

"I could not stop drinking! I could not stop sticking that needle in my arm! I could not get my life together! No matter what I tried I always failed! Until...I learned the TRUTH!"

"FREE MAN WALKING"



by **ANDY NIEMAN**

"FREE MAN WALKING"

Andrew Nieman

Copyright 2012 Andrew P. Nieman

Front cover photo taken in front of First Pentecostal Church in Whitehorse, Yukon,
Canada by Christian Kuntz.

I have lost most of my childhood friends to drug overdoses and alcoholic mishaps that claimed their lives. Friends that I have grown up with and have grown to love over the years. When they die they take a part of you with them when they go.

They could've found the freedom that I found but for whatever reason they didn't. I dedicate this book to them, to my mother's memory, my family and to those who will find freedom through this true-life story. That same freedom that I have found and have come to love. That beautiful freedom that I am not willing to exchange for anything this world has to offer. (AN)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER ONE: "MY WORLD... SKID ROW"

CHAPTER TWO: "SLEEPY HOLLOW"

CHAPTER THREE: "STEAMING PANTS AND POOR MAN'S HOCKEY"

CHAPTER FOUR: "MY RICH UNCLE"

CHAPTER FIVE: "BREAKING AND ENTERING"

CHAPTER SIX: "THE WOODEN BARREL AND COURT"

CHAPTER SEVEN: "LOWER POST INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL"

CHAPTER EIGHT: "THE PEDOPHILE"

CHAPTER NINE: "THE GROUP HOME & SKAGWAY"

CHAPTER TEN: "THE PARKING METERS"

CHAPTER ELEVEN: "DEATH AND MY FIRST BIRTHDAY IN JAIL"

CHAPTER TWELVE: "THE DRUG LIST"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: "BUDDY"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: "VICTORIA AND OAKALLA PRISON FARM"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: "ALMOST LOST MY MIND AND MY LIFE"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: "WITH MY NAME ON IT"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: "A MAN NAMED RAUL"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: "A VISITATION IN MY ROOM"

CHAPTER NINETEEN: "A NEW ROAD"

CHAPTER TWENTY: "EVERY SIN WASHED AWAY"

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE: "SCHOOL AND THE HOLY GHOST"

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO: "EPILOGUE"

When a prisoner has finished his time in the penitentiary, on his release day, as he is walking towards the last gate that separates him from freedom, a guard yells out, "Free man walking!"

Today... I am a Free Man Walking.

PROLOGUE

When the suggestion was put forth that I should write a book on my life I thought with enthusiasm, "Yeah, I **should** do that!" At the time, I had no idea of the monumental task I was about to embark on. Monumental, in terms of not only fitting in the time to write, but also to deal with those emotions that would be re-lived and the scenes that would be re-played over and over again for the benefit of accuracy. The task is monumental in terms of deciding where to begin, what to include and what to leave out.

Like a painter dipping the tip of his brush into many different colors seeking to find that perfect hue, I now realize that I too, must "dip" my historical "paint brush" into the harsh colors of a jaded past and into the pools of my emotions in order to paint as accurate a picture as memory will serve. I have been given a new lease on life. I know that. It can't be argued. And along with that lease, comes a price tag. A price tag I'm grateful yet burdened to pay. Part of that price tag, are the memories which must be resurrected of loved ones long since passed-on. Memories, once thought to be so carefully tucked-away in a dark secret chasm of the mind they would never be disturbed again. Tucked away in a place where it seems not even hypnosis, or the strongest truth serum (if there were such a thing), could penetrate. Memories, still so very clear they seem to have been waiting for these precise moments to come alive once again.

There will also be scenes, complete with the sounds of skid row and prison life. Scenes that bring to life the muffled sound of a lonely heart breaking as the under-nourished body is stabbed repeatedly by the agonizing knife of drug withdrawal. There is sweat. There are tears. There is humor. There are scenes of drug overdoses and of prison violence. Scenes, like the time I stood on the steps of the Lower Post Indian Residential School, a ten year old boy with tears in my eyes, after being told I was not going home. I was 300 miles away from my mother, my father, my family and my friends. A child forced into a strange environment with people I did not know. Scenes, of that same ten-year-old boy smoking cigarette butts out in the wilderness, on a weekend outing at the residential school. There are scenes also of lasting friendships borne out of adversity. Friendships created through the necessity of survival. Scenes also, which depict the kind of courage it takes to admit you've suffered physical, sexual, emotional and mental abuse at the residential school. That you've done wrong to those who have treated you well and you need their forgiveness. Your mind's eye will view scenes of laughter, smiling faces, joy, triumph and trauma and most importantly...love.

This writer will give you a front-row seat. A real-life virtual tour, of the way it is in the life of a person living for over ten years on skid-row and ten and one half years behind prison bars. You'll have a glimpse into the life of a person who was a chronic, hopeless alcoholic for twenty-seven years and a drug addict for twenty three. You will walk through the seedy world of the cocaine addict and the heroin addict. You'll learn first-hand what it takes to come out of such a painful life as well as how to live an overcoming lifestyle that endures, after the drugs.

The writer will not have any trouble recollecting scenes or events for this autobiography. Just as a soldier will remember the sounds of war, or a rape-victim remembers the touch of cold steel on flesh, pain somehow has a way of triggering one's memory (or is it memory that triggers pain)? Neither will there be any need for

exaggeration in this story. Reality has its own staying power and sings its own sour-sweet song, loud and clear. And truth... truth does not back down nor bedfellow with exaggeration, it has no need to. It is not my job to convince you of truth, it is merely my place to present the factual events of my past life, leading up to the present, where my life now stands. My criminal record is posted online as an establishment of truth at: www.freemanwalking.net.

As we embark on this journey together, it is this writers hope, that these pages will instill a hope into the hearts of those who are going through something similar and for mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers who may have family or relatives living on skid-row, in prison, or who are presently living in the throes of alcohol/drug addiction or other realities of traumatic despair. Please, and I say again.....**Please**, don't *ever stop* HOPING, PRAYING, and BELIEVING in them. And NEVER STOP LOVING them. Simply because... **you just never know**... how they will respond, when the true love that only comes from above and from your heart, will break through into their darkness! As long as they are still breathing, there is hope for them.

As I look back on the days of my past now, the scenes are still so very clear, as though they had just happened last night. I honestly thank God, in fact I pray, that He would never let me forget those times, while I'm here on earth. It marvels me, how the human mind seems to store *in mint condition*, those memories that are the hardest on us. While the good ones seem to vanish like the quickly fading voice of a nurse counting backwards, after administering a final anesthetic dosage before wheeling you into the operating room. While I sit at this computer and write this autobiography, I find it hard to stifle the emotions that stir in me. I'm thankful many of those emotions are of sheer gratitude. Yet, many of them are not. The process, I now realize, is one that's both a burden and a blessing. Before we go any further, may I stop and say, "Thank you"? To spend these moments with you is a great privilege, and I want you to know how grateful I am for the opportunity.

I would like to write of a happy childhood where fond memories of love and nurture abound. In fact, I would even be satisfied to write of a somewhat normal childhood, but reality dictates otherwise. I am left with only one alternative... presenting the bare, unrelenting, traumatic, sometimes happy, sometimes sad, triumphant, never-a-dull-moment... truth. Truth that is complete with knarls, warts, bumps, bruises, velvety-smooth caresses and time-less endurance. This is not a sad story. It is one of triumph. It is my story and it may even be a part of your story. It is truth and truth lingers. I have paid the price for your ticket to this live event. Now it is time for you to get comfortable and enjoy your front row seating.

Not being one to stick to formalities and for the sake of sheer adventure, I sometimes like to just jump into the thick of things and explain later. This is where we will begin. Jump-in with me, as we take a first-hand look, or, should I say, a real-life tour, and examine how the life of a former alcoholic, cocaine/heroin addict and an ex-convict's life on skid row turned into a beautiful journey out of addiction and how I became a free man walking. Andy.

CHAPTER ONE

A GLIMPSE OF SKID ROW

“The Lighthouse”

**The sun was setting in my life,
I couldn't last much more,
I watched as all my broken dreams,
Came washing up on shore,
As hope was fading from my heart,
I took another drink,
I stood in rags, I begged for food,
To the bottom I would sink,
I roamed the streets in dark of night,
I cried my silent tears,
As loneliness chained down my heart,
Cocaine brought me new fears**

A. Nieman

I did not sleep well last night. This morning I wake up around 7:00 am. It is never comfortable on my flattened out cardboard box laid out on the concrete floor of an underground parking lot. The only time I didn't notice the discomfort, was when I passed out there. The underground parking lot was below the United Church on East Hastings St. and Gore Ave. This is Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. What woke me were the muffled, angry, voices of heroin and cocaine addicts arguing in the dark. Someone complained that they had missed the vein. Another swore out a stream of profanities so loud it made everyone uneasy and caused each of them to take a quick nervous scan of the parking lot. The one doing the swearing had just realized their so-called dope turned out to be nothing but Baking Soda. Still another practically shouted, “Hold the #&*% light still!” as he sought to find a vein in the almost-impossibly dim light of a flickering Bic lighter. The flame goes out, producing another string of profanities from the one desperate to get the syringe into a vein.

The one “keeping point” (watching for police) - usually called the “point-man” was normally the one who had already “shot-up” (injected) his/her drugs. And as always, depending on what their drug of choice was, they wound up doing a very poor job of “keeping point”. The reason being, if it was heroin the point-man shot-up, he/she would be “nodding-off” or fighting off the opium dreams, and it would only be in-between nods, that they would garner a look to see if there were any cops around. Mind you a nod could last anywhere from ten seconds to two minutes so you were really taking your chances!

If the point-man's drug of choice was cocaine, he/she might be so high and paranoid they would quite easily suspect any and every person of being an undercover cop. A coca-nut, which is slang for a cocaine addict, when high on cocaine is always paranoid. A “coca-nut” is in such a state of deception and paranoia while high on the drug, that he/she would not believe anyone on this earth, that something is any different than **how they see**

it! They would normally remain in this state, until the effect wore off and they came down off the drug. When cocaine-induced paranoia has an addict in its grip, there is *no way* another human being can “talk” them out of their paranoid state, simply because cocaine induced psychosis rules their thinking process. The addict has to come to a place where they convince their own self that the perceived danger has passed. A cocaine addict in this hyped-up state can be very dangerous, while at the same time be extremely scared of everyone and everything. I have been there thousands of times.

On this particular morning I am feeling very cold. A cold I just cannot shake. The wet, damp cold, the west coast of British Columbia’s October night, normally brings. Vancouver, Canada is wet, cold and damp, even for those who *did not* live on the streets. I was also feeling another type of cold. This cold ran deeper than any rain-swept night. It is the cold reminder that I am “damaged goods”, damaged, by the sexual perversion of a pedophile at the Lower Post Indian Residential School. I wished I had a blanket tonight. My sad reality reminded me that not even the world’s warmest electric blanket would be able to bring some warmth to my icy-cold soul. Besides, I usually did not sleep with a blanket. I gave up the futile effort of trying to keep a sleeping bag. It was never any use trying to hide a blanket in this seedy run-down neighborhood. A neighborhood that was thick with drug dealers, prostitutes, ex-convicts, alcoholics, screaming sirens and mean police. This neighborhood was also crawling with homeless people, who always seem to know exactly where to look to find any type of stash. I would usually just pull my coat around me real tight in an attempt to be warm. I never really ever slept a good night’s sleep while doing drugs and living on the street. It was usually a matter of laying my drug-riddled body down in sheer exhaustion. If I happen to catch a few winks while in the process, well...that was a bonus. Other than that, my only sleep came when I would pass out from an excessive amount of alcohol consumption.

This morning, the cold seeped deep into my bones and seemed to “push” itself into every fibre of my being. A wave of cold remorse and forlorn feelings of a failed life had settled into its familiar spot, smack-dab in the center of my heart. And, as was the norm, I struggled to keep it from draining my strength. Along with that wave of remorse, came a stream of familiar thoughts I had no control over. I thought of my many failed attempts trying to “get straight. I thought of the deep sheer contempt I had of myself for being such a two-faced person. I thought of my body’s present condition, so undernourished, weak and drug infected. I thought of my mother and my family so far away, no doubt wondering how I’m doing and hurting for me. I thought of suicide again. It would be so easy to just buy a cap of “China White” (the most potent heroin on the streets at the time) and overdose myself. End it all. There was just one problem. I was too scared there might really be a hell, complete with flames, gnashing of teeth and eternal torment somewhere down below. This fear kept me alive. I had no choice but to fight on. What a contradiction this life of mine was. I was afraid of life and afraid of death. My only option was to struggle on. I dreaded my past, feared my future and despised my present.

In times like these, my thoughts always turned back to the one whose love for me I knew was so real. A love that I knew would never let me down nor ever leave me, the love of my mother Agnes (RIP). When I thought of my dear mother and the hurt I had caused her as a result of my alcohol and drug addictions, it always cut me somewhere deep down in the pit of my soul. I tried my best to avoid thinking of her as it made me lonely and made me feel regretful. I had become somewhat of a master at shutting off

those thoughts and the sad feelings that accompanied them. This is what I called my “dead man mode”. It was a skill I had developed over ten and a half years behind prison bars “doing time”. A skill that was honed out of survival’s necessity as a young boy on the loose, forging out my individual path of survival, self-destruction, criminal activity and addictive behavior. It was not a skill to be proud of. I taught myself to “shut people out”, in a cold-hearted manner. I hated myself for it. It became too easy at times. But it was also very necessary. Necessary, because on the mean streets of Vancouver’s skid row and in jail you just didn’t allow your heart to get too close to anybody. And I mean anybody! Relationships in jail could be very shaky at the best of times and could easily end at the drop of a misplaced or misunderstood word to the wrong person. A friend could be with you one day and dead the next. Or be transferred to another jail. Or be “shanked” (knifed), make bail or overdose. I’m sure you get the picture. You just didn’t “buddy-up” to every Tom, Dick and Harry who came along. You chose the ones you would associate with very carefully. It mattered, because other convicts judged you by the company you kept (just as people on the “outside” do). It mattered more if you were in for a long time or if you were a chronic convict. I was a chronic convict, meaning; I would always be coming back to jail until the day I died. In other words, I was doing life on the installment plan. Most of those in jail are addicts of one kind or another, not everyone, but most. As an addict, one is not as emotionally stable or developed as healthy people are. An addict usually carries a lot of “baggage”. Society calls that baggage a dysfunction. In reality, that baggage is unresolved hatred, abuse (of all sorts), depression, mental illness, abandonment and childhood violence. These insecurities are usually hiding underneath a tougher-than-thou image. They could easily make a person very explosive and dangerous. Jealousy, hatred and violence, are also part of that baggage. Such character traits lingered just under the surface of the skin of this writer and most of the people I “did time” with in jail.

Rising from the flattened out cardboard box, I found I had to resort to my emotional dead man mode this morning. When thoughts of my mother were involved at these times, I especially hated myself. I missed her and always felt pangs of guilt when I was reminded of the grief I had caused her. My mother always felt so far away from me. My dead-man-mode did not always work and usually failed me when I really needed it the most. That is when depression would engulf my soul. It would turn everything gray. And the ills of the world, people’s kindest acts and sincerest desires to help, would be viewed through a negative, untrusting, hateful, jealous, attitude. Alcohol and drugs were my only relief then. They were the only things that brought me close to feeling a sense of peace. Such relief was always short-lived and fleeting. Peace and strength were nothing but words to me then. They didn’t mean anything. I couldn’t comprehend the full depth of what they stood for, how they were achieved, or even if they really existed. Just words. They never really existed for me. Just words.

I stirred from my place of restless, fitful sleep. I had to start the day. There was no escape from it. I knew the “shakes” from needing a drink would soon be rearing its ugly head, in the form of dry heaves, a runny nose, shaking hands and watering eyes. I couldn’t stay here much longer. My addictions were forcing me to move on. I dreaded the thought of walking on my blistered feet again. Walk? Who could enjoy the *luxury* of *walking*? Not me. Not this morning. Limping, was the only pace I could keep. I had been awake for four days straight, shooting cocaine and working any scam I could find prior to

my laying down in the underground parking lot. Cocaine is an “upper. It stimulates you. Ninety percent of those four days was spent walking the drug dealer’s beat on my feet, hence the blisters. Each time I took a shot of cocaine, I would gain about fifteen minutes of relief from the ache of those blisters. When I was drinking, the alcohol numbed the pain even more. It made me oblivious to the pain, which in turn caused me to do more damage to those blisters by walking on them. But there was no escaping it, the pain always found its way back with the inescapable dawning of another day.

This morning, I was somewhat relieved the soup line was just down the street. But what did it matter? I could not keep any food down anyway. That is, not until I got a few drinks into me. Some mornings, depending on where the alcohol and/or cocaine had taken me the night before - I could easily wake up miles from this area, and either had to walk back or would have to scam a bus ride. I’m thankful the walk is not so long today. The main reason I make my way down to the soup-line, was not to eat, but to see if any of my buddies had anything to drink, or perhaps some valium or other pills to ease my suffering. This was my routine. I was hungry, sick, cold and as usual lonesome. Lonesome seemed to be my only constant, ever-present true companion. Long story short, I was not a pleasant sight. I was thirty-nine years of age and felt like I was going on eighty-nine! As I made my way down the street, I noticed the air was clear and cold. It had stopped raining. I caught the smell of fried bacon from one of the restaurants I passed by and it kicked my hunger pangs into gear to remind me that food needed to be a priority and *soon*. I almost gagged at the smell of food even though bacon was one of my favorite breakfast items. I also noticed that the soup line was longer than usual. My mind cleared enough to conclude that it was the day before welfare Wednesday. That meant people on welfare were out of money and groceries. They would be hitting the soup lines.

I searched the faces in the line to see if there were any of my drinking or drugging buddies there. I could not help but notice how despicably sad, dirty and unkempt the people in the line looked. People who looked exactly like me. What caught my attention the most was what I seen in their eyes. Rather, what I did *not see* in their eyes. They looked at me with eyes that were empty, sad and hopeless. Their eyes looked blank at first glance but if you continued to look just a little longer you would see the hurt in those eyes. There is no hope in those eyes. These are eyes saying, “I have all but given up. I do not have a future and it hurts.” They looked like prisoners of war in a concentration camp. They looked like people from a war-torn, third world country in line for a ration. Heads hung down. Their shame was evident in furtive glances and restless feet. They didn’t look you in the eye. If they did, it was only for a split second. You got the impression that if you looked at them long enough, they were afraid you might see their past. See their failure. See their pain. The only ones who let their eyes linger on you were the ones under the influence of alcohol or some other drug. This was the only way they could continue looking at you without feeling self-conscious.

The people in this line were mostly First Nation people, but there were also white people, Hispanics, Mexicans, Blacks, French people and others. They are real people. They have souls. They have a history. They are mostly people who live on the street. These are the homeless, the ex-convicts and prostitutes. They have feelings just like you and I. They do their best to survive. They are drug addicts. They are alcoholics. They are those who live in poverty. They laugh once in a while. They cry more than they laugh. They leant a helping hand whenever the opportunity arose in the past. They would still

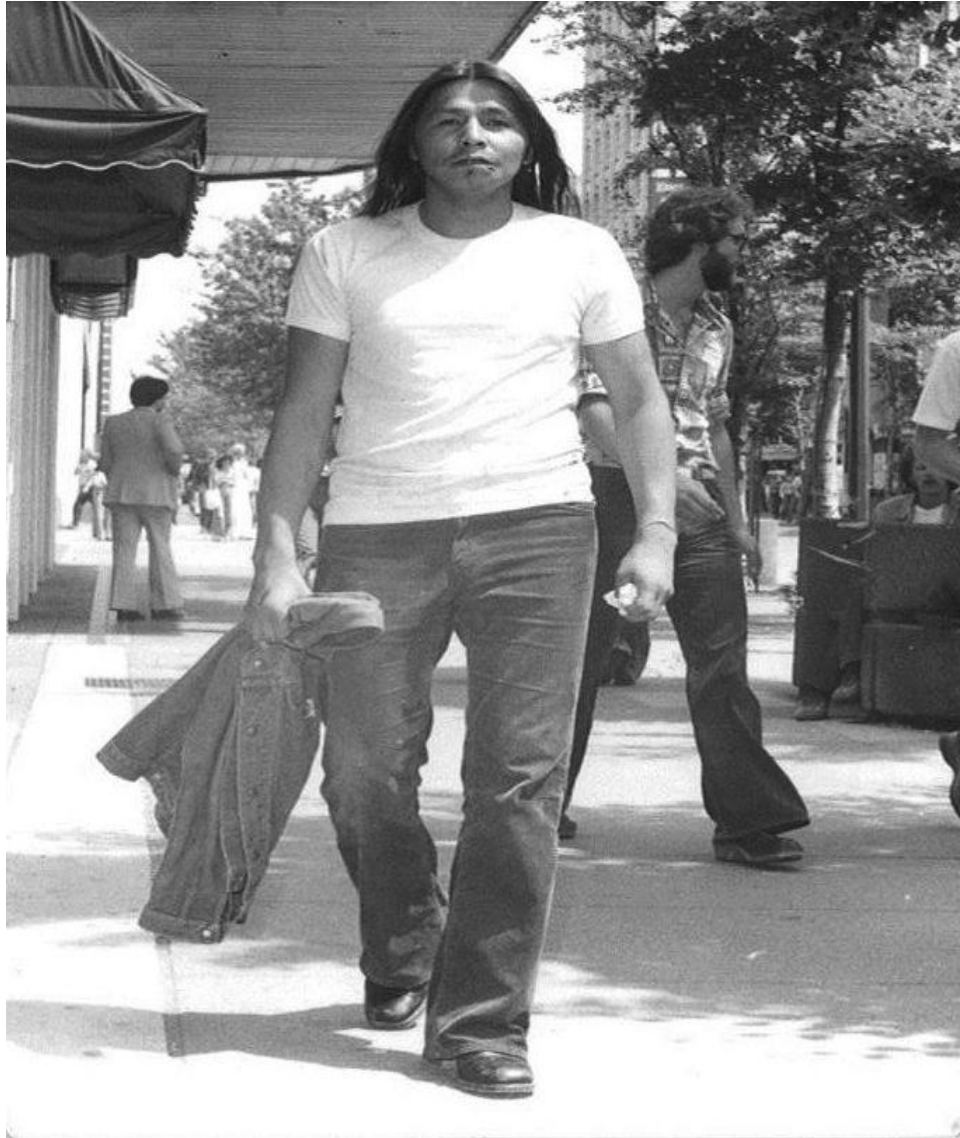
lend a helping hand, if they could. They could still be kind. They could still feel compassion. They have resilience. They feel remorse. They have come through more trauma than they care to remember or admit. Some never dared to dream anymore. Others once had dreams so bright. Dreams that were so real, they could almost reach out and touch them! That is... until the cruelties of life; sexual abuse and addiction took them by the hand and dashed those dreams upon the rocks of cruelty, failure and despair. Cruelties, which dragged them, against their will at first, down the road of alcoholism, violent crime, prostitution, stealing, lying, homelessness, panhandling, drug addiction and eventually an early grave. If not an early grave, then a hospital, a prison, a mental institution or a life of desperation on skid row streets. After a while they go along willingly accepting this as their fate because they now believe they have no choice. Their dreams are gone. This is now their lifestyle. It was all they knew and probably all they would ever know. To me, it was like looking in a mirror. All of this was evident in those eyes. It all hit home with me. Sadness once again stabbed my defenseless heart. I wished I could help them, but I needed help just as much myself, if not more. I tried not to look too long, I seen too much of my own reality and hurt there. When I was hung-over, as I was this morning, my defenses were down and it seemed I could notice nothing else but the pain and the heartache.

For the most part, most of them were sober. This was not a good sign for someone who desperately needed a drink. I didn't feel my chances of finding a drink were all that great, but I decided to take a peek inside the United Church anyway, after all it couldn't hurt. I was glad I did! For right there, not more than ten feet from me, was a sweet sight for sorry, sad, blood-shot, hung-over eyeballs! There was my best friend Gary Dawson! (RIP). Gary was a full-blooded First Nations man who had Tlingit (pronounced Kling — Get) blood in him. He was sitting there enjoying his cup of soup and his coffee. I limped up to his side and he glanced to see who it was that had come so close to him. I could smell alcohol on his breath. When he recognized that it was me, his eyes lit up, "Nieman!" he practically shouted. He smiled at me with that smile that always made me feel so important, no matter how sick I was. A smile that seemed to say everything was going to be all right because I had just come on the scene. Gary had that kind of a smile. He quickly perked up, "Well, if it isn't my good old side-kick. You sick? Looks like you need an eye-opener! Grab yourself some soup and let's blow this rat-trap. I'll fix your hangover." I didn't bother getting any soup, my feet and my head hurt too much. It wasn't worth the pain to wait in line. I needed a drink! I would think about my stomach later. I hobbled along beside Gary, grateful that he was slowing down to accommodate me. That was one of the reasons he was my lifelong best friend. He had real compassion. He cared for me. He always cared for me. Doesn't matter what I did or where I came from, Gary still cared for me. Gary did not do any hard drugs anymore. He used to shoot heroin with me and our other Yukon buddies, but he had given that up over fifteen years ago. The only drug he would allow himself to indulge in now was marijuana or hashish and of course alcohol. Gary had a cure for me this morning all right. He didn't like to drink that cheap Ginsing stuff, he had to have his good old fashioned, liquor store wine. I knew the wine had to have come from a bootlegger because it was so early in the morning. On this particular morning, being in the pain I was in, Gary was a knight in shining armor! I didn't care what kind of drink he had, or where he got it, just so long as IT HAD ALCOHOL IN IT!

We made our way down Hastings Street to Victory Square, stopping in a doorway along the way to have a gulp. I was glad to see that the bottle of wine Gary had was almost full. It wouldn't cure my hangover completely, but it would definitely take some of the edge off so I could become somewhat functional. Then, I could start planning my scams for the day. I knew it would be more than enough to get Gary well on his way to being intoxicated. Gary always seemed to get drunk faster than me ever since he quit doing the hard drugs.

We sat down in Victory Square. Gary pulled out his harmonica and started to play his mournful, sweet blues that usually got people to stop and listen. On this morning, they were actually stopping and listening, even in this cold! If I had been one to use my brain for something other than dreaming up illegal scams, I would have thought to put a hat on the ground for a collection. Instead, I just sat there listening, the music caused me to roll over melancholy thoughts in my head as I reflected on my failures in life and my drug addict lifestyle. Oh the joys of a hung-over mind! My damaged, lonely, lost childhood memories came stealing back again and flooded me. When Gary stopped playing and the people clapped, he routinely asked if anyone had a smoke for, "Me and my buddy?" When cigarettes were passed out, Gary would then hone in on one of the spectators and ask, "Say, could you help a guy out? Me and my buddy are short. We're just trying to get enough for bus fare." Nine times out of ten he would get "bus fare". And I would always say, after the crowd had gone, "Gary, don't ask for bus fare next time, ask for money FOR FOOD! They'll give you more that way!" His reply would never change, "You ask next time then." That always shut me up.

As we sat there drinking the wine, Gary looked over at me and I could see he was starting to feel the effect of the booze. He was closing one eye to get a better focus. He was getting more talkative with people as they walked by. He began to wander around the park. He would play his harmonica and ask for smokes. He always had a joke to tell when he was "feeling his oats". And I could tell that's exactly what he was doing, because he was chatting with three ladies and they all burst into laughter. Three *white* ladies at that! Gary, like the rest of his family, had an awesome sense of humor. He saw the world through a different "lens" than most of us did. I always looked up to him. Gary was one year and ten days older than I. He was my best friend and always had been for as far back as I can remember. He was that type of friend, who you could not remember the first time you met them. It was as if they were always there. Someone, who just naturally belonged at your side. He was also one of the most respected fighters I knew. He may not have been the best fighter, but to me he was the most respected. I mean I've had friends who were very good fighters who were very bad news and you just didn't mess with them! They would shank you, or pipe you, shoot you or just plain beat you within an inch of death. But Gary was the fighter I respected the most because he didn't look for fights. Not only did he *not look* for fights, he always stood up for the little guy. If Gary felt someone was getting bullied, he would purposely take the place of the person being bullied, and challenge the bully by saying, "Why don't you pick on someone your own size, like me?" I can honestly say, I've never seen Gary lose a fight and I've seen him in many, many "scraps". Gary would never, and I mean never, back down from *anyone!*



This is Gary walking down the street in Vancouver. I believe he is 18 yrs. old in this photo. RIP my friend, I still miss you a lot.

I loved Gary because he was honest and had a big heart. Here he was, growing up with someone who knew nothing but stealing and lying (yours truly), and he still maintained a high level of honesty. The only time I ever saw Gary being involved in stealing or not telling the truth, was when I was influencing him. Gary looked up to me and I looked up to Gary. Gary found it hard to say no to me because I usually had a way of making money and of getting drugs and/or alcohol, throughout our whole lives. That is...when I wasn't in jail. But even in jail it wasn't hard for me to get those things. I liked to get things the quick, easy, ready-at-hand way. Gary liked to do things the honest way. He only had a grade eight education, just as I did, but he was willing to work when work was available and whenever he was sober enough to work. I also loved Gary because he had such a tremendous sense of humor. That humor always showed itself true to form, especially when we were both down and out. I come from a frightening, wild, gloomy, traumatic, fight-for-survival lonely childhood. So it was always very refreshing to have

someone around who could make me laugh. Gary could always make me laugh and so could his brother “Maddy” (RIP). I treasured Gary. I loved Gary. Gary was my secret role model. I didn’t have to tell him any of this, he knew it. We were the closest of friends. We were the best of friends. We came through everything together. The Group Home, LSD trips, Magic Mushrooms, MDA, Marijuana, Hashish, Drunk tanks, Heroin overdoses, Firefighting you name it! Whenever I felt the world was letting me down and no one cared how I felt or understood me, I could always turn to Gary! We could be walking down an alley digging in garbage bin after garbage bin and we’d both be belting out the same Rolling Stones song in what we felt was perfect harmony singing real loud ... “I can’t get no, satisfaction. I can’t get no girl reaction, but I try n’ I try, n’ I try... I can’t get no!” That was Gary’s lifelong favorite band. He didn’t just like the Rolling Stones, he had a passion for them! And today in the park, once again, Gary would belt out a Stones’ tune. And once again I felt like Gary was my knight in shining armor.

As Gary was joking and being friendly with other people in the park, my mind pondered the happenings of last night that lead me to today’s present situation. My heart felt the cold stab as a lightning bolt of loneliness pierced it. A wave of melancholy and forlorn crept in. I wanted my life to be different. I wished there was some way out of this despicable world of ex-cons, alcoholics, rip-off artists, winos, addicts and drug dealers. I knew there wasn’t. I had tried so many avenues; Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Native Spirituality, Eastern Religions, Philosophy, Psychology/Self-Help Books and church after church after church. I tried to “straighten-out” for my mom, my family, my girlfriends, to keep a job, and to stay out of jail. As usual, nothing worked. Everywhere I turned for help, I always met with failure. I felt like I just didn’t possess the moral fiber, the strength of character, or the sheer will-power, that I heard so many say is what it takes to beat the addiction. Every avenue I turned to, seeking some assistance to help me overcome this dreaded curse, would always lead me to the same pitiful result... utter disappointment and a deeper disdain for self and life. Was I to be forever doomed to this ball and chain of self-loathing, alcoholism, depression, hopelessness, homelessness, suffering and shame? My thoughts began to drift to last night’s activities.

Not many people survive much less thrive, after spending over ten years on skid row, as a full-fledged alcoholic, wayward convict and a pill-popping, cocaine/heroin addict. I’m one of the uncommon few who did. On more occasions than I can remember, my life on the streets of Vancouver’s downtown Eastside, found me at 3 a.m. (or thereabouts), crouched in a darkened alley, underneath (what I was sure had to be the world’s dimmest light-bulb), searching desperately for a vein in which to inject the cocaine-filled syringe. That’s exactly what I was doing last night. As the cold west coast rain fell relentlessly around and on me, I was reminded how increasingly difficult it was to find a vein that wasn’t collapsed. A collapsed vein is a vein that does not pump blood as fully as it used to, due to the overuse of a syringe, or some other impediment. A normal vein will usually puff-up when the blood flow is pinched, making the vein stand out, and it is easier to inject a syringe. A collapsed vein will not puff-up as much as it used to. It then becomes very hard to get the drug directly into the blood stream. When this happens, there is the risk of missing the vein completely, upon injection. When a vein is missed, the drug is injected directly into the muscle and flesh. This is a painful process and the drug takes much longer to take effect. If the vein is missed and the drug injected,

there is the risk of initiating an abscess. This is one of the worst fears of an addict, besides spilling the drug, getting ripped-off or overdosing. An abscess is a very painful and I emphasize *very painful* infection. Within minutes, the pain starts. And it could turn into an infection that usually forms around the injection spot, into a large lump of increased swelling, redness, pain and it will eventually fill with pus. A full-blown abscess left untreated is an awful sight and the pain is second only to the smell. The combination of the two is an awful experience. The lump can become so large and painful one cannot bend the arm. The abscess can last anywhere from two to three weeks or longer, depending on the care that it receives.

In the back alleys of Vancouver's skid row, I would play out this scene of searching for a vein time and time again. While looking for a vein, I had to keep a wary eye on the alley for the police or any other threat that would attempt to keep me from my injection. Once the injection was complete, there is no real enjoyment. The pain, both physical and emotional is numbed for a while and goes away. Then when the effect of the drug wears off there is a lingering sense of being used and exploited once again by the drug. It's almost as if the drug purposely reminds that you have no control over it because it has complete control over you. You experience paranoia, mild hallucinations and suspicion. At times like this, one always feels that there is something, someone, a threat of some kind out there stalking you. The more cocaine in the injection, the closer the threat would come to overtaking you. I would repeat this very same ritual at least fifteen to twenty times on an average day or an average night. This had become "the norm" for me. It was all I lived for. It was all I breathed for. Just let me get that needle in my arm and well... quite frankly, you could take the world and do what you wanted with it. Why did I do it? The drug offered me a numbing effect. A numbing effect, that temporarily took away the physical and the emotional pain. It relieved the pain of childhood trauma and sexual abuse, the pain of a failed life and mile-deep valleys of death-like loneliness. This had become my life. There appeared no way out for me, or so I thought, other than in a pine box. I had resolved this in my mind and accepted it to be my fate, my reality. I had no doubt I would return home from Vancouver in a pine box. The only question remaining was not how, but where and when would I go?

I finished my injection. Gathering up my small bottle of water, my syringe and after taking a last look on the ground to see if I dropped or missed anything I was off into the big city night. A night that would pass by repeating this same ritual until the dawn arrived once again on the mean streets of Vancouver's downtown eastside. This was a typical night in the addict's life where drug dealers peered at you from under sweat suit hoods. This was an ordinary night where prostitutes with running mascara, could be seen occupying every street corner, giving you an expectant, hopeful look with eyes asking, "Are you a trick (client)?"