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Best Buddies

Frank Zahn

My best buddy Jake and I lived next door to each other and did everything together during our growing up years. My mother used to say we were thicker than thieves.

Jake was Catholic, and I was Jewish. I got a kick out of his religion because he worshiped one of my people—a Jew. And he got a kick out of my religion because I didn't have to go to confession all the time.

I remember Jake saying, “You sure are lucky. Going to confession is a pain in the neck. Sometimes, when I go, I feel guilty cause I don't have any sins to confess, except, of course, jerking off. And my priest always sounds like he's tired of hearing about that.”

Although supportive of each other's differences, Jake and I were competitive about everything. I was stronger than him, but he was quicker on his feet. He was taller than me by a couple of inches and slimmer. He was better than me at basketball and track, and I was better than him at football and soccer. We got the same grades in our math and gym classes, but his grades were better than mine in the social studies, and my grades better than his in the sciences.

When I say we were competitive about everything, that's exactly what I mean. I remember one afternoon in his bedroom when we got into a heated argument about who had the biggest biceps. Finally, he got his mother's measuring tape from her sewing box and measured the flexed biceps in our right arms.

“Mine is nine and three-quarter inches plus a little,” I remember him saying. “And yours—let me see—is about nine and a half.”

“Bullshit!” I yelled. “Give me the tape.”

I grabbed the tape from him and measured each of our right arm biceps. I made sure both were fully flexed.

“You're so full of it!” I said. “There's not a goddamned bit of difference. Mine's just as big as yours. They're both a little more than nine and a half inches.”

I laugh about the biggest biceps competition now. But back then, it was just one of the many juvenile ways Jake and I competed with each other in attempts to test ourselves and build self-confidence.

Throughout those years, I thought I knew everything there was to know about him. But during our junior year in high school, I discovered he had been keeping a secret from me. It was a secret I never would have guessed, and I only found out what it was by accident.

It happened when I came looking for him one late Saturday afternoon. I came around the back of his house, and low and behold, I caught him and Robbie Williams, a guy in several of our classes, kissing and fondling each other. They stopped and stepped back from each other when they saw me.

“Holy shit!” I said, then turned and ran back to my house and up to my room.

As I lay on my bed, staring up at the ceiling, I had trouble believing I had seen what I had seen. And it took me a while to process it and accept that Jake, my best buddy, was gay.

The next day and from that day on, Jake and I never talked about it. I never questioned him about it, and he never explained. We just acted as if nothing had changed between us, although as time passed, we spent less time together. He spent more time with Robbie, and I spent more time with my girlfriend Tessa Brewer.

When Jake and I graduated from high school, we left home for college. He went to UCLA, and I went to UT Austin. I felt sad about us going our separate ways because I knew I would miss him. And because I sensed that he had gone through a lot of angst about his sexuality, I felt guilty because I had never hugged him and told him that it didn’t matter to me that he was gay.

I mean, we were best buddies. Yes, we were competitive, but we had always been supportive of each other’s differences. And yet, I had failed to be there for him when he probably needed my support the most.

We have long passed our college years now, and unfortunately, we haven’t kept in touch. But I think about him often, and I still feel guilty about not telling him back then how I felt and how glad I was that we were best buddies.