In fact, I think the title of my book is going to be *The Table Where Rich People Sit.*

If you could see us sitting here at our old, scratched-up, homemade kitchen table, you’d know that we aren’t rich.

But my father is trying to tell us we *are.*

Doesn’t he notice my worn-out shoes? Or that my little brother has patches on the pants he wears to first grade? And why does he think that old rattletrap truck is parked by our door?

“You can’t fool me,” I say. “We’re *poor.* Would rich people sit at a table like this?”

My mother sort of pats the table and she says, “Well, we’re rich and we sit here every day.”

Sometimes I think that I’m the only one in my whole family who is really sensible.

Maybe I should mention that my parents made this table out of lumber somebody else threw away. They even had a celebration when they finished it.
Understand, I like this table fine. All I’m saying is, you can tell it didn’t come from a furniture store. It just doesn’t look like a table where rich people would sit.

But my mother thinks if all the rulers of the world could get together at a friendly wooden table in somebody’s kitchen, they would solve their arguments in half the time.

And my father says it wouldn’t hurt to have a lot of cookies piled up on a nice blue plate that everyone could reach without asking.

But tonight it’s our kitchen and our argument and our family meeting and our very spicy ginger cookies piled up on my mother’s one good blue-flowered plate exactly in the center of the table.

I’m the one who called the meeting, and the subject is money, and I say we don’t have enough of it.

I tell my parents they should both get better jobs so we could buy a lot of nice new things. I tell them I look worse than anyone in school.

“I hate to bring this up,” I say, “but it would help if you both had a little more ambition.”

They look surprised. You can see they never think about the things we need.

Right here, I might as well admit that my parents have some strange ideas about working.

They think the only jobs worth having are jobs outdoors.

They want cliffs or canyons or desert or mountains around them wherever they work. They even want a good view of the sky.

They always work together, and their favorite thing is panning gold—piling us into that beat-up truck and heading for the rocky desert hills or back in some narrow mountain gully where all the roads are just coyote trails.

They love to walk the wide arroyos, the dry streambeds, where little flecks of gold are found.

animals each one of us has seen and the ones we still most want to see out in the wild—not in a zoo.

Mine is a mountain lion. I’ve dreamed of him four times, and I’ve already seen his track. My father chose a grizzly bear. My mother wants to see a wolf and hear it call. And my brother can’t decide between a dolphin and a whale. I remember every one because I make the lists.

They end up deciding I’m worth about a million dollars.

I say I don’t think I am, but I write it anyway.

In fact, it turns out that every one of us is worth a million.

So we have four million and fifty thousand dollars.

Then I realize I want to add five thousand dollars myself for the pleasure I have wandering in open country, alone, free as a lizard, not following trails, not having a plan, just turning whatever way the wind turns me.

They say that’s certainly worth five thousand.

So that makes four million and fifty-five thousand dollars.

Finally, my brother says to put down seven dollars more for all the nights we get to sleep outside under the stars.

We all say seven dollars doesn’t seem to be enough. We talk him into making it five thousand.

Now my paper says four million and sixty thousand dollars—and we haven’t even started counting actual cash.

To tell the truth, the cash part doesn’t seem to matter anymore.

I suggest it shouldn’t even be on a list of our kind of riches.

So the meeting is over.

The rest of them have gone outside to see the new sliver of moon. But I’m still sitting here at our nice homemade kitchen table with one cookie left on my mother’s good blue-flowered plate, and I’m writing this book about us.

I kind of pat the table and I’m glad it’s ours.
any other day of your life. How much would you say that color is worth?”

“Fifty cents?” my brother asks.

But they decide on another five thousand.

So now I write forty thousand dollars.

But I’d forgotten how much my father likes to make bird sounds. He can copy any bird, but he’s best at white-winged doves and ravens and red-tailed hawks and quail. He’s good at eagles, too, and great horned owls. So, of course, he has to add another ten thousand for having both day birds and night birds around us.

I cross out what I had and I write fifty thousand dollars.

Now my mother says, “Let’s see what our Mountain Girl is worth to us.”

I’m beginning to catch on to their kind of thinking, so I suggest I’m worth ten thousand dollars even though my little brother has begun to laugh.

“Don’t underestimate yourself,” my father says. “Remember all those good lists you make for us.”

He’s right. I do. I made a list of the best books each one of us has read and a list of all the ones we want to read again. I also made a list of all the

They used to tell us that the truck just knew which roads to take and that coyotes showed them where to look for gold—but I never did believe it.

After a month or two out there, they always had a little bit of gold to sell, but you can tell it never made them rich.

As far as I can see, it was just an excuse to camp in some beautiful wild place again.

They don’t mind planting fields of sweet corn or alfalfa. They like to pick chili and squash and tomatoes. They’ll put up strong fences or train wild young horses.

But they say they can’t stand to be cooped up indoors.

So now, of course, my dad is asking, “How many people are as lucky as we are?”

But I’ve called this meeting and I say, “I bet you could make more money working in a building somewhere in town.”

“Remember our number one rule,” he says. “We have to see the sky.”

“You could look through a window,” I say.

But they won’t even think about it.

Do you see what I mean about being the sensible one?

Finally, my mother says, “All right, Mountain Girl. We’re going to explain how we figure our money. You be the bookkeeper tonight.”

She hands us each a pencil and some yellow paper.

She gives some to my little brother, too, though he’ll just sit there pretending to write when we write, or he’ll draw people dancing up in the sky.

And by the way, my name’s not really Mountain Girl.

They call me that because I was born in a cabin on the side of a mountain where they were looking for gold one summertime in Arizona.

They say it was the most magical place, the most beautiful mountain they ever climbed.
Maybe it was, but you know how those two exaggerate.

Anyway, they wanted my first sight to be that mountainside, so they held me up outdoors at sunrise when I was just about eight minutes old.

The truth is, I still like sunrise quite a lot.

And my little brother... They call him Ocean Boy. They say since I already had the best mountain for my first sight, they thought they ought to find the most beautiful ocean for him. I think they went all over Mexico looking for a place where ocean touches jungle. And they had to find a certain kind of purple-blue night sky and the exact green waves they like.

They held him up to see those waves for his first sight.

Someday we’re all going back to his green ocean and my high mountain. But for now (even though they claim to be so rich) they can’t take us anywhere at all.

No wonder I had to call this meeting about money.

“I’ll prove it to you right now,” he says. “Let’s make a list of the money we earn in a year.”

“How much is that?” I ask. “I’ll write it down.”

But he says, “Not so fast. We have a lot of things to think about before we add them up.”

“What kinds of things?”

My mother says, “We don’t just take our pay in cash, you know. We have a special plan so we get paid in sunsets, too, and in having time to hike around the canyons and look for eagle nests.”

But I say, “Can’t you give me one single number to write down on this paper?”

So we start with twenty thousand dollars.

That’s how much my father says it’s worth to him to work outdoors, where he can see sky all day and feel the wind and smell rain an hour before it’s really raining.

He says it’s worth that much to be where (if he feels like singing) he can sing out loud and no one will mind.

I have just written twenty thousand when my mother says, “You’d better make that thirty thousand because it’s worth at least another ten to hear coyotes howling back in the hills.”

So I write thirty thousand.

Then she remembers that they like to see long distances and faraway mountains that change color about ten times a day.

“That’s worth another five thousand dollars to me,” she says.

I’m not surprised because my mother claims to be an expert on mountain shadows in the desert. She says she can tell time by the way those colors change from dawn to dark.

I scratch out what I had and write thirty-five thousand dollars.

My father thinks of something else. “When a cactus blooms, you should be there to watch it because it might be a color you won’t see again...”