

My Cousin's Keeper

A short story by Neil S. Plakcy

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When my cousin Jenny came to live with me in Miami, she had shoulder-length blonde hair the color of sand at the end of the day which hung around her face in dirty clumps. As soon as she woke up in the morning she slathered on blue eye shadow and mascara but she never took a bath or shower and a rich fungal odor clung to her even after I convinced her to dunk into the pool with me.

I moved down to Miami about a year ago managing a store at Dadeland Mall and writing, trying to get some stories published in literary magazines. My uncle called me two months ago on a day when I'd had a rough time at work and come home to find two stories had been rejected.

"I've got a favor to ask of you, Lee," he said. "It's about Jenny."

Jenny was in a detox program at the Dade County jail but he could get her a conditional release if he could find a solid local citizen who would vouch for her and give her a place to live. He offered to pay my rent if I'd take her in. I figured that would allow me to quit work and concentrate on writing for a while so I said yes.

It was a bad idea. She resented me and my bourgeois drug-free life style. I resented her slovenly ways and her slow stupid manner. Every time

she went out I opened the windows wide and turned the fan on high, but I could never completely get the smell of her or the feel of her out of the place before she got back.

Every two weeks her parole officer stamped her card and Jenny got to stay out of detox for another fortnight. I knew she wasn't clean. But hell, I'm her cousin, not her keeper. I did set some rules. No drugs, dealers or dopers in my apartment. I let her smoke cigarettes, and she left the ashtrays full of stinking butts. She could drink, too, if she bought it, and she did. She slept late and then watched game shows with the volume turned up. "Why don't you go out and do something," I said.

"Get a job."

"You don't have a job, you sack of shit, so lay off me," she said. It was no use trying to convince her that writing was my job. On a bad day I ended up at the library, writing in longhand. On a good day, a man in an old car would come by, ring the buzzer and take her out to get high. There were a half a dozen different guys, and she got out every other day.

Jenny took over my spare room, the one I used as a study. I had to move my desk and computer into my bedroom, leaving her the sofa bed and a small wooden bookcase. She replaced my Impressionist reproductions with an enormous Grateful Dead poster and a Bob Marley concert poster decorated with marijuana leaves.

She scattered her clothes around the room. A black bra hung from the standing lamp, and there was a nest of dirty panties tangled up with shorts and jeans under the window. The bookcase was covered with rock concert T-shirts and the only books she owned were a history of reggae music and a couple of color travel books of Jamaica. Ashtrays filled with butts littered the floor, the windowsill and the back of the sofa bed.

I wanted to go in and cleanup that pigsty, but I held back. I hoped she would get tired of living that way one day, or at least she'd run out of clean clothes.

I was surprised the first time she was gone overnight. Technically she was supposed to be in my care, and if her parole officer paid a surprise visit and I couldn't locate her she'd be in deep shit. I knew she knew that.

"Aw, fuck off," she said when she came back and I yelled at her. "You just care about your fucking gravy train. You don't want my father to stop paying you."

"Damn right," I said. "You think I want to go back to work again?"

One night she dressed up and said, "I'm going to a concert. I might not be back tonight."

"What do you want me to do? Take an inventory of the needle marks on your arm and then count again when you come back?"

She gave me the finger and walked out. It was real quiet and nice while she was gone, almost like it used to be before she moved in. I got up

when I wanted, instead of being jolted awake by five hundred decibels of Ozzy Osborne. I washed the ashtrays, aired the place out, and tried to forget I ever knew Jenny.

I started to worry a little towards the end of the third day. I was due for another check from my uncle and I felt guilty about accepting his money if I didn't know where she was.

I thought about giving it up. I even looked at the help wanted ads in the newspaper. But I was hot on the trail of a novel and I didn't want to go back to work and lose it.

"Did ya miss me?" Jenny asked when she came in. She was wearing a T-shirt I'd never seen.

"Yeah, I could hardly take a good shit the whole time you were gone for worrying about you," I said.

"You're loosening up," Jenny said. "That's a good sign." She went into her room and went to sleep, still wearing all her clothes.

I didn't want to loosen up. I made myself promise not to use curse words around Jenny. After all, I was supposed to set a good example for her. She woke up around eleven, just after I'd finished a really good chapter of the novel.

We sat out on the balcony in the dark, drinking screwdrivers and talking about our parents. Hers were divorced, and her mother had walked

away a few years ago. "I get a card once in a while," she said. "Look, she's gotta get her shit together, just like me."

"I'll trade you," I said. My parents wouldn't let me go. They called two and three times a week, just checking in.

We sat up until four o'clock. It was the first time we really talked to each other. The next morning Jenny took a shower and asked me where the laundry room was.

A couple of days later she asked if she could read one of my stories. "If you want," I said. I chose a story I thought was pretty simple, without a lot of big words.

She liked it. We started to do little stuff together, like go to the grocery store or out for cigarettes. Sometimes we just got in the car and drove along the beach, up to Fort Lauderdale or down to the Keys.

Once in Key Largo she pointed to a bar. "We go there sometimes," she said. I looked at it, and knew I'd never go in there. It was just an old shed, with half a dozen motorcycles outside.

"You go there?" I asked.

"Maybe we go to a concert or a bar or over somebody's house," she said. "Or maybe there. They have music on the weekends, sometimes good bands. But I'll tell you something, Lee." She leaned over to me, and her beery breath didn't bother me. "When you're high they all sound good."

I was getting to like her. She had a sense of humor and sometimes she was fun to have around. One day I found her in the living room, reading a Hemingway novel. "This book's supposed to be good, right?"

"One of the best," I said.

"Yeah, I kind of like it," she said. "They drink a lot of wine and then they talk about screwing. I used to know a guy like that."

July was miserably hot, but I couldn't afford to run the air conditioning too much. "Come on, you gotta," Jenny said. She was laying on the floor in the living room, wearing a bra and panties, with the portable fan blowing on her, and she was still sweating. So was I.

"I can't," I said. "Money is tight and electric is expensive."

She got up in disgust and made a phone call. A half-hour later the buzzer rang, and she walked out. "See ya around," she said.

I took off my clothes and took her place on the floor, but it didn't help much. The heat wave held for days, and Jenny never came back. I started to worry. I told myself that if she came back, I'd run the air conditioning. What the hell, maybe I could get some temp work to cover the bills.

She had a date with her parole officer on a Tuesday at the end of the month, and I knew if she didn't make that they'd come after her. All day Monday I wondered what I could do. The only place I knew to look was that biker bar in the Keys, so finally around five I got into the car.

I didn't even think about what I'd say to her. I didn't expect to find her at all. I pulled up in front of the place and almost changed my mind. I was scared. There were five big bikes parked out front, and a couple of souped-up old clunkers. The juke box was blasting through the open door.

I sat in the car for a few minutes, and finally went in. It was dark inside, and while my eyes got accustomed I sat at the bar and ordered a rumrunner. After a few minutes I could look around, and I saw her, slumped over at a noisy table in the corner. There were four guys with her, and two girls. All of them looked mean.

I gulped the last of my rumrunner, feeling the 151°-proof rum burn down my throat, and walked over to the table. "Hey, Jenny," I said.

A fat, bearded guy with a dragon tattoo on his left arm looked up. "Somebody invite you over here?" he asked.

"She did," I said. "Hey, Jenny, wake up."

She looked up. "What the fuck you want?" she asked.

"I want to take you home. You've got parole tomorrow."

"I don't give a shit," she said, slurring her words.

"Yeah, well I do. So come on." I took her by the arm and tried to pull her out of her chair.

"Hey, you take your hands off her," the fat guy said.

"Stay out of this," I said. "She's my fucking cousin and my fucking responsibility. I'm taking her home."

He stood up. "You let her go or I'm gonna bust your ass."

"Fuck off," I said. He swung at me and I ducked. He smashed his hand into the wall.

"God damned mother fucker," he said. I got a good grip on Jenny while he shook his hand and swore, and I dragged her out to the car. No one else spoke or moved in the bar. I pushed Jenny into the car and went around to the driver's side. "Hold on there," the fat guy said. "You ain't getting away from here so easy."

"Watch me," I said. I jumped into the car, turned it on, and backed out fast into traffic. A car going south screeched its brakes and blew its horn— and I turned and headed north.

The fat guy ran for his car with two of his buddies following, and took off after me. "What kind of shit is this?" I asked Jenny.

"I don't know," she said. She slid back into a stupor.

"Lot of help you are," I said. I stepped on the gas. There was almost no traffic and I got up to eighty, skidding on the turns. The fat guy stayed on my tail. As we got into the Everglades the road narrowed to endless miles of two lanes and no passing zones.

"Come on, baby, keep it going," I said. I came around a corner and slowed down fast for a station wagon tooling along in front of me at forty-five. The fat guy moved up fast behind me and tried to bump me off the

road. There was a steady stream of traffic heading south so all I could do was lean on my horn.

I saw those Burma-Shave like signs that tell you a passing zone is up ahead, and the fat guy bumped me again. "Jesus Christ be with us," I said. we came to the passing zone. I stayed behind the wagon, going slow, and the fat guy bumped us again.

"Why don't you pass these guys?" Jenny asked.

"Hold your horses." Just as the road was narrowing I made my move. "Come on baby, do it for me," I said. We shot around the wagon and zoomed off down the road. The fat guy was stuck behind the wagon.

I did eighty all the way up the turnpike, and by the time we pulled into my parking lot I was exhausted and my hands shook.

"You did all right," Jenny said.

"Go to sleep," I said. "Your parole officer sees you like this tomorrow morning you're bouncing right back to detox."

I was scared the fat guy might show up, but none of Jenny's men came by for days. Jenny took a shower every day and combed her hair. I thought she was finally on track, until she started walking out again.

She'd get dressed up and leave, be gone for a few hours and then come back. I watched her closely but she always seemed sober. A week went by like that, and then one day she said, "I got something I want to show you."

I was sitting on the sofa reading. "What?"

"Look here."

She was holding up a piece of paper. "Don't make me get up, all right? Bring it over here."

It took me a minute to figure out it was a paycheck. "You got a job," I said. "You little slut."

She smiled. She walked over to the window, and pulled it shut. Then she turned on the air conditioning. "My treat," she said.

I sat back on the sofa, enjoying the cool air. "You're an angel from heaven," I said.

She sat down on the floor next to me. From that angle I realized she looked like my father, which meant she looked like me. "Yeah," she said. "The angel of air conditioning."