

**THE PRIZE**  
STANLEY DAVID GEDZELMAN  
29 June 2013

Mark loved games and was good at them. He loved the strategy, the adventure, the competition. Every spare moment found him playing some game. He had only two great problems. First was school, which took up a great deal of boring time. His father told him to think of each school subject as a game. But he couldn't. Second was that he had run out of worthy combatants. The other kids had given up the challenge, and the guaranteed prospect of losing meant no fun playing any game with Mark. This forced Mark to make compromises such as "I'll play a game of tennis with you if you play a game with me." That was the only thing that sort of worked.

One day, Mark grew irate after he emulsified one of the kids. "Why are you giving up so easily? You just want to end the game fast so we can play tennis longer." The kid responded, "I didn't give up. And if you think you're so great why don't you enter a tournament?" "What tournament?" Mark had never heard of it. The kid informed him that tournaments went on all the time!

Mark found out the kid was right. Mark's favorite game had local, state, regional, national and even international tournaments. The local tournament was played at a game store four miles away. He walked all the way there and was hooked before he stepped through the door. He was even more hooked when he came in third out of 25 competitors. It was wonderful to beat kids but superlative to beat grown-ups.

When he came home he regaled his parents with tales of his new adventure. His parents showed the typical condescending inattention designed to change the subject as soon as possible. But Mark was persistent because he wanted to go to a regional tournament in Birmingham, over 100 miles away. For that, his parents would have to drive. Mark's father agreed on the condition that Mark improve his mediocre grades. He would have to study at least ten hours per week with no distractions, in other words, no games in sight or mind. Mark agreed immediately, but found his parents were serious. He had to study at the kitchen table when his mom or dad was in the kitchen, and they timed him and checked his work religiously.

Time came for the tournament. The setting was impressive. There were over 250 competitors. The games were played in the hotel's smaller banquet hall. The

competitors sat at tables of 8 and the tournament was conducted as a series of elimination rounds. The top two finishers in each round qualified to continue.

In his first round, Mark was eliminated. He had fallen for every trick. What a demeaning start to his career. In the car on the way home he looked morose. "Did you learn anything, son?" Defiant Mark said, "Next time they won't pull the same tricks on me."

Mark began to practice assiduously. One of the local grown-ups had signed up for the tournament in Atlanta and offered to take Mark if he would share expenses. He begged his parents for permission and for the funds. His father said, "It will cost you. You'll have to clean up after 7 dinners." There was no negotiating. Mark agreed.

The Atlanta Regional Tournament had 800 competitors. It was like a Medical Conference. Mark did better. He won the first round but, facing two Masters in the second round was eliminated.

There were no more tournaments until summer. Mark practiced his game skills every moment he could get after all the time lost to homework and dinner clean-up.

That summer, Mark entered 4 tournaments - in Tallahassee, Birmingham, New Orleans, and Atlanta. Each carried a hefty registration fee and two were far enough away to require overnight stays. This called for more concessions. Mark became Official Family Dishwasher, Official Family Lawnmower, and several other odious Official Family titles. He yearned for the day he had his own money.

In Tallahassee, Mark made it to the semifinal round. In Birmingham he made it to the final round. New Orleans was a disaster. In the third round he drew a rotten deck and was placed at the table with the National Champion and two State champs. He got creamed. But he wasn't depressed - he breathed revenge.

Every free minute was devoted to practice. The game store owner helped, recruiting all the local talent for Mark to compete with including an outstanding player who hated tournaments. Mark's game improved – markedly!

Atlanta's National Tournament was gigantic. There were 4000 contestants. Mark sailed through the first day, annihilating his competitors. He took first place almost every game. His confidence grew with each round.

Sunday was much tougher. It seems everyone was some sort of champion. Still, he triumphed again and again. The day passed in a whirl. In the final round he drew an incredible deck, played it perfectly and stood as National Champion. At 12 he was the youngest champion ever.

He was hailed at the ceremony and sent with his parents to the Award Room. Specifics of first prize were always secret. You could win a car, a boat, or even a Florida Condo! The official congratulated Mark and showed him his prize. Mark was stunned. It wasn't a check. It wasn't a car - he was much too young to drive. It wasn't anything he could ever have suspected. It was a girl - a sorry looking, pathetic girl. "Meet Emily, your prize!"

"This is no prize. It's a joke! What am I going to do with an ugly girl? Don't I get a choice?" The official was aghast. No one ever questioned the prize. "You must accept the prize. It's in the rules. We went way out of our way to get Emily for you. You can't imagine how incredibly lucky you are!"

Mark stormed out of the room. As Emily trailed behind, Mark wished she would die right there on the spot. He turned around, sneered at her, told her how ugly she was and how she made his life miserable. She appeared to shrink even further as he swelled with anger and frustration. This award was a punishment worse than all the jobs and obligations his parents had loaded on him. But he really lost it when his parents told him to cool it.

What was a tragedy to him didn't seem bad to his parents. For some strange reason, they didn't seem troubled at all by the new burden. His mother actually seemed glad to have a girl in the family. And his father couldn't hide a silly look. Mark couldn't know his father's thought - "I wish I had such a gift when I was 12."

Mark dreaded the first day of school. When his mother dropped them off Mark raced away to make it seem he had nothing to do with Emily. But he couldn't get rid of her. She was in all his classes and each teacher introduced her as Mark's Prize. And just as he had expected, the kids were ready for him. They were relentless. "Ooooh! Mark has a sex slave." Or, "There goes Cinderella's prince." Or, "Mark has a crush on his sister."

One day it dawned on Mark that since Emily was his prize he could pawn his chores off on her. He became imperious. He wouldn't look at her or talk to her except to boss her around or snipe at her with some snide remark. His parents gave up their feeble attempts to make him a bit less ungracious. Autumn passed in this miserable fashion.

As holiday season approached, Mark and Emily were invited to a party. Mark told Emily, "You're not going!" Mark's mother piped up, "Oh yes she is!" You could see that she meant it. "Then *I'm* not going." "Oh yes you are. You're going to escort Emily. If no one else dances with her, you will. Then you'll escort her home like a gentleman. You have treated her enough like a Cinderella! Cross me in this and all games and tournaments are history for you!"

As they got in the car, Mark noticed that Emily had put on lipstick. It was the first time she ever tried it and she hadn't done a very good job. She looked a bit clownish but not a bit sorry. In fact, she looked strangely pretty.

At the party James, the school's Mr. America, asked Emily to dance almost immediately. Mark was relieved. Emily was beaming. It was her first triumph. But after the third or fourth dance with James, Mark found he didn't like it. Surprise! He felt jealous. After a few more dances with James, Mark couldn't take it any more. He rushed over and jerked Emily away. "She's mine!"

"Oh, no, I'm not!" Emily snarled at Mark and almost sprinted back to James.

Mark was devastated. He ran straight home. His parents weren't happy. "When we pick up Emily, you are going back into that party and you are personally going to escort her home - graciously."

Over the next months Emily lived in ecstasy. She had such a crush on James. "His Magnificence" had chosen her from among all girls. All her thoughts aimed James-wards. From that point, she didn't ignore Mark - she simply didn't see him.

All Mark's earlier contempt evaporated. What had he done? He had been given a great prize that he had spurned until the tables had turned on him. Mark was falling in love and Emily couldn't have cared less.

The worst thing of all was that Emily was there all the time. Mark felt like disappearing in his own home. He kept out of sight of Emily whenever possible. But how could he avoid someone who lived with him? He felt terrorized in her presence at dinner and in the car on the way to and from school. He couldn't face her. In one way, nothing was different. Mark ostensibly continued to ignore her. But everything was totally different.

There were more parties and always, there was James. Mark settled into a sorry state of hopelessness. One night when he was brushing his teeth he glanced in the

mirror. "I look as pathetic as Emily used to." The thought startled him. It was righteous revenge. Protruding from the beam of his great self pity, he discovered a mote of empathy for how Emily had suffered those first few months, and regret that he had been its cause.

At dinner the next night Mark announced that he would do the dishes. When Emily brought some of the dishes to the sink he growled at her, "Go away, I don't need your help." It was depressing that she could get so close to him and yet be so far.

At the school's annual Maypole Dance, Mark was again assigned as Emily's escort. It had become Mark's unenviable responsibility to deliver Emily to James and then disappear until it was time to escort her back home. But this time James lavished his affections on a new girl. In Emily's dream world, she hadn't even sensed the change in James. She couldn't breathe. Mark saw her gasping and helped her to one of the remote parts of the schoolyard so that she should not be on display in her humiliation. He was soft with her. "You'll find someone better than James and then he'll be sorry, just as I was when you found him."

Mark couldn't believe his confession. Neither could Emily. "You really like me? All you've ever done was order me around and then ignore me."

Mark could barely whisper, "You were too beautiful to look at after you fell for James."

Back home that afternoon, Emily suddenly squeezed Mark's hand, gave him a kiss on the cheek and ran into her room, where she hid until dinner. After dinner, everyone noticed that Mark was humming as he washed the dishes.