The Worm Turns

Can a bucket of slimy worms show Willie’s classmates who he really is?

It was Career Day in fifth grade. Mrs. Monroe’s class had already heard from kids planning such careers as knuckleball pitcher, rock musician, and hairstylist to the stars. It was Willie North’s turn to present “What I Want to Be When I Grow Up.”

“I’m going to be what I already am,” Willie said. His voice was raspy; he wasn’t used to speaking out in class.

“A fifth-grader?” Mandy asked. The class laughed. They always did when Mandy spoke, even if what she said wasn’t particularly amusing.

“I’m a vermiculturist,” Willie said. “I’m already making $60 a week at it.”

Sixty bucks! Everyone pushed their chairs closer to the display table. Willie wasn’t used to everyone looking at him. Usually no one noticed him. It wasn’t that they didn’t like him; they just didn’t know him. Career Day was a great opportunity to show his classmates what Willie North was all about.

“Does anyone know what a vermiculturist is?” Mrs. Monroe asked. Willie wasn’t surprised by his classmates’ blank looks.

“A vermiculturist is a kind of farmer,” Willie said as he put a large bucket on the table. Intrigued, the kids drew their chairs even closer.
“I despise broccoli,” Mandy said. Willie pulled out a fistful of shredded newspaper and held it in front of Mandy. “I don’t farm vegetables. I farm worms.”

The newspaper wiggled.

“Ewwww!” Mandy squealed.

“Worms!” George jumped back, knocking over his chair.

Willie was surprised by his classmates’ scrunched faces and sour looks. He had assumed everyone loved worms as much as he did. Many kids pushed their chairs back; only Michaela moved closer.

“How does anyone make money farming earthworms?” Sam asked. Sam was going to be a stockbroker, drive a hot car, and date supermodels.

“These aren’t earthworms,” Willie said. “These are composting worms, known as red wigglers. They eat . . .”

“Compost!” Michaela said.

“Garbage?” Mandy yelped. Mrs. Monroe gave her a warning look.

“I’m sorry,” Mandy muttered. “But this gets more disgusting every second.”

Mrs. Monroe turned back to Willie. “This is fascinating. Continue, please.”

Willie dumped the worms back in the bucket, then pulled on rubber gloves.

“Right, NOW he puts on the gloves,” George said.


“My worms will process all of this trash—which is free—and turn it into castings, which I can sell as fertilizer.” Willie held up a large mason jar for everyone to see. The jar was filled with what looked like dark-brown soil.

“How do the worms make the fertilizer?” Michaela asked.

“They eat it,” Willie explained. “And then they excrete it.”

The kids exchanged blank looks. Then Mandy erupted: “Ohmigosh. Don’t you guys get it? The kid sells worm poop for a living!”

The classroom rattled with the noise of chairs being pushed back. Even Michaela leaned away from the table.

“Thank you, Willie,” Mrs. Monroe said. “Excellent presentation.”

“When I grow up, I hope I get to sell worm dung for a living,” George whispered. Mandy giggled, starting the class in an avalanche of laughter.

“Class! That’s enough!” Mrs. Monroe said. She’s wrong, Willie thought as he packed away his worms. It isn’t enough.

It’s too much.
The rest of the presentations went by in a blur. Willie vaguely remembered kids wanting to be a sushi chef, a dental hygienist, and a tattoo artist.

No one laughed at them.

Willie should have pretended he wanted to be a video-game designer. That would have gotten him plenty of attention. **But why plug into some fake electronic world when there was a world of wonder right under your feet?**

Mrs. Monroe’s voice penetrated Willie’s haze. “A can of worms. Can you think of any other, Willie?”

“Any other what?” Willie stammered. He looked up at the clock; it was almost lunchtime. He had zoned out the rest of the presentations and half of language arts class.

“We’re talking about common sayings that express common truths. Like ‘Don’t count your chickens before they hatch.’” Mrs. Monroe’s voice was kind. She knew why Willie hadn’t been paying attention. “Michaela suggested: ‘You don’t want to open that can of worms.’ Can you think of any other sayings involving worms?”

“No, sorry,” Willie mumbled.

“How about ‘The early nerd gets the worm’?” George whispered.

“That’s bird, you jerk,” Michaela snapped. “Right, Willie?”

Willie’s only answer was to bury his head in his hands. Mandy had been right about one thing, he thought. They just don’t get it! **You’re not supposed to treat people like worms.** You’re not even supposed to treat worms like, well, worms. You’re supposed to show respect. Why don’t they get it? Don’t they understand that someday the worm could turn?

Willie jerked his head up.

“Willie, did you think of something?” Mrs. Monroe asked.

“Someday the worm will turn,” he said.

“Excellent,” Mrs. Monroe said. “Anyone know what that means?”

“What you do may someday be done to you,” Michaela said, glaring at George.

Mrs. Monroe’s voice faded as Willie began to consider what would happen if someday the worm really did turn.

What if animals, such as worms and chickens and squirrels and mosquitoes, could do to people what people did to them?

It wasn’t difficult to imagine: Fishermen impaled on hooks and cast into rivers. Dog owners chained to posts, yelping at passing cars. Cat lovers forced to use a litter box and not allowed to play outside.

Willie smiled as the worm-turn pictures cascaded in his mind. Poodle owners getting flea-dipped, then primped and powdered...
for a people show. Parrot owners forced to squawk “Polly wants a cracker” and swing on a perch. Mosquitoes conspiring with fireflies to trap folks in people-zappers.

Some turns of the worm were too silly to even consider. Horses riding people. Deer stalking hunters. Dalmatians driving fire trucks. Monkeys trying to feed peanuts to kids in a zoo.

What you do may someday be done to you?

Willie shuddered at the turn his daydream was taking. Some turns were beyond imagining. Steaks and chops. Fur coats and snakeskin boots. Taxidermy and road kill. Certainly the worm couldn’t turn like that!

But what if it did? And what if the worm kept turning until all nature reversed? What if sharp thorns waved in endless rows while sweet corn hid in shadows? What if mice caught cats and worms throttled birds and roses ate Japanese beetles? What if whirlpools spun backward, and volcanoes erupted upside down, and the sun shone at night?

What if people showed so little respect for worms and everything else that the whole world turned inside out? Willie feared that turning the worm would not turn people’s hearts.

**People just didn’t seem to get it.**

Maybe getting it was Willie’s job. Maybe it was OK if no one knew what Willie North was about, as long as Willie North knew what the world was about.


“Excellent,” Mrs. Monroe said.

Greener because my worms make it that way, Willie thought with a secret smile.

When Willie came in from lunch recess, he found Michaela opening his worm bucket. Mandy looked on.

“I won a bet,” Michaela said. “So Mandy has to look at your worms. Close up.”

“Forget it.” Willie snapped the cover back on.

“Please?” Michaela said. She poked Mandy.

“Please?” Mandy echoed, rolling her eyes. Willie knew Mandy was looking at his worms only because Michaela had an iron grip on her arm.

Willie wished he had never brought the worms into school. It was much better when no one noticed him, when no one really knew him.

But as the saying goes, the cat was out of the bag. Willie pried open the top to the bucket.
Michaela peeked in. “Newspaper?”
“Where's the cow manure?” Mandy kept her distance but stood on tiptoes to look.

“Newspaper makes good, clean bedding,” Willie said. “Plus, the worms will compost it.”
“I just don’t get it,” Mandy said. “Why would you want to do this?”
“Because worms are the muscle of the Earth,” Willie said. “They move more dirt than all the bulldozers in the world.”
He paused, waiting for Mandy to make a wisecrack. She moved a step closer, still staring at the worms.
“Because worms are the lungs of the world,” Willie continued. “They make airways in the soil so plants and subterranean animals can breathe. Aristotle called worms the intestines of the Earth, because they eat its waste. But they're not.”
“No?” Michaela smiled.
“They are the heart of the Earth,” Willie said. “They take the worst of the world and make it into something that gives life.”
Mandy's eyes went wide. “Willie North!”
“What?” Willie waited for the inevitable insult.
“Nothing,” Mandy said. “It's just I've never heard you talk so much.”
“Sorry,” he mumbled.
“No. I'm sorry.” Mandy reached into the bucket and gingerly touched a red wiggler. She jerked her hand away as if she had touched fire.
Willie picked up a worm and let it rest in his palm. Mandy touched it, a little longer this time.
“Cool,” she said with a smile that Willie knew she meant.

Cool, Willie thought as the worm turned in his hand. Someone gets it.