I had to learn of this world by force. Nobody could convey to me the strange nature of the world which I would inherit. But, at the age of six, the character and attitude of this world was beaten into my skull—literally. Falling 50 feet (or at least it seemed that far) onto pure concrete was something I did of my own volition. No one helped me on this one. While an event like this can only be painfully written, it does, or it did, reveal who I am today.

It was a warm fall day; birds in the air, leaves on the ground, and little kids all in-between. In homeroom I saw the same old kids with their same old clothes, the same old hair, the same old faces, the same old attitudes. I saw the girls already preparing for the life of the glamour model—always combing each other's hair and excluding everyone else. I saw the clever bullies, too—the kids who beat you up when it was recess but acted like innocent little darlings around the teacher. The rest consisted of boys and girls who, twenty-four hours a day, dreamed of firefighters or ballerinas. I really didn't fit anywhere. I told my parents, "I'm going to be an angel when I grow up," and I modeled myself around the ideal of an angel, if that's possible. I took all my studies very seriously and I rarely let myself daydream, because that's not what angels do. I listened attentively in church and I loved to read about all the different heavenly spirits. And the teachers loved my attitude, even encouraged it. That is how my teachers always described me in my report cards:

"Oh, Mark is just an angel. I'm so pleased with him."
I also dressed sort of like one-- white shirt and dark pants, like those undercover angels on the T.V. shows. And my school thought of me so much as one that I got to play Angel Gabriel in the school pageant a few years later, full with white robe and golden wings. But the wings didn't work in the play, and they didn't work that warm fall day either. I was more tied down to this world than I expected.

I think our school was structured more on Catholicism than the bricks. This building, or, better yet, this castle, was a school, a convent for the Sisters of Mercy, and a church. It created a looming outward view with its cold gothic architecture, medieval sculpture, and stained glass Saints with warm or cold eyes (depending upon who you were and what you were doing) that followed you everywhere. Inside, the corridors were filled with emptiness. At one end lied the school, and as nice as the teachers were, it was still hell for us students. At the opposite end stood the church. And in-between, lining the corridor, sat the Sisters and their rooms-- people to help us on our spiritual voyage through the hallway. The Sisters were our teachers, and they often took us to the church for choir practice. All eight grades (actually, they were called 'levels' at the time, the school being 'Non-graded') composed the chorus, so that no one would feel excluded. Most of the time we spent filling the old church with praise for God. Other times we used it for graduation, and for all the sacraments that pertain to young students, save one. For confession, the priests preferred the sacristies so that we could carry out our penances in the church, in the presence of God and the Saints. In this way, the little rooms became the mundane abodes of St. Peter.

"Good Morning my son," said the priest.

"Good Morning Father." I replied.

"How are you today?"
"Fine, thank you."

"Good. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit"

"Amen."

And with those words and those hand gestures we began the ceremony of spilling my guts to God. The priest said a few words, prayers to God-- the same words he had spoken to the thirty people in line in front of me. He then asked me for my sins. I accomplished this task with only the greatest difficulty. Angels didn't have sins, but I do remember doing at least a few things that I shouldn't. So I gave him and Him two or three sins and then stopped. I expected that he would ask God for my absolution. But instead he said nothing, giving me one of those looks saying "that's it? That's all you're going to tell me? Come, now, I know you've got more." But I kept quiet. I thought I had said everything. I was either very holy or very forgetful.

Recess is one of the most looked-forward-to periods of the day for any youngster. It is a chance to escape school and religion. But I really didn't change my personality that much. While the other kids were playing doctor or princess, I played angel. I was still the angel-like boy when racing, or wrestling, or playing tag. I was just a very nice, very shy boy who played along with everyone else. My favorite activity, though, was to climb the monkey bars. I always tried to stand up on top. Angels were supposed to be close to God, and that was the closest spot to Heaven in the whole play-yard. My teachers never discouraged me from this, but the recess official always watched nearby:

"Now you be careful, Mark, and watch what you're doing."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"All right. Go ahead and play."
I think she might have given me too much freedom. She wanted to make me happy. I trusted that she would always be there for me, if I stumbled. I failed to ever look down. Below me was the hard concrete foundation, the support for these iron bars that we had always used as props for a prison. And once, while I was hovering up there like an angel, I tripped. I fell, without the holy wings to support me. And my head bounced as I hit the concrete, apparently a loud enough THUD to alert the teacher.

"Oh my gosh! Mark! Uh, um, um, Oh! Are you all right? Oh!"

She was in hysterics for a little while. I said nothing, for I did not see the need to be alarmed—namely, the stream of blood flowing from my head. The teacher saw it, though:

"Mark, unbutton your shirt and put it right there on top of your head, won't you?"

"Okay."

By the time I got to the top of the long, steep, green hill, I saw that my white shirt was pure red. At the top, though, stood the stain-glassed windows of the church, which bared a strange resemblance to my stained shirt. God had not forsaken me.

They called my dad, and he came as soon as possible. Until he arrived, the teachers left me alone. I guess I frightened them away. Maybe because my whole head was stained and I was still calm and composed. Maybe because they didn't know what to say. Maybe because they were worried about how this would affect me, and if I would return the next day without permanent injury. They also could have been worried about themselves, about getting diseases and dying. My dad wasn't frightened, however.

"How are you feeling, son?" he asked.

"Fine."
"Does your head hurt?"

"A little."

"Here, let me see."

I managed to grit my teeth and hold the pain inside until the last of the spectators/teachers left the hallway. Then I began to cry. Not from the pain that my dad created by examining my scalp. Not from the collision either, nor from the blood that now clotted my hair. I really didn't know why I cried. But I do know that the firemen and policemen were looking much better as career opportunities after that day.

To this day I cannot remember the details after that. My parents informed me that I was taken to Convenient Care, where they examined my head.

"Are you okay?" he asked me.

I nodded.

"It's nothing serious," he told my dad, as he placed a large butterfly bandage on my skull.

"You don't have to worry about anything. You can go back and play tomorrow, just be more careful next time. Okay? Okay. Here's some candy for you. Thanks for coming in, Mr. Burish."

And that simple lolli-pop cured me. The outer layers of my head fixed themselves pretty quickly. I didn't even miss any school. I would like to think that I was still reaching for God on those monkey bars the next day, but I doubt it.

I take this world a little too seriously. "Be Careful," they all tell me. So I am always sure where down is. "Be careful" is a phrase that has come to mean the Cherubim, the real angels, and their flaming swords.