

Chapter 1

Nightmares into Dreams

The narrow trail up the rocky slope beckoned me, as it always did whenever the demons of childhood bombarded my subconscious. I hiked the trail with ease until I reached the crest of the gorge, where I paused to inhale the rich aromas of evergreens and moist earth. Looking north, a ribbon of gray meandered from east to west - the Columbia River. Beyond the river, a thick belt of fir trees announced the Washington State border.

I wheeled about, eager to continue my hike on the trail through thick undergrowth. Instead, I found myself facing an open field of long grasses and wild flowers, burnt by summer's scorching sun. In the middle of the field stood a giant tree unlike those indigenous to western Oregon. A sense of dread washed over me and settled in the pit of my stomach. I recognized the hated maple tree and realized that I was no longer in Oregon, but twenty-eight hundred miles east, in Pennsylvania.

My feet ignored my brain's signals to flee, and I stood paralyzed for several seconds, uncertain of where I was or how I'd gotten there. A child's wail startled me. Thinking someone must be hurt or lost, I rushed toward the cry. I was within fifty yards of the gnarled old tree before I saw the chain, wrapped around the tree trunk and hooked to a dog collar. The dog collar circled the neck of a sobbing child who couldn't have been more than two years old.

Shocked that anyone would do such a thing to a toddler, I sprinted across the grass to his aid. When I was within fifteen feet of the boy, a man stepped out from behind the tree. He waved a stick over his head and screamed at the child.

"You are worthless! A dummy! A panty waist! I hate your guts!" His rough, gravelly voice boomed across the field.

"Stop! Stop!" I knew that I had to save the child from a certain beating.

The man whipped about to face me, the menacing stick high over his head. As he focused his gaze on me, he grew in stature until he loomed fifteen feet or more above my head. "Who are you?"

"Stop!" Though I shouted as loud as I could, my words were but a whimper.

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“Who do you think you are?” The man angled around me, ready to strike. “You stupid, worthless, piece of...” As he swung his weapon toward my head, I threw my hands up to protect myself.

“No-o-o-o-o!” I tried to cry out. I tried to run, but my legs spun helplessly in place, like automobile tires on ice. No, this can’t be real! I willed myself awake.

The field, the tree, and the man disappeared; and I found myself in a warm and familiar cocoon of darkness. In the soft moonlight coming in through our bedroom window, I could make out the form of my wife, Bonnie. I exhaled sharply.

“Honey, are you OK?” Her voice was fuzzy from sleep. “Was it a dream again?”

“Yeah!” I couldn’t breathe. Cold sweat beaded my forehead. Tears ran down my face, saturating my pillowcase.

“Well, you surely scared me!” She laughed. “I thought it was the beginning of the apocalypse!”

I gave a nervous chuckle. Bonnie could always make me laugh, in spite of myself. “I’m sorry I wakened you.”

She slipped under my rigid arm and rested her head on my chest. “It’s OK. If anyone understands, I do.”

Bonnie had also come from what is commonly called a “dysfunctional” family. Over the years we’d seen one another through uncountable bouts of tears, agonizing nightmares, and numerous journeys down venomous memory lanes.

After a few minutes, I disentangled myself from her arms and sat up, threw back the covers, and slid my legs over the edge of the bed. “I-I-I need a drink of water. I need to be alone.”

“I love you.” Bonnie rolled over to go back to sleep.

The pattern was always the same. It would begin with a horrendous nightmare. Sometimes I would be trapped in an old barn with a lion or bear and be unable to locate the barn door. Sometimes I’d find the door, only to realize it wouldn’t budge. I would awaken to find myself in a cold sweat. I would then slip away to my study to give the artesian well of terror I suppressed deep inside of me time to subside. I hated the fact that my father could still reach out and affect my life after all these years.

The source of my nightmare came from a very real occurrence in my life. I remember being lashed to a tree with a chain and a dog collar fastened around my neck. Somehow I’d wandered off, and my father accused me of running away. To teach me a lesson, he let the dog go

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and chained me to the tree trunk. I was two. It was the first time I remember my father telling me that he hated my “guts.” I didn’t know what “guts” were, but I knew it had to be pretty bad because my father looked so angry.

I grew up being afraid of my dad. I was so scared of him I would do anything to please him. But try as I might, I couldn’t make him happy with me. Whenever something broke down on the farm and I happened to be close by, he whipped, beat, or kicked me. Whenever a tractor wouldn’t start, I was to blame. Whenever I smiled or looked like I might smile, he’d slap or kick me and tell me, “Wipe that smile off your face, Boy, or I’ll wipe it off for you!”

I wasn’t the only one to suffer at his hand. Our pets felt his rage as well. One day he came in from the barn and found our tabby housecat licking butter from an uncovered butter dish on the kitchen table. Furious, he grabbed the animal by the neck, stormed outside, and hurled it against a tree trunk. Cats are supposed to have nine lives, but this one didn’t have a chance to live two.

When I was seven, we had a golden-brown mutt we named Tippie. At night, Tippie loved to sleep at the foot of my bed and keep my feet warm. I could depend on Tippie to be there for me. I would bury my face in his fur whenever I needed a friend. One day my father took Tippie over the hill and shot him for reasons my young mind couldn’t understand. That night my faithful friend didn’t return to the house; he didn’t hop up on the foot of my bed. I cried myself to sleep.

In the morning while I was milking the cows, Tippie appeared at the barn door, his fur matted with blood. “Tippie! You’re alive!” I didn’t dare speak above a whisper. The dog limped over to me and lay down beside me. I hugged him, matted fur and all. The look of pain and confusion in his soulful, brown eyes broke my young heart. Tears welled up in my eyes and then ran down my cheeks. I could barely see clearly enough to finish milking the cow. I had to do something to help my friend. Frantically, I glanced about the barn. Where could I hide him? Where could I keep Tippie safe from my dad? In the hay loft? In the tool shed? I thought about all the possibilities. But before I could formulate a plan, my father strode into the barn..

“What’s that mutt doing here? I thought I finished him off yesterday!” Grabbing Tippie, he dragged the dog out the door. On his way he grabbed the gun he always kept loaded in the barn. “Keep milking!

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“No, Dad, please don’t!” My cries fell on deaf ears. Time stood still as I buried my head in the flank of the cow I was milking. I winced as I heard the single rifle shot. I never saw my friend again.

Before I was born, my grandparents had purchased a hundred-acre farm and given it to my father. Grandpa also gave us a team of horses, along with a couple of old tractors. In the summer it was my job to hitch the horses to the one-row cultivator and cultivate the corn. My father refused to let me drive the tractors. “You’re too much of a sissy to drive heavy machinery. Boy, you will never amount to anything no matter how long you live!” During the day Dad worked at another job while the four of us boys did the farming and baby-sat our little sister, Diana.

My grandparents were my only refuge. They would play with me, laugh with me, and hug me - gentle, loving treatment I never received at home. At their house no one called me dummy, stupid, worthless, sissy, pantywaist, ugly, and other names too crude to repeat.

I was thirteen when my father sold the farm, packed up the family, and moved us to Wisconsin, where he purchased a 320-acre farm, along with a collection of new machinery. It was a strange place. Every building on the farm was made of old boxcars - the barns, the garage, the shed, even the house. How my mother managed to make the house homey, I’ll never know. We hadn’t lived there a year when a stranger came by one day and hauled off the tractor and farm machinery. He left the horses, the manure wagon, and the cultivator. The next day another individual came for the cows. All we had left was the land and the rusty boxcars. Without explanation, we loaded our household goods onto an old International truck and moved to another farm my father had rented. We lived in an old farmhouse with no indoor plumbing until a stranger repossessed the new cows my father had purchased.

Having lost everything to the bank, my father took a job managing a farm for someone else. With dad home all day, the beatings got worse and more frequent. One day he hit me so hard that he knocked me unconscious. His outbursts left visible marks on me too. At school the other children called me “fat lips and red eyes.” By the age of fifteen, I believed that it was only a matter of time before my father would kill me like he had Tippie and the family cat. I never thought I’d reach adulthood. And if I did, I wouldn’t amount to anything anyway. He’d convinced me I was useless and the beatings were all my fault.

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I was afraid to live, afraid of what was going to happen next. I was also afraid to die. At night I would lie awake and wonder how long it would hurt before I didn't know anything more. Only my fear that the pain of dying was worse than the pain I'd already experienced kept me alive.

After a while we moved to yet another dairy farm that my father was hired to manage. Every morning my brothers and I helped milk fifty cows before we left for school. It was my job to feed the cows and to keep their water cups clean. One morning while I was cleaning Maddy's (all the cows had names) cup, the water wouldn't stop running. Frantic, I desperately tried to turn it off, but everything was getting soaked. I rushed to where my father was milking. "Dad, Maddy's water cup is overflowing!"

The words had barely left my mouth when Dad's fist hit me so hard I crumpled into the trench. He kicked me, dragged me out of the trench, and pulled me to my feet. He continued kicking me while slapping my face several times as hard as he could. Terrified, I wet my pants, but he didn't notice since I was already covered with manure and cow urine. Stunned, I had no idea what had set him off.

"No son of mine is going to talk like a city slicker!" He slapped me several more times on the side of the head. "The water cup is not overflowing; it's running over!" He shoved me back from him when the cow he'd been milking was finished.

Released from his clutches, I staggered out of the barn. My vision was blurred; my head pounded with pain; blood gushed from my nose; my lips had begun to swell. And I couldn't stop crying. In the bitterly cold morning air, my wet clothes stuck to my skin as I stumbled toward the house. I'd climbed up the stairs to the back door before he caught up with me.

"Don't you dare tell your mother, or I'll give you a beating you'll never forget! Straighten up and stop crying, you miserable pantywaist!"

With that he grabbed the garden hose and blasted the manure off my clothing. The icy water bit into my wounds. When he was satisfied that the filth had been washed from my clothing, I slunk into the house, hoping my mom wouldn't see me. I sneaked up to the bedroom I shared with my brothers.

I was terrified of my father's threats. I didn't want to go to school, but I didn't want to stay home either. I didn't want to have to lie to my teachers, and I didn't want to lie to my mother. I longed for someone who would just hold me and let me cry until the pain stopped. If I

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promised my dad I wouldn't tell mom what happened, couldn't I, at least, let her hold me? But I knew that wasn't feasible because my mother would ask why I was crying. I could run away! How many times had I dreamed of doing just that. But what would happen to me if I were caught and sent back? I might as well face it - I was worthless trash, too stupid to ever amount to anything.

When my father would talk about me to other people, I'd cringe in embarrassment. He'd make fun of me and tell them how much he hated me. "Why, I actually had to teach my worthless son how to 'talk like a man'! I'm not about to have a son of mine talkin' like some sissy!

The beatings lasted until I was sixteen. The last one caused a black eye, bloody nose, fat lip, and a stream of blood oozing from between my teeth. To top it off, I'd wet my pants. His mistake was forcing me to walk through a group of people in an effort to embarrass me further. His plan backfired. Someone who saw my injuries threatened to report him to the authorities. As a result, he never touched me again, but there were times when he acted as if he wanted to very badly.

Though the beatings stopped, the emotional abuse continued. With every hateful word, he ingrained in me the belief that I would never amount to anything. I was so afraid of failure that I subconsciously set myself up to fail. And fail I did - from completely blanking out on the music I was playing during a performance at boarding school to bumbling through every social contact I tried to make with members of the opposite sex. Around my peers I was shy and easily intimidated. Like the weaker chicken trapped in a pen of healthier chickens, I was the prime target for being heckled. In high school, bullies regularly took their shots at harassing me. I lived in a state of constant terror until I escaped to a Christian boarding school.

During Christmas vacation of my senior year, I welcomed the opportunity to stay at the school rather than go home. By staying at school, I could avoid my father's abuse and also work off part of my bill. Owing nothing at graduation was a bonus as far as I was concerned. I thought this was a good idea until I discovered that my biggest tormentor was also staying at the school. I didn't know which was worse, my father or the bully. Just a month previously, he and a gang of his cronies threw me off the porch of the dormitory into the bushes seven feet below. And now I found myself stuck not only on campus with him but working alone with him for two weeks!

"OK, boys!" Our supervisor pointed toward a boxcar full of redwood two-by-fours. "That's your job. Unload the wood and stack it

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over by the wall.” He pointed toward the yawning cavern of the wood shop. With that he strode off toward his pickup truck. “Call me if you have any problems.”

I took a deep breath and glanced out of the corner of my eye at my nemesis. He grinned back at me. From the glint in his eyes, I knew that this would be a long two weeks. The first day was bad. He heckled me incessantly. The second day was like the first.

Halfway through the third day, I’d had it with his jabs. I dropped my armload of lumber and dived for his waist. I had three brothers; I knew how to fight. We regularly wrestled with one another. If we were caught, we would be punished. Because our punishments were always more painful than the actual fight, I avoided fighting as much as possible. But I’d had it with this guy. I couldn’t take any more. The perpetual bullying and belittling had to stop!

As we wrestled on the warehouse floor, I was surprised how easily I overpowered him. Within a few short minutes, I’d pinned him to the ground. Lying flat on his back on the concrete floor, he looked up at me and suddenly asked, “Are you a Christian?”

Still holding him down, I froze. “What difference does that make?”

“That’s why we’ve been bugging you. We wanted to see how long you could last and if you are for real.”

Oops! Now I felt terrible. I rolled off of him and onto the sawdust-coated floor. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, that’s OK.” He sat up and brushed the sawdust off his shirt and jeans. “I deserved it. I guess even Christians have a right to defend themselves, right?”

I stared at him for an instant and then broke into laughter. He laughed as well. I stood up and reached out a hand toward him. He took it. I helped him to his feet. This proved to be a turning point for me. I discovered that by laughing with people who laughed at me, I could change their laughter from derisive humor to a joke shared. From then on I quit being afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing socially and, instead, chose to laugh at my own mistakes.

While I made progress socially, I transferred my fear of my father into a terrifying fear of my God. No matter what people told me about the loving heavenly Father, I knew that, in time, He would hurt me too. How could I trust Him? How could I ever be good enough to please Him?