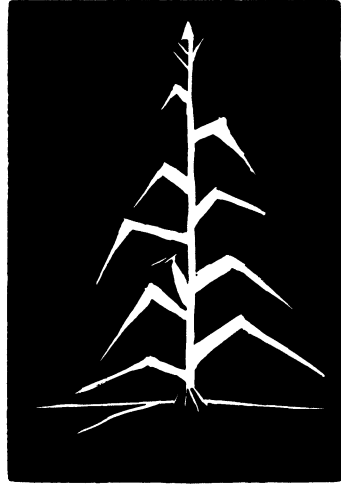


The Winner

Betty Ann Kopp



AL SQUATTED on the trailer steps, nervously stretching and curling his fingers. He could hear the Doctor moving around inside, and his wife moaning. Wonder how long it'll take that fool doctor. God, her hand looked awful—all twisted and bleeding.

Al squirmed as a scream of pain pierced the thin walls. He lit a cigarette with shaking fingers and gazed at the road blankly. A tractor rumbled by, pulling three wagons full of corn. The flagman in the last wagon glanced curiously at Al and the trailer. He'd heard about the accident. News travels fast—even in a big canning factory.

Al looked up as his brother Jim slowly dragged up the muddy path. Al said sharply, "You Jim, what you actin' so queer for?"

Jim said, "Ain't actin' queer. Just thinking s'all."

Al snorted, "Only thing worth thinkin' 'bout is what's nice. Nothin' nice happened around here."

Jim crouched on the lower step and muttered, "Well, just thought I'd come and see how Dor—uh. Got somethin' I wanta talk over, Al. Kinda thought I wouldn't bother goin' back to high school. Best part of the corn pack's comin' up. Payin' good money, too. Guess the family's gonna need a little extra, too."

Al looked up quickly, "How ya' figger, Jim? We been doin' all right this summer."

Jim looked at the door of the trailer and muttered, "Well, I was just a thinkin'. Schoolin's kinda expensive."

The sun baked their bowed shoulders as they sat in silence. Al watched the smoke curl between his moist fingers. "Well, Jim, ya gotta consider all the angles. Joe and Mary said they'd put ya up while school's runnin'. Course you'd help around the house like Ma does."

Jim interrupted, "Yeah, but with Ma and me there. That'd be two of us extra. Just cause Joe's got a nice business in that feed store—. Besides it ain't as if he's our brother."

Al muttered, "What'd he expect? He knew the family was on the rocks. Cripes, when he was courtin' Mary he always brought us somp'n to eat."

Jim's eyes followed Al's cigarette as it spun through the air. "Well," Jim said, "it just don't seem right somehow." Already he began to sense he was losing another argument. He saw Al stiffen as they heard the Doctor walk towards the door—then walk back!

Jim looked at Al for guidance as he always had. "Um, Al?"

Al raised his eyes slowly. "Yeah, Jim?" Then he answered the questioning fear in the boy's eyes. "Guess I gotta face it, Jim. Dot'll never use her hand much. Doc said he might even have to cut it off."

A shudder went through Jim's body as Al continued. "Look, Jim, if you quit school now you'll end up like the rest of us. Tied down with a family before you're twenty. Dot can't work much now. And if we have a family, I don't know how she'll manage."

Jim said excitedly, "But Ma could come and help out."

His voice trailed off as Al shook his head slowly. "No, Jim, Ma's worked herself out for us kids. It's my job to provide for my family. When Pa couldn't work any more she made ends meet somehow. We can, too."

Jim rubbed his mouth. "You know Ma'll never stand for it. She'll come runnin' as soon's she smells trouble."

Al said sharply, "She ain't gonna smell no trouble cause there won't be none. She's got it easy for the first time in her life and she's gonna stay at Mary's. What ya' shakin' your head fer?"

"Well," Jim said, slowly, "what'cha gonna use for dough? I got what I've saved this summer—"

Al broke in harshly, "Damit, we don't need yer money. That's

fer schoolin'. I can take that job as hired hand with board and keep."

Jim's mouth dropped. "But, Al, you don't like farmin'. You was gonna save yer money and open that garage next year. You said—!"

Al said angrily, "That was before. I'm not gonna be beholdin' to nobody. Even if it's family. The rest scratched enough so I could have the little schoolin' I had. Ma's countin' on someone gettin' through high school. You're the last, Jim, and you gotta do it."

They both jumped to their feet as they heard the Doctor snap his case shut. The scene was stamped on Al's mind—wagon train goin' by making the dust rise and slowly settle where the sun had dried the road. The wind, wailing around the corner of the shabby trailer, with its sour acrid smell of rotting corn stalks. And the tense waiting—waiting! If she could only keep her hand. She could use it a little then, and they could get by. Even if all his fine plans for gettin' ahead were smashed, they'd eat most of the time.

Al turned slowly as Doc Spears let the door slam shut. "Well, Doc?" Al waited nervously.

"Well, Al," Doc drawled, "you're a lucky man. Won't have to amputate. Course she can't use it much, and it'll be a little twisted, but—we all have our cross to bear in this vale of tears. That'll be ten dollars, please."

Al sagged against the wall of the trailer as he pulled some money from his pocket. Doc Spears hummed off-tune while Al counted the money into his own sweaty palm.

"Ah. Thank you, my boy. See you tomorrow," Doc said jovially in his best bedside manner.

Al nodded and choked out, "S'all right, Doc."

As Jim started down the path, too, Al said, "Jim, you're goin' back to school."

Jim kicked a stone protestingly and said, "Um, I guess so. You always did win, Al, but kinda seems like your luck's run out. I guess maybe I'm the winner."