

## *The Prize*

What's the point?

Who am I kidding anyway?

Even if I do win a prize tonight, who would care?

Mum and my brother would say, "Well done Michael," and "Great stuff Mick. It was awesome." They'll say it anyway.

But Mum always thinks I'm the best thing since sliced bread and Dale thinks he needs to be more than my big brother, ever since Dad left.

Dad didn't approve of me playing recorder. "Sissy instrument," he used to call it. Even when I was the best in the school and then went on to eisteddfods and other competitions.

"If you're going to do a woosy thing like play music, why don't you pick a decent instrument? Like a trumpet or guitar or something like that."

Dad didn't understand. He didn't understand anything about me, or about Mum or Dale. That's probably why he left. That was five years ago. I was ten.

I wanted to show him that I could be better than anyone. And I was. No-one could play like me. Like tonight, I played one of the Telemann solo suites. It's really difficult and I know I played it the best ever. I've only heard people on CDs play better than me.

I don't know why I still play the stupid thing. I like the sound, but why bother anymore? No-one important takes any notice. Mum and Dale don't count, because they're family. And my teachers don't count, because they're paid to care.

Tonight's really important, because it's a big competition. I'm up against a clarinettist and a couple of violinists and some pianists and a girl playing a harp. It's the State finals and I'm dressed up like a geek with a tie and all.

I have to sit at the side of the stage with the others who aren't playing right now. One of the violinists is on. She's good. She's playing Paganini. It sounds awesome. I wish I could be *that* good.

One by one they play and get clapped and come off. It's agony waiting for it to finish. I feel like leaving, but Mum would kill me. She's out there in the audience somewhere with Dale and his girlfriend.

Finally we've all played and we go on stage for the audience to clap for all of us again and then we go off again to wait for the judges to decide. It seems like we wait for ever. One guy's biting his nails and some of the kids are pacing. I'm sitting on my hands to stop from shaking. We all want to win or at least get second or third. There's money for all the prizes.

The kid next to me nudges me and says, "Hey, that's you!"

I look up. "Me?"

"Yeh, they said your name."

I didn't hear it. That means I must have got third. I walk onto the stage, into the bright light and there's lots of clapping. I look for Mum in the audience but I can't see any of the faces. Someone on the stage hands me an envelope and shakes my hand and says, "Well done, young man."

I mumble "thank you" and leave the stage. I open the envelope and look at the certificate. 'Honourable Mention' it says. Several of the others want to see it, but I put it back in the envelope and walk towards a door with a green EXIT sign above it. I nearly trip because I have tears in my eyes and things look blurred.

I push through the door and go out into the car park. There are just a few people out here. There's a man leaning against a car, smoking. He looks sort of familiar, but I can't see him clearly. When he looks up I look the other way and start walking.

I've only gone a short way when I hear footsteps behind me and then a hand grabs my shoulder. I almost scream.

I turn around, thinking I should hit the guy and run, but I freeze. It's Dad! Suddenly I'm thinking he wants to take me away or something. I'm confused. I haven't seen him for a couple of years. I can't say anything.

"That was some pretty impressive playing," he says.

"What was?"

"In there." He nods his head in the direction of the hall.

"But..."

"Yeh, I was there, standing at the back."

I stare at him.

"Why...?"

"I've been to most of your concerts and... most of the other times you've played." He looks at his feet. "I always leave before the end because..."

I can see his eyes are wet. He swallows a few times.

"Why don't you ever stay? Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugs. "I guess I didn't know how to tell you that I think you're bloody good. Not after all this time."

I look at him. Is he being sarcastic, like he usually is?

"I'm bloody proud of you, Son."

And then he puts his arms around me and I cry. He does, too.

I've finally won first prize.