When asked how old he was, he held up three little fingers. He had blue-white eyes and cherry Kool-Aid stains in the corners of his mouth. The sweet taste sliced through the top of his mouth, like heaven, and spread itself out, leaving a smile on his face. He was wearing a navy blue ski coat, two sizes too large, that he had inherited from his older sister, and a pair of faded blue jeans. In his right hand dangled a pair of black Keds, stained a greenish-brown and curled up on the edges. On his feet, he wore a pair of bright red mittens. He looked right through me, penetrating all my pretenses. I swallowed hard as fear and sadness rose in my throat. He tilted his head, that softened his gaze, but he remained silent. It took all my effort not to squirm or look away.

I asked, “Why aren’t you wearing your shoes?”
He replied, “They hurt my feet.”

“Why are you wearing your mittens on your feet?” I asked.
He replied, “Because they were cold.”

A distant clash of metal reverberates through the steel and concrete dragging me back to the cold, blue-grey walls. They are heavy, twelve inches thick. The incandescent light from the center of my ceiling reflects off the walls and then darts between the rolled steel bars that face out to the darkness and the five tiers of cells. My sister told me that story a long time ago. Her purpose was to show me the importance of not embarrassing our family, but somehow that doesn’t seem to matter anymore. I close my eyes and linger for a moment with the little boy. I want to pick him up and hold him in my arms. I want to take him to a place where he will always be safe, a place where his shoes won’t hurt his feet.

I remember another story my mom told me about when she saw me standing with my face toward the sun. Something about the way I looked captured her attention. Perhaps it was the “odd” look on my face or my little two-year-old body with a large head and a far away look smiling in the sunlight that compelled her to ask, “What are you doing?”

I replied, “I’m standing in a sun storm.”

But the concrete and steel call, and my eyes open. I live in an eight-by-twelve foot room, where the mattress on my bed lays on a steel frame.
bolted into the wall. I have white sheets and two grey wool blankets. Next to the bed, the silver-grey toilet and matching sink penetrate the wall like a stainless steel alien. The toilet water is stained brown, with the last of my instant coffee from the night before. The sink has buttons you must continually press to keep the flow of water going. To fill a cup with water requires two hands. Everything in here requires exertion. The hardness molds me. I have adopted the attitude of Kenny Moon, a Black Guerilla Family Lieutenant, “Walk slow, and drink a lot of water.”

Lately, I’ve been thinking a lot about my older brother. He was with me from my beginning, and we went everywhere together the first few years of our lives. We even slept in the same bed. I remember at night, when I awoke, I would say, “Bruce, you awake?” and he would always reply, “Yeah.” I would say, “Do you have to go?” and he would reply, “Yeah,” and together we traversed the dark hall to the bathroom.

When I was in the third grade at Maple Elementary, my brother was in the seventh grade at Eisenhower Junior High. During the Cuban missile crisis, my brother and I came home from one of those trying days at school when we all had to crouch under our desks and not look at the flash. We were never told during the actual drill what we were trying to avoid by being under our desks; it was simply referred to as “civil defense procedures.” Of course we didn’t live in a vacuum and we were soon appraised of what a nuclear attack might look like. Imagine a flash that melts little boys and girls and then the violent wind that follows and knocks over buildings, and we’re safe and secure under our little desks with our hand covering the back of our neck and our eyes averted down and closed to avoid the flash. And after all that, we were told the radiation would follow and people would get sick and die. I always wondered if I would be the one who would survive. I knew so little about dying; I had just begun living.

I don’t believe it was the teachers’ intention to scare us, but they couldn’t hide the truth. Imagine being a teacher with twenty-five innocent faces trusting in you and you know this is ground zero. Perhaps some of the images from Hiroshima would fill your mind. Twenty-five children crouched under desks, flash-burnt into granite like little nuclear fossils forever preserved.

All this was a little too much for my brother, and for him it was time we did something. We formed a defense unit called the Rough Riders. At the first meeting of the Rough Riders, our neighborhood gang, Quinn, Bob, Neal and Steve Hedges and my brother and I, were in attendance. As usual, my brother took charge of the meeting. He began by passing around some photographs of Hiroshima after it had been bombed. It was while we
were looking at the rubble in these photographs that we learned hiding under our desks at school was akin to sheep quietly going to slaughter.

Through my brother’s leadership we developed our survival plan. We set up our headquarters in the old mining tunnels behind Connelly’s field. In the field there was an old barn, with a hayloft we used to play in. My brother said the barn would be our above-ground headquarters and in case of a nuclear attack we could go down into the mountain. None of us were as vigilant as Quinn Bassi who lived on a small farm. His family raised several Black Angus cows, chickens and had large gardens. His father was an outdoorsman and could have easily lived off his farm. Quinn took the business of stopping the communists seriously and could be seen patrolling in front of the barn early in the morning. I can remember my parents remarking, “He sure is up early this morning.” This comment changed a few weeks later to, “Lord, what’s wrong with that child.” But that was Quinn’s way; he said the communists never slept.

The Rough Riders had quite a stockpile of things such as: water, C-rations Bob Connelly got from his father, three Daisy pump B.B. rifles, two Crossmen .22 caliber pellet rifles and an assortment of Marvel comic books with Batman, The Flash, Superman and all the other heroes that know right from wrong. I remember at one point we began a serious campaign of anti-personnel devices, but this program came to an abrupt halt when my father stepped into one of our snares, twisted his ankle and was doused with a mixture of farm yard animal waste and rotten eggs. That was a mixture we had devised to tag the enemy and represented several weeks of research and development. At that historical point the Rough Riders went into deep cover and were rarely visible as a unit. Soon we began to grow up and we put away our childhood toys.

My brother was four years older than me, which is only a lot in dog years or when your brother crosses that invisible line into a testosterone-driven teenager. Although he took on a lot of the characteristics of the former, like running in packs and hanging around Betty Lou’s, who seemed to be in constant heat, it was really the latter that drove him. I think it was a combination of the cold war era, the loss of President Kennedy and those startling images of southern policemen and national guardsmen beating young black children that began forming the questions our parents could no longer answer. It was in this field, called America, that the first seeds of rebellion were planted. Of course this is nothing new for youth but it is new for each generation, and for this generation the rebellion first found its voice in questioning conformity.

Soon after this, my brother joined the Army and was sent to Vietnam. I remember he sent me a letter from Ft. Polk, Louisiana, where he did extensive jungle training for the Airborne Rangers. He once wrote that it
was easier when he got in country than at Ft. Polk. I remember his first letter describing his initial landing in Vietnam. It was January 14, 1968, and the airfield was under rocket attack. They circled until they were almost out of fuel and then were told to deplane quickly, run a hundred meters and take cover. He said when he jumped through that door, it was like being plunged into a green and blue sauna and when he opened his eyes, golden light and humidity poured over him. The world had suddenly changed, as if he had stepped back in time to some place that had only recently arisen from the primordial mud.

My brother had only been in country three days when he went for what they called a “walk around.” He was a Warrant Officer attached to the 1st 18th Ranger Battalion and was a briefing officer. Because their firebase was under construction and he had no office, he went out for a walk with some Rangers he knew from Ft. Polk’s jungle training. There was Tennessee, Kentucky, Buddha and Doc Ramsey. On that first mission, he was walking point with Buddha. He hadn’t seen him since jungle training and because Buddha was walking point, my brother was with him. His superior officer, the Ice Cream Lieutenant—a name given him because of his baby face—told them they were going out to a village ten klicks to the west. When they arrived, Buddha and my brother were the first to enter the village. The village consisted of bamboo framed huts made with thatch and various pieces of sheet metal and salvaged materials. The first hooch he ever entered was empty except for a disassembled AK 47 on a wooden table and a cigarette left still burning. My brother’s letter read:

The whole world shifted from a soft casual world to a sharp, crystal clear moment as the scent of the jungle rose on swirling thermals of electrons that clung to the roof of my mouth and the edge of my soul. It was like finally awakening from a dream and becoming fully awake and alive.

They began to move back toward the platoon fifty yards away. Just as they reached the berm in the terrain where their platoon waited, the morning was lit with machine gun fire. Buddha and my brother hit the ground and were pinned down for several full minutes. Because time had slowed and stretched itself around an instant where entire lifetimes are reviewed, three minutes of uninterrupted machine gun fire seems like an eternity. For the Ice Cream Lieutenant, who seemed to swat at one of the metallic bees that became a jagged red blossom where his Adam’s apple had been, it became eternity as he slipped into slow motion beneath the surface of the field like a swimmer going under for the last time.

It was in this battle that lasted three days that my brother was given the Silver Star and promoted to Lieutenant. This was January 19, 1968,
and my brother had only been in country five days, when one of the first attacks of the TET offensive began. My brother wrote that they discovered there had been over a thousand Vietnamese watching him and Buddha walk into that village and miraculously they both made it out. Because of his battlefield promotion, my brother became the leader of this thirty-two-man platoon, and because of their extensive Airborne Ranger training, they never lost another man. Unlike regular army, their platoon carried only weapons and munitions and could live for weeks off the natural economy, and unlike regular army, they ate what the Vietcong ate, and like the Vietcong, could smell the American troops when they were in the jungle. It was during this time my brother wrote to me:

This is the ultimate high and I am forever addicted! Ten thousand electric neon volts surge toward the kill; it's the ultimate awakening, moving within the thrill, as the rest of the world simplifies and disappears silently to still.

After crawling the last mile to a village on their bellies and lying silent with blackened faces throughout the night, they would rise behind Law's rockets' red glare and M60's and M14's on full auto, bursting in the air, giving proof to the first light that God had left, but the Rangers were still there.

Back at home, my addiction was just awakening. I was in high school experimenting with mood-altering drugs, while listening to the Beatles' Abbey Road album and all the others like Jimmy Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Country Joe and the Fish, Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, Eric Burton, War, Jefferson Airplane, Sly and the Family Stone, and of course Robert Zimmermann, the Jewish folk singer known as Bob Dylan. I remember the anti-war messages and the virtues of chemical consciousness mind expansion that this music extolled. When I ran away from home and went to the university this message was refined by faculty and "outside agitators," and I began to pursue my addiction more openly. I remember my parents always wanted me to get a haircut and disliked my political views, but they did say I was the "cleanest hippie" they had ever seen. This was in reference to my several showers I took a day. Because I defied my parents and didn't go to the local community college, I had to finance my education myself. I did that like any true-blooded American hippie; I got scholarships, grants and loans. Thus emancipated from the capitalistic, alcohol swilling silent majority that was engendered by my parents, I went to college.

Although I was avidly against the war, I've always believed in non-violence. In some circles this was not acceptable. If you were not part of

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the solution you were considered part of the problem. I lived for free at one point in a rather radical dormitory. They were involved in burning draft cards and civil disobedience. One day they went off campus to a downtown location and were going into factories and stores disrupting the silent majorities’ work schedules in hopes of elevating their awareness of the tragedy in Vietnam. I went down to watch them when they all assembled at rush hour and were marching through the streets. As I watched from the side of the street with the other civilians, I decided I should stand in the street with the demonstrators, just to feel what that was like. The artist in me wanted to experience life, and like all the drugs I had been experimenting with, this was another opportunity to expand my consciousness. With my shoulder length hair, I stepped off the curb and breathed in the revolution. From the center of the street I looked out into the crowds of the silent majority who watched us like any parade, but before I could fully breathe in this experience, the riot squad, with helmets and night sticks, charged. I immediately got back in with my silent majority; I had grown rather fond of them anyway, and watched the beating and chasing in the street. Then, a six-foot-eight riot-clad policeman, with his nightstick in both hands, tried to put that stick in my throat. I grabbed it with both my hands and our eyes locked.

He said, “Get out there with your friends!”

As I could see men on roofs with walkie-talkies directing the riot squads in the herding of the demonstrators into a trap where they could converge on them from three sides and give them a good beating, I pushed the riot cop to my left and took off on two-minute-mile feet to the right, down an alley away from the trap. Not only have I never believed in violence, I am actually allergic to night sticks and mace, so I slipped back in with my silent majority and went back to college. I can remember back at the dorm, students were livid about the way so and so got beaten to a bloody pulp, but like those at Kent State when the national guard murdered four students, a realization that these people were not playing surfaced. I had seen this in that brief moment while I stood in the street: not only did the police want to kill me, but also my silent majority was calling for my blood. I saw it in their eyes and I think it was here that a piece of my innocence was taken.

I first met my partner in crime at a party at his parent’s house. He had a long angular face with a substantial nose that slightly hooked down. He stood about five-foot-ten; his body was thin and resembled an upright weasel. His fine brown hair pulled back revealed a long expressive forehead that shrouded his eyes. He had thousand year-old brown eyes that flickered and ignited with the passion of his focus. When he locked on with
these embers of molten ice and tightened them down to a laser-sharp focus, the radiating force could absorb and consume in a hypnotic fashion. When he laughed it seemed to come from the center of the universe, pulling those near into the contagion of his eruptions. Mischievous, whimsical, demonic and with legions of other manifestations, his countenance, like internally applied masks, shifted, depending on the feedback of the world until the right face locked in with the morality of a heat-seeking missile. From this, my crime partner for the next decade emerges, Michael, the archangel. He was talking to someone about needing a thousand dollars to buy some drugs in California. For some reason, I am still not sure why, I said, “I’ve got a thousand dollars.”

His focus shifted from the person he was talking with onto me. His smile broadened, his eyes twinkled, and if my memory is correct, he sprouted horns and threw his tail over his shoulder.

Michael, the archangel, and I headed for San Francisco with our long hair and buccaneer spirits. I felt I was continuing on my quest for cosmic consciousness and mind expansion. We parked Michael’s 1969 VW camper and decided to walk through a rural part of the Haight-Ashbury district. The architecture of whole city blocks was high ceiling, three-story houses with steep, pitched roofs that rose and fell on the hills in tight clustered rows. These houses were built at the turn of the century during a strike by the shipwrights who were true craftsman that left their signature on this city. Although these houses were occupied by several families, the free invitation of the sixties that allowed almost anyone to crash at your home had diminished. The peaceful era of the early ’60s seemed to have collided with the ’70s and a shadow was moving across an era of love and light.

I take two faltering steps and sink to the floor. The cold bars facing out of the cell press against my cheek. I slide my hand and my wrist between the bars. An invisible delicate breeze from the outside pours cool sanity over my wrist. In this way, another moment is spent thwarting the darkness, but it is patient, it can wait, while the steel and the concrete absorb the fluids of my life. I fear the final metamorphosis. I am becoming the moth, a dried, paper-thin wisp, staring out between cobwebs of an attic window, separated from a world it can still see. When I close my eyes I am that moth. I can still see.

I can see her as if she were there, but when I reach out to touch her, the cool glass of steel and concrete wrap me in their tomb. Her face has begun to change. This scares me most. Her face grows less distinct and often blurs into other images. I know it’s only a matter of time before she completely disappears, and I become something else, something like the
living dead I see here every day with the light gone from their eyes, their connection to humanity forever severed. They have found freedom from their terror in the walls, and they have relinquished their souls to steel and concrete. They no longer flutter at the glass in the attic window.

The racking of a cell door rings metallic. It’s 4:30 a.m. and the trustee is being let out to join the kitchen crew for breakfast. His feet click on the concrete and echo hollow off the cavernous walls. The sound grows louder, ripping the stillness with the force of his approach, and then stops.

“They got the money Holmes.”

I look into his face. He has become what I fear I am becoming.

“What’s the matter with you Holmes, you look whacked. Here.”

He hands me a tightly wrapped toilet paper bundle through the bars.

“Be careful, Holmes, that stuff’s live. There’s ten bags, and I would halve them, and Holmes, that outfit’s damn near new. It was only used by a little old lady to inject her insulin.”

I hear him laughing as he moves off down the tier, but I can’t get past the image. I see him in the high desert, crawling out beneath the morning sun, shedding his skin. His wiggling wet, pink, tender flesh, baptized in the abyss, emerges a translucent white, which contrasts his brackish blue, teardrop tattoos that fall emotionless from his brown reptilian eyes.

My mind wanders and then alights on Christmas day, one year ago. I went to visit Alex, a short timer with less than a year before his release. When he worried about his little boy and his wife, I used to tell him that I could do that little bit of time he had left standing on my head, in the shower. My thirty-year sentence for possession with the intent to distribute a controlled substance stretched eons of time past his doorway to freedom. With a light purposeful pace, I walked to Alex’s cell with hopes I could experience, vicariously through him, his Christmas Day visit. I wanted to make that third-party, contact high with the free world. I had done this often, gone to his cell after his visit to breathe in his excitement and hope, and to imagine, through him, life beyond these walls. These visits momentarily restored me.

When I entered his cell, he was lying on his bed looking up. Thick red mounds of bluish-white intestines spilled steaming out of his center and onto the floor. I wanted to run, but his eyes still focused, found mine. I didn’t ask him any questions, like who had done this. It didn’t seem important. I knelt amidst the horror and put my hands on his face, and we spent his last moment together. I watched his light streak across his eyes and fall forever within the blackness of his pupils, like another Christmas night sky. Later, I learned he had swallowed several red and green balloons filled with heroin. He had been delayed returning from his visit, because his three-year-old son, Jason, decided he didn’t want to leave his Daddy.
Jason had become hysterical and had to be pried loose from his father that Christmas day. Because of this delay, he was unable to vomit the balloons up as planned and was waiting for them to pass. The Mexican prison gang, who had enlisted his services, was not known for their patience. They ripped him open, like wrapping paper and ribbon, and while he watched, they took the red and green surprises from the heat of his life, leaving him cooling and undone, all alone, in the dark.

That was last Christmas. This year I am celebrating alone.

I open all ten of the red and green packets, sticking them together and forming a thumbnail size sphere of brown tar into the spoon. I add the water and light a flame. The burnt spoon bubbles brown; a thick ambrosia that fills my nostrils with the spicy flavor of heroin. The smell pulls invisible threads that nauseate my stomach and soul with the sweet poison that feeds the body with a soft death. I drop the white cotton into the brown sea. It absorbs from the inside out. The snow-white fibers wilt, stained brown. The last white pores glisten wet and brown when the needle pulls the bubbling amber fluid up into a plastic barrel reservoir. I point the needle up and push the orange plunger in, so the air is replaced with the burnt reddish-brown fluid. Two quick taps with the nail of my left index finger and the last tiny air bubbles disappear. I place two white socks, tied together, around my biceps. I tighten them. This separates the blood flow of my arm from the rest of my body. It isolates a cold blue vein on my forearm. I squeeze my fist several times, further swelling the vein in the pit of my forearm where it meets the anterior side of my elbow. I pierce the skin with a deft plunge. It burns hot. A sharp jolt shocks, then cools, as the needle is accepted like an old friend who has only startled me. I pull back the plunger. The red tide pours in, swirling through the brown mud. I press in the plunger. Finally I release the belt, mixing my blood, my life and my spirit with the soft brown potion of the poppies.

She appears, crystal clear, dancing in slow motion, with shoulder length brown hair and liquid pools of penetrating white fire-blue eyes. She sways slowly, looking into my eyes, igniting the flame within that had almost been extinguished. We lie wrapped in firelight and flannel; we ascend on warm summer breezes. She twirls and leaps on light feathered moves that glide like panthers and helium. She flows like silk in flutters, softly billowing, gently gliding, and soaring over mountains colliding with clouds. She holds delicate white fingers up, with her palms facing me and looks into my center. I raise my hands to hers. We form a silent prayer. She smiles and whispers, “forever within.” I fall up and through on the warmth of her breath and drift from here to there, and to places far beyond the blue
tattooed, steel and concrete dried people. I arise from the attic in a streak of silver cobwebs. I ascend through the cool glass, the steel and the concrete; nothing separates me anymore, and when I look down, with my Kool-Aid stained smile, I see the bright red mittens, still on my feet.