WE WERE PROMISED

HOW AN APPALACHIAN GRANDMOTHER FOUGHT A CORPORATE GIANT

JULIA FLINT



FOREWORD BY ELIZABETH CATTE

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Karen searched through the stacks of papers on her desk, remembering a profile of Logan Kruger she once printed. According to Forbes, Kruger's total compensation for 2009 alone was more than $4 million. The number was beyond com-prehension. That someone could earn so much and still not be content, she couldn't understand. Karen told herself, *Every cent Mike and I have ever earned is just peanuts compared to what these CEOs make*. Which was true. If Mike brought home $40,000 a year (which could include working holidays and overtime) after thirty-three years, his *lifetime earnings* would have been $1.32 million—not even half of Kruger's compen-sation for one year.

In addition to following the news on Kruger, Karen had been watching news coverage of the Occupy protests that began in New York City in September 2011 and spread across the United States. The protests were the latest wave of mass movements emerging in the wake of the 2007–2008 global financial crisis. Organizers of the Occupy movement were calling attention to the effects of increasing economic inequality fueled by financial and political systems benefiting the top 1 percent of earners at the expense of the rest of society. Karen could appreciate this perspective and sympathize with the anger and frustra-tion people were experiencing. She believed the Ravenswood retirees were victims of the ruthlessness and greed that she saw as driving decision-making in corporate America.

Felt acutely in communities like Ravenswood, uncertainty and instability had been undermining America's working

class for decades. Industries that had thrived in the postwar decades of the twentieth century, particularly manufacturing, were declining. Workers bore the brunt of the impact, while US businesses might remain profitable for owners, even as production declined. As CEOs shifted their focus to maximizing financial gains for shareholders, decisions resulting in short-term profits had taken precedence over planning for the long-term viability of a company and the security of its workforce. At the same time, deregulation in the business and financial sectors increased the concentration of wealth among the wealthy, driving income inequality across the nation.

In 1965, when Kaiser ran the Ravenswood plant, CEOs on average earned 21 times what the average worker earned in a year. CEOs earned more than 60 times as much as the average worker in 1989, and 117 times as much by 1995. By 2009, CEO earnings had ballooned to 180 times an average worker's pay (and the gap has continued to widen). At the same time, companies publicly lamented the challenges of maintaining their obligations to retirees—carrying on as if workers themselves were to blame for living long enough to retire and expecting to do so with dignity and security. As Ellen E. Schultz documents in *Retirement Heist*, American companies raided workers' pension and retirement accounts to boost profits. At the same time, companies often built up lavish retirement packages for executives. Schultz agreed with companies' cries that America was facing a retirement crisis—but, she makes clear, it was no accident. Companies sacrificed their workers in order to benefit executives and shareholders.

Kruger's departure came almost three years after Century idled the Ravenswood plant, and despite her outrage over Kruger's claim for additional compensation, Karen had to believe that his leaving was good for the retirees. She



Occupy Century Aluminum camp. (Photo by James Fassinger.)

told journalist Jared Hunt that the lockout had ended after Ravenswood Aluminum Company fired several executives, and she was hopeful that parting with Kruger would signal a new chapter for Century. She shared this as rumors that Century was moving more seriously toward restarting the plant were gaining ground. In December, the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* published a story discussing the potential for a plant restart and quoted Karen as stressing that the retirees did not wish to be a roadblock but were determined to see the company fulfill its prior obligations—determined and willing to do whatever was necessary.

Occupied: December 2011–January 2012

Karen felt apprehensive walking into the union hall for the retiree meeting in mid-December 2011. She remained standing when she entered the back room, resting her hands on

the back of one of the folding chairs. Conversations quieted, one after another, the retirees wondering if she might have some news about the restart. Karen always had some news to share. She was always talking to someone, always researching something, planning something. She looked a little nervous, though, fidgeting with the gold rings she wore.

"I know you all are going to think that I have lost my mind," she told the retirees, rolling her eyes when someone teased that they knew she had but loved her anyway. "Well, I have an idea," she said, sounding serious, "and I can't do it on my own."

"Tell us what to do, boss," someone replied, without a hint of hesitation.

"If you say no, I'll understand," she continued. "I know it's winter. But I say we get some tents and set up camp at the entrance to the plant, like the kids have done in New York and everywhere else. We should tell Century we aren't leaving until we get our health care. We should Occupy Century Aluminum." She held her breath for a moment, listening to the shuffling of bodies in chairs and the muffled sounds from the two offices near the front of the building. She wanted to give the retirees a moment to think about what she was asking of them.

"Karen, could we wait until after Christmas?" Hoot asked, breaking the silence. Luther "Hoot" Gibson was one of the oldest retirees fighting alongside Karen. He had hired on at the Ravenswood plant in 1958, after serving in the military. He started out sweeping floors and worked several jobs before training to be a millwright. He worked for almost forty years, half of those years on swing shifts, before retiring in 1996. Hoot and his wife, Lois, both active with the retirees' campaign, had been high school sweethearts. They married in 1955, and raised their two boys outside of Point Pleasant, West Virginia, south of Ravenswood. Their kids were grown now

with kids of their own. Hoot had been looking forward to seeing them over the holidays.

"No, Hoot. We can't wait," Karen said firmly. "The legislature starts up in January, and Century will want to get that bill passed this year. We need to do it now." It was a big ask, she knew. At just shy of sixty-two years old, Karen was one of the youngest retirees committed to fighting Century. She took in the faces in the room, now questioning if she was crazy. Could she really ask these men and women to put their lives on hold, to miss Christmas, to sleep in tents during the coldest months of the year?

"I know this is—" Karen began, prepared to plead her case.

"OK, then. You heard her," Hoot said, looking around the room as he raised his hand. "Who's with me?" Two more hands went up, then three. Then more. Jim Weltner, Ripcord, John Morris, Les Shockey, and others were on board. Karen could feel tears welling up as she looked around the room. Before she could say anything more, the retirees were discussing the logistics of where to find tents and what supplies they would need to pull together.

Karen created a Facebook page for their protest that afternoon. She put out a call for donations, asking for firewood, inflatable mattresses, warm blankets, Christmas decorations, and prayers. In the next post, she shared that while Century's former CEO was handed $6 million once he was no longer of use to the company, West Virginia workers were left to die with no health insurance in their retirement. And still, $6 million wasn't enough for Kruger. "We are the 99%," she wrote, announcing that the retirees' Occupy Century Aluminum protest would begin on December 18, 2011.