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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