

Chapter 1

Fifth grade was the worst. It was an absolute horrible nine months. I hardly know where to begin so I'll just start the enumerating. To start with I had to get glasses the summer before. They were horrible, wretched black goggles. They were the kind of glasses that would have fit right on Buddy Holly's nose just fine but looked like an abomination on me. And ten to make matters worse, the week before school began, I broke my arm flying off Marvin Alvarez's trampoline onto the pavement. I spent the first two months of the school year in a cast that went from my wrist all the way up to the shoulder blade on my right arm. I had to write everything with my left hand. That was just me.

Our family life, once so solid and certain, started to crumble. My remaining grandparents died the year before. My father's job down at the steel mill had been cut in both hours and pay. Mom and Dad started to argue. They argued all the time. It just wasn't your ordinary "I keep telling you to take out the garbage" type of arguing either. No sir. This was the type that was accompanied by slamming doors, throwing pots and mutual threats of murder and suicide.

When it got extremely bad, I'd go to my room, lock the door, crawl into my closet, turn on the light and read my comic books. The yelling and screaming became a faraway muffled sound outside my fortress. It's not like the paid me any attention and cared where I was during their storms on insanity. It's the only place I felt safe. I was safe among my comic books, stamp collection and hot wheels cars. Sometimes I would pull my little twelve inch black and white TV into the closet and watch TV all night while they argued. If the antenna was turned "just right", there were a whopping three channels I could tune in.

As the year progressed, insane things started happening. My father would sleep outside on the hammock between the two pan trees. Sometimes my mother would disappear for two or three days. She would

always come back though. A few times it got so bad, I was shipped out to my aunt and uncle's house while my parents could try to "get their heads together" or "dry up" or "try one last time"

All this never seemed to work though. I'd be back for less than a week and something simple like a "towel on the floor" or an "unpaid bill" would kick off the fireworks again and I'd run off to the safety of my room.

And right in the middle of this storm, one or both of my parents had the brilliant idea that it would all get better if we joined a church and tried to fix things that way. So, they bought me this silly little uncomfortable suit and we went to church every Sunday. We joined the local Baptist church, went every Sunday morning, smiled a lot, shook a lot of hands. We said stuff like "So good to see you", "Isn't it a glorious morning?" and "Wasn't the sermon truly inspirational today?" For weeks we went to potluck dinners after each Sunday service. To this day, I still have trouble even looking at a casserole in a 9 x 13 Pyrex dish. None of this brotherhood and community participation did anything to help my parent's issues at home though. They'd be at each other throats again by Sunday night.

So, just as fifth grade was winding down, it was decided without consulting me that I should leave for a couple of weeks and go to Church Camp. They said something like, "It would be good for me to make new friends" while they "work it out between each other". The thought horrified me but as their arguing got even worse, I began to warm up to the idea and started looking forward to the whole Church Camp thing.

And this is where my tale really begins. At that instant of being shipped off to Church Camp, sitting in the middle seat of a blue and white Dodge Van, somewhere, sometime in the hot summer of 1981 as the tires hummed on the Texas pavement.