

The Early Years

I was a twin, born into poverty and five weeks premature at Dallas's Parkland Memorial Hospital on Columbus Day (October 9) 1960. My mother was very ill at the time and it was somewhat miraculous that either of us survived the pregnancy. I weighed five pounds, seven ounces and measured fifteen inches in length. My brother was stillborn and weighed three pounds at delivery. Sharing my mother's body, and feeding off it was an ever growing abdominal tumor that weighed eleven pounds when it was removed. All this from a woman who weighed seventy-eight pounds when she was admitted into the hospital. One might say that my arrival in this world was tumultuous. My world was not destined to improve any time soon.

Try as they might, my parents were unable to provide adequate or consistent support for their children and, when I was two years old, the State removed me, my brothers, and my only sister from their custody. We were all placed in Buckner's Children's Home; I was later placed in foster care where I remained until I was almost seven years old; my siblings remained in the orphanage. The public welfare system of today was nonexistent in that day. Then, if the parents were unable to support their children the State would assume custodial guardianship of them. The children would then be placed in orphanages where they would remain until the circumstances of their parents improved sufficiently that they were able to support their children. My parents reached this point just before I was to enter first grade; I did not attend kindergarten or pre-school.

During the following two years - I assume because of financial constraints and complications - we moved from one house to another, about every six months. Interestingly, it was always rental houses; never apartments. My ninth birthday was approaching when my parents bought their house, the house they would retain until after my mother's death. It was not a great house, and it was not in the greatest of neighborhoods, but it was theirs, and it meant that we would no longer be moving with the change of the seasons. Upon moving into this house I enrolled in my third public school in a two year period. Before the passing of the next year I would kiss my first girl and try my first drugs; both would prove intoxicating, and both - together - would lead me near unto death.

My venture into drugs began with weed - the neighborhood was full to overflowing with it - but it wasn't long before I was seeking bigger and better highs. I was trying to escape forces and circumstances that I could not control, and drugs, for a time, proved a very effective escape mechanism. The bigger (i.e. older) kids were doing more exotic drugs: angel dust, PCP, LSD, magic mushrooms, hash, and a whole host of others, and they were more than willing to share, if for no other reason than just to watch the little kid get stoned, and to be entertained by his craziness. I was being used to transport drugs and money before I turned eleven, and, by this time, I had already put my first experience with horse behind me. It was the beginning of the end.

In late May, 1973, my life changed forever as the angel of death kissed me on the forehead, smiled down upon me and said, "Not this day." The school year had just ended and Rebecca (my girlfriend, of sorts) and I were occupying the furthest corner of the bleachers, celebrating with our own private party. We were mainlining horse and went too far. The last I remember Becky was resting her head on my shoulder. She died that day, but I was not to share her fate. I have often wondered which one of us were the luckier on that fateful afternoon. When I regained consciousness I was in the hospital being treated for a heroin overdose. The next three months of my life were spent in Westgate Sanitarium in a heroin rehab program where I was administered ever decreasing doses of methadone. I spent most of my days puking my guts up and wishing for the blessing of death nearly every minute of every hour of every day. This wins the award for the most difficult and challenging period of my life; it constitutes one of the hardest and most terrifying memories that I possess, a memory that continues to haunt me, and one that moves me to tears each time it surfaces.

This experience all but cured me of any desire to do drugs, though I would develop a notable fondness for alcohol during the years that followed. It also, however, eliminated my only effective escape mechanism. The next two years were, for the most part, uneventful. I spent most of my time in my bedroom, trying to remain out of sight and out of mind. I adopted reading as my new escape mechanism during this period and I consumed book after book after book, trying to stay off the streets and away from drugs, and out of the way of a physically abusive father, a psychologically abusive and alcoholic mother -

she could also become violently physical, and brothers and a near neighbor who were either physically or sexually abusive, or both. My sister, as much as she could, tried to protect me from the surrounding evils. At fourteen years old, in a fit of rage, I tried to kill one of my brothers with a knife. I decided then that it was time to leave; I was gone before nightfall. The next three years found me wandering across three states: Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana before returning home to Texas at seventeen.

On returning to Texas I reenrolled myself in highschool, but, after having been out of school for the previous three years, and being now older than the rest of my class, I found the routine and the environment impossible to adapt to. I became a two-time highschool dropout. I was travelling down a bad road, but fortunately, and to my own credit, I at least understood this. I enrolled myself in GED classes during the evenings and found a job during the day. Six weeks of study saw me complete the required examinations and I earned my GED through Mountain View College in Dallas. I had begun making positive changes in my life, but my social environment was less than supportive. The old neighborhood was, after all, the old neighborhood. In my mind I knew that a better life was out there somewhere; I only needed to find it. At nineteen years old I began talking to military recruiters. At twenty I was on the road again. I turned twenty-one in Navy bootcamp, smelling the salt of Lake Michigan in the air.