

# **The Weight Guesser**

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for Jeanne

“Once again I must bow!”

## The Weight Guesser

1

The sun had just risen above the big tent but already a great crowd of people had passed through the busy turnstiles that led to the fairgrounds. The boy paused by the doughnut stand to count his newspapers and record his sales in the notebook he kept in his hip pocket. Then with a determined frown he pushed off again through the bodies that pressed towards the Midway. He walked with long strides, his newspapers under his left arm. Now and then he yelled, "Paper! Paper! Hey, get your morning paper!" He had brown hair, pretty features, and large hazel eyes that seemed too serious for his age; he was eleven years old.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and lovely girls, gather round, gather round." The boy had gone just a little ways when he heard a shrill voice across the street from him. He turned to look. In a ramshackle stand by the gate to the amusement park, a tall man with long arms and legs and skinny fingers gestured wildly before a group of curious people. His face was as thin as his body and almost yellow in color; his dark hair was greased back from his narrow forehead and pointed nose. Figurines of all shapes and sizes stared out from the shelves behind him. Next to him was an immense scale and above it a rectangular sign with the words printed in black letters: FOOL THE WEIGHT-GUESSER. HE GUESSES GOOD BUT CAN HE GUESS YOU? ONLY FIFTY CENTS! The boy crossed the street and joined the group of people by the stand.

"Yes, I say it again, gather round, gather round," the weight-guesser was crying. "Let me be the first to PROGNOS-TI-CATE... and I say it again, ladies and gentlemen, boys and lovely girls, let me be the first to assert that the mysterious forces of the universe are AB-SO-LUTE-LY PRE-DIC-TA-BLE!" He pointed towards the sky. "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and lovely girls,"—now his hand swept down and backwards to indicate the shelves that surrounded him—"you see here displayed a VE-RI-TA-BLE WON-DER of MAG-NI-FI-CENT PRI-ZES!" His hand came to rest at

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last on the lapel of his soiled tuxedo.

The people in front of the boy, most of them farm boys and their girlfriends, inched closer to the stand. He pushed his way through the jean-clad legs until he could see. He watched the weight-guesser's skinny finger as it pointed towards the sky. Now the sun floated like a pale moon behind the gray clouds above the Ferris wheel. The boy's eyes passed over the prizes on the shelves. There were all kinds of cupie dolls, two large pink bears, several plaster pigs, and one figurine that seemed out of place, a green dwarf with chartreuse eyes. Then the boy noticed the thin man had fastened his eyes on him. He looked away.

Once more the skinny finger pointed towards the sky.” And furthermore I assert that NO PRE-DO-MI-NANCE WHAT-SO-EV-ER OF SU-PRA-MUN-DA-TO-RY POWERS... And what have we here?”

A hefty farmgirl had stepped towards the scale. At first the weight-guesser hadn't seen her; now he swooped down on her so suddenly that she jumped back and shielded her face with her hand. The weight-guesser laughed, a high shrill laugh. He bowed low, extending his arm to the side. Then he took hold of the farmgirl's uplifted hand and led her to the scale. The boy with the newspapers laughed and looked around to see if everyone was enjoying the weight-guesser's antics. All the farm boys were grinning.

“ONE HUNDRED AND FORTY SEVEN POUNDS, NO MORE, NO LESS! Yes, ladies and gentlemen, boys and lovely girls, if I be in MIS-CAL-CU-LA-TO-BY ER-ROR, then let the impeccable pointer tell the absolute truth!”

The girl stepped on the platform with a giggle. The impeccable pointer zoomed up to 190, quivered, bounced back to 147, and settled at last at 169.

The weight-guesser looked at the pointer for a moment with puzzled anguish, then he stepped backwards, shrugged his angular shoulders, glanced at the sky, and wound up by bowing his head so abruptly that his long hair flopped over his brow and nearly touched the pointed tip of his nose. Then he raised up his yellow face again and peered with crazed eyes over the heads of the crowd.

“Sad fate! Sad fate: Sad fate!” he cried.” Once again I must bow. Once again I must humble myself. Once again I must ascertain anew how AB-SO-LUTE-LY PRE-PON-DE-RATE...”

He went on in his high-pitched voice. The farmgirl shrugged, put two thick hands on the sailor doll, giggled, and with her prize pressed against her breast disappeared into the throng of people that rushed towards the Midway. As if by a common decision, the bystanders turned to leave. Only the boy had remained. He had moved a ways back towards the lilac bush that divided the stand from the public toilets but his eyes were on the weight-guesser.

The thin man watched as the farm boys left. Then he walked over to the side of the stand and picked up a paper cup from behind a plaster pig. Next to the stand, seated on a black foot-locker, was a dumpy, little woman who wore a wide-brimmed straw hat and a blue sweatshirt that said, “Try me.”

“Fuckin fat-so,” the weight-guesser said, speaking in a lower voice.” I had her figgered at 170, but I was givin’ her a break.”

“Oh yea?” said the woman. “You’re so generous, ain’t you? That’s three breaks already this morning.”

The weight-guesser picked up a sailor doll and threw it against the elm tree behind the stand. The doll shattered and fell to the ground. “And there’s four breaks. So what’s it to me? This junk comes seven for a buck.”

The woman raised back her head in an open-mouthed sneer. “So ain’t you in a mood?”

“I ain’t in no mood,” the thin man said, taking a sip from the cup. “I just got to think of some gimmick.”

The boy was still standing by the lilac bush on the other side of the stand from where the doll had shattered. The weight-guesser saw him.

“Whatsa matter, kiddo? You want to step on the scale?” he said, turning towards him.

The boy’s eyes widened. He hitched up his newspapers under his arm. He was wearing blue jeans, a T-shirt, and a money apron that said “Pioneer Press.”

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“No, sir. I don’t have fifty cents.”

“Oh yea? Then scram.”

The boy had gone a few feet when the weight-guesser yelled, “Hey kid!” The boy turned politely around.

Whatta you do, you sell them papers?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How much you make on each paper?”

“Two cents.”

The weight-guesser’s thin lips curled into a half-smile. He shook his head. “You got to be kiddin’, kid. That’s chicken shit.”

The boy shrugged his shoulders. He started to go. But then he noticed that the weight-guesser’s eyes were still fastened on him. He took a couple of steps backwards and looked to the side. Then he looked back at the weight-guesser who had turned towards the dumpy woman with the same half-smile on his face. The boy took a couple of more steps backwards.

“So what’s yer hurry, kid? Minute ago you was a-gawkin’ at the prizes.”

“I wasn’t in a hurry. But I got to sell my papers.”

“So that’s what you do, you tote them papers and holler, ‘Paper, paper, git yer fuckin’ paper?’”

The boy reddened and shrugged again.

“Zat what you do, kid?”

“Yes.”

The thin man took another sip from his paper cup, smiled sideways at the woman again, and raised one skinny hand to his chin which was long and pointed like his nose.

“What’s yer name, kid? You got a name or they just call you the newspaper kid?”

“Quentin.”

The weight-guesser folded his arms and shook his head. “Haw-haw-haw. What kind of half-ass name is that? Zat yer first name or yer last name?”

“First name.”

“So yer first name is Quintner, huh? So what’s yer last name, kid?”

The boy didn’t answer.

“So what’s yer last name then?”

“Bausch.”

“You got to be kiddin’. You got to be kiddin’, kid. You handin’ me some kind of line?”

“No.”

“You mean to say that of all the SPEC-TA-CU-LOUS MAR-VELS of this STU-DI-FE-ROUS EARTH, yer fuckin’ name is Quintner Bausch?”

The boy shrugged his shoulders again and rocked from side to side. He looked out towards the street to see if anyone was watching.

“Bausch,” sneered the weight-guesser, running his skinny fingers through his long hair. “Puts me in mind of a hound dog yelpin’. Bausch, bausch, bausch. Grrr-rowww!”

The dumpy woman let out a long laugh. When she laughed, she threw back her head, disclosing a set of stumpy teeth, and made a wheezing noise through her nose. The boy turned to leave.

“No need to be in such a hurry, boy. I’m talkin’ to you,” said the weight-guesser, closing the distance between himself and the boy in three long steps. “No need to be in a hurry,” he whispered, leaning over him so that the boy could smell his stale breath. “You don’t even know what I’m up to, now do you, Quintner?” His voice was coaxing and sweet.

The boy sighed. He stepped back and looked up at him. “No, sir. I don’t.”

“Well, I was just thinkin’,” said the thin man in the same plaintive tone, “I was thinkin’, you see, a fine boy like you, you might be in-tah-res-ted in a job. Now mind you I ain’t talkin’ about no half-ass chicken-shit job like what you got. I’m talkin’ about a job of work.”

The boy hesitated. He pursed his lips, nodded, and frowned.

“What ya thinkin’, kid?”

“I dunno.”

“Sure you know, Quintner. You mean to tell me you don’t even know what’s in yer own head?”

“I was just wondering for how much money.”

“OOO-eeey! Didn’t I tell you, Freda? Didn’t I tell you

the minute I saw him this here ain't no or-di-nerry kid? Didn't I peg him just right?"

The boy smiled and nodded his head from side to side.

"So what you thinkin', kiddo?"

"I'm still thinking for how much."

"OOO-eeey! Ol' Bow-Wow here, he's got him a head on them litter shoulders, don't you, Quintner?"

The boy reddened. He looked off towards the Midway where the Ferris wheel turned above the brightly-colored flags on the gate to the amusement park. Then he looked at the figurines on the shelves. Once again his eyes settled on the dwarf. He looked back to the weight-guesser who studied him with one skinny hand raised to his chin.

"Don't ya, Quintner?"

"I guess so. I dunno."

"So you walk around all day yellin "paper" and how much you make, kid?"

"Yesterday, two-seventy-five."

"Two dollars and seventy-five cents is what you made, kid?"

"Yes."

"Well, you come back here tomorrow, you be here at seven o'clock sharp-, and if we have a good day, there's three-fifty in it for ya. You get that, kid? If we have a good day, you're gonna get three dollars and fifty cents. Now that's if we have a good day. If we do better than that, you might make three-seventy five or maybe even four Yankee dollars... So whatta ya think of that, Quintner?"

The boy nodded. He frowned and pressed his lips together. "Well, I got to ask my mom."

The thin man took a final sip from the paper cup, raising it high in the air to drain the last drop. "Well, sure, kid, you go talk to yer mamma and Moses and Aber-ham and Jesus Christ, and if you got a mind to do a litter work, well, then I'll see you tomorrow at seven o'clock sharp."

The boy nodded again. "Okay, then, I'll talk to my mom." With another frown and a determined look on his face, he turned, passed beyond the lilac bush and vanished in the crowd.

“So what was that?” said the dumpy woman. “So tell me you’re gonna give that squirt four bucks.

“Just bug off, fat-lip,” said the thin man. ”Anyhow, I got my gimmick. You just wait and see.”

In a minute he was yelling again at the top of his lungs. “You see here displayed a VE-RI-TA-BLE WON-DER of MAG-NI-FI-CENT PRI-ZES...”

Once again a group of curious people had gathered in front of the stand. But this time no farmgirl stepped towards the scale. After several minutes of yelling, he suddenly left off, took a sip from the paper cup, and glowered at the thronging crowd in the Midway.

2

Later that morning Quentin Bausch stood alone on the first landing of the exterior steps that led up to the grandstand building. Now the sun was high in the sky above the gray clouds that still loomed in the east. In the distance he could see the Ferris wheel and Silver Bullet; a steady stream of people passed between the rides, their colored clothing flickering in the sunlight. The aroma of pronto pups came up from the food stand below the stairs where a long line of people waited to be served. By the gate to the Midway, jutting out from the lilac bush, was one end of the weight-guesser’s stand. Just the backs of the dolls could be seen, but now and then the boy saw the weight-guesser moving between them. With his skinny arm raised skyward, he stepped towards the crowd; his arm swept down, he backpedaled towards the scale; and so on again and again in a strange, circular dance.

The boy stopped in this same place every morning to look at his pocket notebook. In it he had a list of the people who bought papers from him every day. Below the list he had written a note: “Don’t forget Mr. Hammond.” The day before, Mr. Hammond had given him fifty cents: “Here, son. That’s enough for two papers and a twenty-cents tip. You bring me the other paper tomorrow. I can see that you’re honest.” Quentin Bausch had circled this reminder two times.

Having decided on a route for the morning, he climbed the stairs to the grandstand building where there were long aisles of displays. "Paper! Paper! Hey, get your morning paper!" he cried. He needed to yell as loud as he could in order to be heard above the combined noise of the crowd and the big cars that were roaring around the track on the other side of the building.

He had sold four papers when he spotted a friend of his named Jimmy Warren who like him was from the East Side in Riverton. Jimmy Warren was standing in front of a piano display, passing out leaflets.

"Hey, Jimmy, whatta ya doing?" he cried. "How come you're handing out these circulars?" That very morning they had ridden to the fairgrounds together in the back of the newspaper truck.

"Cuz this guy is giving me fifty cents an hour for it, that's why," said Jimmy Warren, his face flushed with excitement. He was a small boy with freckles and red hair that flopped over his forehead.

"Fifty cents an hour!"

"I ain't fibbin', Bauschie. Fifty cents an hour!"

"And what do you do? You just stand here like this?"

"Stand here, and when people come by, I give them a circular," said Jimmy. He handed out a few circulars to illustrate his point.

"And can you ever stop and rest?"

"I get breaks. I can go one now."

The boys walked across the building towards the refreshment stand, Jimmy describing every detail of how he had met the piano salesman and how he was going to work ten hours and make five dollars, Quentin Bausch with a serious frown on his face and his newspapers tucked under his left arm.

The refreshment counter was by the ticket gates that led to the grandstand. They ordered hotdogs and sat down on a cardboard box behind the counter. The drone of motors came from the open doorways on the other side of the turnstiles. Now and then a great cheer went up from the open doorways on the other side of the turnstiles. Quentin Bausch was still

dazed by his friend's good luck. He fingered the coins in his money apron,—there were ten quarters and four dimes and he had started the day with a dollar in change. He looked at Jimmy Warren with a serious frown.

“This guy was talking to me. He was saying he'd give me three-fifty a day to watch his cupie dolls or something like that... a weight-guesser by the Midway.”

“You should take it! You should take it!” cried Jimmy, his freckled face glowing. “You should take it, Bauschie, cuz when you're on your own you're on your own and all that, but ain't you tired of yellin' ‘Paper’?”

No sooner had he finished his hotdog when Quentin Bausch jumped up with his newspapers in his hand. Jimmy Warren protested.

“No, I got to go, Jimmy. I promised this guy I'd bring him a paper. He's way up by the tractors.”

“You're going all the way up to the tractors just to bring some guy a paper?”

“I promised.”

Quentin waved goodbye and resumed shouting “Paper!” as he dodged between the steady steam of bodies, most of them than himself, moving toward him or advancing more slowly in the crowded interior corridor of the building. At the door he looked back. Jimmy was still sitting on the cardboard box behind the refreshment counter.

Mr. Hammond was a salesman for Blaugas Natural Gas. Quentin found him sitting in the Blaugas Customer Pavillion with his fellow workers. John Hammond was a serious-looking man with a crew cut and solicitous eyes.

“Here he is!” cried Hammond when he saw him. “Didn't I tell you he'd show up? Didn't I tell you that this kid is as honest as the American West? You guys can lay your money on the table. I tell you, Horace Greeley would have been proud, real proud.”

Quentin Bausch smiled in embarrassment. Looking beyond the men in the sitting room, he noticed a pretty girl about his own age sitting by herself with a magazine. She had blue eyes and blonde hair arranged in piggy tails. When she looked up from her magazine and stared at him, he felt

all the more uncomfortable. His face grew red.

“I might not be here tomorrow,” he said. “I might get a job.”

“A job, kid?” the men chorused. “Ey, now you’re talking, boy! Hey, this kid is headed for the big time!”

John Hammond leaned towards him with a strange look of benevolence in his serious eyes. “Hey, Quent, I got a little present for you. Come on back to my pickup truck.”

“Should I come, too?” the girl asked., addressing Hammond who was her father but directing her blue-eyed gaze towards the boy.

“No, you stay here,” said Hammond. She had arched up in the chair, fluffing her blonde hair with one small white hand. She settled back again and smiled. Quentin looked away.

In the parking lot behind the pavilion, the boy watched as the man rummaged through the cab of his truck. At last, he pulled out a small object, a plastic statue of Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus had a pink robe, wide-spreading arms, an effeminate, bearded face, and a dark red Valentine heart on the outside of his body. The boy looked at the statue; it was like a freak on the Midway. Then he noticed that, despite her father’s directions, the blonde girl had come out as far as the back of the pavilion. She was watching him from the back of a car with an impish smile on her face.

“You know, the Lord Jesus watches over us,” said John Hammond, leaning over the boy so that Quentin could see the beads of sweat on his upper lip.

“Yes, I know,” said Quentin. ”Are you a Catholic?”

“No,” said Mr. Hammond. “I belong to a particular sect... There’s no need to go into it now... but just remember the Lord Jesus watches over us.”

Quentin looked dumbly towards him, holding the little freak Jesus in his hands. The blue-eyed girl had snuck up two cars closer. She stuck out her tongue at him.

That night at supper, the events of the day kept running through Quentin’s mind. He sat at the supper table with his mother. The supper consisted of sauerkraut, boiled potatoes, and pork chops.

“Mom, I think I got a job,” Quentin said out of the blue.

His mother was a pretty woman with dark brown hair and hazel eyes as large as his own. She was affectionate towards him, and was always kissing him or pinching his cheek. He was her only child.

“A job? Quentin, are you serious? You little man, you never cease to amaze me! Oh, how I wish your father was here to be as proud of you as I am!”

The boy beamed with delight at his mother’s praise and nodded his head from side to side. He picked at his sauerkraut.

“At least, I think it’s a job. He told me to be there tomorrow at seven o’clock sharp.”

“And who is HE?” his mother said, examining him with her vigilant eyes.

“Oh, a man by the Midway, a skinny man, a weight-guesser... You know, he guesses people’s weights, and if he’s wrong, he gives them a prize. He said he would give me three-fifty a day.”

Three-fifty!” his mother said. “Well, I guess I’m going to have to accept you’re no ordinary boy... And is he a nice man?”

The boy lowered his eyes. “I think he is, Mother.”

“You think he is,” she said, her hazel eyes growing even larger. “But you don’t sound so sure.”

The boy shrugged his shoulders and looked up from his plate. “The only thing is, he says dirty words.”

“What kind of dirty words?”

“Just ordinary ones.”

She sighed. “Well, I just wish your father was here so he could tell you about things like that.” But what I’d really like to know is whether you say dirty words when he does.”

“I don’t say them, Mom.”

“How did he bring up this job? Were you just standing there? I suppose he can tell a good worker/“

“Oh, I dunno, Mom. Like you say, I was just standing there watching him guess weights.”

“And did you call him, ‘sir,’ like I told you to call older people?”

“Yes, Mom. I called him ‘sir’ a whole bunch of times.”

She laughed. She had a delightful melodious laugh he loved to hear. She kissed him on the forehead. He lowered his eyes.

“Well, I know you’re strong, Quentin,” she said, “and you’re trying so hard. I know I can trust you.”

“No, I won’t say them, Mom,” he repeated, “I know it’s a sin.”

For a while, they ate quietly without looking at one another, and then the boy said: “Well, you think I could work for him, Mom? I won’t say dirty words, and he’s just a weight guesser, and it’s just for five days until the fair is over.”

“Well, if I let you, will you go to mass tomorrow and pray to the Lord to be a good boy?”

“I got to serve anyhow,” he said. “And I will be good, Mom. You just wait and see.”

True to his word, Quentin was in Sacred Heart Church the next morning for the 6 o’clock mass, saying “mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa,” and trying to force himself to reverence by repeating the words, “Jesus, my Lord, my God, my all.” But all he could think of was the plastic Jesus with the Valentine heart and the skinny man with the long, thin hands. He finally pushed them out of his mind and closed his eyes. For a moment he was surrounded by a comforting darkness, then in the middle of the darkness he saw a blonde girl with blue eyes.

3

When Quentin Bausch came out of the church and looked towards the gray expanse of the school playground, he saw that the sky was overcast. A light rain was falling.

Later, from the back of the newspaper truck, he looked off towards the fairgrounds. The sky was so gray that it seemed as dark as night. It was now nearly seven o’clock but the streetlamps were still lit. Each swaying light was surrounded by a circle of glowing haze. The buildings were enveloped in mist.

Quentin paid his quarter and went through the turnstile.

The streets were deserted; they had been washed clean by rain. The wet surface reflected the red, yellow, and green lights of the stop lights on the quiet streets. The Midway was quiet. The Ferris wheel was not going around.

Quentin walked around the immense side wall of the Cow Palace, which was a couple of blocks from the Midway, and saw the Weight-guesser's stand in the distance. The two amber lights above the stand had been lit but the shelves were still empty. He stood by the lilac bush, awaiting the weight-guesser's arrival.

At last, the thin appeared from a silver trailer behind the elm tree. He was dressed in the same clothes he had worn the day before,—a soiled tuxedo with a yellow-stained white shirt and a sloppily-arranged bow-tie. The weight-guesser looked sleepy. There were dark shadows beneath his colorless eyes. He looked at the boy as if trying to remember who he was. Quentin Bausch was still standing by the lilac bush with his jacket collar up and his hands in his pockets.

"I'm here to work," said the boy, holding up the brown bag that contained his lunch.

The weight-guesser shook his head. He swept back his greasy hair from his narrow forehead and stared at the boy as though he was trying to focus his thoughts.

"Oh yea, I remember... You're Quintner, the newspaper kid."

"Yes, sir, I'm here to work. Like you said, 7 o'clock sharp."

The two of them stood about ten feet apart, assessing one another in the steady rain. The flags on top of the amusement park gates were sopped with rain and hung like wet sheets from the flagpoles. The sun was a poor ghost of itself hovering dully behind the swarming gray clouds in the eastern sky.

"Well, as you can see, kid, this goddam rain is coming down," said the thin man, raising up his yellow face towards the overcast sky. "Streets are deserted."

The boy held his ground. In the grayish yellow haze of the street lamps the weight-guesser looked more desperate and fragile than he had looked the morning before.

“But I came all the way here to work,” the boy said, lifting up his bag again. He was thoroughly soaked; he shivered in the wind.

The weight-guesser sat back on an empty shelf and looked off towards the edge of the fairgrounds. Beyond the turnstiles was a miserable row of working people’s houses. They were painted in falsely-optimistic pastel colors and seemed pushed against the earth by the heavy gray sky.

The weight-guesser softened. “So you brought yer lunch now, did ye, kid?”

And you make it yerself?”

“No, my mother did.”

“Say yer mother did, zat right, kiddo?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, bless her then.” The thin man swept back his hair again. A small line of people were waiting to go through the turnstile. He observed them for a moment and then began moving back and forth between the shelves like a lion in a cage. “Well, lookee here. Let’s just get a-goin’ on it then. Cuz maybe this day is gonna be all right.”

The boy’s face brightened. He watched as the weight-guesser considered his small domain. “First thing is these goddam dolls. We got to put them on the shelves,” the thin man remarked, walking over to the black foot-locker that the dumpy woman had been sitting on the day before. His lean body moved strangely in stiff, jerky movements like a wind-up soldier. The dark clouds let loose suddenly with a torrent of rain. The man in the tuxedo and the boy with his collar up sheltered themselves for a moment beneath the elm tree behind the stand. Then the rain let up. But looking towards the Midway the boy saw that darker clouds were advancing from the west.

They went over to the foot-locker again and opened it up. All kinds of figurines were crammed inside of it. Lying sideways in the corner, half-covered by the other dolls, was the green dwarf; only part of its body and one eye could be seen. The dwarf’s face was as long and thin as the weight-guesser’s face; like him it had a pointed nose and chin. The one eye that could be seen with its chartreuse center, glowed

from the midst of the other dolls, which were duller in color.

“Whatsa matter, kiddo? You don’t like the dwarf?”

The boy shrugged his shoulders.

The weight-guesser picked it up in one skinny hand.

“These here come ten for a buck, but I only got one.”

The boy made no comment.

The weight-guesser leaned over the foot-locker again.

“If you take these dolls out of the box and put them on the shelves in whatever, goddam way they come out, that is fine with me. Then, when and if you get done, just come on over and knock on the door.”

The thin man looked at the boy for a moment, then off towards the silent Midway. He shrugged his shoulders and retired to the silver trailer, slamming the door behind him.

The boy sighed. He stood quietly for a while, then he set his brown bag by the foot-locker, opened the lid, and propped it against the side of the stand. He began taking the dolls out one by one, looking at each one of them. When he got to the green dwarf he stopped. In the half-light from the amber lamps above the stand it looked grotesque; the eyes glowed from the triangular shadow at the corner of the box. At last he picked it up, holding it at arm’s length, and set it on the shelf above the locker. Now three objects remained: a lamp with a bare bulb, a large bottle of whiskey, and a bottle of Seven-Up. He went over to the silver trailer and knocked on the door

After several knocks, the door cracked open; the thin man peered out from the narrow opening. Once again he studied the boy’s face as if didn’t know who he was.

“I put all the dolls on the shelves like you said,” announced the boy.

The weight-guesser looked over the boy’s head towards the fairgrounds. It was still raining but a crowd of undaunted people was passing along the sidewalk in front of the stand. It was still as dark as night. Across the street in front of the Cow Palace, the arc lights swayed in the erratic wind.

“So you got them all out,” the weight-guesser said. Once again he seemed to be trying to focus on the scene in front of him.

“Yes, sir. Just like you said. I put all the dolls on the shelves. I got them all ready. They’re all on the shelves.”

Finally, the thin man came out again, sleepily arranging his tattered bow-tie. Now a larger group of people passed up the sidewalk in the half-light from the amber lamps above the stand. Soon the rides in the Midway began creaking and whining. It was still so dark the rides themselves couldn’t be seen; the two circles of the double-decker Ferris wheel were delineated in the mist by two circular strings of white lights that went round and round against the gray sky.

The weight-guesser began yelling. His skinny index finger pointed to the sky. “And furthermore I assert that NO PRE-DO-MI-NANCE WHAT-SO-EV-ER OF SU-PRA-MUN-DA-TO-RY POWERS will prevent me from the PRE-CISE AND PER-FECT PROG-NOS-TI-CA-TION of the PRE-PON-DE-RATE POWERS...”

In the amber light his yellow face looked more yellow still. His shrill voice rose and fell in the gray air. Quentin, as in a daze, watched his frenzied eyes and the turning lights of the Ferris wheel behind. He looked at the conglomeration of dolls on the half-lighted shelves. Once again his eyes were drawn to the dwarf, and once again only one eye of the dwarf could be seen. Quentin could see it glowing at him from the figurines that were cluttered together on the far side of the shelf by the foot-locker.

Three people stepped on the scale -- two farm boys and a red-faced man with a mustache. Then the weight-guesser swung towards him on one well-planted foot.

“Next thing you got to learn, Quintner” he said, leaning over him, “is about the cup.” He held up the paper cup which on the previous day had always been in his hand. “Come on over here with me.”

With long, gangly strides he walked over to the foot-locker and opened the lid. He stood bent over with the lid on top of his head so that he seemed to be standing beneath a small black roof.

“Come on under this cover here with me.”

Hesitantly the boy stuck his head under the lid. The weight-guesser had turned on the lamp on the bottom of the

chest. He was mixing himself a drink of Whiskey and Seven-Up. The harsh light from the bare bulb on the lamp came up from below the weight-guesser's face so that the bottom of his pointed chin and bottom edge of his thin lips and tip of his nose and the under-surface of his deep eye sockets were illumined with yellow light while his other features were hidden in dark shadows. The boy leaned over and observed this strange apparition bobbing up and down like a fishing bob above the black hulk of the soiled tuxedo.

"If you mix this with this, and set it behind the pig, you will keep me happy," the weight guesser informed. "I need this to converse with the supramundatory powers."

By this time many people, bundled in rain coats, were pouring) through the turnstiles. A roar of voices came from the Midway. People gathered by the stand. The thin man's voice rose shrilly in the gray air while with skinny hands he gesticulated before the cringing faces.

The boy began to take comfort in the privacy of the footlocker. Each time he mixed a drink, he lingered under the black roof that hid his face from the crowd. He had done this several times when the weight-guesser jerked up the lid of the chest so suddenly that the startled expression on his face drew a great, roar of laughter from the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and lovely girls, let me introduce to you my UN-WILL-ING A-CO-LYTE!" the weight guesser shouted, gesturing towards him with a sweep of his long arm. The boy stood shame-faced before the laughing people.

"Next thing to learn is how to act," the weight-guesser said to Quentin when no one was watching.

The boy shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know what you mean." He noticed that the dumpy woman had come out of the trailer. She was watching him with her fat face twisted in amusement.

You don't need to know, Bow-Wow," the thin man replied. "Just go off with this fifty cents and then come on back and look at the scale like you want to try it." He put two quarters in the boy's hand.

The boy looked at the quarters for a moment and then

folded his small hand around them. They felt sticky and warm.

The weight-guesser leaned closer to him. His two long hands settled on the boy's shoulders. One side of his mouth contorted into a half-smile. He flicked his head towards the other side of the street. "Go over there by the Cow Barn and come back."

The boy hesitated, leaning away from the thin man's face. "Not sure I know how."

The weight-guesser gave him a shove. "Sure you know how, Quintner. Git over there by the Cow Barn, and when you see me wink, come walkin' back."

Quentin did as instructed and came back.

"Now here we have a fine young man. A fine young man, PRIDE OF THE LAND: Ladies and gentlemen, boys and lovely girls, my PRE-CISE PROG-NOS-TI-CA-TION is SIXTY-EIGHT POUNDS, NO MORE, NO LESS."

The boy stepped on the scale. The pointer settled at 63.

"Now take a doll. Take the dwarf," the weight-guesser whispered. The boy reached up for it. "Walk away, walk away," urged the thin man. The boy trudged off towards the Cow Barn, and stood there with the dwarf in his hands, waiting for the signal to return.

4

Quentin Bausch was starting to think, "I'm in some kind of a jam." He kept saying these words to himself, "some kind of a jam." A strong wind had come up as though out of the ground. He could see the stand in the distance. The amber lights above it were lurching back and forth. Beneath them moved the thin man in jerky pantomime. Now he had one skinny hand raised high against the sky; now he slashed the air with it as though his bony index finger was a knife. A sudden long step brought him nose to nose with the grinning crowd. Another took him back from them. He danced around the scale. Someone slouched forward; the faces of the crowd lifted in expectation, then lifted higher still in a chorus of guffaws that floated towards the boy as though borne on water. Then the weight-guesser wheeled and winked. The

crowd was leaving the stand. The boy headed back with the dwarf in his arms. For an instant he glanced at the glowing chartreuse eye. Across the street a man kicked a shelf and shouted, "Tomorrow I fix!" "Some kind of jam, some kind of jam," Quentin kept saying to himself.

He put the green dwarf on the shelf and stood off to one side hoping the weight-guesser wouldn't notice him. He felt queasy and off-balance as though he was tilted to one side. He looked down at his shoes. When the amber lights swayed in the wind, shadows passed back and forth over the sawdust in little waves that dissolved his shoes in a sea of light and dark ripples. Then he looked up and saw that the weight-guesser was leaning against a pole on the far side of the stand by the dwarf. He had one skinny hand raised to his chin and his greasy hair hung down over one side of his narrow forehead.

The dumpy woman in the straw hat stood beside him with her red face yanked back and her mouth open; he could see her stumpy teeth.

"So whatsa matter, kid?" said the weight guesser. "Is somethin' the matter? All got to do is speak up."

"Nothing is the matter," said the boy, shuffling his feet and looking off towards the side. "I don't feel good, that's all." But inside he thought again, "I'm in some kind of a jam."

"Say you don't feel good. huh?" the thin man whined. "So why don't you just say yer a sissy? Why don't you say yer Fancy Dan from 0-rang-go-tang? Why don't you say yer too good to get dirty, Bow-Wow? Yer gonna cop out and take off like a litter turd?"

The dumpy woman raised up her red face in a long, wheezing laugh.

"I ain't gonna take off," the boy replied, trying to clear his head. He gazed at the thin man who was surveying him with an inscrutable smile. "I ain't gonna take off." Tears welled in his eyes.

The weight guesser bounded towards Quentin in three long strides and put his skinny hand on the boy's shoulder. The boy tilted to the side.

“So then stand up like a man,” the weight-guesser said.

For the first time the boy noticed the weight-guesser’s eyes were as yellow as his face as if stained with nicotine, and he noticed that a web of red lines radiated from the colorless irises to the sides. The weight-guesser’s breath was heavy with booze.

“So then stand up like a man,” the thin man repeated. “I’m going to show you a litter trick.”

He walked in a little circle in front of the boy, dragging one foot. The dumpy woman threw back her red face in another wheezing laugh.

“You get it, Bow-Wow? I’m a poor, mis-ra-ble cripple. You get how to do this? Just drag yer leg.”

He stepped back and said under his breath to the woman: “This is the gimmick I was tellin’ you about.”

“Now you do it, Quintner.”

The boy made a circle, dragging his foot behind him.

“Now yer talkin’, Quintner. Now you got it preddy good. Just drag yer foot a litter more. Now get a sad look on yer face.”

The boy tried but he couldn’t. After he had made several half-hearted attempts at it, the dumpy woman grabbed his shoulders and shook him so briskly that his teeth chattered.

“No, Dodo, stand twisted, look dumb... You ain’t never been in a play at school?”

“No, ma’am,” said the boy. Tears welled in his eyes again.

By this time it was late afternoon. What gray light still lingered in the overcast sky was speedily fading. But still a mist hung over the fairgrounds. The rain-coated people kept pressing towards the Midway where the rides swirled in a bedlam of noise and circling colored lights. The boy noticed that the paper cup behind the plaster pig was almost empty. He went over to the foot-locker and stood beneath the cover in the security of the four dark walls. When he emerged he saw that the weight-guesser was staring at him. His yellow hand covered his mouth; above it his bloodshot eyes were staring at him.

“So now is the time for it, kid.”

“Time for what?”

“Time to do yer litter act.”

“I don’t want to. Please don’t make me do it, mister.”

The thin man smiled with half of his thin mouth. “Sure you want to, Quintner. Now go over there by the Cow Barn and when you see me wink, come limpin’ back.”

“And don’t forget to look sad like I told you,” the dumpy woman called after him. He hardly heard her voice. It came from far away. He stood on a concrete abutment by the Cow Palace, locking towards the stand. The weight-guesser’s long head turned towards him and inclined to one side. He limped across the street. As he approached the stand, he could see from the corner of his eye that everyone was looking at him. “Oh’s” and “ah’s” of sympathy greeted his arrival. He made a sad face and stood crooked, looking at the weight guesser.

“Now here,—SAD SIGHT, SAD SIGHT,—is one poor lad,” cried the thin man, pointing at him,” a poor lad who lo and behold destiny has sent us!” One skinny hand pointed to the sky. It had started to rain again. “When I consider his LA-MEN-TA-BLE... yes, I say it again, ladies and gentlemen, boys and lovely girls... LA-MEN-TA-BLE PRO-STRAY-SHUN...”

The thin man guessed the boy’s weight exactly. Nonetheless, with sweeping gallantry, he gestured for him to take a prize. The boy went up to the shelves as though in delirium, put two small hands on the green dwarf and limped off towards the street.

The sight of the boy hobbling away sent a wave of compassion through the crowd. In appreciation of the thin man’s magnanimity, several people stepped forward to try their luck on the scale.

Several trips later, the boy noticed with a start that the blonde girl with blue eyes was standing with some other children on one side of the crowd. She was dressed in a white jumper with a blue sweater and blue knee socks. This more teenage attire, along with a different arrangement of her golden hair,—set in small curls that puffed out from her pretty face,—gave her a surprisingly lady-like appearance;

and, as though she, too, was aware of this, she had topped it all off by assuming a naively sophisticated air. The impish expression was gone from her face. She stood demurely with her hands folded in front of her wide hips. Then, suddenly, her posture changed. She inclined her head to one side and stared at the boy as though trying to remember where she had seen him before. Quentin Bausch noticed this gesture. He turned his body away from her so that his face was hidden from view.

“Yes, I say it again, ladies and gentlemen, boys and lovely girls,” the weight-guesser was crying with his skinny hand raised high in the air, “when I sadly consider his IN-CON-SO-LA-BLE HU-MIL-LY-AY-SHUN...”

The boy limped forward as in a dream, carefully twisting his body to keep his face out of sight. He reached up. His hands closed on the dwarf. He hobbled off into the midst of the thronging crowd.

As soon as he was a ways from the stand, the boy resumed a normal walk. With the dwarf in his hands, he went around to the back of the Cow Palace where there was a duck pond with lily pods. Two mallards, one brown and one speckled, swam by the shore. He sighed and drank in the peaceful scene. The light from the arc lamps by the Cow Palace rippled across the water. The back wall of the building sheltered him from the wind.

He sat by himself for a few moments and started to go back. He carried the dwarf inside his jacket so that only its head stuck out. The dwarf’s single chartreuse eye glittered in the dark like the hands of a fluorescent clock.

As he rounded the corner of the Cow Palace he came to a sudden stop. The blue-eyed girl was coming up the sidewalk with her father who was apparently returning from a religious meeting of some sort; he carried a plastic bag full of Jesus-statues. The boy made a move to turn back but the girl had already seen him. She raised back her pretty face in recognition. A wild look, a mixture of amusement and horror, came into her wide blue eyes. She began to bleat like a lamb in a high, exaggerated voice.

“That is him: That is him!” she cried shrinking back

from him as though he was some kind of beast. "Haw! He's not a cripple! He's a fake! He's a fake!"

The boy spun backwards as though slapped in the face. For a moment he lost his sense of direction. He could only see the two circles of white lights on the Ferris wheel which were still whirling against the dark sky. He stumbled towards the street, pushing his way between the bodies of the people that were rushing towards the Midway. He was stepping, moving forward, but the ground felt liquid and far away. His body felt wrenched. At last he reached the stand.

The weight guesser had started to put the dolls back into the box. The woman was gone. The boy set the green dwarf to one side of the foot-locker. '

"You can help me put these nick-nack's away... We got to put them in the box and then you can go."

The boy, was still in a daze. He reached for some of the dolls and began to pile them in the box. The thin man smelled of sweat and booze. He held his booze cup in one hand and piled in the dolls with the other. He emptied the cup, lifting it high to drain the last drop. Then he poured himself another cupful, this one of straight whiskey. In a little while, he was staggering around.

Soon all the dolls were put away except the dwarf which was still lying in the sawdust. "So now you can go, kid. Good-bye and good-night."

The boy didn't move. "I was wondering about my money," he said after a pause.

"Didn't I say I had you pegged for a smart one? Didn't I say I had you pegged?" the thin man blubbered on. He poured himself another cup of whiskey.

"I do need the money, sir," the boy said, "and I worked all day."

"Oh yea, yer money, yer money. Of course, of course," said the weight guesser. He counted out eight quarters into the boy's palm.

"Sir, that's only two dollars. You told me three-fifty. That's only two dollars."

"I told you three-fifty if we had a good day, kid. But we didn't have a good day. We had a bad day. So I'm giving

you two bucks.”

The boy frowned. The thin man looked at him for a moment, nodding his head from side to side. He put two more quarters in the boy’s hand. Then seeing the dwarf in the sawdust, he picked it up and plunked it in the boy’s arms.

“And here’s a prize for you, kid. Don’t say I never did you nothing. So beat it.”

The boy had gone a few feet when the weight-guesser shouted after him: “Hey, kid!”

The boy sighed and turned around. He felt tired, so tired that he could hardly stand up. The thin man approached him in three gangly strides. He leaned over him with a strangely-sollicitous expression in his bloodshot eyes. The boy twisted his head to avoid his breath.

“The last time you was up there doin’ yer litter act, did you see that preddy girl that was watchin’ you?”

The boy said nothing. He felt queasy. The weight guesser’s face floated above him as though detached from the body beneath it.

“You did see her, cuz I saw you lookin’ her over, up and down.’

The yellow face of the weight-guesser came closer to the Quentin’s eyes. Behind it the colored lights on the Ferris wheel were spinning around.

“That must have given you a litter jack-knife in yer pocket, didn’t it, kid?”

The boy closed his eyes for a moment to rest and then looked again at the weight guesser’s yellow-stained eyes.

“Didn’t it, Quintner?”

“I dunno,” said the boy.

“Sure you know, Bow-Wow, cuz I seen you lookin’ at her preddy litter ass and I saw that litter jack-knife go up.”

The boy looked from side to side. The weight-guesser leaned farther over him so his breath was inescapable. He looked at the boy with a saccharine sweetness in his eyes. “Cuz I was just thinkin’, now yer all done for the day, and did yer litter act like I told ya, and put all the figgur-reens up so nice, just like I told ya, just like they come out... well, I was just wonderin’ could I hold ya.”

The boy stepped back a little, shuffling from side to side. On the sidewalk the people still pressed towards the Midway.

He shook his head. "I don't know what you mean."

"Sure you know, Quintner. You got a litter nugget in yer pocket there, don't ya? I just want to hold it a while. There's a couple bucks in it for ya, and if you let me kiss ya, there's maybe three or three-fifty."