

AUGUST 8, 1988

\$2.00

# TIME

## Through the Eyes Of Children

**Growing Up in America Today**





# TIME

THE WEEKLY NEWSMAGAZINE



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Photograph by  
Eddie Adams



## A Letter from the Publisher

This week's cover stories on the joys and perils of childhood today are the children of Boston Correspondent Melissa Ludtke. A former kid herself (in Amherst, Mass., in the 1950s), she wondered what it was like to grow up in a world vastly different from the one she knew as a youngster. Ludtke located the five marvelous children whose lives form the centerpiece of the stories and spent a total of four months living with them. "My interest in children's issues began with a teenage-pregnancy story that I helped report in 1985," she relates. "The experience convinced me that for all the work of sociologists, psychiatrists and researchers, children are best able to articulate what makes them the way they are. But we know little about how such issues as working mothers, single-parent homes, drug abuse, sex and economic hardship affect youngsters."

With that in mind, Ludtke set for herself a remarkably sensitive task: to look at the world through the eyes of youngsters. Her idea was to find a few fairly typical children and live with them 24 hours a day—go to school with them, watch television with them, eat and sleep in their homes. The first challenge was to find a selection of interesting children from various income, ethnic and geographical groups. Initial guidance in that quest came from Dr. Robert Coles, winner of a Pulitzer Prize for his



Correspondent Ludtke at age nine, and now

study *Children of Crisis*, and from Marian Wright Edelman, who heads the Washington-based Children's Defense Fund.

Ludtke grasped the magnitude of her commitment one winter morning in Prenter, W. Va. "There I was, sleeping in a room with the three Nelson children, sharing a bed with one of them, Nancy. At 5:30 Nancy got up and our day began. At the time, their father was a miner and their mother a homemaker. By my next visit, three months later, Mr. Nelson had been laid off from his job and was taking care of the kids, while Mrs. Nelson had entered the job force for the first time in her life."

Ludtke's months in the kingdom of the young convinced her of two things. First, children do not remain as they are for very long: some of her subjects have grown visibly since she lived with them (though the ages in the stories have not been changed). Second, something is missing in the lives of many children nowadays. "They are looking for someone—parents, teachers, ministers—to set limits and impose discipline," she says. "Without walls to bounce against, children seem lost."

Robert L. Miller

Seatbelts save lives. Don't drink and drive.

# The most important part in any car is a sober driver.

Between now and September 3 we hope you will call 1-800-444-8987 for information on where to sign this year's Drive for Life pledge and petition. We, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, hope you will join us in support of MADD and make it a point not to drink and drive on this day.

And during this day, remind others to do the same by driving with your lights on.

Your efforts can make a difference.

Last year was the first Drive for Life pledge day. That day showed nearly a 30% reduction in alcohol-related fatalities.

What happens on our highways as a result of drunk driving is a crime. Last year, 23,000 men, women and children lost their lives in drunk driving crashes. Help us reduce these numbers.

Please join us on September 3. And shed some light on this sobering topic.

**DRIVE  
FOR LIFE**  
Saturday, September 3, 1988

**MADD**



# Children

*Saturday morning was come, and all the summer world was bright and fresh, and brimming with life. There was a song in every heart; and if the heart was young the music issued at the lips . . . Cardiff Hill, beyond the village and above it, was green with vegetation, and it lay just far enough away to seem a Delectable Land, dreamy, reposeful and inviting.*

*Tom appeared on the sidewalk with a bucket of whitewash and a long-handled brush . . .*  
—*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

**C**HILDHOOD: THE DELECTABLE LAND. Like Cardiff Hill, it lies just far enough away from the adult mind to be dreamy, to shimmer with a sentimental abstraction—if one does not recall it too precisely. Childhood, where everyone begins, has the power of myth. Big people are gods, and the world is magic—or terrifying.

Like myths of Eden, the stories of Huck and Tom endure in the American imagination. But they have a dark side too. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck's journey in the Delectable Land is also a drama of alcoholism, child abuse, young runaways, social breakdown, violence, hypocrisy, racism and a child's struggle to understand right and wrong in a society that has lost its bearings. *Huckleberry Finn* is still the best book about

American childhood, as contemporary as a milk carton bearing the photograph of a missing child.

Only sentimentalists have ever considered childhood to be a kingdom of untroubled innocence. Today there is more trouble for children and less time for innocence than in recent generations. The problem is not so much that children have changed. The world has changed. Writes Dr. Robert Coles, a psychiatrist and author who has studied the lives of the young for more than 30 years: "Children have always been, and still are, a mirror to us—ourselves writ small." Ourselves have changed.

It is both the best and the worst of times for children. Their world contains powers and perspectives inconceivable to a child 50 years ago: computers; longer life expectancies; the entire planet accessible through television, satellites, air travel. But so much knowledge and choice can be chaotic and dangerous. School curriculums have been adapted to teach about new topics: AIDS, adolescent suicide, drug and alcohol abuse, incest. Trust is the child's natural inclination, but the world has become untrustworthy. The hazards of the adult world, its sometimes fatal temptations, descend upon children so early that the ideal of childhood is demolished.

Crack, for example, is far more addictive and deadly than marijuana, the drug of a different generation. Strange fragments of violence come flashing out of the

television set and lodge in minds too young to understand them. In New York City a five-year-old and his friend argue about 1) whether there is a Santa Claus and 2) what Liberace died of. In New Orleans a boy in first grade shaves chalk and passes it around the classroom, pretending it is cocaine.

**T**he messages are powerful and contradictory. Rock videos suggest orgiastic sex. Public health officials counsel "safe sex." Prudence—and morality—would recommend no sex to children, who have no clear idea of what sex is anyway. Oprah Winfrey and Phil Donahue conduct seminars on such subjects as lesbian nuns, exotic drugs, transsexual surgery, serial murders. Television pours into the imaginations of children a bizarre version of reality. But TV has a certain authority in loco parentis. It is there when the kids come home.

Every stable society transmits values from one generation to the next. That is the work of civilization. In the Freudian scheme, it means the construction of a strong ego and superego above the dark basement of the id. Today in American culture, the barbarous id is both powerful and profitable (in the drug underworld and the entertainment industry, for example). The transmission of values is more difficult. Today's parents are often raising children in a world far removed from their own memories of childhood.

Thirty years ago, in the era of Ozzie and Harriet, two out of three American families consisted of a breadwinner, known as Dad, and a mother, known as Mom, and the children they both were raising. Today fewer than one in five families fits that description.

Children have lost status in the world. Teachers have endured a long decline in public esteem. Day-care workers rarely earn a living wage. The role of mother is being rewritten, and that of father as well. A generation of chil-

dren is being raised in the midst of a redefinition of parenting. Childhood has become a kind of experiment.

Cant phrases, such as "quality time," have found their way into the vocabulary. A motif of absence—moral, emotional and physical—plays through the lives of many children now. It may be an absence of authority and limits, or of emotional commitment. A mother writes in the *New York Times*: "What I see emerging is an entirely new category of professionals who spend little, if any, time with their children. There appears to be a new form of neglect: absence . . . Recently my six-year-old daughter exclaimed, 'Look, Mom, Sarah has a new babysitter.' The 'babysitter' was Sarah's mother."

American parents have not suddenly grown malicious or indifferent. Many are at the mercy of economic changes. Today 50% of working mothers have husbands earning less than \$20,000 a year. To support a family, buy a house and prepare for a child's future education, two incomes become essential. More than half of women with children younger than three years old work outside the home. But because society, and especially the workplace, has not caught up with these changes, the job of raising children has become more complicated.

Growing up has always been difficult. Today it is difficult in unprecedented ways. For the 52.4 million American children 14 and under, the terrain is strange and forbidding. Perplexed parents, finding their own childhoods seemingly irrelevant to the task, are left to improvise.

But examining the changed shape of childhood may allow parents and children alike to understand it better. Each childhood is distinctive, the first chapter of a new biography in the world, and its truth is in the individual details. What follows is stories gathered by Boston Correspondent Melissa Ludtke over a period of four months, stories of five children trying to grow up in America in the late 1980s.  
—*By Lance Morrow*



Katie



John David



Bianca



David



Josh

Katie Davis gazes out over Seattle's Puget Sound; John David Gutierrez keeps his eyes on the ball in Austin; Bianca Belonga sticks close by her New Orleans home; David Nelson yearns for a brighter West Virginia future; in Belmont, Mass., Josh Maisel reflects on the tough decisions that lie ahead

Photographs for TIME by Eddie Adams





# Katie

AGE 8, SEATTLE

From day care to dream time, Katie Davis keeps on going through long, crowded days. Family members and day-care workers are attentive, but often she would rather just curl up with a book.

Stealing a midair kiss from her father Bruce, above; surrounded by her mother Mary, Bruce, half-sister Mona and half-brother Jason, who make up her "house of five"



KATIE DAVIS ENJOYS READING stories about kids who are a few years older than she is. As school ended for the summer, she started *Lizard Music* by D. Manus Pinkwater. "I love it," Katie says enthusiastically. "It's about a boy who is twelve. He's remembering last summer when he was eleven and his parents were away. He's left with his sister, but then his sister goes away for the weekend with these hippies at a camp. I don't know yet how it ends but maybe, because of the title, the boy will meet a lizard that makes music with a flute."

An imaginative world of fantasy complements the otherwise complicated and often hectic pace of Katie Davis' life. Much like the boy in *Lizard Music*, Katie will be spending the summer hanging out with her half-sister Mona Wessels, 16. "It was weird when Mona came to live with us," says Katie. "It was like a new person, like we're adopting someone because you are taking someone from your family who doesn't live there into your family again. It's a fun-

ny feeling. It's nice but it's kinda weird."

Katie is the only child of Bruce and Mary Davis. He is a doctor, and she is a family nurse practitioner. Both work at Seattle's Group Health Cooperative. Mona is Mary's daughter by a previous marriage. Two years ago, Mona moved out of her father's house and settled in with the Davises, as had her older brother Jason, 17, a few years earlier.

Now Katie and Mona spend a lot of time together. Before school let out for the summer, Katie was sometimes picked up by her sister from an after-school day-care program and walked home. This summer Mona and Katie will take field trips around Seattle while the Davises work. Katie and Mona will travel to the zoo or the aquarium or the science center on city buses. Or because they share a passion for reading, they will walk to the community library and find more books. "Mona teaches me all this stuff," says Katie, who asks Mona to dress her up like Madonna, or mousse her hair to make her look like a punk rocker. "I mean, I probably am not going to have cigarettes when I grow up because Mona says she was really addicted to them and it was hard for her to quit," says Katie. "She'll beat me up if I ever smoke a cigarette."

Katie is an energetic, bubbly girl with sunny, shoulder-length blond hair and blue eyes that shine from behind jet-black eyelashes. Last year she wrote and illustrated a book (one copy in circulation so far) with the tongue-twisting title *Xavier Xanax Excitedly Xeroxes X-Mas Xylophones and X-Rays in Xanadu*. It is subtitled *A World Alphabet Book*, and all 26 letters receive similar treatment. In a blurb about the author, she writes, "Katie Davis lives in Seattle, Washington, in a house of five. And whenever she gets lonely she just goes off to play with her puppy, Taffy . . . and a lot of times her friends get in fights so she has to make them friends again. She has gone to many places like Disneyland and Disney World."

Katie is a day-care child. To her generation of children, day care is as familiar a destination as Disneyland, if not nearly as magical. During the fall, winter and spring, Katie goes to day care before and after school each day. Because of Mona's presence, Katie has had a brief reprieve. Says she: "I used to go to day care all summer. I didn't look forward to summer then."

When the Davises' work schedules and Mona's after-school activities made it impossible for anyone to be home when Katie's school day was done, her parents put her in full-time day care. "Some children Katie's age go home with a key, unlock the door and wait for their parents to come home," says Bruce. "With Katie at day care, there is clarity about where she is going to be after school. I don't feel great about Katie being in day care, but I do feel safe."

Until Katie was three, her mother stayed home with her. But both parents knew that the longer Mary remained away from her nursing career, the tougher

re-entry would be. Her salary pays for Jason's and Mona's private-school tuitions and will help with impending college costs. "A lot of women give up a career and they can never get back," says Bruce. So Mary resumed work, part time at first, and Bruce rearranged his workday to fit better into his daughter's schedule.

Katie thinks about how things might be when she has children of her own. "I'll probably do it the way my mom did. If I'm already working and married and everything when I have a kid, I will ask my bosses to save my place for two or three years, if they can do that," says Katie. But she also has a plan in mind if she does not have a job. "Then I'll probably stay out of work for a few years, stay home with the kid and then get a job and maybe get a baby-sitter."

At times during the school year, Katie spends ten hours away from home each day. After rising at 7 a.m. and downing a breakfast of Lucky Charms, she buckles herself into the front seat of her mother's Volkswagen Jetta for the two-minute ride around a sharp bend and up a steep hill to the red brick Montlake Elementary School. She stays for an hour in a kindergarten classroom where the Community Day School sets up shop each day before and after school. At 9 a.m. she joins her third-grade classmates at Montlake. When the school day finishes, Katie circles back to day care, where she stays until 6 p.m.

Katie clearly does not like day care. "A lot of times it gets really boring just going there," she says. "It's the same setting and usually the same things to do. I wish every day they would have a different setting, one day have a jungle look and the next day have a different look because it really gets boring." At day care, there are no Disney tapes to push into the VCR, as there are at home, no video games to play. She cannot invite friends over to her house, nor can she go to theirs. Worst of all, she cannot disappear by herself into her bedroom and play with her toys or work on her next book. "I would love if I could just stay in the attic," she says. "There's a little room in my mom and dad's closet. There's this little door to get in. It is really fun in there. They have all these old literature books and poetry books and drawing books. It is like a big library, and I could just sit there and read all day."

Sometimes when she's feeling unhappy at day care, Katie starts to imagine that the other children do not like her. She suffers from attacks of what she calls "aloneness," a feeling she rarely has when she is at home alone. At day care, Katie's mood alternates between detached boredom and rapt anticipation. One moment she is like an engine revving up, fast and eager. Then she lapses to a slow idle. Whatever internal rhythm Katie is moving to, it is set against a steady background beat of group activity swirling around her.

Staff members at Montlake Commu-



At day care, Katie suffers from attacks of what she calls "aloneness," a sad feeling she rarely has when she is by herself at home.



At Montlake School, she worries about classmates who do not have her "good life"

nity Day School try to come up with new ways to entertain and stimulate their charges, about 20 kids who range in age from five to eleven. Every day there are fresh art projects, and occasionally there are puppet-show premieres. The children construct large forts out of masking tape and tightly rolled newspapers. There are sing-alongs and story sharings at snack time.

No matter how creative the entertainment, however, the children find it hard to keep going, going, going as they head into the final stretch late each afternoon. "For ten hours a day, these kids have to interact with about 20 or 30 kids," says Katie Humes, who takes care of the children at day care. "Imagine if we adults had to constantly be trying to get along with that many people. And then some

parents come expecting to take their kid to gymnastics or some other lesson. And they wonder why the child is crying. It can all be too much."

Toward the end of the day, the slightest twist on the doorknob is enough to get a sea of tired eyes to look up. As parents arrive to pick up their kids, Katie quickly looks up to see if it is her mom or dad. Most kids have a pretty good feeling for what time their parents normally appear, so when a parent is late, a child becomes anxious.

Katie is looking forward to this summer's break from day care. But she already misses her classmates, and in a way she misses her school too. For inside Montlake something exciting is happening. Over the past three years, LaVaun Dennett, Montlake's principal, reorganized the school schedule so that the average class size

could be reduced from 28 to 20 without adding a single faculty member. More time is now spent on reading and math, which kids do according to ability, not grade. Katie's skills in these subjects are far beyond the third-grade level, so she takes those classes with older children.

A few months ago, Katie and Mona wrote a rap song about Montlake after the school board considered closing it down for budgetary reasons:

*Montlake School is the neatest  
around  
And if they tried to close it down,  
Tell it like this, Tell it like that,  
Montlake's the best and that's a  
fact.*

*We're all good friends. We like  
each other,  
Just like we're sister and brother.  
If you're looking for a place that's  
great,  
Why don't you try Room Eight.*

**R**oom Eight is where Mrs. Liz Holmes presides over a class of 20 third-graders, including Katie. At 9:20 one winter morning Katie was at her desk reading *The Babysitters' Club* by Ann M. Martin, when Mrs. Holmes said, "Give me five!" She employs this playground greeting as her way of getting the kids' attention. Katie placed a bookmark where she stopped reading, folded her hands squarely on her desk and focused her eyes on her teacher.

This morning Mrs. Holmes wanted to talk about an argument she had seen during recess. "Now if some of you feel you are spending time with kids who break school rules, you will learn bad things," she said. "It might look macho. It might look chic, but we know better . . . You have choices to make. So grab for happiness. You're smart. Be wise. I love you and worry about you all the time. I want you to make good choices."

In Katie's classroom there are children who return each afternoon to homes shattered by broken marriages, drugs, alcohol and sometimes violence, including child abuse. "These kids live in stark reality," says Mrs. Holmes. "For most of them school is a sanctuary." The boy who sits beside Katie was addicted to methadone at birth. About half of Montlake's students come from single-parent families. About a third of the children qualify for free hot lunches, meaning that the family's income falls below the poverty level. Nearly half the students are black, bused in from neighborhoods far away under a voluntary desegregation plan. Where they live, Katie is unlikely ever to visit.

Katie knows how fortunate she is.

The boy who sits next to Katie was addicted to methadone at birth. Half the students come from single-parent families. A third qualify for free hot lunches.



Her parents call it Katie's climber, but she is happy just to be relaxing in her own backyard

"My family always goes on some great trip, and it really makes me happy," she says. "But a lot of the kids just stay home, sitting on the steps in the hot sun, moaning and groaning and not having anything to do. It would be nice if the people who run the airlines would at least let them travel for free."

Officer Alex Thole wears a silver badge identifying him as a drug/alcohol officer of the Seattle police department. He is at Montlake to teach the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program. "We've got kids in the third grade using alcohol and marijuana," says Thole. Other children are confused because parents or relatives abuse drugs or alcohol. And the kids do not know how to respond. One girl whose parents smoke marijuana wrote a note to Thole telling him she did not know what to do. He helped her bring up the subject with them.

Katie has learned a lot from watching her step-siblings survive adolescence. A few years ago, Jason was involved with what Mary calls the "wrong crowd" of teenagers who were abusing drugs and alcohol. One member of that group is still a crack addict. For a time his crowd dressed in black and talked constantly about death. "We thought we had lost him," says Mary. Then Jason moved from a

huge public school to a smaller, private one. He was in the school musical, recently won a Rotary Club award for Service Above Self in the community and spends a lot of time with Katie and the family.

**J**ason's difficulties taught Katie that to "Just Say No" is not always easy. "A lot of kids say, 'Well, when I grow up and anybody comes and offers drugs to me, I am not going to take them,'" Katie says. "But when the time happens, you really get freaked out. They say, 'Come on, man. Take some.' You don't know what is happening, so you do. Most people say they won't, but they do."

Can Katie think of a way not to accept? "If I had a bunch of people with me, like some older kids, then it would be pretty easy to say no," she responds. "But if I was alone, then I probably wouldn't think about what is going to happen to me when I get older. I would just say yes or no. And I would say whatever comes out. It's like that's what happens. That's really scary."

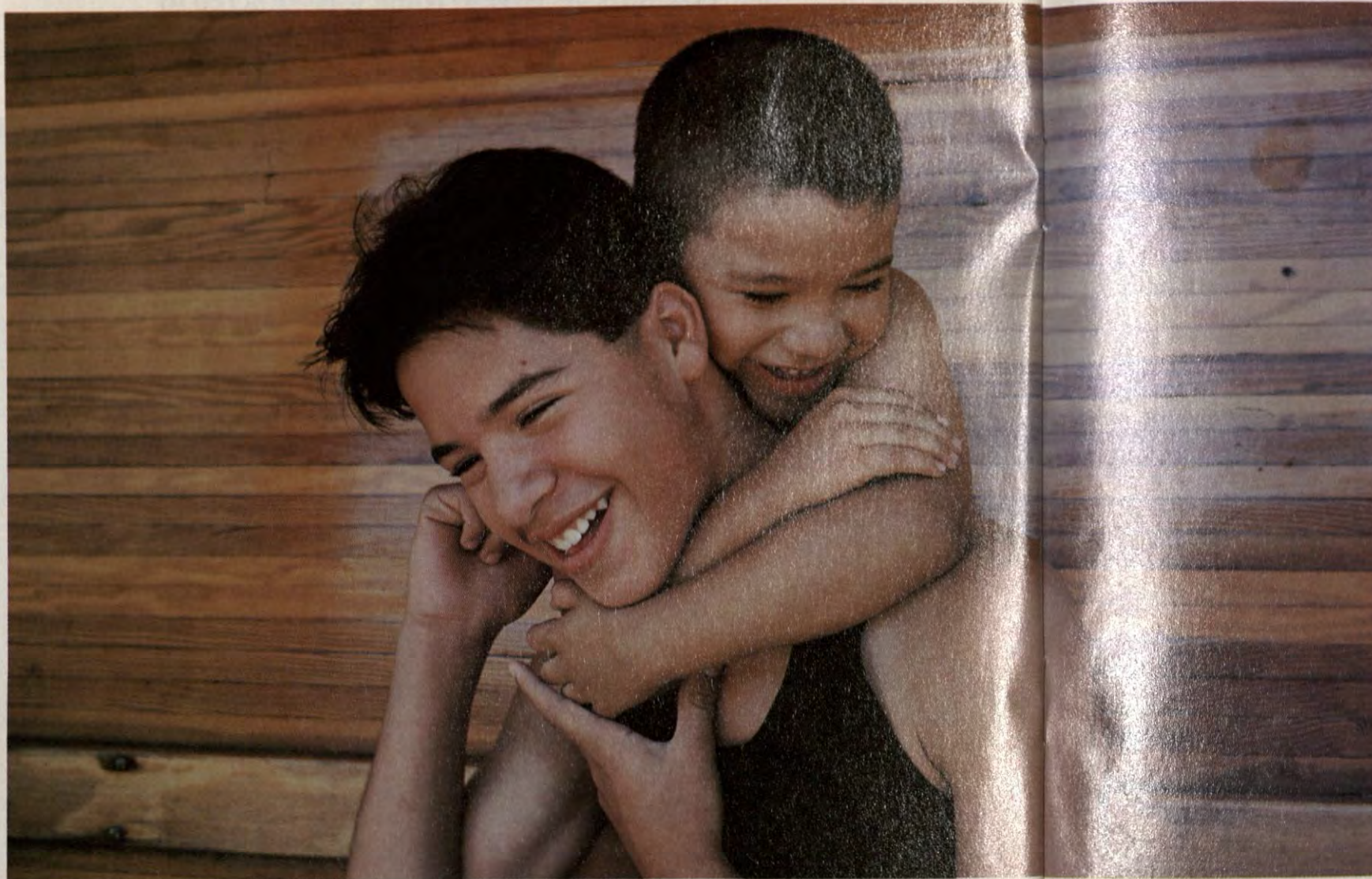
Until recently Katie never went to sleep without her father taking her on a voyage of fantasy. Katie recites the stories as though she heard them last night. "Once there was a girl named Princess Leah, and her cousin Princess Katie came to a party she was having for her birthday.

They had just finished playing pin the tail on the shooting star when out of the sky came a space dragon, and it came down and took Princess Katie up with Princess Leah to the star castle, and they were captured."

Now her father gives Katie a back rub before she goes to sleep. This is no ordinary back rub. It is an imaginary exploration of people, places and things. As he draws with his fingers on her back, she guesses what the image is. He begins with rubs and pats, flips and blips. These are names Katie and Bruce invented. Then it is on to frizzlies and scritchies, bumpillies and square-illies, name-illies and picture-illies, initiallies and real, which is the real back rub. When Bruce does a picture-illie, for example, his finger draws an object on her back. "Then I imagine it all in my head," says Katie. It can be as simple as a waterfall.

Then Katie rolls over in the bed her father built in her room under angled ceilings on the top floor of their cozy brick, gingerbread-looking house. Her Barbie dolls are stored safely in their pink footlocker. Her snugly stuffed animals are placed carefully around her. On the floor next to her bed is a pile of books awaiting the dawn of another gloriously unprogrammed, day-care-free summer morning. ■





# John David

AGE 12, AUSTIN

With Mexican roots, John David Gutierrez has blossomed into an all-American kid.



John David gives a lift to Brother Christopher, above; the two boys with Sister-in-Law Laurie holding Son Robert, Brothers Xavier and Abelardo, and Parents Mary Louise and Abel

house contains dozens of trophies, team pictures, championship caps and gold-plated plaques from the competitive seasons that began when he was five. "I dream a lot," says John David. "I dream of becoming a pro baseball player. Or being a soccer player in the World Cup. Or playing baseball in the Olympics for the U.S. In my dreams, I try to be the best I can."

John David is young enough to believe still in the potential of childhood dreams. But he has seen dreams fail. He has two older brothers, Abelardo, 23, and Xavier, 19, who during adolescence lost their way. "They had a chance, and they didn't do it," says John David. "Abel, he was a good pitcher, and he had a chance maybe to go to college. And Xavi, he could have made it too. He told me, 'Try not to mess up like I did.'"

Abel, named after his father, is the eldest of four sons. He once pitched a no-hitter on the way to the Babe Ruth World Series quarterfinals. But in his junior year of high school, Abel inexplicably quit baseball. His parents could not persuade him to stick with it. "When he was 13 or 14, he got involved with kids who didn't give a damn," says his father, a solicitous, gentle man who at 52 works in the auto-parts department at a General Motors dealership and devotes his spare time to coaching his kids in their various sporting activities. Along with his wife Mary Louise, 48, a small woman with an optimistic nature, he attends every game their sons play. "Abel believed more in what those kids had to offer than what we had to say," recalls his father sadly. Now Abel works as a systems operator at a local management company.

As a youngster, Xavi had spinal meningitis, and school was always difficult for him. But he worked hard, set money aside and sent out applications to junior colleges. Two months after Xavi graduated from high school last year, however, his girlfriend Laurie, who had just turned 16, gave birth to their son Robert Isaac Gutierrez. Two weeks later, they were married. Laurie has returned to high school, where day care is available for Robert. Xavi works at several minimum-wage jobs, the only ones he can find.

From his brothers, John David has learned how difficult it is for young people to take on adult responsibilities. "I don't want to have a family like my brother has now, at an early age," John David says. "Not that soon."

His mother has worked full time at the state department of human services, where she processes vouchers, since before her first child was born. "Nowadays, once you start depending on that second paycheck, there's no turning back," she reports.

"I have been staying home by myself until my mom gets home since I was in kindergarten," says John David, who usually entertains himself with television. "I'm not really scared, because we have friends around here if anything happens."

Recently he has been playing with

Nintendo, the video game that is the Hula-Hoop of the 1980s. Nintendo draws millions of children into the high-tech, button-pressing world that may be their workaday future. Sometimes John David plays alone, but when his five-year-old brother Christopher is home, the two of them compete against each other. The boys sit together in an armchair pushed close to the television set, their fingers moving expertly across the buttons on a palm-size control panel. They are mesmerized.

Their father regards Nintendo as a symbol of the struggle that Hispanics have with the Anglo world. "I still believe we are Mexican-American people," Abel says. "When John David and Chris and some of the other kids play the Nintendo games, it is to be competitors with the Anglo people by having what they have."

John David has a different perspective. His parents, who grew up in southeastern Texas, were kept out of the Anglo world as children. John David has not grown up as an outsider. "The kids haven't experienced prejudice," says Mary Louise. "We experienced it from the Anglos from the day we were real little, when we couldn't go swimming in Austin's public pools. When we talk to the children about it, they say, 'Oh, Mom. That couldn't have happened. Not here.'"

When the elder Abel was growing up, he and his eight siblings picked cotton until the harvest ended each autumn. The elementary schools they went to were segregated. John David has always attended integrated schools and plays on integrated teams with blacks, Anglos and other Hispanics. "I have friends from different races—blacks, whites, Mexicans," says John David.

Sometimes in America a strange obliviousness becomes the price of assimilation. John David tries to piece together his heritage. "I guess it's like you come from another country. That's a country, isn't it? Mexico?" He asks in all seriousness, "Isn't it a country?" On television John David sees news reports of people with olive skin and thick black hair like his crawling through holes in a barbed-wire fence that separates Mexico from the U.S. Is this how his parents' families came to America? He does not know. "Freedom. I guess that's why they came," John David concludes. "I don't know if they had money."

His grandparents were poor and powerless, but they were rich in the hope that life in America would be better for their children. "My daddy believed in us helping in the cotton fields, but he didn't want us to be what he was," says the elder Abel. "He wanted something more for us." That wish came true. Abel and Mary Louise provide four sons with the comforts and opportunities of a middle-class upbringing. But they worry about the hurdles their third son must now clear, barriers that seem even higher than when Abel and Xavi were in school: the increased





For a boy who cares about his appearance, primping is part of the morning routine

prevalence of drugs and alcohol, the growing temptations of early sex. They worry about a terrible undertow that drags children down, that somehow robs them of hope or motivation.

After a 7 a.m. breakfast of bacon rolled in a singed tortilla, John David is ready to leave for school. Dressed stylishly in a blue-striped button-down shirt, blue sweater, wide-pocket gray jeans and Nike sneakers, the sixth-grader hops up into the cab of his father's pickup truck for the ten-minute ride to Bedichek Middle School, where a majority of the 1,040 students are Anglo. After school, John David takes a city bus home.

By the time the morning's announcements start, John David is at his desk preparing for math and science. The voice over the loudspeaker reads a poem. "Accept me for me./ Even though I am not

the image of your fantasy./ I am striving to be the best I can be./ Please accept me for me." Despite the fidgeting, the students seem attentive.

The poem is aimed at children with a profound and growing problem: for varying reasons, they have simply quit trying. Many students actually brag when they receive an F, as if it were a flag of proud defiance. Kids who wave it see no reason for caring how well they do. Life is pretty good right now, they conclude. Won't it always be this way? They seem immune to external motivation from parents or teachers. These children languish, blankly passing time behind their desks until a lure like drugs or gangs or other trouble leads them away.

"I think the idea of the American Dream has vanished from these kids' minds," says Suzie Doerr, a teacher at Be-

dichek. "These kids think life is fancy-free." Hermelinda Garza Perez, a second-generation Mexican American, teaches eighth-graders. "Their goal is to get by, not to get better," says Perez. As a child, she went with her mother to her job as a maid. "My mother always said to me, 'I don't want you cleaning someone else's commode.'"

Commodities and cotton fields were powerful motivators. But there was more. When John David's parents were growing up, society passed along the message that there was reward for striving. And many people, like Abel and Mary Louise Gutierrez, did succeed. These days the message needed to motivate kids seems more confused and tougher to deliver.

"We gave our kids what we didn't have," says Mary Louise. "We gave them material things, which maybe in a way wasn't good." Two steady paychecks enable the Gutierrezes to provide their children with middle-class paraphernalia: video games, three television sets, a stereo in John David's room, a VCR in the family den, trendy clothes. Their life-style is far from extravagant, but, as Mary Louise admits, "the children are really not wanting for anything. A family needs two paychecks to make it, to give kids what we didn't have. Maybe that's not good. We had love as kids, and we had nonmaterial things. We had intangibles, like we had Mother at home with a little snack when we came in. These kids don't have that because their mommy's out there working."

John David's biggest uncertainty involves drugs. Will he succumb to pressures to take drugs? At Bedichek, there is a club called B.A.D. (Bobcats Against Drugs) and T-shirts proclaiming the club's message: I'M HAPPY TO BE S.A.D. (Students Against Drugs).

Sometimes, though, John David imagines a group of older kids trying to force drugs on him. "I might try to run where there is a bunch of people. But if I ran, they would just gang up and beat me up. They might carry knives, and they would stab me. They would probably leave the knife in and run off," he says. "The other option is just to take the drugs, but I don't know if with just one, you'd get addicted to it. Just depends on what kind of drug they put in it. Those are the only two options I can think of right now."

John David's parents prepare once again for a son's imminent departure from childhood. They know the pressures on him will be intense, as they are for so many millions of children today, but they hope John David will find the strength in today and the belief in tomorrow to carry him safely through. "Children need a sense of security," says Mary Louise. "If they don't have that, if they go out there and feel they can't turn to us, then they are lost."



Face to face with Jem, her cartoon heroine, she is temporarily lost in a world of fantasy

# Bianca

AGE 9, NEW ORLEANS

Television comes alive for Bianca Belōnga. Someday she wants to be a star like Jem and wear red earrings. For now, she imitates characters she sees on the screen.



Stepfamily-to-be: Bianca, backed up by her mother Sherri, future stepfather Leonard and his daughter Mahogany

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER WAIT on a New Orleans park bench for their respective buses to arrive. Every working day, the child takes one bus to school, and the mother rides another to work. When the vehicles pull up, mother and daughter part company, as usual. But the girl realizes she has left her school books on the bench, and she runs back to retrieve them. By now the mother has boarded her own bus. With a maternal premonition of danger, the woman tries to get off.

"I could see two men jump out of a car and grab her," says the mother. "I yelled at the bus driver to let me off. When he turned toward me, he was wearing a hood, and his eyes were big flames of fire like he was the devil. He was laughing and wouldn't open the door. I couldn't get out of the bus, but I could hear my daughter yelling." The bus drives away.

At that instant, Sherri Belōnga wakes up screaming. She sits upright in bed. Leonard Howard, her fiancé, is also awake. "Leonard says to me, 'It's only a dream,'" Sherri reports. She is a 25-year-old single mother. Bianca, 9, the girl in the dream, is her only child. That night Sherri can not fall back asleep. Months later, the dream still haunts her.

Themes of danger and escape, often through fantasy, are woven into the textures of Bianca's life. "Sometimes I have



She will not take science courses because she fears burning her hand "like that woman on *The Young and the Restless*."

problems sleeping," says Bianca, a shy, sensitive and self-centered child. "Like I sweated one time. All you could see is wetness." Was she sick? "No. But then it reminds me of when that girl got bitten on *Fright Night*. She started turning ugly, and then it was like she was sweating. But the only movie that scared me was *The Exorcist*. That scared me. Her head turned all the way around, and something green just jumped out of her mouth and killed the priest. You see the devil was inside of her. Some people say it was like a true story that really happened."

Does she believe it? "I don't know," says Bianca shyly. Her mind is stocked with what she has learned from television and movies. Bianca says she wants to go to college because if she does not, she will "end up like that lady in a cartoon" who sings because she didn't finish school. But she will not take science, for fear of burning her hand in a lab, "like that woman on *The Young and the Restless*." She talks about the bad effects of cocaine and reveals that she learned about the subject from a TV movie called *Desperate Lives*.

Bianca feels safe when she is at home in front of the television. When Jem, a shapely, superstar rock singer who is the title character of her favorite cartoon show, shakes her radiant pink hair and makes her magical red earrings sparkle, Bianca is transported into another world. Jem embodies what Bianca would like to be as an adult: sexy, a singer and a success. "I don't want to be a maid at hotels when I grow up," says Bianca. "That's what my auntie is. She works for a hotel in the French Quarter. I want to be a singer like Jem. I'm going to have some red star earrings like Jem's, but they don't have to be magic or powerful."

For Bianca, Jem is something of an obsession. When Bianca was seven, she watched the show once a week on Sundays. Now, two years later, she watches it at 7:30 each weekday morning and again at 4:30 every afternoon. The escape into television extends beyond Jem. With cable, Bianca has more than 40 channels to choose from at any moment. Seated on a small wood-rimmed couch, usually by herself, Bianca uses the remote control to click her way through the channels.

When Jem is on television, Bianca's face is set in a blank, enameled look. Her brown eyes are wide, unmoving, unblinking, transfixed by the 19-inch color screen. With her right foot, she taps out the beat of the program's frequent songs. She knows the lyrics by heart and sings them loudly to herself.

One morning Sherri calls to Bianca from the kitchen. "Your blue sweater is

over here. Come get it." No response. Jem is fending off her evil enemies, the Misfits. Sherri repeats the message. Again, nothing. She brings the sweater to Bianca, shoves her daughter's right arm through, wraps it around her and guides the left arm in. "This is every morning," Sherri sighs. Says Bianca later: "I know I couldn't hear what my mom said this morning about wearing my sweater. I



From her school journal: "My mom always love me . . . taught me wrong to right"

didn't hear it because I was too busy in the television, but when I heard it the second time, I remembered the first time."

Bianca re-creates *Jem* episodes at home. Her doll collection includes several Jems, each with a switch in the back of the neck to turn on flashing red earrings; a few versions of Rio, Jem's boyfriend, with elaborate outfits; some villainous Misfits; green- and purple-haired members of the Holograms, Jem's backup singers; a miniature pink waterbed, which doubles as a piano; a stage for the Holograms; a pink wardrobe to store the outfits; and a pink roadster. Bianca knows that her Jem habit is hard on her mother, who works part time answering telephones. "If I get a Jem doll, then my mom don't have any money for the next day."

Two low-lying, dilapidated brick housing projects border the neighborhood. Just around the corner from Bianca's house is Joseph Kohn Middle School, where teenagers hang out, selling drugs, causing trouble. They spill into the neighborhood, sending out ripples of fear, especially for parents with younger children.

On a sunny afternoon, Bianca rides her bike up and down Pauline Street. She does not stray far from home. A few blocks away, another child, about Bianca's age, is hit on the head and knocked off his new

bicycle by an older boy, who rides away on the bike. There is no outrage in Bianca's voice as she recounts the event. She seems to expect and accept what happens. "That is why I never ride it much," Bianca says of her pink ten-speed. "My mom paid lots of money for it. I may not ride it that much, but I still like it." Usually, it rests on its kickstand, hidden behind the house where no one can steal it. In a way, Bian-

ca is like the bicycle, safe but immobile.

Until last year, Sherri and Bianca lived in another predominantly black area of New Orleans with Sherri's mother, Maurine Belönga, who raised five children by herself after she and her husband were divorced. Sherri is the youngest. Six weeks after she met Leonard, 29, a soft-spoken, neatly dressed mail clerk, on a blind date, Sherri and her daughter moved in. She wears an engagement ring, though no wedding date has been set.

Leonard's parents live in the other half of the one-story, pale blue home, which they bought when Leonard was eight. The house stands in a neat row of similar dwellings, each with a small square-columned portico and patch of front yard. After a 1960 federal order desegregated William Frantz Public School, which Bianca now attends, the neighborhood changed from all white to nearly all black. Today only 26 of New Orleans' 126 public schools are racially integrated. Bianca's school is virtually all black. When told about the bitter struggles to integrate Frantz, Bianca says, "That's history." She brushes away further discussion.

"Bianca has a lot of her father's features," Sherri says. No photographs of the man are around the house. Sherri never lived with him. Bianca saw him only oc-



Even as her daughter sleeps, Sherri fears tomorrow: "Every time she leaves out the door, it is scary"

asionally before he became ill and died when she was not yet four years old. "You don't miss what you don't know," says Sherri, dismissing any relevance to Bianca's life. Recently, Bianca was asked for her father's name in a school workbook. She wrote in Leonard's name.

On weekends Bianca often visits her grandmother, with whom she was especially close in the pre-Leonard days. Since Bianca and Sherri moved, Bianca's affections have shifted in the direction of her mother. Last November Bianca wrote in her school journal, "I would like to say something nice to a special person, Mom. My mom always stand by my side when I needed her. My mom always love me, took very good care of me. And always taught me wrong to right. I always love my mother." Mother and daughter grew up together. In some respects, they were raised more as sisters than as mother and daughter. "We talk a lot, alone," says Sherri. "We are extremely close. I tell her things I tell no one else. And what I tell her not to tell, she don't."

Bianca's classmates say they want to be engineers, teachers, scientists, nurses, football players, policemen. A fourth-grader named Erica writes in her journal, "When I grow up I will get married and be an engineer because I have to study

some science and math and be a doctor or a teacher and for my children to have school and clothes and food and strong and healthy."

Other journal entries are less encouraging. Cynthia, a former foster child who sits in front of Bianca in class, once wrote, "I would like a magic ring that do anything I said and I would want my baby doll to be a real baby." The teacher wrote back, asking her, "How would you take care of a real baby and still go to school?" She answered, "I have a mom, you know." To this, the teacher replied in her red ink, "This isn't your mom's baby. Why should she take care of it?" No reply.

What is to become of the third-grade girl who wrote in her journal, "I'll have my own children someday, I'll be sure to do this and that. Then I'll kill myself."? Another entry: "The best thing about a pet is that it dies." And "I would not like to have the mother I have now. She don't love me."

Students in nearly three-quarters of the New Orleans elementary schools, including Frantz, rank below the 50th percentile on national reading tests. Without mastering the ability to read, kids like Bianca will find it impossible to realize

their dreams. Bianca, who reads a bit above her grade level, keeps what she calls a "literature book" at Leonard's house. Her grandmother gave it to her. She reads it by herself. "I keep it in the back room," she says. "It has lots of stories in it by different authors."

Talking recently with a friend about what lies ahead for Bianca—menstruation and other bodily changes, dating—Sherri suddenly realized that when her daughter is 15 she will be only 31. "I told my friend, I don't know if I'll be ready for it," says Sherri. "I'm young myself. And my friend says, 'You'd better be ready for it.'"

Sherri worries about what is ahead for Bianca. "Young men today have garbage on their minds." She says. "If they take you to Burger King, they think they can sleep with you. I tell Bianca, 'Don't wrestle with these little boys. They want to touch you in the wrong areas. You don't want them up close, period.'"

"It's sad you have to talk to them about it at this age, but times are so different," says Sherri. She speaks as if it has been decades since she was a child. "Under the influence of drugs, 14-year-old boys might decide to go off and grab Bianca. Every time she leaves out the door, it is scary." For both mother and daughter, the nightmares have already begun. ■





# David

AGE 10, PRENTER, W. VA.

For generations West Virginia mining families survived by digging coal out of the plentiful hills. But these days life down in the hollows holds little promise for boys like David Nelson.

While his father prays, David naps, above; dressed in his Sunday best, he heads for church with Brother Stephen, Sister Nancy and his parents Joy and Larry



EVERY SUNDAY MORNING DAVID Nelson's family attends church on nearby Williams Mountain, where his father Larry, a coal miner, was born 39 years ago. Inside the small Advent Christian church that his father and mother Joy, 36, helped build, David joins his brother Stephen, 7, and his sister Nancy, 13, in a Bible class. Later in the day, the family drives an hour and 15 minutes to another Advent Christian church at the top of a distant and twisting hollow. David's parents, who are licensed to preach, lead the service, which lasts nearly two hours.

Tears well up in Joy's eyes as she stands at the pulpit one Sunday evening offering testimony to all that God has done for her family. David sits in the pew behind Nancy, combing his sister's curly blond hair, inattentive to his mother's preaching. Nancy blows bubbles with thick pink gum. Stephen lies across a nearby pew, asleep. "Boring," Nancy says. Only David stands with his father to sing the final hymn.

"It's hard having two preachers for parents," says David, who feels the twin yoke of religion and strict parental supervision. David describes the biggest lesson he has learned from his parents. "Not to cuss or go to beer joints or girly bars. Well, they haven't told me not to go to girly bars, but they wouldn't like it. They don't like for us to do anything that a Christian wouldn't do. If I did that, they'd kill me."

Prenter, W. Va., where David lives, is a tiny coal camp of a town some 40 miles and a mountain pass south of Charleston. A single paved street runs through the town. One-story look-alike houses with green shutters, rickety porches and peeling paint are squeezed between the road and the steep hills. No traffic light. No police station. No firehouse. No school. That is ten miles down the road, where Prenter Creek empties into Big Coal River.

For David Nelson, a pudgy, serious, persistent boy, there was never any question that he would be a coal miner like his dad, who came back from Viet Nam in 1971 and followed his father and grandfather into the coal mines. When David was younger, Larry took him for his first look at the mines. "He was ridin' me around," David recalls, "and I looked up and there was this big mountain covered with coal. I thought about working there someday."

His choice is more than a mere wanting. It is a profound longing, a matter of identity. David's younger brother Stephen wants only to play football for West Virginia and go on from there to play professionally, even if it means leaving the hills and the coal mines. David wants his father's identity, his land and context.

He may not be able to have it. Last winter David's father, like many other miners, lost his job. Unemployment pays him less than half his union wage. "Yeah, I want to be a coal miner," David says, "if they ain't shut down."

Even at his age, David understands that workers are being replaced by machines that can mine more coal more cheaply. His father has been laid off twice, the previous time for three years, so David worries about coal's future as well as his own. "I'm afraid," he says, "that later on the dead trees and plants won't be able to produce coal and everybody will be losing their jobs."

The West Virginia hills cradle families in cozy, isolated hollows. Mining is dangerous, and children worry when their fathers go into the mines. But a different kind of hardship comes when the mines close down; often families split up when breadwinners depart to look for jobs. Children remain behind, wondering if they too will one day have to leave the security of land and family.

"These are my hills," a *Coal Valley News* editorialist wrote more than 30 years ago. His words are no less pertinent today: "I do not hold title to the lands, but I reap every benefit and every injury to them. Believe it or not, you and I are the guardians of these hills. They are God's hills and we are the keepers. More than that, we shall inherit the manifold

blessings of the hills. They are our hills."

When he is working, David's father drives a buggy in the mines and carries a shovel, which he derisively calls "an ignorant stick." To work in mining, David's generation will need to operate computers. In Prenter only four out of ten children graduate from high school. "I will either get a house here or build one on a big piece of land up there on the mountain," says David, imagining his future. Then the vista darkens: "But if there is no work here, I would have to move away, find a new job or somethin'."

After Larry was laid off last winter, he began cooking, cleaning and putting the three children to bed. To help out with expenses, Joy took a job selling coupons for photographs door to door. She drives to distant hollows, logging nearly 1,800 miles during the five or six days she works each week. She takes in about \$240 a week before taxes and expenses, barely breaking even after car repairs and other costs. Now Larry thinks about heading north to look for work in a factory.

"I have a little difficulty being a househusband," says Larry, who struggles to balance the powerful image of older, more macho times with current necessity. "But I love being with the kids. I also believe it is good for them to see me doin' housework, so they don't keep believin' that outside work belongs only to the man and inside is the woman." This is quite a change in attitude for a man who insisted his wife quit nursing school after he and Joy married.

When David turned ten last year, he was finally old enough for a Nelson family ritual, deer hunting. He had waited impatiently for the birthday. David's father had not been allowed to hunt with his father until he was ten. The waiting and expectation give importance to the ritual. David and his father went up on Old Brammer Ridge to search for a buck with antlers big enough to be legal. "We got to where we's goin'," David remembers. "We couldn't find no deer." There were more deer when he was a boy, Larry told his son. The note of elegy, of an age gone and irrecoverable, lingered in the autumn air.

David recalls what happened next: "Then this big buck come up there, and Dad goes, 'David, there's a buck!' And he just threw his gun up there and he went *ka-pow!* He got him. He's layin' there kickin', and Dad goes, 'Shoot there!' And I put a bullet in the gun and I go *boom!* And the bullet hits the dirt. I go, 'I think I missed it.' I put another one in there and I aim again. *Ka-pow!* I say, 'Dad, I think I missed again.' We went down there, and it stopped kickin' and stuff. And Dad, he just started guttin' it. Dressin' it. It was the first time I saw that. I about threw up. It stunk. The intestines. The heart. The lungs. The stomach. I was right beside it. I was glad I wasn't no deer."

Larry wants his kids' upbringing to mirror his own. "I try to work with my





David leads his family across the Big Coal River: "If there is no work here, I would have to move away"

boys to revert them back to my childhood," he says. "When I was small, I ran in the mountains. We went into the creeks and dammed up a swimming hole. I try to get them to relate to nature themselves. Try to show them there are other things out there than alcohol and drugs. David, he is respondin' real well, fishin' and huntin'. A lot of parents, they say they want to raise children different than the way they themselves were raised. I'm proud of how I was raised. Only had two pair of pants, but I had a pride about me. My parents gave me love. Today we livin' in such a rat race. We don't take time to love the kids, to pass on what we have been taught."

Trying to reproduce a cherished past is difficult when so much has changed. Larry's childhood swimming hole long ago was filled with silt from the mines. The movie house is gone too, displaced by cable television and the VCR. The Nelsons have both. Out of fear for their safety, the Nelsons do not allow their kids to explore the woods by themselves, as Larry did, or even walk or ride their bikes too far from home alone. "There was a lot more they was allowed to do back then, like go out in the woods and not be afraid of bein' kidnaped or gettin' shot at or somethin'," says Nancy. "Here in Prenter, this old man he pulled up and tried to pick up this girl. He grabbed her leg and tried to pull her in his car. Her dog bit him, and she got away. She hit him with a rock too."

Larry and Joy Nelson's Fundamental Christian faith imposes strict rules on their children. What they watch on television is strictly monitored: no soap operas, no shows with a hint of sex. The children will not be allowed to date until 16, even though many girls in Nancy's seventh grade already wear boys' rings.

"Sometimes when me and Joy come by the high school, the kids be like white on rice wrapped around one another," says Larry disapprovingly. "Several gotten pregnant. I think America as a whole has dropped her values. Now it seems all right to have premarital sex. Mothers goin' along with it. I believe it is our responsibility to teach our children the values when they are much younger."

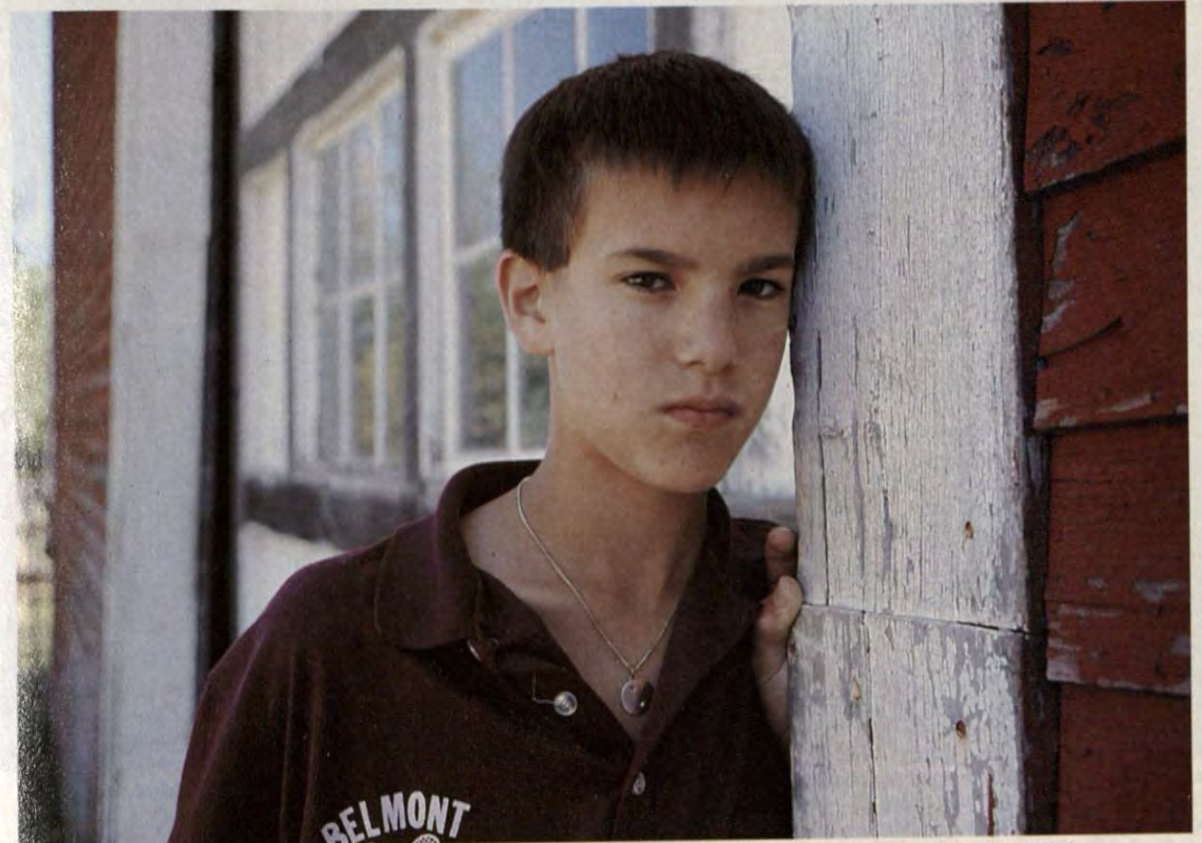
David shares a bedroom with his siblings. The room is barely large enough to fit the three beds. In the winter, cold air knives through the spaces between the clapboard walls. The children sleep under layers of homemade patchwork quilts. No door separates their bedroom from the living room, a small rectangle dominated by the wood stove that is the sole source of heat for the house.

There is one thing David desperately wants, an object of desire he shares with Nancy, Stephen and his parents: a house of their own. The family's current four-room dwelling, for which they pay \$30 a

month in rent, is owned by a coal company. Taped to the kitchen wall is a newspaper article with a drawing of a house with floor plans. Nancy calls it "our dream house." With its dormer windows and steeply pitched roof, the structure looks more suited to suburbia than to this West Virginia hollow. But it has four bedrooms.

On that happy though ever distant day when David moves into his new house, one item will surely go with him. It is the mounted head of the nine-point buck he and his father shot last fall. David remembers: "We came to skin the deer, and Dad looks at it and says, 'I'm going to have that mounted.' Then he was tearin' the skin off, and we found where I had shot it real close to the tail where it went through the backbone and came out the other side. And Dad says, 'If you goin' to shoot a deer, you got to shoot it up around the shoulder or neck.' I say, 'I know.' You see, it was really Dad's deer."

The head now hangs in the living room with a plaque inscribed LARRY AND DAVID NELSON, NOV. 23, 1987. The trophy, just to the right of the mantelpiece, has a place of prominence in the house. "Goin' huntin' with your son is something a father can't explain," Larry says. He looks up at the deer. "I downed the deer, and David put it away. It was a special time for us. Maybe 20 years from now David will look back and recollect the times we had together." ■



He carries "a little angel and a little devil" inside his head. "I usually don't do what the devil tells me"

# Josh

AGE 14, BELMONT, MASS.

Between childhood and adulthood lies the treacherous territory of adolescence, a region full of brainless impulses, hormonal furies. Josh Maisel is about to cross it.



Flanked by his amalgamated family in Belmont: Stepbrother Dylan, Father Sandy, Stepmother Joyce and Big Sister Dana

AUNTS, UNCLES AND COUSINS from faraway places came to celebrate the last bar mitzvah of the generation. Balloons danced in the early summer air. That morning Josh Maisel, then 13, entered Beth Israel Congregation in Waterville, Me., as a child, and he emerged, in the eyes of his faith, a man. Serious duties replaced the weightlessness of his younger years. As a child, Josh had listened to Scripture and learned; as an adult, Josh is allowed to read from the Torah so that he can pass on his family's faith to a new generation.

At 14, Josh is astute enough to understand that his bar mitzvah was more a ceremonial aspiration than a sudden transformation. Between childhood and adulthood lies the ridiculous and treacherous territory of adolescence. It is a region full of dangers, brainless impulses, hormonal furies. And it must be crossed.

Josh has just successfully passed one milestone in the process: his freshman year of high school. His still boyish face is framed by a square-edged haircut. Josh has always been small for his age. That bothers him but does not slow him down. Barely 5 ft. tall, he competes in a sport of giants: his ambidextrous dribbling helped him become starting point guard on the ninth-grade basketball team at Belmont High School in suburban Boston.



"I mean, I don't like to have limits, but I understand why there are limits. But when I'm being limited, I don't like it."

Childhood has not been an easy path for Josh. He will never forget the night nearly nine years ago when his parents told him they were divorcing. "My sister Dana and I really liked watching the TV show *Mork and Mindy*, so my parents decided to tell us right before the show so we could watch it afterward," he says. "I don't think we ever got around to watching it. I just remember crying."

As he grew older, Josh's pain subsided, but he knew that his life would never be the same again. "It just takes time," he says. Time, and a sense that he was not going through this alone. "A couple of years later, my best friend's parents got divorced. Then a lot of other kids' parents got divorced. I guess when it happened to me, it was just starting." When asked about his greatest worry as a child, Josh replied, somewhat absently, "War. It's scary to think what could happen." But at the mention of his parents' divorce, Josh adds, "Now that I think about it, war looks really small compared with that."

His parents Sandy and Mary Lou Maisel were college sweethearts when they were married at 21. They were divorced when Josh was six. Sandy Maisel, 42, is a professor of government who recently finished one year of teaching at Harvard. Usually Sandy teaches at Colby College in Waterville, where Josh was raised. Sandy took over full-time custody of Josh and his older sister Dana, now 16, after the divorce. On certain weekends and selected holidays, Josh and Dana spend time with their mother, who runs a management-consulting business in southern Maine.

Within a few years of the divorce, Sandy remarried, and Josh's family grew by two. His stepmother is Joyce McPhetres Maisel, 31, a college counselor who, like Sandy, was divorced. She has a nine-year-old son, Dylan McPhetres. The new family structure can get confusing. Dylan calls his stepfather "Sandy." Dana and Josh call him "Dad" and their stepmother "Joyce." Bouncing back and forth can trip Dylan up. "Sometimes I call my dad 'Josh' because I'm used to saying his name," says Dylan. "Once I called my stepmother 'Mom' and I also called Sandy 'Dad' once. It is really difficult saying all the different names, especially of all the relatives, because I've had really a lot of names in my life."

On a Friday afternoon, Josh's mix-and-match family is in the bleachers at Belmont High watching him play basketball. Sandy shouts loudly at each play Josh makes. Joyce arrives from work at half time. Mary Lou sits with Dana a short distance away. That night she'll drive the kids two hours north for a planned three-day holiday weekend; Dy-



On weekends, Josh heads north to spend time with his mother Mary Lou in Maine

lan will be dropped off in Kennebunk, Me., to spend time with his father. A different parent will bring all three children back to Belmont. Parenthood in the late 20th century: love and logistics and chagrin.

When Josh comes out of the locker room, he kisses his father, hugs Joyce, gives his mom a kiss and says softly to her, "I have basketball practice on Monday. It's important to me." The coach called practice when the team lost. Josh wants to be with his team even if it means cutting short his visit with Mom. The delicate letting-go stage of parenting has begun.

**H**urried and hushed negotiations commence. Mary Lou huddles with Sandy and Joyce to discuss logistical changes involved in meeting Josh's request. Dylan will have to return early. Dana too. Within ten minutes, it's settled. Sandy and Joyce will make the round-trip drive on Sunday. Josh will be at practice.

In Belmont parental expectations are high. Parents typically work in high-pressure, top-dollar professional jobs around Boston. In many families both parents work full time, as Josh's do. Success is trumpeted at Josh's school, as it is in Josh's family. More than one-third of the Maisels in his father's generation made Phi Beta Kappa. In Belmont some 90% of high school students go to college. Many fear dire consequences if they do not get into the "right" college, and competition for those cherished spots is keen.

"In Belmont it's the gold medal or nothing," a parent said. "The bronze is not enough."

Like all the other ninth-graders in Belmont, Josh took a semester-long health class taught by Joan MacClary. Josh filled his notebook with all sorts of facts: for example, alcohol reduces sperm count, though he noted in parentheses that "it will go back up." And Josh knows that because he weighs about 100 lbs. he would be legally drunk after three drinks.

"I don't want you to memorize what these drugs do," MacClary tells the class one day. "You can look that up in a book. I want you to understand why people use drugs." A girl asks, "Is marijuana worse or better than alcohol?" Josh volunteers an answer: "Worse, because it's illegal." His teacher is not so certain. "That's a tough question," she says, noting that scientists are still trying to figure out how dangerous marijuana is. She is not recommending either drug to the students but trying to get them to recognize that alcohol is also a drug that can be abused. In Belmont alcohol is the drug that kids are most likely to encounter at a young age.

To those in Josh's generation, the word party is no longer a noun but a verb with a specific definition: no parents, plenty of alcohol, possibly some other drugs. When kids party in one of Belmont's large, comfortable homes, the result can be hundreds of dollars' worth of property damage. Word spreads quickly whenever a youngster's parents



Josh and Dylan tussle like brothers, call each other buddies and share the deep and painful scars of divorce

leave town for the weekend. Kegs of beer are tapped, and kids descend in crowds. Almost before it begins, the party—which may have started as an invitation to four friends to come by—is out of any one youngster's control. So why do parents leave kids by themselves for a weekend? Says a Belmont parent: "We are trying to show the kids how much we trust them."

Peer groups fill the role that family once held for adolescents. For starters, kids spend more time with peers nowadays; parents are not home so much. Peers are often the ones who establish limits, or an absence of limits, for one another. Josh says he does not want to try marijuana, for the moment at least. Ditto for drinking. But Josh does worry that without a buddy to help him say no, he might be tempted to join in if his friends were doing it. "I haven't really had the urge to drink or use drugs, and I haven't been pressured," he says. "I have kind of decided I can wait those couple of years till I'm older."

Josh knows that he still wrestles with "a little angel and a little devil" inside his head. "Like, I know I shouldn't do something because the angel tells me I shouldn't. But sometimes I do it anyway," he says. "That's one thing. As I've grown older, I usually don't do what the devil tells me." But Josh knows kids whose devilish side won out and who did not wait to try alcohol or other drugs or sex.

In the afternoons, kids turn on TV soap operas and see adults drinking to feel

comfortable, using drugs for fun, having sex with each other's mates. Or on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* they hear adults talk—sometimes brag—about similar behavior. Self-restraint no longer seems like a very adult way to act. Kids have pressures too, so youngsters who cannot wait to grow up now figure they know how.

**S**andy and Joyce set limits. If Josh or Dana has a party at home, the parents can walk in at any time. Neither Josh nor Dana may go to a party at a house when parents aren't there. When the kids go out, they must call in if they change locations. "We want to know where they are, period," says Joyce. "They don't have an option not to tell us."

"Do you like the idea that your parents set limits?" Josh is asked.

"No. Yeah, I do," he says, uncertain of what he thinks about this confusing topic. "I mean, I don't like to have limits, but I understand why there are limits. But when I'm being limited, I don't like it."

If parents did not set limits, how would he know what is right for him?

"Kids don't, and that's where you have problems, because if parents are very lenient and don't set limits, then kids will never learn that there is a limit and that they should stop at some point," he says. "That's when they go and start experimenting with that stuff."

Can he imagine what it would be like if his parents set no limits on what he could do or when he could do it?

"I think that kids think they look good now if they don't have limits, but it's worse in the end," Josh replies.

At 7:30 the next morning, Josh, dressed in his usual school-day outfit of jeans, sweatshirt and sneakers, sits in English class. Most of the girls, who are taller than Josh, wear short skirts and white ankle-length socks with their sneakers. Between classes, kids primp in front of mirrors on locker doors. Lip glosses glow at the start of each class. An open locker door reveals a picture of a sunset with these words underneath: "Let's get drunk and go to heaven." A few kids kiss amid the shuffling crowd. Over the decades the smooching pose has not changed: girls stand nonchalantly as boys, elbow bent against the locker, shield the stolen kiss from view.

Josh's class is studying Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The play, almost four centuries old, is about adolescent rebellion, a phenomenon that remains eerily constant through changing times. "Back then kids were expected to be adults when they turned 13 or so," says Josh of the play's tragic heroes, who are the same age he is. "The difference now is, kids don't have to."

Sometimes Josh imagines what being an adult will be like. "I will have to really look after myself and not have somebody looking over my shoulder to be sure I'm doing the right thing," he says. "And I'll have to teach my kids the things I've been taught."