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My Brother's Keeper



Finalist

I remember my big brother crying through most of his boyhood. The brother who didn't cry—I'd pat his shoulder while he sobbed over things he couldn't explain. But for the most part, we were happy kids. It's just that Phillip cried every day until he was about 17 years old.

I think the only thing we were missing was a pet. My parents said we couldn't afford a pet, and actually, there wasn't much that we could afford. Our clothes were second-hand, but no one would have known unless we told them. Mom shopped at Aldi's, and Phillip and I didn't know that our "Doritos" tasted like complete shit until we were well into high school. The two of us had a car we bought together with the little money we earned from working after-school jobs. I worked at the Dairy Queen, and Phillip worked right next door bagging at the Carey Heights Family Grocery. We parked the old Cutlass Supreme in the joint parking lot, and off we would slump to our jobs. I got to drive on the way home.

Phillip and I never talked about ourselves or anything important. We just did stuff together. We were those weirdo brothers who got along, and we looked alike, too. We both inherited our mother's dark-chocolate hair, pale skin and big brown eyes, but

everything just looked better on him. We are both pretty moley, something we inherited from our father, but mine showed up all lumpish on my eyelid and forehead. Meanwhile, Phillip's were placed as graceful beauty marks on his cheek and neck.

I don't know if we would have been that close if we'd grown up wealthy or even middle-class. Pulling our resources together, we would go out to eat with friends and share meals, and no one wondered if we were poor. They just thought we were twins or something, and we just wanted to eat the same thing.

One night after a high school basketball game, Phillip and I waited in Applebee's for our friends. We sat in the lobby and colored in Applebee's coloring books, the kind that try to teach children Applebee's is the only restaurant—an integral part of adulthood. We laughed loudly, drawing dicks and balls all over the Applebee's propaganda, and our commotion caught the attention of a small Down syndrome man. He politely introduced himself and said he wanted to color too. I jumped up and got him a fresh coloring book and more crayons and got him set up. I showed him how to draw a proper set of dick and balls, and made sure he didn't forget the occasional curly hair. His delicate eyes smiled as he giggled and slobbered on my shoulder. But Phillip stopped coloring and moved to the other side of the bench to watch. This kind of behavior wasn't out of the ordinary for him, because Philip didn't like strangers. Easily awkward, I could tell the Down's man made him nervous.

Phillip was quiet throughout the meal. He pushed his food around his plate and sulked, but not in the way a child mopes for attention, Phillip wasn't trying to hustle anything out of anyone—he could never help the way he felt. On our way out, we saw the Down's man again. He hugged and kissed me on the cheek and didn't want to let go. Who must have been his parents peeled him off and apologized. As Phillip and I drove home, I watched his face alternate between distress and confusion. I asked him what was wrong.

“You're just a really good person,” he said.

I think it would have benefitted Phillip to have a pet when he was a kid—a dog, a cat, a fish, something. Phillip was seventeen the last time I watched him cry. He had brought home a puppy, but our parents told him to take it back to wherever it came from. He said he made enough money at Carey Heights to buy dog food, but our parents argued that it wasn't enough. They said we didn't understand

all the hidden costs of a pet and they weren't going to end up footing the bill. I defended Phillip and offered to pick up extra shifts at Dairy Queen to help pay for these costs—so mysterious to me then—but they shook their heads. Phillip gave the puppy to one of the teachers at school. We never saw it again, but that dog ended up living something crazy, like twenty-years. It died of natural causes.

By the middle of Phillip's senior year, he had stopped speaking to our parents almost entirely. I don't think it was about the dog, I don't think it was about anything—really. He just grew moody and restless. One afternoon while our parents were gone, Phillip and I lounged around watching reruns of *M*A*S*H*. There was a knock at the front door and I stood to answer it. Phillip jumped up and threw his hands out at me, pausing them midair. He lowered his voice and gritted through his teeth, "No! Do not answer that!"

"Whoa. What's going on?"

"Shut up!" In a hushed voice, he managed to come across as screaming. "What is *wrong* with you?"

No second knock came, but we stood like that for several minutes, the pulse in my throat the only movement between the two of us. Phillip eventually sat down like nothing unusual had happened, and I went to the front window to peer out through a crack in the blinds—must have looked insane from the street. On the doorstep was a brown UPS package. It ended up being a delivery for our mom, just a box full of discounted cooking utensils.

Phillip moved out as soon as he graduated high school. He came home only once, and that was on Christmas morning. He stayed an hour, just long enough to open presents—half of which he left behind on our parent's living room floor. I spent weekends at his house watching TV on a secondhand couch that smelled like cigarette smoke. I did see my brother a lot that year, but looking back, I guess he never went out of his way to see me.

The weekend after I graduated high school, I moved out of my parents' house and in with Philip and three of his friends. Early spring, the house was moist and trashed. The other guys were nice, but no one spoke to me more than polite small talk. Phillip kept to himself, locking the door of his room and passing through the house on his way out to work. He would appear in the kitchen, an apparition stirring Rice-A-Roni in a small pot, and he would smile at me almost gratefully. Occasionally, early in the morning, I'd run into

a pretty girl on the way to the bathroom, but I never really knew if she belonged to my brother or one of the others.

One day that winter, Phillip arrived home after work so happy I'd describe him manic. He was never diagnosed with bi-polar disorder; he was never diagnosed with anything. But he appeared so overjoyed, I remember feeling afraid. He whistled through the house and up the stairs and into my room. He leaned his forearm on my doorframe and wore a contorted smirk.

"Hey buddy, let's go for a ride."

"Ha, okay. Where we headed?"

He grinned. "Kittens. *Baby* kittens."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope. A girl at work knows a lady who has a whole litter. Let's go get some."

"The landlord doesn't mind?"

"Fuck 'em."

We drove almost 30 miles outside of Carey Heights, arriving at an old farmhouse. A middle-aged woman in overalls and scraggly hair escorted us to her back porch.

"Now they need their shots. They ain't got their shots yet." I nodded politely and assured her it wouldn't be a problem. I picked up each kitten out of the wooden crate and kissed the tops of their smelly heads and patted their tiny butts. Phillip grabbed an all-black kitten much skinnier than the others, and named her Clove. I decided on a round, gray kitten with a milk mustache. I named him after the mustached man who smiled on the JARVIS LAW OFFICE billboards and who looked like a friendly walrus.

Jarvis was a happy little guy. He played and followed me around, he used his litter box, and he even slept with me. Clove, on the other hand, was odd. She pissed and shit in Phillip's closet and spent most of her time hiding underneath his bed. I tried holding her, but she grew more hostile each day. Phillip and I would bring the kittens together, but Jarvis ignored her and opted to play with my fingers. Despite how bizarre Clove was, she pleased Phillip. It actually seemed appropriate that he would have a cracked-out little kitten.

The following week Phillip worked doubles at the grocery, so I decided to check on Clove. I opened Phillip's door and nearly choked on the smell of cat shit and vomit. I tied one of his t-shirts around

my face and tended to the hot mess permeating his confined room and closet. I scooped up gooey cat diarrhea through plastic Carey Heights' grocery sacks. I poured vinegar all over the hardwood floor and scrubbed it with a thousand paper towels. I changed the litter in the cat box, though it had been unused. I changed the water in Clove's bowl and mixed some chicken broth in with her dry food. When I got down on my hands and knees to check for her underneath the bed, I saw a puny, black clump breathing heavily in the far corner. As I crawled under and grabbed her, I was met with an agonizing cry of pain.

I pulled her out and saw an ugly sore on the back of her elbow. It was raw flesh, and some of her fur missing. My hands shook, dropping her in that moment of panic, she dashed back underneath the bed. I ran out of Phillip's room and called him several times. When he called me back, he was furious.

"What the fuck, Ryan. What do you want? I am at fucking work—"

"Phillip, it's Clove, she has a—"

"—who? What are you talking about? Are you seriously calling me at work over a goddamned cat?"

"No, listen, it's serious. Her skin is like peeling or something..."

Click.

I waited for Phillip to come home but he never did that night. I didn't see him until the next afternoon, and his eyes were bloodshot—he looked deranged.

"Phillip, we need to talk. Right now."

"Seriously? You're a roommate now, Ryan. You can't demand..."

"You better take Clove to the vet before I do. Okay? There is something wrong with her skin and it looks really painful and it's making me sick just thinking about it."

"Yes, I will take her." Phillip waved at me. "Stop worrying."

"You'll take her now?" I asked suspiciously.

"I will take her when I wake up from this nap. Okay? A couple of hours will not make a difference at this point."

I should have just taken her myself. I should have done a lot of things differently, but I was a dumb and broke, selfish nineteen-year-old, worried I wouldn't have enough money in my savings account to pay for the visit. I barely had enough money for rent or gas. I

decided she wasn't *mine* and justified that negligence to myself. After all, Jarvis was fine. I took care of him and paid attention to him. He had a room full of toys. He had wet food and dry food and tuna treats. He was healthy and funny and everyone in the house loved him. So, I put Clove out of sight and out of mind. She was a runt, and Darwin was right.

Phillip and I returned to normal. We watched sitcoms together and shared Hamburger Helper meals, and gossiped about girls who parked their cars in the Carey Heights' lot. He didn't offer up any free information about Clove, and I didn't ask. I'd say about a week-and-a-half went by before curiosity got the best of me. I walked to his room and tried to seem casual about it, but the truth is, I was nervous.

His room no longer smelled like shit and I was comforted by the fact that Clove must've been using the litterbox. But when I checked, it was immaculate. I peered underneath his bed and saw Clove crouched in her corner. She didn't squirm when I grabbed her; she was warm, soft, and subdued. She was even smaller than I remembered, and when I pulled her into the light, I was horrified. All the fur on her left back leg was missing, and her flesh raw and oozing. I gently touched the place where her inner thigh met her belly and some of her fur just slid off. She moaned a little and stared up at the ceiling. I screamed.

Phillip appeared in the doorway, his eyes ashamed and worried. "What...what is going on, Phillip?" I wailed.

He winced. "What is it? Ryan?"

"You never took her to the vet, did you? Did you? Goddamnit, Phillip, look at her! Just look at her." A steady stream of tears flowed over my cheeks, and I rubbed her tiny nose with my pinky. "We have to take her and we have to take her now—right now. Let's go. I'm getting my shit and I'm driving and we're fucking leaving."

I placed Clove on a towel in the middle of the floor and she just laid there. She didn't move or bother to readjust herself. I walked past Phillip, shoulder bumping him as I headed to my room for my keys and wallet.

"Ryan, wait. Buddy? Stop. We can't take her to the vet."

"What? We have to." I thought about her tiny skull and how her ears just fell. "She is clearly in a lot of pain and might even be dying, Phillip. What is wrong with you?"

“We can’t take her. They’ll call the police. They’ll arrest us.”
Phillip’s eyes were pleading.

“Why would they arrest us? We’ll just tell them we didn’t know it was this bad. That it just...it just got way worse overnight.”

“No, Ryan. I did it.”

I blinked. “You did what?”

“I’ve been burning her with a lighter.”

I pushed back the damp, sweaty hair from my face and stared at the hardwood floor.

“I don’t know, buddy. I don’t know why. I just did. I just sat there and did it.”

My mouth was open, the room still.

“Please. Please, help me, Ryan.”

“Okay,” I said, unable to look at him. I looked at every corner and every empty space in that room, but not at Phillip. I remember I didn’t want to even speak his name. “Okay, yes. We cannot take her to the vet. But we have to do something.”

“Yes, you’re right.” I could hear the relief in Phillip’s voice and it made me sick. He eagerly asked, “What should we do? How should we do it?”

“Nope. Wrong.” I madly shook my head. “How are *you* going to do it? I’m not touching this. I’ll have no part in this—”

“—okay, bud, it’s okay, you don’t have to. I’ll do it.”

I closed my eyes and covered all of my face with my hands. “Just smother her or something. Strangle her.”

“No, I can’t *do* that!” Phillip jumped around like a child who didn’t want to visit Grandma’s house. “No, Ryan, I can’t do that! Please!”

“Oh fuck you, Phillip. You can burn her legs with a fucking lighter but you can’t put her out of her misery?”

Phillip fell silent. I looked at him and saw my brother—saw him whole. I said, “Alright, I guess you don’t need to do that. It’s... I guess it’s too close, even for you.”

The events that followed—the plan I orchestrated—were difficult for me to comprehend. I don’t like to think that that person exists somewhere inside me. I don’t like knowing he is in there. I told myself I was innocent, because I didn’t actually physically do any of it. The only thing I physically did was walk into the kitchen, retrieve two plastic grocery sacks from underneath the sink and hand them to

my brother. From there on, I merely proposed a plan. I look back on that day and tell myself I was being pragmatic. I don't know if I did the right thing, but I haven't convinced myself I didn't do the wrong thing either.

I told Phillip to drive to an isolated location, maybe the parking lot behind the abandoned Methodist Church. I told him to park the car and wrap Clove in the grocery sacks, and to be sure to tie the bags tightly so she couldn't wriggle away. I told him to get out of the car, and place her just in front of the rear wheel. I told him to get back into the car. I told him to floor it.

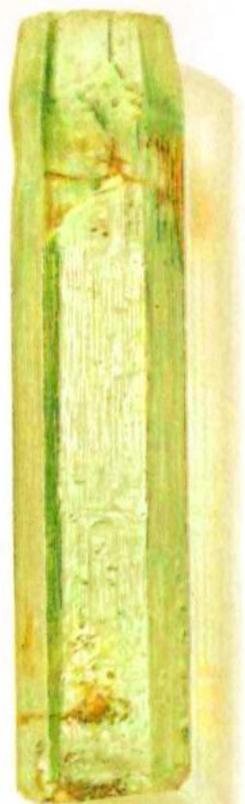
As I waited at home, I tried to cry. I tried to cry for my brother, I tried to cry for Clove's short life. I tried to cry and feel sorry for myself. But when Phillip returned, I looked up and we were both completely dry-eyed.

"How did it go?"

"I didn't get her the first time." And he went to his room and shut the door.

A few weeks later, I came home from work and Jarvis walked toward me sideways. His nose ran green mucous, and his mouth locked open in an unforgettably haunting position. I immediately took him to the humane society where they told me he had caught distemper and needed to be put down. When they asked why I never brought him in for vaccinations, I said I couldn't afford them.

That summer I moved out and got an apartment with my now-wife. My relationship with Phillip deteriorated, eventually ceasing to exist at all. He stopped showing up at family functions, stopped calling on holidays and birthdays, and my parents and I stopped asking if we talked to him. I think he's a chef now. Someone told me several years ago he moved to Maine to live and cook at some mountain resort. The last I heard, he had beaten up his girlfriend and put her in the hospital and he's really sorry about it. And I just wonder if he cried.



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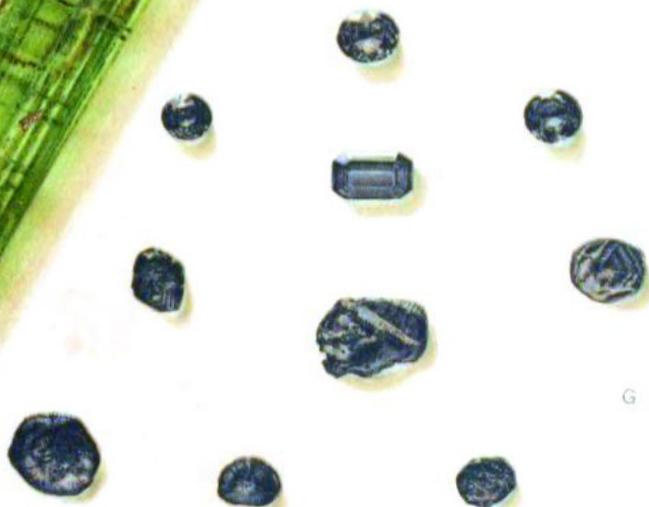
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