant spot, asks him to stop drinking.

Jeannette hesitates both because the family knows direct confrontation won't work, and because she is sorry to say out loud how much of her adoration of him she's lost.

Dad looks wounded, and says that Jeannette must be ashamed of him. She assures him she's not, but he walks into the yard and asks if she'd mind leaving him alone.

Jeanette's request makes Dad see himself through Jeanette's eyes and makes him ashamed. His desire to be alone reflects how shaken he is.

The next day, he tells Jeannette that he's going to stay in the bedroom alone for a few days. The day after, she peeks in to see him writhing on the bed, tied down with ropes. Mom says there's nothing she can do: "Only he knows how to fight his own demons."

Mom's mention of demons recalls the imaginary Demon that Dad taught Brian and Jeannette to "hunt"—these demons are similarly invisible but, as Jeannette can see, very real.

After a week, Dad lets the kids see him, though he's pale and thin with shaking hands, and he's never hungry. Lori tells Jeannette that it won't last, but Jeannette insists it will, since getting sober was a present to her.

Dad's physical addiction here is plain to see, as are the length that he's willing to go to try and reform, for Jeanette's sake. Lori, the older sister, is skeptical; Jeanette the younger more idealistic sister, still believes that her Dad won't let her down.

By the fall, Dad decides to celebrate having recuperated from his alcoholism, and takes the family camping to the Grand Canyon. They pack up the car and, once just out of Phoenix, Dad asks Jeannette how fast she thinks the car can go. "Faster than the speed of light," she replies, and Dad hits the gas. The speedometer pushes past a hundred, and the car begins to shudder, before smoke billows up around the hood. The car slows to a clattering crawl and then stops.

Jeannette and Dad playfully goad each other on as they used to in the old days, when they could joke and have adventures with abandon. Those days are definitively over, though—Dad's carefree speeding leads not to thrills but to a breakdown.

Though Jeannette is confident he can fix the car, Dad says he doesn't have the right tools. He tells the family that they'll have to walk the eighty miles home. After a few hours, a blue Buick with a well-coiffed lady pulls up and offers them a ride. "You poor people," she says, and keeps on repeating it: "you poor kids, poor things" until Jeannette says, "We're not poor." No one says much for the rest of the trip, and Dad disappears once she drops the family off.

Jeannette refuses to entirely stamp out her illusions, but Dad is forced to accede to reality. Already in a somber mood from the car debacle, Jeannette cannot stand to be boxed into a category like "poor," even if that wasn't precisely the woman's intention. The family, though silent, probably agrees.

Three days later, Dad returns stumbling and yelling, and starts throwing silverware across the room screaming for Mom. She grabs a knife to protect herself and he wrestles her to the floor. Instantly, though, it turns from a fight to an embrace and they each laugh and hug each other. Jeannette is distraught that Dad has returned to drinking.

Ashamed from the broken down car and the pity of the woman in the Buick, Dad is ashamed. And shame leads him back to drinking, which is a betrayal of his promise to Jeanette and likely a source of further shame. Dad's relationship with Mom, just like the family's life together, walks a fine line between joyful and frightening, dangerous and loving.

Mom starts to mention moving to West Virginia where Dad's parents, who could help him out, live. She makes it sound like an adventure, though Dad refuses to accept the idea. Mom, though, says she's inherited some land in Texas from Grandma Smith, and has just received a check from the company leasing the drilling rights. With it she buys a used, rickety old car, 'The Piggy Bank Special."

In this case, Mom's sense of "adventure" also has practical implications: she seems to sense the family has no future in Phoenix, that things are falling apart, and is using "adventure" to try to get Dad to give in to return to a place where the family might have more support.. Note the vagueness of Mom's mention of inherited land in Texas—this land will remain a mysterious piece of the Wallses' life.

Once she has a car, Mom tells the kids they'll leave the next morning, with no time to officially withdraw or get school records. She says she won't lease or sell Grandma Smith's house, but will just leave laundry and dirty dishes around to prevent burglars from sneaking in.

Mom's resistance to leasing or selling the house is in fact an unwillingness to give up a possession she considers hers and her disinterest in money. At the same time, it's completely nuts, both in her plan to dissuade burglars with dirty dishes and because her refusal to get money from the house sentences her family to what will only become even more dire poverty in Welch.

Dad still is refusing to come as the rest of the family packs up the car. At the last minute, Jeannette cries out that they need him, and the other kids chime in, until he ambles up from his chair and into the car.

What with his unemployment, alcoholism, and inability to fix the old car on the way to the Grand Canyon, Dad no longer easily occupies the position of head of the family. Here, the children's insistence that they need him lifts his spirits. In his own way, he does want to be there for his family. But he also wants to be needed.

PART 3: WELCH

The family soon realizes that the "Piggy Bank Special," an Oldsmobile, is not even worth the two hundred dollars paid for it. It breaks down several times, and never can get above twenty miles an hour.

The fate of the Walls family's cars seems to echo their own luck or lack thereof—as we've seen, Jeannette structures the family's moves around them.

They sleep in the car every night for the month it takes to cross the country, and one morning wake up to Oklahomans laughing at them. Jeannette hides under a blanket and refuses to come out, leading Mom to admonish her to enjoy life's comedies a bit more.

Once again, Mom's "adventures," though they can seem exciting in and of themselves, become depressing to Jeannette when exposed and compared to others' situations.

By late November, they reach West Virginia, where Jeannette notices that the air feels heavier and darker. They arrive in Welch, a valley flanked by wooden and brick buildings perched precariously on the hills.

Jeannette's first impression—the heavy, dark air—will foreshadow her conception of Welch itself, especially compared to the fresh air of the desert.

They arrive at a large but battered house and are welcomed by a pale, obese woman with a cigarette in her mouth—she is Dad's mother. Jeannette calls her Grandma but she snaps at her to call her Erma.

From her home to her personality and body, Erma could not differ more from Grandma Smith, whom Jeannette so adored.

Next to Erma a fragile-looking man with white hair, Ted, tells Jeannette it's fine if she calls him Grandpa. Redheaded Uncle Stanley, smelling like whiskey, hugs and kisses the kids over and over again. Jeannette wonders if this is one of Dad's pranks, and the real family is somewhere else, but Dad isn't smiling and looks uncomfortable.

Jeannette cannot see any resemblance between Dad and his family. But their relationship, it will turn out, is far more complex than strict resemblance, as Dad's initial discomfort suggests.

The family eats overcooked, salty beans together and descends to the basement, a large room with one bed, a pullout couch, and a coal stove. All the kids climb into bed, tickling and teasing each other until hearing a "thump" from upstairs. Mom goes up to investigate: Erma says they're making too much noise.

Again, Erma's welcome differs wildly from Jeannette's memories of her time with Grandma Smith. The family connection, here, seems to mean little more than a boarding-house agreement.

Jeannette doubts that Erma likes them, but Mom says that she's had a difficult life, and that they'll adapt.

Mom, as usual, sees the victim in people, as well as how their past affects their present.

The next day, Jeannette sees Uncle Stanley listening to the radio, on which they hear someone speaking in tongues, and then a preacher speaking in a "hillbilly" accent asking for donations. Dad claims this is what turned him into an atheist.

Another example of how people's characters are shaped by their family histories, even if that includes rebelling against what the family history means.

Mom and Dad take the kids for a tour and tell them about Welch's history. Unfit for agriculture, it was only developed in the early 20th century, as robber barons brought in laborers to work the coal mines.

Welch's coal mines—dank, sooty, and dangerous—will come to epitomize the way Jeannette feels about their life in Welch.

There's a river named the Tug, but Dad says that they can't go fishing or swimming, since the Tug serves as the catch-all for the town's sewage system—there's even toilet paper in the branches at the banks.

Any thoughts Jeannette and her siblings might have of replicating their adventures in the desert wildlife must be shelved.

The main road has a grand courthouse and a bank with arched windows, but by this point it's run-down. Dad says it's been this way since the fifties, when JFK came to Welch to hand out the first food stamps and prove abject poverty did exist in America.

Welch's poverty is striking even in comparison to the Walls family's earlier abodes. It also fits into a broader story of the decline of industry in 20th-century America.

Mom agrees that things have grown shabbier since she was last in Welch after she and Dad were first married, but cheers up when she realizes there probably aren't any other artists to compete with her.

Mom's incurable optimism once again, is here combined with her equally persistent, though never fully pursued, dream of becoming an artist.

The next day the kids go to Welch Elementary, where Mom tries to convince the principal that the kids are gifted. The principal asks Jeannette eight times seven in such a thick accent that she doesn't understand—and he can't understand her answers. He decides the children have learning disabilities and places them in a classroom for slower children.

This inauspicious start establishes Welch as backward and closed-minded, and contrasts with Phoenix, where the kids' advanced reading abilities were immediately recognized. Mom's typically spontaneous decision to move without getting the kids' school records is also at fault here.

Jeannette arrives for her first day in an old coat with the buttons torn off, and the other kids whisper about her at recess. Her classes are filled with rote memorization of West Virginia's counties and videos of the high school's football games.

These examples are meant to show not just the abysmal academics but also the close-minded attitude of Welch's inhabitants. Yet even in Welch the Walls are considered poor, as the teasing Jeannette for her clothes shows.

In English, Jeannette's teacher goads the students into making fun of Jeannette for thinking she's too special to bring in school records. The class laughs at her, and a tall black girl with almond eyes jabs a pencil into her back.

Again, Jeannette's new school is shown to be close-minded and suspicious of outsiders. The teacher's cruelty is astonishing, a sign that it's not just non-conformist adults who abdicate their responsibilities to children.

Jeannette lingers in the cafeteria, eating alone, until the janitor nudges her outside to recess. The tall black girl from class, along with two of her friends, make fun of her for having no buttons on her coat, and start kicking and shoving her, which she takes without fighting back.

Jeannette acts noticeably less curious and more resigned compared to the first days of her previous moves, possibly because she's older and finds starting over more exhausting and less exhausting.

At home, Jeannette deflects Mom and Dad's questions about school rather than face Mom's optimistic responses to whatever she tells them. Dinitia Hewitt, the leader from the first day, and her sidekicks gang up on Jeannette every day after lunch and call her poor, ugly, and dirty—none of which Jeannette can really refute.

Unable to reconcile the way Mom and Dad have painted their life—as thrilling, spontaneous, and rebellious—and the bleak way it is portrayed by these girls, Jeannette simply stays silent.

Jeannette finally tells Mom only that girls are making fun of her for being poor, and Mom says to tell them that Abraham Lincoln was from a poor family and that Martin Luther King would be ashamed. She tried these tactics, but the girls laugh and just continue.

Even if intellectually Jeannette might know this tactic is futile, she still trusts her parents as parents, looks up to them, and values their opinions enough to try them out.

A month into school, Jeannette is wandering in a park and sees a wild dog approaching a small black child, who seems about to run. She yells at him not to, but he dashes towards the trees. Jeannette can tell that this dog might be wild but is more scary than truly evil, and she scares him away by raising a stick at him.

Jeannette's scrappy childhood has given her peculiar but often useful knowledge. In this case, she knows how to read wild dogs' moods and employs this knowledge to help out another.

Jeannette carries the boy piggyback to a neighborhood with brightly painted houses. She drops him off at a neat but small house and, turning around, sees Dinitia looking at her from across the street.

Note that Jeannette thinks nothing of carrying a black boy back to his neighborhood. As we will see, this attitude is far from common in Welch.

The next day, Dinitia stops bullying Jeanette, and the others soon lose interest. Though she never apologizes, Dinitia does ask Jeannette for homework help. She goes to Dinitia's house that Saturday—or to "Niggerville," as Uncle Stanley calls it.

Jeannette's actions have made Dinitia reconsider her. Uncle Stanley, meanwhile, epitomizes the uglier side of racism in Welch.

That afternoon, Erma asks how "Niggerville" went. She blames blacks for Welch's deterioration, and says they are the reason she refuses to leave the house.

Again, a common story in American history, as black residents bore much of the blame for things "going downhill."

Jeannette tells her not to use that word, and that Mom says black people are just like us. Erma curses at Jeannette and sends her down to the basement without dinner.

Mom's admittedly odd ethical code nevertheless places respect for other human beings at the top—a belief that Jeannette can easily accept.

Lori congratulates Jeannette on standing up to Erma, but Mom says that they have to remember to be polite while they're Erma's guests—confusing Jeannette, who hasn't heard Mom talk that way before.

Mom's iron convictions seem to wobble, and the reader (though perhaps not Jeannette) understands that the family's dependence on Erma letting them stay in her home must play a part. This is the sort of dependence Mom never wanted to have, but which desperation has pushed her and her family into.

Mom says Erma's parents died when she was young and she bounced around between relatives, essentially as a servant. She says everyone has one good thing in them. When Jeannette asks if that applies to Hitler, Mom immediately responds that he loved dogs.

Once again Mom's optimism is here on display. Yet here that optimism seems close to insane. Is this "good" trait of Hitler's at all meaningful. Is the insistence on Hitler having a good trait optimistic or delusional?

That winter, Mom and Dad decide to drive back to Phoenix to pick up the bikes, school records, and other things left in the house. Mom leaves Lori in charge and tells the kids to listen to Erma.

Once Mom and Dad go back for the rest of their belongings, it becomes clear that Welch is not just another stop on the road, but a longer-term stay.

Jeannette envies Mom and Dad for returning to Phoenix, where she remembers riding her bike, eating free bananas, and studying at a place where the teachers considered her smart.

Jeannette's nostalgia for Phoenix is intertwined with her understanding of home as defined by these certain possessions and experiences.

Brian and Jeannette wonder aloud if Mom and Dad will return. The kids know that they are more inconvenient to their parents now that they're older and can no longer sleep in cardboard boxes or cling to the sides of U-Haul trucks.

Both Brian and Jeannette have begun to realize that their childhood "adventures" were in part simply a result of being little kids, who were both easy to tote along and naïve.

A week later, the kids are all watching TV in the living room when Erma tells Brian to follow her into Grandpa's bedroom, where she can sew up his shorts while he's still wearing them. Jeannette follows them into the bedroom and sees Erma squeezing at Brian's crotch while he cries and resists.

Part of being left alone as a child, the reader comes to realize through various examples, is being left to fend for oneself against the unsettling or even criminal desires of adults. Nearly all of the adults in the book betray children in some way.

Jeannette yells at Erma to stop and calls her a pervert. Lori runs in and tells everyone to calm down, but Erma slaps her and the two get into a fight.

Lori has taken on her role after being left in charge by Mom and Dad, which she handles as Dad would—by fighting.

Erma sends the kids down to stay in the basement, where they can't use the bathroom and can eat only the beans Uncle Stanley sneaks down to them.

Once again the children's parents have left them alone, and now to the harsh punishment of another family member who should be protecting them.

A week later, a foot of snow falls on Welch. Since Erma won't give the kids any coal to burn, they all climb into bed every day after school to do their homework together and keep warm.

A major difference between being poor in the American Southwest and in Welch is, the kids realize, merely the difficulty of keeping warm.

The night Mom and Dad come back, the kids hear the door open upstairs and Erma begin to complain about all the trouble they've caused. Dad heads downstairs to yell at them for not being proper guests. Jeannette thinks he'll understand when she explains, but Dad only says that Brian can take anything, as a man.

Again, Mom and Dad are caught between a desire to defend their kids, and their reliance on Erma. Jeannette, as usual, is overly confident regarding Dad, but his dismissal, formulated in terms of self-sufficiency, is all the same shocking.

Afterwards, Jeannette and her siblings wonder why Dad was acting so strange. Jeannette asks aloud if Erma might ever have acted towards Dad as she did with Brian—it would explain a lot, she thinks. But Lori tells her not to think about it, or she'll go crazy.

Jeannette and her siblings begin to piece together how certain traits and actions can have a profound base in the past—though this kind of reflection on one's own father may well turn one "crazy."

Mom and Dad tell the kids that they arrived in Phoenix to find the house looted, with everything gone. They took a few things back, but the Oldsmobile finally died in Nashville, and they abandoned it.

This anecdote underlines the ambiguous relationship of the Walls family towards material possessions, between covetous and casual.

Erma claims she can never forgive the kids and they can no longer stay with her. The family can't afford a rental in Welch proper, but Mom and Dad find a place over one of the mountains and up a one-lane road called Little Hobart Street. The houses here are shabbier than the ones in the valley, but their new home is the shabbiest of all: gray and drab, it juts out from the hillside, perched on rickety cinder-block pillars.

All their tip-toeing around Erma has come to naught, and though getting support from Dad's family was the main reason for their move, Mom no longer seem to have the energy o skip town now those bonds have been broken. Jeannette describes the new house as bleak and grim, a physical description that fits well with her emotional views on Welch.

The house has three small rooms and no indoor plumbing—the family doesn't have money for electricity either. But Mom concentrates on the beauty of the cast-iron coal stove—even though there's no chimney and the ceiling is coated with soot.

The cast-iron stove exemplifies both Mom's tendency to find the best in any situation, and her (as well as Jeannette's) complex attraction towards certain objects. At the same time, the chimney-less stove is ridiculous, and using it is likely to be dangerous.

Dad, for his part, says that this is just a temporary solution, providing a plot of land to build the **Glass Castle**. It'll take him a little while to adapt the solar cells, given that where the house is located, barely any sun will reach it.

While Mom concentrates on the positive in what's available, Dad constructs an entirely alternate set of possibilities, he continues to dream.

The family moves that day. One room becomes the master bedroom, living room, and artist studio, while another is the kids' room with homemade plywood bunk beds, and the third the kitchen. The kitchen has gnarled electric wires everywhere. Whenever they can afford electricity, which is rarely, anyone who touches a surface in that room gets a severe electric shock.

The house is not just awful. It's dangerous. They are living in a place that physically harms them.

Still committed to the adventure of it, Mom tries to teach Lori and Jeannette how to use the house's sewing machine to make dresses, though they turn out baggy and unfitted; she also covers the house's walls with her paintings until there are several layers of the paintings, which she rotates every so often.

The baggy dresses are an apt symbol of the more pathetic side of Mom's grand ideas. Meanwhile, her layers of paintings suggest a troubling emphasis on accumulating possessions, something we'll see more of as time goes on.

One day Jeannette asks Dad if they are ever going home—when he asks "Home?" she responds, "Phoenix." Dad replies that this is home now.

Jeannette's understanding of home is tied to Phoenix because she felt (relatively) safe and accepted there. But her parent's choices have taken that home away from her, and she as child is still subject to her parents.

Jeannette and Brian decide to embrace this new home by beginning to dig the foundation for the **Glass Castle** during all their free time. After a month, the foundation is deeper than they are tall.

Though Jeannette and Brian have grown older and savvier, they haven't yet let go of the best of Dad's yarns and promises. If this is home, they are going to make it the home they've dreamed of.

One day, Dad tells Jeannette and Brian to dump the house's garbage in the pit, since they haven't been able to pay the trash collection fee. He says it's a temporary measure until he can hire a truck to move it. But he never does, and the foundation begins to fill up with trash.

Typically, Dad's decisions like these are veiled in excuses and elaborate justifications. This time, though, the imagery is potent enough to work against him. The dream itself is filled up with trash—it's become worthless. This is a critical moment in Jeanette's growing up, as one of her central idealizations of her father is destroyed.

The garbage also attracts rats, one of whom Jeannette discovers "bathing" in the sugar bowl. When Brian throws a skillet at the rat, it hisses at them and they run away. That night Maureen is too afraid to sleep, and to reassure her that she is "surrendering to fear," Jeannette turns on the light—only to find the rat on her blanket.

Jeannette's language—surrendering to fear—mimics that of her parents' when they told her (insanely) not to be scared of potential child molesters. Here that advice is again shown to be insufficient—sometimes a situation can be so bad that not giving into fear isn't going to do anything to stop the reality of a rat infestation.

Their dog, Tinkle (a stray that had followed Brian home) catches the rat and kills it. Mom says she's sorry for the dead rat and names it Rufus, while Brian hangs it from a tree by the house to scare off other rats. Their next-door neighbor, Mr. Freeman, mistaking the hanging dead rat for a possum, shoots at it and blows it away.

Mom's attitude towards the rat is on the one hand slightly endearing and on the other horrifying and over the line. To align oneself with the victimhood of a dead rat that was threatening your children seems like a delusional extension of concern for the weak. The house on the hill in Welch has very thin boundaries between the human and animal.

Jeannette, Brian, and Lori begin to sleep with makeshift weapons by their heads, while Maureen spends nights at other friends' houses.

As with Dad's drinking, each kid deals with the family's situation in his or her own way.

Mom doesn't seem worried about what the neighbors will think about the garbage or cleanliness, but Jeannette tries to think up ways to improve the house, like painting it yellow with paint Dad brought home from an odd job.

Mom's emphasis on non-conformity remains constant even with extremes like enormous rats, while Jeannette is more concerned with other people's opinions.

The rest of the family is unenthusiastic about this idea, so Jeannette embarks alone, until she has completed all the sections of the house that she can reach without a ladder. She spends a few days trying to build one, but by that time the paint freezes and then melts into lumpy, runny liquid. Now the house is even worse—a "patch job," a job left half done.

Jeannette's tenaciousness makes clear that her desire to improve the house is not only based on what others think—she truly believes a beautiful home will make for a better home. The half-painted house is a sobering symbol of Jeannette's inability to create such a thing given the situation in which she has been placed by her parents, and is another step in her journey to realizing that to get what she wants she will have to "escape" her parents.

Jeannette's family is the poorest on Little Hobart Street, but Mom and Dad never accept welfare, food stamps, or church drive clothes, saying they can take care of their own family.

While Mom and Dad's belief in living outside the system is extreme, they continue to insist on self-sufficiency. On the one hand, this might be seen as kind of noble or at least principled. On the other hand, these principles are endangering their children.

Jeannette is friendly with the oldest of the six Hall children who live nearby: 42-year-old Kenny, who, like all of his siblings, is mentally challenged and lives at home. The other kids tease Kenny about having a crush on Jeannette, and she has to let him down by explaining she doesn't date older men.

Unlike Lori, Jeannette dislikes confrontation—as with Billy, she prefers to feign liking someone and tell white lies rather than risk causing him pain.

Mom and Dad always tell the kids they don't have it as bad as some—for instance the Pastors, the nine children of the town whore, Ginnie Sue Pastor. Ginnie Sue spends her time working like any mom and dresses like any mom instead of lounging around like the women at the Green Lantern.

While the ladies at the Green Lantern seemed to have chosen their job, there is a greater desperation evident in Ginnie Sue, who must resort to prostitution in order to feed her large family.

The oldest Pastor daughter, Kathy, wants to be Jeannette's friend, and invites her over so that she can tell Ginnie Sue about her family's time in California. Jeannette agrees since she's curious about what it's like to be a prostitute (she's figured out what happens at the Green Lantern). She thinks up questions to ask Ginnie Sue.

Despite Jeannette's own unconventional childhood, she is intrigued by even another, unknown way of scraping by. Her curiosity is a natural part of growing up, though possibly surprising given her own unpleasant experiences with sex.

When she visits, Ginnie Sue asks Jeannette to help her pick apart a chicken, and Ginnie Sue and Kathy marvel at Jeannette's thoroughness.

With, often, little to eat, Jeannette has become an expert at making the most of what is available.

Jeannette tells the two of them about California and Las Vegas, exaggerating her proximity to showgirls, casinos, and air-conditioned hotels and restaurants.

Just as Mom paves the way for a move by calling it an adventure, Jeannette rewrites the past in the same way. Yet Jeanette's lies also make clear how her own parent's

On her way home, Jeannette realizes she hadn't asked any of her questions—she had even forgotten Ginnie Sue was a prostitute. Thinking about it, she decides that prostitution does at least put food on the table, she decides.

This realization is humanizing, as she learns to see people not just as a social category. Further, that she sees practicality in Ginnie Sue's desperate turn to prostitution to feed her children again challenges the non-conformist impracticality of her parents who insist on self-sufficiency but barely put food on the table at all.

Fighting is common in Welch, perhaps because of the poverty or lack of activities. The Wall kids join in, usually fighting as a team. Their proudest victory is the "Battle of Little Hobart Street," against Ernie Goad. It starts when Ernie begins throwing rocks at Jeannette and Brian for "stinking up" the town. He yells that they're garbage—they even live in it. Jeannette has to admit it's true.

The Walls children tend to adapt to the social rules and customs of wherever they find themselves, just as they adopt a new physical home. Their parents do nothing to intervene. Not only has the foundation pit ruined Jeannette's dreams for a Glass Castle, but the illusion has now been fully dismantled, and Jeanette now admits fully to the reality of her situation.

One weekend, Ernie throws a rock through the window and yells that they're garbage before running away. Brian cooks up a plan to make a catapult with a mattress and ropes like the medieval ones in their library books —enough to kill Ernie and his friends, they think. When Ernie's gang returns, Brian gives the signal and he and Jeannette catapult the mattress lined with rocks into the air, hurling them into the group of kids and chasing them away screaming.

Once again, without the watching eyes of parents (always absent from these scenes), childhood fights take on very adult stakes. The kids' autodidact education also comes in handy here. The battle may not have killed the enemy, but Jeannette and Brian can still claim victory. Note that Lori, now getting older, is increasingly absent from these scenes.

As winter turns to spring, life in Welch becomes slightly more manageable. Longer days mean more light to read by, for instance.

For Mom and Dad, self-sufficiency works best when nature does its part to facilitate it.

Mom reads in bed and apologizes for not being productive by saying that reading is one of her own addictions.

The kids are well acquainted with the phenomenon of addiction from Dad, and Mom takes advantage of this to justify her own lack of productivity.

Lori is the family's biggest reader, and enjoys fantasy and science fiction. Jeannette prefers books about the hardships of this world rather than another: her favorites are *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. The last encourages her to believe in her father like that book's protagonist believed in hers, despite his drinking.

Possessions like books can tell much about a person's character, hopes, and dreams. Their choices suggest that Lori, already, is seeking to escape from the family's life in Welch, while Jeannette prefers to look for redemption within their difficult situation.

One night Dad comes home with deep, bloody cuts on his head and arm. Mom is asleep and Dad asks Jeannette to sew up his arm. She feels like she's sewing meat, and tells him she can't do it. Dad guides her fingers until they've completed a few stitches, and Dad tells Jeannette he's proud of her. That evening, when Jeannette returns home, he's left again—increasingly a common event.

Just as when Dad threw Jeannette into the hot spring, he seems simply incapable of thinking that Jeannette might not be able to live up to his expectations for her. And as before, Jeannette suffers but ultimately comes through. The cuts and absences also suggest that Dad's drinking is taking a turn for the worse.

Though Dad can usually get odd jobs, he prefers to search for a way to hit a windfall, by figuring out how to burn coal more efficiently, for instance. Jeannette tries to be supportive but finds it increasingly difficult to believe in him.

Odd jobs and a windfall are some of the only options for someone who refuses to work within available authorities and institutions. Jeannette's lack of belief attests to her growing up.

Sometimes, Mom receives checks from the drilling company on her land in Texas, though she is always vague about this. She refuses to sell the land, as it's part of her family—every few months, though, she receives a check and they eat well for days.

Though the family could certainly use the money Mom would get from selling this land, she is sentimentally attached to it just as Jeannette is to her rock collection.

At school, Jeannette hides in the bathroom during lunch so that the other kids don't make fun of her for "forgetting" to bring her lunch, and later picks through the garbage for the uneaten food the other kids throw out.

As a child, Jeanette thought her life was exciting and free. As a young adult, she begins to feel the shame of her poverty. Her "self-sufficiency" in finding food in the trash is forced upon her by her parent's neglect.

Maureen is the only sibling to have a stable food source, since she rotates among her friends' houses for dinner. But Jeannette notices Mom is getting heavier, and one day Brian finds her eating a giant Hershey bar under the covers. Mom starts crying and calling herself a sugar addict, and says they should forgive her like they forgive Dad for his addiction. Without saying anything, Brian breaks the bar into four pieces and the kids gobble them up.

One result of Mom and Dad's creed of self-sufficiency is that the Walls family members each have varying levels of access to food. But what could be called self-sufficiency looks more like lack of responsibility from a mother, especially as she cries and looks for excuses. The kids' silence confirms that they won't accept those excuses.

As winter arrives in Welch, Jeannette begins to feel ill. She wears only a thin wool coat, and the family can't afford coal for heating. She and Brian occasionally collect coal pieces that have fallen off trucks, but usually concentrate on finding dry wood. Mom claims that life is easier for them than it was for the pioneers who lacked all modern conveniences.

While the Walls parents can preach self-sufficiency and refuse charity from other people, they can't generate their own heat. They can't be self-sufficient in the face of the weather. Mom tries to ease these difficulties with optimistic platitudes. Her children seek pragmatic solutions.

When it gets warmer and the snow starts to melt, it becomes difficult to find dry wood. One day Lori uses kerosene as an aid (against Dad's wishes, since he says it's dangerous and unnatural) and it explodes, singeing her thighs so that she can't sleep under blankets—though it's too cold to do without them.

Dad does tend to be savvy about scientific matters, but with him gone the kids have grown desperate to do whatever it takes to keep warm. Fire, again, is both a potent protector and a threat when unleashed.

One day Jeannette goes to her friend Carrie Mae's house to work on a school project. When Carrie Mae's dad shows Jeannette how their thermostat works; she first thinks he's joking. For several nights after that she dreams that her family has a furnace that can be turned on with a lever just like her friend's.

Jeannette is increasingly drawn not just to shiny, beautiful things but to material objects that can have a concrete effect on her family's standard of living.

At the end of their second Welch winter, Erma dies. She had long prepared for her funeral and leaves detailed, intricate instructions. Jeannette is surprised at how upset Dad seems—she'd assumed he'd feel relieved.

Jeannette knows the tight hold Erma has retained over Dad, but there are complexities in his relationship with her that she still hasn't quite grasped.

When Mom asks if the kids have something nice to say about Erma, Lori responds, "Ding-dong, the witch is dead." The others start laughing, but Dad looks furious and yells at the kids, saying that he is ashamed of them.

Even at Erma's death, the long-simmering tension between the kids and the parents regarding how to treat Erma rises once again to the surface.

Four days later Mom sends Jeannette to find Dad, who still hasn't come home. She moves from bar to bar and finally finds him at the dark, grimy Howdy House with the other regulars.

Despite her growing disillusionment with Dad, Jeannette is still considered his "favorite" and chosen as the one most likely to make him return.

Dad orders Jeannette Cokes as he continues drinking whiskey, until he is stumbling so much that a man offers to drive them home. When she tells the man she wants to be either a veterinarian or a geologist, he tells her she has "big plans" for being the daughter of a drunk. He means it as a compliment, he says, but Jeannette refuses to say another word.

Jeannette partly succeeds in fulfilling the vast responsibility Mom has placed on her—she's found Dad—but is powerless to stop his drinking. The man's comment is hurtful both for his designation of Dad as a drunk, and his inability to see Jeannette in any other way.

Not long after Erma's death, Uncle Stanley falls asleep while smoking a cigarette in the basement, and a fire breaks out. Though he and Grandpa escape, the house burns down. They move into an apartment with a working bathroom, giving the kids a chance to take a weekly bath.

Like Mom and Dad, Uncle Stanley seems not to treat his home with much care, making accidents that much more likely. His mistake, though, is a windfall for the Walls kids who can now finally keep clean.

One time, when Jeannette goes over to take a bath, she feels Uncle Stanley's hand easing its way onto her thigh as he touches himself. She tells Mom on him, but Mom says he's just lonely, and that sexual assault is a "crime of perception." Jeannette, however, refuses to go back even to take a bath.

Unfortunately, Jeannette is now used to this kind of sexual harassment. Though Mom is often so forward-thinking, here her non-conformist thinking aligns with prejudice against the reality of sexual assault.

That spring, heavy rains flood the Tug river and spread mud into the houses; 126 people die from a landslide by a mine. According to Mom, this is nature's revenge for man "pillaging" and building upon the land.

Nature is variously an aid and a threat to the family's life on the margins. Mom, always with her own way of seeing things, mixes the ideas of Christianity and environmental justice.

The house is consistently damp, sprouting mold and mushrooms. Mom gets bruised by falling through a rotted step. She jokes that her husband doesn't beat her—he just hasn't fixed the stairs.

Dad used to wow the children with his plans to build the Glass Castle. Now he is absent while the house he does have—a wreck—falls even further apart.

One day, as Jeannette and Brian are exploring, they find a diamond ring, which Mom takes to be appraised. Though it turns out to be valuable, Mom decides to keep it to replace the one Dad had given her and then pawned. When Jeanette says that the ring could buy a lot of food, Mom responds that it can also bring "self-esteem," which is more important.

Mom's opinions on material possessions, like all of her opinions, are unconventional: she isn't immune to pretty things, but she also links them to sentimental rather than material value. And she almost always puts her own individual needs—whatever she perceives them to be—above the needs of her children.

Mom does seem to toggle between dark moods, when she yells at the kids for preventing her from becoming an artist, and cheerful periods, like when she decides to clean the house. Instead of ridding it of the clutter, though—like Jeannette wants to do—they end up just organizing the clutter into piles.

Having to take responsibility for others, her kids, has never come easily or naturally to Mom. The cleaning episode again juxtaposes Jeannette's desire for order with Mom's fascination with objects others would consider trash.

Jeannette takes advantage of one cheerful moment to broach a grand plan to Mom: that Mom should leave Dad in order to be eligible for welfare. Mom is shocked that Jeannette, Dad's last defender, would abandon him, and claims that going on welfare would be psychologically damaging. She also refuses to get a job with a salary, again calling herself an "excitement addict."

By this point, the reader is far less shocked than Mom that Jeannette would "abandon" Dad. Instead of proposing alternatives, Mom refuses all the options Jeannette offers her, as if not choosing anything was not a choice of its own. As Dad has fallen into alcohol addiction, Mom seems to manufacture addictions for herself in order to justify her own refusal to take responsibility for her kids.

That summer, Dad still thinks of Jeannette as his biggest fan. One afternoon as they're sitting on the porch he points down at the valley houses, the ones nearly swept away by flooding. He put lots of thought into *their* home, he tells her jokingly—real estate is all about location. They each start laughing uncontrollably and can't get themselves to stop.

Though only implicitly and obliquely, Dad seems to admit that the house on Little Hobart Street hasn't been the greatest home for the kids. But this scene gives us a glimpse into how the Wallses can also be a normal family, laughing and joking with each other. It is another glimpse into Dad's charm.

To get away from the heat, Brian and Jeannette go to the public swimming pool, until the day Ernie Goad tells everyone that the Walls kids make the pool smell, since they live in garbage. The two quietly leave, with Ernie triumphant about his revenge.

That Brian and Jeannette quietly leave instead of fight reveals that they've had to accept, to a certain extent, their lower rung on the social ladder in Welch because of where they live.

Later that week Jeannette runs into Dinitia Hewitt, who invites her to go swimming with "us" in the morning. "Us" means black people, who only swim in the morning despite the lack of official segregation. Jeannette gets a few curious looks as she enters the locker room, but soon feels confident enough to joke with the other women there. She swims and plays in the water with Dinitia all morning, feeling cleaner than she has in ages.

Jeanette's kindness earlier to the black child now results in Dinitia's kindness here. Jeanette's comfort, after an initial period of getting used to this situation, also suggests a model for finding a home or community: it doesn't have to be about blood or location, it can be about finding kindness and openness.

That afternoon, a man with a folder under his arm knocks on the door to Jeannette's house saying he's from child welfare, and asking for Rex or Rose Mary Walls. He says he's received a call about possible neglect at the house.

Though Mom and Dad have refused to have anything to do with welfare or the state, the state has managed to seek them out anyway. Their balancing act between non-conformist and reckless seems to have tilted, in the state's eyes, into recklessness.

Jeannette claims she's not neglected, and that her parents do work—her dad as an "entrepreneur" developing coal efficiency technology, and her mom as an artist and teacher. She tells him to come back later before she can answer any more questions and she accepts his card.

Even if she goes hungry and lives in filth, Jeannette never hesitates to defend her family to outsiders, embellishing the facts just as Mom and Dad do to make their occupations sound legitimate.

Angry and fuming, Jeannette runs outside to throw rocks from the hill, and worries about how she'll be unable to fight off the child welfare man like she'd fought off Ernie Goad.

Jeannette has learned to defend herself physically, but this kind of battle requires other skills—ones she's not sure she has.

Though Jeannette had initially assumed Welch was one more, brief stop, Mom and Dad seem to have lost their desire to move around. They talk vaguely about Australia and Alaska, but their plans never translate into action.

Before, Mom and Dad did not often talk about moving—they just woke the kids up at night and left. By staying in Welch for so long they seem to have stagnated, despite their worsening lifestyle.

When Jeannette gives Mom the child welfare man's card, Mom grows quiet instead of being self-righteously angry like Jeannette. While Mom paints a picture of a woman drowning in a lake, she tells Jeannette brusquely that she'll just get a job.

While Jeannette considers the welfare man as a single enemy, Mom is aware of the powerful system behind it. Her morbid painting reflects her angst at having to give up her dreams a get a regular job as a result.

With her teaching certificate, Mom gets a job teaching remedial reading within a week, and the family hurries to clean the house—though the welfare man never returns.

Mom's ease at getting a teaching job shows how the family's situation is in many ways a matter of choice—Mom and Dad's choice.

Mom can't get along with Lucy Jo Rose, a fellow teacher who drives her to work and thinks that "Jackson Pollock" is a derogatory term for Polish people. Several times a month she refuses to go to work, until the kids cajole her into going.

This example creates a contrast between Mom's worldliness and artistic knowledge and Lucy Jo's lack thereof (though Lucy Jo, unlike Mom, still manages to show up for work every day).

For the first time in awhile, though, the family can pay all the bills and buy food and a fridge. Although there are hundreds of dollars left over with each paycheck after the bills are paid, the money never lasts the month and the food always runs out by the end.

Though Mom's steady job solves many of their problems, it does not do away with all of them, as creating a budget and sticking to it are not part of Mom and Dad's freedom-loving lifestyle.

Mom claims that it's difficult to make ends meet with four kids and an alcoholic husband, but Lori and Jeannette draw up a budget as if they were in charge of the money, with generous cuts for Mom's extravagances, which would still allow for new clothes and coal for heating and other necessities.

Lori and Jeannette, on the other hand, embrace financial organization in order to show that there is actually enough money—Mom and Dad are just not responsible enough to budget it like their daughters.

That fall Jeannette starts seventh grade at Welch High School. Though Dinitia is there, she spends most of her time with the other black girls, though the two do pass notes in study hall.

Though it was easier to be friends outside school, Dinitia and Jeannette still find it difficult not to conform to others' expectations in school.

Dinitia also starts drinking at school, and has trouble with her mother's new boyfriend. She passes one note to Jeannette one study hall in December revealing that she's pregnant. When she doesn't return to school, Jeannette goes to her house and asks for her, but the door is shut in her face. Jeanette later finds out that Dinitia has been arrested for stabbing and killing her mother's boyfriend.

Part of growing up, for Jeannette, is watching other people struggle with their own problems, stemming from their own choices as well as inherited from their own families. Dinitia is a sobering example of how a devastating family life can put someone on a path from which it's nearly impossible to return.

Romantic relationships begin to be the main point of conversation for girls at school. Jeannette doesn't trust boys, but wishes one would like her even though she's tall, gangly, and pale with red hair and protruding teeth.

Even though she's dealt with more than a seventh grader should in terms of disturbing sexual behavior, she's also a normal middle-schooler whose hopes and expectations conform to her age.

Jeannette has never been to the dentist, and while she initially decides to save up for braces with money she earns babysitting, she is shocked to learn from a classmate that they're twelve hundred dollars—four years of babysitting.

With many common parts of childhood—like braces—unavailable to Jeannette, she has little ability to gauge how she can participate in these traditions.

She decides to take matters into her own hands, tying a rubber band across her upper teeth, wrapping larger ones around her entire head, and eventually holding them in place with a metal coat hanger. One night Dad comes in and surprises her as she is wearing her contraption. He marvels at her engineering chops.

Jeannette, as usual, takes responsibility for her own desires and commits to carry through the project. This committed nature contrasts with Dad's behavior, although we can see his engineering interest echoed in Jeannette.

Seventh grade is also when Jeannette begins to work for *The Maroon Wave*, the school newspaper, where she can fit in and meet people without having to pay for uniforms or equipment. Miss Jeanette Bivens, the organizer, was also Dad's beloved English teacher who, he says, was the first person to believe in him. He named Jeanette after her.

Other aspects of middle school, like sports and clubs, are similarly barred to Jeannette because of her family's poverty. It is in part because of this that Miss Bivens and The Wave will become so dear to Jeannette (as the teacher was to Dad).

In the evenings, Jeannette proofreads at the offices of *The Welch Daily News*, where the *Wave* is printed, and draws on her experience proofreading Mom's essays and her students' homework. She adores setting the type, making corrections, and carefully pasting the lines of the type together.

Jeannette's love of order and organization serves her well as a proofreader, and the examples she lists are all typical of the characteristics we've come to see in her personality.

Jeannette also enjoys watching the reporters and editors at work, as they send journalists out to find out information about something on the police scanner. She realizes that being a writer doesn't have to mean being isolated like Mom—instead a writer can be intimately acquainted with the world, and "know what was really going on." Jeannette decides that this is what she wants to do.

Jeannette's time spent at the newspaper office acquaints her for the first time with a career, rather than the jobs Mom and Dad have held at various times. To "know what was really going on" will become a way to achieve order, undergirding Jeannette's general process of growing up, as well as her choice of career.

Jeannette sometimes feels badly about not taking care of Maureen, so that year, she, Brian, and Lori save for months to buy Maureen a toy kitchen set at the dollar store. On her birthday, Maureen asks as usual to hear about life in California, and says that's where she'll live when she grows up.

We're reminded of the Christmas in which Mom wanted to do something special for the kids, though this time she's absent from the preparations. It's not yet clear if Maureen's love of California is more than just a dream, but it clearly speaks to her desire to escape Welch.

Maureen does, though, seem happier than the other children, with her beautiful face and many friends whose Pentecostal families take her under their wing. Maureen does, however, start to talk about the devil visiting her and following her around. While Brian wonders if they should keep Maureen away from the Pentecostals, Mom says that religion is individual and each person has to figure out his or her own way.

While Jeannette, Brian, and Lori have shared experiences and hardships that have brought them closer together, Maureen, being younger, has had to find her own way to navigate. In this case, Mom's lack of judgment comes across as admirably open-minded.

Though at times like these, Jeannette thinks Mom is incredibly wise, Mom's moods are also becoming more intense and extreme. Near the end of the school year, her negative thoughts completely take over after she's spent time painting when she should have written her students' progress evaluations, without which the remedial program will lose its funding.

We're beginning to hear more about Mom's wildly swinging moods, which seem to be becoming worse as she ages—perhaps as she realizes her artistic dreams are growing less and less attainable. Her breakdown, though, seems to be entirely due to her own choices.

Lori tries to console Mom as she sobs under the covers, but Jeannette looks on, feeling scornful about her mother's childish behavior. She swears that she will not end up like her mother by the time she's thirty-eight, Mom's age now.

While Jeannette has often made excuses for Dad, she seems unable to feel the same pity and compassion for her mother—perhaps precisely because she fears becoming like her.

Lori, though, feels sorry for Mom for being married to Dad. When Jeannette says that Mom needs to be stronger, Lori says that not even a caryatid (ancient Greek pillars shaped like women that support the temples on its their heads) would be strong enough.

Lori's caryatid example is a typical one given her love of books and learning. Lori also seems to grasp better than Jeannette how difficult it must be for Mom to take charge and responsibility of their lives given the destabilizing force that Dad is.

That summer, Mom leaves for Charleston to take college courses for her teaching certificate. Lori is heading to a state-sponsored summer camp, so Mom leaves Jeannette with two hundred dollars, giving her an opportunity to prove that Dad just needs a strong woman to manage him.

The implicit argument between the way Jeannette sees Mom and the way Lori understands her can now be played out in reality, with Jeannette taking over Mom's role with the rest of the family.

The first week, Jeannette sticks to her budget and organizes the house, which has again become a mess.

Her position of responsibility seems to start off seamlessly.

The next week, Dad comes home one afternoon and asks for money for beer and cigarettes—five dollars, or two days' worth of food. Jeannette finds herself unable to say no, but feels used.

It's unclear why Jeannette feels she has to give Dad money—she starts to see how family love and loyalty can often subvert rational thinking, and how Dad uses that love for his own purposes.

Dad asks for five dollars again a few days afterward, and then twenty, claiming he needs gas to borrow a friend's car for a meeting. Jeannette feels increasingly desperate, and when Dad asks if he's ever let her down, Jeannette is about to tell him the truth. But she can't manage to, and she gives him the money.

On his end, Dad knows very well how well he can manipulate Jeannette. His daughter may no longer believe in him, but still doesn't want to hurt him by telling him what she truly thinks.

That weekend, Dad tells Jeannette to accompany him on a business trip to pay back that money. He picks out a nice dress for her and drives her to a dark, run-down roadside bar. Dad leaves her at a bar to play pool, and a mustachioed man named Robbie asks Jeannette to dance and flirts with her.

At first, it seems that Dad is up to another of his harebrained but brilliant tactics. Jeannette has a complicated relationship to flirting, since she's wanted a boy to notice her, but still knows to be wary of older men.

Though Jeannette expects Dad will be furious once he realizes what's happening, he seems nonchalant and simply yells over to Robbie to join him in pool. After a few hours, Robbie is drunk and on a losing streak—Dad gets eighty dollars on him.

It becomes clear here that Dad is not just manipulating Jeanette's love to get money; he is using her like a prop to get money out of Robbie.

Robbie invites Jeannette upstairs to listen to a Roy Acuff record and dance. Jeannette is worried about his intentions, but when Robbie asks Dad he says, "Sure," and at Jeannette, "Holler if you need me."

Jeannette still sees Dad as a protector, but here he has given up that role.

Upstairs, Robbie dances with Jeannette but then starts groping and kissing her. Jeannette is too mad at Dad to want to scream for him to rescue her. Robbie mentions how bony she is and Jeannette adds that she has some scars, unbuttoning her dress at the waist to show him. As Robbie pauses, she escapes downstairs.

Though Dad seemed unworried about Jeannette going upstairs, she sees now that it wasn't because she was in no danger. As usual, Jeannette thinks fast and uses her quick wit to escape from frightening situations on her own.

Afterward, Dad gives Jeannette forty of the dollars he's won, and though Jeannette is seething, she accepts the money since she knows they need it. Dad asks her if she's upset about something, and Jeannette tells him Robbie attacked her upstairs. "I knew you could handle yourself," Dad replies, comparing this to the time he threw her into the water to teach her how to swim.

Jeannette would like to stick to her principles by not accepting the money, but her innate pragmatism wins out. Dad's comparison to the swimming lesson makes sense in his mind, though he seems to disregard that he's put her in harm's way not in a pool but with another human being with his own desires.

A few days later, Dad asks Jeannette to come with him to another bar, and when she refuses, he demands another twenty dollars, which she gives him. Jeannette knows a check is coming from Mom's Texas land, but Dad beats her to it by waiting for the postman. Dad suggests they hide it together in the encyclopedia, but the next day when Jeannette goes to find another hiding place for it, it's gone.

Jeannette is now desperately trying to negotiate between keeping herself safe and fulfilling the task Mom set her at the beginning of the summer. Dad's tricks seem calculated for someone far older than a 13-year-old, and Jeannette's mistakes confirm that it's not a fair battle.

Jeannette finally realizes that standing up to Dad is more difficult than she'd thought. She applies for a part-time job at a store called Becker's Jewel Box, telling Mr. Becker she's seventeen rather than thirteen, and is hired for forty dollars a week.

It's taken much of the summer, but Jeannette finally accepts that Lori may have been right and that Mom's position is difficult. Jeannette, though, continues to search for other options.

Jeannette enjoys the work at the store since anyone buying jewelry is happy, despite Welch's poverty. But it annoys her when Mr. Becker takes the key to the diamond display case with him when he leaves for lunch, and carefully counts each ring upon his return.

As a clerk at a jewelry store, Jeannette both enjoys and is wary of the enormous amount of wealth on display. Mr. Becker does not trust her responsibility, and so he locks the case.

Jeannette is particularly attracted to the watches, which actually serve a purpose and stands for someone's need to be places. Jeannette dreams about taking one of the watches for herself.

For Jeannette, a watch is not just a luxury item but an object that symbolizes the kind of person she would like to become.

One day, an employee from another of Mr. Becker's stores stops by and, in conversation, Jeannette learns the other woman makes a commission of ten per cent of every sale. When Jeannette asks Mr. Becker why she doesn't get a commission, he says that as an assistant she's not eligible for commissions.

Jeannette may have thought she had tricked Mr. Becker into hiring her before 17, but he has his own ways of making sure he benefits even at her expense. Another betrayal of a child by an adult.

The next day Jeannette slips into the watch display case, which Mr. Becker doesn't see a need to keep locked, and slides a watch she likes it into her purse. She tries it on in her bunk bed at night.

Note how mistrust and betrayal leads to betrayal in turn. Jeanette feels justified in stealing the watch because Mr. Becker has cheated her.

But since she's worried about being seen with the watch on, Jeannette decides to only wear it at home—but then wonders how to explain it to her family. Mr. Becker might even be able to tell she's done something wrong by her attitude, she thinks, and since she can't lie well she'll become a juvenile delinquent. The next week she slips the watch back into the display case.

Though rational thinking has led to the crime, it also permits Jeannette to see that there's no way she can sustain the subterfuge. Unlike her parents, Jeannette has a conception of the consequences of her actions.

At the end of August, Lori returns from camp bursting with stories about the friends, food, and songs of her summer. It's the first time she's realized, she tells Jeannette, that she could have a happy, normal life.

For Lori, it has required leaving not only Welch but also her family for this epiphany to take place. That it was not clear to her that she could have a happy life is a testament to the warped world her parent's have created for her.

Mom returns from her summer, where she adored living without responsibilities, committed to concentrating on herself rather than others by quitting teaching and working on her art. She asks Jeannette why she should be the one earning money, and says that Jeannette and Lori can get jobs.

Mom's attitude is similar to Lori's, though as the mother it's more complicated for her to "escape" their life in Welch. Still, Mom wants to challenge the idea that her role as parent comprises certain responsibilities, like providing for the family.

The first day of school, Mom refuses to leave with Lucy Jo, and when Jeannette's cajoling doesn't work, Jeannette says that to be treated like a mother Mom should act like one.

After attempting to deal with Mom in a number of indirect ways, Jeannette finally states outright what she thinks about Mom's lack of responsibility.

Mom tells Dad when he returns home that Jeannette back-talked her, and Dad admonishes her for not respecting her parents. Jeannette repeats that neither of them is acting like parents, and when Dad threatens to beat her with his belt if she doesn't apologize, she refuses. He whips her on the back of her thighs six times.

Jeannette, having tried to take on responsibility for the summer, is clearly angry that her parents won't do the same—won't fit into the roles that Jeannette believes they ought to. Rather than engaging with the argument, Dad simply punishes her. Her parents want the authority of parenthood, but not the responsibility.

Jeannette races outside and into the woods, where she throws up. She wanders for hours through the trees until she's made two decisions: first, that she will never allow anyone to whip her like that again; and second, that she would follow Lori in escaping from Welch and their family.

The profound unfairness of this physical punishment—her parents asserting their rights over her—when they have so completely ceases to take responsibility for their own actions that drives Jeanette to understand that they are the cause of everything that's wrong in her life, that, in effect, she will never find a home where her parents are.

Jeannette buys a plastic piggy bank and puts the seventy-five dollars she's earned at her job that summer into it, beginning her escape fund.

Though modest and even silly-looking, the plastic piggy bank will become a powerful symbol of Jeannette and her siblings' dreams for the future.

That fall at school, two New York filmmakers, Ken Fink and Bob Gross, arrive in Welch as part of a government cultural program. Despite their funny names, Jeannette is awed by their clever, complex humor and the symbolist foreign films they show. After one showing, Lori shows them her illustrations and they say that New York City is the place to be if she really wants to pursue art.

Just as Jeannette and Lori have committed themselves to escaping Welch, two other "foreigners" arrive to show that a different way of life is in fact possible. It's also this fortuitous visit that gives the sisters the name and idea of New York City as a destination for their vague escape plan.

New York also appeals to Lori as a place where it won't matter that she's different, wearing army boots and polka-dot dresses rather than jeans and T-shirts and creating Gothic-style paintings late into the night.

From the start, Welch's inhabitants have seemed unable to deal with those who are "different," whether through poverty or aesthetic choices.

Jeannette offers to make her escape fund a joint fund, and she and Lori name the piggy bank Oz. Lori starts to paint commissioned posters for Welch High students to hang on their walls. Jeannette babysits and does other kids' homework, guaranteeing them at least an A-. Brian, though too young to imagine leaving with his sisters, pitches in by mowing lawns and cutting weeds.

As usual, the Walls siblings (barring Maureen) act as a team—even though Brian is not initially part of the escape plan. Naming the Piggy bank Oz suggests their sense of the fantasy of their vision their uncertainty if it's achievable.

The money in Oz is safe, since there's no plugged hole at the bottom and the slot at the top is too thin to extract the money.

From the summer, Jeannette is well aware of the danger of keeping loose money in the house.

One day that winter, Jeannette arrives home to find a Cadillac Coupe DeVille outside their house, which Dad has won at a poker game. Jeannette knows Dad should sell the car to pay for clothes, food, and electricity, but he wouldn't think of it. Jeannette, too, comes to love the car, which they name "Elvis."

The car contrasts vividly with the squalor in which the Walls family lives, but despite her pragmatic principles, Jeannette too finds that something as nice as a Cadillac can be seductive.

Mom uses the car to drive to craft fairs and try to sell some of her paintings. When the family accompanies her, they sleep in the car, and Jeannette remembers how easy it used to be to stay on the move.

An echo of a moment earlier in the book, when Jeannette had considered home as a function of all the car trips they've taken. There is a sense that the family's juggling act between order and turbulence is much harder to maintain once they've settled down; though at the same time there was no way not to settle down. That border between order and turbulence can be exhilarating, but it can't ever less.

As Lori's graduation from high school approaches, she has fears for her future in New York—the escape plan has never fully included what she'll do once she gets there. She initially thinks she'll get a college scholarship and is a National Merit Scholarship finalist, but she has to hitchhike to Bluefield to take the test. The trucker she gets a ride with tries to seduce her and she is unnerved enough that she doesn't do well on the test.

Even as Lori plots to escape Welch, the circumstances that define and limit what she is able to do there have far-reaching implications, preventing her from establishing one straightforward path that she could take once she gets to New York.

Lori then puts together a portfolio for the Cooper Union art school, but spills coffee on it just before it's due. She hears about a scholarship for the best work of art inspired by a literary genius, and decides to make a clay bust of Shakespeare.

Lori's attempts to apply for higher education seem increasingly desperate, even doomed, though also substantially creative.

Dad thinks Shakespeare is a fraud, since no one person could have had his vocabulary, and that instead his plays were written by a group of people. As Dad is explaining this to Lori, he reaches over to the sculpture and wipes off the mouth, renaming it the *Mute Bard*. Lori is devastated but Dad says she's thinking like a "sheep."

Dad's conspiracy theories are never far below the surface and can crop up at any time. Dad thinks that his modification of the sculpture makes it more creative, a better, more non-conformist piece of art—yet his modification is another instance of him asserting control over his children after having given up any right to do so through his neglect. It also seems like he might be angry and ashamed that Lori wants to leave.

Jeannette says that Lori should still go to New York, get a job, and save up until she can apply to school.

Jeannette refuses to give up on the escape fund—after all, if Lori can't make it, how will she?

Dad sulks since the entire family is upset with him, and wonders aloud why Lori would even want to go to a dirty sinkhole like New York.

Even though Dad is often physically absent, his distress at the family breaking up shows that he does still care.

One May evening, Jeannette returns to her bedroom to put a few babysitting dollars into Oz, and finds him slashed open on the floor, with all the money gone.

Much of the action has been building to this point: with the money gone and bank slashed, both the dream of escape and the possibility for it have vanished.

Jeannette wonders desperately if she can quickly make back the nine months' worth of money that they have saved, but when she goes into the living room, Lori can tell from her face that something is wrong. She runs into the bedroom and starts whimpering rather than screaming.

Jeannette's half-baked plan reveals her desperation, while Lori's response shows just how devastated she is. Neither can, in this moment, think of new solutions like usual. Lori's whimpering is a sign of her total devastation.

Dad doesn't come home for three days, and when he does he seems nonchalant despite Lori's and Jeannette's fury. He throws a few dollars at them. Jeannette asks him why he's doing this to them, and his face grows angry, but he stumbles to the sofa and passes out. Lori says she'll never leave, but Jeannette reassures Lori that she will—it's the only way to know she, Jeanette, will be able to leave too.

Jeannette and Lori attempt, finally, to have a direct confrontation with Dad. But his alcoholism acts as a shield, and the sisters get no satisfying response or even excuse. But even despite the confrontation's failure, it gives Jeannette motivation to start over, and to convince Lori that she will escape.

The next day Jeannette buys a change purse, which she wears under her clothes, and then hides in a hole in the wall in the house.

It's taken time, but Jeannette has been forced to mature into a trickster nearly as good as her dad. (Also, finally the broken down nature of their house serves a positive function).

They have made only $37.20 by the summer, when one of Jeannette's babysitting families offers to take her to Iowa to take care of their two children for the summer, and then pay for her ticket back to Welch. Jeannette tells the mother, Mrs. Sanders, to take Lori instead, and to buy her a return ticket to New York City rather than Welch.

Despite Jeannette and Lori's commitment, they haven't been able to make all the money back on their own. The babysitting family's offer underlines that the two must, in fact, rely on others and cannot be entirely self-sufficient.

The day Lori leaves, she refuses to say a word to Dad, but hugs the rest of the family and leaves without looking back. Dad says that the family is falling apart, and Jeannette agrees.

Though they agree, this statement means one thing to Dad, who is largely responsible for the breakdown, and Jeannette, for whom Lori's escape is actually a triumph.

Now in the tenth grade, Jeannette becomes the news editor of *The Maroon Wave*, and enjoys attending school events since she now has an excuse to be there alone.

Even after years, Jeannette has never fully fit in at Welch, but can now take refuge in the newspaper's responsibilities.

Jeannette spends her lunch hour writing and editing, giving her an excuse for why she doesn't eat lunch, and an opportunity to find the industrial-sized cans left in the cafeteria garbage.

The Wave becomes a kind of home for Jeannette, as well as a more practical opportunity to take food scavenging into her own hands.

Jeannette gets the editor-in-chief job as a junior and sells newspapers in the hallways. She only reaches a small percentage of the school, even though she tries creating poetry competitions and a fashion column. One day, someone tells her that the same names always appear in the newspaper. She establishes a "Birthday Corner" and circulation doubles, though Miss Bivens wonders if this counts as serious journalism.

Just as Jeannette has tried multiple, increasingly crafty ways to keep the family purse from Dad, she applies this same motivation to selling newspapers. Her pragmatism clashes a bit with Miss Biven's more idealistic notion of journalism, and also foreshadows the sort of journalism Jeanette will eventually get into.

That year, Chuck Yeager, the first pilot to break the sound barrier and one of Dad's heroes, comes to give a speech at Welch High. Dad is thrilled and helps Jeannette think up all kinds of questions, since Yeager has agreed to let her interview him. Dad stays up late teaching Jeannette all about aviation history and aerodynamics.

This last-minute education recalls the earlier, and happier, times in Jeannette's childhood when Dad would regale the kids with adventure stories and facts about science and stars. Again, even as Dad descends into neglectful and dangerous alcoholism, there remain moments when his charm, knowledge, and caring remain visible and enthralling.

Chuck Yeager holds the entire school in thrall, and later allows Jeannette to interview him for almost an hour. During the interview she mentions the airplanes he's flown in that she learned about from Dad, and Yeager calls her an expert. For a brief moment, the other kids at school all compete to talk to her, asking her about the interview.

Jeannette may have lost her faith in Dad, but she can still admit that he is in many ways brilliant—and Chuck Yaeger's compliment to her is indirectly a compliment to him. This is Jeanette's first experience of being popular.

In New York, Lori is working as a waitress at a German Restaurant, taking classes, and loving how art and music are everywhere. Jeannette counts down the months until she can join her.

After the setbacks, fears, and worries about the unknown, it seems that Lori has succeeded in establishing a life outside Welch—setting a promising example for Jeannette.

Jeannette has decided to enroll in a city college in New York and apply for a job at the wire services AP or UPI, becoming one of the important writers the people at *The Welch Daily News* joke about.

What Jeannette has learned through her nights proofreading and editing is actually now materializing into a concrete career path.

When Jeannette goes to see Miss Katona, the college guidance counselor, she advises Jeannette to apply to college in-state, since it'll be cheaper. Jeannette proposes to move to New York for senior year so that she'll be in-state there, but Miss Katona counsels her against it because of all that she'll miss—the prom and Senior Day. Jeannette is skeptical that she'll miss much, and thinks seriously about leaving after junior year. She races home and again notices her unfinished paint job, recalling how nothing she's done to improve their lot in Welch has worked.

Miss Katona's advice regarding the prom and Senior Day are ludicrous given Jeanette's situation. Her needs, her goals, have made her grow up faster, to see other things as more important. Here, the unfinished house painting serves to confirm that Jeannette must leave Welch if she really wants to make it, that Welch and her parents themselves stand in the way of her becoming what she wants to be. That she needs to take responsibility of her own life.

When Jeannette tells her parents her plan, Dad walks out without saying anything. Mom encourages her to go to New York, but seems about to cry. She says it's not fair that Jeannette gets to leave and she's stuck in Welch.

Of course, Mom could make plans to leave Welch as well, but what she really seems to envy is Jeannette's motivation and commitment in doing so.

Lori offers Jeannette a place in her apartment, and Brian starts counting down the months, as Jeannette had done with Lori. Dad, on the other hand, barely speaks to Jeannette anymore.

Dad continues to not understand the destructive force he becomes. The love behind his anger his clear, but so are his delusions.

One evening, though, he asks Jeannette to take a look at something with him. He spreads the blueprints for the **Glass Castle**, which they haven't mentioned since they started filling up the foundation with trash, on the living room table. He tells Jeannette he's redoing the layout so that her room will be bigger, and shows her his intricate diagrams and measurements.

In this, one of the book's most devastating scenes, Dad tries in vain to resurrect the old dreams for a better life, down to the most elaborate details—as if the better he described the dream, the more real it might seem to Jeannette.

Jeannette tells Dad that he'll never build the Glass Castle, and that even if he does she'll be gone.

This is the bluntest Jeannette's ever been in refusing to subscribe to Dad's illusions.

Dad suggests that Jeannette can stay in Welch and get a job at *The Welch Daily News* while he works on the **Glass Castle**.

Dad modifies his dream somewhat to allow for Jeannette to pursue some of her own dreams, like journalism.

Jeannette tells him that there's no way she's staying put, and if he builds the **Glass Castle** it shouldn't be for her. Dad walks out with his blueprints without saying a word.

Jeannette refuses to be swayed, showing how she really has lost so many of her childhood illusions.

At the end of May, Jeannette is feeling increasingly scared. She says goodbye to Miss Bivens, who assures her that she'll be alright but wonders aloud who will serve as editor of the newspaper—she thinks she might try to convince Brian.

Miss Bivens is one of the few positive adult influences in Jeannette's life: here, she strikes an effective balance between encouraging Jeannette and noting how much she's needed in Welch.

As Jeannette packs, she decides to leave everything from the past behind, even her geode, which she gives to Maureen.

Jeannette's few material possessions have defined her throughout her childhood. By leaving them behind she seeks to establish a new identity.

Jeannette leaves on the seven-ten morning bus, so Mom, who likes to sleep in, doesn't wake up to see her off. But Dad is there to carry her suitcase, and gives her his favorite jackknife before she departs. He tells her she can always come home if she needs to, but Jeannette knows she never will.

Though Dad has been unable to directly ask Jeannette to stay, and unable to articulate his dismay at her departure, his actions underline both how he'll miss her and how much he cares about her. She has inherited her parents' self-sufficiency.

As Jeannette looks out the window at Dad, she wonders if he had left Welch at 17 thinking he'd never come back either.

Yet even as Jeannette is positive she'll never return, she is aware of how adolescent dreams can so easily crumble.

PART 4: NEW YORK CITY

As Jeannette approaches the city, she wonders if all people will see is a tall, awkward, Appalachian hick. She hopes that they'll see instead what Dad calls her "inner beauty."

Though Jeannette has purposefully refused all of Dad's oblique offers to stay, she still relies on his support to survive in a new, scary place.

At the bus station, Lori's friend Evan meets her. He offers to carry her suitcase, but Jeannette soon takes it back. He comments that West Virginia girls are a tough breed.

Jeanette's self-sufficiency immediately makes her stand out. The "lessons" her parents have taught her are immediately established as beneficial.

Jeannette meets Lori at the restaurant where she works, called Zum Zum. As she waitresses, Lori speaks in a thick German accent to improve her tips.

Just like as a child in the desert and in Welch, Lori finds a way to use her intelligence to maximize her success.

Jeannette wanders around while she's waiting for Lori, and finds that New Yorkers, once they learn you're not trying to get something from them, can be friendly and helpful with directions.

Compare these first interactions with Jeanette's dismal impression of Welch. This feels like a place that could become a home. Note also Jeanette's willingness to ask for directions, something Dad likely wouldn't want to do.

Lori and Jeannette head to the Evangeline, a women's hostel, that evening. Jeannette notices an orange glow in the sky from all the pollution—you can never see the stars. She wonders if that applies also to her planet, Venus.

Given Mom and Dad's suspicion of big cities, this is the first time Jeannette finds herself under a starless sky—perhaps even without her beloved Venus to orient her.

It only takes a day for Jeannette to get a job at a hamburger joint, which pays over eighty dollars a week. She loves the excitement of it, as well as the twenty percent discount on lunches.

The job is pays twice as much as Jeannette's gig selling jewelry, and the novel location makes it seem even more new and exciting.

That summer, Jeannette and Lori move into an apartment in the South Bronx, a bit shabby but far nicer and larger than Little Hobart Street—and with running water.

Jeannette continues to compare her current home to Welch, and materially, the new home wins on every front.

Jeannette enrolls in a school that offers internships rather than classes. She interns at *The Phoenix*, a newspaper in Brooklyn run by a man named Mike Armstrong, which has broken typewriters and old press releases instead of copy paper.

For Jeannette, The Phoenix is one step further along the path she's set for herself beginning with The Maroon Wave, to become a journalist who knows what's "really going on."

That spring Mr. Armstrong is interviewing a job candidate when a mouse runs over her foot, terrifying the candidate. When the woman leaves Mr. Armstrong offers Jeannette the job, which she accepts.

Again note how her awful childhood experiences actually have hardened Jeanette and prepared her to succeed. After the Little Hobart Street rat, a mouse wouldn't faze her at all.

Jeannette starts working ninety-hour weeks, relying on her ten-dollar watch to make sure she isn't late. The check doesn't always clear, but when it does she makes $125 a week.

The mention of the watch recalls Jeannette's desire to be someone who needs to be places. And from $40 to $80 to $125 a week, she certainly is moving up in the world.

Brian writes to Jeannette telling her about the family: Dad's drunk or in jail, Mom's in her own world, and Maureen has essentially moved in with friends. Although Jeannette thinks of Brian as a country rather than city kid, she decides to convince him to join them in New York. She gives him a list of reasons, and he is quickly won over.

As Jeannette is fulfilling her own dreams step by step, the family seems either to have stagnated or regressed. The Walls children continue to stick together, and Brian too realizes that he needs to escape his parents to make a life.

After his junior year, Brian joins the sisters in the city and gets a job at an ice-cream parlor in Brooklyn.

Like Jeannette, Brian has skipped prom and Senior Day for a new adventure.

Jeannette has decided to stay at her job rather than go to college, which she doesn't need in order to become someone "who knew what was really going on," as she says—who can figure things out on her own. However, when Mr. Armstrong sees Jeannette looking something up in the encyclopedia—figuring it out on her own—he says that college will allow her to work even better jobs than this one. She can always come back to *The Phoenix*, he says, though he adds that he doubts she will.

This moment encapsulates the tension between the positives and negatives of self-sufficiency. Jeanette can figure things out on her own, and this gives her strength and independence. But it also can be much harder, and take longer, to figure out everything *for yourself. Armstrong can see Jeanette's potential, and he was the wisdom to help Jeanette see that pure self-sufficiency will never allow her to achieve it.*

Jeannette applies to Barnard College, the sister school of Columbia. She is accepted. Grants and loans cover most of her tuition, and she gets a job answering phones at a firm on Wall Street for the rest. She lives in the Upper West Side apartment of a psychologist in exchange for babysitting the woman's two sons.

It's stunning how quickly Jeannette has moved from a shack in West Virginia to an Ivy League university, thanks both to her own pluck and to the help and support of others, even if not her parents.

As a student, Jeannette is hired as an editorial assistant at a famous magazine. Elated, she feels she's finally "arrived."

Though she may have materially arrived, Jeannette's process of growing up doesn't end here.

Sometimes Mom and Dad call from Welch, usually with new problems to report. When Lori hears that Maureen has fallen off the porch and gashed her head, she decides to bring Maureen to New York, though she's only twelve. Mom likes the plan but Dad says Lori is stealing the kids.

The Walls children remake their home without their parents. Dad remains delusional, not seeing that he and Mom are the barriers to their children having an acceptable life. His kids all leaving him shames him, while Lori grows into being the parental figure of the family.

Lori, Jeanette, and Brian bring Maureen anyway. She lives with Lori, and they enroll her in a Manhattan public school. They all meet to eat at Lori's apartment on the weekends and reminisce about the crazy times in Welch.

At once, the tumultuous years spent in Welch are no longer a daily battle but rather a comical memory, safer because it's now firmly in the past.

Three years after Jeannette's move, she is listening to the radio when she hears about a traffic jam on the New Jersey turnpike, in which a van had broken down and spilled clothes, furniture, and a dog all over the highway. That night she gets a phone call from Mom saying that she and Dad have moved to New York. Just as Jeannette thought, the van was theirs.

Though the last scene had located the siblings' past life firmly in another time, this event makes clear to Jeannette that she can escape Welch but not her parents nor their crazy "adventures."

When Jeannette hangs up, she looks around the small maid's room where she lives in the psychologists apartment. She thinks about how it's nevertheless hers and hers alone. There's no room in her house or her life for her parents.

Here Jeannette suggests another way of thinking about home: as something that belongs to her, without being shared with others.

The next day, Mom and Dad meet all four of their children at Lori's apartment. When Jeannette, who still feels a little hostile, asks why they've moved to New York, they say it's so they can be a family again.

Though they had shown it in different ways, it was always clear that Mom and Dad were upset that their kids had left—not seeing, or perhaps refusing to admit, that the kids were leaving them.

Mom and Dad live for a while in a boardinghouse until they fall behind on the rent, at which point they move into a flophouse in a seedier neighborhood. Eventually they get kicked out of the flophouse, after Dad falls asleep with a cigarette and sets the room on **fire**.

Mom and Dad's start in New York seems to repeat Jeannette's childhood in fast-forward, with even an echo of Uncle Stanley's setting their house on fire.

Lori then lets her parents stay with her for a time. After a few months the entire place is jammed with Mom's paintings, street finds, and colored glasses. Meanwhile Dad is coming home more and more often drunk and angry.

Mom's curious relationship to objects becomes more acute and her tendency to hoard more evident in the confined space of New York, and in the home Lori has created for herself.

Brian invites Dad into his apartment and locks the alcohol cabinet, but comes home one day to find that Dad has taken the door off its hinges with a screwdriver and drunk every bottle. Instead of yelling at Dad, Brian tells him he'll just have to follow some rules. But Dad says he won't submit to his own son, so he starts sleeping in the van.

Dad's engineering acumen combined with his consistently creative tactics manages to outsmart Brian. The mention of rules, however, is enough to scare Dad away—the kids' entire childhood has been defined by the absence of rules. Now they embrace them.

After giving Mom multiple deadlines for cleaning up, Lori finally kicks her out and she moves into the van as well. After a few months, Mom and Dad leave it in a no-parking zone and it's towed. They can't retrieve the car because it's unregistered, so it is effectively lost. They sleep on a park bench that night: they've become homeless.

From a flophouse to the street, Mom and Dad seem to have descended rapidly into homelessness. Even though none of their choices are new or unexpected, urban poverty seems to be a different animal.

A few times a month, the entire family still all meet up at Lori's apartment, where Mom tells the kids that they've mastered the schedules for the soup kitchens and the locations of public library bathrooms. They've also spent time attending free plays, concerts, and museums. It's an adventure, she says.

Mom's language and tone of adventure is, incredibly, still earnest rather than ironic. Admittedly, she embraces the new life with the same kind of intellectual curiosity with which she taught the kids outside of school when they were young.

Towards the winter, the Mom and Dad spend more and more time in the libraries, where Mom is reading Balzac and Dad is researching chaos theory.

Another example of Mom and Dad's broad definition of education, challenging themselves even while refusing to conform.

Jeannette is torn, wanting both to help Mom and Dad and to abandon them. She often finds herself giving homeless people spare change, wondering if it's just to ease her guilt for not helping her parents.

The conflicting messages of responsibility that Mom and Dad have given to Jeannette come to a head with this internal conflict.

Once, when Jeannette gives some change to a homeless man on Broadway, her friend Carol tells her not to, saying that they're all "scam artists." Jeannette can't object, she feels, without revealing who she really is.

Though she's technically now an adult, Jeannette has still not figured out who she really is, or at least how to reconcile the different ways she defines herself.

In a political science class at Barnard, Professor Fuchs—one of Jeannette's favorite professors—asked if conservatives or liberals were right about the cause of homelessness. Jeannette responds that it's neither a result of misguided social programs nor of cuts in those same programs, but that sometimes people refuse to make the compromises and choices that would allow them to make ends meet. Professor Fuchs is furious, asking her what she knows about the struggles of the poor. Jeanette doesn't respond.

This devastating episode for Jeannette could have been more easily resolved had she dared to explain how her own family history led to her thoughts on the matter. Still unsure who she is and where she belongs, however, Jeannette proves unable to do so. She remains ashamed of her past, unwilling to accept it as part of her.

Mom and Dad hate shelters, so on winter nights they either sleep in church pews or, when the pews are full, show up at Lori's, where Mom sometimes breaks down and cries, saying that things can be hard as a homeless person. .

We've seen Mom's cheery attitude descend into bitterness and despair before, but now things are different: they lack a true, stable home (however transient), and Lori and her siblings are no longer tied to their parents' fate.

Though Jeannette considers dropping out of Barnard since she feels so hypocritical, like she's pretending to be something she's not. Lori, though, advises her to stay, since dropping out would be counterproductive and would devastate Dad.

Jeannette's inability to reconcile her past and present leads her to consider taking radical measures. Yet it is the idea of not pleasing Dad that helps to keep her going.

Jeannette meets Mom at a café to try to discuss some options that could ease her mother's situation—moving back to Welch or Phoenix, selling the land in Texas or her expensive Indian jewelry. But Mom refuses all of them, saying things will work out.

As usual, Jeannette seeks practical, concrete, and orderly solutions to problems, whereas Mom tends to assume these problems don't exist.

That spring Dad comes down with tuberculosis and is hospitalized. When Jeannette comes to visit him he introduces her to all his new friends (i.e. other patients) and shows her the chaos theory books she's been reading, some of which are making him think that there might be a divine creator after all.

Jeannette mentions the fact of Dad's hospitalization nonchalantly, as small crises have become routine for Mom and Dad. Dad's shifting thoughts regarding God imply that people can change, and certain ideas are not necessarily permanent.

After six weeks in the hospital, Dad doesn't want to go back to the streets since he knows he'll start drinking again. Instead, he gets a job doing maintenance at a resort upstate. Mom refuses to join him in the "sticks."

This is the longest he's been sober since he tried to give up drinking for Jeannette, and Dad finally shows some self-awareness about his addiction and the consequences of his drinking.

Dad seems to be doing well, and enjoys living near the country, but Mom keeps calling him and telling him how much easier homeless life is in a pair, and how much the dog misses him. Eventually, she convinces him to move back, and he immediately starts drinking again.

Mom's constant cajoling may stem from her conviction that Dad needs to be responsible for her and her needs, but she seems unable to see that her needs may not match his needs; that placing her needs first could be dangerous for him. And they are. It is never more apparent than here that at this point Mom and Dad enable each other, that they help to accentuate each other's most problematic qualities.

By this time, Lori is an illustrator at a comic-book company, Maureen is in high school, and Brian is working to become a policeman. The entire family celebrates Christmas that year at Lori's apartment. Mom and Dad give the kids battered street finds, while Jeannette gives Dad warm winter clothes. He says they must be ashamed of him and stomps out, leaving Mom to happily accept her presents.

Jeannette catches the reader up on the siblings' now separate lives, no longer centered around the family's "adventures." Mom and Dad's differing reactions to receiving nice Christmas presents underline their different attitudes towards being "self-sufficient" but unable to provide for anyone else.

That August, Dad, who has been following along her class syllabi by checking the books out from the library, calls Jeannette to discuss her courses. She says she's thinking of dropping out, since she's a thousand dollars short on tuition. A week later, he arrives at Lori's carrying a garbage bag with 950 dollars he's won at poker. Jeannette hesitates but he insists until she accepts it.

From chaos theory to general mechanics, Dad is capable of and interested in intellectual discovery, which recalls for Jeannette the pedestal on which she'd placed him as a child. Dad, in his own non-standard way, still wants to provide for his daughter. Unlike her father, Jeanette is not too devoted to self-sufficiency to refuse.

That fall, Mom and Dad find an abandoned building to move into on the Lower East Side. They'll be squatters—or as Mom calls it, modern-day pioneers.

Mom has used the language of pioneers before—here it sounds more enthralling and less dismal than urban squatters. Once again her optimism seems ridiculous, and yet she seems to believe it.

Jeannette goes to visit them and finds boarded-up windows, one light bulb strung from the ceiling, and a hinge-less door. But their apartment fits all Mom's scattered possessions, and Dad has hot-wired the building to a utility cable down the block.

Jeannette's first impression reveals how she judges the space of a home herself, but her subsequent reflection acknowledges Dad's handiness and the apartment's aptness for them both.

Jeannette is reminded of their home in Welch and just wants to run away, but she also realizes how proud Mom and Dad are of their new home. They tell her about their fellow squatters fighting against the housing agency. It occurs to Jeannette that they've found a community of others who have spent their lives fighting against authority—their own kind of home.

Jeannette continues to toggle between her visceral reaction of disgust and her emotional attempt to understand Mom and Dad's embrace of this apartment, and their definition of home—which may, Jeannette is learning, be far different from hers.

Mom and Jeannette's siblings can't make it to her graduation that spring. Jeannette wants Dad to attend, but tells him she can't risk him showing up drunk and combative.

Jeanette remains ashamed of and unwilling to reveal her past or her parents to the people in her new life.

Jeannette is offered a job at the magazine where she's been working part-time. Her boyfriend Eric, who lives in his family's apartment on Park Avenue, offers to let her move in with him. Eric owns a small company; he is painstaking and organized, responsible, and calm. When Dad asks about him, she tells him that Eric treats her fine. She thinks to herself that while she feared she'd end up with someone like Dad, she's with the exact opposite.

Jeannette's description of Eric already depicts him as exactly the opposite of Dad—organized rather than scattered, responsible rather than negligent, and calm rather than edgy and impulsive. Just as Dad ran away from Welch to find an alternative in Mom, Jeannette seeks to find the opposite of Dad in Eric.

As she moves into the Park Avenue apartment, Jeannette thinks about her parents, and wonders if she has found a place she belongs, just as they seem to have done.

Jeannette here shows a growing maturity regarding the unstable and diverse definitions of a home.

Dad refuses to come visit Jeannette, saying he'd feel out of place, but Mom does come at once and is fascinated by the china and Persian rugs. She says she prefers the view from the Upper West Side, and Jeannette tells her jokingly that she's a pretty snobby squatter.

Similar to the Christmas presents anecdote—Mom doesn't think twice about admiring material possessions, whereas Dad sees in them what he could not provide.

Jeannette then tells her mother that she wants to help her and Dad, either with a car or rent or a down payment on a place they could own. Mom responds that Jeannette's the one who *she's* worried about, and asks if Jeannette's lost the values that she's tried to give her.

For Jeannette, "help" must be material and concrete. Mom turns the offer on its head by challenging Jeannette's very materialism.

Meanwhile, Jeannette's editor assigns her a weekly gossip column, which also concerns Mom, who would rather Jeannette be doing muckraking investigative journalism. But Jeannette is thrilled, thinking that the job will let her be someone "who knew what was really going on."

Jeannette has consistently pursued a career path from her days in high school, even trying to fit a new job offer into her goal of knowing what's going on.

Jeannette adores her new job and the perks that accompany it: the art-gallery openings, movie premieres, and private dinners, as well as all the famous and interesting people she meets.

Suddenly, Jeannette has access to a part of New York cultural life that her parents, despite their free events, could not dream of. Her initial adoration of this world seems idealized but also understandable.

Jeannette is convinced that she couldn't keep her job if people knew about her family, so she keeps her past hidden, leading to one awkward moment when she gives a vague answer when a dinner companion asks her about her family, so that the companion ends up asking if her family owns coal mines in West Virginia.

In this new, vast, exciting world to which Jeannette has only had a brief introduction, family roots like hers are simply inconceivable. And she remains unwilling to threaten her new situation by revealing her past.

Jeannette marries Eric four years after moving in. Not long after, Mom's uncle Jim dies, and Mom tells Jeannette they need to buy Jim's half of the Texas land to keep it in the family, for sentimental reasons. She tells Jeannette she'll have to borrow a million dollars from Eric.

Mom's desire to buy the land for "sentimental reasons" is consistent with her attitude towards material wealth in general, valuable to her as an object of appreciation rather than deriving any advantage from it.

Jeannette slowly realizes that this means that Mom's half of the land is also worth a million dollars. When Jeanette raises this point with her mother, Mom says she's not sure—she never had it appraised, since it was never her intention to sell it. Jeannette wonders if her entire life, as well as her parents' current situation, is a farce. But she understands on some level that Mom's possession of the land is simply a matter of faith, impossible to rationally object to.

Here it becomes clear that Jeanette's entire awful experience in Welch—the abject poverty, hunger, rats, all of it—could have been turned on its head if Mom had just sold that land. The family could have been comfortable,. Her initial reaction to this is shock and horror: how could her mother have not sold that land to help her family? But she has also grown up enough to struggle to understand the difference between her own worldview and her mother's. And even as the reader was horrified by Jeanette's life in Welch, now faced with the prospect that Jeanette could have avoided such a life, the reader must ask whether the things Jeanette learned from that life weren't valuable lessons after all.

Jeannette tells Mom that she can't ask Eric for a million dollars. Mom tells her how disappointed in her she is.

This exchange again highlights Jeanette and her mother's different values: to Jeanette a million dollars is valuable; to Mom it's just paper that gets you things worth sentimental value.

Though Lori and Brian have stable jobs, Maureen never manages to finish college and wanders from job to job and from boyfriend to boyfriend—looking for someone to take care of her, Jeannette says, just as her friends' families in Welch.

Lori, Brian, and Jeannette often needed to band together as children to create a stable life for themselves; Maureen, who being younger was never entirely part of their group, has sought order and home outside the family.

One day Maureen comes to see Jeannette, with dark makeup and bleached hair, and mentions Mormon kidnapping cults that need to be uncovered in Utah. Jeannette, alarmed, tells Mom that Maureen needs to see someone, but Mom counters that Maureen just needs "fresh air and sunshine." Maureen ends up living with Mom and Dad in the abandoned tenement.

When Jeannette was growing up, Mom and Dad's conspiracy theories seemed questionable but ultimately harmless, whereas Maureen's now seems to warrant more serious attention than Mom's non-standard and optimistic medical advice.

Six months later, Mom tells Maureen she'll need to find a place of her own instead of living in the tenement with them, and Maureen stabs her. She's arrested. When they all meet at the jail, bail is denied.

The stabbing puts an end to any ambiguity on whether Maureen is struggling in the same way as Mom and Dad, or if she has more serious mental issues.

The family gets into a massive fight about who is responsible for Maureen's situation: Lori blames Dad for a toxic childhood environment, whereas Mom blames junk food and Dad says that Maureen was just made that way.

How do we account for people's actions, especially violent ones? The Walls family's various explanations arise from different ways to understand responsibility.

Maureen is sent to a hospital for a year. After she's released, she buys a one-way train ticket to California. Jeannette hopes California will become Maureen's true home, with its warmth, grapes free for picking, and the opportunity to sleep under the stars.

As a child, Maureen had often asked her siblings to tell her about California, which she was too young to remember. While Jeannette sought a home through a career, for Maureen it may be more a sense of place that will define home.

Though Maureen didn't want anyone to actually see her off at the train station, Jeannette wakes up early the morning of Maureen's departure to imagine her leaving. Jeanette regretfully things about how she never had, or made, time to really care for Maureen in New York.

As Jeannette grew up she was increasingly frustrated with her parents for their inability to take care of and responsibility for her. But did she fail to do the same for her sister?

Jeannette hardly sees Mom and Dad for a year or so, until she gets a phone call from Dad inviting her to the tenement. When she arrives, she sees that he has a beard for the first time. When she asks about it, he says it's now or never—he's dying.

Jeannette's realization about Maureen has only deepened the borders between her life and her parents'. Their physical changes, like Dad's beard, mark this passing of time.

Dad tells Jeannette that he got into a fight with Nigerian drug dealers, which has given him a rare and un-curable disease. She knows that the illness is actually the product of all his cigarettes and alcohol, but lets him go on.

Recall Dad's improbable if not fantastic stories about demons and piloting. Through stories Dad imposes another, more appealing narrative on his life. It is completely clear now that Dad's stories were a way not just of entertaining his children but of hiding the truth from himself, of ducking the responsibility and therefore shame of what he had put his family through.

Jeannette knows how much chaos Dad has created for her, but also cannot imagine life without him, and acknowledges his unique love for her. She apologizes for not asking him to her graduation, but he shrugs it off and says that he's proud of her.

It takes Dad's approaching death for Jeannette to realize how disorder and turbulence have not been uniformly negative in her life; at least, she wouldn't be who she is without them.

On her way out, Dad asks if he's ever let her down. He immediately starts laughing, and Jeannette smiles too.

Dad knows the answer is yes—he now accepts that truth—and in accepting it the shame of failing in that responsibility seems a good deal less.

Two weeks later, Dad has a heart attack. Before they let him off life support, Jeannette visits the hospital and has a strong desire to pick him up and run down the hospital halls one more time.

Flashback to one of the early scenes, when Dad gathers Jeannette into his arms and they "escape" from the hospital together, towards another adventure. Despite everything, Jeanette still loves him and wants to give him that feeling of safety and excitement that he gave to her, to bring him to that border between order and turbulence.

In the weeks following Dad's death, Jeannette finds herself restless and uncomfortable, always wanting to be somewhere else or, especially, on the move. She picks up skating, but soon realizes that she needs to reconsider more major things.

Her inability to stay in any one place suggests that Jeannette does not see herself as belonging in any of them—a problem that surface-level solutions like skating won't resolve.

Jeannette leaves Eric a year later, realizing that he's not the man for her, and that Park Avenue is not where she belongs.

This decision seems to be tied to Jeannette's desire to seek a true home, a realization she's had with Dad's death. In Eric, she had run to the opposite of what her parents were, and had run to a ready-made home of wealth and comfort. But she hadn't found, hadn't built, a home that fit her.

Though Jeannette's desire to always be moving fades, she still enjoys walking at night, where on particularly clear nights she is able to see Venus.

Dad's Christmas gift to her allows her to remember Dad but also to orient herself emotionally in a changing environment.

PART 5: THANKSGIVING

Five years after Dad dies, Jeannette awaits Mom and Lori at the train station near the country farmhouse that she has recently bought and renovated with her second husband, John. He suggested that she invite her family to Thanksgiving there.

With a rapid fast-forward between Parts 4 and 5, we shift from a turbulent, transitional moment to what looks like a kind of stability for Jeannette. Dad never built the Glass Castle. But Jeanette has built this house.

They drive through the woods and marsh ponds to the house, as John tells Mom and Lori about the area's history and farm life. Jeannette feels comfortable with John, a writer, whose mother is from Tennessee—not far from Welch.

Though Jeannette had always refused to admit that Welch was any kind of a home to her, her comfort with John's family history suggests otherwise. She seems to have found a balance between city and country.

When they arrive, Brian and Jessica, John's daughter from his first marriage, come out of the house, and Brian teases Mom about the dumpster gifts she probably has brought for the family.

In New York, these gifts were a cause of shame for Dad, but by now the family seems comfortable enough to be able to joke about them.

Brian, now a sergeant detective, is now divorced from his wife. But he's enjoyed his time renovating a town house in Brooklyn and being pursued by two other women, so he hasn't done badly, Jeannette concludes.

Simply escaping from Welch and from Mom and Dad is clearly no guarantee that all would be easy for the Walls kids, though that realization is part of growing up for them.

John and Jeannette show Mom and Lori the gardens, which they've prepared for winter, and Mom seems to appreciate their self-sufficiency.

Jeannette still values Mom's appreciation. And she's internalized, and accepted, at least some of Mom's creed of self-sufficiency.

When Mom sees the pool, she shrieks in delight as she runs onto the green cover and falls into it. Brian's own daughter Veronica seems fascinated but confused. Jeannette tells her that Grandma Walls is different from her other grandmother, but Jessica notes that Jeannette and her mother's laugh are exactly alike.

Mom's childlike qualities have often exasperated Jeannette. Yet through Veronica's eyes she can again see how her mother's non-conformist exuberance can be exhilarating. Further, Jessica's comment about the similarity of Mom and Jeanette's laugh notes that despite Jeanette's vow to never be like her mother, she will always, because Mom is her mother, share similarities with her. And that Jeanette notes this with calm suggests that as she has grown up and built her own home, she has come to accept her past and her parents as part of herself.

Jeannette shows Mom and Lori the house, the first she's ever owned, with fireplaces and high ceilings. The kitchen is packed with multiple Thanksgiving dishes, and as Brian and Jeannette look at the spread she knows he's thinking the same thing she is—as he puts it, it's not that difficult to feed a family. But Lori admonishes him not to mention that now.

Jeanette is not ashamed of these possessions, yet they are also a different sort of possession from the art objects she shared with Eric. Seeing the meal reminds all the Walls of their resentments about the way they were raised—how their parents put their own needs and cares among providing even the most simple needs, like food, for their children, shows how they can never entirely escape that past. Yet that they don't criticize their mother or get angry suggests that while that past will always be a part of them it doesn't have to rule them, that they can grow beyond it.

At dinner, Mom says that the city has finally decided to sell the apartments to the squatters for one dollar each. She'll have to return soon for the squatters' board meeting, she says.

Not long after Jeannette finally owns a home of her own, it seems that Mom will be able to as well. Mom has found a home among the squatters.

Mom also mentions that Maureen is thinking about coming back for a visit.

As the novel comes to a close, loose ends are tied up, so that the reader can place Maureen's status as well.

The family, following John's suggestion, drinks a toast to Dad: "Life with your father was never boring," Mom says.

The toast is a massive understatement, but also seems a proper homage.

It grows windy outside, and Jeannette notices that the **flames** from the candle move somewhat, the border between order and turbulence shifting again.

It is fitting that the novel ends with fire, so omnipresent in Jeannette's life. This time it is a fire on a candle, though, a controlled fire within a stable home, and yet Jeanette also still has the lessons her father taught her, can still appreciate that beauty on the border between order and chaos, and that appreciation enlivens her life.

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