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| **The Glass CastleBy: Jeanette Walls**© 2005 by Jeanette Walls. |

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We were always doing the skedaddle, usually in the middle of the night. I sometimes heard Mom and Dad discussing the people who were after us. Dad called them henchmen, bloodsuckers, and the gestapo. Sometimes he would make mysterious references to executives from Standard Oil who were trying to steal the Texas land that mom's family owned, and FBI agents who were after dad for some dark episode that he never told us about because he didn't want to put us in danger, too. Dad was so sure a posse of federal investigators was on our trail that he smoked his unfiltered cigarettes from the wrong end. That way, he explained, he burned up the brand name, and of the people who were tracking us looked in his ashtray, they'd find unidentifiable butts instead of Pall Malls that could be traced to him. Mom, however, told us that the FBI wasn't really after Dad; he just liked to say they were because it was more fun having the FBI on your tail than bill collectors.We moved around like nomads. We lived in dusty little mining towns in Nevada, Arizona, and California. They were usually nothing but a tiny cluster of sad, sunken shacks, a gas station, a dry-goods store, and a bar or two. They had names like Needles and Bouse, Pie, Goffs, and Why, and they were near places like the Superstition Mountains, the dried-up Soda Lake, and the Old Woman Mountain. The more desolate and isolated a place Wise, the better mom and dad liked it.Dad would get a job as an electrician or engineer in the gypsum or copper mine. Mom liked to say that Dad could talk a blue streak, spinning tales of jobs he’d never had and college degrees he’d never earned. He could get about any job he wanted, he just didn't like keeping it for long. Sometimes he made money gambling or doing odd jobs. When he got bored or was fired or the unpaid bills piled up too high or the lineman from the electrical company found out he had hotwired our trailer to the utility poles -- or the FBI was closing in -- we packed up in the middle of the night and took off, driving until Mom and Dad found another small town that caught their eye. Then we'd circle around, looking for houses with for-rent signs stuck in the front yard. Every now and then, we'd go stay with Grandma Smith, Mom's mom, who lives in the big white house in Phoenix. Grandma Smith was a West Texas flapper who loved dancing and cussing and horses. She was known for being able to break the wildest broncs and had helped Grandpa run the ranch up near Fish Creek Canyon, Arizona, which was west of Bullhead City, not too far from the Grand Canyon. I thought Grandma Smith was great. But after a few weeks, she and Dad would always get into some nasty hollering match. It might start with Mom mentioning how sure we were on cash. Then Grandma would make a snide comment about Dad being shiftless. Dad would say something about selfish old crones with more money than they knew what to do with, and soon enough they'd be face-to-face in what amounted to a full-fledged cussing contest.

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"You flea bitten drunk!" Grandma would scream."You goddamned flint-faced hag!" Dad would shout back."You no-good two-bit b\*stard!""You scaly castrating banshee b\*tch!"Dad had the more inventive vocabulary, but Grandma Smith could outshout him; plus, she had the home-court advantage. A time would come when Dad had had enough and he'd tell us kids to get in the car. Grandma would yell at Mom not to let that worthless horse’s a$$ take her grandchildren. Mom would shrug and say there was nothing she could do about it, he was her husband. Off we’d go, heading out into the desert in search of another house for rent in another little mining town.Some of the people who lived in those towns had been there for years. Others were rootless, like us -- just passing through. They were gamblers or ex-cons or war veterans or what Mom called loose women. There were old prospectors, their faces wrinkled and brown from the sun, like dried-up apples. The kids were lean and hard, with calluses on their hands and feet. We'd make friends with them, but not close friends, because we knew we'd be moving on sooner or later.We might enroll in school, but not always. Mom and Dad did most of our teaching. Mom had us all reading books without pictures by the time we were five, and Dad taught us math. He also taught us the things that were really important and useful, like how to tap out Morse code and how we should never eat the liver of a polar bear because all the vitamin A in it could kill us.He showed us how to aim and fire his pistol, how to shoot Mom’s bow and arrows, and how to throw a knife by the blade so that it landed in the middle of a target with a satisfying thwock. By the time I was four, I was pretty good with dad's pistol, a big black six-shot revolver, and could hit five out of six beer bottles at 30 paces. I'd hold the gun with both hands, sight down the barrel, and squeeze the trigger slowly and smoothly until, with a loud clap, the gun kicked and the bottle exploded. It was fun. Dad said my sharpshooting would come in handy if the feds ever surrounded us.

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Mom had grown up in the desert. She loved the dry, crackling heat, the way the sky at sunset looked like a sheet of fire, and the overwhelming emptiness and severity of all that open land that had once been a huge ocean bed. Most people had trouble surviving in the desert, but Mom thrived there. She knew how to get by on next to nothing. She showed us which plants were edible and which were toxic. She was able to find water when no one else could, and she knew how little of that you really needed. She taught us that you could wash yourself up pretty clean with just a couple of water. She said it was good for you to drink unpurified water, even ditchwater, as long as animals were drinking from it. Chlorinated city water was for namby-pambies, she said. Water from the wild helped build up your antibodies. She also thought toothpaste was for namby-pambies. At bedtime we'd shake a little baking soda into the palm of one hand, mix in a dash of hydrogen peroxide, then use our fingers to clean our teeth with the fizzing paste.I loved the desert, too. When the sun was in the sky, the sand would be so hot that it would burn your feet if you were the kind of kid who wore shoes, but since we always went barefoot, our soles were as tough and thick as cowhide. We'd catch scorpions and snakes and horny toads. We'd search for gold, and when we couldn't find it, we collect other valuable rocks, like turquoise and garnets. There'd be a cool spell come sundown, when the mosquitoes would fly in so thick that the air would grow dark with them, then at nightfall, it turned so cold that we usually needed blankets.There were fierce sandstorms. Sometimes they hit without warning, and other times you knew one was coming when you saw batches of dust devils swirling and dancing their way across the desert. Once the wind started whipping up the sand, you could only see a foot in front of your face. If you couldn't find a house or car or a shed to hide in when the sandstorm started, you had to squat down and close your eyes and mouth real tight and cover your ears and bury your face in your lap until it passed, or else your body cavities would fill with sand. A big tumbleweed might hit you, but they were light and bouncy and didn't hurt. If the sandstorm was really strong, it knocked you over, and you rolled around like you were a tumbleweed. |

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| **Jeannette Walls***Jeannette Walls is the author of the best-selling book,*[*The Glass Castle: A Memoir*](http://astore.amazon.com/memoirsbyme-20/detail/074324754X/002-0483260-0882466)*, published by Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc., NY.* |