

WET BEHIND THE EARS

JACK C. HALDEMAN

Genuine effort can be less work than cheating, but Willie Joe just isn't the kind of person who exerts himself even in a sink-or-swim situation.

Willie Joe Thomas was born to bad luck. Some say he brought it on himself, and they may be right. He was a swimmer, a college student, and a deceitful man. Not necessarily in that order.

Rather than study through high school, Willie Joe had forged his transcripts to get into college. Rather than work to pay his tuition, he got a swimming scholarship under false pretenses. If there was an easy way to do something, he would do it. Like an amoeba, Willie Joe had followed the path of least resistance all of his life. It showed.

The water was warm, and the chlorine stung his eyes as Willie Joe pulled himself from the pool. He headed for his towel, dead last again. The meet with A&M was tomorrow, and if he didn't shape up, he'd lose his scholarship for sure.

That would mean work, and Willie Joe hated work. He slipped away to the showers, managing to avoid the coach.

Big Ray, who worked out in the weight room, was scrubbing down in the shower with the hot water on full force. Willie Joe stripped off his suit and stepped into the steam.

"Afternoon, Willie," said Ray. "Short practice today?"

"Had to leave early. Got a chemistry midterm."

"How did practice go?"

"Fine," lied Willie Joe. "I'm in top shape."

"Gonna really show it to those Aggies

"You bet," said Willie Joe. Dead last against three of the "B" team. A humiliating defeat. He could feel the scholarship slipping through his wet fingers like a bar of soap.

As soon as Big Ray left the shower, Willie Joe turned the water down to a more comfortable level. He washed quickly so that he would be out of there before the rest of the team showed up.

Dripping water, Willie Joe grabbed a towel from the stack beside the lockers. He hated being wet more than anything in the world. That was unusual in a swimmer, but Willie Joe wasn't your usual swimmer. He was more like a fake swimmer.

When he had first embarked on his college career, it had seemed like a good idea. Being a fake swimmer was a lot easier than being a fake football player, for instance. On the other hand, it involved a lot of water. Willie Joe felt bloated all the time and imagined he sloshed when he walked. The more water managed to seep into his life, the more he hated it.

In the winter his wet hair froze, in the summer it was always plastered down against his head like a wet mop. He had a nasty fungus in his ears that he couldn't shake. It seemed as though his fingers and toes were constantly wrinkled, and he had the world's worst case of athlete's foot. He was in the water as little as possible-just enough to keep the coach off his back-but that was still way too much. He'd grown to dislike everything about the swim team except the scholarship. Even the bathing suits were the wrong color.

His hair was still damp as he walked across campus to Whitehand

Hall and took his seat in the crowded lecture room. Although chemistry had the reputation of being a bear of a course, he wasn't worried at all. He'd put a lot of effort into this exam. He was better prepared than he'd ever been before.

He'd scribbled the redox equations on the ledge over by the pencil sharpener. He had a periodic table stuffed inside his slide rule. The gas laws were written on the insoles of his tennis shoes, and a couple of complicated formulas were scratched on the bottom of his calculator. He was extremely well prepared and breezed through the exam without a hitch.

It never occurred to him that if he put half the time and energy into studying that he did into cheating, he'd get better grades with a lot less work. Things like that seldom occurred to Willie Joe. He was that kind of a person.

As he left the exam, he knew he really should go back to the pool and catch the afternoon practice session. Instead, he called the coach and told him his cousin had gotten sick again. Then he headed for the Plucked Chicken, over in the mall.

The other guys on the swim team watched their diets all the time, but Willie Joe didn't see much point in all that healthy stuff. It seemed too much like work. He liked chicken wings, and the greasier and hotter they were, the better he liked them. The Plucked Chicken carried five kinds of hot wings, from blistering to nuclear. He couldn't make up his mind, so he ordered a dozen. A dozen of each. He washed them down with a pitcher of Triple-Kick Cola-three times the sugar, three times the caffeine, and three times the bubbles. Then he had seconds on the wings, and thirds.

Countless wings later, Willie Joe stumbled back to the dorm in the dark. The evening had somehow slipped away from him. He was just rolling into the sack when his roommate, Frank Emerson, burst into the room, turning on all the lights.

Oh, no, not again, thought Willie Joe, pulling the pillow over his head. Frank was a grad assistant down at the chemistry lab and was as strange as they came. Inorganic compounds got him all excited and the mere mention of carbon bonds would keep him babbling all night. The guy was loony. He was also devoted to rules, a real pain. Willie Joe figured rules were for other people.

"I've done it," said Frank, pulling the pillow off Willie Joe's head. "This time I've really done it."

Willie Joe sighed and reached under the bed, pulling out the box from last night's pizza, or maybe the one from last week. A snack was just the thing for an occasion like this. There was nothing like a slice of cold pepperoni pizza with extra anchovies to take the edge off of a chatty roommate.

"Done what?" he asked, examining the pizza. The hardened cheese had grown some greenish fuzz, which he brushed away. Definitely last week's pizza, he decided. The crust tasted like cardboard. He grinned; old pizza was the best pizza. "Another perfect solvent?"

Frank blushed. He'd wasted a month's research looking for the perfect solvent, something that would dissolve anything it came into contact with. It had taken him that long to realize that even if he succeeded, no bottle

in the world would be able to hold it. It was a lost cause.

"No, this one works," he said. Suddenly he frowned. "It's against good common sense to eat old, unrefrigerated food. You know that."

"So I'm uncommon, test-tube face. I do what I want. What boring thing have you discovered this time.

"It's not boring, and you should have some common sense. The reason people use common sense is because it can save them grief. You're just asking for trouble." He set a small vial on the dresser. "This is it," he said with no small measure of pride.

"Great," said Willie Joe, pulling another slice from the box and brushing it off. "No doubt you have something in that little jar that will change both the course of history and the face of the Earth.

Now, how about turning off the lights so I can get a little shut-eye. I've got a meet in the morning."

"I call it a molecular sliding compound, and I'm going to give it to the U.S. Navy. Besides, it's a vial, not a jar. You should learn to be precise with your scientific terminology."

"Humph. I know a jar when I see one. What's the Navy want to slide for? "

"You don't understand. What this compound does is polarize the electrostatic charge between the hydrogen/oxygen bond, causing a great deal of molecular slippage and a subsequent near-total decrease in the coefficient of friction."

Willie Joe squinted at his roommate, beginning to doze off. "Huh?" he said. "Put that in English."

"If you paid attention in your chemistry class, you would understand what I was saying."

"If I paid attention to everything I was supposed to, I'd never have any fun. What did you say?"

"The practical effect of this compound is that it effectively eliminates all friction from anything placed in water. Boats will be able to move across the sea with no resistance at all. The fuel savings will be astronomical. It will be possible for submarines to achieve incredible speed. Imagine, if you will, sailboats zipping along as fast as speed boats, battleships breaking the sound barrier in the Atlantic Ocean. Water

will never be the same."

"It staggers the mind," said Willie Joe, pulling the pillow back over his head.

"I don't believe you grasp the full import of this discovery," said Frank. Willie Joe just snored, clutching a slice of pizza to his chestlike a triangular teddy bear with pepperoni eyeballs.

The alarm went off at seven, and Willie Joe's stomach felt as though the boxing team had used it for a punching bag. His stomach grumbled and his body ached all over. He stumbled to the sink, tossed down some antacid tablets, and brushed the fuzz off his teeth. He felt terrible, and his brain just wouldn't get into gear. He blame(the anchovies on the pizza. Next time, no anchovies.

This was it, the big day. It was likely to be his last day, too. He wouldn't be able to fake his marginal swimming skills any longer.

So far he'd been able to get by with a batch of phony press clippings and a season-long case of the cramps. The coach had said if he didn't swim today against A&M, he'd be dropped from the squad. That meant he would lose his scholarship and his free ticket to the easy life at the University. He'd have to get a job, and that was unthinkable. He'd never had a job of any sort before and now was not the time to start.

As he put his hairbrush down, he saw that the vial was still on the dresser. The conversation with his roommate last night came back to him in blurred bits and pieces. Through the sleepy fog of nuclear wings, Triple-Kick Cola, and week-old pizza, he remembered something about moving effortlessly through water. If it worked for boats, why wouldn't it work for people? There were two ways to find out. Either he could wake up Frank and ask him, or he could sneak past his sleeping roommate and steal the stuff.

Always the amoeba, Willie Joe snuck past Frank and stole the vial. It was clearly the path of least resistance.

The dressing room was full of steam and tension, as it was before every meet. Some of the athletes sat by themselves in silent contemplation, while others kidded each other with loud, nervous laughter. Willie Joe stood at his locker and stared at the vial like a drowning man might eyeball a life preserver. It was salvation. And to think that dummy of a roommate would have wasted it on the Navy. He started sloshing it on. It had a most unusual aroma, not unlike that of a dead armadillo after ten days on the side of the road.

To put it politely, Willie Joe stank.

"Powerful after-shave you got there, W. J.," said Kevin Barker from the next locker. "Takes me right back to the farm."

Kevin was a butterfly man who sometimes did the crawl. He was so gung-ho he shaved his head before every meet. Willie Joe hated people like that.

"Nobody asked you, chrome dome," snapped Willie Joe.

"Hey, take it easy," said Kevin. "I was only making a joke."

"Well, joke someplace else. I've got no sense of humor today." Willie Joe hid what was left of the vial behind his clothes and slammed his locker door shut. The coach was beginning to give his pep talk, urging all the men to go out and win this one for the Board of Regents'. Willie Joe took the opportunity to slip into the showers and test the compound while no one was watching.

As he stood under the shower, the water ran off him like raindrops off the hood of a brand-new Cadillac. He grinned. This would be a piece of cake.

He went to the bench and sat down, hardly paying any attention at all to the preliminary races. The Aggies were ahead, but that didn't bother Willie Joe. He'd win this event, and that was all he cared about. It was in the bag.

"Glad to see you're suited up, W. J.," said the coach. "I hope your cousin is okay."

"She's much better. It was a miraculous recovery."

"Another one? Well, that's good. How're the cramps?"

"No problem, coach. I never felt better."

"Glad to hear that, son. You're on next. We need this one, and the hundred-meter freestyle may be our only chance."

"I'll do my best, coach."

"I know you will. Carry on." He wrinkled his nose. The boy smelled like he'd been rolling in bear grease.

Willie Joe took his place at the end of the pool. Unlike the others, he didn't jump into the water before the race

to get used to the water. Instead he practiced looking cool and aloof. No sense in tipping his hand.

They lined up for the starting gun, taking their ready positions with care. The men on either side of Willie Joe were gagging, and someone went off to see if the ventilation system was broken. The gun went off, and so did the swimmers.

Willie Joe hit the water like a hot knife sliding through melted butter. His entry was so smooth he could hardly feel it when he broke the surface. He slid under the water like a human torpedo and was halfway across the pool, far ahead of everyone else, before he had to take his first stroke.

It proved to be his downfall.

He pushed his arms, and nothing happened. He kicked his feet, with no results. The compound was working, all right. It was working only too well. He was completely friction-free in the pool, but at the same time he couldn't push against the water. It was like pushing against air. Having lost the forward momentum from his dive, he sank to the bottom like a rock. The other swimmers passed over his head, leaving a trail of bubbles.

Willie Joe pushed against the bottom of the pool and shot straight up, leaping from the water like a dolphin at Marineland. He sank just as quickly. In the end, he had to walk across the bottom of the pool to the ladder at the shallow end. Dead last again. Finished. All washed up. As he climbed out, he saw that the police were waiting for him. So was his roommate. Frank looked pretty excited. He was yelling something about national security and the CIA. The coach looked as if he wanted to pummel somebody. The water slid off Willie Joe like magic, collecting in small puddles at his feet. It was all over. Willie Joe shook his head and groaned. The police came toward him with handcuffs. Jail would probably be better than having to face the coach. No telling what Frank would do if he got the chance. If he didn't go to jail, he'd have to get a job. Frank would probably make him work it off in the chem lab. He shuddered at the thought.

Questions:

Place your answers on a separate piece of paper, then return this page to the box where you got it so others can use it. (Save a tree)

1. Give a quick (1 paragraph) summary of the story.
2. Why does Willie Joe think Frank's new compound will help him at the swim meet?
3. Because Willie Joe did not pay attention in science class, he did not think about how friction can be helpful. Explain what Willie Joe failed to remember about friction. How did this cause him to lose the race?
4. Some of the things that happen to Willie Joe are terrible, yet this is a funny story. How has the author turned Willie Joe's misfortune into something we want to laugh about? Include examples from the story.
5. What would have happened if Willie Joe had put the compound on the bottom of his feet? Write a funny paragraph to describe the scene.

Who's Jack C. Haldeman II?

Sports and science fiction may seem like an unlikely combination, but Jack C. Haldeman enjoys both. He has written science fiction stories, sports stories, and stories such as "Wet Behind the Ears," which is a bit of both! Before becoming a writer, Haldeman received a college degree in life science and worked as a research assistant, a medical technician, a statistician, a photographer, and an apprentice in a print shop.

Many of Haldeman's stories are funny. One such story, "What Weighs 8,000 Pounds and Wears Red Sneakers?" describes a family that discovers their front yard is actually an elephant graveyard. But not all of Haldeman's science fiction is funny or sports-related. Haldeman has also written several science fiction adventure novels that explore issues in biology and in weapons development.