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The Grasshopper Holocaust of Summer Suburbia

Brian Jackson

Let me ramble what I remember: me and Casey are up there in the field, dirty knees and Star Wars t-shirts, flaming up grasshoppers with Daddy's Zippo lighter in a dry, cloudless August. Mom is a distant, hollering, echoing voice from down in the ghost summer suburb and we ignore her, busy burning. Says she's made us grilled cheese sandwiches and red Kool-Aid if we'd only quit playing and come down from the milkweed and cactus and ant piles and get the good earth out from underneath our fingernails. Casey is hopping and jumping after a sandpaper grasshopper and kicking up dirt into his blue Velcro shoe straps; me, I'm hungry and red-skinned, absently flicking flames out the top of the lighter with a shaggy head of dirty blond dancing in the wind.

"Aren't you hungry, Case?" I ask in the tone of the younger brother, the beggar, the sissy, wanting to go home to those sandwiches and leave the grasshoppers to chew the wheat staffs and jump at each other. Casey has that little brown guy by his

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two great legs, all spread apart like a wishbone; it wiggles and helplessly flails its curled arms, and its wings twitch.

“Bring the lighter over here,” he says, eyes wild and curious, blue, like the neighbor’s kiddy pool I can see from the top of the field. The forever backyards stretch out to the city far off by the mountains, with fences and swing sets and neat little gardens in rows of bushy green, and I can hear the rumble-hum of a lawnmower tearing up grass and sticks and sucking up scrambling grasshoppers in somebody’s backyard. They jump in thousands like springs out of the dry wheat staffs of the field and into thick green diagonally cut grass of yards, where concerned, pink-headed business men in Saturday’s jeans lumber out with hoses to spray seeds of death at them, or sour-faced teenagers suck them up into the helicopter blades of the Toro. Me and Casey burning them in the field and Saturday’s sweaty bald hardware businessmen poisoning them in the yard. The great grasshopper holocaust of summer suburbia.

Up in the field, General Casey is shouting, “You’re an enemy spy! We caught you behind enemy lines spying on us!” He shouts using his best deep television voice at the brown grasshopper (who offers no certain reply but struggling). “Do you know what the penalty is for spying in this country? Do you? Torture by fire!” And he laughs a jagged and sinister laugh that chills my bones; that laugh, the same as when he sat on my chest pinning my arms under his legs and stuck tickly-itch grass into my nose until floodgates opened and I cried out for my momma. And now there is something in that voice, that mock military dictator voice so sadistic and wrong, so evil. The grasshopper hears the evil in Casey’s voice and twitches and twists violently to get out of those fingers that pinch his long jumping legs. I question my loyalty to the dictator.

“Bring the lighter over here,” he says without looking up and I can’t move; the wind whips my Darth Vader iron-on. I grip the lighter, hidden in my hand behind my back.
“Bring it here, Dickey,” he says now, scowling right at me in impatience. His bald forehead gets all wrinkled up with displeasure and the almost gray stubble on his shaved head shifts forward like it will slide off into the dirt. “I wanna do this one.”

“That’s not my name.” I take a helpless look at the ground and watch a few red ants, so busy, all scrambling around, crawling up over my black Chuck Taylors. It’s like looking over all those stained wood, chain link, barbed wire fences down there and watching summer children run in and out of the houses throwing water balloons and flying out into the streets on BMX bikes or running over to the sandbox to bury GI Joe men; a thousand moms chasing naked kids down the sidewalk. It’s like God’s up on that gold throne, the one Momma told me about, looking straight down into buzzing suburbia, the pools and lawns, taking notes and laughing.

And here is the devil up in the wasteland holding a grasshopper he wants to deliver to the flames and listen to the crackle-snap and watch it go black and crispy. “Okay, Dickey! Dickey Doo!” He’s walking over to me but his total burning concentration rests on the helpless hopper.

“My name is Richard.”

“Okay, Dickey Doo-Doo!” And now he’s standing in front of me with his brown corduroy legs spread out and flapping around in the wind and weeds, and there’s Yoda with wise and sympathetic eyes all faded on his shirt. Casey has the grasshopper right in front of my face, scrambling, pleading. “Take the spy and gimmee the lighter or I’ll hit ya.”

“You hit me and I’ll scream real loud, Case.”

“You scream real loud and I’ll burn you up too, Dickey Doo.”

There is this lonely dog bellowing far off and down in the valley, a deep and foreboding sound to accompany my fear. Fear like dirt clods collecting in my belly. Like that irrepressible
choking feeling of fear when me and Case walk home in post-dusk after piano lessons, feet slapping on cracked sidewalks in front of all the abandoned wood-rotted houses slouching over like forgotten tombs in the neighborhood. Fear intensified by that smile, that terrifying smile splitting Casey’s mouth as he tells me of phantoms moaning and shrieking in those dark dumpy and echoing houses of our world, our summer suburbia. Yes, fear...do I believe him? Believe he’ll burn me?

“You can’t burn me—I’ll tell.” The lighter is cradled in shaking hands behind my back. I look at the grasshopper, his struggles getting less intense as determination (hope? fear?) ebbs into hopelessness. My mind in an instant thinks back to our unfinished basement where I found a lifeless mouse caught in a trap behind the grumbling water heater. I had wondered where the mouse’s mom was and why she hadn’t told him to stay away, to go somewhere else, to crawl into the sheet rock walls of my bedroom upstairs where I could hear the scratching, where there was no trap. A cold steel trap, a mouse almost bent in the middle, a crying boy who can’t look away. I lay in my bed that night hoping to hear the scratching when I couldn’t sleep, hoping for an impossible resurrection in the walls. I had half dreams of the cold steel on my own back, and I struggled to breathe.

Casey lets go of one stretched leg and the grasshopper violently springs back to struggling, the other bent leg pinched in dirty fingers. He steps closer, arm out and hand open to receive the lighter. “C’mon, girlie. Last one.”

Details get foggy, translucent here when my mind goes back, way back up in that dusty field among the tall swaying staffs of dry wheat. I know I don’t want a last one. My eyes fog up with stinging tears of shame, of foolish compassion. My heart is deep in my chest thumping up my throat in rapid bawumps. Suddenly Casey’s outstretched hand grabs my shoulder and twirls me around. His hand, so much stronger than both of mine,
snatches for the lighter and smashes all my fingers, and I pipe out in surprise pain and begin to cry. He yanks Dad's lighter out of my hands and pushes me down into the dirt. Hot dust stings my eyes, clings to the tears on my face, and goes down my throat. Through the haze of my watery eyes I see an anthill underneath my chin where millions of red ants run everywhere and nowhere, enraged at the giant face that has crushed their home. I see one bright red ant crawl up my arm and into my shirt but I don't care, I'm bawling out in fear and pain, my hands scraped up in hot dirt and rocks.

I slowly sit up and turn to look at my older brother Casey with his lighter and his victim. I suck long, lip-quivering breaths and gasps with a dirty face as he resumes that demonic dictator voice, so menacing, so sadistic. I hate him.

"Now we shall put you to death," says General Casey, holding the grasshopper in his left hand and Dad's Zippo lighter in his right hand, and he flicks and flicks at the scratchy wheels making little white sparks shoot out the top. It reminds me of Fourth of July sparklers in happy times, not like this. "We shall execute you like we did to all your other friend spies."

"Case, ay . . . ain't . . . you . . . hu . . . hungry?" I'm sputtering out gibberish now, can't talk and sob at the same time, just muttering.

"Shut up, Dickey Doo-Doo, crybaby girl," says Casey. "Watch this."

He gets a soft, wavy flame out of the top of the lighter and holds it to the grasshopper's face. The tiny arms flail around frantically as the face and the body turn brown, then sickly black. There is a light crackling sound as the wings catch fire and shrink into blackness, and Casey is laughing. The crackling and the struggling stop as the grasshopper's body is consumed in Casey's flame until it becomes a flame itself and licks at Casey's pink fingers.
“Oow! Ey!” And he drops the flaming grasshopper into the dried-up wheat, shaking his hand and doing a silly dance. Before I get any satisfaction from Casey’s injury I see fire climbing up the wheat and the dry weeds where he has dropped the burning spy. A humble streak of smoke snakes into the sky above where Casey does his “ow” dance. I rub my damp eyes and watch, mouth agape, as the field, the world, begins to catch fire and I sit on the dirt terrified, saying nothing. Casey turns to the heat with an open-eyed look of fear and guilt and begins to panic.

“Oh no!” he shouts to the flames, shaking his head at the growing fire that spreads with the hot wind of summer. “Run, Richard! Run!” And me and Casey begin to run frantically down the rocky hill to our home in peaceful, unknowing suburbia of dreary August. Before we get too far away from the flames I see Casey trip into the dirt, poofing out a ghostly cloud of dust all around him. A rusty wire has entangled his legs and dragged him down onto the dirt on his belly. I can hear him cry as I run past him, little legs pumping and a heart pounding in my ears. As I slip and stumble down the hill and into our backyard, into Momma’s spine rows of carrots and tomato cages, I can hear a cry for help somewhere up in the field and it sounds like wind or a distant bellowing dog in another neighborhood. I run into the yard and pull open the slide door of the aluminum tool shed and it screeches and shrieks. I jump into the pitch dark shed and struggle the door shut, closing out all the noise out there in the world.

And I sit in silence, in a musty darkness, with the smells of grass clippings and mower gasoline and rusty garden tools, sobbing as the world burns burns burns right down to the ground. I sit on the aluminum floor, clasp my knees to my chest, and rock back and forth, back and forth.