A Secret Between Brothers

A short story by Henry Cavanaugh

Jack was happy that he came from a family with good genes because he had never really struggled to get the attention of guys but sometimes he felt like an afterthought in the presence of his older brother Sean. Jack was good looking in an everyday sense but Sean always looked like he'd just fallen straight off of the runway and was the object of affection of every person he ever met. Most people barely even noticed Jack when Sean when he was around and although he had put up with it for twenty-two years, Jack's envy was reaching near-critical levels.

At a party with a number of their friends, Jack found himself falling into bitterness as he watched one of the guys he had been crushing on for months all but mounting Sean and acting like putty in his hands. Jack knew that his brother respected him and would never do anything to undermine him but sometimes Sean could be clueless about how good looking he was and how that reflected back on his younger brother. Sick of watching his crush riding Sean like there was no tomorrow, Jack retreated into a bottle and vowed to get knockout drunk so the next day he wouldn't be able to remember the ugly feeling of being jealous of his own brother.

It was gone midnight when Sean found him out on the balcony with a nearly empty bottle of white wine in his hand. Sean himself wasn't quite sober, having been treated to a number of shots courtesy of their friends, but he had his wits about him enough still to be aware that something was troubling his brother. Throwing his arm around Jack's shoulder, Sean placed a sloppy kiss on the younger man's cheeks and slurred, "What's up, lil bro? You look lonely."

Even though none of it was Sean's fault, Jack couldn't help but feel angry at him. "I'm just sick of being the ugly brother. I wish I was you." It was the booze talking but there was more than a little grain of the truth in the words too. Sean seemed to have it so easy, charming everybody with those good looks and Jack simply couldn't compare. He was always the runner up and Sean would never know how that felt. It wasn't fair!

Sean narrowed his eyes and stared at Jack for such a long time that the younger brother considered dropping his gaze and apologizing before Sean surged forward
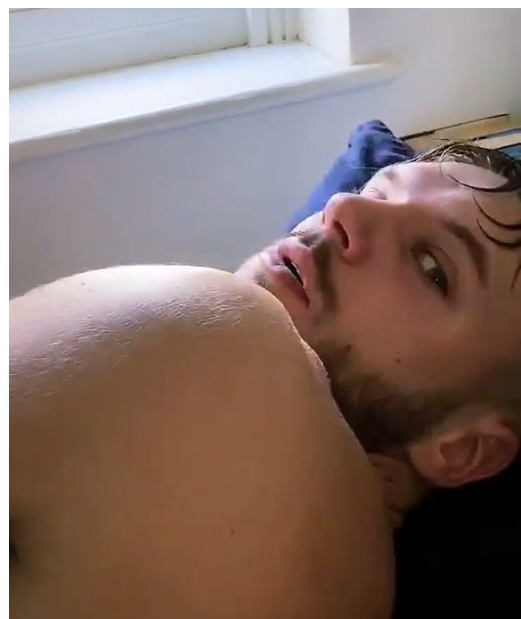
kissed the other on the forehead. "I don't think you're ugly at all, Jack-y boy," he insisted, unknowingly insulting his younger brother in the process. Jack had always hated that nickname and how it made him feel like a child. Sean only ever got called 'hot stuff' or 'studly Sean' - where were his complimentary nicknames?

"Of course you wouldn't," Jack scoffed, pulling out of his brother's grasp. "You don't realize how good you've got it, do you? That's the saying, right? You'll only appreciate it when it's gone." A flicker of confusion passed across Sean's face and Jack pulled away again, knowing that no good could come of the situation. He could only hope that they had both had enough drinks to forget the tense moment the next morning. To make sure that happened, Jack retreated off the balcony and grabbed another bottle of wine. He wouldn't be satisfied until he'd passed out and retreated to a relaxing dream where *he* was the one everybody was tripping over to impress…

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Sean was miserably aware of his hangover from the moment he began to stir the next morning. He was surprised because he'd never really been one to feel the effects of drink the next day but there was no mistaking the pounding in his head and the sickly sensation in his stomach. This was a hangover alright. The night before had done a number on him, that was for sure.

Rolling over in the bed, Sean was greeted by the sight of a broad shirtless back. Truthfully he couldn't remember actually heading to bed, nor could he remember how he'd spent most of the evening aside from having a drink in his hand. He could briefly remember having a conversation with his brother out on the balcony and being annoyed with what was said but exactly what that exchange had involved now escaped his memory. Whatever it was, he'd have to speak and apologize to Jack for it. He didn't want alcohol to spoil the friendly relationship he shared with his younger brother.

Shifting in the bed to get a better look at his bed partner seemed to cause the other to stir and Sean's heart skipped a beat as he caught sight of the man's face. How he could be staring at himself from a third person perspective wasn't something he could answer but there was no

mistaking that he was looking right at his own face without the involvement of a mirror.

For several moments the two remained frozen in place, their eyes locked, before whoever now wore Sean's face rolled over in the bed and grinned at him. "G'morning," he croaked, his dry throat not causing the smile to drop from his lips for even a moment. "So, how is it?"

Sean was caught off guard by the question. "How is what?" he asked before pausing to consider the voice he had spoken in. He didn't sound like himself at all. In fact, he sounded like --

"Being the ugly brother," the other responded without missing a beat. He was still wearing that grin on his face and Sean was beginning to understand why he was so often complimented on his smile. "I see what you mean though. I'm not ugly, just not *you*-levels of hot."

Piece by piece the conversation from the night prior began to come back to him - the hurt look in Jack's eyes as he'd angrily confessed to feeling like second back, like Sean had been unknowingly keeping him in the shadows all those years. The memory helped clarify some of the morning's events although it was no clearer why any of it was happening. Hell, how did two brothers even wake up in each other's bodies? That wasn't normal and yet there they were, living proof of the abnormality.

Sean was at a loss for words. Jack, however, seemed to have found his voice more than ever before. Despite their levels of popularity Jack had always been the more socially eloquent one while Sean could be somewhat reserved at times. To see his body grinning like a fool and talking so animatedly… well, it was alarming to say the least.

No more alarming though than when Jack leaned over to place a kiss on his forehead then even one on his lips before giving Sean a sly wink. "Don't worry little brother," he whispered, keeping within close quarters under the sheets, "It'll be our little secret."

As his own body was pressed against him in teasing fashion, Sean felt strangely inclined to agree. His rational mind didn't want to admit it but maybe this was a secret worth keeping...