

I WILL GO TO MY GRAVE filled with remorse for what I did to my brother.

The sight of the town of Sandara—barely changed over the decades—sends a pang of sorrow through me. I wonder how I've managed to survive since that fateful summer.

It happened forty years ago, when I was twenty. It seems forever ago, but strangely, it could have happened only yesterday. The rawness of that summer lives within me—an open wound seeping sorrow and regret.

Why am I returning to this place, now?

As the 747 descends toward Barcelona, I peer out the port-side window. Ignoring the sun's glare through the window's whorl of scratches, I look down at the small town of Sandara nestled into the mountains tumbling down to a curved inlet in the Mediterranean. From this height, the July crowd appears like clusters of dots on its white beach. I see the town's twisting, narrow streets, meandering uphill to the mountains behind it. The seventeenth-century Gothic Church of San Sebastian perches atop a promontory at the northern end of the cove.

As we pass over Sandara and the glittering Mediterranean, I feel as though I've been in exile and in some strange way, am coming home. What do I expect to find? What revelation will come to me? Will I somehow feel expiation for my role

in the tragedy of Sandara? Will I ever find a modicum of peace or tranquility, after what happened that summer? I close my eyes and try to banish thoughts of it all, but memories wash through my mind, chillingly.

It was late July four decades ago, when I sat in the rear seat of a taxi with Luke—my older brother by two years. We were traveling to Sandara, a little-known vacation spot twenty-five miles southwest of Barcelona, along the rugged Catalan coast of Spain. I never quite knew how Luke had learned of Sandara, but he telephoned me from Rome and suggested we spend time there. It would be our first time living together since he'd left for college. We planned to stay for a few weeks—four, to be exact. I would then return home for my last year of college. Luke's plans were unknown—he was leading a nomadic life in Europe, but I'll get to that later.

The taxi driver, a leather-faced man with a drooping mustache, took the mountainous road's hairpin turns at break-neck speed. The tires squealed and the taxi tilted as the vehicle raced along the narrow road carved from the reddish precipices towering high above the sea. My toes curled when I peered down at the Mediterranean, a dizzying five hundred feet below the barrier-free road. Where the cliffs met the sea,

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the water roiled in white crescents and crashed onto jagged rocks with a fury that belied the sea's calmness visible on the horizon.

While I clutched the rear door's armrest, Luke—carefree and daring as always—laughed each time the taxi fishtailed, spewed dust and gravel, or came treacherously close to the road's edge. After a series of stomach-churning twists and turns, we came to a broad sunlit plateau—high above the Mediterranean.

The cab came to a lurching stop. A stunning sight stood before us. An empty car sat angled near the cliff's edge, engulfed in flames. It leaned at the tipping point, mere inches from where it could slip over the edge and plummet to the sea. Plumes of black smoke billowed, rising high above the Mediterranean's deep blue, only to be ripped away by the shore-bound winds. The smell of gasoline fumes and burning rubber filled the air. Shimmering heat waves created a mirage-like appearance, as though we were looking through desert heat at a distant object. Heat fanned from the fiery vehicle.

Getting out of the taxi, we called to any occupants, but no one answered. The air undulated in the scorching heat emanating from the car. We backed away from the vehicle. Our

driver chattered excitedly in Catalan. Though I knew nothing of the language, it was clear he was fearful the fire would ignite an explosion.

But Luke—with his usual sense of bravado—didn't hesitate for a moment. Shielding his eyes, he ran to the vehicle—an old Peugeot—and moved dangerously close. Peering inside, he shook his head. He raced around to the other side and again looked into the car. For a moment, he was lost in clouds of smoke and flames. Emerging from the far side, he yelled, "No one's inside," and backed away, coming toward us, coughing and rubbing his eyes. He went to the cliff's edge, peered down, and called out, "I don't see anyone."

The occupants seemed to have mysteriously vanished.

The sea breeze fanned the flames. They licked around and over the Peugeot, consuming it completely. The car's paint blistered and curled. The odor of incinerated paint, rubber, and steel intensified. Twenty minutes passed before the vehicle became a smoldering skeleton of hot steel. Eventually, it seemed safe to pass the burned-out shell.

As I think about it now, that fiery hulk may have been an omen of things to come.

Back in the taxi, the driver gunned the engine and we sped past the hot wreckage. Descending gradually down the

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mountainside, we arrived at Sandara a half hour later.

We rented a three-room ground floor apartment in a two-story building on Calle de San Sebastian, a narrow alley of a street a short distance from the church on the promontory. “Real cheap in gringo dollars,” Luke commented as we inspected the one-bedroom flat with a walled-off patio at the rear. A lemon tree stood in the middle of the patio and a citrus scent filled the area. I pictured us drinking many a glass of Spanish wine out there, enjoying the sea breeze that swept gently through the area.

We explored the town’s winding streets and alleyways, its bodegas, restaurants, and shops. “Gabriel, it’s going to be quite a time,” Luke said, as we sat at a table at an outdoor café watching the passing tide of pedestrians. “This town’s overrun by hordes of Scandinavians every summer. Tourists come from England and Holland, too, all wanting to spend vacation time in the Spanish sun. I have a feeling this summer will be one to remember.”

I’d long ago learned to trust Luke’s instincts. He was supremely gifted—socially, intellectually, and physically—and I’d always idolized him. Looking back now, I realize my hero-worshipping of Luke, which bordered on gullible naiveté,

was part of what led to the tragedy awaiting us.

Luke was athletic, broad-shouldered, and tall, with long blondish hair that swept back from his forehead in a well-tended mane. He had deep blue eyes and handsomely etched, strong features. In contrast to my pale skin, Luke's radiated a bronzed look from countless hours on the sun-drenched beaches of Nice, Cannes, Portofino, and Italy's Amalfi coast. His skill with languages was amazing: his Spanish, French, and Italian were flawless. After completing college, he'd perfected them during his yearlong sojourn through Europe.

Luke graduated *summa cum laude* from Princeton with a degree in European history and romance languages. But, much to our parents' chagrin, he hadn't yet decided his life's direction. So he traveled extensively, visiting nearly every country in Western Europe, taking in the sights, honing his language skills, and "living off the land," as he put it. I always wondered how Luke managed to pay his way through Europe. But it seemed a given: he had the personal resources and undeniable *élan* to charm people and find his way through virtually anything.

Our family could never have afforded Luke's Princeton tuition. Dad worked like a joyless drone in a metal plating factory, while Mom labored as a seamstress from our clapboard

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house on Grant Avenue in Newark, New Jersey. Luke never asked them for a dime. He'd won a full academic scholarship to college and paid for his dorm room, food, clothing, books, and other expenses—all on his own. Whenever I asked how he earned his money, he always deflected the question. Strangely, our parents never seemed curious enough to inquire.

“How are you paying for this trip?” I asked, since we were traveling on Luke's dime and I had virtually no money. As a student at a state college, I'd been working part time to take care of tuition, expenses, books, and various sundries, but could never have afforded the luxury of a month in Europe.

“Don't worry, Gabe,” he said. “I've got it covered.”

Luke purchased my ticket from Newark, and we met up at Barcelona Airport, where he had arrived from Rome.

Whenever I tried to pay for anything, he'd wave me away with a big-brotherly gesture.

“What do you do? Sell drugs?” I asked only half-jokingly.

He laughed and shook his head.

“Money comes easily,” he said. “It's just a ticket to better things.”

“Maybe so, but where does it come from?” I pressed.

He snapped his fingers, laughed, and slapped me on the back.

“So, how can you afford all this?”

“I’ve saved from what I earned in college.”

“Doing what . . . ?”

He simply smiled. “Oh, a little this, some of that . . . ”

“Are you a gigolo?” I asked.

Luke laughed and shook his head. “No way, Gabe, I don’t sponge off women.”

Maybe he wasn’t a gigolo, but there was no doubt Luke was a shameless lothario. He radiated infectious cordiality—a suave, charismatic ease that attracted people the way chum draws sharks. Ever since I could remember, women had always flocked to him, and no matter where he was, a beautiful woman was always at his side.

Our genetic pool was not nearly as kind to me. In fact, as a kid, I’d sometimes wondered if we were truly brothers. For a while, I nurtured the fantasy I’d been adopted because of the vast disparity between Luke and me. That notion evaporated as we became teenagers and it was clear we both bore a distinct resemblance to our father.

But there were obvious differences between us. I was shorter, not nearly as good looking, and could never lay claim to Luke’s level of social adroitness. And I never possessed his extraordinary athletic ability. In high school, he



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was a championship basketball player, high-jumper, and long-distance runner, and he won a state trophy in the five-mile cross-country race.

Though I'd always been smart and had moderate success with girls, I was never the recipient of the abundant gifts bestowed upon Luke. I felt in many ways the inferior brother, a mere squire—a Sancho Panza—if I compared myself to Luke's flamboyant style, his way in the world. He was a conquistador—a throne-bound prince—while I was the younger and less fortunate one—the sidekick.

An ineffable sense of contentment filled me as we sat at the Terra Mar Café that afternoon after we'd rented the apartment. I was ecstatic about spending a month in Spain with Luke. We luxuriated amid potted geraniums and sunlight gleaming off white stucco walls. The staccato rhythms of the Catalan language pulsed in our ears. Sipping an oak-aged Rioja *tinto*, I inhaled its vanilla-tinged bouquet. The wine felt like velvet on my tongue, and a warm flush filled my cheeks. Waiters passed our table and the aromas of *pollo con arroz*, freshly grilled shrimp, and chorizos followed in their wake. A gentle breeze washed over us and my skin tingled deliciously as we sat drinking wine and smoking Fortuna cigarettes

beneath an umbrella.

It was my first trip to Europe, and oddly, I had no wish to visit Paris, Rome, Florence, or Madrid. Thoughts of the Louvre, the Coliseum, the Prado, or the other great sights of Europe were far from my mind. Rather, I was content to remain in this obscure Spanish town on the Costa Brava amid sun-worshipping northern Europeans, eating simply prepared fresh food, sunbathing, and socializing. Luke would be my worldly cicerone, my Sandara Sherpa guiding me through these sybaritic pleasures before I returned to the doldrums of my last year at Montclair State University. It was everything I could have hoped for, and I felt fortunate my brother was sharing this adventure with me.

As streams of vacationers sauntered past our table, I couldn't help but notice Luke's magnetic effect on the tide of women. Though feeling that nagging tinge of envy, I knew I would reap rewards from Luke's charisma. We were together, and I would be the beneficiary of his social gifts. Luke seemed indifferent to the women staring at him, but I was hungrily aware of each one as she passed our table.

A strikingly tall, deeply tanned blond woman walked by, accompanied by her darker-haired girlfriend. The taller one looked like a goddess who'd stepped from the cover of a

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Swedish fashion magazine. She had prominent cheekbones, powder-blue eyes, and flaxen-blond hair worn in a waist-length French braid. She was so alluring, such a traffic-stopper, that men—even those walking with women—turned and stared openly at her. I was no exception. Luke, however, was busy perusing a local newspaper, and never noticed her.

The woman stopped as though seized by some inexplicable force. Her eyes narrowed as she peered at Luke.

“Look over your left shoulder,” I whispered. “A Nordic goddess is staring at you.”

Luke looked up from his paper, turned, and took her in. Their eyes met. Luke nodded and canted his head. Some unspoken message seemed to pass between them. She responded to his gesture, and a smile danced on her gloss-covered lips. She pivoted and walked past the café. I was certain she was feigning indifference. And I was right. Before going very far, she turned again and cast another glance in Luke’s direction.

Luke nodded once more; she smiled openly, whirled, and walked away.

A familiar feeling came over me. Luke could make me feel like a bystander, the backdrop for a mini-drama in which I’d never truly have a role. I feigned amusement, as a familiar stab of fraternal envy pricked me. I knew Luke’s looks, his

supreme confidence, and that certain *something* that made for his unbridled triumph in everything would never be mine.

I now acknowledge I adored, envied, admired, and at times, deeply resented my brother for the panache with which he waltzed his way through life. I'm certain my jealousy ran deeper than I realized, but was camouflaged by an abiding bond of brotherly affection—even love for Luke.

Now, all these years later, I realize my lack of confidence—my sense of feeling callow and uninitiated in his presence—gave Luke a dangerous power over me. He could lead me anywhere and I would follow without question or doubt. It was a deep and disastrous flaw in my character—one I will always regret.

As we sat at the Terra Mar Café, a strangely prescient feeling came over me and I sensed in some unformed, yet powerful way, the summer at Sandara would be a turning point in our lives.