On that warm night in July, you lift yourself up to the railing of the overpass above the Los Angeles River. In the distance you can hear the cars moving along the Hollywood Freeway, and beyond it you see the glow of the city lights. I want to believe that as you fall you feel nothing more than the wind rushing up against your face. There is no pain. No impact. In my dreams you are suspended in midair.

You were 44 years old the night you stormed out of the house in the heat of another fight with your husband and ended your lifelong battle with drugs and alcohol. That it happened in July, the month our brother lost this same battle years before, was no coincidence. You had never been able to reconcile Barry’s death; the sadness only deepened over time.

I know that there were other roots and causes for your illness, our brother’s and my own, and that the symptoms came earlier, in childhood. That need for stability. That need to belong. We were just kids when our mother got out of prison and moved us to Los Angeles from San Jose. I could never understand why our father let us go, because our mother wasn’t mentally stable, and the years we spent in L.A. were dangerous ones. We had little supervision, no hard and fast curfews. At 8, I had my own apartment key and came and went as I pleased.

Barry was determined to become a successful actor, and he did, eventually starring in "Bad Company," with Jeff Bridges, and "Daisy Miller," with Cybill Shepherd. But also around this time, his drinking escalated, when he couldn’t get up in the morning without a half-pint to steady his trembling hands. By 27, his once handsome face was severely bloated, the whites of his eyes were yellowed and across his nose spread a threadlike pattern of broken blood vessels. The condition is called spider angioma; I know because I developed it, too. I know because I’ve read dozens of books on alcoholism and drug addiction, though no amount of knowledge ever helped me stop.

At 14 I was already drinking and using. The first time I shot heroin a friend and I had just burglarized an office building. We fenced the goods in Watts and then drove up to Griffith Park. Along a quiet mountain road, my friend tore a strip from an old beach towel and tied it around my arm in the car. "Make a fist," he said. The sun was setting over the city, a thin layer of smog hung in the sky and the colors, refracted through the fading light, were remarkable. Pinks. Yellows.
Shades of purple and brown. "Hold still," he said, and then I felt it, the needle, like the sting of a mosquito. It was as if I were sinking into myself, and for a moment, instead of feeling pleasure, I panicked, because I didn't know where or how far it was taking me. But then it leveled out, and I found myself in a fine place somewhere between consciousness and a dream.

That summer I left L.A. to live with our father again. At the time I was afraid of what I was becoming, but I didn't realize that this choice would one day help me overcome my addiction. He was a building contractor, and he taught me how to roof a house and pound a nail straight and true. Each day we worked long hours. At home he expected me to pick up after myself, to help with the dishes and laundry. If I went out, I had to be back by a certain hour.

We lived in a rented house on the poor side of town, and until we could afford another bed, I slept with our father. At night he told me stories about growing up in the backwoods of Oregon and how he used to hunt for deer and fish for salmon. He told me about the years he worked for the Southern Pacific Railroad and laid track through terrain that until then no white man had ever seen. He told me about the Cherokee and taught me to count to 10 in their language. He had a talent for detail, and as he described the rivers, the salmon leaping out of the water, the sun glinting off their backs, I was there with him. I lived in his stories as I would someday live in my own.

Now it is your story and our brother's that I am thinking about. In my dreams I am beside you on that overpass above the L.A. River. In my dreams I am beside our brother when he pulls the trigger of a .38 Smith & Wesson, the barrel in his mouth. I reach for your hand. I reach for his. You look at me and smile. Then you let go, as Barry lets go, and I watch you fall, again and again, as I will watch the image of our brother recoiling from the blast. There is no more pain. No impact. In my dreams you are suspended in midair, the wind rushing around you, captured in flight. And finally I see myself, at 14, in bed beside our father, the room still and dark. That kid who shoots heroin, robs and steals, is getting drowsy, his father's voice slowly fading, and when I wake up 30 years later as a middle-aged man, sober, alive, I realize that this brief time I spent with our father has much to do with why I am still here and you and our brother are not.

Drawing (Drawing by Bob Hambly)