

Making Friends
with Billy Wong

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Chapter 1

All it took to send my summer on the road to ruin was a fancy note and a three-cent stamp. The minute that envelope showed up, Mama was packing my suitcase.

Except for when I asked her for a pimento cheese sandwich at the Esso gas station, I didn't talk the entire way from Texas to Arkansas. When you aren't speaking to the person next to you, five hours and thirty-two minutes is a long, hot car ride. But my mama talked. A lot.

"Your grandmother wants to get to know you, Azalea. She needs your help." She turned off the highway at the sign *Paris Junction Arkansas 3 miles*, and she kept talking. "That's why she wrote that sweet note. You'll be fine."

I slumped down and clomped my cowboy boots against the front seat. After a while, I whispered, “You know I’m not good with new people. Why can’t you help her?”

“You realize I’d stay if I could.”

“I realize no such thing.” I crossed my arms and blinked hard to keep from crying.

“My new job’s just started and your daddy’s on the road.” Mama fiddled with one gold loop earring, then with the radio dial, and didn’t say her real reasons.

1. I’m not allowed to sit at home by myself while she works. Till I’m twelve. Which I will be next year.
2. She’s hardly come back to Arkansas since her own daddy died.
3. Every time she and my grandmother talk on the telephone, my daddy says fireworks start flying!

“What if I miss the Tyler Elementary Back-to-School Picnic?”

“It wouldn’t be the end of the world,” Mama said.

“Well, it might be the end of *my* world.”

Okay, I truly don't care about meeting a bunch of sixth-grade strangers, even if my one true friend, Barbara Jean, swears the picnic will be fun. But I'm not admitting that.

"I'd better not miss riding up front in Daddy's big rig to the Grand Canyon. He promised I could go if I made straight As in fifth grade."

She ignored that and said, "You might find a friend in Paris Junction."

"I have a friend. She's back in Texas." I glanced out the window when we pulled up to #14 Ruby Street, a little blue house with a mailbox out front. "Don't even know what to call my own grandmother! All I have is that one birthday card she sent last April."

"Try Grandma Clark. That's what I called mine." Mama smoothed down her hair and checked her lipstick in the mirror before she stepped into the hot sunshine. She was finished with talking. Finished with me.

I gave up and stomped up the sidewalk to my grandmother's front porch. *After* I slammed the car door hard enough for Daddy to hear clear to Texas.