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## Reading Article GP2

### **Article #20: My Bold Brother Carmen**

*By Albert DiBartolomeo*

As kids, my brother Carmen and I were inseparable. I was 14 months older, and bigger at the time, but often found myself following his lead. He was daring as a boy. When he got the idea to explore a city dump, I agreed to join him, even though the dump sprawled on the other side of a busy freeway.

"We'll be killed," I said as the air from the speeding vehicles buffeted our faces. "Not if we

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I had the impulse to distinguish myself with bold action, but I lacked my brother's courage. And sometimes it made me feel inadequate.

We had different talents too. I had manual skills; Carmen was more artistic. I hammered together milk crates, two-by-fours and roller skates to fashion scooters that we rode noisily about our Philadelphia neighborhood. I assembled paper kites and model cars. But Carmen could fashion them out of thin air. He could draw anything.

I never thought the hand skills I possessed were special, but I always believed that Carmen's artistic ability was a rare gift.

My father died when I was ten and Carmen was nine, and we were enrolled in two different boarding schools for boys who had lost parents. Naturally we each drew closer to friends we

made at school. And inevitably we drifted apart.

After graduating from high school, Carmen spent a year working at odd jobs before entering art school. In those days he always seemed to have a piece of charcoal or a paintbrush in his smudged hands.

Before I moved into an apartment three blocks from our mother's house, Carmen and I often did our schoolwork at the kitchen table deep into the night. He painted or drew, and I read novels for my college English classes. The rest of the house slept, and the world itself, on some nights, seemed to have quit its rotation toward morning.

"I've been seeing this girl named Marcelle," Carmen said to me one night.

"M... .."

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Carmen was 23 when he and Marcelle married and moved to Northeast Philadelphia. We began to see one another only on scattered weekends. When we did, I still saw his merriment and energy, but there was also a sense of restlessness and dissatisfaction with his routine. He seemed poised to streak across the sky toward something bright and marvelous.

At the time, I was working at a low-level job at a public school library. I saw myself plodding toward a future vaguely outlined and gray. Almost in desperation, I turned back to simple things. I discovered woodworking and started to make cabinets and furniture in my own shop.

Then one day Carmen told me that he and Marcelle were moving to New York City. He was 25 at the time. I was not surprised.

"I'm ready, and if I don't do it now, I never will."

"Do you have a job?"

"No, but I can free-lance."

"Why New York?"

"I'm an artist. That's where artists should be. Why don't you come?"

I wanted to think of myself as an artist, too, but had been writing without success.

"Why do you want to come to New York?"

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His departure for New York left me feeling abandoned. He had once again scaled a fence, dashed across dangerous terrain. And I began to distance myself from him.

Six years after his arrival in New York, Carmen helped form his own graphic-design company. Vacations had him snorkeling off Cancún and strolling among the sword merchants and snake charmers in the bazaars of Marrakech.

More postcards of foreign sights came in the mail.

The farthest I'd been from home, by contrast, was Rhode Island. I felt unsophisticated compared with Carmen, particularly when he visited and regaled us with stories of life in New York City.

I had no such tales to tell, nothing to relate of foreign lands, no significant achievements to

share. More often than not, at the end of these visits, I felt like a failure next to him.

Things began to change about the time I returned to college for a master's degree in creative writing. I'd been hearing murmurs about trouble in Carmen's marriage, and then he told me that it was over.

"We'll be divorced in six weeks."

"What happened?"

"We were too young. It was my idea to go to New York. It didn't work. I feel terrible."

He appeared tired and worn, as if the pace of his life and the battering that came with it had

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I'm sorry to be calling so late," Carmen began.

"Is everything all right?"

"No." He halted as if groping for words strewn about a room as dark as mine.

"She's leaving me." His voice was thick with pain.

I knew that Carmen's second marriage of less than two years had been unraveling, but I had not expected to hear this at 3 A.M.

"I broke one heart," Carmen said, "and now I'm having mine broken." He choked on the last word, his breathing labored, as though he were struggling with a great weight.

"Listen, why don't you come and stay with us for a while?"

There was a pause, as if he were mustering strength. "I think I will," he said, and began to talk about the incremental failures that had led to this night. While I listened, pity and a new awareness crept into my chest.

It had been wrong of me to feel envy for his courage and to feel inadequate for what I identified as cowardice in myself.

That night when my brother's anguish pierced my soul, I began to see that life was not just a battlefield where one's bravery was put to the test. It was also a place where one could seek and receive compassion. Carmen struggled through several difficult months, but eventually he recovered from the breakup. He threw himself back into his career, and he and

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With that understanding came peace and a renewed closeness with my brother. We lean on one another now, each gaining strength from the other for our separate journeys.

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