

Berto and Cosi

by Teri Pastore

The sun was out, in that *sort-of* way unique to the Pacific Northwest. From the top of the hill at the end of the soccer field, Mt. Hood rose in a snow-topped chevron and dominated the anemic morning sky.

"How could you say dog's don't have butts?" I said. Look how cute she is. She has a little bunny rabbit-butt." Cosi was oblivious to our conversation about her hindquarters and continued to stick her nose in the grass, sleuthing for smelly treasure.

"It's not a butt; it's a gluteus maximus muscle," Berto said.

Oddly enough, the sharp inhale of his non-filtered Camel seemed right at home on the grade school soccer field. He had that kind of magic. Berto's appearance, no matter how rank, didn't count against him like it does the rest of us. At a little over six feet, with a belly that sloped over his jeans, my brother still had a confidence that comes only from the truly lost and it trumped any damage that usually resulted in bad first impression. Women fell for it every time. Dressed in Columbine-sheik, his black trench hit him at mid-calf and surrounded his lanky stature like a stiff shield.

Berto flicked his butt with measured force on to the grass field.

"Gross," I said, and mashed the lit butt into the ground. Cosi came over to see what the fuss was about. That's when Berto straightened his arms out east to west, and started to walk like his legs were fence posts cemented in dress shoes. "Monster," he said to Cosi, and took two or three steps in her direction.

Cosi knew this game. We played it all the time, but her Uncle Berto was a new player. She took the bait and started to gallop at G-force speed in a sweeping circle around my brother and I. When Cosi ran, it was like she hooked into the gravitational force of a merry-go-round on crack. She cut so close to the ground she was eyeball to eyeball with grass blades. Her jowls wobbled over

her jawbone. She was in her zone. I sat in the middle of the circle and watched the two of them perform the steps to this familiar ritual.

Berto had come to live with me a month earlier. He'd been cursed by being the favored child of our parents. Their indulgence resulted in a 40 year old man and heroin addict from age 17 and all that accompanies such an existence such as thievery, larceny, and duplicity, a Baby-Huey of a man who had no clue how to survive in the world.

I knew or I thought I knew what I was getting into when I agreed to take him in. I said yes because he was my little brother; I said yes because I loved him, because I had a thing for helping others, but mostly I said yes because I thought if I said yes my parents would love me a little bit more. I was wrong on all counts, except that I loved my brother.

Watching Berto play with Cosi that day, dressed for a world constructed in the secret, sore places of a junkie's mind, I loved my brother more than I had ever loved him. For both of us, I think, that moment was a reprieve from the sick, suffering narrative we called "family," and as such, that moment became golden; its joy blossomed like a mushroom cloud, signed its sweet signature into both our hearts, and heralded the beginning of an end that was as destructive as the active volcano taking up the morning's sky.

