

## Medical Marijuana and the Brothers Grim

We either start off on the wrong foot or we stick that foot in the mouth. About eight months earlier I had driven down to South Gate, my old stomping grounds, as a surprise visit. For some time, I had felt a son's guilt, living only a dozen miles away, yet rarely dropping by to see his mother. This lack of motivation is due in part to the dreary suburb of Los Angeles where my mom and her soap operas have counted out the days of their lives. Akin to the soulless prefab city of Phoenix, South Gate is perhaps one of the most uninspiring places on earth. Except for the uniquely styled houses from the 1930s and 40s, which gives South Gate a slightly more charming appearance, industry and strip malls govern the human spirit. Furthermore, the drive is made long and tedious by the dense volume of cars and semis, bumper to choking bumper, down rivers of multi-level freeways and their tributaries, which irrigate the interminable concrete landscape. Coated layer upon layer along the cinderblock walls, dividers, and overpasses, the graffiti seems to lift off the surface in relief, as thick as rabbit fur. Sprinkled here and there, in the most unexpected and inaccessible niches, the word LEST pops up like a bunny's ear from the surrounding furry blur of indecipherable hieroglyphs. Lest we forget.

Most of the signage in South Gate has undergone a linguistic manicure. Once, a uniformity of English dominated the visual cortex. Now, the shop signs and commercial advertising are mostly in Spanish, many of them hand painted. I pulled into the carport, and rang the doorbell at my mom's house. The place where I grew up after we moved to California from Canada. The house where my brother was born. I could smell the caldo verde and chicken fricassee and crispy homemade fries as I approached the front porch. That meant my mom was in the kitchen cooking. The aromas set off a whole bouquet of memories. Proust had his French madeleine, but I had my Portuguese fries. And who should answer the battered old door but my brother Vasco, as happy as an escaped convict, grinning from ear to ear in his glee to see me.

"Hey bro, long time, what are you doing here, stranger?"

"I thought I'd kill two birds and get to see both of you. Mom said you had moved back in, so I came over for a visit."

"Yeah, but it's just temporary. Til I get back on my feet. I'm glad to see you, dude. Hey, mom has been bitching that you never visit or call her. What's up with that? Even I have a better track record. At least I call her regular."

"Yeah, when you need money."

"Hey man, don't even go there," Vasco said, laughing, "I'm the one who has been working gigs since I was 10 years old, remember? I always pay my own way, dude. And look who's talking? Who's the guy who can't seem to make a living and has to lean on someone else? Besides, I've lent Mom money in the past. I'm short these days."

"Okay," I said, taken aback by Vasco's blunt self-confidence. You just couldn't knock my brother over. "I suppose you have a point and I should keep my big accusatory mouth shut."

“Ah, don’t worry about it,” he said, turning around, “you are who you are.” He walked toward the couch with a slight limp, as he adjusted his prosthetic. “Hey come sit next to me and talk a bit while Mom makes dinner. I’m sharpening and polishing my blades.”

Vasco had a large collection of knives displayed on the coffee table. Even as a child his fascination for sharp shiny implements was a driving force. He had started his collection in part because he had a keen eye combined with a streak of odd luck. Wherever we went, Vasco was always finding pocketknives, penknives, fishing knives, Buck knives, Bowie knives, Baker knives and every kind of blade imaginable. He would spot one lying in the gutter, or on a park lawn, or half-buried on a sandy beach, or even stuck to the trunk of a tree at the center of a carved heart, left there forgotten, no doubt, by some love-struck tagger. As time went on Vasco would continue to stumble onto more knives like a trail of crumbs marking the path to his future.

“How’s Jennifer?” he said in an upbeat voice. “She still worried about money?”

“Not for now, at least. She just landed another post-production job and it pays outrageously well.”

“Give her a big squeeze for me.”

“I sure will. I’m glad you guys are getting along better these days. You both started off on the wrong foot.”

“Yeah, well that foot’s gone now.” We laughed, but I got a pang of remorse in the pit of my stomach. “Sit down bro, you’re making me tired having to look up at you.” He ground the knife blade against the sharpener like a pro. My pro bro. I sat down beside him. “Your woman.” he said, “doesn’t realize that the chip on her shoulder is as big as the chip on mine. Anyway, that’s all in the past. I was a cocky bastard, Jenny was self-righteous, and you were an incompetent mediator, walking around on the eggshells Jennifer and I dropped between us. You’re way to mousey, brother, like Mom. You need a little more of dad’s belligerence to get you safely through life.”

“Magalhinho!” my mom suddenly exclaimed, walking into the living room from the kitchen, surprised to see me. Magalhinho is a diminutive for ‘little Magellan’ or literally ‘little Mags.’ “Que surpresa! Pensei que immigraste para outro país” she said, sarcastically, but in a warm, humorous tone of voice.

“Go on, dude, give Mom a hug, she’s aching for it,” the bossy Vasco pontificated.

I wrapped my arms around my mom and held her close for a long moment. This always leaves her radiant. She said that dinner was served, that she would add an extra plate for me and that she would also pack up a small to-go dinner for Jennifer, who loves my mom’s cooking. Everything was delicious as usual. The caldo verde, made from thinly diced kale fresh from her garden, was divinely earthy and nutritious. The chicken fricassee was a perfect blend of lightly sautéed chicken with onions, garlic,

carrots and peas. But most importantly was the memory food: Portuguese fries – as always, crispy, sublime, and addictive. It was cozy and nurturing like old times and we were all happy to be hanging out.

After dinner we retired to the large rec room at the back of the house. Vasco pulled off his prosthetic and jumped in the tub for a quick shower. He usually took three or four lavish showers a day, having always been in love, since childhood, with the sensuality of water. While waiting, my mom and I chatted about her relatives in Portugal and possible dates for her next visit to see her mother and sister. A towel wrapped around his waist, Vasco hopped out of the bathroom on one leg, no cane or crutch to support him, and sat on the couch next to me. He dried his long corkscrew hair with a second towel. Beginning at his scalp and slowly working down the length of curls, he scrubbed and hummed ‘An Octopus’s Garden’ under his breath. Then he reached down beside the coffee table and pulled up what looked like a first aid kit filled with paraphernalia related to his artificial leg. Diligently and snugly, he wrapped white gauze tape around his thigh from the hip down to the tip of the femur; where the flesh had been pulled over and stitched tight and the scar had healed like invisible mending and the base was as smooth and round as a baby’s bottom; where the knee, the lower leg and the foot still held a phantom presence. He shot me a child’s smile and said, “I treat my stump like a little baby. These are its swaddling clothes. Very comforting.” A lump of sadness that had been stuck in my throat suddenly dislodged and dropped through my abdomen into my left leg where it throbbed in sympathy for my brother’s pain. Next, Vasco slipped on a rubber stocking as if he were caressing panty hose over his thigh. I asked what it was for. He told me it prevented his stump from sliding around inside the hollow chamber of the C-leg (a microprocessor-controlled knee prosthesis). The stocking would grip the inner walls and the screw at its bottom would snap at the knee joint to a locking device, which would secure it in place. He stood up, inserted his thigh into the chamber, shifted his weight and docked that sad stump like a pirate ship entering the harbor. I heard it snap and lock. “Ah, hum,” Vasco exhaled, “that feels much better.”

He leaned back on the old leather sofa. My mom had wanted to throw it out a while ago and buy a new couch, but Vasco insisted on keeping it for sentimental reasons. He had smoked his first joint and kissed his first girl while chilling on that soft leather. Now he stretched out his one leg, sunk further into the sofa and relaxed. But not for long. Vasco, like our dad, couldn’t sit still. An incurable wanderlust caused them both to fidget and rummage through things, burning up calories and nervous energy for miles out of each day. He walked over to a set of free weights, picked up two dumbbells, 25 pounds each, and curled a round of 50 for each arm. Then he set the weights back down on the bench, raised the palm of his hand toward his head and gave each of his facial cheeks a good smack, hard and loud.

“Aow! What did you do that for?” I screeched, feeling his pain again.

“I work every part of my body so I’m rock solid and unshakable. If I ever get in a fight and somebody punches me in the face, I’ll be toughened up enough to take the blow. I like to be prepared. I don’t want to lose stamina and focus when I duke it out, especially now that my balance is off with only one remaining leg.”

“Is the payoff worth it, Vasco? I mean...ouch, smacking yourself in the face? Doesn’t that approach really hurt?”

“Nah, I’m used to it. My buddies and me would smack each other around all the time. Once, I was at the bank with Sleaze. We were standing in line waiting for hell to freeze over with only two tellers and 20 customers, when out of the blue Sleaze whacked me hard on the cheekbone. I said, ‘What the fck’ and whacked him right back. Then he took another swipe and hit me on the jawbone. So I swung again and collided with his chin. We kept up this grisly ping pong match til our heads bobbed around like two jellyfish.” Vasco demonstrated comically by giving his head a gelatinous roll. With all those long curly tentacles of hair, his head really did look like a jellyfish bobbing on a wave. “Every person in line was horrified by our theatrics, but I’ll bet it was the most entertainment they ever got at the bank.”

Vasco walked back to the couch in measured strides and perfect locomotion. If I didn’t know he was an amputee, I would never have guessed he was wearing a prosthetic. Reaching under the coffee table, he pulled out and unscrewed a small jar of medical marijuana, jammed one of his knives into its depths, lifted the heavily loaded blade into the light to inspect it and licked off the sticky goo like a honey bear. Turning to me with his rapacious grin, he offered me some. I declined.

“Bro, you have got to get over your fear of pot. I can’t believe you’re such a scared little girl around herb. Come on, you of all people, who have dosed on LSD, DMT, Magic Mushrooms? Those are all heavy hitters. And you can’t handle a little harmless weed?”

I’m one of those three percent of the population for whom pot is an anxiety inducer, not reducer. I get paranoid in abnormally odd ways that make it difficult for my friends to be around me. The universe becomes a hostile environment where everything in it is predatory and I’m the only available food source.

“Chill out, you’re hanging with Mom and me,” Vasco said, always challenging his older brother’s wishes, even as a child. “This is government issued medical marijuana, dude, do you realize how weak this shit is? It’s for old ladies and their cataracts! Here, I’ll just give you half a teaspoon, just enough to leave you with a slight buzz.”

What could I do, but give in to him? Something I always did. That’s why Vasco was such a brat and a bully – he had always gotten his way because we had always acquiesced in his every whim. He reloaded the knife blade and handed it to me.

“Careful, I just sharpened it,” Vasco said, laughing. I must have swallowed the prescribed dose with a stoic and dour expression because Vasco busted up, handing me a mint. “Here dude, have a lemon drop, it’ll help the medicine go down. It also helps with cotton mouth.”

For a long while I sat in anticipation of the usually paranoid effects this drug induces on my nervous system; but chilling in such a comfy situation, I soon forgot about it. Vasco had my mom and me in stitches with his crazy stories. I asked if he had ever tried the salvia divinorum I had given him a while back and what he thought about it. Salvia is used by the Shamans of Huautla Mexico. The indigenous peoples of this region chew the leaves of the “diviner’s mint” (a relative of the mint family) for a slow 45 minute meditative high that is usually pleasant and self-reflective. But the rest of the thrill seekers in the western world smoke the extracted compound (usually soaked in Salvia leaves), exaggerating the experience about 10,000 times in potency. The active ingredient is salvinorin A, a powerful hallucinogen and dissociative unlike LSD, DMT, psilocybin or mescaline because it has no nitrogen atoms, so it is not an alkaloid (making it difficult to schedule under the current laws). It is still legal in the USA and most of the world. No one knows how it works. It seems to compartmentalize in one part of the brain affecting depth perception but not...uh, width perception, if there is such a thing. In other words, it deflates the universe, similar to the world as described in the book *Flatland*, where only two dimensions exist. Immediately after smoking the first hit from a salvia bong, consciousness mutates onto a single surface where people have recounted the terrifying sensation of becoming paint on a wall or linoleum on the floor. Salvia divinorum is similar to DMT in duration – lasting about 10 to 15 minutes – but from inside the experience this seemingly short time frame feels for many users like they are trapped in this flattened space for eternity and are often traumatized by the idea that there is no way to get back to their familiar three dimensional reality.

“Yeah, bro, what a trip. I smoked out with a friend late one night in some dark parking lot in downtown L.A. No sooner had I taken a huge hit of Salvia from the bong than a security guard walks up and tells me I have to move my car. What a shocker. If you think pot is intense, try to find your keys and start the car, high on salvia.”

“Oh my God,” I said astounded, “you actually drove on salvia? Holy shit. And downtown? After midnight? You’re either a brave hombre or a suicidal maniac.”

“Tell me about it, bro. Driving on salvia felt like I was gagged and locked up in a bank vault trying to explain to someone on the other side how to sign and cash my check. Then my buddy starts to come on. The first thing he does is grab my arm like a silly girl and scream, ‘What’d you do to me bro...what’d you do to me? I’m a bumper sticker...I’m a bumper sticker! No. NO! I’ve been tagged. Peel me off bro...Peel me off!’”

My mom and I practically peed our pants laughing. It was then that the room began to look strange and hostile. More precisely, as the THC tinkered with my brain circuitry, my judgment, my reason, my interpretation of reality, I realized that no place in the universe could ever be that different from downtown L.A. in the midnight hour. Isn't everything, after all, potentially hostile? Every item in the room looked familiar, yet was now wrapped in the invisible film of something sinister. All around me, the objects of Vasco's world imposed their menace: skulls and knives and bones and teeth and ritual masks from our trips to the Amazon and Peru. Vasco had some death metal music playing in the background and on the wall in front of me a large floor-to-ceiling poster displayed the Sex Pistols in all their punk fury at the height of their glory. Johnny Rotten sneered with rat yellow teeth while Sid Vicious flipped me off. I thought of my Junior High buddies razzing me while I was stoned, 'You're going straight to Hell, dude!' Suddenly I wanted to bolt out of there. I got up to leave.

"Hey, hey, hold on bro. Where you going? Sit down."

"Uh, I'm starting to feel a little strange."

"Well, that's a good thing, Mags. It means the medicine is working. Now sit down and enjoy it."

Vasco's commanding voice struck me with a mesmerist's authority. I sat down. I began to worry suddenly that someone might break in. The neighborhood had changed over the years. When I grew up here it was all blond, blue-eyed surfer kids descended from the Dust Bowl immigrants who came to South Gate in the 1930s to work at the Firestone plant. But by the late 70s and early 80s it was white flight by droves into Orange County. The deserted lands soon filled up with Hispanic families. My parents stayed. And even though all my friends, who had moved on as well, thought it depressing to revisit the *new* South Gate because of all the gangs, I didn't experience this. Unlike the surrounding freeways, I saw very little graffiti here and all the homes were nicely painted and the yards sweetly manicured by working class families raising kids. But now I was coming on and my unconscious dug up the worst scenarios.

"How well do you know the neighbors?" I said dryly, with my cottonmouth.

Vasco's laugh filled the room and I could hear it echoing through the neighborhood. "Dude, you're not paranoid are you? Relax. You're here with Mom and me. I know the neighbors really well. They're good people. I've done lots of favors for them. And they watch Mom's back. If anyone so much as steps into her backyard, the dogs start barking and the guns come out waving and pointing."

"Great, just what I needed to hear right now," I said, not trying to be ironic but earnest and uncomfortable.

Feeling this, Vasco laughed sympathetically. "I'm exaggerating, of course – about the dogs, ha...No, serious, get real Mags. Have you ever heard any guns going off around here? You're safer in this 'hood than you'd be at some chi-chi gallery on

your home turf. At least here, at Mom's, you'll never be assaulted by bad art. Poor taste can be deadly. And if you were to pay Mom a visit more often and hang with the neighbors, you'd know this. And I'll tell you another thing, bro. You need to get stoned more often. Your paranoia happens each time because you smoke it once in a coon's age."

Quite unexpectedly, I saw a raccoon peaking in through the window. Its large black and white eyes fixed their gaze on my startled ass. In a large number of communities around L.A. these critters have started appearing more frequently. Driven out of the wild by overdevelopment, raccoons are incredibly agile survivors, forced to adapt to modern life like the rest of us. The pure coincidence of seeing a raccoon at the very instance of Vasco's pronouncing that archaic slang phrase 'in a coon's age,' sent a chill up my spine.

"I get a little weird too, the first time I get high, after not smoking herb in a while," Vasco said, again empathetically. "It might also help if you can find a certain strain with a ratio higher in CBDs and lower in the anxiety-producing cannabinoids like THC."

"Really! You're serious?"

"Yeah man, I memorized that quote straight from *High Times*. You don't know about CBDs? I'm surprised. An educated guy like you. Read up on it. I'm just an ignorant guy. You're the bookworm."

"Why put yourself down, Vasco. You're anything but ignorant."

"It's not a putdown. I know myself well enough, dude. I know my strengths and weaknesses. There's situations where I have the upper hand and there's subjects you can handle better. I know the difference. As your buddy Freud says, 'Sometimes a spade is just a spade.'"

I didn't laugh at Vasco's malapropism in calling the cigar a spade, but I did calm down. Pot turns everything serious for me – all laughter and irony are usurped by "fearful symmetry" and I am always out of sync with Jehovah's "forests of the night" where he "twists the sinews of *my* heart" in sadistic pleasure. But my brother's voice had added an Olympian authority that overrode the chemistry of the drug and my Catholic upbringing.

The Sex Pistols now looked less menacing. Benign really. Shock value is as fleeting as an orgasm. When The Beatles first appeared on the "Ed Sullivan Show," my parents' reaction was to exclaim, "No, that can't be their own hair! They must be wearing wigs." Then came the real bad boys – the Rolling Stones and the Animals. The Beatles were soon reduced to cute little phallic dolls for girls. Then came Cream, Led Zeppelin, David Bowie, The Ramones, Patti Smith, the Clash, every new band upstaging the other in shock deployment—only to sell out, in the end, for soda and car commercial ads. Johnny Rotten said at the time, "We're the last rock and roll band." And he was right. Nothing in the counter culture has ever been as shocking since the

punkers. Not even close. Marilyn Manson, you say? Or the Burning Man scene, you might rave? Nope, just pabulum for the masses. Disneyland stuff. Years later, hanging from the wall in my mother's house, as if it were a stained-glass window, the Sex Pistols, with their razor blade earrings and adorable expressions, suddenly transformed into cute little cherubs, young and pretty icons that a grandma would buy in some rock 'n roll souvenir shop to take home to her grandkids.

I don't know how much time had passed, but next thing I knew, I was staring at all the new knives Vasco had laid out one by one on the rec room coffee table and in my stoned head I had covered the length of human existence related to the history of knives. What did the first knife look like? Was it a sliver of wood? A shard of shiny, black obsidian? How many barrels of blood were drawn from all those sharpened edges—the knife as hunting tool, the knife as weapon: the sword, the saber, the scimitar, the foil, the bayonet, the dagger, the switch blade, the shank. I could feel my blood draining from every vein simultaneously. Then, again, I caught a glimpse of the raccoon staring unabashedly through the window among the countless shadows ('a population of black demons and black wolves').

"Son of a bitch, there's that damn coon again," Vasco swore, picking up a machete and running out the back door into the yard. "God damn it, the thing keeps fcking with Mom's garbage cans. Trash all over hell that I have to pick up. Motherfckr!"

"Vasco," my mom demanded, "don't say such bad words! God will punish you. *Meu Deus, que rapas tao malcriado.*"

I listened to the raccoon hissing and Vasco snarling back at it in a Mexican standoff. Then I heard the creature screech; then a thump; then something running off into the night in pain. Vasco walked back in the house wearing a raccoon's satisfied grin. My mom and I were mortified. "What happened, *que passo?*?" we said in chorus.

"The fckr tried to swipe at me with those long gnarly claws. There was no way I could outmatch its speed and it wasn't gonna back down, so I unzipped my pants and pissed on it. Man, you should've seen its eyes blink and squint. I'll bet that was the last thing it was expecting from a human. I'm telling you, it cussed me out...swore like a sailor before it bolted. Mom, you ought to get on the coon's case about that."

She was laughing so hard she had to run to the bathroom before it all unraveled. When she came back she sat in the corner demurely, at a distance from Vasco and me, listening to our conversation. My mom loves a good party. And as most girls will reliably demonstrate, my mom is as bouncy as an olive in a martini glass, when she's being entertained. But for my village-bred mother her participation has always taken place from the sidelines like a fly on the wall.

"What are you doing, Mom?" Vasco snapped in his commanding tone. "Don't sit in the corner like a stranger. Come over here and sit next to us."

"Nao, esto bem aqui."



"No you're not, that's ridiculous, Mom. Why should you sit in the corner like that? You're not at the neighbors. This is your house. So make yourself at home. You're sitting with us. Here, I want you in this chair." Vasco threw some pillows onto an old recliner where my father used to sit watching TV every evening.

But Mom stayed put. I noticed her body movements, curled up on herself, her arms crossed, the fingers of one hand busy picking at her cuticles, while she nervously bit the nails of the other hand. I knew these habits well. I had inherited them, yet had worked quite hard as an adult to break the pattern through my studies of the Alexander Technique and the Feldenkrais Method (two approaches for gaining greater body awareness). My mom, tensely glued to her Soaps, hadn't had the same opportunities and had no recourse but to pop bubblewrap all day as a deterrent. I noticed how many of her shy, anxious habits I had unconsciously picked up and how as a teenager these effeminate gestures got lots of laughs from the macho guys in high school, where even the girls thought I was gay. At the time, I didn't care. I was being true to my nature. Eventually, though, I decided to rid myself of these useless habits, not because some insecure suburban juveniles thought me a sissy, but because the fidgeting drained away at my energy. Meditation and Buddhist practice had also helped calm me down considerably. But try teaching Buddhism to an old Catholic mother set in her village ways. The medicine kicked in with a strong new wave of insight. Suddenly, in this peculiar frame of mind, it struck me like a lightening bolt hitting a church steeple that the village mindset had left its imprint so deeply on my mother because the tradition was thousands of years old. My Mom couldn't move from her spot at the back of the house because she had been conditioned like so many women before her to regard herself as inferior to the men who ran the world *carte blanche*. This sad state of womanhood had not always been the case. The women of ancient Greece, for instance, were much like the modern women of the twenty-first century. Relatively speaking. They couldn't vote, but they shared many other privileges with their male dominated society, could walk around topless under that hot mediterranean sun, could engage freely in conversation with men at parties, unescorted. Sex had no charge. None of that Puritanical silliness set in motion by Jehovah and the adopted religion of desert sheep herders. But then the Greeks went to war with the Persians for half a century. When these Spartan and Aegean men returned from the Middle East, they *rethink* their own wholesome way of life to reflect that of the Mesopotamian cultures whom they had fought and beaten. Hum, you confine the women to the back of the house, stick a veil over their faces and tell them to shut the hell(enic) up and not speak until they are spoken to. This struck these Hellenic warriors as not such a bad idea. But who were they kidding? They dared to call themselves Spartans? What a bunch of pussies. Obviously they couldn't deal with a strong woman. Adopting these drastic measures was not a great way to get laid. Not surprisingly, it didn't go over well and the fashion just as quickly disappeared. Although copy-cats of everything Greek, Rome never adopted that Persian custom. Even though the Romans treated their women like second class citizens, they never considered covering up the

female form. The Romans wanted their women as naked as possible. Sex for the Romans was like picking your teeth or farting. But 800 years of Moorish rule and the Ottoman Empire left its cruel mark on European society's treatment of women. Up until World War II, women couldn't go anywhere unaccompanied by a male chaperon. My mom couldn't attend parties or dances or weekend picnics in the countryside. Her father had kept her under house arrest, as if she were some cruel dragon's prisoner locked in the castle tower, until she became the shrunken violet. My body must have responded to her physically restricted past through a warm mirror of empathy. This shy, retiring posture, transferred a long time ago from mother to son like nuturing milk, was my way of bonding with her. But it has held me back, preventing worldly success. And just as my mother has sat in the corner unable to move forward – I have stayed put as well.

I found myself staring at Vasco's knives again. My brother caught the strange expression on my face as I scanned the variety of lethal edges. Growing up, he had always been extremely sensitive and aware of my changing moods. When it came to his older brother, Vasco struggled between respect and disdain. He looked up to me and poked fun at me. He developed both love and frustration for me. Protected me, defended me, praised me. Rejected me, offended me, razed me. He applied this behavior to the whole family as well as to the outside world, so I never took it personally. For some odd reason obsequious agents always surrounded Vasco, catering to his every whim with well-meaning but spoiling servility. No one provided him any boundaries and this irritated him. Once, when he was five, I took him to the beach. He was Tom Sawyer with all his little playmates, a whole gang of toeheads at his beck and call running about building his gigantic sandcastle, ornate with seashells, and as baroque as Louis the XIV's palace. Very impressive. When I went to fetch him to go home he insisted on 15 extra minutes. I gave him a half hour. When I returned, Vasco was on his knees, facing away from me, scrupulously constructing the final turret. I stood behind him quietly observing his work; my long shadow loomed over him. Without turning around he said, "Mags, go sit down by the water and read your book, I'll call you when I'm ready." And I did exactly what he told me. The family colluded in creating the little monster. But on this particular night, relaxing so joyfully at our mother's place, entertained by raccoons and evening shadows, Vasco's generous spirit sensed my vulnerable state and came to the rescue.

"What's up, bro?" he said kindly.

"Wow. How different you and I are, Vasco. I just realized that I'm actually scared of knives. Well sure, I mean...I can handle a kitchen knife with ease. I don't ever flinch around household utensils. But pocket knives and weapon-style street blades leave me queasy." Especially if I'm high, a superstitious feeling of impending disaster comes over me when I see something sharp...and the very presence of knives amplifies my altered state into downright terror.

“Remember, bro, that Tibetan healing event you took me to? At UCLA? I loved those Buddhist homies in their cool orange and yellow robes, all happy and shit.”

“Yeah I remember. I enjoyed taking you to that performance. You were still a young teenager. Sixteen?”

“I was fourteen. And I’ll never forget those monk dudes and their deep throats. The raunchy healing chants came up from their guts and sounded like they were grinding rocks with a power drill. It made me cough up all my sins. I had to leave the auditorium for a while to clear my own throat. I was hoarse for days. But then all wounds healed up inside me, my dark past lifted and I felt like the new kid on the block. Remember, Mags, when the monks talked about how to deal with your anger and your deepest fears?”

“No, remind me.”

“They had you play-act. They suggested you take a knife, even a toy knife *if you’re so inclined*, and slash it around through the air. Make circles and switches and jabs.” Vasco demonstrated using a scary serrated blade. “The monks said that in this way...you know, by acting it all out playfully...you could dice up your anger and slice through your worst fears. No harm done. No one gets hurt. Here, try it, bro.” Vasco handed me one of his largest Bowie knives, the blade facing away from me.

“Don’t you have any toy knives?” I asked nervously. “I’m *inclined* that way.”

I swallowed a pang of fear, and suddenly feeling my Buddhist oats, I grabbed the handle. Vasco knew how to emotionally manipulate his older brother. Just bring up a topic I’m interested in and I’m all putty in the hand. Tibetan healing monks? That’ll do it. The knife felt solid, substantial, dangerous.

“Go ahead, swing it around. It’s not going to bite you, dude. The raccoon’s long gone. It’s just you and me and Mom and this beautiful quiet night.”

I gently moved the blade back and forth through the unwelcoming air, thick with resistance.

“No dude, not like a girl. You’re supposed to be confronting your anger and your fear...not buttering your toast.”

Advancing, then hesitating, then thrusting the knife-point gingerly, I pricked the emptiness before me as if I was afraid to poke a hole in the ether and deflate the world. Then, more boldly, I jabbed at the air and cut sweeping arcs diagonally from right to left and back again. I was ashamed to admit that it felt exhilarating. I thought of all the violence around the globe. And what could be the reason for it’s existence? Hunger—the prime mover of living things. The ravaging hunger, driving the *kill* up and down the food chain until it reaches the pinnacle of all killing – in the human animal – where hunger teams up with greed and heedless aggression.

This thought reminded me of the Baghavat Gita and the soldier's dilemma. On the battle field the young prince Arjuna is distraught, telling his charioteer, Krishna, that he doesn't wish to go to war. The reluctant Arjuna sees war as a useless endeavor that will only end in the killing of cousins, friends, neighbors, allies. What's the point? Surprisingly, Krishna at first calls him a coward, then encourages Arjuna to continue with the battle and engage in war. This is strange advice from an antiwar book promoting pacifism and compassion. Krishna explains that we are all born with the burden of responsibility. Every one of us assumes a different archetype to which we are accountable. A fisherman has his specific responsibility which is different from that of a banker's. And so a soldier must live up to his commitment to do battle. That is his purpose. There is no way around it.

Of course, the story of the Baghavat Gita is really a metaphor for inner struggle, for the daily fray we face just to get through the long day. We must all do battle with our private demons, our petty fears, our jealousies, our anger. We must all confront our inner lives, whether it be with our toy knives or our real ones.

By now I had gone aerobic, swashing that large blade around. Vasco was amused. But just when I was beginning to feel complacent toward my terror of sharp things, my brother decided to really put me to the test. Just as the pot was coming on full blast, he pulled out a gun from under the coffee table. I just about pissed on him. The raccoon would have been happily avenged. Only in the movies had I ever seen a real gun. I grew up in Canada, where cops keep their guns wrapped in a holster like a leather burka. Even American cops, their guns more exposed than the Canadian Mounties, only reveal the butt end. You never see the entire weapon. Vasco wagged the gun around with the careless dexterity of long practice and experience. He brought it closer for me to inspect, almost right up under my nose. I jerked back. My mom and I balked and cried out.

"Vasco, what the hell are you doing? Put that thing away!"

"I want you to hold it, bro."

"No way, get that thing away from me." I recoiled, shivering like a rabbit in a hole as a fox scrapes, claws, tunnels at the entrance. "I'm serious, Vasco, I don't want it near me."

"Don't be a pussy, dude. Take the fcking gun." He clasped my hand and forced the weapon into my palm, folding my fingers around the trigger. "Don't worry. It's not loaded. Ha."

"Well thanks for telling me that *now*. You could have mentioned it before you cocked it about and shoved it into my hand. I feel raped."

"Oh, you poor girl, does your pussy hurt? Every man should know how to operate a gun. The things you're afraid of have no weight, no rhyme, no reason. Just hold it for a second."

"It has wierd energy." I complained.

“No it doesn’t Mags. Sometimes a gun is just a gun. It’s a standard Glock. As common as a toothbrush. Metal barrel, plastic exterior, nothing more than that. All the weirdness is in your head. Your mind is fcking with you, bro. Sit there and meditate on it.”

In fact, unlike the knife, the gun felt hollow, insubstantial, harmless. As light as a feather in my hand (the sort of feather this deadly object could quickly dislodge from some unsuspecting bird). How could something so weightless and insignificant, almost an afterthought, a mere idea, cause so much damage in the real world?

“Have you ever killed anyone, Vasco?” I asked innocently, reluctantly.

“Not as far as I know. But I have been shot at on occasion.”

“No shit?”

“Late one night, about a month ago, I saw a drunk girl stumbling through the parking lot trying to find her car. I was about to escort her back to the bar and buy her some coffee so she could sober up first before driving home, when out of nowhere some asshole tried to force himself on the poor vulnerable thing. With his pants already unzipped, he held one hand over her mouth, the other shoved up her dress, as I yelled out. I pointed my gun at the bastard and told him to back off. He quickly packed up his dick and split into the darkness. But then I heard shots whizzing right by my head and I could see the guy had gone back to his car to get his own gun, which he now pointed my way. I ducked into the shadows out of view. I could tell I was well hidden because he kept wavering his aim, pointing at various possible targets, looking for me. Then I set my sights and opened fired on the guy. I’m a good shot so I made sure I didn’t hit the little prick, but I did want to make sure he got a taste of his own poison. The bullets whizzed close to his head as his shots had whizzed past mine...and now that I recall, making me whizz my pants. I hope he shit in his, the bastard. He raced off in his Camaro, which was now decorated with a whole magazine round of my bullets. The incident sure as hell sobered up that girl. She scatted like an alley cat back to the bar.”

Mom and I were dumbstruck. This is not the kind of gritty horror story you want to bring home to mother. Leafy green innocence, through which certain sounds are not allowed to enter, still plugs the ears of that old village girl. Not to mention my own sensitive ears – in my current state.

“My God, Vasco, you scare me. You could have been killed. Walking around with a gun is no way to live a life. It’s just negative energy you’re spreading.”

“Would you prefer it if I didn’t have a gun with me that night? What would have happened to that girl and to me? Having packed the Glock, I was able to save the girl *and* my ass.”

“But you may have been able to accomplish the same thing by just screaming ‘bloody murder.’ He may have just run off. Instead, by threatening the asshole with a gun, you made him fire back at you. It’s tit for tat. That kind of energy begets more of the same. For every action there’s...”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, an equal and opposite crapshoot. Look dude, I appreciate your armchair philosophy, but I’m sweating bullets in the trenches every night. I don’t spend my evenings in a cozy coffee house reading e. e. cummings. You have no idea what it’s like walking through the nightmare alleys I frequent.”

“But then that energy rubs off on you and you bring it home. Mom tells me you mistreated Dad toward the end. Physically. That’s called elder abuse. Dad was terrified of you. He was frail and unsure footed and in your anger you would grab him by the neck as if you were going to choke him. He was afraid of losing his balance around you. He seriously thought you’d topple him over and crack his head on an end table. You know, when you’re old and wobbly, the ground is a faraway land.”

Vasco’s face grew suddenly furious. “You of all people know what it was like to live with Dad. He was opinionated, stubborn, impossible. How many grueling screaming fights between you and the old man did I have to endure growing up? Once, you even threw your dinner plate across the room. I was six years old.

“Sorry to put you through that, Vasco. That was bad of me. But at least I didn’t grab his throat and try to choke him.”

“That’s because you’re a coward, bro. You never stood up to him. Dad told me when *you* were six he got complaints from the principle that you were hitting kids. So Dad took off his belt and beat the living crap out of you. He said later he regreted it. You stopped fighting, sure enough, but you turned into a complete sissy, unable to fend for yourself.” Vasco’s anger eased up, only to expose deeper emotions. He quickly turned sentimental, tears rushed to his eyes as he continued. “Man, why did you have to dredge up this old crap. You don’t think I feel guilty as hell about what I did to the old man? He was a control freak. Every move I made, there he was breathing down my neck, bitching, asking for my help and then complaining I didn’t do it right. What the fck! But I also loved the guy. We had a lot of laughs together. We hung out. Mom doesn’t mention any of the good times. Only the rough days. You weren’t available. I did all the heavy lifting around here any time shit needed to get done. I was under a lot of pressure from my ex-girlfriend who was also living here. That was a mistake. She couldn’t stand Dad. I kept taking her side. It was frustrating, dude. And in my frustration I lost it and took it out on the old bastard. Do you see that hole in the wall next to the Sex Pistols? That’s where I needed to sink my fists of fury instead of landing them on Dad’s face.”

Vasco broke down and began to cry profusely. The tears wouldn’t stop and he never looked away. Just kept staring straight at me, tears streaming down his cheeks and dripping off his chin, proud even in his vulnerability, until I broke down and also started crying. Then Mom joined us in a violin trio of old wounds. I always choked up when I saw Vasco crying. Since his

birth, my connection to my brother's pain has been profound – as if one of his knives would pierce my heart whenever he got hurt. Although he was always a sensitive guy underneath, his hide was thick. Over the years he had turned into a tough bastard, like our dad, so it was rare to see his ducts wet. He used to cry a lot as a kid, but L.A. street life had evaporated his tears – compressed the remaining salt into angry bullets.

“Maybe you should make better choices, Vasco, where you hang out at night. And who your friends are.” I said, still concerned for his safety.

“Hey, bro, if I hadn't made the choice to be at that bar on that particular night, that girl would have been totally screwed. And please leave my friends out of this. They are who they are and they do what they do and I picked them. Right? I made the final choice of friends to hang with. They are an extension of who I am. They're not perfect. They're fck-ups like me. But I do come from a loving family and I recognize the few places in the world where love exists. There isn't much of it to go around, I'll grant you that. But I've been able to find love, outside the family, through my crew. You may think my friends are a bunch of losers. And it's true, they are broken and damaged. But they have big hearts and they would cover my sorry ass in a heartbeat through any emergency. My buddies and me look at ourselves from the perspective of the comics we read. The Fantastic Four, The Avengers. We help and protect. We roam the streets and if it so happens that we stumble across anyone in need, we jump to the rescue. Jesus didn't only rub shoulders with the rich bastards. The dick elite. He related to a bunch of 'little faith' losers and working girls. I do what I can, dude. And as I've told you before, I don't hang out with drama queens and bookworms. I follow the path of the lowest common denominator – the man on the street.”

Once again, Vasco shut me up. He continued.

“I feel blessed, Mags, to have such amazing friends. Do you know what my homies did for me recently? It got me all choked up and shit. They pooled their money together and hired Marko, this top New York graffiti artist, to come out to L.A. for a special event in my honor. They licensed space on the L.A. River bed and they're planning to throw a huge party for me afterwards. It's all going to be photographed and videotaped. The Artist has already begun the project. It's a tribute to LEST, my tag name. And I'm really proud of it. I'll show you pictures sometime.”

“Hey, that reminds me, Vasco, I've been wanting to take a video of you for a long time now. I want to stop by with my camcorder and some lighting to capture you on film.”

Vasco's smile slowly disappeared as he looked at me in an odd, serious way. “What the hell would you want to do that for, bro?”

“You know, to capture your life story. Jennifer and I have been doing it for years with very old people. They’re resistant at first, but then they really get into it. Their kids and grandkids love the idea. Just something to always have on hand to remember them by.”

Vasco stared at me stupefied, immobile, more dumbfounded than my mom and I had been with his stories the entire evening. He appeared to be deeply wounded by my offer.

“What’s the matter, Vasco, you look pale.”

“I’m extremely insulted, bro. I just explained to you what my friends are planning for me and how much it means to me and then without acknowledging my excitement you tell me about some project of your own? What’s in it for me?”

“I thought you would enjoy it too.”

“No Mags. Your video of me would be all for *you*. Because you and Jenny have already written me off for dead, haven’t you?”

I was shocked, again, by his directness. “You’ve got it all wrong. I’m the guy doing the research for you on everything out there related to cancer. I’m the one that kept pushing at you to pound down the hospital doors at KP, until they took you seriously. Otherwise it would have been more than the leg that would be missing. Of course I’m your biggest supporter. How can you accuse me of any ulterior motives? You’re not going to die, Vasco.”

“Yeah sure. But just in case I do *croak*, you have alternative “B” as a contingency plan. A video of my life story? What are you going to call it? “In Memory of Vasco?” Hum, maybe something to remember me by when you’re feeling all sorry for yourself and guilty that you didn’t spend more time with me while I was alive? You’re an ass, dude. I’m really hurt.”

He didn’t talk to me for a long time after that. And I felt horrible that I hadn’t considered his feelings and given his little gangster affair by the river more importance. I could even have showed up at his gala with my equipment and casually walked around shooting people (how apropos) and their conversations, the art and the artist at work. I could even have captured Vasco’s life story indirectly by asking each of his friends on camera to tell me a funny Vasco incident that was particularly memorable. But there is no science to hindsight and perhaps the opportunity might still arise. One thing I know is certain. On two legs or on one, Vasco will not go down without giving his life a good kick in the balls.