

Sample Chapter from *The Blessing Next to the Wound*
by Hector Aristizábal and Diane Lefer

Aunt Ligia's tone of voice didn't register at first. I was in Pasadena. She was calling from Medellín.

Then I realized. This was it, the call I had been dreading for years. "The paramilitaries took Juan Fernando," she said. "They've disappeared him."

It was July 22, 1999, almost seventeen years to the day when Juan Fernando—nicknamed Mono, and I were both arrested in Colombia by the US-trained military. A priest had overheard him talking politics. Soldiers had ransacked our home and detained me when they found found "subversive" literature. I was twenty-two years old, Mono still in his teens. Most likely the only reason we weren't killed was witnesses had seen us taken away and a human rights organization had come looking for us. After days and nights of torture, I was released. Mono wasn't so lucky. He spent several months in prison.

Now, on the flight back home to Medellín, I struggled with fear and guilt:: while I'd been absorbed in my new life in California, Mono had been left unprotected.

By the time I arrived, a truck driver had found his body in a ditch.

The morgue was a cold room. On the wall to the left, a crucifix with a tortured Christ. On the wall to the right, a medical diagram of a human body flayed to show its organs and arteries and veins. Mono was in a black bag with a zipper. They opened the bag.

I demanded an autopsy and I demanded that the pathologist let me stay and watch. In front of me, there was a table, all cold stained white tile, and bars on which

they laid my brother's body down, and under the bars, I saw the sink and the drain to carry away the fluids that would come out of him.

I wanted to see with my own eyes and I brought my camera because I wanted proof of what they'd done to him. In the most recent photographs I had of Mono alive, he was smiling, laughing, and Laura, his young daughter was goofing around and sticking out her tongue. My parents still talk of what a fussy baby Laura was, always crying, and how Mono never lost patience with her, he was always very patient and very calm.

Now, my brother's body was naked, covered with blood and dirt. I touched him, I caressed him. The pathologist didn't try to stop me, but he pointed out the ligature marks and my brother's arms and legs and torso covered with burns. The whites of his eyes bloodied and red and the blood crusted where it gushed out of his ears. The pathologist opened my brother's body, butchered it in front of me, so that I could see inside.

I took pictures, my fingers stiff with the mortuary cold.

"You see when he was found, his intestines were empty," the pathologist said. "How long did they have him?"

"Ten days," I said.

"Well, for ten days, they starved him."

I don't have the words to describe what it is to see your brother dead and his body opened and his scalp lifted up and placed over his face like a mask while the pathologist took his brains out so that I could look. But what I wanted to see was invisible. My brother left school early, but he was always reading and his brain was full

of the poetry of Neruda and the words of Lenin and Marx. He read García Márquez whose fictionalized versions of Colombian history made our story part of the cultural patrimony of the entire world. I looked at pieces of my brother, I saw his heart, but where was the place where he held Laura? Pieces of my brother's body went into a plastic bucket and parts of my brother went down the drain.

No human being, no matter what he's done, deserves to die this way. The torn skin and abrasions on his throat and neck. The bloody mess at the back of his head where the bullet finally brought the torture to an end.

In Colombia, people disappear and are never seen again. At Juan Fernando's funeral people said, "You're lucky. At least you found a body to bury."

Revenge. All I could think of was revenge. I convinced one of my best friends to take me to Santa Rosa de Osos, an enclave controlled by the paramilitary, the town where Mono's body had been found. In my delusional state, I wanted to find my brother's killers and kill them. So there we were, headed into the lion's den, a clearly suicidal act. My friend was driving and we were drinking aguardiente. Halfway there, my friend stopped the car and looking me directly in the eyes, he said, "What are you doing? And what am I doing taking you there? I don't want to die with you this way."

I said nothing as he turned the car around and we returned to the city drinking aguardiente all the way. We ended up at a strip club. I kept drinking, now with one of the young dancers. She told me about her sick child at home whose father had been killed by the police for no apparent reason and how this was the only job she could find to support herself and her child. For the first and last time in my life, I paid someone for

sex. My own despair took advantage of hers, and never before had I felt so ashamed. I had touched bottom.

Back home in Pasadena, I went through the motions at work and in front of my wife and kids, but I'd startle awake in the morning with the conviction that this was the day I would have to return to Colombia and track down Mono's killers.

In some of the worst moments of my adult life, looking into the eyes of my children has been enough to bring me back to my senses. Not this time. As I drove the freeways, I raged with hate against my fellow Americans, all commuting inside their little bubbles, paying taxes—just as I did—that helped fund atrocities around the world. We were all guilty. We all deserved to die and I fantasized making that happen. I saw myself with a high-powered weapon picking off strangers, blasting them to hell, one at a time. I dreamed at night of explosions and, against the screen of my dreaming, blood ran in torrents. Every night and sometimes during the most ordinary moments of the day, there it was in front of me: a kaleidoscope of body parts. I wanted to kill, I wanted to die, anything to stop the pain.

I am not a killer. Having sex with the prostitute—which I consider an act of spiritual violence--is the only violent act I've committed in my life. And yet, a terrorist was being born inside me. If someone had handed me a suicide vest and said, *Go. You can have your revenge, and you can end it*, I might well have strapped that vest on and gone to kill and to die.

I was a psychotherapist and though I knew that I desperately needed help, everything inside my being recoiled from the idea of turning to the sorts of treatment

offered by my own profession. My brother had been brutally murdered, and someone would have the nerve to put a label on me: post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD. Someone would prescribe drugs to take the power away from my justified rage. The more I thought about the help my own profession might offer, the more I burned.

Some inner compass pointed the way. I picked up the phone and called mythologist and storyteller Michael Meade, the first person outside of books who talked to me of ancient and tribal wisdom, who said that every person on earth is born with an aimed soul along with the gifts that help the soul move in the direction it's meant to go. He invited me to join him at a weeklong conference he was about to hold in a wooded retreat outside Chicago. As he would say during that gathering, "Death is the teacher. All philosophy begins in death. You have to deal with it or it will deal with you."

The photographs of my brother's cadaver had been developed but I hadn't once looked at them. What for? The images played constantly in my mind's eye and my own body responded to the pain of every burn and every broken finger and every broken rib. I took the photos with me to Chicago.

There, Meade, Malidoma Somé, the shaman from Burkina Faso, Orland Bishop, the director of Shade Tree Mentoring, and Luis Rodriguez, the author and poet of East LA guided us: seventy men I'd never met before, men of different ages and races and backgrounds. I talked about Juan Fernando, about everything he had gone through and for the first time, I opened the envelope that held his pictures.

During the lunch break, men who'd never known my brother asked if they could join me in building a memorial altar to him. We walked outside through the woods and

gathered natural objects. Throughout the day, we carried in earth and shaped it into a mound to which men kept adding stones and branches and leaves. On it, I placed a single picture of my brother. Men added pictures of their own loved ones and objects representing people they had lost and mourned. As the evening went on, the small altar to my brother grew into a giant shrine of fascinating beauty.

That night, we brought water, fire, and earth to the meeting room and Malidoma taught us ritual songs from the ancestors of his tribe. We lit hundreds of candles to symbolize the spirits and we invited our own ancestors to join us, and we invited the mothers, fathers, children, siblings, and friends who had entered the other world and left us. The room was filled with an astonishing radiance as the dancing lights seemed to beckon to each other in greeting.

This group of strangers cried for me because I still couldn't cry. Months had passed and I was still in shock but something was happening to me now in this world filled with candles and rocks and nature and the tears of men. There was a moment when 70 men were behind me, some with their hands on my shoulders, when I stood in front of my brother's picture at the altar and felt I was no longer a mass of muscles and bones but something else that was simply swept away, uplifted from the ground.

Orland offered me the pictures of my brother, now covered in delicate fabric that looked like butterfly wings. I buried the package in Mother Earth and asked her to carry some of the pain for me and to receive my brother in her womb.

All around, men were crying, for their own wounds, I'm sure, but they were also crying for me. This community didn't promise to cure me, but gave me a profound sense of connection. The solace, solidarity and support gave me a base from which I

could harness my own resources to move forward. I felt suspended in time and felt the power of my brother's presence.

The moment lasted an eternity. Its effects still resonate within me.