

Worms and Whippins'

By

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A moth circled the bag of water on the oak stump in the backyard. The mission was given by their father. "Figure out what happened to the goldfish, or everybody gets whipped. You got fifteen minutes," he yelled as the screen door slammed behind him.

Joanie, the youngest, started crying. The other four waited for Dad to get out of earshot before pointing fingers. After five minutes, Sara, second youngest, told Jesse, the middle child, to shut up when he accused Joanie. Everyone stared at the backdoor hoping Mama hadn't heard. That was an automatic whippin'. No one used that kind of language in a country with free speech.

Josie and Joe, the twins and eldest, glared at Jesse as he gave an evil grin at his younger sister before kneeling to peel a chunk of bark off the stump.

"We need to get this figured out." Joe looked nervously at the backdoor. Dad whipped Joe harder than the others.

"Where is the goldfish, guys?" Sara asked, glaring at her siblings.

"Yeah, where's the goldfish, guys?" Joanie mimicked in between short, quick breaths.

Joe looked at his watch. "Nine minutes."

"A good detective always goes over the events of the crime." Josie began.

"You watch too much television." Her twin rubbed his neck.

She ignored him and went on. "Let's start when we first got the fish."

"I got the fish," Jesse stood and plunked the bark off the wall of the shed.

“Yes, you threw the ping pong ball into the fishbowl admirably,” Josie said with as much snark as she could muster.

“It should’ve been mine,” Jesse complained. “I used my allowance to play the game.”

“But Mom said it was all of ours as long as we take care of it,” Sara’s whine annoyed everyone.

“Dad didn’t like that at all.” Joanie grimaced.

“She said it so we could keep it,” Josie remembered.

“Maybe Dad got rid of it and just wants to whip us for eating too much of the cotton candy. I heard him gripe to Mama about it.” Jesse wiped the bark dust on his pants and went back to the stump for more.

“Anyway, that was the last thing we did before going to the minivan.” Josie glared at the wet dust stain on Jesse’s pant leg, knowing she would have to remember to treat it as part of her laundry chores.

“Yeah, who had it then?” asked Joe, checking the watch. “Six minutes left.”

“I did,” Joanie raised her hand to wipe tears from her cheek.

“So, you did it!” Sara pointed an accusing finger.

“Did not!” the youngest squealed.

“No, she didn’t. I saw it when dad opened the side door,” Joe said.

“That puts it in the minivan.” Sara cringed as Jesse's toss missed the wall and bounced off the tin roof, sounding like a dynamite blast to her.

“It was on the floorboard between the back and middle seats. Dad made us because we were fighting over who got to hold it on the way home,” Josie said.

“Who sat closest to it?” Joe asked, still looking at his watch.

“Sara and Joanie were in their booster seats in the back of the van,” Jesse returned to the stump.

“I didn’t touch it.” Joanie whined.

Sara’s eyes bulged with tears. “I hate touching fish. They’re slimy. Remember the fishing trip. I gagged when Dad made me touch the Perch I caught.”

“Me too.” Joanie barely got out.

“Less than two minutes to go,” Joe said. “Come on guys, I just had one before the fair. Dad will make it worse this time.”

“Well, I didn’t do it. My money would’ve been wasted.” Jesse threw a plethora of bark chips at the wall and cried, “Shotgun!” He wiped his hand on his jeans and rejoined the group.

Josie stared at the stain of wet oak bark on Jesse’s pants and thought about how hard it would be to get the stain out.

The quiet of the evening settled on the five children. Josie walked up to the bag, looked down, and stared closely. A smile crossed her face.

“One minute,” Joe’s shoulders slumped in defeat.

“Joe, remember that book we read on fish in science class last year.” She faced her twin.

“Yeah. So?” Joe finally looked at something other than his watch.

“It said that goldfish love worms.” She raised her eyebrows for confirmation.

“I guess.” Joe paused. “I don’t really remember it.”

“It also said that if you eat a goldfish without properly cooking it, you’ll get the worms inside of you.” She winked at her twin before turning to the group.

Joe caught on. “That’s right. And they will eat your innards when you’re asleep.”

“And everyone in class gagged at the picture.” Josie laughed.

At that moment, Dad walked out the backdoor. “Well? Who did it? Or does everyone get whipped.”

“Daddy! Help me! I can feel the goldfish worms inside me!” Jesse sprinted to Dad and leaped into his arms. “Don’t let them eat me.”

“How did you know?” Joe’s eyes widened.

“The bark stain on his pants is wet and the bark on the stump is dry. Meaning that the bark was dry. He put his hand into the bag, got the fish out, ate it, and wiped his wet hand on his pants.”

“Ew, gross.” Joe contorted his face.

“He did it with a Hot Wheels car last summer.”

“Okay, but when did he do it?” Joe asked.

“On the way home. Jesse was the closest to the bag because he was in the center seat alone and the bag was in front of the back seat on the floorboard. The girls passed out on the way home, and we were singing to the radio with Mom and Dad.” Josie started walking to the house with her twin. “If he couldn’t have it, no one would.”

“After all, it was his money,” Joe whispered as they passed their brother getting whipped by Dad.