

Brothers

by Tyler Koch

The young boy woke to the sound of laughter. He blinked himself out of deep sleep and allowed his eyes to adjust. The red numbers on his clock read three minutes after midnight. He put his feet on the floor and stood, walking to his bedroom door and putting his ear against the wood. At first he heard nothing, and just as he was about to return to bed he heard his brother's voice. The young boy smiled and opened the door.

He crept down the hallway. On either side were pictures and drawings. The young boy wasn't a bad drawer, he was getting better at coloring. His most recent picture was of a dragon. The wings were a little small for how big the dragon was but his father said that was okay, that all famous artists drew dragon wings too small at one point or another. He said he liked the picture so much that he hung it on the wall. Next to the dragon were photographs of his brother. In some he played sports. Others with him and a pretty girl, both dressed for a special occasion. One was a collage of his brother at different ages, the photographs sideways and glued together. His father got a medal once for running a race and that was on the wall too.

When the young boy reached the end of the upstairs hallway he stopped at the top of the stairs and listened. He heard his brother's voice from below mixed with others he didn't recognize. They were probably friends of his from school. His brother always had a lot of friends. Once he got to ride with his mother to the high school to pick up his brother. He saw him in the courtyard surrounded by a group of group of boys and girls. They all laughed at something he said.

"My brother is funny," said the young boy.

The mother let out a long sigh. "He's like your grandfather that way. Always the center of attention."

The young boy took a seat on the top stair and peeked through the opening in the railing. He saw the kitchen and half the living room from the angle. His brother was just in his line of vision, sitting on a barstool facing away.

“—on man. You can't be for real.”

His brother waved a brown bottle that he held. He adopted a posture on the barstool that the young boy knew well. He called it his serious pose.

“Dennis, listen to me. You're not allowed to speak for the rest of the night.”

Laughter, and his brother sat back and took a drink from his brown bottle.

“Well what about you?” asked somebody the young boy couldn't see.

“What do I think? I don't think it matters all that much who made the team and who didn't. We're all on the team, aren't we? Who cares about the others.”

“I know Jerry was upset.”

“Then he should have tried harder.” His brother held up both hands. “Enough of that. It's getting depressing in here. Dennis! Another round for me and my boys.”

One of his brother's friends entered the kitchen and opened the fridge and took four brown bottles, two for each hand. He gave one to his brother and disappeared from view.

“It's lucky your parents are gone for the night.”

“Cheers to that,” said another.

His brother raised his brown bottle and drank. “Cheers indeed. Otherwise we would have had to go to Marvin's house and we all know how that would have gone.”

A collective laugh.

“Maybe his sister would have been there.”

“Cut it out—”

“Ah what are you complaining about Marvin? Your sister is a looker. What's the big deal? She's what, twenty five. She's not going for any of us anyway.” Somebody said something the young

boy couldn't hear, and his brother grinned. "Well, she wouldn't be going for any of you."

"Please, like you have a shot."

"A better shot than you Grant. Tell me the last time you looked at a woman without turning red."

"Patricia."

His brother laughed and he spilled some of the liquid in his brown bottle. He cursed and wiped the stain on his pants. "See what you did Grant? I'm like Pinocchio. You tell a lie and I spill my beer." The young boy's brother adopted another pose, one leg crossed over the other. He used this one when he had something important to say. "Listen to me boys and listen well. You want to know the secret of women? Everybody thinks it's buying chocolate and sweet talking. I've made that mistake, I know most of you have. It's not easy trying to play the field. Sometimes you think a girl is in to you and it turns out you're wrong. Other times she plays hard to get and no matter what you do she turns you down. So I sat down one day and thought to myself, what the heck is going on? That's when I had an epiphany—look up that word Dennis if you don't know what it means." The group laughed. "I realized that we were doing it all wrong. We were the ones going after the girls instead of having the girls come to us. I mean, let's think about this. How much easier would it be if dating were the other way around? Us guys, we're easy. We either like a girl or we don't. We'll tell her right to her face. But girls like to play their games. They like to keep us guessing. So what did I do? I ignored them. I waited until they got tired and came to talk to me instead of the other way around. That's how I knew the ones who were interested." His brother took a drink from his brown bottle and wiped his lips with his forearm. "That's how it's done. Let the girls come to you."

A silence followed his brother's speech. The young boy moved down a step to get a better look. He saw the four friends, scattered around the living room on the couch or the loveseat or the ground. Each of them had the same brown bottle in their hands.

"That doesn't work."

His brother lifted an eyebrow. "No? Tell me who's the hottest girl in school?"

The friends all passed a look.

"That's what I thought. In fact, isn't the Sadie Hawkins coming up? Perfect example. You can sit back and let the girls come to you—except you Grant. Patricia is never going to bite."

"You don't know that."

His brother shook his head and coughed and spilled more of the liquid onto his pants. "What did I tell you? What did I say? You lie and I spill my beer." He stood up and pointed to the dark spot on his thigh. "Pinocchio." He walked over and put his leg next to Grant's face. "Next time you talk about Patricia I'm going to spill my beer on you instead."

Grant tried to push his brother's leg away. "That smells."

"Not as bad as you do."

But his brother backed away and returned to the barstool. "Seriously. I'm not going to have any more beer left if we keep this up."

All his friends laughed except Grant. He stood and asked where the bathroom was.

"That way," pointed his brother. "And try not to stink up the place. My brother's room is right above the bathroom. Let's try not to wake him up."

Grant shuffled off and his brother took another sip from the brown bottle.

"I didn't know your brother was here."

"Where else would he be?"

"With your parents."

His brother laughed. "You think they want take care of him? Not likely. You've met him before. You know how old he is?"

"Ten?"

"Ten." His brother snorted. "Try seven. That's eleven years between us. You figure out how that happened."

The young boy moved down another step. His brother was talking about him and he wanted to hear what he had to say. His brother chose another pose, this one for when he felt relaxed.

“But really, he’s not all that bad. For being seven he’s pretty decent. Katrin even likes him. He likes to draw pictures for her whenever she comes over.” His brother took a drink from the brown bottle. “She’s really good about the whole thing. The drawings suck but she doesn’t care. My dad—” his brother laughed “—my dad even hung one of the drawings on the wall. Can you believe it? Thankfully Katrin takes all the drawings I don’t want so I don’t have to worry about dealing with that.”

“Better than my brother,” said one of the friends. “He just complains all the time.”

“And you don’t think mine doesn’t? Please. Ten bucks says my brother complains way more than yours. And your brother is old enough that at least he won’t cry that often. Just last week we were wrestling and I stepped on my brother’s toe and he started crying. Just like that. Of course my parents thought it was my fault. It’s hard to teach a younger brother about being tough, you know? I think I was born that way, but my brother—my brother just doesn’t have it in him. I don’t think he’ll ever play football. We have an uncle who plays badminton.” His brother shrugged. “Maybe that’s all he’s cut out for.”

“Badminton? Seriously.”

His brother leaned forward. “I’m telling you guys. That’ll be my brother. Master Champion of badminton. Won’t my family be proud.”

They all laughed, like it was the funniest thing they ever heard.

“Alright, alright,” said his brother, holding up his hand. “Quiet down. We don’t want to wake him. In fact, I’m going to go check on him right now, just to be safe. I can already hear my mom yelling at me for waking him up.”

The young boy got to his feet and quietly as he could and tiptoed back to his room and shut the door and crawled back

into bed. He closed his eyes. He heard his brother open up his door.

“You awake?” he whispered.

The young boy didn't answer. He pretended to be asleep.

His brother shut the door and the young boy opened his eyes. He thought about what his brother said. He was upset that he wasn't tough like his brother wanted him to be. That's what he would try to do, not cry when he was hurt. His brother and his father never cried. He didn't want to cry either. He reached beneath his covers and pinched himself. His eyes began to water but he squeezed his teeth and kept the tears from spilling. There. That wasn't that hard.

Suddenly he yawned. He was more tired than he thought. He closed his eyes again.

Badminton. He'd never heard of that before but his brother said he was going to be a Master Champion and so he wanted to learn. He wondered if it was really hard. He hoped not. He didn't want to let his brother down. He wished he were funny. He wished he had friends that stayed over late. Maybe he would have a girlfriend when he was older. There was a girl in his elementary school who said she liked him. Her name was Rachel.

More than anything the young boy wanted to be like his brother. He fell asleep with a smile on his lips, to the sound of laughter.

