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The Brothers

by Mary Brannigan

"Anyway, what about your story?"

He seemed taken aback at my question, even though he'd been listening to me rattle on about my dysfunctional family for the past half hour. That's the thing about good listeners - they are often loath to talk about themselves. Still, I decided to persist as I knew very little about John's background. "You don't really want to hear about my life" he said. "It's not very interesting".

"Well, where did you go to school?"

"In Dublin," came the terse reply. After that I gave up for the moment, deciding I'd come back to it another time. We went on seeing each other for a while, but the relationship fizzled out and we went our separate ways. John just seemed uninterested in taking things further.

Some years later I made friends with Frances, whom I met at our local church. She was married with a four year old daughter and I often spent time at her home, having been introduced to her husband Noel. He was a teacher and always made me welcome when Frances invited me for meals.

As time passed, I learned that her mother died when she was two, leaving her and four siblings in the care of a grandmother. Her father had a small farm and eked out a living from the land. In time, when her eldest brother was six, the father decided to send him to a free boarding school run by the Christian Brothers. He was the brightest of the children and it was thought best to give him the chance of a good education. The others went to the local school and did quite well, growing into well adjusted adults. The grandmother lived to see them grow up and emigrate to England. It was here that I met Frances.

I got to know them all as they visited their sister and her family. All, that is, except the brother who had gone to boarding school. He, it seemed, was a bit of a loner, sharing a house with his father who had followed his family to England. These two tended to visit together for quiet family suppers. Frances seemed very protective of her clever brother.

"JJ is not a great mixer," she said to me one day. By this time I'd become quite a fixture at the Johnson's home, having no relatives of my own in England. Fran and I, having no sisters, tended to confide in each other more than most. Thus it was, that one day she decided to tell me something of JJ's life.

It turned out that his time at school with the Christian Brothers had not ended well. In short, he had been abused by these holy men and ended up in a mental hospital due to his time in their so-called care. It had been ten years before he was well enough to be released into the community. This was why his sister kept his visits private.

Then one day, Fran decided to invite me to one of their quiet suppers. I guess she at last felt that her brother would be comfortable in my presence. I decided to tone down my somewhat verbose behaviour for the evening. As I was introduced to the visitors John betrayed no sign of recognition. His was a story best left unshared.