

FALL OR FLY

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Introduction

Welcome to Coalton

True, beneath the human façade, I was an interloper, an alien whose ship had crashed beyond hope of repair in the backwoods of Southern Appalachia—but at least I'd learned to walk and talk enough like the locals to be rejected as one of their own.

—Sol Luckman

A baby is born with a need to be loved—and never outgrows it.

—Frank A. Clark

THERE ARE two ways to achieve parenthood in this life: sex and paperwork. Most people prefer the first method, but it's good to know there's something else to fall back on.

The world of foster care is an amazing place, a maze of a place, a blazing mess of a place, and one of the most strangely hopeful places you can enter. Accent on "strange." If you say the words "foster care," people's minds fly to the inner city: New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and their skyscraping poverty. Add "adoption in Appalachia," and here come

the consanguinity jokes. “Aren’t you all one big happy family anyway? Why make it official?”

Investigating foster care and adoption in the Appalachian Coalfields provides little opportunity for laughter, however. The truth is that more than 90 percent of the children up for adoption in this region have living parents.¹ In the majority of cases, the kids are “available” because of their parents’ substance abuse, and since dealing drugs tends to be a family business (and using drugs a genetic scourge), these children have no suitable blood relations to look after them.

Perhaps it is best to start with a description rather than with statistics. In the same way that the Ozarks or the West Coast can be both stretched to a one-size-fits-all covering and narrowed to specific zip codes, Appalachia has at least two definitions. The US government says it is a vast stretch of economic, geographic, and population diversity encompassing portions of twelve states from Alabama to New York, plus the whole of West Virginia. In casual usage, “Appalachia” tends to mean the central belt of this governmental stretch, rife with mountains and coal seams. If Appalachia is a beautiful, resilient, misunderstood place, Central Appalachia is its poster child.

Then there are the Coalfields, which are part but not all of Central Appalachia. This mostly mountainous region is—save for a sprinkling of cities—sparsely populated, low on jobs outside the extraction industry, and full of twists and turns in roads and cultural mindset alike. Both physical and mental navigation can be difficult to the newcomer. Also, Coalfields isn’t an official term: Are there coal mines nearby? Okay, you’re in the Coalfields.

Take West Virginia out of the picture and focus on an area consisting of almost equal parts of Kentucky, North Carolina, Virginia, and Tennessee. Therein sit upward of 12,000 children with living parents who have lost custody—a big number, and every single one of them has a face, a name, a story. Let’s pull that unfathomable statistic down again by focusing on a location that is losing its coal and lumber mainstays yet filling up with foster kids, 496 at a recent count. We’ll call it Coalton, in honor of its heritage. Coalton spans two states, encompasses one large (50,000+ residents) and a few small (fewer than 5,000 people) cities, and includes parts of the Unaka, Cumberland, and Chilhowee mountain ranges, as well as the Smokies. It is where I conducted the interviews in this book.

Permit me to introduce myself next. I'm an Appalachian born outside Great Rock, a midsized town in Coalton that has been my home for the past decade. These days I own a bookstore and direct a health organization; in my earlier years, I was a journalist and then a professional storyteller. I am neither a foster parent nor a foster child.

WHO'S TELLING THESE STORIES, AND WHY?

In these pages you will meet several social workers, but four are recurring characters: Cody, the hard-talking cynical altruist; sweet, brokenhearted Beth; feisty young Barbie, half righteous indignation, half passionate hope; and wise elder statesman Dale, who has guided them all. They will be your guides for this inquiry, and they are composite characters. Their personalities are based on those of key social workers I came to know well, but the words these characters speak come from many workers interviewed during the year I spent gathering the sixty-two separate oral histories represented in this book. To protect anonymity, and also to frame the inquiry in a way that makes it flow, the social workers are combined into these four, plus a few others.

So when I say that "Dale" asked me to develop this book, I mean that a man with an amazing reputation in his community, backed by colleagues in his agency, e-mailed to ask, "Could you do for foster parents what you did for those cancer patients?"

Two years before, a regional cancer center had offered a grant to help cancer survivors shape their stories into tellable narratives for those not facing the same journey. The storytellers and I then went to various faith and community centers where these survivors, sometimes along with family members who had lost loved ones, told their personal tales to intimate audiences. One of these was the church where Dale serves as pastor. The project resulted in bittersweet tears, exchanged phone numbers, and an increase in appointments at free screening clinics. That last outcome had been the stated goal of the grant.

"Could you do that for foster parenting?" Dale asked. "I think more people would do it [become foster parents] if they understood a few things. Get us some storytellers going. And could you write a book?"

In 2012, St. Martin's Press published my memoir describing the comedic adventures of opening a bookstore in a small Coalfields town. But St. Martin's was a big New York City publisher with major distribution channels; a regional book would not interest them, and the opportunity to feature regional voices was what interested us. Also, as I pointed out to Dale, *Little Bookstore* was about running a bookshop, something I had actually done. My background included neither social work nor foster parenting.

Dale is a very persuasive guy, so we dropped the book idea and altered the live storytelling plan to an online forum. Soon we were plotting access strategies. Social workers tend to be reticent and bound by regulations—and full of untold stories roiling below their calm surface demeanors.

We settled on a regional blog as the venue. *Adoption in Appalachia* would provide anonymity, dignity, and a timeless forum for people who felt ready to tell their stories. It circumvented any potential exploitation of tales that really belonged to children too young to give permission for telling them. Best of all, the stories didn't have to be cleared with "headquarters" because no one would ever know who the social workers were.

That beginning was my first clue of just how deep into the inky blackness of uncharted waters this storytelling journalism project could go. Most reporters will tell you that we are guided by an insatiable curiosity coupled with a willingness to be invasive. As I listened to foster parents, social workers, adopted and foster children, and support-service people like pastors and counselors tell their stories, I began to form questions. Questions that would not go away.

What does it mean to love someone? When is it acceptable to judge someone for how they do something that you're not even willing to try? Who is foster care for, the children or the community around them? How long can this system sustain itself?

With information and support gathering in full swing—and with questions buzzing like angry bees inside me—Dale and I planned to launch the blog at an Appalachian Studies Association Conference held at East Tennessee State University. Shortly after the information on our session went out in the preconference program, an e-mail arrived from Gillian Berchowitz. She had read about our storytelling blog on adoption. Was there a book associated with the project? No? Would we like there to be?

Dale answered his phone on the second ring. I read him the e-mails, then added, “Dude, that was cheating, playing your minister card to ask God for a publisher.”

I could hear him grinning all the way down the phone line.

That’s how the opportunity to give voice to a group of people who rarely get such a hearing entered our lives. The goal was to make sure the stories were honest: no cotton-candy sweetness or sparkling rainbow veils.² But the stories also depended on my access to people willing to talk to me and on how eager they were to tell of their own experiences. As a result, this book has tilts and twirls to it; I make no pretense that this is a comprehensive picture, just that it is a deeply veined one, sometimes hitting seams that have been left embedded without translation from the chaotic vernacular in which they were uncovered. If the stories told here don’t seem to make sense sometimes, or seem like they shouldn’t have happened, that’s because they don’t make sense and probably shouldn’t have happened.

Gillian was particularly interested in a book that focused on the true day-to-day tales of those inside this localized world of adoption and foster care. Thus, these stories had to deal in a fair but unequivocal manner with the years of exploitation that the mass media have laid over people’s understandings of Central Appalachia. No poverty stereotypes, no easy applications of “everybody knows,” and no apologies for not being inspirational. Although the work encompasses cultural issues that may be unique to Appalachia, the stories offer little comparison between Coalton and the rest of the country, citing only a few statistics to show how Coalfields residents stack up against the wider world. Comparisons and statistics are for the most part restricted to the endnotes.

Since you were interested enough to pick up a book on the subject, likely you already understand that foster care is an international issue with significant cultural variations. *Fall or Fly* examines small areas of a defined multistate region within a single country. While foster care in Coalton may differ from or bear burdens similar to how foster care functions and dysfunctions in other places, this inquiry is about a few places inside the Coalfields, representing the larger picture.

I said “no apologies,” but perhaps one is owed to Dale, who started this project in order to recruit foster parents. The more people inside this world talked, the deeper their stories became—and the more I worried that

what had been intended as recruitment had morphed into exposé. Social workers are rarely given a free pass to tell tales, so it's only natural that the negative stories came first; the reader should keep this in mind and try not to build a false picture if many of the events narrated here showcase frustration rather than inspiration. It's good that the project offered social workers a chance to tell their side, because foster care stories are like twelve-sided dice: you never know what's coming up, depending on who's doing the telling.

As for Dale, he let me off the hook one day while I struggled to articulate how few of the stories held "commercially viable" inspirational appeal.

"We don't want to recruit under false pretenses, and we don't want parents who think they'll be the next Hallmark movie. Just tell the stories truthfully. That's enough."

I hope so, because *Fall or Fly* encompasses humans full of rage and a system plagued by crazy, alongside homes redolent with warmth and offering pathways to possibility. The takeaway most will find here has two parts:

1. Adopted and foster children, their parents, and their social workers include some of the most hopeful humans you will ever meet.
2. Despite official-speak, they have had few reasons and even less encouragement to be so hopeful.

Children in Coalton's foster care system are doubly burdened. First, they're kids. Who listens to kids, even when they're trying to articulate their own needs in the face of harsh circumstances? Second, those from Appalachia's Coalfields have grown accustomed to being helped rather than listened to. History has taught citizens here that helpers aren't interested in what we people of Appalachia know, far less in who we know ourselves to be; they're here to "fix" us so we can be all they know we can be, if only we knew better. That applies to kids too.

It is undignified to be a victim. The Coalfields population may or may not be one; answers vary with each person you might gather the courage to ask. But these young'uns shifting between houses with no say in the matter, learning contradictory rules with each move, bleeding dignity every time they stuff their personal belongings into a garbage bag and occupy

the backseat of a car? They are victimized. Self-efficacy is the first casualty, followed by trust, confidence, hope, and a viable future. Yet these children are our future.

COLLECTING THE STORIES

The interviews resumed after Dale's encouragement, this time more in-depth, taking little diamonds of individual telling and turning them into as holistic as possible a depiction of what's going on in foster care and adoption in the Coalfields. Phone calls and "I can meet you at the Mountainside Dairy Queen tomorrow morning" notes flew via Facebook Messenger. The core group of a dozen people who'd been my informant base expanded, slowly, as trust built.

We—the social workers, the foster kids, and I—were careful in the telling and collection of stories. Nobody's real name appears in any of the transcripts; I kept forgetting real names and called informants by their pseudonyms when asking for follow-up interviews, causing moments of confused merriment. When possible, interviewees read the drafts of their stories and made tweaks or comments. In the early stages, not many foster parents were willing to speak to me, so I worried about balance when social workers and foster kids discussed events involving foster families. Yet both groups also willingly told uncomplimentary stories about themselves.

The first in line to talk tended to be the social workers. Former and current foster children were a mixed bag of reluctance and eagerness; foster parents rarely returned phone calls; adoptive parents were mostly happy to chat; but it was the social workers who loosed pent-up torrents that turned mountain stoicism into volcanoes spitting boiling lava.

Social workers and foster parents have several things in common, and the first one you notice, when standing outside listening in, is that neither group can catch a break in public opinion. They are either saints or sinners—"no middle ground," as one interviewee said months later, articulating the observation in a single phrase. Foster parents tend to be seen either as naïve victims for taking a cuckoo's egg into their nest or as paragons like Mother Theresa. Either way, bless your heart but you're not to be trusted, because you're not like the rest of us humans.

As for the public's opinion of social workers, who would do that job for that pay? Their very altruism made them suspect. Social workers rarely get to talk without repercussions, and they really wanted people to understand that Coalton culture sometimes eats social programs for lunch. Over and over again, the stories social workers told hit a common theme: parents who were part of the problem rather than the solution. It took a lot of listening to get past the anger and hear the reasons behind the stories the workers wanted to tell. Social workers in the Coalfields vary widely in type and temperament, but if I had to choose one phrase with which to summarize their perspective, it would be "benevolent frustration."

One of my earliest lessons in listening with discernment during conversations between foster parents and social workers came from asking the latter about things they didn't deal with directly. (I asked about group homes.) Caseworkers who had been talking nonstop at one hundred words per minute shut down faster than a flooded coal mine. And proved harder to open back up. Finally, it became clear: what dedicated social workers couldn't change for the better, they wouldn't talk about. That thing did not exist in their world. Cut off the part you can't save; close the doors on the energy drain that won't yield results. Eventually, I learned that this defense mechanism applied equally to government bureaucracy, bad foster parents, and kids who were their own worst enemies.

What's interesting in light of this observation is that the workers talked practically nonstop about foster parents overly concerned with money or morals. If you think about it, maybe that's a hopeful sign. Because social workers don't waste their breath on things they can't change, if the bulk of their venting centered on foster parents, then foster parenting is likely a place where awareness can bring about positive change. I'd like to think so, given that my original intent was to recruit foster parents.

Interviews with foster parents proved more difficult. Social workers thrust contact details on me with the parents' permission, but the latter often exhibited passive resistance when I called. Too busy, so sorry. Actual refusals varied in wording but centered on the foster parents' feeling that they had little good to say about the system, coupled with reluctance to discourage someone considering being a foster parent. Some felt their experiences were too stereotypical to be understood outside the region. Others thought them too unique to avoid identification; they didn't want

to be targeted, prosecuted, or recognized. Four interviewees or contacted individuals narrated similar tales of coping with an older foster's inappropriate behavior to a younger child yet forbade publishing that story because people would recognize them.

Adoptive parents, on the other hand, were eager to talk. Most started as foster parents and fell in love with specific children. They were as happy to relate their history as any couple explaining how they met and fell in love. Adoptive parents were also more forthcoming about existing and prior struggles with their children. When I first mentioned the different trust levels observed between foster and adoptive parents during interviews, I was standing in the office parking lot after meeting with Cody about how to proceed in collecting stories. He said he wasn't surprised and offered an early clue into the difference between adoption and foster care, as viewed by case managers (those who oversee the care of displaced children). He suggested that most people doing foster care for good reasons wind up adopting.

"Long-term foster homes are where you find the stuff going on that you don't want to find. Not always, but our goal is always adoption." Parents who foster, unless they do respite or emergency care, tend to wind up realizing that the best way to make a difference is to choose one child or sibling group and adopt. "So you're trying to talk to those who are feeling too new to talk, or maybe they're not wanting a lot of disclosure. Or they're trying to adopt and getting yanked around by the bio parents and the system. Either way, they're in limbo."

At the time, barely two weeks into the interviews, his comment didn't resonate. I watched Cody hop into his jeep, scribbled his words on the back of a napkin in my car (fieldworkers take note: never turn your recorder off, even in the parking lot after a good night's collecting), and filed the comment under "see if this attaches to something later." A month later, what he'd meant made sense. You'll read in this book several narratives of people who made the journey through foster care to adoption.

Then there were the interviews with kids. We set ground rules: No one under the age of fifteen. Aged-out adults who used to be in foster families were preferred. I could make observations while attending family-fun events held by Department of Social Services (DSS) or therapeutic agencies but could not conduct interviews. In the end, I talked to nine foster kids, past and present. They were the smallest group of interviewees.

WHO ARE THESE STORIES FOR?

Like foster parents and social workers, Appalachia is a sitting duck for judgment from people who watch life there unfold in dysfunctional hidef from the coziness of an armchair. In Coalton, blaming the victim and suspecting those who came to help have both been elevated to art forms. If this book produces mission-like zeal toward adopting children out of Appalachia, as a couple of child advocates from outside Coalton have suggested it should, then *Fall or Fly* will have failed. The last time a wave of do-gooders swooped in to rescue children from communities deemed unfit to raise them? Ask your nearest Native American friend how that worked out.

First and foremost, this work intends to honor social workers. Their words shape its core. If honesty about what they face every day comes across as negativity, let that vented anger stand as its own tribute to those who expressed it. God bless any woman trying to make life better for children she did not bear, and any man who did not biologically father the child he seeks to help.

But this book also seeks to offer appreciation where blame-the-victim mentalities run rampant, such as with the urban poor or in ethnically cohesive communities, as well as in the Coalfields of Appalachia. If you're from a place targeted by other people trying to tell you what you're supposed to be and why you aren't up to that benchmark, please hear this message: the problems within a community are not only solved by those who live in that community but also should be defined by that community. We who live with the problems know when something works and when it doesn't and where priorities need to lie.

This book is dedicated with love and respect to Coalton's residents, especially those who were or are foster children. I hope it answers questions for anyone who has asked, "I wonder what it would be like to foster a child?" Foster parenting is tricky, yet you might be the only chance some children will ever find, the sole source of stability and affection they will come to believe in or learn from. Herein lie depictions of how several parents, children, and social workers felt about their ride on that bucking bronco. It is for you to decide what role, if any, you might play in this rodeo. (P.S.: Dale would like to hear from you if you decide you're interested.)

WRITING OTHER PEOPLE'S STORIES

Coalton is a small place made up mostly of tiny towns and rural municipalities, so the stories told here have been scrambled to protect the identities of the tellers. All of them are true, but I've rearranged where they happened, to whom, and when so as to render the main characters invisible where they live. Secrets shared here are often "open" ones—meaning that everyone knows, but no one names names. Scrambling ensures that those who spoke with brave honesty aren't rewarded with public criticism.³ As one participant put it, "Everyone dealing with the foster care and adoption world should get cut a little slack."

Speaking of slack-cutting, the writing style in this nonfiction work is called storytelling journalism for several reasons. Although as a former journalist I wanted quotes to be the exact words of the interviewee, I removed distinguishing speech characteristics such as repeated profanity, dialect, colloquial grammar, and verbal tics. In the few instances when interviews were not digitally recorded, quotations fleshed out from notes were rendered as accurately as possible. If a pseudonym was assigned and the person used a real name, the pseudonym has been substituted without brackets. This also applies to place names, all of which are fake. Descriptions are of the real locations.

Interviewees participated firsthand in the events they described to me; barring a few exceptions, I was never present at those events. In some cases, I could approach others involved for corroboration; sometimes trust deepened, and return interviews closed holes in the patchwork of the first telling. When that happened, the events may sound as if I'd been standing there. But sometimes there was no way to get more detail. Circumstances varied. If the story reads more like journalism, quoting one person, it's because there was no way to reach deeper than a single source.

And while it may seem odd to put a conclusion in the opening of a book, permit me to summarize with (or introduce, if you prefer) five words that will resonate throughout the interviews, stories, and thoughts that describe adoption and foster care in Coalton: Chaos. Frustration. Compassion. Desperation. Hope. You will hear echoes of these words as you read, and we will return to them near the end of the book.

Read it and laugh. Read it and weep. Read it with one of my favorite Dr. Seuss quotes in mind: "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not."