"Joe and the Race"

a short story by Brad Baughman

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ID 499

Dr. Liston - Supervisor
I really had no desire to leave my warm seat on the school bus as it coasted to a stop between two other yellow and black beasts in the parking lot. I would much rather have snuggled up in the torn, green vinyl seat, listened to Don McClain's *American Pie* that was blaring from the radio speakers, and watched the Brandon County Junior High Cross Country Championship race. Unfortunately I wasn't there to watch; I was at the race to run. As the rest of my teammates bounced excitedly off of the bus clapping and screaming, I half-heartedly joined in with a few faint horrays of my own, yet I knew my only real expression of elation would not come until the two-mile race was behind me and I was back on that bus headed home.

I don't think anyone, including myself, ever thought of me as a running enthusiast. As a matter of fact, I dreaded every mile that I ran in practice, but the running helped me get in shape for the basketball season, and I also felt obligated to participate in the sport since every available body was valuable to the sports' program at Glenn Junior High. Although I was not one of Glenn's most outstanding or promising runners, I certainly was the most consistent; I had never placed in a meet in two years of competition.

It wasn't until I stepped down from the bus and scanned the race area that the revelation of how big and important
this meet was hit me. Blue and yellow plastic flags outlining the two-mile course flapped in the wind, while runners clad in brightly colored sweat suits that had no doubt been boxed up all season and broken out just for this final meet jogged and stretched all around. All the bright colors were quite a contrast to the dark, unfriendly November sky that pushed huge gray clouds eastward and that sent cold gusts of wind whipping through my sweats as I began my stretching exercises. As I had expected, a mild case of the pre-race butterflies fluttered around and then finally settled in my stomach. I never was sure why I got the butterflies before a race. There was really no pressure on me, for I knew that I was not a serious contender, and my coach knew that my performance would probably have no bearing on our team score. But the queasy feeling persisted, undoubtedly fed by my gnawing fear of finishing dead last. I had never finished last in any race before, but I had come close a few times. Grunting and straining to touch my near-frozen feet, I had one positive consolation. Regardless of the outcome of the race, the race that I was twenty minutes away from running would be the final race of the year and probably the final race of my cross-country career.

Nearing the end of my loosening-up routine, I noticed that all seven of the county teams had arrived, and I began scanning the competition. Right away I picked out five runners whose stomachs indicated they had spent more time forking in mashed potatoes than they had running. A
closer look revealed four runners that I had previously beaten during the season. While I was gloating with a new-found confidence, a big, gangly, mop-haired boy lumbered towards me, and as he came closer, I recognized him. It was Joe McMarron, a boy whom I had met last summer and who lived in the subdivision next to mine. Still lumbering, and now grinning like a little boy who just found his first discarded Playboy Magazine in an alley, Joe waved a big hand and said hi. I couldn't help but notice how much Joe had grown since I last saw him in August when we were both chased away from our favorite illegal fishing hole by a shotgun-toting caretaker. He was definitely the tallest runner entered in the race, but because about three-quarters of his height came from his waist up, he would not have the advantage of long legs. The t-shirt he wore looked at least two sizes too small, and I couldn't tell if his goosebumps were turning purple because of the biting wind or because his circulation had been restricted. He wore no sweat shirt or sweat pants, but was outfitted in his white, too-tight t-shirt, baggy white shorts, and white socks. With the all-white running outfit and his pale white flesh, Joe looked as if he had just come from Hollywood where he had been turned down in a bid for The Man From Glad spot. His shorts—he must have borrowed a pair of his Dad's boxer underwear—drooped down to his bony knees and ballooned with air each time a breeze
gave way to a gust. Perhaps this ballooning effect helped to keep the shorts on since there was really nothing else to support them. Joe just didn't have any buttocks.

It suddenly came to my attention that Joe was missing more than a butt. He didn't have any shoes on. When I asked him where his shoes were, he chuckled and said that he had left them in his locker at school but was prepared to run sock-footed. "What a dedicated athlete," I quipped, and Joe chuckled again. Before I could begin telling Joe of my nervousness and my fear of finishing last, he spouted out all of his pre-race frustrations and anxieties. When we had each finished our separate discourses, we both agreed that we were bound to keep each other's company at the rear of the pack once the race started. Joe mumbled a few profanities about the cold, gloomy weather, grinned, wished me good luck, and stiffly jogged over to join his teammates with the toes of his soiled socks stretched out and flopping in cadence with his brown bangs as he ran.

A shrill whistle interrupted my enjoyment of the comical sight, and I turned and ran towards our coach who was calling us all together for one last pep talk. Once again we jumped up and down shouting, but this time I felt a little more a part of the celebration. I was no longer worried that I would finish last. After all, I surely ought to be able to outrun a guy running without any shoes. Still, I became a bit more nervous when I began removing
my sweats at the starting area. Runners were jumping up and down and shaking their arms, hands and legs. As soon as my sweats were off, I understood why there was so much movement; it was cold. Taking my place at the back of the crowd of runners that was forming, I caught a glimpse of two big, brown, socked feet dancing up and down, quiverung, shaking, and rubbing each other as if they were really excited about something. I followed the happy feet up to the cuffs on a pair of brown double-knit slacks, up the slacks to the faded gold letters on the blue nylon windbreaker that read STATE LAB SCHOOL COACH, and finally up to the agonized, cringing, twisted face of Joe's coach. Just then, Joe stepped in the starting area beside me in a pair of size 11 black wing tips. The mystery of the dancing feet was solved.

Before I had even had time to tease Joe, a loud crack echoed near my ear, and the entire throng of runners surged forward and I surged with it. Richie Swift, a seventh grader from Joe's school who had been permitted to run for the eighth-grade team since there were not enough eighth graders to officially constitute a team, sprinted into a commanding early lead as if someone had goosed him with a hot iron. Most of the rest of the runners were swallowed up in the fast tempo and ran to catch Richie. Fortunately, I found my pace in the first quarter mile--
slow and easy. Joe was right behind me. I didn't have to turn around and look to know that he was there; I could hear him every time one of those big heavy shoes pounded the earth. I could also hear him sucking down air in big guops, followed by a series of quick, rhythmic pants. Looking up ahead, I noticed that the pace had slowed considerably, and Richie, no longer in the lead, must have petered out and fallen in with the rest of the runners. At the three quarter mile mark, the wind brought more than cold chills when it became thick with a stench that had no other possible source but vomit. Twisted up like a hot pretzel, clutching his abdomen, and moaning and groaning, Richie lay off to the side of the course cursing the school cafeteria between moans. The sight, the smell, and of course the high probability of my becoming ill also, inspired me to really stretch my legs, quicken my pace, and leave Richie, who had officially claimed last place all to his messy self, in the weeds. The whole scene was rather ugly, but Joe managed to get a laugh out of it.

Methodically, I kept pounding out each step. I knew that I couldn't continue the pace I had established while running away from the vomit, but the spurt had enabled me to pass a few more runners, and I was doing better than I had anticipated. I was pretty much running alone when I spotted the finish line. Suddenly my whole attitude changed,
and I prepared myself for a fast, dramatic finish. Exerting all the energy that I should have distributed evenly throughout the race, I made a mad charge for the finishing chute, sprinting the last quarter of a mile. Pumping hard, I zipped by three more runners, entered the mouth of the chute and snatched a popsicle stick with the number 29 on it, indicating my finishing position. Gasping for air, with my hands on my knees, I looked up just in time to see Joe come barreling toward the chute. Joe grabbed his stick and kept running until he was out of the chute where he threw himself down on the brown grass. Immediately, he kicked off his wing tips, pulled off his socks, and examined the huge water-filled blisters on the balls of his feet.

I tried to cheer Joe up a little by reminding him of how well we had both done, but he seemed not to hear me and he just kept cussing the shoes. Finally he looked up, congratulated me, and we shook hands. We also made plans to go sledding later in the winter when we got some snow, and then I left him sitting there, shivering and picking his blisters.
"A Different View of Things"

a short story by Brad Baughman

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Dr. Liston - Supervisor
Buddy had been to the market before plenty of times. Yes, he had been making the trips with his Dad for the last three summers ever since he was twelve years old. But tonight I was going to make my first journey to market, and I sure was excited—and a little scared. I hated to admit to the scared part, so I kept that to myself and didn’t tell anyone but Buddy. It just didn’t seem right to me for a healthy fifteen-year-old boy to admit that he was scared. When I had told Buddy about my being a little afraid, he understood. He had looked up after putting a melon in his bushel basket, nodded, rolled his big brown eyes and grinned. He even admitted that he had been scared the first couple of times that he went to market. I figured that I had a right to be scared though. Ever since I was old enough to understand what was being said around me, I had heard quite a few wild and violent market stories from Grandpa Smith, Uncle Art, Uncle Skelly and Uncle Bud. Even Buddy, who usually opened his mouth only to eat or drink, spoke of fights, stabbings, and shootings that seemed to occur with regularity at the Farmers’ Market in downtown Indianapolis. Just last night when Buddy and I lay awake in the basement of his house waiting for a breeze to slice the humid August night, I asked him what the market was like. He described it to me, and then asked me if I had heard about the fight his Dad had been in last summer at the
market. I hadn't heard, but I sure was anxious to hear because Buddy didn't talk too much, so when he did, I figured he would say something worth listening to.

"I'm waiting, Buddy," I said. Buddy just grinned, his white teeth glaring at me, and began his tale.

"Well, Brad," he began, "last summer about this time, Dad and I hauled in a pretty big load in the White, prob'ly about 250 bushel of real nice melons. When we got 'em to market, Uncle Art had already sold 150 bushel of 'em at $6.50 a bushel, and after a couple hours on the walk, Dad sold the rest at $7.00 a bushel. Anyway, Dad was real happy to get 'em sold so fast. Plus all that money in his billfold was cheerin' him up a little. Since we had picked heavy that day, and the weatherman was callin for rain the next day, Dad decided that we wouldn't pick in the morning. Besides that, Uncle Art had asked him to stay and help sell on the walk, so we were just gonna go ahead and spend the night there."

"Grandpa used to stay all night a lot too, didn't he Buddy?" I asked.

"Yeah, he did," Buddy replied, "and Dad has been stayin more than usual lately. He just doesn't like to leave until he knows all the melons are sold and he has collected for 'em."

"I'm getting kind of tired, Buddy. Could you hurry up and get to the good part," I said.

"Well, a little after 2:00 in the morning, Dad and I crawled in the back of the truck, fluffed the straw up, and
tried to get some sleep. Now I knew that sleeping in the back of that truck on a hot summer night wasn't too comfortable, but I also knew that there was plenty of room for two people in there. That's why in the middle of the night when things seemed to get kinda crowded, I knew there had to be somebody else in that truck with us. I slowly opened my eyes, and right there at my side with his long skinny fingers feelin' around Dad's billfold pocket was a young black guy. I just stared at him. I was too scared to move or even yell."

"Well, what did ya do, Buddy?" I asked.

"I didn't have to do a thing," Buddy replied. "Dad felt the guy fooling around in his pocket, raised up, spun around real fast, and hit the guy right in the face. I heard it pop real loud. Then the two of them wrestled in the truck, while I along with most of the straw went flying over the side rails on to the pavement below. Dad must have been getting the best of him because the black guy was screaming and hollering real loud. By the time all the noise had woke everybody up, and Uncle Art and Uncle Skell got to the truck, Dad was sitting on the guy with one hand wrapped in the guy's black kinky hair, and was smashing his nose into the bed of the truck."

"I bet Uncle Bud was really mad," I said.

"Yeah, he was," Buddy added, "and he got even madder when the guy started accusing him of assault."

"What made him think he could get away with that?" I asked.
"He claimed that he had had a little too much to drink that night and had crawled in to the back of the truck looking for a place to sleep. He said that he didn't see anybody in the truck at first, and when he did, he tried to get out but Dad had grabbed him and started hittin him," Buddy answered.

Buddy and I both agreed that the man's story wasn't bad because there were quite a few drunks and winos constantly wandering around the market at night looking for a place to sleep. But we also agreed that the story failed for a couple of reasons. First of all, after the scuffle, Uncle Bud couldn't find his wallet, until someone noticed a slight bulge in the black guy's pants. The billfold was hidden down in his right boot. Secondly, the thief was definitely black, and all the farmers on the market that night were white. Buddy said the police came and hauled the man to jail, and everyone went back to sleep. Everyone except Buddy.

I had been thinking about that story all day, and it was still on my mind when Buddy interrupted me while we were loading the melons we had just finished picking.

"What's the count?" asked Buddy.

"Uh, I forgot Buddy," I replied. "I was still thinking about your Dad's fight at market last summer."

"That's okay," Buddy reassured me. "It looks like we'll have about a hundred bushel this load," he added as he surveyed the melons that I had already stacked in the truck and then the ones that still lay scattered in the wagon where he was standing.
"They sure are running big again today," I retorted. "These cantaloupes ought to sell as soon as we can back 'em onto the walk and get 'em busheled up."

Boy, was I glad that during my daydreaming I had only lost count and hadn't gone so far as to drop one of the melons Buddy had been pitching to me, for Uncle Bud was only a few steps away, kneeling in the shade of the big walnut tree, busheling up seconds that would be sold or given away right there at the house. The dull thud of a big, ripe cantaloupe hitting the bed of a truck is one sound Uncle Bud hates to hear but has a keen ear for. I knew exactly what would have happened if I had dropped one of the melons. Uncle Bud would have slowly walked over to the truck and patiently explained that each one of the melons was worth about fifty cents, and would I be so careless as to throw fifty cents away. Of course I'd tell him that I wouldn't throw fifty cents away, and that I would be more careful from then on. As he would walk away, he'd glance back and give me one more reminder to handle the cantaloupes tenderly. Then Buddy and I would have both snickered. That is exactly how it would have been had I dropped one. I knew; it had happened a few times before.

Buddy and I finally finished loading the cantaloupes, and they sure were a beautiful sight in the back of the truck. I was awfully proud of myself, for I had done most of the stacking and the melons were well rounded, bulging against the side rails. Admiring my work, I was convinced that there couldn't
be one hundred bushels of cantaloupes anywhere in the world as nice as these Brown County melons. They were large and heavy, had that good ripe color, were covered with thick netting, and most of all they were delicious. They put those little California melons sold in the grocery store to shame. I noticed that Buddy was taking a good long look at the load also, and I figured he was just as proud as I was.

"Isn't it funny, Buddy," I began, "how we're standing here admiring 'em, while all day long while we're pickin 'em we get so tired to seein 'em in the field that we almost pass 'em by and leave 'em to rot or for the groundhogs to eat." Buddy just shrugged his shoulders, smiled, and muttered "Uh uh."

I then realized that Buddy wasn't as proud or excited about the load of melons as I was, or as I had wanted him to be. And I think I understood why. Getting to help Uncle Bud and stay with Buddy for a couple weeks in the summer was like a vacation for me. The farm was a good change of scenery and pace from the suburbs. Working on the farm was a full-time summer job for Buddy, one he had had for the last three or four summers. So every morning when he strapped his faded Lee overalls on over his dark body, laced up his workboots, and grabbed his old brown felt hat and headed down to the fourteen-acre melon field, he was just doing his job.

"Supper's ready," hollered Aunt Barb from the back porch.
"We're coming, Barbara," Uncle Bud yelled as he started to get up from underneath the tree. Buddy and I walked over to the front porch, sat down on a couple lawn chairs, took our dirty boots and socks off, and went into the house to get washed up for supper. When we sat down at the table, Uncle Bud was talking to Uncle Art on the phone, telling him that we were bringing in 100 bushels, and Aunt Barb was carefully pulling some ears of corn out of a hot, steamy pan. Uncle Bud frowned as he hung up the phone and told us to take some blankets and pillows with us because we'd probably stay all night since the melons weren't selling. That bit of news really caused my heart to flutter. I sure hadn't counted on staying all night at the market. I ate my meal fast because Uncle Bud ate his fast, and I didn't want to get left behind. After gulping down our meal, Buddy and I rounded up a couple pillows and blankets while Uncle Bud got his cigarettes, Top Yield hat and sales book, and we were all set to go. Although we had a pretty good load and Uncle Bud drove pretty slow, it seemed to me that we would get to the market in no time. Fruitdale, Morgantown, Trafalgar, Bargersville, and Stone's Crossing were all behind us, and I suddenly found myself in downtown Indianapolis surrounded by the tall Eli Lilly Buildings. Buddy told me that we were almost there, and sure enough, the next turn that Uncle Bud took, let us right into the market.

I saw four drives or streets at the market. Two were
marked "One Way" in, and the other two were marked "One Way" out. We passed the first three and turned on the fourth and last one that took us in to the market area. In between the drives were the walks where all the produce was unloaded, displayed, and sold. Each walk had a metal roof over it that was supported by steel beams. I guess we had arrived fairly early since there weren't very many trucks there. Uncle Bud drove down to where Uncle Art was working and backed the truck up against the curb at the edge of the walk. Buddy and I hurried out of the truck and followed Uncle Bud over to see Uncle Art. Uncle Art was sitting behind an old wooden school desk, legs crossed, counting the money he had just taken out of the money pouch that was chained to his belt. He didn't look up until he had finished counting, and then he said hello and told Uncle Bud that the melons weren't selling too good, and he'd been taking $4.00 a bushel for them. Buddy and I slowly made our way out of the group, and Uncle Bud noticed us slipping away.

"Don't wander off boys," he said. "We're going to unload those and bushel them up shortly."

"Okay," Buddy and I both said.

"Thirsty?" Buddy asked.

"Sure," I said.

"Let's walk over to the retail walk and get a coke or something," said Buddy.

"Sounds good to me," I added. "But what's the retail walk?"
"On the retail walk, people can buy just one or two cantaloupes or watermelons if they want, or maybe just an apple or one or two peaches. See, the other walks are for wholesale buying, and there are minimum amounts of produce that must be sold."

It made sense to me, and we walked over to the farthest walk where several little markets with canopy overhangs were set up. We bought our pop and started heading back to the truck. In the fifteen minutes that we had been at the market, the entire place had really become busy. The trucks were now lined up in the drives waiting for a space to back in so they could unload. Above the engine noise and the constant honking, I heard a man yelling "Indiana watermelons, a dollar and a dime," and I saw a lady to my left peddling produce, screaming "A dollar a dozen for fresh sweet corn."

Besides being noisy, the market was very dirty also. Beer and pop cans and bottles were scattered around everywhere. Candy wrappers, cigarette butts, and old magazines were also thrown about. Along the curbs of the walks, flies buzzed around the piles of rotten or damaged fruit and produce. I even saw a couple old shoes and a pair of pants over near the rest room. Buddy had already told me not to go into the rest rooms at the market. He said they were even dirtier than the rest of the market, and the drunks usually slept in them. Compared to the rest of the market, Uncle Art's area was fairly clean and neat. All of his fruit and produce was
arranged neatly on the walk. He was selling just about every kind of fruit and vegetable that grew in the United States. The sweet smell of the cantaloupes, however, drowned out all of the other odors—well, just about all the odors. When I got close to some of Uncle Art's workers, I smelled a rude combination of alcohol and body odor. The worker named Slim especially smelled like alcohol, and Buddy said that Slim usually headed for the nearest liquor store as soon as Uncle Art paid him. Most of the workers on the market that weren't farmers were winos who probably had no home or family, Uncle Bud told me.

With Uncle Bud supervising, Buddy and I unloaded the truck and busheled up all the melons. Buddy's 100 bushel estimate had been close; we had 94 bushels to sell.

"What do we do now?" I asked Buddy when we finished unloading.

"I suppose we just sit and wait and hope Dad can sell them," said Buddy. "Uncle Art may want us to help him with some of those watermelons over there," added Buddy, pointing to a huge pile of watermelons at the end of the walk.

"Let's just wait. I'm too tired to do any more lifting right now," I moaned.

Until about ten p.m., Buddy and I just waited around, helped load 300 Vincennes watermelons that a man bought from Uncle Art, and loaded the fifteen bushels of cantaloupes that Uncle Bud sold. I may not have been busy, but I sure was being
entertained. Two men down the walk a little way were arguing about peaches. The seller claimed that the peaches were Freestone peaches, but the buyer said that they weren't, and "there was no way in hell that he was going to pay what that idiot wanted for them." The two quit their quarrel and began fighting. The fight didn't last long at all, but one guy did come out of it with a bloody mouth. Shortly after the fight, Buddy and I were approached by a man in green knit pants, a flowered shirt, shiny shoes and sunglasses. I knew he wasn't a farmer, but he was selling some things. He had three switch-blades, some Indian jewelry, diamond rings, and he said that he had some CB's and tape decks in his car. He even told Uncle Art he could get him a good lawn mower for a very reasonable price.

By one a.m., things were fairly quiet at the market, but Uncle Bud had told me that buyers come in at all times of the night. He told Buddy and me to stay awake for a couple of hours and to wake him if any one was interested in the melons. Well, Buddy had fallen asleep on a cot, Uncle Art was sleeping in his car, and all of his helpers had scurried away as soon as he had paid them. That just left me and the Potato Man. Buddy called him that, so I did too, not to his face though. The Potato Man sold potatoes out of the back of his old, beat-up Chevy truck. He was a dirty man, needed a shave, and he smelled too. He wore one of those bright orange hunting caps with the ear flaps and chin strap. As we talked, he
took occasional sips on a bottle of Early Times Whiskey. He even offered me a sip, but I refused.

"It sure is a nasty habit, drinking this stuff," he said. "Don't ever get started doing it, cause it's harder 'n hell to stop. One of these days I'm going to give it up for good, go back home, and see if my wife will let me back in the house."

"You're married?" I asked.

"Yep, got five kids too, and not a one of 'em will have anything to do with me though. Can't really blame 'em though."

"Say fella, how 'bout helpin me eat this here watermelon," said the Potato Man.

"That's a good idea, cause I am pretty hungry," I said.

"You got a knife on ya?" the Potato Man asked.

"Nope, sorry, I forgot mine," I answered.

"Well, I'll take a walk around and see if I can borrow one from somebody so we can eat that thing," he said.

"Okay, I'll just wait here."

I watched him as he staggered across one of the drives towards a lighted area on the next walk. He stopped a couple of men, but they both shook their heads no, and he staggered on. About fifteen minutes later I saw him coming towards me from over by the retail walk that had closed at ten. He threw his now-empty whiskey bottle down, and it shattered on the pavement. I started in his direction to ask him if he had had any luck finding a knife.
"Hey mister, you got a knife I could borrow? Me and my friend want to eat a watermelon," he said as he looked right at me.

"I'm the one who was going to help you eat the watermelon. Don't you remember me?" I asked him.

"Oh yeah, yeah, sure. Let's just bust it open on the concrete and eat it," he mumbled. So we did just drop it on the walk, and did our best trying to eat it. The Potato Man had dug another bottle of whiskey out of his front seat, and was just about finished with it when Uncle Bud woke up and came and told me to get some sleep. I crawled in the back of the truck, spread out my blanket, and despite the heat and humidity, I fell asleep in a short time.

As was often the case, I slept great, but not long enough. When I woke up at eight-thirty in the morning, Buddy was sucking a bottle of orange juice, and Uncle Bud was sitting on a crate, smoking a cigarette, holding a cup of White Castle coffee, and smiling. He had sold all the melons. Buddy told me that Uncle Bud had to sell them for $4.00 a bushel, but he was still happy to get that much, because some melons hadn't sold at all and were going to be hauled away by the Pig Man. Uncle Bud told us that we were going to get some breakfast at the Waffle House and then head for home. I accepted that. I was ready to head for home.

As I climbed into the truck, I saw that the market looked as dirty in the morning as it did in the evening. The trash,
the dirt, the trucks, the cans and bottles, and the flies buzzing around the piles of rotten fruit were still there. An old lady, wearing a long black rain coat and men's tennis shoes, wheeled a rickety wooden cart along the curb picking through the garbage, hoping to find something edible. She came to an obstacle in her path. A bright orange hat stuck up above the edge of the curb. It was the Potato Man. The lady stepped over him and pawed through another pile of rotted garbage.

"Uncle Bud, wait!" I cried. "See the Potato Man lying over there by the curb. Shouldn't we go see if he's okay?"

"He's okay Brad. That's where he usually is in the morning." I looked at Buddy, and he nodded.

"Let's go get some breakfast, boys," Uncle Bud said, and we left the market.