

My Brother's Keeper

The apartment complex Fred lived in turned out to be part of a retirement community. It was a low flat building where seniors could live in their own apartment but eat in a central dining room and get assistance with cleaning and other daily tasks. This was not a new complex by any means. The building needed painting, the carpet was worn, and the whole place had a slightly musty smell to it, but it was clean and it looked like people cared for it. I was more than a little surprised to be here, as I hadn't seen Fred since he took an early retirement almost ten years ago. He had been my supervisor when I first started with the company and had tried to be a mentor, but he'd never moved very far up the corporate ladder so there wasn't a lot I could learn from his career. We'd exchanged the usual promises of "call if you need anything" when he retired and we traded Christmas cards for a few years, but we soon drifted out of touch. His call yesterday was the first I'd heard from him in several years. After a few pleasantries he asked me to come visit him. He apologized for the inconvenience, but at the same time he was most insistent. I had a sales call to make out that way anyway so I agreed. As I knocked on his door I was beginning to have second thoughts. I was already feeling awkward and out of place, and he hadn't even opened the door yet.

I heard him call out that he was coming and then there seemed to be a long wait until I heard the bolt slide back on the door. The door opened and I was surprised to see him sitting in a wheelchair, with a bottle of oxygen at his side and a plastic tube under his nose. He looked like he'd aged several decades since I'd last seen him. He welcomed me in a hoarse voice and led me into his living room.

I felt uncomfortable sitting on his couch while he got me a glass of water, but he insisted on it. I suspected he sipped water almost all day long and he didn't want to drink in front of me. The couch had seen better days and the wood-grained vinyl was peeling off the pressboard end table. He brought me the water and we exchanged a few reminiscences about people we used to work with before he got down to business.

"I suppose you're wondering why an old man called you after so many years." He began. "The sad truth is that I never made many friends in my life, and most of the people I did know are dead or in a nursing home. My wife and I never had children, and ever since she died I've been living alone in this poor excuse for an apartment. I have a younger brother, but I can't talk to him about this for reasons that will become clear later. I know I haven't seen much of you for many years and I really don't like to impose, but I need you to do me a favor."

I shifted uncomfortably on the couch. I knew I was expected to say "Yeah, sure. Anything." But I didn't want to make any promises. He hadn't called me up after all these years to ask for something insignificant. I was struggling to think of something noncommittal to say when he continued, as though there had never been a pause.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to ask you to do anything difficult. It doesn't involve money and it's not illegal, but it is important. I'd ask someone here to do it but the staff

are just hired hands. They're nice, but I can't trust them with something this important. The people who live here, well, they're not going to be around much longer than I am." He paused, and now it was his turn to look uncomfortable. He seemed to be at a loss for words. He touched his shirt below the left breast pocket as though he was feeling for something, and then continued.

"I don't know how to say this. You'll think I'm a crazy old fool no matter how I say it, but I need you to believe me. Let me start at the beginning. Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"I've got a sister who lives in Detroit" I replied. "She's a couple of years older than I am."

"That might help you understand" he said. "I assume you love her now, but did you ever fight when you were little?"

"Yeah, we fought like cats and dogs" I said, glad that we were finally talking about something inconsequential. "She was always teasing me, and Mom let her do all kinds of stuff I couldn't do. When I hollered Kate would just look at me and say 'You're too little' in a whiney, insulting kind of way. So I'd put garlic in her shampoo, or draw moustaches in her movie magazines. You know, the stupid stuff that kids do."

"Stupid stuff, indeed." He seemed lost in sad thoughts for a moment. "I was an only child until I was seven. Then my mom had another baby. Mom and dad used to fuss over him all the time, but I certainly couldn't see what all the fuss was about. He looked stupid to me. He just lay there in his crib, drooling and making dirty diapers. The first time I ever got straight A's on my report card he threw up all over Mom and my report card while she was looking at it. It didn't get any better as he got older. He'd toddle around the house in a diaper and a tee shirt, sucking on his fist and drooling on everything. Once he went into my room and grabbed a model airplane I was working on. Broke it all to pieces. I swatted his hand for that, and Mom got mad at me. Not only did she yell at me for swatting him, she said I couldn't build models in the house any more because he might eat the glue."

"Of course I realize now this was just normal sibling rivalry, but I was just a kid then. I thought I hated my brother. I thought he had to be punished for being bad, and if Mom wasn't going to let me swat him I'd have to find a way she wouldn't know about. There was a strange old lady that lived a few blocks from us who had a sign in front of her house saying she was a palm reader. Madame Palmtry she called herself. The kids in the neighborhood said she did voodoo, so I decided to go see her."

"I never realized how creepy the house was until I walked up to the front door. The house itself was pretty plain but it was painted a pale lilac color with purple trim, which certainly made it stand out in our neighborhood. The paint was faded and peeling, the grass looked dead, and on either side of the door there was a gnarled thorn bush with only a handful of leaves. I almost lost my courage and turned back, but I knocked on the door.

A dark complexioned woman with dozens of bracelets and a gold snake wrapped around her upper arm opened the door. Her face fell when she saw I was only a kid.”

“Sorry, my child.” She said. “Whatever it is you are selling I do not want.” She started to close the door until I said I’d come on business. She looked at me quizzically, then opened the door and motioned me in.

“What business brings you to see Madame Palmtry?” She asked. “You wish me to read your palm? To tell you what the girls think of you?” I told her I wanted a voodoo doll of my brother.

“Oh, he must have been very bad for you to want such an evil thing.” She replied. “Or perhaps you do not know what it is you ask. What you want is not voodoo but hoodoo. It is a curse, but the person who owns the doll is as cursed as the person who is the target. You could cause your brother much misfortune with such a doll, but soon you would wish you had never touched it. No, I do not think you want this thing.”

“But can you do it?” I asked.

“Yes, yes Madame Palmtry can do it. But do not ask me to do such a thing.”

“How much?” I asked.

She looked at me with disdain. “How much money do you have?” she asked.

I pulled my money out of my pocket and counted it. “Seven dollars and twenty-three cents” I replied.

“That would never do” she said. “For such powerful magic you would have to pay fifty dollars. And you would have to bring me a picture of your brother, and a hair from his head and some spit. But this is nonsense. I have already said you do not want such a thing.” And with that she hustled me out of the door.

Fred stopped talking for a moment. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. I could hear the soft hiss of the oxygen flowing out of the tubing. Then he took a sip of water and continued talking.

“Of course \$50 was an impossible sum for a boy my age. I think she knew that and just named a figure that would get rid of me. In any event, I soon forgot all about it. The Little League season was just starting and I spent very little time in the house with my brother. Then it was my birthday. I got the usual cards with money from the out of town relatives, a new baseball from my Aunt Myrtle, and a bathrobe from my Grandma Parks. My mom and dad really floored me, though. They gave me the best present of all – a puppy!”

“I named him Raffles after a cartoon character and he followed me everywhere. He liked to fetch and we played tug of war with an old sock. Mostly we just chased each other around the yard. When I went to school or to baseball practice he’d mope around the house and then come running to greet me when I came back home, his tail wagging like mad.”

“One day after baseball practice I came in through the kitchen door and shouted ‘I’m home!’ My little brother came running in from the dining room to show me some picture he’d found in a book. The door to the dining room was half shut so he knocked it open as he ran through. Then, for some reason, he slammed it shut behind him. Raffles was running right behind him and the door hit him in the neck. He fell down dead in the doorway.”

Fred paused for a moment and closed his eyes again. I could tell that even after all these years the memory of that day was still painful to him. Then he continued.

“Things got kind of blurry after that. I was crying and screaming at my brother at the same time. He was crying. My mom came in and she started screaming at me for screaming at my brother. That’s what really hurt. She was holding him and trying to comfort him while she was yelling at me, and he was the one who killed Raffles! That night I added up all the money I’d gotten for my birthday together with the money I’d saved in my bank. It was just a little over \$30, so I did something I’d never done before. After everyone had gone to bed, I crept into the kitchen and stole a \$20 bill from my mom’s purse. I also stole a picture of my little brother. The next day when Mom wasn’t looking I tackled him and yanked a couple of hairs out of his head, and I threatened to yank some more out if he didn’t spit into a cup. Then I ran to Madame Palmtry’s house.

“She seemed surprised to see me. ‘You again?’ she asked. I just held out the money, the picture, the hair, and the cup with the spit in it. She got a pained look on her face, she almost looked frightened, and then she looked behind her. Most of her furniture was gone, and there were boxes filled with lamps and books and things. She looked back at me and said ‘Come in.’”

“She took me into the kitchen and then she disappeared for a minute. She came back with a sewing basket and a handful of straw. She took a scrap of cloth from the basket and quickly sewed it into a crude doll. She stuffed the doll with the straw, then she stuck in the hair and dribbled the spit into it. She burned the photograph and scraped the ashes into the doll. All the while she was reciting some strange kind of a poem. It almost sounded like a prayer.”

“Finally she turned and handed me the doll. ‘Be very careful with this’ she said. ‘You are your brother’s keeper.’ Then she hustled me out the door.”

“That night, after everyone was in bed, I stuck a pin in the doll. I expected to hear my brother yell, but nothing happened. Disgusted that I’d just spent \$50 on a hoax I tossed the doll onto my dresser and went to bed. Then, in the middle of the night, my mother

woke me up. “We need to take your brother to the hospital” she said. “He’s very sick.” She handed me my bathrobe and slippers and led me out to the car. My dad carried my brother out and laid him down in the back seat beside me. He was moaning and holding his stomach. His face looked pale and sweaty. I was scared out of my wits.”

“We took him to the emergency room, and they rushed him into surgery. Fortunately they were able to remove his appendix before it burst, but he still had to stay in the hospital for a couple of days. The next day I rushed back to Madame Palmtry’s with the doll. I wanted her to take it back, to remove the curse, but the house was empty.”

“A few weeks later I accidentally knocked the doll off my dresser and stepped on it while I was getting ready for a baseball game. During the game, while I was at bat, my parents were watching me and didn’t notice my brother had wandered off. He climbed a few rows higher in the bleachers, then fell off the edge and broke his leg.”

“By this time I was terrified of the doll. I took everything else off the top of my dresser and kept it there, on top of a little pillow. One day my brother didn’t come to dinner when Mom called, so we started searching the house for him. When I looked in my room I was horrified to see that Mom had cleaned it and the doll was no longer on top of the dresser. I found it in the top dresser drawer, where Mom had stuffed all the baseball cards, orphan socks, and other things she’d found lying around in my room. I carefully took it out and put it back on top of the dresser. A little while later my dad heard muffled crying from the spare bedroom. Somehow my brother had locked himself in the closet, along with the winter coats, jigsaw puzzles, and other odds and ends my parents were storing there.”

“After that I knew it wasn’t safe to leave it lying around, so I carefully tied it to a leather cord that I wore around my neck, underneath my clothes. I quit the baseball team so it wouldn’t get hit by a line drive, and I avoided beach parties and other events where I couldn’t keep it hidden. I’ve lived with that cursed thing around my neck for over 50 years, but it’s never again caused any problems for my brother. Now that I’m living alone I put it on my dresser at night, but I still like to keep it with me during the day.”

As he said this he reached under his collar and pulled out a leather cord with a small cloth doll attached to it. It didn’t look very impressive. It certainly didn’t look like something that had cursed two men for half a century, one of whom didn’t even know it existed. Fred continued.

“I tried to find someone who could remove the curse, but with no luck. Several people told me that only Madame Palmtry could remove the curse, but I’ve never been able to find even a clue as to her whereabouts. A few charlatans charged me money to remove the curse, quite a bit of money in one case, but they were frauds. And now I’m worried about what will happen to this doll and to my brother when I can no longer take care of it.” He looked me straight in the eye, and his eyes seemed to be pleading. “Will you take care of it?” he asked. “You don’t have to wear it or do anything at all except

keep it out in the open where it won't be disturbed. When my brother dies you can bury it."

I was caught completely off guard by his request. Up until this point he had just been a strange old man telling a tall tale. I didn't believe in voodoo, but I found myself unable to even touch the doll. I certainly didn't want to take responsibility for it for years to come.

"I, I don't know" I stammered. "I'll have to ask my wife. It's a big responsibility." This was weak and I knew it, but it was the first excuse I thought of. I couldn't say no to those pleading eyes, but I didn't want take the doll. The pleading look disappeared from his eyes and was replaced by one of resignation.

"I understand" was all he said. We talked a bit longer about the office and the current business climate, but neither one of us was really interested in the conversation. I looked at my watch and made an excuse about needing to meet with a client. As I left the apartment and heard the door close behind me I let out an involuntary sigh of relief.

I didn't say anything to my wife about the visit. She only knew Fred slightly and I didn't want her to start worrying that he was losing his mind. Besides, his story about the doll had given me the creeps and I wanted to put it behind me as fast as possible. Over the next couple of weeks, though, I found that was impossible. The memory of Fred and that cursed doll kept haunting me at odd hours of the day and night. Finally I told my wife about the visit. To my surprise, she suggested I call Fred and tell him we'd take the doll.

"I don't believe there's really any curse on it" she said, "but it's obvious that Fred believes in it. He's really worried about it and it would mean so much to him if you'd take it. It wouldn't be any trouble for us. We can just stick it in the guest room and forget about it."

The next day I tried to call Fred, but there was no answer. There was no answer the day after that, either, so I decided to stop by the apartment that afternoon after I called on a client. When I walked up to his apartment I found the door was open and all the furniture was gone. A lady in a maid's uniform was vacuuming the carpet. When she turned off the vacuum I rapped on the door frame.

"Excuse me" I said. "Do you know where Fred is?"

She looked at me with a guarded expression. "Are you a friend of his?" she asked.

"Not really. I used to work with him years ago, but we were never close. I just wanted to talk to him for a minute."

Her expression turned to one of sadness. "Mr. Peterson died in his sleep Sunday night." She said. "The funeral was yesterday. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this."

“I’m sorry to hear that” I replied, with a growing sense of unease. “Do you know what happened to his things?”

“His brother came by this morning and cleaned out the apartment” she said. “He didn’t stay long. I think he was in a hurry to catch a plane. He took some photographs from the living room and a few papers from the desk, and he called the Salvation Army to pick up the furniture.”

“Do you if he took a small doll with him? It probably would have been on the dresser?”

“I didn’t pay much attention to what he took” she replied, while coiling up the cord to the vacuum cleaner. “I was cleaning the kitchen at the time. All I saw him take were some papers and pictures. He didn’t take much, though. Just a few things that fit in his duffle bag. He carried most of the stuff down to the dumpster. All the clothes and razors and stuff.”

“Which dumpster?” I asked, trying not to sound panicky.

“The one by the back door” she replied. “But it’s gone now. They pick it up every day, just after lunch.”

“Where do they take it? The county landfill?”

“Uh-uhh.” She had set the vacuum cleaner aside and was cleaning the windows. “We don’t have a landfill any more. They built an incinerator a couple of years ago. My brother-in-law works there. They got a big conveyor belt that carries the trash way up in the air and then it falls down and burns.”

My blood froze as I pictured the doll going up the conveyor belt. “You said Fred’s brother was in a hurry to catch a plane. Did he say where he was flying?”

“He didn’t say nothin’” she replied. “Not to me anyway. I just guessed he had to catch a plane because he had his uniform on. He’s an airline pilot.”