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Short Story  
Approximately 4,000 words

SYNOPSIS

*tell story in Seward's voice  
reminding Harry theme evolve  
in tone I simply telling how it  
was then*

"Before the Grasshopper Became a Burden" is a short story of a young man's rite of passage into adulthood - from the abandon of youth to the caution of age - severing instinct and gaining a semblance of reason.

As he opens his eyes and allows shame to embrace him, he admits the stoicism of the community. The passion and exploration of his youth are spent and stoicism claims him, following the inverted eye-opening experience. (Inversions are key symbolisms in the story: end at beginning of the corn row, scent seeping up rather <sup>THAN</sup> down, etc.)

We are frequently more receptive to the inklings of ~~emerging~~ emerging self-realization when we allow our instincts to guide us from behind drawn eyelids. Our vision is often keener with our eyes closed, swaying like a branch in a breeze.

Stoicism is a virtue, but passion is its own reward. Willoughby fails to achieve initial self-realization in the frenzied rite of passage; therefore he is damned to rigid thought and reason. There is no return when the grasshopper ceases to soothe, and its perpetual clicking in the grass becomes a burden.

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SHORT STORY  
4,000 WORDS

" BEFORE THE GRASSHOPPER BECAME A BURDEN "

(NO CAPS)

He stood at the end of the corn row and stripped the threadbare shirt from his slick chest, casting it to the rain-pattered dirt with collartips fluttering like a wetwinged dove.

He ripped the trousers from his sucked-in waist and kicked the slumped heap with his barefoot into the final sun diffused by a settled cloud.

The dark corn blades licked and sliced at his peach skin as he raced and soared down the row - youth and spring fused in the fertile forest, deep and wild and new - leaving behind the old house with the old couple who begat him, as in the Bible, like Sarah and Abraham. Old. Old. Old. And he was new.

The cloister of locusts, like the buzz of oblivion, became all sound. The wet earth touched his toes, and the scent seeped up between the tender blades, blending with the ripening corn, blonde silks caressing soft and moist on his lean ribs.

The arched forest extended as if the rows marched end to end and joined, stretching into the soft gray dusk where a

whippoorwill swooped and lit in a pine, calling lonesome as a train whistle.

They, the old ones, would be there perched in their rockers on the front porch, listening for the thunder following the rain.

The youth knew they could not hear the corn cracking with growth, the locusts' hum, nor smell the rising sap with their calloused noses. Because they were old, as if they had used up their sense of smell, had wasted all sensibility and waned, waiting for the grave.

YEA THOUGH I WALK THROUGH THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH...

And he felt a surge of life spring in his chest and rush to his head, tasting it, bittersweet. He licked the moisture from his ripe lips as he galloped, trying to erase the memory of the last funeral which did not pertain. He could smell it if he were not careful, the dank stillness of death. He could hear it in the thousand droopy voices of the death hymn:

IN THE SWEET BY AND BY,

WE SHALL MEET ON THAT BEAUTIFUL SHORE

The pulse in his head pumped the sad organ chords, and he shook them off to a rattling of the brain. A screech owl hooted, and the moon peeped over the pines as he took another

rustling row towards home, slowing to allow the silver blades to touch him, to tickle him, to tame him.

He knew they would worry when they saw the moon and recognized the night. Soon she would bellow, "Will-a-by," long and low, strung out with a high "B" on the end like a hog call. Not Will as he wished and wrote on his papers at school: Will Carson, rugged and tough - he wished. But he was timid and tepid, and he knew it was because of them. Because they were old, old when he was born, growing older as he grew.

#### ONE FOOT IN THE GRAVE.

He felt the remorse bloom like a nocturnal flowering vine, winding through the corn stalks to entangle him. He loved them. He could not bear to think of them gone. Just gone.

Silver blades slashed his hairless chest, and he tasted the blood he felt they drew. He blinked the tears that formed the silver prisms veil between him and the moon.

"I'm too dadbummed young to be sad. Ain't no sissy neither," he said to the corn cracking and to the sap rising in the border of pines emitting a faint light from the house.

He slapped the blades aside and hastened, slowing as he heard, "Will-a-by," long and shrill, whistling through the night

breeze.

He could smell the pungent old of camphor from the house, see the starched muslin curtains ballooning lightly at the windows, and hear the ticking of the handwound clock.

He could hear the creaks of the staid forms, moping in to bed at eight, falling into short sleep, oblivious to the myriad sounds of night.

'If I had a car,!' he thought, stopping when he reached that point to think what he might do if he had a car.

'If I had a car, I'd go to a basketball game at the school-house,' he completed the thought. And as if it were accomplished, he smiled radiantly at the dull moon.

The mosquitoes had found him, and he slapped sharp flesh and scratched, deriving pleasure from the itch. He wet the corn arrogantly with his own force, by his own control, and inhaled his acrid fragrance rising with the dew.

"Will-a-by!"

"They don't know I'm alive til I'm gone," he said, wondering if that made sense.

"Boy, somebody's gonna think you're crazy," his Pa always said, shuffling off from where, <sup>WILLOBUGH</sup> he rocked the bench back to the wall or wobbled a glass of clinking ice on the table or steered a makebelieve racecar along the dark, dank hall where

the faded ancestors watched from picture frames.

'If I could hurry up and get sixteen, I could join up in the Army,' he thought, conjuring an image of a spiffed uniform, all green, which would magically include courage and a gun.

"I could shoot a coon out of a tree at fifty-foot," he argued.

"Will-a-by!"

"What, Ma?" he yelled, too loud for the surrounding quiet. It collapsed.

~~Same tone:~~ "Will-a-by!"

"I'm acoming!"

'She couldn't hear it thunder,' he thought, snatching colorless clothes and yanking them on, smoothing them in the moonlight.

"I'm acoming," he hollered.

He heard the chairs scraping across the porch floor to the wall where they tilted them to keep them dry and tidy in case of rain or dogs. Then the screen door squeaked open and shut and a soft padding and sliding of feet echoed through the hall.

Passing quietly through the back screen door, kneesagged and ~~flagged~~ with a tuff of cotton to discourage flies, he

crept to his room on mudcrusted tiptoes to avoid disturbing or being disturbed. He closed the door and lay on the bed, lumpy with aged cotton, but smelling of sun. The room was sparse and square like the walls of his mind; each tacked up object representing the accumulations of his brief past, like memories: a turpentine calender with wide blocks, pencil crossed for days passed, and (scrawled) <sup>FOR</sup>handscript of special events that were meaningless because they never matured. (A girl with heavy thighs clad in white shorts, bogging in highheels, leaned against a pine tree, smiling with her knee cocked towards the chipped face oozing gum); a baseball glove, pied with age spots, handed down like an old shirt from Buerie who had served in the Korean War, or J.J. whose war was World War II, or Kenneth or Caulie, or Calvin who made it through the first one. (No one had claimed the Vietnamese War yet).

He shuddered and stretched on the bed with his arms crossed under his head and his elbows touching the cool metal of the bedstead, forcing his toes to hook beneath the bar at the foot of the bed.

Mentally he examined the remainder of the room, as bright in memory as if the light chain attached to the bedstead had been yanked: A fly swatter and a funeral parlor handfan from Mama were stabbed together on a nail; a gun rack of budding DEER antlers held his only gun, a rifle of dubious age and brand,

and a picture of Jesus, radiating beams of purity, concealing a magazine picture of Elvis, contorted and flinging a guitar with passion etched on his hiked brow.

The walls were neutral with a single window, the roughness sanded by time and brother's hands; <sup>AN</sup> antedated chiffonier squatted, within which secrets hid like a bed of mice beneath stacks of starched shirts, stiff as cardboard. <sup>pe</sup> And an old dresser loomed with a mirror desilvered in splotches like pewter fingerprints. <sup>7</sup> The image it reflected was wavy and thin, more real than illusory, he feared. And a straight-back chair sat square against the wall with a cowhide bottom, <sup>o</sup> newly stretched from Old Molly's hide.

He clasped his hand over his heart and held his breath, checking for the internal rhythm he heard, or felt, or sensed in the sultry night.

He smiled and removed his hand, tapping the bedstead with his fingernails to the beat of the jukebox from the juke in the negro quarters of Calvin. It carried clear and sound on ~~the sound of~~ the night's northerly breeze through the quarter mile span.

"Willoughby," his Mama said, and he stilled his fingers and focused his eyes on the light entering his room with the penetrating gray form.



"Mama."

"Just come in to kiss you good night," she said, and bent to kiss his damp forehead with her dry lips.

She smelled of cornstarch and of the indescribable fragrance of motherhood, the fragrance that is never duplicated and yet always the same. Just Mamascent. Unique and comforting, common and disturbing. That imperceptible delay of all boyhood maturation. That consolation for frailty and error. A travesty of manhood owing to an emotion based on smell.

"Night, Ma," he said, and watched her large form move back through the rectangle of light.

"I love you," she said through the closed door to the darkness.

He waited to resume his tapping on the bedstead, waited for the scent to dissipate, the childlike dependence to pass into the realm of self-reliance and trepidation, the daring and bold bother of his youth.

"I'm gone," he whispered, as already he plucked the tacks off the musty window screen, rolled it in a careless scroll, and stepped through, jumping to the ground in a surreptitious squat.

He rammed his fists to the bottoms of his pockets and

looked around at nothing but the silver sand of the grassless yard where prized, useless plants peeked from electrical insulator borders. Smoothly he jaunted towards the beat, straddling a slumped fence effortlessly, whistling inside his mouth.

He cut across fields of blanched grass stippled with white gopher <sup>WEEDS</sup> blooms, looking back once at the tall farm house, more roof than rooms, topped with glinting tin.

The field ended at Old Jim's collard patch, silver too in moonlight. He passed between the outhouse and <sup>THE</sup> house, silent and dark as if each contained someone sleeping or neither contained anyone. He knew Old Jim slept on his niggercot, having shuffled in at dusk from his rocker, yawned and lay til dawn, like always. He could smell the faint odor like the rust on an iron washpot mixed with the honeysuckle that crept up the side of the house.

Willoughby forgot it though as soon as he reached the railroad tracks, silver ribbons running east to west.

The white Masonic Building and store, though dark and closed tightly against the night, appeared lit with lanterns where the moon reflected around the bars on the windows.

'Ain't no call for bars. Wonder how come they put them things up in the first place when nobody don't come around,'

he thought, taking the paved road in front toward the intersection - a mere crossroad, minus traffic, with two stop signs foolishly directing as if the mailboxes in front of the somnolent houses might march forward and ignore.

Treefrogs croaked, as if begging for rain, even as the fog drifted in guazy clouds over mudpuddles, left and right, on dirt drives to houses effete of motion.

But the beat from the juke was a palpable presence, beckoning in perfect unison with his heart, each step matching the rhythm: up to the crossing, turn west.

He experienced a surge of anticipation and fear as he saw the light pour from the juke to the troughed black dirt under the porch shed. Two negroes emerged, allowing the screen-door to slam freely with a bang, like a cap pistol. He clutched the pocketknife with his pocketed hand and released it, reassured by its presence, just in case. The two men sauntered off, blending into the dark of the quarters. They ducked heads in laughter, appearing ~~to~~<sup>AS</sup> be only two cigaret coals, like lightening bugs. (OVER PAGE 10 A)

(BEGIN) Casually he shuffled up, brushed his feet in the unctuous dirt packed by feet, and pulled the screen door open, seeing first the irridescent lights of the jukebox where two negro girls dropped nickles in slots, punched buttons and shifted melon hips as the record lifted, lay, and spun beneath a minute

Willoughby rounded the yard that merged with the crossing where a trellised seven-sister rosebush bloomed near the stop sign.

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needle , errupting in song - BLUE SUEDE SHOES - too vibrant for the ten-by-ten square room: plank floor depressed in the center like a bread tray, rustic ceiled and heavy with alcohol and sweat, one negro per square foot of seasoned floor. (NEXT PAGE) 11 A)

(Begin) Tilted forward also was a red and white soft drink box with "an~~e~~laborately scrawled "Royal Crown Cola" rusted in streaks from the moisture leaking to the center of the floor and puddling like a leak in the exposed tin roof supported by rafters, cobweb netted. Wet barefoot tracks danced from the bowl to the wall, like multiple attempts to climb out.

~~And~~ <sup>Then</sup> there was total quiet in the blaring.

"Mister Will-a-by, you ain't come apeddling no coons in springtime? Is you?" yelled Lucius: above the blaring, as if no blaring existed.

"Nope. Just come by to play your nicklelodeon," said Willoughby, rattling the three nickles in his pocket that noone heard.

Wide eyed and gaping, the crowd of negroes made stunted activity of awe, ambling to the drink box, mumbling affably while opening the R.C.'s with a snapping fizz.

"Well, you's welcome as the flowers in May!" said Lucius from behind the plank counter with the cigar box and rancid

The depression of the floor caused the off balanced jukebox to skip, jolting the song from blue to shoes in a clipped rhythm like stuttering.

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candy bars, laid in a row like crossties.

He hooked his thumbs in his rainbow-striped gallouses and thrust his balloon ponch forward, rocking back with his mouth stretched to expose gold teeth in a black face, glistening with perspiration like grease.

Willoughby genuinely matched his exaggerated smile and also thrust his stomach forward, effecting only an arching of his thin back.

Trusting his awkwardness did not show, he strolled over over to the jukebox as the two <sup>BLACK</sup> girls self-consciously sidled to the wall, muttering meaningless, inflectionless comments addressed inwardly.

"Blue Suede Shoes" was being lifted by the jukebox's mechanical arm and returned to its slot in the revolution of black discs.

Willoughby drummed his fingers on each side of the jukebox as he perused the lighted lists, eventually punching a bluegrass tune. The stillness was relieved by the grinding of the turntable and the erratic motion of the mechanical arm.

As the needle trembled on the ridges of the record, the fiddles ground like a car starter, accelerated and raced. He backed away in an arm slinging buckdance, barefeet stamping the floor to the puddle. And then he turned, tramping and

stamping in a circle, meeting each wide-eyed gaze and growing grin of the onlookers, till first one and then another patted a foot and hesitantly joined the rhythm with a sporadic clapping of hands into an easy, regular rhythm.

"Watch dat Mister Will-a-by cut the buck!" shouted Lucius, tramping on heavy feet from behind the counter, sloping to the bowl in a sliding shuffle that splattered water to the walls. Before long everybody, with minor reticence, was buckdancing and whooping, gaining volume toward the end. But Willoughby, steamy with excitement, was a step ahead, up the slope to the jukebox, clanking a coin and repeating the selection, caught in only a temporary lull, a momentary silence.

"Mist'a Willaby sho' know he can cut the buck!" someone said before the starter grinding took off again.

Willoughby was immersed in the heady sensation of the rhythm and the heat, the mincing feet and lusty sweat, the giddy spectacle of black and white stirring in a bowl. The two girls with revolving breasts and vacant faces channeled through to the center and circled him, ripe as corn, rich as coffee, swirling with breasts brushing his shoulders. Their wide eyes touched his, but did not see. He closed his eyes and inhaled the foreign, familiar fragrance of them, smelling the



corn, feeling the frenzy of his heightened senses. His skin prickled. He felt cold, then hot, a rising euphoria that rushed in his ears like the sound of locusts, of oblivion. It peaked, pealed like a thousand bells and burst, subsiding to a fine meshing of spirit and flesh.

He regained an awareness of his surroundings before he opened his eyes, spellbound in a moment of shame before he relented again to the swelling tide of emotion produced by someone else's nickles and allowed the floating breasts to suspend him from gentle to crashing waves of abandon.

He had ceased buckdancing at some point and merely swayed as if intoxicated. If he opened his eyes he felt the shame, saw the girls, common as mud, saw the dark eyes and the faces of simple pleasure, faces only casually observed in the fields or store or in the process of coon trading.

They were intimate now. No longer identical, nameless and faceless, but separate and stark individuals. Although both girl's faces remained blank, devoid of expression, there were identifying moles and freckles and lidlines fine and heavy as if drawn with different pencil points. Both had coarse, wiry hair, but one was wavy, almost sleek from root to end; the other was frizzy and full blown. A dent in the upper lip

of one contrasted with the even fullness of the other. A light pulse at the throat, as regular as a river's flow, distinguished the shorter girl from the taller whose pulse resembled a Mexican jumping bean.

The men, even with the constant turnover from coming and going, were distinguishing facial features: bulging eyes and squinted, and slack and rigid skin in shades of umber. They ranged from short to tall, fat to small, but each with a separate slope of the shoulders or straight as a T, shoulder to shoulder, neck to spine.

Hands. The hands were as varied in shape and size as those drawn by a classroom of children, each hand placed and traced on white paper to take home to mama. They were the same identical hands clasped to hoe handles in the fields, yet different, clapping and swinging and slinging sweat to the jolting walls.

He closed his eyes for the desirable swelling, the euphoria that had waned, and found that his balance was faulty. So he opened them, steadied himself, closed them again and swayed.

He stretched them open and the shame embraced him. The smell was rank, the room squallid, the eyes penetrating and same. The music became unbearably harsh and grating.

Already the roosters were crowing as he started for home along the road intermittently darkened by the shadows of houses cast from the setting moon. The crickets shuttled to a somber hush, as if weary of their own sounds.

Fog shrouded the railroad tracks, exposing only a powerless span of rails.

Old Jim's house was dimly lit in communion with first dawn. His steps were as muted as the first breath of light, not yet a shuffle, as he prepared for the approaching day.

As Willoughby crossed the field to the yard, he smelled the coffee from the soft light of the kitchen and heard the dull thudding of sleepnumbed feet, the light rattle of a pot, the muted clatter of contact with the stove.

"I don't reckon I done nothing I can't get over," he said.

He crawled through the damp window, pressed the tacks on the screen, stretched out with his arms and feet slung to the four corners of the bed, and drifted along the aisles of corn, through the maze of blackness, into the buzz of oblivion.