

Fighting The Ninja

Charles Norman

Prison showers can be scary places. I'm not talking about those old "B" movie scenes where the big hairy guy with a handmade blade shanks the hapless prisoner for refusing to star in a gang rape, grimaces of pain, blood swirling down the drain, last words of "I love you, Mama", before the poor guy curls up and dies on the tiles.

Nowadays the showers are scary not from knives but from germs, leftovers from consensual acts clogging the pipes and floating sudsy sewage out into the hallways, catching those strolling unaware in flip-flops on a slippery stretch, skidding and cartwheeling, splashing onto their backsides into the mire.

I've spent my life in prison, and I'm not germaphobic by any stretch. Hell, I eat chow off those greasy, plastic trays every day, but at least they run them through hot water in some semblance of sanitation. Every day someone asks me for a cigarette. I tell them I don't smoke, I'm trying to get out of this prison alive, and lung cancer's not part of my plan. Neither is catching some creeping crud from the drain monster.

When I first came to prison the older men would joke that there was so much spilled seed from self-abuse in the shower that if you listened carefully you could hear millions of little voices down in the drain crying, "Daddy, Daddy".

I'd work out in the morning, come in to take a shower down the hall from my cell before lunch, and get grossed out by all the hair, melted soap, and gunk clogging the drains, the mold on the tiles, the musky odors, the scary streak running down the walls, the thoughts of what had gone on in there the previous evening to leave all that refuse behind. "Housemen" are those assigned to clean up every day, but the operative term has always been "sorry housemen", who shirked their duties, slept instead, and left the shower to molder, fester, and seethe.

I couldn't stand it anymore, so I asked the sergeant if he'd issue me the cleaning supplies and let me take care of that one shower. Incentive is virtually extinct in prison. His brow furrowed and his eyes darted around for thirty seconds or so, but he couldn't fathom any ulterior angle on my part, so he said okay.

It was hot. I'd lift some weights, jump some rope, get sweaty, check out a quart spray bottle of bleach, disinfectant, a scrub broom, cleaning rags, and a mop from supply, and head to the shower, a cell-sized room with

three shower heads and a plastic curtain. I'd run the hot water for a few minutes, steaming things up, and then spray bleach from the ceiling to the floor, hitting the walls, drains, and curtain. I'd be in my workout shorts, walk away for ten minutes, let the bleach work and sterilize all the little organisms.

I'd come back and scrub every surface with the broom and disinfectant, run the hot water, clean all the hair and gunk out of the drains with rubber gloves on, wipe down and polish the walls and fixtures, then get my soap, shampoo, and towel, and take a cold shower with peace of mind, a rare commodity in prison. My shower was so clean that men from other wings and floors would line up to use it. Sometimes you become a victim of your own success. More usage meant more crud to clean up. It was a worthy investment nonetheless.

The sergeant was making his rounds one morning with his personal flunky, a notorious snitch and sycophant, a slightly-built white homosexual who personally screwed every sodomite who sought his favors. I was standing outside the shower spraying bleach, the chlorine fumes almost choking.

"Damn, Norman", he said, "That shit's strong. Why you spraying so much in that shower?" His little buddy, Brian, wrinkled his face and sneered at me, picking up his boss' cues that I might be chewed out momentarily.

I'd been lying in wait for someone official to ask me that very question. I pounced. "Well, Sarge, it's like this. Two fellas go in the shower and turn the water on real high. They soap each other up, and the big guy bends over the little guy, and shoves his thang way up in there, ripping and tearing loose the sewer lines. They'll be in here screeching like alley cats for awhile. Maybe the big guy knows it, maybe he doesn't care, but in amongst all that blood and shit and jism running down that boy's legs onto the floor are millions of little HIV viruses, several strains of hepatitis, maybe a couple shots of syphilis, gonorrhea, and herpes, and who knows what other contagious, and fatal diseases in a soupy stew".

"That's gross, Norman", Brian whines.

"Shut up", I snap. "You're the one I'm talking about".

The sarge is looking a little pale. Several synapses are crackling as he processes the images I'm painting in his head. I continue.

"Clots of all that stuff that spurted out of his diseased backside are simmering on the floor in pools. They dry off and leave. I come in, track

through their remains, turn on the water, the stuff splashes over my feet and legs, and who knows, maybe I've got a fresh cut on my toe, and millions of little disease organisms leap and dive into that virgin bloodstream".

I take a breath. "That's one scenario. Or I can come in here with pure bleach, one of the few substances besides Lysol and nuclear radiation that will kill all that stuff, spray the place down real good, scrub every surface, rinse it off, and have a safe, sanitary shower for all of us".

"You're doing a good job", he says. "Keep it up". He hurries down the hall, his lapdog racing to catch up. We don't have to worry about the sergeant using our showers, I don't think.

Brian got sick and went into the infirmary for a couple of days. He came back out. He wasn't looking very healthy. He went back inside again. John, the orderly, confided that Brian was bleeding from the rectum, that the doctor had to pack his rear end with industrial-strength tampons, that his intestines had been ripped and torn so much it appeared someone had stuck a baseball bat in there. Days later they brought in a meat wagon. That's what they call an ambulance in prison. Usually when one of those comes for you, you're just a hunk of meat, not a person. It looked like one of those nature films, a crowd of prisoners watching the action in front of the clinic like a tightly-compressed herd of antelope staring at the lions devouring one of their less-swift relatives, each one thinking, better him than me.

The paramedics went inside wearing biohazard suits with the visors, like the ones in those Robin Cook disaster movies, pushing a stretcher with a plastic hood over it. They came back out with Brian strapped down and stretched out inside like the bubble boy, shoved him into the back of the meat wagon, and drove off. We didn't see him again. All quiet on the prison front. Something was seriously wrong with Brian, and it wasn't kidney stones, which is what the nurse told people.

In prison, they call HIV and AIDS, "the ninja", the black-clothed assassin that creeps inside and cuts your throat in the night, then slips away unseen, leaving you there to bleed out, alone.

There are certain disadvantages and responsibilities to being one of the few people in the prison with a formal education. In the kingdom of the dumb, the "Jeopardy!" champ isn't king, but some think he's the answer man, their personal source for every doubt and question.

It started the next day. Some of these big muscle-bound dudes become meek and fearful when they are confronted by things they can't pigeon-hole

or find a place for in their tiny universe of understanding. I'd seen Roscoe accompanying Brian into the shower more than once, but his question caught me off guard.

"Norman, you're pretty smart". He wouldn't meet my eye, talking to the floor. "You heard about that boy Brian. They say he got that ninja".

"Yeah, Roscoe, I heard that".

"You know I was knockin' that boy off, right?", he asked.

"I kinda got that impression, Roscoe, but I try not to see certain things".

"I know you're not that way, Norman, you're not in the game, but I need to know something, and I respect your intelligence. You a straight dude, and you ain't gonna go repeating anything".

"I appreciate that Roscoe. What do you need to know?" He was having a hard time getting it out.

"Brian got that ninja. He dyin'. I was hitting him pretty regular. What do you think the chances are that I mighta' caught it from him?"

I frowned and shook my head. "That's a hard question to answer, Roscoe. Were you using any kind of protection?"

"Protection?" The big man tilted back his head and laughed. "Nah, we ain't never used no protection. Too late for that now. They don't sell rubbers in the canteen nowadays".

"I don't know what to tell you, Roscoe, except to go to medical and ask them to give you a test".

"They'll do that?"

"You have to ask".

"Thanks, man". He grasped both my hands in his big paws and squeezed, then hurried off, presumably to the clinic. I hoped for the best for him.

The next day Bible Willie came to my cell. He got his name because he carried an oversized Bible everywhere he went, to the chow hall, to work, to the softball field.

"I needs to talk with you, brother", he whispered, looking around. No one was near.

"You knows I's a Christian, right?", he said, holding up his ever-present Bible for emphasis.

I nodded. He had something to say. No sense interrupting his train of thought.

He took a deep breath. "I ain't always been a Christian, though".

“No?”

“No. A couple years ago I backslid for a spell. I was tempted, and I fell. I had sex with that boy Brian for a couple months”.

“No shit!” I was surprised. It was like hearing that Jerry Falwell or Jim Bakker had succumbed to the flesh. Well, maybe not that bad.

“They say that boy got the ninja”.

“Yeah”, I heard.”

“Tell me the truth”. Willie pronounced it “troot”. “You think I could have that ninja?”

“You’re a Christian, right?”, I asked.

“I’m a Christian”.

“Then I suggest you pray, Willie”.

“Will you pray with me?”

“I’d be proud to”. We did. I felt a little weird at first, praying with this man who had fallen hard and risen and would probably fall again, but was scared now, and knew only to turn to his God for hope and comfort. But if you can’t pray for a person like that, under such strange circumstances, how can you pray at all?

I suggested he get tested. He left, another satisfied customer.

Mama Herc was next. Mama Herc was a genuine prison legend, infamous beyond his razorwire boundary. When I was in the county jail for a couple of years fighting my case through the courts, recidivists shared chain gang horror stories about what would happen to the scared newcocks upon their arrival in prison. All that was missing in those jail cells to make it any scarier was crackling campfires and hooting owls.

“When you get to prison, boys,” one scrawny, toothless thirty-year old six-time loser, with toothpick arms stained blue with crude self-inflicted tattoos crisscrossed with white razor blade scars, intoned, “You’re gonna run into Mama Herc”. He smiled, revealing gums, and smacked his lips.

“Who’s Mama Herc?”, some frightened teen burglar or car thief would always ask.

“Boy, Mama Herc is a sweet young white boy’s worst nightmare”, he’d say, warming up. “She, or he, whatever you wanna call it, is the biggest, meanest, strongest damn queer in the prison system. He’s a monster, can lift all the iron in the weight pile, gets his strength and his protein from eatin’ up young boys like you, and you, and you, every day”.

“What?”

“Yep. Mama Herc’s a black giant with plucked eyebrows and shaved legs, arms pumped up like Virginia hams. When I came into prison, sweet sixteen, all clean, not like I am now, I heard these footsteps behind me, turned around, and there was Mama Herc, the black Goliath, Frankenstein, Sasquatch, and Medusa rolled into one”.

“What happened?”

“Mama Herc grabbed me by the throat with one hand, picked me up in the air, pulled me toward him, kissed me right dead on the lips, and grinned at me”.

Groans and yechs resound.

“You should have smelled that breath. It’d make a vulture puke. Least he didn’t stick his tongue in my mouth”.

More groans and gags.

“Mama Herc looked me right in the eye and said, “White boy, I’m gonna suck your dick”. And he did. What was I supposed to do?”

“When he got done, he squeezed my neck a little bit, just to let me know he could pinch off my head if he wanted to, and told me, “Now you’re gonna suck mine”.”

Louder gasps and groans.

“Mama Herc’s still up there waiting for you boys to show up. When the bus pulls in, he’ll be standing on the side with the others picking out the fish and the fresh meat. Welcome to prison”.

Untold thousands heard those apocryphal tales of impending doom at the hands of Mama Herc, but the reality was quite different.

I’d been in jail for so long, had been in so many knockdown dragout fights over food trays, the TV or telephone, that I’d developed a reputation as “standup”, one of the most revered praises, meaning that I wasn’t afraid, would fight, wouldn’t snitch. In prison your reputation precedes you, follows you, and often haunts you in a primal, often Biblical manner. Heaven help the cowardly, ratting child molester who exists at the very bottom of the pecking order and food chain.

So many murderers, robbers, kidnappers and thieves had passed through the county jail and made my acquaintance before they matriculated to the big house that when I finally got off the bus at Raiford, I was greeted by so many hardened convicts that you’d think it was a bizarre high school reunion.

Fellow standup convicts issued me the requisite razorsharp shank, a wicked, carbon steel prison knife made in the furniture factory, and clued

me in on watching my back and avoiding homosexuals in the shower. Take showers in shifts. Wait till the “others” get out, go in with your homeboys, always have a few friends outside smoking cigarettes and standing guard.

I had a fresh life sentence, had lost my girl, been framed by crooked cops, and faced a long stretch ahead of me in prison with little chance of survival. I was not a happy camper. Early Saturday morning some of the boys came and got me, invited me to go to the weight pile and partake of some tomato puree buck, prison wine that packed a mule kick I didn’t even know you could make wine out of tomato puree. I’m not a drinker, but it was early in my career, I was being tested, I wanted to be sociable, so I agreed to have one drink. Famous last words.

The guards didn’t go around the weight pile. Too many steel bars and muscle men. It was early yet, 8 a.m., and besides my four friends and their three gallons of buck in bleach jugs, only one hardcore weight lifter made use of the facilities, a very large muscular black dude doing dead lifts with about six hundred pounds on a bar that bowed in the middle every time he lifted it.

I’m sure there’s a drink that tastes worse than tomato puree buck, but I hope I never experience it. Prison alcoholics must have a masochistic streak to subject themselves to such punishment. It did its job, though. One cup turned into two, and suddenly I felt dizzy and lightheaded. Everyone was talking loud and laughing. I forgot about my plight and predicament, which was the point, I suppose. I got loud, too, and exceedingly irritated at the weight lifter who kept cutting his eyes back toward us, seemingly upset that several drunks were disturbing the tranquility of his weight pile so early in the morning.

He had a headband on, and several strands of those cheap pirate beads encircled his bull neck. When he dropped the weights with a clang and turned to stare at us, I noticed that his eyebrows were shaved and thin lines had been drawn on his forehead like a surprised clown. For some reason his disdainful look infuriated me, and the action of the tomato puree wine on my brain cells emboldened my normally taciturn temper.

“What you looking at?”, I yelled.

His eyes narrowed, and he pointed his thumb at his chest, questioning.

“Yeah, you, you big musclebound motherfucker”. His eyes widened. He wasn’t used to being talked to like that. My friends shut up. He took a deep breath and stepped forward. I took two steps toward him. The alcohol had taken over my tongue.

“You want some of this, you overgrown piece of shit?” I shouted, hitting my chest with my fist. “Come on”. I took another step. He took two.

“That’s it. Come on, cocksucker”, I bellowed. “I’ll kick your fucking ass”. I squared off in a karate stance.

“I’m not scared of those muscles. Bring it on. The first thing I’m gonna do is snap that fuckin’ leg at the knee, then I’m gonna snap the other one, then the party begins”.

He’d never said a word, but his eyes lasered fury and anger into me. He stopped. He breathed in and out several times, turned around, seized the steel bar loaded with weights, screamed, and flung the massive barbell into the air over his head. Then he threw the weights to the floor, chips of broken concrete flying everywhere with the clang of iron bouncing away as he stormed out of the weight pile. I flashed back to the original “King Kong” movie, when Kong was pulling up trees and slinging dinosaurs. We watched him hulk down the road. My buddy whistled.

“Man, do you know who that is?”, one friend asked, looking at me strangely.

“I don’t know and I don’t give a fuck”, I said, the wine still talking.

“That was Mama Herc”, another said. “Man, if that cat got ahold of you he’d rip your arms off, he’s so bad”.

“I can’t tell”, I said. “He hauled ass”.

“Yeah, he did”. We went back to finish the dregs of tomato puree buck. The next day I awoke feeling like someone had drilled a two-inch hole through my skull. That was my first and last foray into buck territory.

A week later, I was in the chow line with Murf the Surf, another chain gang legend who’d become infamous for stealing jewelry from a New York museum, but was serving life for the murders of a couple of women in South Florida. Murf was like the prison welcome wagon, taking promising new prisoners in hand and introducing them to prison society.

They were serving fried chicken and the chow hall was crowded. Murf made his way toward the back where a huge black man sat at a table alone, hunkered over a tray, tearing into a large chicken breast like a starving dog. Mama Herc. Uh oh. Nothing good could come of this. Murf greeted Herc like a long-lost brother, and motioned if we could sit down. Herc nodded, not missing a bite of the greasy chicken. Herc’s eyes never left mine.

“Herc, I want you to meet a good friend of mine, Charlie. Charlie, Herc”.

Herc took a breath. "We met", then resumed crunching up the chicken bones.

That threw Murf off for a second, wondering how we'd met, and him not knowing about it.

For all his size Mama Herc actually had a soft voice that belied his reputation as a maneater. I'd never actually heard a sound out of him besides a scream and bellow.

"Murf", he said, wiping his mouth. He pronounced it, "Moif". He cut his eyes to me. "He's yo' frien'?", he asked.

Murf nodded, amused, sensing something.

"Dat cat's one crazy cracker", he said, spooning mashed potatoes and gravy into his cavernous mouth.

Murf grinned. "Why do you say that, Herc?"

"Last week I was workin' out, and that cat called me every kind of motherfucker and cocksucker they is".

"No shit!" Murf was astounded. "What happened?"

"I was gonna try him, but he said he was gonna break both my legs, and then really fuck me up. The way he looked, I thought he might be able to do it, so I just said fuck it and went to my cell".

Murf looked at me. My turn.

I acknowledged that it had happened.

"I owe you an apology", I said. "I didn't even know who you were. I had a couple cups of that tomato puree buck those guys in the kitchen made, and it went to my head. I never should have said those things. Will you accept my apology?" I extended my hand across the table. The moment of truth. If he wanted to do something here, I was in trouble.

He reached across and my hand disappeared into his. He shook it. I tried to shake back, but I could feel the bones in my hand crackling. He wasn't even squeezing hard. I hoped he'd turn it loose. He did.

"We straight", he said, meaning no hard feelings, and resumed scouring his tray.

Months later Herc signed up for a prisoner self-help program where men spend days sitting in a circle and telling their life stories, among other activities. Herc opened up, and I learned the terrible truth behind his chain gang legend.

He'd gone to the state reform school not much more than a scrawny child, and had been brutally raped, abused, and passed around by the older

teens. He was too small to fight them off. His life was a living hell for weeks and months. He turned to the weight pile, desperate to add size and become strong, and in a couple years, he'd spurted upward, at fifteen, bigger and stronger than most fully-grown men. By then he'd developed a taste for homosexuality, and the weak prey of years past morphed into a predator.

Now he was a grown man, having spent most of his life in captivity, turning into that which he'd feared and hated most as a helpless youth. He denied the veracity of the chain gang stories about his attacking fresh young prisoners in years past, and beneath that frightening exterior a little boy still hid.

I developed a respect for Herc, for his sheer determination as a survivor. I'd been a grown man when I came to prison. I couldn't imagine how damaging and horrifying it might have been had I come to prison as a child. Might I have developed into something like Mama Herc? I shuddered to think about it. I would rather have died. Many did.

We became friends, as odd as that may seem. He had a child-like innocence of many things. He'd never had a life in society, never had a job, never drove a car. He was scared to death of women. He was insecure and uneducated, and had no skills but one. He was the strongest man in prison. He owned the weight pile. He was truly institutionalized, a product of his environment, and life in a "free society" was as alien to him as life on Mars or Jupiter.

Years passed. Anytime there was a dispute of a fact Mama Herc would bring the arguing parties to me. "Now ask Norman. He knows everything". Not quite, but more than most of them. Whatever I said they accepted. So when Mama Herc came to me about the ninja and that boy, Brian, I felt very sad. What could I say?

"You know what I wanna ask you about?" He pronounced ask, "axe".

I nodded. "Brian".

"Yeah, that boy. You know I had a thing about that boy for awhile".

"I didn't know that, Herc, but I'm not surprised".

"He was fine at one time, before he got sick".

I said nothing.

"They say that boy got the ninja. That's some bad shit. What you think, Norman? You think I got it, or mighta' got away with it?"

"I don't know, Herc. It's hard to say without a blood test".

“I don’t want no blood test. You know I’m scared of needles”.

“It depends, Herc, on the risky behavior”, I said. “If you were pitching and he was catching, and he had it, the odds are a lot better than if the roles were reversed, if he were pitching and you were catching”.

Herc dropped his head, then looked at me. He shook his head, resigned. “We was playing all positions, my man, back and forth”.

I couldn’t say anything. I put my hand on his shoulder as scant comfort, one friend to another, and the big man began crying, whether for himself or the lost boy, I did not presume to know.

He leaned down to my shoulder and sobbed, shaking. I couldn’t reach around him, he was too big, but at least I could reach to his back and pat him as my grandmother had done me when I was a little boy, hurt, crying from a stubbed toe. We were standing in the hallway in front of my cell. Men passed by, staring, then averting their eyes at the incongruous scene, the massive black homosexual crying on the shoulder of the straight white dude comforting him. Nobody said a word. Nobody dared.

When I didn’t think it could get any worse, an hour later Pop Blakely came to my cell. I was trying to write a letter.

Pop Blakely was a scrawny, wizened black man in his seventies, perpetually hacking and coughing, his lungs seizing up, a cigarette always stuck between his lips and a cup of coffee in one hand. He didn’t weigh one hundred pounds, and looked like he’d died a couple years before but had forgotten to lie down and be still. He coughed for a full minute, took a sip of his coffee and hit off the cigarette, and spoke.

“Norman, you know that boy Brian was in my cell the past six months, right?”

I snapped. “Jesus Christ, Pop, not you too! Am I the only person in this prison who hasn’t screwed that boy!”

“You might be”. He hacked and wheezed some more until I thought chunks of his lungs might come out, but instead he spit a thick yellow gob of mucous into my toilet and flushed it.

“They put the boy in the top bunk of my cell”, he said. He took another puff and blew the smoke out into the hallway out of deference to my not smoking.

“I was laying there playing with myself”, he continued. “I had the old snake out, and I was trying to slap some life into it”.

I tried to banish the images from my mind to no avail.

“That boy, Brian, heard me down there, and he popped his head over the side of the bunk, looked at me, and said, “Pop, you ain’t gotta’ do that, let me do it for you”, so I told him like that guy on TV said, come on down!”

We both burst out laughing. I couldn’t help it. Pop Blakely went off on a coughing jag, spat, wiped his rheumy eyes, then spoke again.

“What you think the odds are that I got that ninja from that boy?”

“How old are you, Pop, seventy-five?”

“Seventy-two”.

“I hear you got diabetes, a bad heart, lung cancer, and tuberculosis”.

“Don’t forget the emphysema and the kidneys”, he added.

“You smoke how many packs of cigarettes a day?”

“I cut down to two packs of ready-rolls a day”.

“Pop, with all that wrong with you, I wouldn’t worry about the ninja”. He seemed satisfied with that answer, and scuttled away.

Time went by. Brian’s gone. Roscoe’s gone. Bible Willie’s gone. Mama Herc’s gone. Pop Blakely is long gone. I’m still here.

I watched those poor people in New Orleans after Katrina hit, wading chest-deep and neck-deep through toxic flood waters, pushing their meager belongings in a garbage bag ahead of them, pushing their grandma on a mattress, dead animals floating by, the city turned into a massive sewer.

Prison is also a sewer. To survive prison you must wade carefully through the sewage, sometimes it’s waist-deep, sometimes it’s neck-deep, sometimes it’s over your head. You have to slowly navigate through the rats and vermin and turds swimming and floating along with you. You are immersed in it, but if you’re determined you can keep your mouth and nose and eyes above it, don’t let it get inside you, bide your time, and when you get to the other side you can cast off your filthy clothes, wash and clean and dry yourself, and leave the stink of the prison sewer behind.

Some don’t. Some dive headfirst into the waters of the prison sewer, they inhale deeply, take it all in, become a part of it. And they die. Some live, but are irrevocably changed.

As for myself, I stand in front of my shower with my spray bottle filled with bleach, making sure I cover the walls and floor and especially the drains, serving my life sentence, wondering if I will ever go home.



* “Mama Herc”, photo by Charles Norman (1985).¹

ENDNOTES

- ¹ I took the photo shortly before Mama Herc’s release from prison. I was in charge of the “Jaycee Photo Project” at Zephyrhills Correctional Institution, and took 35 mm photos on weekends for \$1.50, two copies. Herc was getting out soon, and I told him, “Why don’t I take a photo, Herc? After you’re gone, people won’t know what you really looked like”. He said he’d like to, but he had no money. I agreed to pay for the photo, give him one copy and keep the other for the “historical record”. It was a real scene, Herc’s photo. Must have been a hundred prisoners watching out of camera range. Herc was very nervous. The last photo taken of him had been the one taken at the Lake Butler prison reception center so many years before, the day he came to prison. He adjusted his “doo rag” and his beads, finally just flexed his muscles and I snapped the photo. He was so proud of it, and I’m so glad I took it. When I first met Mama Herc at Raiford in 1980, the original setting for “Fighting The Ninja”, he was perhaps 40 pounds heavier and solid muscle. In between 1980 and 1985, Herc spent 18 months at the Brooksville Road Prison working from daylight to dark on the road crews which burned him down to 240 pounds or so – a shadow of his former self. He was still incredibly strong. Mama Herc was released shortly after the photo was taken and went to St. Petersburg, Florida. The ‘prison grapevine’ reported that he didn’t last long on the outside and was killed within a year or so of release. Mama Herc, whose real name was Alphonie Smith, a true chain gang legend, lives on in countless apocryphal stories of his prison exploits.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles Norman has been in Florida prisons for more than 30 years. His poems, short stories, essays and memoirs have received numerous national writing awards ever since he won awards from Mensa and PEN in 1986.

In 2009, he won the Outstanding Achievement Award, given infrequently by the PWP. “Fighting the Ninja” took first place in the memoir category in 2008. He continues his fight for freedom in a high-tech world that has changed greatly, writing a blog (see <http://charlienorman.blogspot.com>), embracing Facebook, and sending emails and communiqués from prison. Friends maintain his website, www.freecharlienow.com.