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Foliate Oak Literary Magazine



Brother's Keeper

by **Norbert Kovacs**

Most of the Pearson family and its relations were chatting over lunch under the canopied tents next to the pines when Justin, the younger Pearson son, collapsed by the hill. His brother Reggie, the only one to see, came quickly from the drink table where he had gone to fetch a lemonade for their uncle. He found Justin lying face down on the ground, his head lolling on its side as if lifeless. He can't be, Reggie thought, moaning inwardly. He went and raised his brother from the ground, cupped an arm around his loose torso, and led him to the unused picnic table near the parking lot. As they went, Reggie turned his hard, mustached face to check if any of their relatives saw that he was carrying away his brother. He relaxed finding none did.

Reggie had meant the reunion, organized with his cousin Patrick, to be a happy event, free of trouble. His brother, Reggie had known from the start, posed a serious risk it might not. Justin did a poor job of keeping himself in order at any time. Growing up, he had not gotten along with other kids, landing in fights and sulking even around friends. While he had done okay academically, he had quit school early, calling the classroom "pointless" for him. He had gone on to become a clerk at a small music store on the Post Road where he revealed little promise of success. He yelled at his boss, a strict, heavy fellow, and even the customers in his worst moods. All the while, he was racking up debt he gave no hint of paying. His life seemed a mess. However, Justin was his brother and Reggie had to invite him with their three dozen other relatives to the reunion. No way around it, Reggie thought beside himself.



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When Justin had arrived for the event at the chosen park in Hamden, Reggie's faith vanished that his sibling might survive the day without grieving the family. Clad in a black T-shirt and dingy, denim shorts, his dark hair uncombed, Justin stood out badly from their relatives who had come in plainer, quieter style. His attitude seemed out of sorts, too, his dark eyes dazed, his face very white. His steps wavered almost like he were drunk. Reggie tensed, watching him approach from the parking lot. However, Justin waved hello to Reggie rather than come talk and kept his distance through the day.

Reggie was glad Justin did not create any pressing problems as the event continued. In fact, he forgot his brother, wandering among the pines, as he spoke with their kin at the reunion tent. He became comfortable with his Uncle Sinclair, another corporate manager like himself, as he proudly mentioned his employer's prospects for profit. He asked his cousin Anne, a marketing star, about the condo she newly had refurbished. Over a sherbet with cousin Tim, he discussed the politics of town. He liked conserving with them all, but his favorite proved Aunt Joan. Joan, a small, gray-haired woman, had contended with cancer and undergone chemo in the past year. She told Reggie about the adjustments forced on her. "God, the pain I went through," she said, her head lowering. Reggie listened quietly, his eyes intent on her careworn face. He sensed a new kind of bond building as he spoke with his aunt and many of their other relatives, much as he had hoped in organizing their day together. When his brother collapsed, he had to forget everyone else, his attempts to forge connections, and go help him. To the older sibling, it seemed the worst thing that might have happened that day.

Reggie seated Justin on one end of a bench at the covered table by the parking lot and sat on the bench across him. Justin's eyes, he saw, had lost focus, his complexion paled. The fellow raised his head slowly from its slump as if he were exhausted.

"That didn't look good back there," Reggie said, his face hard on his brother's. "How are you feeling?"

"Bit out of it, I guess."

"What does that mean?"

"I smoked a joint before coming here."

Reggie's head began to ache. Of all things, he thought. "Are you kidding?" he said.

Justin frowned. "Why would I say it if I didn't?"

"You did that when you knew all our family would be here?"

"Yes, I did. I didn't feel very good this morning, so I did." Justin hesitated, turning aside, and added, "Maybe I wasn't thinking too clearly."

"And so you thought to come? When everyone would see you a mess?"

"I wasn't going to stay from family; definitely not our parents. I thought I'd be okay by now. I'm not."

"It wasn't a good choice. you're in no shape to stay. It'd worry too many of our family to find you like this. Why don't I take you home? You're across town, aren't you?"

Justin's dark eyes swam as if lost. He seemed not to care about his brother's question. "Fine," he said at last. "Take me home, if you like."

Reggie stood and went to the main tent where most of the family sat talking. A kind smile on his lips, he told his cousin Patrick, who was supervising, that he had to take Justin home

"for something" but would return. He went back to the small picnic table, helped his brother walk, stumbling, to his Audi and get inside, then drove them from the park. Reggie sat upright before the wheel as Justin slumped beside him, his head leaning toward the passenger side window.

"I hope going home proves something to you," Reggie said as they followed the long avenue toward Justin's apartment. "You really can't see our family in this condition. What do you think they'd feel knowing you came on drugs? That you can't respect them. That you don't care. They expect you to be grown up, Justin. They were."

Justin slumped in his seat and did not reply. Reggie went on, working himself up. He felt the bright blue of the lake by the road urged him. "And how about what I feel? I organized the reunion. Saw to renting the field in the park. Bought the stuff for the barbecue. I asked everyone to come."

"Yes, it was a lot," Justin said, his voice low and bored.

"I can't believe you showed up like you did after all I planned. It's like you meant to undermine me."

Justin slumped even lower in his seat and Reggie trusted he had made his point. When they reached Justin's apartment complex, a limestone building from the sixties dull with age, Reggie parked near the entry, got out, and opened the passenger-side door for his brother. "Let me help you up," he said and reached with his strong arms.

As Reggie did, Justin drew upright with an effort. "I don't need it," he said and got out of the car carefully but without trouble.

Reggie thought this a good if sudden change after his state in the park. However, shutting the car door, he said, "Let me go with you to your room to be sure you're okay."

Justin's face grew uneasy. He motioned silently toward the entry as if to signal that Reggie could come if he really wished. The two entered the building, took the elevator up, and stepped out on the fifth floor. As they walked toward Justin's room, Reggie kept close at his brother's side to see that he would not fall again. He is on drugs after all, he thought. He *could*. After they passed a few doors of the hall, Justin tensed and scowled.

"Here, you don't have to be right on me," he said. "Like I'll run."

His brother's sharp tone caught Reggie off guard. "Sorry about that," he said, trusting that Justin had spoken in an ill mood. He put a larger gap between them, and they walked on quietly, neither speaking to the other.

At Room No. 516, Justin unlocked and opened the door, and the two brothers went inside. Justin passed down the short corridor that led to the living room and crashed on the orange sofa, kicking up his legs. Reggie looked around as he stepped into the room. He had never been in his brother's apartment. Justin had invited him over once or twice after he had moved from their parents', but Reggie had found easy excuses to stay away: a presentation due, a date already planned. His first survey of the room showed him a regular pig sty. Soiled shirts and crumpled jeans lay scattered about the floor. Empty Chinese food boxes dabbed in sauce. Several grease stains spotted the beige wall-to-wall carpet. Old smoke had tinged the bookcase and hanging photos

"What a mess," Reggie said. He went toward the kitchen off the living room and found dirty dishes piled in the sink. By the stove, an unclean towel sat bunched in a ball. "Where do you keep your garbage bags?" he asked, addressing the kitchen rather than his brother.

"What for?" An edge had come into Justin's voice.

"To clean up." Without waiting for his brother to reply, Reggie opened the small door

beneath the sink, the spot where he kept his own trash bags at home, and discovered an open box of them tucked beside the garbage pail. He pulled out a long, white bag, returned to the living room, and went to picking up the junk that littered the floor. "What a mess you live in," he said, as he cast a greasy, empty box of Chinese takeout into the bag. "You need to take some more pride in your place. Or at least be sanitary."

Justin bowed his head into his hand, as if he had a headache. "Reggie, don't be like this," he said.

"But what do your friends say about this place when they come and see all this junk?" Reggie asked, chucking a taco boat into the white bag. "Or what about your landlord?" Reggie liked that he had said this. There seemed a kind of power in the landlord's name and he made to wield it. "How about what he would think?"

"Don't, Reggie." Justin bowed his head more into his hand, so that his brother could not see his face.

Reggie felt moved at the effect his words brought. He said with new emphasis, "He might throw you out."

Justin sat up. His face had hardened, and he glared at his brother and yelled, "REGGIE, STOP!"

This shout after his brother's apathy that afternoon arrested Reggie to the spot. His eyes fixed on Justin in fear. He is in pain, he realized. Justin scowled and went on, his voice raised:

"You don't live here. You've never visited. You don't care!" He struck his own chest. "I live here and you don't! You don't even *KNOW* me anymore!"

Reggie felt as if he had been slammed into the ground. He shook his head with a weak motion. "What are you saying? I know you. You're my brother."

"We don't talk," Justin said, his voice falling. His pale face held on his brother's as his eyes burned ruddy and dark. "Except like once a year at holidays, we haven't. I've gone through a lot you don't know. I had a best, good friend. You don't know him. Ron the clerk in the store next to mine. He and I used to meet and share lunch in the back of my store. He was the nicest guy; he'd give me part of his sandwiches when I didn't even ask. He moved out of state and for some reason, I can't find out what's happened to him. He's not the type to go and cut ties with anyone he knew. I'm worried something's happened to him. There's my friend Sally. She sings in the local band where I play guitar. She used to make the other musicians and me laugh all the time. Sally's been seeing this guy, Rich. And now she comes to rehearsal exhausted and has bruises on her arms. I try and get her to say what's happened, to say anything, but she won't. I think she's scared. Since everything with Ron and Sally, I've had it bad. I don't stay home. I go out I don't where. Sometimes, I find myself in the park wandering and can't think. I don't know what's gone wrong with my very best, good friends. I got into pot I guess because of it....But you don't care, do you? How could you understand?"

Reggie held silent. He had not imagined his younger brother, the resistant one, the youth who quit school finding it useless, could suffer like this over anyone else. He had believed Justin cared for little beyond loud music, lazing around, and doing the most to have his family dislike him. It had made sense to dismiss Justin as abnormal and not dwell on him. Reggie saw now he had been wrong. Justin had suffered and was struggling. It was something like their Aunt Joan had done facing her cancer, he realized, recalling his talk with her that afternoon. He'd had to endure in pain just like their elder. Justin's words weighed on him as he stood motionless in the junk-strewn room. When he spoke, his voice came small and as if from a distance.

"I didn't guess you were going through this. I'm sorry. I should not have yelled."

Justin leaned back in his seat, jerking his face toward the corner. Reggie lowered his eyes. He thinks all I'm saying is cheap, he thought. We have *not* spoken a good while.

"It sounds rough for you," Reggie continued, hoping to be heard. "I don't know what to say. But I think I should try to help. When you're like this, you need someone. Showing up to meet our family on pot is a problem. It might have been worse than fainting." He turned aside. "I have to go and check on the reunion. I don't think Patrick could fare that well this long without me."

Justin lost more of his color and made to stand. "You'd like me to show you out th--"

"Wait. After I'm done there tonight, I can come back. Would you be here?"

"You actually want to come back?"

"I do."

Justin drew still and studied his brother. He seemed ready to scowl again. To not believe, as Reggie thought. However, the young man said, "I'll be here." He sat down on the sofa, his back straight against the cushion, as his older sibling went alone to the door. I will have to be gentle with him tonight, Reggie thought. And do something for him. It might be smart if we went somewhere. A quiet place where we might talk without distraction. Reggie passed from his brother's apartment into the open hallway and left to see to their family.

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