***The Glass Castle***

1 I never believed in Santa Claus.

2 None of us kids did. Mom and Dad refused to let us. They couldn't afford expensive presents, and they didn't want us to think we weren't as good as other kids who, on Christmas morning, found all sorts of fancy toys under the tree that were supposedly left by Santa Claus. So they told us all about how other kids were deceived by their parents, how the toys the grown-ups claimed were made by little elves wearing bell caps in their workshop at the North Pole actually had labels on them saying MADE IN JAPAN.

3 "Try not to look down on those other children," Mom said. "It's not their fault that they've been brainwashed into believing silly myths."

4 We celebrated Christmas, but usually about a week after December 25, when you could find perfectly good bows and wrapping paper that people had thrown away and Christmas trees discarded on the roadside that still had most of their needles and even some silver tinsel hanging on them. Mom and Dad would give us a bag of marbles or a doll or a slingshot that had been marked way down in an after-Christmas sale.

5 Dad lost his job at the gypsum mine after getting in an argument with the foreman, and when Christmas came that year, we had no money at all. On Christmas Eve, Dad took each of us kids out into the desert night one by one. I had a blanket wrapped around me, and when it was my turn, I offered to share it with Dad, but he said no thanks. The cold never bothered him. I was five that year and I sat next to Dad and we looked up at the sky. Dad loved to talk about the stars. He explained to us how they rotated through the night sky as the Earth turned. He taught us to identify the constellations and how to navigate by the North Star. Those shining stars, he liked to point out, were one of the special treats for people like us who lived out in the wilderness. Rich city folks, he'd say, lived in fancy apartments, but their air was so polluted they couldn't even see the stars. We'd have to be out of our minds to want to trade places with any of them.

6 "Pick out your favorite star," Dad said that night. He told me I could have it for keeps. He said it was my Christmas present. "You can't give me a star!" I said. "No one owns the stars." "That's right," Dad said. "No one else owns them. You just have to claim it before anyone else does, like that dago fellow Columbus claimed America for Queen Isabella. Claiming a star as your own has every bit as much logic to it."

7 I thought about it and realized Dad was right. He was always figuring out things like that.

8 I could have any star I wanted, Dad said, except Betelgeuse and Rigel, because Lori and Brian had already laid claim to them.

9 I looked up to the stars and tried to figure out which was the best one. You could see hundreds, maybe thousands or even millions, twinkling in the clear desert sky. The longer you looked and the more your eyes adjusted to the dark, the more stars you'd see, layer after layer of them gradually becoming visible. There was one in particular, in the west above the mountains but low in the sky, that shone more brightly than all the rest.

10 "I want that one," I said.

11 Dad grinned. "That's Venus ," he said. Venus was only a planet, he went on, and pretty dinky compared to real stars. She looked bigger and brighter because she was much closer than the stars. Poor old Venus didn't even make her own light, Dad said. She shone only from reflected light. He explained to me that planets glowed because reflected light was constant, and stars twinkled because their light pulsed.

12 "I like it anyway," I said. I had admired Venus even before that Christmas. You could see it in the early evening, glowing on the western horizon, and if you got up early, you could still see it in the morning, after all the stars had disappeared.

13 "What the hell," Dad said. "It's Christmas. You can have a planet if you want."

14 And he gave me Venus.

15 That evening over Christmas dinner, we all discussed outer space. Dad explained light years and black holes and quasars and told us about the special qualities of Betelgeuse, Rigel and Venus. Betelgeuse was a red star in the shoulder of the constellation Orion. It was one of the largest stars you could see in the sky, hundreds of times bigger than the sun. It had burned brightly for millions of years and would soon become a supernova and burn out. I got upset that Lori had chosen a clunker of a star, but Dad explained that "soon" meant hundreds of thousands of years when you were talking about stars.

16 Rigel was a blue star, smaller than Betelgeuse, Dad said, but even brighter. It was also in Orion – it was his left foot, which seemed appropriate, because Brian was an extra-fast runner.

17 Venus didn't have any moons or satellites or even a magnetic field, but it did have an atmosphere sort of similar to Earth's, except it was super-hot – about five hundred degrees or more. "So," Dad said, "when the sun starts to burn out and Earth turns cold, everyone here might want to move to Venus to get warm. And they'll have to get permission from your descendants first."

18 We laughed about 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."