

A Vietnam Veteran

A Vietnam veteran, addicted to alcohol and marijuana, returns to the United States suffering from nightmares, flashbacks, a terrible temper and the fear he'll wind up killing someone. During his two years of duty, he'd dodged random rockets countless times as they landed all around him, and he'd watched his best friend get half his head blown off. Most of the men he'd been close to were either injured or killed. For most of his time in Vietnam, he'd stayed stoned on alcohol and marijuana laced with opium. He's come home with every kind of post-traumatic stress symptom, complicated by addiction.

Considering himself dangerous, untrustworthy and full of poison, he decides he's unfit to stay with his family. So he leaves home to hole up in a rat-infested, condemned building in New York City—no lights, no bed and no heat. He bootlegs electricity from the place next door and settles in with throwaway furniture he picks up from the street. For protection, he keeps by his side a butcher knife, taped to a broom handle and a chain studded with razors. These two handcrafted weapons establish his reputation as someone not to be messed with and help him fend off intruders who don't know any better. He feels he has demons inside of him that have to be exorcised — these impulses to hurt people need to be cleansed out of him somehow. His healing regimen is this: every day for sixteen hours a day, he plays John Coltrane on a record player he's found in the trash. Having once played tenor sax himself he finds something in this music that reaches him. John Coltrane is his mentor, idol and savior.

"The music could touch the tender side of me . . . and the rage, too. It was like being cleansed. The music was so pure and lovely; but so edgy and real; it went right through my body. I started to see beauty again. As long as it was playing, all the garbage that had been dumped on me was no longer part of me. It was like a spiritual enlightenment. For a long time, the only thing I could stand to do was listen to that music, over and over again. Sixteen hours a day seven days a week. That was my healing. Other things came later—a very special woman and a job at a methadone clinic. But it was the music that purged me, delivered me back to my true self. It drove the demons out and restored my humanity. Dr. Coltrane found me and brought me back."

From the book: "Invisible Heroes"