

"Behind the Grey Mountain"

-by-

Andrew Kicking Horse

California

What matters most is that my heart beats. "Ak achuma imma an chu kask", the goodness of my heart. Against the worst intentions of a few, against the odds of many, my heart beats on marking the passing of the prime of my life in this cell. For now, I exist. I live in an altered world which has altered the person I would become.

My heart beat in wild terror as the judge announced the verdict in July of 1988. Guilty! Instead of giving me death though, the sentence was life in prison without the possibility of parole. Never even achieving as much as a traffic citation before, I was now thrust into an unknown world behind the grey mountain. I could have considered a more immediate alternative - an open courtroom window - ten stories above the busy Santa Ana California street below..... but my mama was there. She watched attempts to give me death in three (3) different trials, withstood that shock and had accompanied me in prayer over the hundreds of miles that separated us. Now, she watched me being sentenced to life in prison.

Mama is a strong woman and forgiving in nature. Just three years earlier, her only daughter, my beloved sister Kim was tragically murdered and now, as always, mama stood there tall and proud, expelling strength to me through eyes filled with love and tears. No, you can't stop running water nor kill the fire that burns inside.

I was solely tempted by the window and the prospect of a life so drastically altered it simply terrified me. Aho! The trickster, the one they call the devil was playing games with my mind. But I could not ask my mama to witness the leap. Mothers see their children into this broken and none should have to watch them leave it so abruptly.

Five years, approximately 1825 days, 43,000 hours, 2,628,000 minutes have now passed. How many heartbeats? My mind can't compute the number and this trivia is just another way of idly passing the time. Others have passed longer periods in these cells. Surely, I can muster the strength and faith to endure.

The morning silence is flushed as the cell door opens its steeled jawed mouth. It is a beautiful day as Father Sun spears his rays of sunlight through the broken glass of the window. The cells around me empty as the repetitive structured time unfolds into another day. As the tiers of lost souls on my block begin to empty, I hear prisoners cursing and verbally abusing the female yard officer. Her name does not matter. These men would grouse and grumble at whomever cranked the doors open or closed, regardless of gender. This matters though..... that the sickening display of verbal abuse towards another person underscores our culture today and exposes our social attitudes.

No, this is not simply a bunch of prisoners yelling just to be heard but a mirrored reflection of a society gone array. Dehumanization in this place hangs thick enough to cut with a knife!

The sunset smells heavy - the musk of the field nearby, the odor of the rank and polluted Salton Sea near the prison, and the stench of crowded human bodies. Throughout the day, shouts, curses, racial slurs, and the mind-numbing blare of television sets in the crowded dayroom makes concentration difficult, sleep impossible. As I write, earplugs made of toilet paper screwed firmly into my head, a half-dozen prisoners stop at my cell and interrupt. They ask me if I want to get in on the football pool? I tell each one that I don't gamble. They look at me like I'm crazy. Some ask for coffee, a cigarette, anything before deciding that when I say no, I mean no! "Sorry Chief" they utter. I reply, "I'm not a Chief to deaf ears." They go to the next cell & try again.

There are times my rage becomes intolerable. Despite my attempts to adhere to non-violence, there have been times when that rage has overflowed. I try to check the stress and tension sparked in the belly of this overcrowded beast by running the perimeter of the yard until, exhausted and winded, I stagger to a halt. I lift weights (drive iron) trying to keep in abeyance not only my rage but the toll of these 38 years

on my body.

One afternoon, under the weighty burden of iron, I watched a thunderstorm move inexorably towards the prison. As it began to baptize the land, a brisk wind sprang up, heavy with the breath of wet soil and the advent of another Fall that is soon coming. The sky cleared its throat with the rattle of thunder. Raindrops pepper me, soft accompaniment as I heft the press, pushing away my rage. The wetness on my face isn't completely from the rain though!

My cartharsis incomplete, I walk to the gym and burn my hands punching a wildly swinging heavybag. An officer watches then makes me stop. He notices the crimson smear left on the bag when I stop to rest and wipe my hands on my shirt. He doesn't understand, sometimes neither do I.

To know the truth about prisons and being an indian in prison, one must pierce illusions and view it from the inside. Things aren't always as they appear and the general public has been brainwashed and blinded about truth, justice, and the American way. It's freedom of speech as long as you don't say too much!

Prisons slowly kills most souls. They then shallow lives whole and cut many of them short. Prisons affect everyone they touch forever. They are designed and operated specifically for revenge. In this gentler and kinder country, we met out harsher punishment of longer duration than any other major industrialized nation in the world.

Prisons hurt, they maim, and they kill. They demoralize and feed self-hatred generated by failed human potential. To be a human caged, shackled, and bound is a humiliation which makes one feel subhuman. This is the white man's way. His promise of justice for all that only a few select receive. He has made the Indian people many promises and broken every one except one..... he promised to take our land.

The slow and methodical rape of the spirit continues day after day in here. A lot of people in prison are convinced that they have no worth, no purpose, no hope, no rights, so thereby, no chance in life. After all, they are prisoners, subhumans to society. For too many, this terrible lie becomes truth, a prophecy fulfilled in a thousand ways each day and night and a reality sometimes culminating in a sharp razor blade at midnight.

There are over two million people in America's prisons today and as more institutions are constructed and even more being considered, we cannot deny any longer the damage we are inflicting on ourselves as a nation and a people, damage which can be fatal to a democracy. Thmas Merton's words on decisions filter into my mind: "We live in a time which one cannot help making decisions for or against humanity, for or against life, for or against justice, for or against truth."

As long as decisions are made for others, we are all doing time. As long as there are others willing to sit in judgment of many, regardless of whether they are innocent or guilty, we are walking a road of eventual doom for society. For it is only when we decide in favor of humanity, in favor for life, justice and truth, that the rage I acknowledge and so many others deny can finally be kept at bay. Then the job of rebuilding the shattered lives of a broken world can begin.

But I am simply a red man, an indian who is incarcerated behind the grey mountain. A number that the court has determined by a stacked sense of justice simply because they said so. It is said, "It is easier to perceive error than find the truth", and I believe this is true. The former lies on the surface and is easily seen, while the latter lies in the depths where few are willing to seek it.

It's midnight again and darkness has fallen over this cell. A tiny insect crawls around the corner of the concrete wall that separates my cell from the one next door. It stops to watch me write memories away.

The End.