

Secrets

JUDY TROY

In order for characters in a short story to be credible, there must be motivation for their actions or for changes in their way of thinking. Read until you reach the paragraph ending "...cars on the highway" on page 71. Then stop and write a sentence or two about what changes, if any, you think Jean will make in her way of thinking. Check your predictions after you complete the story to see how close you came.

My father died in 1966, from a fall at a construction site where he was working, in Jacksonville, Florida. I was thirteen, and my brothers, Eddie and Lee, were eleven and eight. We had just moved from an apartment into a small house near Interstate 95, but our real home was South Bend, Indiana. We had only been in Florida for eight months. Both sets of grandparents wanted us to return to Indiana.

"They think I'm helpless," my mother said, "which makes me angry."

We were in the car on a Sunday night, two weeks after my father's funeral, driving home from the beach. My mother was working as a secretary at my brothers' elementary school, and her friends from work had invited us to a cookout. My mother said the cookout was to cheer us up. But, once her friends had got the fire going, they talked about how sad they felt for us. "What kind of food did your father like?" my mother's friend Grace Nolan asked us.

"Meat," Eddie said, "and not many kinds of vegetables."

Grace Nolan started to cry.

"Well, he liked potatoes, too," Lee told her.

"So," my mother said to us now, in the car, "I

told your grandparents we'd be staying here."

"Good," Eddie said, from the back seat. Of the three of us—Eddie and Lee and me—he was the one who had made the most friends.

"I'm not sure I want to stay," I told my mother. "Or if Lee does." Lee was asleep, next to Eddie, with his head and shoulders on the seat and the rest of him limp on the floor.

"Lee wants to stay, Jean," my mother said. "I already know that." She pulled up in front of our house. It was ten o'clock, and we had forgotten to leave on any lights.

"Wake up, Lee," my mother said. She got out of the car and opened the back door and gently shook him. Sometimes he slept so soundly that it was impossible to wake him up. He opened his eyes for a moment and looked at the dark house.

"Why isn't Dad home yet?" he asked. My mother picked him up and carried him inside. He and Eddie were small for their ages whereas I was tall and too heavy. I watched my mother put Lee into bed. Eddie lay down on his own bed, against the opposite wall, and fell asleep with his clothes on.

My mother and I went into the kitchen. Spread out over the table were letters from the

construction company my father had worked for, and forms from its insurance company. We were supposed to receive twenty-five thousand dollars, and my mother was planning to use this money to buy the house we were in, which would allow us to live on the salary she made. The problem was that there had been people around, when the accident happened, who said that the fall had been my father's own fault, and not the fault of the construction company. So there was a chance the insurance company might not pay us. My mother was worried about this, and now she sat down at the table and began to fill out the forms.

I went into my room, next to the kitchen, which was really meant to be a small utility room. My father had painted it yellow and put in carpeting for me. I changed into my nightgown and got into bed. Every night since my father died, I had been unable to fall asleep. During the day I didn't cry, and it didn't upset me to hear about things my father had said or done. But as soon as I was almost asleep, memories would come into my mind that made our situation seem real to me. I stayed awake all night, it seemed to me, listening to my mother in the kitchen and to the distant noise of the cars on the highway.

In the morning, my mother made me get up and get ready for school. My brothers and I had stayed home for a week after my father died, and then my mother allowed me to stay home for an additional week. I told her I didn't want to talk to people at school yet, but the truth was also that I had got used to staying home—to being able to wear my nightgown all day if I wanted to, or lie in bed all morning, reading a book. I didn't want to go back to living my life, because my life had started to seem like too much trouble. Each small thing, like brushing my teeth or putting on knee-socks, now made me tired. I felt I had to do fewer things each

morning, in order to save energy for some more important thing I might have to do in the afternoon.

After I ate breakfast, I walked to the end of our block and waited for the bus with Nancy Dyer, who was in my class. It was November, and she was wearing a blue corduroy jumper her mother had made. She had brought over my assignments, for the two weeks I had been home, and on the bus we went over them. I made corrections according to the answers she remembered from class. "You did real well," she said when we were finished. "But then, you're smarter than I am to begin with."

"That's not true," I told her. "I just do more homework."

"That's what I mean," she said. She had her eyes on her boyfriend, who was getting on the bus. He was a thin boy, with black hair. He sat in front of us. He ignored her and took out a piece of notebook paper and shot spitballs at a red-haired boy across the aisle.

"He's mad at me all the time now," Nancy whispered. "I don't know why."

She had tears in her eyes, and I looked away and watched the trees flashing past in the window. In the reflection, I could see that three people on the bus were looking at me—the red-haired boy, and two girls in the seat in front of him. When I first got on the bus, one of these girls had said, "There was an announcement in school about your dad."

"I know," I said. "Nancy told me."

"I can't believe that happened to you," she said, and whispered something that I couldn't hear to the other girl. Now, as I turned away from the window and looked across the aisle, the red-haired boy smiled at me and was about to say something when he was hit in the forehead by a spitball.

When we got to school, I went to my locker to put away my sweater, and then I went to science

and algebra and history. In each class, the teacher took me aside and talked to me about my father, and two or three other people spoke to me about him as well. The boys, especially, wanted to know exactly what had happened. "Did he step off the beam by accident," one boy asked, "or was there something he tripped over?"

"I think he tripped," I told him.

"Wow," the boy said. "I can just picture that."

During lunch, the group of girls I sat with stopped talking to each other when I walked up. "You can sit here, in the middle," Roberta Price said. Everyone moved over, and Carla Norris unwrapped my straw and put it in my milk. "We wondered when you were coming back," Roberta said. "The principal thought maybe last week."

"I decided to wait until today," I told her. We began to eat. Most of us had bought hot lunches. We all had mothers who were either too busy in the mornings to make us sandwiches or who felt we were old enough now to make them ourselves. Carla was the one exception. Her mother not only made her a sandwich but put a note in with her lunch every day.

"Here it is," Carla said. She unfolded a small piece of yellow paper. "Good luck on your geography quiz," she read out loud. "Your father and I are very proud of you." She and everybody else at the table looked down at their food.

"That's better than the one where she told you to wash off your mascara," I said, after a silence.

"It sure is," Roberta said quickly. "That one was sickening."

I had English class afterward, during fourth period. My English teacher, Mr. Thompson, was sitting at his desk when I walked in. I went to my seat and listened to a boy standing next to Mr. Thompson's desk talk to him about com-

mas. "I don't think we need them," the boy said. "Periods are good enough."

Other people were coming into the room, and Mr. Thompson went up to the blackboard and wrote down a sentence from *A Separate Peace*.¹ The sentence was, "Perhaps I was stopped by that level of feeling, deeper than thought, which contains the truth." After the bell rang, he stepped back from the board and asked, "What, exactly, does this sentence mean?"

Four people he called on said they didn't know. The fifth person said, "I think it means a feeling you keep to yourself."

"Why wouldn't you want anyone to know?" Mr. Thompson asked.

"Because it's a secret," someone else said.

"Maybe it's a secret you keep from yourself," a girl in the back row said. "Maybe people don't want to know their own secrets."

"That doesn't make sense," a boy said.

"A lot of things don't make sense," Mr. Thompson told him, "but they're still true." He gave us an assignment, which we were to do in class, and then he sat on the radiator and watched us work. "Don't forget to use commas," he told us.

After class, I went downstairs to the girls' locker room to change my clothes for gym. Our teacher was already there, marking off our names as we walked in. She talked to me about my father, and then a girl I knew from another class said, "I don't know what I would do if my father died, even though I hate him."

We all went out to the basketball court and shot baskets from the free-throw line. After gym, I went to the library for study hall, and then I met Nancy in front of my locker, and we walked out to the school bus. Her boyfriend, who got on the bus a few minutes after we did,

1. *A Separate Peace*: a novel by John Knowles, set in a New England prep school during the 1940s.



Girl Arranging Her Hair (1886) by Mary Cassatt (1844–1926).

sat down four rows ahead of us. He spent the whole bus ride talking loudly to a small, blond girl.

"Sometimes people try to hurt you just to see if they can do it," Nancy said.

"You don't know that for sure," I told her.

"Yes, I do," she said. "I've done it to people myself."

We got off at our block and stood for a moment at the corner before we each went home. The air was so still that the traffic from the highway seemed louder than usual. "I guess I don't need to talk to you about feeling sad," Nancy said. "I forgot for a minute."

"It's different with me," I told her. "It's not something you feel every second."

I walked across the neighbors' yard and into our own; I put Lee's bike in the shed and went

into the house through the kitchen door. My mother was standing in Lee's doorway, and I heard Lee say, "I got an A in spelling. Dad gave me fifty cents last time."

My mother gave Lee two quarters, and then she walked past me into the kitchen, opened the kitchen door, and sat outside on our steps. I went out and sat beside her. "Did Dad really give Lee fifty cents?" she asked me.

"I thought it was a quarter," I told her, "but I might be remembering it wrong." She held my hand, and we watched a squirrel race around the shed.

"Would you give me a hug, honey?" she asked. I put my arms around her. In the past year, I had grown a lot, and now I was bigger than she was; when I hugged her, I was able to put my arms all the way around her.

"I wish I'd stop growing," I told her.

"You'll be tall, like Dad was," she said. "Some-day you'll appreciate it." She stood up and walked down into the yard. She was still dressed in her work clothes—a skirt and blouse and high heels—and her shoes were invisible in the long grass. No one had mowed the yard since my father had died. "The lawn will have to be Eddie's job now," my mother said. "You and Lee can do the raking." She looked up toward the clatter of a woodpecker in our sweet-gum tree. "I'll find a gas station that will change the oil in the car, and then I'll teach myself to do the other things Dad did."

"That seems like a lot," I told her.

"I know it does, honey." She sat back down beside me and pulled up weeds that were growing out of the cracks in the steps. I looked around at the yard and the house—at the patches of bare ground under the trees, the peeling paint around the windows, and all the small holes in the screens—and thought that it would take an army of men to fix everything that was broken.

My mother and I went inside to peel potatoes. At six o'clock, when Eddie came home from playing football with his friends, we all had supper in the kitchen.

"I made a touchdown today," Eddie said.

"Well, good for you," my mother said. "I wish I could have seen it." She had eaten quickly, and she put her plate in the sink and drank a cup of instant coffee while she watched us finish.

Afterward, I cleared the table and washed the dishes. I forgot that it was Eddie's turn, and he didn't remind me until I was done. He and Lee were sitting on the floor in the living room, with Lee's toy soldiers all around them. They were watching television with my mother. I came into the room and said, "I don't feel like watching TV."

"Who cares?" Eddie asked.

"We all care," my mother said sharply. "We're a family, even without Dad. We care what happens to each other." The way she spoke and the look on her face reminded me of my father, of the times he'd lost his temper with us. Eddie and Lee looked surprised, and then, a second later, there were tears on their faces.

I was crying, too, because my mother had started to cry. But I wasn't upset about what Eddie had said or because my mother had got angry. I startled myself by feeling almost glad. It seemed to me that all of a sudden our lives were ordinary again, except that my father wasn't there, and I felt like I was paying attention after being lost in a daydream, or like I was opening my eyes after seeing how long I could keep them closed. When my mother started to speak, I hoped she wouldn't say something nice that would cancel out her angry words. But what she said was, "Okay. Pick up these toys. Then we're going to turn off the television and go to bed."

It was only seven-thirty, but we went into our rooms. I didn't bother to put on my nightgown.

I took off my clothes and got into bed in my underwear, and, even though it was early, I didn't have my same trouble falling asleep. I knew now that my father was dead and that we would live our lives without him, and I fell asleep right away, so that for a while I could not know these things.

Reading Check

1. Why does Eddie want to stay in Florida?
2. Why is Jean's mother worried about the insurance payments?
3. Why is Jean unable to fall asleep?
4. When does Jean return to school?
5. What causes Jean's mother to become angry at Eddie?

For Study and Discussion

Analyzing and Interpreting the Story

1. This story deals with the way different members of a family react to a father's death. What do the mother's actions and words reveal about her character?
- 2a. What impression do you get of Jean from her relationship with her mother and brothers? b. What do you learn about her during her day at school?
3. The sentence the teacher writes on the blackboard states that feelings can be deeper and truer than thoughts. How does this sentence give you insight into Jean's conflict?
- 4a. What causes Jean to re-examine her feelings? b. What truth finally comes to her?
5. During class one student suggests that people don't want to know their own secrets.
 - a. Does this interpretation make sense to you?
 - b. Do you agree or disagree with this idea?