

The Glass Castle

A Memoir

Jeannette Walls

Jeannette Walls grew up with parents whose ideals and stubborn non-conformity were both their curse and their salvation. Rex and Rose Mary Walls had four children. In the beginning, they lived like nomads, moving among Southwest desert towns, camping in the mountains. Rex was a charismatic, brilliant man who, when sober, captured his children's imagination, teaching them physics, geology, and above all, how to embrace life fearlessly. Rose Mary, who painted and wrote and couldn't stand the responsibility of providing for her family, called herself an "excitement addict." Cooking a meal that would be consumed in fifteen minutes had no appeal when she could make a painting that might last forever.

Later, when the money ran out, or the romance of the wandering life faded, the Walls retreated to the dismal West Virginia mining town -- and the family -- Rex Walls had done everything he could to escape. He drank. He stole the grocery money and disappeared for days. As the dysfunction of the family escalated, Jeannette and her brother and sisters had to fend for themselves, supporting one another as they weathered their parents' betrayals and, finally, found the resources and will to leave home.

What is so astonishing about Jeannette Walls is not just that she had the guts and tenacity and intelligence to get out, but that she describes her parents with such deep affection and generosity. Hers is a story of triumph against all odds, but also a tender, moving tale of unconditional love in a family that despite its profound flaws gave her the fiery determination to carve out a successful life on her own terms.

For two decades, Jeannette Walls hid her roots. Now she tells her own story. A regular contributor to MSNBC.com, she lives in New York and Long Island and is married to the writer John Taylor.



*My parents, Rose Mary and Rex Walls,
on their wedding day, 1956*

I

A WOMAN
ON THE STREET

I WAS SITTING IN a taxi, wondering if I had overdressed for the evening, when I looked out the window and saw Mom rooting through a Dumpster. It was just after dark. A blustery March wind whipped the steam coming out of the manholes, and people hurried along the sidewalks with their collars turned up. I was stuck in traffic two blocks from the party where I was heading.

Mom stood fifteen feet away. She had tied rags around her shoulders to keep out the spring chill and was picking through the trash while her dog, a black-and-white terrier mix, played at her feet. Mom's gestures were all familiar—the way she tilted her head and thrust out her lower lip when studying items of potential value that she'd hoisted out of the Dumpster, the way her eyes widened with childish glee when she found something she liked. Her long hair was streaked with gray, tangled and matted, and her eyes had sunk deep into their sockets, but still she reminded me of the mom she'd been when I was a kid, swan-diving off cliffs and painting in the desert and reading Shakespeare aloud. Her cheekbones were still high and strong, but the skin was parched and ruddy from all those winters and summers exposed to the elements. To the people walking by, she probably looked like any of the thousands of homeless people in New York City.

It had been months since I laid eyes on Mom, and when she looked up, I was overcome with panic that she'd see me and call out my name, and that someone on the way to the same party would spot us together and Mom would introduce herself and my secret would be out.

I slid down in the seat and asked the driver to turn around and take me home to Park Avenue.

The taxi pulled up in front of my building, the doorman held the door for me, and the elevator man took me up to my floor. My husband was working late, as he did most nights, and the apartment was silent except for the click of my heels on the polished wood floor. I was still rattled from seeing Mom, the unexpectedness of coming across her, the

sight of her rooting happily through the Dumpster. I put some Vivaldi on, hoping the music would settle me down.

I looked around the room. There were the turn-of-the-century bronze-and-silver vases and the old books with worn leather spines that I'd collected at flea markets. There were the Georgian maps I'd had framed, the Persian rugs, and the overstuffed leather armchair I liked to sink into at the end of the day. I'd tried to make a home for myself here, tried to turn the apartment into the sort of place where the person I wanted to be would live. But I could never enjoy the room without worrying about Mom and Dad huddled on a sidewalk grate somewhere. I fretted about them, but I was embarrassed by them, too, and ashamed of myself for wearing pearls and living on Park Avenue while my parents were busy keeping warm and finding something to eat.

What could I do? I'd tried to help them countless times, but Dad would insist they didn't need anything, and Mom would ask for something silly, like a perfume atomizer or a membership in a health club. They said that they were living the way they wanted to.

After ducking down in the taxi so Mom wouldn't see me, I hated myself—hated my antiques, my clothes, and my apartment. I had to do something, so I called a friend of Mom's and left a message. It was our system of staying in touch. It always took Mom a few days to get back to me, but when I heard from her, she sounded, as always, cheerful and casual, as though we'd had lunch the day before. I told her I wanted to see her and suggested she drop by the apartment, but she wanted to go to a restaurant. She loved eating out, so we agreed to meet for lunch at her favorite Chinese restaurant.

Mom was sitting at a booth, studying the menu, when I arrived. She'd made an effort to fix herself up. She wore a bulky gray sweater with only a few light stains, and black leather men's shoes. She'd washed her face, but her neck and temples were still dark with grime.

She waved enthusiastically when she saw me. "It's my baby girl!" she called out. I kissed her cheek. Mom had dumped all the plastic packets of soy sauce and duck sauce and hot-and-spicy mustard from the table into her purse. Now she emptied a wooden bowl of dried noodles into it as well. "A little snack for later on," she explained.

We ordered. Mom chose the Seafood Delight. "You know how I love my seafood," she said.

She started talking about Picasso. She'd seen a retrospective of his work and decided he was hugely overrated. All the cubist stuff was gimmicky, as far as she was concerned. He hadn't really done anything worthwhile after his Rose Period.

"I'm worried about you," I said. "Tell me what I can do to help."

Her smile faded. "What makes you think I need your help?"

"I'm not rich," I said. "But I have some money. Tell me what it is you need."

She thought for a moment. "I could use an electrolysis treatment."

"Be serious."

"I am serious. If a woman looks good, she feels good."

"Come on, Mom." I felt my shoulders tightening up, the way they invariably did during these conversations. "I'm talking about something that could help you change your life, make it better."

"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."

"Mom, I saw you picking through trash in the East Village a few days ago."

"Well, people in this country are too wasteful. It's my way of recycling." She took a bite of her Seafood Delight. "Why didn't you say hello?"

"I was too ashamed, Mom. I hid."

Mom pointed her chopsticks at me. "You see?" she said. "Right there. That's exactly what I'm saying. You're way too easily embarrassed. Your father and I are who we are. Accept it."

"And what am I supposed to tell people about my parents?"

"Just tell the truth," Mom said. "That's simple enough."

II

THE DESERT

I WAS ON FIRE.

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

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

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

Mom ran into the room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you guys miss me?" I asked my older sister, Lori, during one visit.

"Not really," she said. "Too much has been happening."

“Like what?”

“Just the normal stuff.”

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

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

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

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

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

Brian thought that was hilarious and just laughed and laughed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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