

Brother's Keeper

It was a late Thursday night in November when I spotted a dead raccoon on the side of the road – except that the dead raccoon was actually a man's muddy tennis shoe and the man wearing it was lying face down in an embankment. Frost was forming on the grass around him while wind licked at his jacket and long hair.

"Are you ok??" I slowed to a stop and shouted from my open window, angling for the curb. The man moaned, wet and guttural, but his tennis shoe didn't move. "Are *you ok??*" I repeated once more, with feeling, shutting off my radio. Perhaps I should have leapt from my car to help – door wide open, heat still on. But it was 11:30 at night on a poorly lit road just outside of Detroit. *Safety first*, they say.

I dialed 911 to try and rescue him or the both of us – depending on how things panned out. He wasn't wearing gloves and his fingers could barely bend by the time I kneeled next to him. He said that he'd been hit by a Jeep. He said his leg hurt really badly. He said his name was Joe.

Moments later, a State Trooper pulled up in his car – suspicious of my Honda with its flashers blinking on 8 Mile Road. I'll never forget how he pulled a stethoscope right out of his coat pocket and began checking Joe's vital signs. *A stethoscope*, I noted to myself, thinking of the assorted screwdrivers, manuals, and burgundy fleece blanket permanently stored and passing time in the trunk of my car. *Maybe that could save a life*. But then Joe's heart rate dropped and all I could see were the whites of his eyes. I grabbed the blanket from the trunk of my car and wrapped it tightly around Joe's torso – stretching the corners over his hands. The Trooper remained perfectly calm but suddenly I was the one moaning, choked and helpless, "No, no, no..." over and over.

The blanket went with Joe into the ambulance. His parents arrived in time to see him loaded in on a stretcher after hearing the sirens from the nearby Extended Stay Inn. They said that they were living there temporarily because Joe had lit a fire in their kitchen that burned their house down. They said that he had left hours ago to go for a walk. They said he was bipolar. His mother gripped the cuffs of her sweater while his father just hung his head.

I didn't expect to see the blanket again, honestly. It was just a generic Christmas gift from my aunt and uncle who'd also given me burned CD's of the entire Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir collection. I took it on camping trips through the Sequoia National Forest and on a date with a guy who confessed mid-picnic meal that he was still married. It felt right to release it to a higher purpose. Honorable, even.

That's when the calls started. First it was Joe's mom – thanking me for saving her son's life and for being "God's guardian angel". She wanted to return the blanket, which I found sweet even if completely unnecessary. But she kept calling – saying that God had brought us together for specific reasons and that Joe could really use some positive influences in his life. My mom would have said the same thing, I'm sure, and perhaps I would have, too, many years earlier. Back when we believed that my older brother, Dave, suffered from something that could be fixed by the Holy Ghost. Back when we thought that God would make him well if we just prayed hard enough. Back when we didn't have a name for his actual condition: schizophrenia.

But that was years ago and I had stopped praying. I responded to Joe's mom by not responding at all.

And then Joe started calling. He left voicemail messages on my phone that ambled along slow corners and conversation points. He said that he wanted to thank me personally. He said that he didn't know anyone in town. He said that he was glad that God wanted us to be friends.

Perhaps I was a bit more gullible then but mostly I felt guilty. Guilty that Dave had been wandering the streets of DC homeless for more than a year. Guilty that no one could find him – not me, not my mom, not even a State Trooper. Guilty that my own mother would desperately want to thank someone in my shoes had Dave been the one shivering on the ground. So I drove back to that stretch of 8 Mile Road and parked beside a white and rusting Chevy van in the Extended Stay Inn's parking lot.

The blanket was folded neatly on a nightstand and warm from the radiator when I walked in. Joe's mom beamed and sat me down in a stiffly upholstered chair while Joe's dad read the paper. I can't remember if Joe spoke or not. I can't remember much of anything other than wanting to get out of there. Once they started asking where I lived, where I went to church, and if I had time to visit more regularly – I started to feel a little bit faint. Or maybe it was just the uncanny resemblance he had to Dave – same age, same dark unkempt hair, same wire-rimmed glasses and same mercurial smile tethered to an unpredictable sea. Joe's mom said to come by anytime. Joe said to give him a call. Joe's dad said nothing.

And that's when I buried the blanket for good in a box that only resurfaced just recently nearly six years later in a bag bound for Goodwill. I never replaced it and I never called them back. Maybe it was the fear of getting caught up in someone else that I might lose. Or shame for not really knowing how to save anyone after all.