

# COSMORAMA

Jul 18

## My Phantom Brother



Matias Travieso-Diaz

*Feel, too, my bosom, how it doth burn;  
glowing flames now lay hold on my heart:  
fast to enfold him, embraced by his arms,  
in might of our loving with him aye made one!*

...

*Siegfried! Siegfried! See!  
Brünnhild' greets thee in bliss!*

**Richard Wagner, Götterdämmerung, Act 3**

Shortly after my parents' wedding, my mother conceived her first child. She had an uneventful pregnancy and I am told that she was bursting with excitement in anticipation of her baby's arrival.

Alas, shortly before the delivery date, a chair in which she was rocking collapsed, flinging her violently onto the floor. She was hurt and the baby perished.

For many weeks following the miscarriage my mother struggled with the physical and emotional consequences of the accident. She was devastated, for her lost child was a perfect, beautiful boy who would have been her pride and joy had he lived.

My mother lingered in sorrow for almost three years. She was morose, shunned physical contact with my father, and spent hours in prayer or alone in silent lamentation. Finally, my father delivered an ultimatum: either she rejoined the world of the living or he was getting a divorce.

That night they resumed sexual intercourse and, in a few days, I was conceived. Nine months later, I first saw the light of day.

I was born carrying a heavy weight. My mother, who had been meticulously careful with all her actions during my gestation, continued her vigilance after I entered the world. She announced, to herself and aloud to others, that I was destined for greatness, bestowed in such a degree as to be sufficient for two men: myself and my older brother, to whom fame and success had been denied by Fate.

Since the very first day, my mother pampered and sheltered me from any potential adversity. She told my father, fiercely: "This one is mine! I'll take care of him!" My father, poor soul, stayed away and never played a major role in my life.

In the early years of my infancy, when boys learn to master themselves through rough and tumble interactions with each other, my mother held me back to save me from a potential injury. She was not aware, perhaps, that the non-injuries I was sustaining could be more severe than a few cuts and bruises. I never broke a leg, fell from a tree, or got a black eye from a school yard scuffle. Yet, I never played ball, or flew a kite, or went fishing. I

only learned to swim and ride a bike when I was well into my teens. I remained, in many ways, as helpless as the baby she had so jealously guarded.

For the longest time, I did not realize that I was being smothered and limited by the constant attention of an overprotective mother. It was only when my kid brother was born, four years later, that I came to understand how unique I was. For my brother, another poor soul, was given adequate care but no special attention. He grew up feeling he was second best and resented everyone for it, but at least he learned to take care of himself.

---

On my fifth birthday, after eating the cake and ice cream and swinging at the piñata, my mother took me aside and handed me a small velvet pouch. "Open it" she said. "This is a very special gift, the greatest I can give you."

Inside the box was a gold chain to which was attached a large oval pendant, a gold framed cameo depicting, over a reddish-brown background, a white angel hovering protectively over a child. "It's the Archangel Gabriel" said my mother, noticing my puzzlement. "He's actually your late brother, who joined the rank of the angels years ago, and now is going to guard over you."

That explanation only served to confuse me. I knew I had a brother, but he was only a toddler, alive and much younger than I. Who was that older brother that I had never met or heard about? And what did he have to do with me?

My mother went on. "I won't be around forever to protect you, so I've prayed to this angel, your older brother, asking that he watch over you and he has agreed. Put the chain around your neck and never take it off. Every time there is pending an important decision in your life, a step that you must take, a risk or danger in front of you, your Gabriel will counsel and guide you to safety and success."

"Will he tell me the answers to the numbers problems I get from Miss Leonor?" "No, no. Gabriel does not get into those little things. But you'll hear from him when something important is in the works."

I was not sure what this business with my so-called brother Gabriel meant, but I could tell from the expectant look on my mother's face that this was important to her, so I hanged the chain around my neck. The pendant sat on my chest, just above the nipples.

"Never take it off, you hear?" She asked, insistently.

"Yes, Mother."

"Swear you'll always keep the medal on and follow the angel's directions. Swear!" "Yes, Mother, I swear," I repeated sullenly.

My mother brought me against her bosom in a bear hug that almost choked me. "My two sons!" she exclaimed, and broke into tears.

---

Over the years, out of respect for my mother, I kept that chain (and three others, successively longer) around my neck. I came to discover that the cameo was not a valuable Victorian jewel but a cheap plastic knockoff; my mother would have never been able to afford the real product. All the same, the pendant was precious to me as testament to her all encompassing love for "the boy who lived," to borrow a phrase that has become ingrained in popular culture.

But it was not, or at least not only, love for my mother that had me wear the chain with the archangel pendant dangling from my chest. For it soon became apparent that something in the pendant appeared to be following my every move, was aware of my thoughts, and was offering advice at many critical junctions in my life. I came to call that something "my Gabriel," and it was never entirely clear to me whether it was an incorporeal entity or a figment of my imagination, but it operated as if it had a will of its own, trying to guide every step of my life.

So, when I graduated from college with an Engineering degree, my Gabriel counseled me not to take a well-paying starting job but to keep studying for several more years and get an advanced degree. I followed this inner voice and persevered, at much cost and sacrifice, but at the end graduated with honors and went on to become a manager at a Silicon Valley technical giant.

Another time, when I was about to propose to a beautiful girl and hoped to get married and raise a family, my Gabriel counseled to avoid premature entanglements and pursue success, which I did... to my profit, but long-lasting sorrow.

For the lost brother that seemed to be speaking to me from the pendant knew nothing about matters of the heart. Security and success were the only things important to him, emotions and morality be damned. It never dawned on me that the counseling I was getting, focused solely on success to the exclusion of love and morality, was inconsistent with the advice that one should receive from a well-meaning angelic figure.

Over the years, my Gabriel caused me to apply for a patent in my name based on an invention by a foreign intern at our firm, who got no credit and just a paltry bonus for his work while we raked millions in profits. As counseled by my Gabriel, I paid bribes to government agents looking into water pollution from the outflow from one of our manufacturing units, nipping in the bud the government's investigation and enabling our continuing to poison the water supply to several communities, with health impacts that were never tallied. On my Gabriel's advice, I used company moneys to make secret campaign contributions to a business associate of mine who was running for office and who paid me back by sponsoring legislation that benefitted us at the expense of our competitors. My Gabriel's advice led to many unscrupulous actions that matured into great wealth and recognition for me.

When I finally was ready to marry, my Gabriel steered me away from still another lovely girl and suggested that I tie the knot with the daughter of the president of a major bank. I acceded, and became husband to a pampered prima donna, a union that yielded more influence and material gain for me but caused endless discord. Our marriage lasted only three years, during which we cheated on each other frequently. We had no children and only rarely saw one another after our divorce.

I remained single after that fiasco.

---

The night of my forty-fifth birthday, the company held a banquet in my honor. I had recently been named "Man of the Year" by a financial magazine, and accolades had been showered on my public persona for many months. I attended the event arm in arm with one of the models that I have on retainer for pleasure and to boost my image, and gave an insincere speech in which I hailed the contributions of many who I claimed had been my mentors or patrons. I left alone as early as I could, sending the model home with a generous gift in her purse.

I had drunk a lot during the banquet and when I got to my townhouse I proceeded to the den and sat, a bottle of whiskey in hand, in front of a brightly lit fireplace, for it was very cold and snowy outside. The flames danced wildly in the firebox, and their heat suffused through the room and started to make me drowsy. I drank a couple of glasses and the warmth generated by the alcohol joined the heat emanating from the fireplace and led me to the verge of sleep. It was then that an inner voice reached me. "Get up! Go to bed! You are drunk and are not safe sitting that close to the fire!"

Under other circumstances, I would perhaps have been grateful for the warning and gone to bed. However, in this night of meaningless recognition, I felt irritated. I clutched the pendant that hung from my chest and vented my frustrations on it.

"Shut up, brother! All the advice I have gotten from you has ended up causing me pain! I am tired of you and want you out of my life!!" As I drunkenly shouted these words, I got up, yanked the chain off my neck, and threw it into the fire.

The moment the necklace hit the fireplace, the gold trim around the cameo melted, but the jewel itself seemed to fight the flames, and then exploded in a powerful burst of energy that sent a spear of fire out of the fireplace, over the hearth, and straight at me. I fell, hair singed and face and hands starting to get burned, but revived in a panic and ran away as the fire spread to the room's carpeting and furniture.

I ran to the garage, where I kept the fire extinguisher, but when I got back inside the fire had already spread beyond the den so that the whole townhouse was on fire. I realized that I would not be able to put out the

conflagration by myself. I got into my car, opened the garage door, and drove away as the sounds of approaching fire trucks were heard.

I stopped the car down the street, a few feet away from the inferno that until a few minutes earlier had been my home. I thought that I would go back and meet the fire brigade, but a disquieting thought assaulted me. Isn't that what my Gabriel would have wanted me to do? This was my chance to escape, once and for all, the tyranny of a pendant holding a brother that never existed but had managed to bend my life to his will for four decades. I drove away into the night, seeking to leave my former life behind.

---

I own a cottage in the high sierras that I visit only during the summer months to get away from the city a few days at a time. I chose the place for its isolation: the closest neighbors live a mile away and at this time of year they were most likely not in residence, since it was the offseason. I always keep the house heated and well supplied, for one of the things my Gabriel made me do was get myself a place to which I could retreat safely in the event of an earthquake or some other catastrophe, natural or man-made. I decided to hole up for a day or two while I recovered from my burns. My house in town was well insured and held nothing of value to me, so not much would be lost through my absence.

I followed on the TV the sporadic news about the fire at my home. The townhouse was totally destroyed, but investigators had traced the origin of the fire to some explosion in the den, whose origins could not be ascertained. Arson and foul play were considered as possibilities, since the owner was nowhere to be found.

I got ready to return to town to set the record straight. Then there was a brief item of news from the local TV station: spurred by the mysterious circumstances surrounding the fire, the city's district attorney had launched an investigation into my affairs, including my financial dealings. The DA was an old enemy, having lost an election to the city council through my support of one of his adversaries. Nothing good could come out of his probing.

For a moment I wished I had my phantom brother around to give me advice and comfort. He had, however, disappeared with the fire, leaving me to my own devices for the first time in my life. What to do?

Then a voice spoke in my mind. "Go to an emergency room and get treatment of the burns. Come back to the city in a couple of days and claim that after the banquet you came back to the townhouse, packed a suitcase, and drove directly to Vegas, where you stayed for a few days, gambling. Say that you were away during the fire and had no idea it had taken place. Ask those lawyers who handle your other affairs to get involved in derailing the DA's investigation. They have nothing on you and you will be OK as long as you stay calm."

As always, I agreed with the advice. But where was it coming from? I had gotten rid of my phantom brother, and was now on my own. Or was I?

I was left with two possibilities. Either Gabriel's phantom had followed me after the fire, no longer residing in the cameo, or ... or my Gabriel had never existed, and the phantom that had counseled me for years was a fruit of my imagination, a way I had unconsciously chosen to provide for my own protection and excuse behavior that otherwise I would have found abhorrent. Either way, like Brunnhild joining Siegfried in his funeral pyre, my phantom brother and I were now merged, and would remain one and the same. That is perhaps what my mother would have intended.

Yet, the "bad advice" that my subconscious mind or my phantom brother had given over the years did not cease with the merger. To the contrary, the recommendations became more frequent and peremptory. The phantom now clearly resided in my brain, where it issued orders rather than suggestions. All bounds of morality and regard for the law were cast aside, as I plunged into an unending orgy of crime that only stopped when I was arrested after one of my schemes to defraud the public was exposed.

During my trial and the subsequent appeals, the inner voice – the phantom's or my own – continued to whisper suggestions of ways to avoid serving time. Bribery, intimidation, witness assassination, a feigned mental breakdown, all sorts of immoral and impractical schemes were suggested, but now I was hardened against these thoughts and resisted them.



So, I was convicted and now sit in jail serving a long sentence that should end with my death before I am due to be released. My phantom brother is my sole companion, but the schemes he (or my deranged mind) continues to suggest are useless, incapable of being realized. That is certainly not what my mother would have wanted.

**END**

[Matias Travieso-Diaz](#)

Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred and forty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in a wide range of anthologies and magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors" is available on Amazon and other book outlets; additional anthologies of his work are scheduled for publication in 2025.