



First Prize

"I don't know what has come over you lately, Jean," Mother complained. "You are either picking on Willie or ignoring him, and you used to be so good to your little brother."

Unfortunately, Willie, stepping into the room just then, heard this speech. He made a face. He hates to be called "little" now that he is thirteen and a freshman in high school. My little brother! At this moment I hated him not only because he had turned into a liar and a cheat¹, but because actually I was even more guilty than he was. It all happened so quickly, so unexpectedly. I know I should have confessed when the prize was announced, the arrangements for the assembly made. But it would have meant not only exposing myself and my brother but also bringing disgrace on Mother and Dad, and I just didn't have the courage.

It hadn't occurred to me that it wouldn't stop there — with his winning the prize — that it would mount and mount, that it would become a citywide occasion; and that if I spoke up now, I should involve not only myself and my brother and my parents but our teachers and principal as well, and maybe even the radio station.

"I know, Jean," Mother was saying now, "that in your heart you are as proud of your brother as your father and I are."

Proud! If she only knew!

She turned to Willie and reminded him it was time for him to get to bed so he could be bright and rested for his big moment tomorrow. I just stood there looking at him. Maybe if he had said something even now, if he confessed the whole thing, we could still do something. Tomorrow would be too late. Tomorrow everything would be over, and he and I and Mother and Dad too would be disgraced before the entire school and the whole city.

But no. He wasn't saying anything. He was only giving Mother a break this once, suffering himself to be kissed goodnight, and off he went to his room.

"You didn't even say good night to him," Mother reprimanded after Willie had gone. "You've been so sullen² lately, so unlike yourself, dear," she went on. "Daddy and I understand. But after all, Willie is still such a little boy and you are three years older and a senior, so you can't possibly be jealous of him. In your heart I'm sure you feel the way your father and I do — awfully proud that out of all those thousands of pupils in the school our Willie's composition won the first prize."

That ring of pride in her voice as she said, "Our Willie!" His composition! If only I hadn't — but how could I possibly have guessed where it would lead? It had started so innocently.

Mother had given a tea for her bridge club and her literary circle, a combined affair. It meant twice as many guests as usual, and so she had borrowed some silver from her friend, Mrs. Brooks. After the guests had gone and the dishes were washed, Mom asked me to return the silver. It is only a few blocks to Mrs. Brooks' house and it would have taken me only a few minutes. But the gang was going to the first show at the Grand, so I asked Willie to take the stuff. Sure, he said, he'd take it for a nickel, only he didn't have time because he had homework to do.

"What homework?" I asked him.

"Some dopey³ composition."

"I can fix that in a moment," I said.

I opened my notebook, took out an essay I had written that week on "If I Had My Wish" and handed it to him. I don't usually bother much with compositions, but I had gone to town with this one because the topic is right up my alley. It must have turned out all right, too, for my English teacher actually marked it as excellent and asked me to read it to the class.

"Be sure to copy it in your own handwriting," I told Willie when I handed him the paper and the nickel. "Leave out some sentences and misspell a few words."

Although homework is passed around all the time, I know it is not an ethical thing to do. You bet I'll never, never do it again. I learned my lesson all right, the hard way. I probably thought Willie's teacher wouldn't even look at the old paper. How was I to know that she would not only read it but would enter it in the citywide contest, that it would win the first prize? And tomorrow morning Willie was to read it in the assembly, and the entire programme would be broadcast over the municipal radio station as part of the celebration of Our Borough Day!

The fatal morning arrived at last. We all saluted the flag; they played "The Star-Spangled Banner"; then the programme started, and went on and on like something in a dream that I couldn't believe was really happening. But there was Willie, sitting on the platform, looking shiny and wearing a white shirt, a tie and his blue Sunday suit — embarrassed and shy as any kid would be — but more happy than anything else.

The principal, teachers, school officials, and people from the radio station were all over the platform. There were a lot of speeches, the school

¹ cheat — обманщик

² sullen [sʌlən] — мрачный, замкнутый

³ dopey ['dɒpi] — глупый

orchestra played, the students sang, but I kept looking into the palms of my hands, and breathing hard as if I'd been running.

Now Willie was standing in the centre of the platform. The man had lowered the microphone for him. He seemed very small standing there alone. I could hear Father clear his throat and I could feel Mom stiffen¹ a bit in her seat. As for me, I lowered my head, my cheeks, burning with shame. For the moment Willie opened his mouth, they would all recognize the words I had read in the classroom only a few weeks before. Oh, the disgrace of it! I shut my eyes tight when Willie began to speak. His voice was loud and clear as he proclaimed the title: "If I Had My Wish."

"If I had my wish, I'd want our team to win every game this season because they are fine players and deserve it. They are also a great bunch of fellows and a regular United Nations so far as race, colour, religion, and all that goes. If I had my wish, there would be teams like ours all over the world; then the H and A bombs would never get out of the comic books. Joe Vitale is the best pitcher we ever had."

Willie went on talking about each player for maybe two or three minutes. As far as I was concerned, it might have been a second or forever. Slowly my hands unclenched. I slumped further into my seat, and suddenly I was sobbing. Mother placed a firm, steadying arm around me. When I dared look up, I noticed her eyes were shining

with tears and even Dad's eyes looked a bit misty².

If I live to be a hundred, I don't think I'll ever be happier than I was for the rest of that day. I confessed everything to Mother and Dad, and although they scolded me, I felt it was well deserved. I had learned my lesson and all that was behind me. Nothing could mar the joy I felt. It was as if I had found my brother all over again.

That evening I was so happy, I couldn't help doing it although I knew he didn't like it — I asked Willie what he had done with my composition.

His face turned red. "I stuck it in my pocket," he explained, "but I must have lost it somewhere because it wasn't there when I got to school in the morning. Miss Farnum made me stay after school and write one. I remembered your title, so I put that down. If I'd had your paper, I might have copied the whole thing," he admitted ruefully³. "I'm lucky I lost it."

My composition was about an imaginary trip to Hollywood. In spite of Willie's protests I kissed him, and then I apologized to him, and congratulated him on being honest and doing his own thinking.

"I'm so ashamed," I said, "I don't know what I was thinking of to suggest such a thing. A fine example I am."

"Forget it, Sis," he said.

I'm just crazy about my kid brother.

29 *Discuss Jean's point of view:*

- 1 How did Jean get herself into the situation that she described here?
- 2 Was Jean more ashamed of herself or of her brother? Why didn't she confess when Willie won the prize? What did she do?
- 3 What did Jean's parents think was the matter with her? Were they unfair?
- 4 At the programme, why did Jean turn to look at her English teacher and classmates?
- 5 Why did Jean sob when she heard Willie read his composition?
- 6 Even though things turned out all right, Jean told her parents the whole story. Why do you suppose she did this?
- 7 What responsibilities do older brothers and sisters have for the conduct and standards of the younger members of the family?
- 8 The author told this story in the first person, from Jean's point of view. Did this make it seem more or less realistic to you? How would the story be different if the author had chosen to tell it from Willie's point of view? From the mother's?

30 *If you had been in Jean's place, how would you have felt when Willie got up to make his speech?*

31 **At one place in the story Jean said, "Although homework is passed around all the time, I know it is not an ethical thing to do." Ethical conduct is, of course, right conduct. In this story Jean is concerned with ethics, the study of questions of right and wrong.**

Express your opinion. Is there a question of ethics involved? Is it ethical to copy homework? If Willie had copied Jean's composition, which of them would have been more responsible? Is it ethical to use cribs⁴ in examinations?

¹ to stiffen ['stɪfn] — делаться жестким, негибким, костенеть

² misty ['mɪstɪ] — затуманенный (слезами)

³ ruefully ['ruːfʊli] — с сожалением, печально

⁴ crib — шпаргалка