

Symbolic Stories

Roland Menge

Cover Art

Susan Menge

SYMBOLIC STORIES 2

Symbolic Stories is under U.S. copyright protection. All Rights Reserved. This is Symbolic Stories_v0008, saved on August 10, 2026.

To contact the author, use email address,
roland.menge@gmail.com.

The author has a personal website at rolandmenge.com.

Cover art by Susan Menge is used by permission of the artist. All Rights Reserved. To contact the artist, use email address susan.m.menge@gmail.com

.

for Jeanne

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword..... 7

The Weight Guesser 9

Immanuel Gonzales 35

How Many Light Bulbs? 51

Justin the Giant 75

Foreword

When I first began writing fiction, as a cab driver in San Francisco in the 1970's, I was interested in Jungian psychology, with its archetypes and symbols, and interested, also, in the mystery and "emblems" (meaning real-life happenings with seeming hidden meanings) that seemed all around me in the night-time cabbie world that I was immersed in at that time.

I was driving Rose company cab 277, and that seemed significant, also, both the Rose name reminding of Yeat's "The Secret Rose" and the number 277, which was supposed to be lucky and a good number (as we believed then that every number had some meaning though often only intuitively grasped).

When I say "we," I am referring to myself and my friend of that time, the 6-4, bearded, limp-walking, high-spirited "cabbie poet" and later psychologist David Frankel, who was also (in my opinion) a great cabbie, adept in street wisdom and able to speed through the snarlingest of traffic while intently conversing with a passenger or even conducting his free psychological counseling.

David and I did not, however, ever discuss my attempts at symbolic stories (and poems). They were the result of my interactions with psychotherapist Dorothy S. Hunt (the "dear reader" in EX TERTIO QUARTUS). She encouraged my inquiries and was the model for the writing style I was trying to learn since I had noticed, in her correspondence, she "took the space" to fully and naturally examine her thoughts and did so in a never-ending flow.

My attitude even at the start of the symbolic stories was that they would not be my ultimate style, but would train me in the use of themes and motifs for eventual employment in realistic projects; and they did, in fact, in my actual life, fulfil that function.

Roland Menge (2026)

"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 PROGNOSTICATE... 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 ABSOLUTELY PRE-DICTABLE!" 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 VERITABLE WONDER of MAGNIFICENT PRIZES!" His hand came to rest at

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 kewpie 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.”

"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 momma 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 kewpie 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 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

He 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 a jam, some kind of a 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."

"Tell me the truth, my friend. Is my face good
or is it bad?"

Immanuel Gonzales

1

The village of Tezontepec, in Hidalgo, Mexico, is now surrounded by the suburbs of Mexico City, which lies 15 miles to the south. In 1905, when this story takes place, it was still a rural village with one church, and sleepy villagers who gave little thought to the capital and only went there on special occasions.

In Tezontepec at that time, there lived a young man named Immanuel Gonzales. Unlike the others in the village, he saw the city every day. He was a carter, and every morning he picked up his fellow villager, Dr. Alfredo Rota, and carried him to a hospital in the center of the capital. In the evening, he brought the doctor back to his mansion by the village mall.

This Immanuel Gonzales was an industrious young man. Other carters were satisfied with renting their carts by the day, but in the course of ten years' time, by working from sunrise to sunset, he had managed to save enough money to buy his own cart; and he was only 33.

"Immanuel has worked very hard," his fellow villagers would say. "Now, he should relax before he gets old."

But it seemed as though it was in his very nature to keep working and moving. He never slowed down.

"One day, Immanuel will have a big house," the young women would observe. "He's just the man to marry."

But Immanuel kept to himself. He lived with his old mother in a little adobe house on the edge of town, on the road that led to the shrine of the Virgin.

When Immanuel wasn't working, he took care of his mother. She was crippled and going blind. She rarely left the house, and, in fact, had become more and more eccentric. She stayed in the house behind closed drapes and never lit a lantern.

Immanuel was so tired by the time he got home that he never bothered to light one either. He ate his beans and rice and watched the fireplace, and thought about the capital where everything was more exciting than the village.

Immanuel was proud of his contact with the city. There was an outdoor swimming pool by the school where the boys and men gathered in the evening. Immanuel was usually too tired to join them, but when he did, he talked about the city.

"You know," he once told them, "I can read the signs in the city. Even in Dr. Rota's hospital. I can read the big words in the hall."

His friends laughed and patted his back. They had forgotten how to read and didn't need to. But Immanuel was different; he had always been smart.

One time he brought home some special cookies from the city. They were frosted with white cream and had cherry jelly in the middle.

"See what they make in the city," he said to his mother. They were standing together in their little living room. It was dark and cluttered with old furniture and pictures. Only by the fireplace was the floor clear enough to stand.

His mother felt a cookie with her fingers, and then bit off a tiny piece of it and chewed on it with a thoughtful expression on her face.

"From the city," Immanuel repeated.

His mother looked up from the cookie, and smiled a toothless grin at him. "You are very smart," she said. "I always knew you were a very smart boy."

2

One day Immanuel had an accident that changed his life. His face was crushed by a fall from his cart. The fall left his nose hideously broken and his mouth distorted.

How he had fallen, Immanuel couldn't say. He could only remember that a snake had hissed and the horses had bolted. When they found him, he was lying face down in the sand with the reins wound around his wrist. The horses were in front of the cart, chewing on grass as if nothing had

Immanuel spent three weeks in a hospital and returned home. Only his blind mother treated him the same. He was met with stares wherever he went, and the children made fun of him.

Dr. Rota came by to see him.

Is there anything they can do for me in the city?" Immanuel asked him. He was sitting in the cluttered living room by the fireplace. Though Dr. Rota had ventured no further than the door, he could see that the carter was terribly deformed. The flickering light made him look all the more hideous.

"Well, yes, there is," said the doctor, "something called plastic surgery. But I'm afraid it would cost very much."

"More than a cart?" Immanuel asked.

"More than ten carts," the doctor answered.

Immanuel considered this a moment, and then slumped back in the dark.

3

The next day Immanuel went to the market place. Some little children laughed at him. He chased them with a stick while they cried, "Monster! Monster!"

He went home and searched the cluttered room until he found a piece of a broken mirror. He cleaned it off with some spit and looked at himself by the light from the fire. His nose was flattened in to his face, and his skull above his left eye had been flattened in. His mouth bent downward on the right side.

After this, Immanuel led a reclusive life, never leaving the yard. Besides his mother, there was only one person in the village who seemed to understand him, an old man who lived by himself further down the road, and walked by every day with a cane and a burlap sack. For no reason at all, this old man was called Sr. Pajaro. No one knew his real name.

Immanuel often saw Sr. Pajaro come by but never talked to him. Whenever he saw the old man coming, he hid in the house. One day Immanuel was pulling out some weeds by the wall, taking advantage of siesta time to come out of his house undisturbed, when the, old man came walking so quietly that he caught the carter by surprise. When Immanuel saw the old man so close by, he gave a little shout of embarrassment, covered his face with his hands, and tried to hide behind a cactus.

"For God's sake, man!" cried Sr. Pajaro, "what are you

whimpering about?"

"About nothing," said Immanuel. "I'm ashamed of my face."

The next day when the old man came by, Immanuel greeted him and the old man smiled. A week later, Immanuel invited him for coffee.

"When I'm with you, I forget how ugly I am," Immanuel said.

"That's because I'm ugly, too," said the old man.

Sr. Pajaro had spoken truly. He was, in fact, quite ugly. He had a beaked nose and little slits for eyes, and his face was so wrinkled and dry that he looked like a lizard.

Even so, in decent clothes the old man was at least presentable; whereas, poor Immanuel, in any clothes, still looked like the wrath of God. Already, the boys from the village were making night-time excursions to watch his house, thinking that the deformed man was in league with the powers of darkness. And all this because of that single day in his life when he had been so unfortunately injured.

4

"You know, Sr. Pajaro, my life used to be very different. I used to get up every morning and drive my cart into town when the sun was just rising. Then all day long, I'd ride around looking at the houses and trees. Now I live in this stupid house alone. It's all because of my stupid shame."

So said Immanuel Gonzales one morning when Sr. Pajaro stopped to talk to him. The old man had set his burlap sack on the ground beside him. He was standing with his hands cupped over the end of his cane. The cane was just long enough for him to rest his chin on his hands. Leaning on his cane in this way, with his wrinkled face sitting on top of his brown hands, he looked like a lizard on top of a rock.

It was a hot day. The sun was high in the sky above the village.

"Well, tell me this," said Sr. Pajaro, "is your case hopeless?"

Immanuel thought for a moment.

"I don't know," he said.

Several days later, Immanuel's mother was surprised to hear him going outside. She heard his footsteps going toward the village.

A crowd of children was behind him when he returned. Some were throwing rocks at him, and some bowed, pretending he was a king.

Immanuel came in, slammed the door behind him, and went in the cluttered room to sulk. His mother was sitting in the dark. It was too hot to have a fire.

"I must be even more ugly than I was before," Immanuel said.

After this, he didn't even go out at siesta time.

5

"You asked me once if my case is hopeless," said Immanuel one day to Sr. Pajaro. "I've been thinking about it, and my answer is no. I've been making a plan."

"What kind of plan?" the old man asked. He was leaning on his walking stick with his chin resting on his hands, and he smiled from the corner of his mouth.

"I'll tell you if you help me," Immanuel answered.

The old man gave a little snort of contempt, and looked to one side. For a moment, Immanuel saw a profile of his pointed nose raised up in the air like the beak of a bird. Then the old man looked back again, rested his chin on his hands, and smiled once again from the corner of his mouth.

The next morning, Sr. Pajaro drove Immanuel's cart to the town mall.

There were two men sleeping by the grocery store, one with a tan sombrero and the other with a brown one.

"Isn't that Sr. Pajaro, the old man who always has a burlap sack?" said the man with the tan sombrero, waking from his sleep.

The second man woke up and blinked his eyes.

"Why, yes it is," he said.

"Isn't that Immanuel's cart, that he worked so hard to buy?" the first man asked.

"It certainly is," the second man said. They both looked a moment, and then fell asleep again.

The old man drove into the market place and stopped at the tavern. He came out with a jug of tequila, and rode off again.

“Well, now” said the man with the tan sombrero, when the noise from the cart woke him up again, “isn’t Sr. Pajaro driving Immanuel’s cart toward the road that goes to Mexico City?”

“Or do my eyes deceive me?” the first man added.

“He certainly is,” said the other man, disregarding the second question. With that, they fell asleep once more, and the town mall was quiet.

When Sr. Pajaro had passed the last adobe house of the village, he stopped and looked to the back of the cart. There was a load of hay in the cart, and on top of the hay there was a brown blanket. He lifted up the blanket and reached the jug of tequila into the hay.

“Thank you, my friend,” said Immanuel Gonzales, and the two men laughed.

The road soon passed through some low hills where they stopped to have cactus pears. They held them with a piece of leather, cut open the thick green skin with a knife, and then sat eating the juicy fruit.

It was now safe for Immanuel to come out. He sat on a rock, eating, and now and then taking a gulp of tequila from the jug. The old man sat beside him, chewing very slowly, and looking out toward the hills. There was no sound except the soft breeze. A tiny twister swirled up the dust. The landscape before them was brown and rocky, but there were some green bushes on the hillside. It was spring. The bushes had little white flowers, and there were some bright red flowers among the dull red rocks.

“It’s been so long,” Immanuel said.

The ride through the countryside was only the beginning of Immanuel’s plan. They continued on to the city and stopped at the hospital where Dr. Rota worked. In the back of the cart beneath the blanket, Immanuel was going through all kinds of contortions. At last, he came out. He was dressed like an old woman with a long silk dress and a fan. He had a fancy hat on his head, and his face was covered by a shawl.

He walked up to the hospital door.

“Permit me to ask you who you are, Senora,” the doorman said.

Immanuel waved the fan and bowed.

“I am Senora Rota, Dr. Rota’s mother,” he said. “I’ve come to see my son.”

The doorman also bowed, but much lower than Immanuel had. “My honor, Senora,” he said.

Once inside the hospital, Immanuel went right to the library. He came back with a big book beneath his skirt.

Under the blanket, he looked at it with Sr. Pajaro. It had a black cover on which the words “Plastic Surgery” were written in gold letters.

Immanuel opened the book and looked at it. The book was so heavy he could hardly hold it up, and the pages were filled with long words in tiny print. He raised up his ugly face and nodded thoughtfully, while the old man stood beside him, smiled from the corner of his mouth, and shook his head.

6

Immanuel’s first operation was unsuccessful though he had taken every precaution to do things right. First, he had boiled all his instruments and three pairs of gloves. Then, assisted by Sr. Pajaro and his blind mother who wore white gowns that his mother had made, he injected his chest and his face with something red.

“What is that red stuff?” asked the old man.

“It kills pain,” said Immanuel.

“Why does it kill pain?” the old man persisted.

“Because the book says so,” said Immanuel.

“My son is very smart,” said Immanuel’s mother.

After the various preparations, he cut a square of skin from his chest and applied it to his face. In doing this, he had followed the pictures in the big black book. But the application died as the wound healed, and merely formed a large scab which fell off in pieces like a snake molting its skin.

After this, Immanuel went back to his book. For days on

end, he lay on the floor by the fireplace, poring over the pictures, with an immense dictionary beside him.

Sr. Pajaro found him some cardboard in the market place. Immanuel cut it up in pieces and used it to write words on that he was trying to learn. He had never learned to write longhand, so he printed instead.

He arranged the words in neat rows, as such:

CELL DEGENERATION

OXYGEN

CELL TEMPERATURE

Immanuel filled up many pieces of cardboard with words, and kept them in a stack in a special corner of the cluttered room.

One day he wrote:

NERVES

The next afternoon he stopped Sr. Pajaro when he was walking by with his burlap sack and his cane.

"We have to get some frogs," he said.

"Frogs?" said Sr. Pajaro.

"Yes, frogs," said Immanuel.

Outside of town, there was a pond where Immanuel had played as a boy. They went there the same night in Immanuel's cart. A long time had passed since Immanuel had been to the pond, and it was a beautiful night with a full-moon and a soft wind that rustled through the reeds. When he saw this boyhood place again, Immanuel forgot all about the frogs for a little while. He dived in the dark water and swam on his back, looking up at the moon and stars as he had done as a boy. The old man stood by and watched.

Immanuel was doing this when he heard a frog croak and remembered why he had come. They found two frogs and put them in the burlap sack. By the time they left, it was already getting light.

Immanuel hid beneath the blanket in the back of the cart as they drove back to town. Inside the burlap sack, the frogs went thump-thump, thump-thump; the wheels creaked as they went around; and the wood of the cart groaned as they

bumped along the road. It made Immanuel sleepy; he fell asleep like a little boy.

Several days after this, Sr. Pajaro came by and entered the cluttered room to find Immanuel on the floor cutting up a frog. He had cut open its chest with great care, and had pinned back its insides and tacked them to a board.

Immanuel pointed to a little white thread that ran between two tiny pink sacs.

"Nerves," he said, nodding his head.

"How do you know?" the old man asked.

Immanuel nodded toward the big black book.

"The skin died because I didn't put it by a nerve," he said, "so now I'm learning where the nerves are."

"In a frog?" said Sr. Pajaro.

"It's all very much the same," said Immanuel Gonzales.

He raised his head up proudly, looked toward the book, and then looked again to the white thread of the nerve.

The second operation was a great success. The application healed well. Immanuel was now engaged in drawing large maps of faces on the sand in the back of the house. Every day, he got up at sunrise and worked until it was too dark to see. Then he went in the house and sat by the fireplace looking at his book and his pieces of cardboard. The next day he'd be outside again. This continued for many weeks.

"You are becoming crazy," said his mother. "All day long in the sun will turn anybody crazy. And yesterday, Sr. Pajaro told me that the boys are watching you from the rooftops."

Immanuel looked surprised.

"What is this to me?" he said after a long while.

"They think you're crazy," said his mother. "All day long in the sun will turn anybody crazy."

He turned to look at her but she was standing in a shadow in the cluttered room. He could only see the dark outline of her figure.

"A good work takes time," he said. "All I need is a little more time."

In the next year, he did five more operations. He had

learned how to take little chunks of bone from other parts of his body and put them in his face. He spent all his spare time looking in the piece of mirror. He had succeeded in making a nose and shaping some bone around his left eye, but his new face was still far from normal. He looked more like a kind of reptile or frog than a human being because the nose was too flat and wide.

His old mother could not see well enough to make out his new face, but she could see his blurred figure bent over the mirror.

“Did I bear a daughter or a son?” she said to Sr. Pajaro. “Does a son look in the mirror like he’s going to a dance?”

Immanuel heard her make this comment. “All I need is time,” he repeated. When he wasn’t looking in the mirror, he was out in the yard, drawing in the sand. Now that he knew the boys were watching him, he couldn’t help watching them back from the corners of his eyes. As he drew his plans in the sand, he sometimes looked up at them with his strange new face.

Sometimes, too, he met their gaze directly, wondering what they thought of him. They didn’t look at him as if he were an enemy. It was more as if he was something they couldn’t understand. Some of the boys were clearly afraid of him, he noticed. They thought he had magic powers.

He started to like the boys. Now and then, he waved at them and a few waved back. One day a little boy came up to him and offered him a flower. This little boy had keen black eyes and curly black hair. He seemed so fresh and innocent that Immanuel hardly knew what to do. He took the flower and bowed low in gratitude.

To his surprise, there was a roar of applause. He looked up at the rooftops and saw that a great crowd of boys had gathered to pay their respects to him.

8

One afternoon, Immanuel noticed that there were some well-dressed men among the boys on the rooftops. Near sundown, these men came over to Immanuel’s house.

Immanuel and his mother retreated to the darkest corner

of the cluttered room behind an old wood chest, and listened to the knock on the door.

“Immanuel Gonzales,” said a deep voice.

“Here I am,” answered Immanuel weakly.

“Shh-h-h!” whispered his mother, covering his mouth with her shriveled hand.

“Immanuel Gonzales,” said the voice a second time, this time more loudly.

Immanuel didn’t answer.

“Immanuel Gonzales!” boomed the voice.

“I’m here! I’m here!” Immanuel cried, rushing to the door.

He opened the door and saw that two well-dressed men were standing in front of it. There was a young man with handsome features and a German hat, and an older man with a little beard and a monocle.

When Immanuel opened the door, the full light of the sun fell on his face.

“Astounding!” said the older man, raising his monocle to his eye.

“Incredible!” said the younger man, taking off the German hat and tilting it to one side to shade his eyes from the sun, which was now low in the sky.

“Sr. Gonzales,” said the older man with a tiny bow, “we are plastic surgeons from the city. We’ve come to pay you our respects.”

Immanuel came out of the door into the sunlight and raised his frog-like face in pride. The men stood looking at his face, shook his hand, and then departed.

On the road back to the capital, the man with the German hat looked at his colleague. “This could be a public health problem,” he said.

“How is that?” said the older man.

“I mean, if people think what we do is simple...this man is a peasant.”

“Think of the damage to our reputation.” said the older man.

“Even so,” said the man with the German hat, “his face is quite hideous.”

“Repulsive,” said the older man, scratching his beard, “the poor man looks like a frog.”

The next day, Immanuel walked down to the village, feeling very proud. He had never been sure how to regard his new face, but the well-dressed men had given him such compliments that he felt reassured.

It was market day. The mall was full of booths where people were selling everything from fruits and vegetables to old shoes and second-hand clothes. There was a great crowd of people in the market place.

Immanuel walked into their midst, smiling. This created a general hubbub. Wherever he walked, the crowd scattered to all sides. He went home in great confusion and looked in his piece of mirror, trying to decide if the people had acted this way because his face was good, or because it was bad.

The next day, he said to Sr. Pajaro: “Tell me the truth, my friend; is my face good, or is it bad?”

Sr. Pajaro looked at him a moment, leaning on his cane. “To me, it’s a good face,” he said at last. “Yes, I would say it’s a very good face, a beautiful face.”

He asked his blind mother to feel his face with her fingers. “Is my face good or bad?” he said.

“You worked so hard on it,” his mother said. “Didn’t we all—you and me and the good Sr. Pajaro? Didn’t we dress up in white gowns? Of course, it’s a good face.”

9

“Immanuel Gonzales,” said the deep voice.

This time Immanuel was not afraid. “It must be the doctors from the city,” he said to himself. “They’ve come to pay me their respects again.”

Immanuel opened the door. The man with the German hat greeted him with a smile, but Immanuel’s attention was immediately drawn to the young woman who stood next to the doctor. She was dressed magnificently in a long white dress with a pink sash, and she had a wide-brimmed white hat with a pink flower on one side of the brim.

She was so beautiful that Immanuel couldn’t think of anything to say. He lowered his eyes, put his hands in his

pockets, and shuffled his feet.

“This is Sr. Gonzales,” said the young doctor. “As you can see, he’s done a most remarkable job of reconstructing his own face.”

“Amazing,” the woman exclaimed. She had a low, husky voice, and almond-colored eyes.

Immanuel flushed with pride and raised up his face into the full light of the sun, so that they could look more closely at his craftsmanship.

“Sr. Gonzales,” said the doctor. “A most extraordinary thing has taken place. An honorable lady has offered to pay the full cost of finishing the marvelous job you’ve begun on your face. It will all be done at no expense to you, and you can return to a normal life.”

Immanuel nodded his head slowly. He thought for a long time and then he said: “I’ve drawn out some plans... Will they do it according to my plans?”

“Of course,” said the doctor.

“Of course,” said the young lady with the almond eyes, pressing Immanuel’s hand with her own. Her hand was soft and moist.

One day soon after this, Immanuel was brought before a class at the medical school. How this happened, he didn’t know. First of all, he was walking down a shiny corridor behind a little group of men in white coats; then, they went through a door and he found himself in an immense room that was packed with white coats and serious eyes. All the seats in the room were full; and besides, there were people in the aisles and seated on the floor.

The woman with almond eyes was standing to one side beside the young doctor, who now was dressed in a white coat and didn’t have his German hat. When the young lady saw him look at her, she smiled and waved. He smiled and waved back.

A man in white standing next to Immanuel began to talk: “As you can see,” he said to the group, “this peasant has made a valiant effort, but has completely failed. Here on the nose, for instance, you can see what child-like molding he has done.”

Back in his room in the hospital, Immanuel brooded alone. "I've been thinking I want to leave," he said to the nurse when she looked in the door.

"You can't leave now. All the papers are signed."

Immanuel was still lost in thought when the woman with almond eyes came by to see him. He was overjoyed. She was dressed as magnificently as before but in a completely different outfit, a long blue dress with a low neckline that revealed the top of her breasts. She had set this off with a heart-shaped amulet that hung from a gold chain necklace.

"Do you think my face is good?" Immanuel asked.

"I think it's unique, very unique," she answered.

She was still with him when they came to take him away on a hospital cart. "Are they going to follow my plans?" he said. He had some pieces of cardboard in his hand.

"Of course, they will," she replied, kissing his cheek.

10

When Immanuel awoke from his operation there was a crowd of men in white coats standing around him smiling. He was handed a mirror. They all were watching. Once again he looked like a normal peasant with everything where nature had put it.

Immanuel was so confused by the sight, he didn't know what to say. He wanted to leave as fast as he could. He bowed awkwardly to express his gratitude, while the men in white continued to beam at him. He made all kinds of obsequious gestures in order to leave.

Immanuel rode back to the village in the back of a cart. Here and there, groups of people stood by the roadside, staring at him with curiosity. Some of them attempted to touch his new face. In one place there was a group of boys who watched him silently. As he rode along, he waved at the people like a carnival king.

Back in his house, he spent long hours looking at his face. "They didn't follow my plan," he said to himself. He looked in the mirror, then he got up and walked around the cluttered room, and banged his head against the wall like a man possessed. This continued day and night.

Sr. Pajaro went to the window to see who was coming in a cart. "It's the doctors from the city," he said to Immanuel and his mother.

The three of them retreated into the darkness of the cluttered room and listened to the footsteps coming toward the door.

Immanuel recognized the voice of the man with the German hat.

"Gentlemen," the voice was saying, "you will see that the job we did was truly amazing. When I first met this poor peasant, he looked like a frog. Now he looks as normal as normal can be."

There was a knock on the door.

"Immanuel Gonzales," the voice said several times. Immanuel didn't answer.

At last, the door was pushed open. A shaft of light shot into the room. Immanuel was standing in the corner of the room. His blind mother and Sr. Pajaro were in another corner, dressed in white gowns.

"Foolish man!" cried the doctor. "What have you done to your face?"

It was hard to see Immanuel where he was standing in the shadows, but there was enough light to see that he had deformed his own face again. He had cut off his nose and begun building another. His face was covered with scabs. Sr. Pajaro stood in the corner with his chin on his hands and a crooked smile on his face.

When the doctors had left, Sr. Pajaro went to the window. Immanuel was seated on the floor, looking at his face in the piece of broken mirror.

"All I need is time," he mumbled to himself.

"Immanuel," said Sr. Pajaro. "There is a little boy in the yard with a flower, and there are boys all over the rooftops."

Immanuel looked up and smiled. "Tell them I'll be out in a moment," he said. "I'm going to talk to them."

“And where was fuckin’ Gwendolyn?”

How Many Light Bulbs?

1

It was a cold, foggy night in midwinter San Francisco. There was so much fog that the tip of the Pyramid Building was hidden in clouds. On the corner of Ellis and Mason in the Tenderloin District, a doorman watched dully as the eenteenth cab of the night came racing by and slammed on its brakes at the corner, then lurched to the left down Ellis out of sight. All the cabdrivers knew they had to hit the corner on red in order to get the green's on Ellis Street, which was synchronized all the way to Van Ness. A lady with a bandage on her nose came muttering by. She gestured "five" and then "two" with long skinny fingers, pointed emphatically to the gutter, and then went muttering off again, elbowing her way through a bunch of laughing students dressed in tuxedo's and evening dresses. Just another crazy sight. The doorman regarded it all with a yawn through his half-closed eyes.

Inside the cab, the meter was ticking. "1.10" it said; then it clicked to "1.30". The driver was a Chinaman with a head as round as a melon. He was driving with both hands on the wheel and was leaning forward so intently that his forehead was pressed against the windshield. Bing-bing-bing. He was hitting all the stop-lights right on the button.

In the back seat of the cab, a thin man with thick glasses and a mop of black hair was engaged in an animated discussion with a woman in a pillbox hat who had a long, plain face like a draft-horse. The woman was much larger than the thin man, who was scrunched to one side of the seat. Her dumb-looking face was inclined heavily towards him. She gestured emphatically and grimaced as she talked. The thin man sometimes looked distractedly towards her, and sometimes looked frantically out the window. They were going past the little hamburger joint on the corner of Ellis and Leavenworth where all the nods and drag queens hung out. One big black queen with plastic boobs and mascaraed eyes dropped her pants and mooned him as the thin man looked angrily out.

"Fuckin' nigger queen," he muttered to himself.

The woman to his left was too busy talking to notice what was outside the window.

"And so you are going down there on Monday," she said with an exasperated sigh. "Is that what I am led to believe, if I do so correctly?"

"Yes, for the cripe sake, on Monday," the thin man said. "Yes, yes, yes."

"And tell me this, then, if I may be so bold as to enquire, what if the Welfare won't take you again? What if they are as tired of taking care of you as I am myself? Tell me that, Wilbur Krenton, what will happen then?"

"Nothin' will happen, for the cripe sake. Nothin' will happen."

They turned left on Polk Street. A little group of wimpy-looking gay dudes with leather jackets and tight jeans was passing noisily along the street in front of the Travel Lodge Motel.

"Stupid little fruits," the thin man muttered.

"You know you are 34," the woman was saying, shaking a finger at him. "Isn't it about time that you take care of yourself?"

"For the cripe sake, I do take care."

"Isn't it time, Wilbur Krenton? Isn't it time? When we go to Miami, I want you to go up and stay with your father. I sincerely hope that you do not have intentions—"

"I ain't got no intentions. I ain't got no—"

"—of staying with me. And do you know why, Wilbur?"

The thin man sighed. There was a brief moment' of silence.

"And do you know why, Wilbur?"

He glowered out the window.

"No, why? Please tell me why."

She sat back in the seat, raised up her chin, and let out a long sigh. "Because I am tired to the bone."

The cab had stopped at a red light on the corner of Eddy and Polk. A fat man in a stocking cap was standing on the corner pounding with his fist on a newspaper box. The

headline said, "New Corruption In The Capitol. At Last The Truth Has Come Out." The fat man was built like a wrestler and was chanting in a monotone: "We don't want that kind of sex here where you meet a gal and all she is is a hole... I'm talkin' about virgin sex where you love her and everything!... We don't want that hole sex here in the United States of America!"

Wilbur Krenton shook his head in disgust.

"Stupid creep," he said under his breath.

"Perhaps you don't know that I started working when I was 13. Perhaps you don't know that, Wilbur Krenton."

"I know it, for the cripe—"

"Since I've been 13, Wilbur, and I'm tired to the bone. And when I am so fortunate as to retire on social security, Wilbur, I will get... Do you know how much I will get? I will get 260 a month. And you get 300 on the Welfare. Now is that fair?"

"I never said it was fair. I been lookin' for a job. For the Pete's sake, Mother, gimme a break."

"A job! A likely story! Wilbur Krenton, the big shot! Listen to him talk!" !

They had pulled up to a battered old hotel with a sign that said "Colonial Estates — By the Day, Week, or Month—Transients Welcome." The meter said "1.90."

The driver lifted up one yellow hand and said, "Two buck." The woman continued to talk.

"In any case, I want you to go up and stay with your father in Memphis."

"I ain't gonna stay with that stupid Kraut."

For some reason, this last comment aroused the Chinaman's interest. With almost no movement of his shoulders, he turned his head a full half circle around like an owl. His round, yellow face looked intently at the thin man.

"Two buck," he repeated.

They paid and watched the cab go off. It was orange in color and looked like it was about to fall apart. That is, Krenton was watching it. His mother was leaning over his head, shaking her finger at him.

"Well, at least you're all right for right now. There's

nothing the matter with the Colonial Hotel. At least there's no bugs."

"There's roaches... There's roaches in the bathroom. There's roaches by the coke machine."

"Well, there are roaches everywhere, as you very well know, Wilbur Krenton. And anyway, I don't call roaches "bugs". I call them "insects... You will be hard pressed to find better than the Colonial Hotel."

"Insects," the thin man sneered.

"And now am I to understand Monday, if I do so correctly?"

"Yes, you are to understand Monday, for the cripe sake."

She arranged her pillbox hat above her long face, raised up her chin, closed her eyes and let out another long sigh.

"Sometimes, I wish to God that some kind of revolution would happen or something like socialized medicine. All those politicians aren't worth the dynamite to blow them up, and don't you tell me it isn't true, Wilbur. Just look at your poor mother for a moment. Can't you see that she's tired to the bone?"

"I didn't say nothin' about no politicians. What do I give a fuck about politicians?" Krenton yelled. He went angrily in, slamming the door behind him.

His mother looked exasperatedly at the door, arranged her hat and sighed another time, and then went huffily up the street with her black purse under her arm like a football. .

2

The next Tuesday this same thin young man was seated at a table with three other people at Ming's Cafe on the corner of Ellis and Leavenworth. Two of them were young men as thin as himself. They were dressed like hillbillies; they looked like they were straight out of the hills. The fourth person in the group was a thirtyish woman with pretty features, a long, thin body, and a pasty-white complexion like dough.

Wilbur Krenton was busy scolding her, and he was doing it so loudly that no one in the restaurant had any

choice but to be party to the conversation,—if such it could be called; he was the only one that was talking. There was a line of men sitting at the counter slouched like dogs over dishes of food. A crazy man at the end of the counter was mumbling away. “Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.... So go ahead and tell me you’re so goddam beautiful.” Krenton hardly noticed him. He was glowering at his female friend and shaking his finger at her. She was looking out the window, puffing on a cigarette.

“Okay now, Billy, now you tell me this,” Wilbur was saying. “Now you be the witness. You be the witness to this. You seen her room. You was up there with me. Ain’t it a dump? Ain’t it a goddam, fuckin’, miserable dump? Ain’t that right, Billy? Now you be witness to everyone here. And you know it is, Gwendolyn. You know it’s a dump.”

“Geez, Wilbur—”

“You saw it, Goerge, didn’t you see it? Wasn’t you up there with me on of all the goddam times, on goddam Sunday night, right when the goddam God-boys was out there makin’ their goddam fuckin’ music in the street. Wasn’t they singin’ away, “At the Cross, At the Cross,” or some bullshit like that, and where was fuckin’ Gwendolyn? Wasn’t she layin’ on the goddam floor?

“Geez, Wilbur, why you bein’ so hard?”

“Why’m I bein’ so hard? Why’m I bein’ so hard? Why’m I bein’ so hard? Billy, you hillbilly asshole, you got to be kiddin’!”

“Don’t say things like that to Billy,” Gwendolyn broke in. “Holy Cow, Wilbur, why don’t you lighten up?”

She got up suddenly and went with long, gangly strides to the water cooler: Undaunted, Wilbur Krenton continued his diatribe in a high shrill voice, addressing his comments to his two hillbilly friends, who looked on with dumb attentive faces.

“Lighten up, she says. Lighten up, says Gwendolyn. Now who is goddam Gwendolyn to talk about light? You be witness to it, Billy. Wasn’t all the light bulbs out? Don’t anyone tell me all the light bulbs wasn’t out cuz just for the nuts of it, I was countin’ how many was out. Billy, wasn’t

the hall as dark as sin? Wasn't the lamp in the kitchen all broke up? Wasn't it layin' on the floor?"

By this time, Gwendolyn had returned with a glass of water. She lit up another cigarette and looked nonchalantly out the window. Krenton turned his attention to her.

"And ain't the light out by your bed, Gwendolyn? Ain't there no light in the frig?"

"There ain't no goddam food in it neither," she said, "cuz you ate it all up."

"How many light bulbs is that anyhow? How many goddam light bulbs is that, Goerge? You be the counter. Let's see, there's the one in the hall..."

"For God's sake, Wilbur," she suddenly cried. "Will you shut your goddam little mouth!"

He went through all the light bulbs again.

"That's six light bulbs, Gwendolyn. Six light bulbs out in that little stinking hole. And everywhere you look, there's a goddam shoe-job with his goddam black dong hanging out."

"Holy Cow, Wilbur, will you just lighten up?"

She skunked back in her chair and shrugged her gaunt-shoulders like a plucked chicken while she lit another cigarette. She looked at him wearily with bloodshot eyes. Her upper cheeks were covered with pimples.

"Six goddam light bulbs," Krenton said. "So where is the seventh light bulb then? Where is the goddam light bulb number seven?"

She shook her head in exasperation.

"So now are you finished?" she asked.

He lit a cigarette.

"Just tell me this, Gwendolyn, ain't it true that I been good to you?"

"You been all right," she replied.

"Just tell me this, was I beatin' on you? Was I beatin' on you?"

"Sure you was beatin'..."

"Was I usin' my karate, Gwendolyn? Was I usin' my karate?"

"No, you wasn't using your goddam karate."

“All I want to know, Gwendolyn, is are you gonna give me that eight dollars.”

Now he was talking in a lower voice. “Are you gonna give me that eight dollars for some food and the bus. Cuz it’s just like I told ya, Gwendolyn, I start work at the car parts factory tomorrow, and it’s way out in the Mission, I got to take the bus. Then Friday I’ll be getting a check. You hear that, Gwendolyn? On Friday I’m gonna get me a check and we can go to the bank. Now all ;I want to know once and for all and for final is are you gonna give me eight dollars question mark period. Billy can witness...”

“For the Pete’s sake, Wilbur! Will you shut your goddam mouth?”

“Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful,” the crazy man at the end of the counter kept saying. Wilbur Krenton went on in his high-pitched voice, while the two men from the hills nodded obsequiously and Gwendolyn looked toward him with her dull white face and bloodshot eyes.

3

Later that evening, Wilbur Krenton was walking up Eddy Street toward the Colonial Hotel. He had put his blue jean jacket on, and he had the collar up because the fog had drifted lower and the wind was coming off the ocean. Scraps of paper somersaulted up the deserted pavement with a hollow rattle. It was 4 A.M. There were cardboard boxes stacked up for the trash man in front of every store. In fact, the trash man was already coming. The truck was whining from somewhere up on the side of Nob Hill.

“Fucking lightbulbs,” Wilbur muttered, looking off toward the south, where there was a ragged silhouette of three-story buildings. The-sky behind them was orange and purplish-red from the glow of the welding torches at the Third Street dry docks. Wilbur looked suspiciously to both sides, and then leaning toward a building for concealment, he carefully withdrew his hand from his hip pocket and fanned out four bills: a fin and three one’s.

“Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful,” the crazy man from Ming’s Restaurant walked by. He looked like an old, wasted-

out hippy. He had long gray hair and a gray beard and he never wore shoes. He pushed his things around in a grocery cart. He always wore an Army field-coat. He was some kind of veteran of the Korean War. "Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful," he said.

"Up your ass, grandpa, up yer shitty ass!" Wilbur said as he glowered past, pushing the shopping cart out of his way. It got away from the crazy man and toppled over in the gutter. Krenton laughed. "Go fuckin' be crazy with somebody else!"

As Wilbur started to cross Leavenworth, he was almost hit by a Mercedes Benz that was taking its free right from O'Farrell. He stepped deftly aside, swooped his jacket at the windshield, kicked the side door, and spit on the window all in one spasmic motion.

His room was on the third floor. There was no elevator. On the way upstairs, he discovered a roach. He managed to smack just the back half of it. It was all smashed into the floor but the roach's front legs and long antennae were swaying back and forth. He took a piece of paper from the wastebasket and folded it over so he could scoop up the roach. Then he set the paper on the burner of his hot plate and watched until the flames curled the edge of the paper and in a diminishing circle of fire closed in on the roach.

When he got upstairs Wilbur laid on the bed and played with his cock for a little while. He went over to the closet and pulled out a girlie magazine. It was the kind he liked with pictures of asses. He liked to look at rear ends and assholes. He couldn't come so he just gave up the whole business, lit up a cigarette, and looked out the window. There was an all-night cafe across the street, "Courtesy Cafe and Coffee Shop". There was a bunch of spades standing around on the corner; one blond pro with hot pants and a fat ass was motioning with her anatomy to a passing car. He wound up his alarm clock and went to sleep.

The only thing Krenton did wrong was to put the bed table in the wrong place; he jumped up so hard when he heard the alarm that he whopped his eye on the corner of the table. So he had a black eye when he went out. Aside from

that he felt like he was ready for the day.

Every one was going to work. The streets were full of people. He felt like a new man. The fog was gone, but there was still a brisk wind. He buttoned up his coat and bent into the wind with a grimace.

A slight drizzle was coming down. He put up his collar. On Hyde Street at the Lafayette Hotel, he looked in the window and noticed that a whole bunch of men were sitting by the counter. There was one empty seat in the middle. He went in, and sat down. A big spade next to him was eating a huge stack of hotcakes with gobs of butter all over it. He was pouring out syrup like it was milk. Krenton looked at the pancakes and then ordered coffee. The waitress was Chinese. He sipped his coffee slowly, now and then watching the waitress go through various changes in posture, then he leaned over to look at the Spade's newspaper. There was some headline about the death of a Coptic bishop in lower Egypt on the Nile. There was an accompanying photograph of a bearded man with a black miter that had a gold star on the front of it. On the bishop's right hand there, was an ascetic-looking young man with hollow cheeks and dreamy eyes. He was holding a white scroll.

The car parts factory turned out to be a two-story brick building with an attached area where stacks of rusted car parts were piled up in various bins according to kind under high roofs of corrugated aluminum supported by naked I-beams of red steel. The roof kept out the rain but the wind came through. Wilbur pounded on the office door. A pretty young brunette with green eyes smiled and came out, closing the door behind her. Inside the office a fat man with a cigar was sitting by a desk, talking on the phone. The brunette was wearing a black dress with a low-cut neckline. When she leaned over to show him where his timecard was, he, could see inside her dress. She was wearing a black bra. She had little cone-shaped breasts.

His job consisted in lifting up parts with a hook, then moving the hooked part along a conveyor until it hovered over a vat of hot water. He dipped each part into three consecutive tanks, which were arranged one after another

along the line of the conveyor belt. The entire path of each part was about 115 feet.

When the little cunt was walking away, he kept his eye on her ass. He tried to imagine how she would look with her ass up in the air and wiggling around in front of his nose. He had a pretty good idea how she would fuck. He could imagine her on his lap and himself with his finger up her slit. He could imagine how he would fuck her. He would pull off her panties and ram it up there fast. He could just imagine himself screwing her little ass in the ground.

He watched the door close and then hooked up a carburetor and moved it slowly along the belt to the first tank. Once the part was on the hook, it was moved along by means of a rope attached to the hook. Each time he got to the end of the run, a meter next to him clicked up another number. When he first looked at it, the meter said "11002"; when the lunch bell rang, it said "11034". He looked at it for a moment with satisfaction. Then he went out in the yard to sit on pile of gas tanks and eat his lunch. The little broad came out and smiled at him. He kind of raised up his head and just gave a little Humphrey Bogart nod. She waved. He looked off toward the street. A bunch of spic kids were standing on the corner. They hooted at the cunt when she walked by.

Pretty soon the fat man came out. He had clammy white skin. He was wearing wrinkled gray pants that looked like a tent and a white shirt that was stained with yellow and open at the collar. He was wearing a solid blue tie. There were drop of sweat on his upper lip and in the wrinkles of fat on his neck and arms.

"So how was your morning, son?" he asked, wiping the perspiration from his face. He took out a pack of cigarettes.

"Not good and not bad."

"Boy, you got it just right there. Isn't that the way it always is on the first day? I agree with you on that... What's wrong with your eye, boy?"

Wilbur nodded. "I been in a fight," he mumbled. A blue newspaper truck slid to a stop at the corner and lurched off to the left. The driver waved at the fat man; the fat man nodded

his head. The fat man took out a cigarette and offered one to Wilbur. He took one and the fat man gave him a light. They stood in silence for a little while until the cigarettes were all smoked up.

"I suppose you noticed the productivity meter," said the fat man, sitting down next to Wilbur on a gas tank.

"I noticed that little deal with the numbers on it, if that's what you mean."

The fat man took out another cigarette and lit up one and handed it to Wilbur.

"What I was going to tell you is that your ratio is off., but of course you're a new man."

"My ratio is off in what manner?"

The fat man gestured toward the three steaming pots of water with his cigarette.

"We call it "real time". According to "real time", you only worked two hours this morning, because "real time" is 15 per hour, and you only did 32."

"But wasn't I here since 8 A.M.? Didn't I punch in on the clock at 8 A. M?"

"No, because the time clock is set on real time."

The next morning, Krenton didn't stop to eat at the Lafayette Hotel. He went hurriedly by and glanced in the window just long enough to get a quick look at the waitress's ass and notice that the same spade was chowing down on hotcakes. He was packing gobs of butter on it. The waitress was bringing him another bottle of maple syrup.

"He eatin' him them pancakes," Wilbur mumbled. He was locking down Hyde Street toward Market where a green street car was passing through a stream of work-bound pedestrians. All the flags were flying in the Civic Center Mall.

Krenton was on the job by 7:45 A .M. By noon he had racked up 46 parts. That was three hours real work. Instead of going out to the yard for lunch, he decided to go back in the dark best part of the shelter where the brick wall on the side of the factory met a high cement wall that divided the parts warehouse from the alley. There were piles of rusted mufflers stacked along the wall. He sat down on an oil

barrel. It was quiet in this dark corner and he felt alone. He lit a cigarette.

4

After a while, Krenton noticed that the little brunette was watching him from behind a pile of tires. When she saw him notice her, she smiled impishly like a naughty child caught in a prank. She shrugged her shoulders and approached him smiling with her arms folded so they cradled her breasts.

“Sometimes during lunch I have no where to no.”

“Oh yea? So, you have no where to go? So don’t you get hungry? So why don’t you go to a cafe or something like that?” said Wilbur. He shook his head from side to side. He was standing with his hands in his back pockets. He lit up a cigarette and looked off toward the street. There was a hotel on the corner, and one block beyond its green canopy, a trolley was passing by.

She shrugged her shoulders again. For a moment, she looked directly at him. He was quite taken by her green eyes. They weren’t exactly green, but something more brilliant. They were flecked with blue and yellow.

“Yes, I do get hungry but the canteen is three blocks away and you know me... but you don’t really know me, do you? I get... I guess you would call it ‘impatient’... you know what I mean? I’m ready to go. I always feel so wound up. My mother used to say it was just my disposition. But what is ‘disposition’? I have to say I really don’t know. I just know I get lonely... ooh, did someone hit your eye?”

Krenton nodded; “You know how it is, babe, I been in a fight.” He took a long puff.”Yea, I know what you mean, doll. Sometimes I get feelin’ the same way. You and me, we got a lot in common. I can see that right off the bat.”

He puffed a little more on his cigarette.

“Yea, I can see that right off the bat,” he repeated.

She smiled impishly.

“You seem to know where you’re going.”

“Kind of basically, I do. I figure I’ll stay here in “parts” for a while, and then try for management.”

She came closer to him. She was wearing some kind of perfume. It reminded him of Candy. Candy was a girl he had known in high school who was always looking for a fuck.

“Oh, and you would be a good manager,” she said. “Your glasses are so thick. They make you look smart, like you’re always reading.”

“Yea, well, that’s true. I read quite a bit. I got a bunch of magazines in my estate. I live at this place called the “Colonial Estates.”

A silence intervened.

“So you like working here?” asked Wilbur Krenton.

“Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don’t.”

“Boy, you got it just right there. Isn’t that how it always is? I agree with you on that. I feel the same way myself.”

They stood in silence for a while. Another trolley car passed on Mission Street.

“My neck’s been sore,” she said. “It’s from reading all them papers for the fat man.

“Where, right here by the backbone?” He felt where her neck hit her shoulders. The flesh on her neck was moist from perspiration. There were droplets of sweat standing out on her neck and some tiny hairs were standing up straight.

“No, lower in the middle more.”

She wiggled her shoulders, expanded her chest, and stuck out her rear end. He looked toward the street. The newspaper truck came by again. He saw the fat man nodding from the office; Then he looked back toward the little cunt. She was wearing a red sweat shirt and blue jeans that were tight at the crutch. After a while, he moved his hands around to the front and rubbed the outside of her bra. She made no attempt to push back his hands. She was very quiet. He did this for a while and then shoved his hand inside her bra. The nipple stood up as stiff as a piece of rubber. He ran his fingers lightly over the tip of her tits. Then she abruptly pushed down his hands, sighed, and sidled away.

“I didn’t plan for that, but now that you’ve done it, you’ve done it.”

“Yea, I guess I have,” Krenton said. He smiled foolishly at her. “I just got carried away.”

She backed off and turned towards the office, first walking, and then she broke into a little run. He watched her ass bounce up and down while she was running toward the office.

That afternoon, he discovered that if he pulled the hooker arm way toward the back of the belt and then jerked it suddenly forward as far as it would go, it registered one number on the productivity meter. He ran off thirty numbers, and then went over to lay on a pile of tires.

The fat man came out.

“We got no use for you, lazy man. You can go.”

“Whatta ya mean I can go? I just racked up thirty numbers.”

Oh, sure, nice numbers you racked up, without going nowhere,” the fat man said. “I was watchin you on our little TV.”

Wilbur got up and leaned towards him.

“So just what was you watchin’? Just what was you watchin’ anyhow on yer little TV?”

“I was watching everything,” said the fat man. He started to take out a pack of cigarettes.

Wilbur Krenton hauled off and popped the fat man in the nose. The fat man fell back into a pile of tires, which toppled over on top of him, so only his wriggling feet could be seen. Krenton went over to get some hot water to pour on the fat man but it was too hot to carry. He went huffing off, throwing the bird to the cunt as he came by.

On Mission Street, he looked for a cab. He had seven dollars in his pocket. All of a sudden, he discovered that the crazy man from Ming’s Restaurant was sitting across the street. His cart was in the gutter again. The crazy man was sitting with his face in his hands,, as though in some catatonic state. Krenton rushed across the street foaming with anger.

“Oh, for the cripe sake, get up off your ass, you crazy old man, you crazy old moron! I just gave you a shove! Goddamit, get up! How’d you like me to give you a swift kick in the ass? How would you like that, you crazy old moron? Get up, you lunatic, get up, get up! Nothin’ wrong

with bein' crazy, you stupid imbecile. Will you just get up? Here comes a kick!!"

The crazy man jumped up, rubbing his rear end. He went mumbling off, pushing his cart. "Beautiful, beautiful. Just tell me this. If you're so goddam beautiful, how come your asshole's so big?"

Krenton hardly paid attention. He spied an orange cab coming in his direction. The driver was a Chink.

5

Wilbur Krenton was surprised to see that this Chink driver was the same one who had given a ride to his mother and himself. They turned left unto Folsom Street and down Folsom toward downtown. All the fags were standing around on the corner by Hamburger Mary's. There was loud music coming from Cissy's Bar. A couple fruits were crossing the street from the Stud to Cissy's. The Chinaman aimed the cab at them; they hopped out of the way.

"Skew fuck-inn fluit-cake. Make him jump good!"

Krenton laughed. He was leaning forward in the back seat and looking out across the meter and over the charging orange hood of the taxi. The Chink was driving with his melon-shaped head almost pressed against the windshield again. The red lights were popping to green right on the button. They were going down like ducks in a carnival shooting range. Bing-bing-bing. Above the dark buildings, the skies were orange and purplish-red from the dry docks again. Now and then, something glowed yellow. The cab slid to a stop on the red light at 7th Street, then lurched up 7th toward the downtown skyline. All the lights in the buildings were lit but the tops of the tallest buildings were hidden in fog. A light rain was falling.

"Tonight China-town too many people," the driver said. "Too many people Fishman Woof. Fluck-inn too-wist. Walk-walk China-town. Walk-walk Fishman Woof."

"Yea, fuck the goddam tourists," Krenton said.

They finally hit a red light at Leavenworth and Golden Gate by the YMCA. The Chnk swiveled his round head around on his neck like an owl so that his yellow face was

looking directly at Wilbur Krenton. His wide mouth widened even more into a grimacing smile. His eyes were so squinted that they were almost shut.

“You German?” he asked.

“Me German? I guess you could call me a German. My goddam father was a Kraut. So what’s it to you, you nosy Slant Eye?

The round yellow face tilted to one side for a moment, still fixed in a smile, then rotated all the way back and tilted to the other side like a ship listing at sea.

“Me hate German,” he said.

“Oh yea? So I’m not even sure I’m a German. Come to think of it, my father was a Swede. Yea, that’s what he was. He was a goddam Swede.”

The Chink tilted to the other side again, still smiling. In back of him, in front of the cab, the semaphore turned from red to green. He started moving the car forward as if he had eyes on the back of his head.

“Me hate German,” he repeated. The head swiveled back.

Pretty soon they pulled up at Momma Ming’s Restaurant. Krenton signaled the driver to stop. \The meter said “1.70.” Krenton waited for •his thirty cents change.

The Chink watched him when he pulled out his fin and two one’s. Then Krenton stood on the corner and watched the orange cab disappear in the fog.

He passed quickly kiddy corner across Eddy Street to the Star Cafe and then up to Gwendolyn’s place in the Astoria Hotel. There was no elevator. He had to walkup the back stairs which were cluttered with scraps of papers and discarded tin cans.

Three flights up and down a half-lighted hallway. She lived way in the corner the alley on the far side of two empty rooms.

Looking down toward the end of the hall, he could see that the light bulb was still out. He shook his head in disgust. “Six fuckin’ light bulbs. Six fuckin’ light bulbs,” he muttered to himself. So where is the goddam light bulb number seven?”

When he got to the end of the hall, he could see that the door was slightly ajar, and hear sighs and grunting coming from the room, plus a loud slurping sound. He could smell that she was fucking. He kicked the door open, jumped into a karate position, and screamed, "Gwendolyn, you slut! You goddam fuckin' slut!"

She looked up with a start. He could just barely make out her dull white face in the orange light that was coming in from the dry docks. She raised a skinny hand to her mouth. There was a big spade slurping away in her crotch like a pig in a trough. It was the spade who was always eating pancakes at the Lafayette Hotel.

The nigger jumped up and came menacingly toward him. He jumped back and rushed down the hall.

"Fuckin shoe-job!" he cried. He stopped for a second to throw him the bird. "Fuckin' Gwendolyn! She ain't nothin' but a slut!"

Outside, in the middle of the deserted street, the God-boys were playing up a storm. There were two of them with trumpets, one with a trombone, and a tall, thin woman who was singing at a microphone with her hands clasped together in front of her, and her eyes turned heavenward. The man in the stocking cap was there, the same one that had been pounding on the newspaper box with his fists. He was playing the drum.

The thin woman was dressed in a red coat that reached all the way to the street. As she sang, she rocked back and forth like a pendulum. "At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light, and a vision of my life was revealed." Her shrill voice rose in the fog-gray air. To this the man in the stocking cap chorused in a monotone, "was revealed, was revealed," accompanying each syllable with a thump on the drum.

The crazy men from Ming's Restaurant came by. "Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful."

So go ahead and tell me that you're so goddam beautiful." The trash man was coming, too. The truck was whining from somewhere up on the side of Nob Hill.

Wilbur Krenton took one look at this scene and threw

them all the bird. “So you can all get fucked! Ya hear. what I’m sayin’? Y’ can shove your tuba’s up yer goddam holy ass!”

Then he wheeled around and looked toward the Astoria Hotel where the green neon sign that said “Astoria” was glowing intensely against the orange and purple sky

“And you too, Gwendolyn, ya hear me? You can get fucked, ya hear me, Gwendolyn? Cuz yer nothin’ but a sleazy, stinkin’ cunt!”

6

Krenton walked up to Van Ness Avenue with his collar up against the rain, and stood on the corner looking down the deserted street toward the dome of City Hall, illumined with yellow lights but half-hidden in swirling fog.

Looking up in the other direction, Krenton could see the blinking yellow lights on the trash truck. The truck turned for a moment unto Van Ness by a stop-light that was blinking red, then it vanished in the fog. When the truck was gone, the stop-light kept blinking. Each time it came on, the buildings by the stop light were tinted with red. The sky above the city was still orange and purple. Far away, Krenton heard the sirens of fire trucks. They rose in the silent air with a hysterical insistency. Sirens shrieked from several different parts of the city. Then it was quiet again. The red light was still blinking.

Looking behind him, Krenton noticed that someone was standing in the shadows waiting for the bus. It was one of the spic kids who had been hooting at the cunt that worked at the car parts factory. The spic was holding a Bible. He was a little wiry guy with shiny black hair and smiling eyes. Krenton could only see one side of his face. Some light was coming down from an arc light on that side.

After, a while, the spic decided to be friendly.

“Me berry happy,” he said.

“That’s good,” said Krenton. “I like happy spics.”

“You know why me berry happy be?”

Krenton looked the other way. When he looked back, the spic began to gesture energetically in order to explain his

question. "You," he said, jabbing his finger toward Krenton. "Know": he put one thin brown hand to his brow.

When he was all done gesturing, he repeated: "You know why be merry happy me?"

Krenton threw him the bird.

"I don't know nothin' about berry this, berry that, berry up yer spic brown ass. So get fucked. You hear me? Get fucked."

He walked up Van Ness toward Nob Hill. He had gotten as far as Pine Street when he noticed an orange-colored vehicle was following in his wake. He took a glance back and saw it was the Chink. He pretended not to notice. He kept walking up the street. The fog was so low now it was swirling up the street. A steady rain was falling.

Krenton walked two more blocks in this way, with his head bent down against the rain, which was coming down harder now, and with the orange cab in his wake like some kind of official escort.

Finally a familiar voice came from the car:

"Where you go, German?"

Krenton kept walking. He could hardly see in the rain. A stream of water was trickling along in the gutter.

"I ain't goin' nowhere, you half-assed Chink."

He shot an angry glance back toward the orange cab. The Chinaman still had both hands on the wheel but somehow he had managed to twist his head all the way over to the passenger window. His round face was floating like a yellow balloon on the side of the car. He was grinning from ear to ear like the Cheshire cat, and his eyes were squinted up into tiny slits.

1

"What mean "slaf-ass?"

"It don't moan nothin', lemon-head. It's just a fuckin' word."

What your name, German?"

"My name is Wilbur Krenton. So what's it to you, pot-head?"

"Wabbow Kanton," said the Chink. "Wabbow Kenton."

They kept moving up the street. The trickle of water in the gutter was larger now. A red light was blinking off and

on. Each time it came on, the semaphore clicked.

Mister German Wabbow Kenton.”

“I already told you I ain’t no goddam German. I already, told you that my fuckin’ father was a goddam Swede.”

The orange cab was now right beside Krenton. The Chink’s smiling face rocked from side to side.

“German like girlie?” he asked.

“What kind of girlie? Now I suppose your gonna tell me that you’re a pimp.”

“Nice China-town girlie. Can fuck, can suck.”

“Oh yea? Sure, sure. For how much? For fifty bucks?”

“Five buck. Can fuck, can suck. Fat ass, big boob.”

“Oh yea? Sure, sure. For how long? For fifteen seconds?”

“Two hour, German. Can fuck, can suck. Long leg, fat ass, big boob. German like?”

“Y’ gotta be kiddin’. Y’ gotta be kiddin’. You handin’ me some kind of a line?”

“Five.buck,” repeated the Chink. He held up an extended hand to signify “five”.

“Two hour.” He held up two fingers and pointed to the back of the cab.

“Y’ gotta be kiddin’. Y’ gotta be kidding” said Krenton.

He opened up the back door and got in.

7

The rain was pouring down so hard now that Krenton could hardly see out of the side window. He leaned forward and looked ahead over the charging orange hood. The Chink was driving intently with both hands on the wheel and his forehead smack dab against the windshield. The windshield wipers were creaking back and forth. They turned right unto Broadway and roared through the Broadway tunnel. On the far side of the tunnel, Krenton could see some of the neon lights on the Strip shrouded in the pouring rain.

Neon lights or not, the Strip was deserted. One undaunted barker was standing out in the rain. He saw the approaching cab and rushed towards it to make his bid. “See. it here in the flesh. See it here in the flesh! See it here in the

flesh!" His voice rose and then faded off behind them. The orange cab screeched right unto Stockton Street. Then they turned left at Washington and popped down into Chinatown.

Brightly-painted Chinese characters floated above the dark shops in the rain. The Chink pulled to a stop at a white apartment building across from Portsmouth Square. Some old Chinese women in rain coats were standing under a street lamp doing Tai-Chi. The trash man was coming down Washington. The yellow lights on the truck were going round and round. The semaphore on Grant Street clicked. The corner had been green; now it was bathed in hazy red. A great stream of water like a small river was rushing down the hill. The Chinese women were making gathering gestures with their hands.

The Chink opened his door and began getting out of the cab. He moved his leg slowly and winced.

"War Two me bang-bang shoot German. Me got wooden leg."

Krenton was already outside the cab. He saw the crazy man go by on Grant Street. His Army coat was sopped with rain, and his grocery cart made a loud creaking sound.

"Oh yea. Y' mean yer leg ain't real?"

He leaned over to feel it. The Chinaman stopped him with his hand.

"German fluit?"

Krenton sneered.

"I ain't no fuckin' faggot. Gimme a break."

"Bang-bang army shoot Gorman. Him bang-bang shoot Chinaman leg. Cut him off. Chinaman sad.... House up slair," he said pointing. "Kanton help, bing-bing open Chinaman gate."

There was an iron gate in front of the door. The Chink unlocked the gate. Krenton swung it out. It made a long creaking sound. The Chink went through. On the other side of the door, a long narrow stairway went straight up to the second floor. The Chink began slowly, ever so slowly ascending the stairs. The hallway was dark.

"How many light bulbs," Krenton muttered, following the limping figure upward. Now it was silhouetted against

the light on the top of the stairs. The walls by the steps were painted a dull white. Upstairs the hallway was painted the same dull white. There was a long narrow hallway, bordered on one side by a blank wall and on the other side by a row of plain doors, each with a white number on it, and all of them painted firehouse red. The Chinaman's room was at the very end of the hall. On it was a large number "7".

When at last they got to the end of the hall, Krenton followed the Chink in. There were only two rooms. The first one was apparently not used very often. There was a card table in the middle piled high with boxes. In the next room were several loose kitchen chairs which had no table to go with them. There were empty boxes on some of the chairs, and a glass cannister filled with moldy potato chips. On the far wall was a couch made into a bed. There were a couple covers on it and one battered pillow. The Chink sat down on the couch and picked up a phone.

"Me call girlie." He tilted his yellow face sideways and blinked one beady eye.

Krenton stood with his hands in his hip pockets, looking out the window toward Washington Street. Now the trash man was right below the building. The yellow light was going around, flashing against the brick walls of the buildings across the street. Krenton could see the huddled figures of the Chinese women going through their Tai Chi positions under the street lamp. The rain was still pouring down.

He looked around the room. There was just one light bulb in the room, a bare one that hung from a cord in the exact middle of the ceiling. On the far side of the room, across from the couch, was a display of pictures that had been cut from a magazine and taped on the wall in an upside-down "V". A picture of a battered American flag was at the apex. It was pock-marked with bullet-holes. To either side of it were picture of Jesus and Mary. Further down were pictures of two Zen Chinese paintings of waterfalls and birds.

Krenton went over to look at the display. "Hey, there's Old Glory," he said, laughing. He was in a great mood. He

was starting to think about what a great lay he was going to get off the Chinese cunt. He could just imagine how he would fuck her little ass. He'd ram his cock up in there hard and stick his finger up her ass.

"German got five buck?" The Chink asked. "Girlie in the hall."

Krenton pulled out the fin and flourished it over his head. "Sure, sure. Here's the fuckin' fin. Good-bye and good riddance." He gave it a kiss.

The Chinaman smiled.

"Hey, by the way, how about givin' me a look at yer wooden leg?" Krenton said. The Chinaman loaned over and pulled up his pants leg. There was a big scar on the leg, a hideous scar, but the leg was flesh-and-blood. It was real.

"Leg not wood. Bang-bang bullet go here. Chinaman cry."

"And here ya was makin' such a big deal about yer wooden leg!"

Tho Chink laughed, a little chuckling laugh. He settled back in the couch. "Sar-root frag, German," he said.

Krenton looked at the picture of the tattered flag and leaned way back, laughing, in an exaggerated salute. "Oh, say can you see," he intoned.

When he looked back, he saw that the Chink had a gun, and that the gun was pointed at his head.

"Hey, what is this?" he laughed.

Just then a shot rang out and the smiling face of the Chink began moving around in a circle. The next thing Krenton knew, he was lying on the floor, staring at the light bulb which glowed intensely yellow, while the face of the Chinaman swirled around it like a top. For just a second he saw this, and then the bulb went out.

Attentiveness is the greatest prayer.

Justin the Giant

1

Justin Girard was a true giant, in the medical sense, having been afflicted with the condition called gigantism from a young age. People having this condition often reach a height exceeding eight feet, as did Justin by age 21.

Justin first became aware of his condition at age 13. A growth spurt at that age brought him to a height a full head taller than any of his peers.

Before bringing his son to the specialist he had heard about, however, the boy's father, Jacques Girard, went to see the specialist himself to assess his son's condition, whatever it was, and determine how best to inform Justin about it. Justin, at this time, had apprehensions about his rapid growth, it was clear, though he had not been formally informed of his condition.

The year was 1888. It was an era in France that, after the upheaval of the Revolution and the later Napoleonic reforms, had ushered in an age that many hoped would be dedicated to literary expression and the arts. The Catholic Church had summoned its cardinals and other notable clerics to Rome to discuss and respond to the growing secularism of modern people. The prior decades had brimmed with new ideas. Charles Darwin had published *Origin of Species*, challenging the individual creation, by God, of all creatures. Karl Marx had published *Das Kapital*, attacking the privileged structure of bourgeois society. Frederich Nietzsche had published *Beyond Good and Evil*, questioning the very foundation of human morals. It was a contentious time.

"Doctor, is there any way to slow the growth, or predict it?" Jacques Girard asked as he sat hunched into his habitual humble posture with his unruly, poorly cut hair, dark brown in color, jutting out from each side of his bald head, and his beard of the same color, also jaggedly cut, rounding out his visage below. As he talked, he clasped together his strong-looking and yet elegant hands which were a core part of his identity. Jacques was a worker with his hands, a maker of stained glass windows.

Jacques was old for having a child of 13. He was in his mid-60's with a face marked with the anguish of his artistic doubts and struggles. He had large and luminous gray eyes brimming with intelligence and sympathetic regard.

"No way I know of," the doctor answered, "though this case is intriguing. We need to examine it closely so that we can affect the process if possible."

In contrast to his guest, the doctor was meticulously neat from his carefully combed blond hair to his crisp white shirt and blue tie, and he said "intriguing" in a way that suggested true interest. His name Jean Saban was well-known in medical circles, and this case portended well, he thought, for a published study.

"I want to understand it as best I can, also," Jacques said, "I want to present it to my son so he can, also. I know he will have many questions."

"And do you think he is capable of understanding?" the doctor said. The same tumor that caused the growth hormone in giants to be produced in excess, the doctor was aware, had in most known cases slowed mental growth.

"Oh, yes! He is an intelligent child! That is his most striking characteristic, even more than his size."

"Well, Monsieur Girard, bring him with you next time you come, and I will answer his questions."

Jacques did return, and he and his son sat side by side, making it easy for the doctor to observe the father and son resemblance and interaction. Jacques was hunched again in a pose that made him seem in the midst of bowing, and his son sat in this same pose, peering out with gray eyes much like his father's.

Dr. Saban observed that Justin had the expected physical features of gigantism: overhanging brow, largeness of waist and hands, and spreading out of front teeth with gaps between them in the visible gums.

"There is a great deal happening to you," the doctor said to Justin. "How do you feel about these changes?"

"Well, it is just the idea of being a 'monstrosity'," the boy answered.

The doctor, who was expecting a simple reply, was

impressed by this remark.

"And where do you get this idea of monstrosity?"

"From Darwin."

"You've been reading Darwin?"

"Just a piece in French."

"Doctor, Justin is always reading books," the father interjected, "and he has a way of taking a particular word and turning it over in his mind. It is one of the chief things about him."

"And is monstrosity one of these words?"

"Oh, yes," the father responded.

"Why this word, Justin?" the doctor asked.

"Just the thought of being out of place," the boy replied.

"I don't want to be." And he went on that, as he understood his reading, there was an elaborate natural design that he would be outside of.

By the time the interview had completed, Dr. Saban had formed the conclusion that the boy was an amazing case in that he seemed adversely affected by the disease in all the expected ways of physical appearance while in his intellectual faculties he had seemingly been affected in a positive manner. Then there was his obsession of repeating words, which made the boy seem in need of psychological assistance, but the doctor had already formed the opinion that this father and son would reject such an intrusion into their intense and private bond.

"Well, it is a terrible thing, I know," Jacques said as he and Justin walked from the doctor's office that day. "But it is not a death penalty, Justin. It has not affected your mind, and perhaps never will, I trust, because I have prayed and prayed to God! I trust in God, Justin, I must say, though I know you sometimes have your doubts in your earnest searching. As do I also, I admit, but in the final analysis I trust in God, and so I think God will allow you to remain clear-minded for your other tasks."

Here, immediately, in the configuration this man and boy displayed, as they walked down the road, their unusual closeness was obvious to any intelligent observer. Both were dressed in khaki pants and loosely-fitting work shirts secured

with wide leather belts, like fish mongers in the town square. Their heads,—in shape, as viewed from behind,—looked much like one another, distinguished by their manes of unruly, jaggedly cut hair (though Jacques was bald on top, as earlier described). Their movement was clumsy as they tromped in leather boots, swaying from side to side; and most of the time their heads were inclined towards one another as they exchanged energetic remarks and gestured back and forth. Now and then one of them or both together would gesture with palms upward as though to say, “Well, that is a puzzle! How could anyone know?”

“What tasks?” The boy asked, never losing the thread of his father’s remarks.

“The tasks of your life, your vocation.”

”I just know, Father, that up to now I have been a grand person, at least in my own imagination. But now my life is set out for me! I will be a monstrosity!”

There was that word again. In the doctor’s office, the father’s face had been unchanging and focused on every word the doctor had said. Now the face with its shining eyes came to life with the new challenge Jacques foresaw of how could he protect his vulnerable son in his predicted transformation into giantness.

It was late afternoon when the Girard’s saw the gravel road to their village curving down into a valley where were a roofless bridge spanning the river and a cluster of buildings situated around a church of medieval design. Drawing closer, they could see the red tile roof of the cottage in which they lived, which was so near the church, and of such similar stone construction, that it appeared to be on the church grounds. The church was constructed of immense blocks of granite with central belltower jutting about a third of its height above the highest point of the roof.

On the east side of the church the road led between other stone buildings to the Girard’s own cottage. It was unique in that it was on the side of the hill adjacent to the church with one of its two enclosures higher on the hill than the other, which had been added on later, and yet the roofs of both were at the same level. As might have been expected,

therefore, when the Girard's entered their cottage, they stepped into a split-level space with the upper area reached by an open stairway. The floor of this upper area, where father and son slept in separate beds separated by a curtain hung from the ceiling, was about six feet higher than the lower area, where were a fireplace hearth with a kettle on a hook and other fixtures used for cooking.

From here, the view out the western windows was of the side wall of the church, where were stained glass windows of immense interest to Jacques. Though he not made these windows himself, he had emulated them as examples of the "anonymous and communal" artistic ethic that he subscribed to, and by virtue of which he respected all art sincerely done. The town library, likewise a stone building, was also in view. The total scene could have been that of a medieval college, and such was the desire of this father and his son, because they were scholars that sought learning in the old way, out of a true desire for understanding. This, since the birth of the boy, had animated the great bond between them.

2

Jacques and Justin Girard,—the ever-watchful, tender-hearted father and his inquisitive, wide-eyed son,—lived in their own little world, a world that, as it appeared in their shared understanding, would have been impossible to re-create at any other time.

There was, first of all, the old church at the center of the town, an edifice that at no other moment in history, as seen through this mutual lens, could have been at once so full of meaning and so obsolete.

The roads of the town still radiated out from the old church, the artist and his son were aware, following still the medieval design, but traffic and interest no longer headed so certainly back to the church as in that bygone era. Along the wall of the church, visible from the spired windows of the Girard's cozy home, the hut-like stone cells that had once housed the anchorites looked as austere as in those medieval times, but no saints peered anymore from the slits through which those renunciates had received their frugal meals.

More than many of those who lived around them,—more even than the priests and nuns, and other artisans like Jacques aligned with the church,—the Girard's knew these facts because they were lovers of church history, and, ironically, lovers, also, of the brave, new ideas by which that history had been re-cast in a modern light.

Early in his boyhood, Justin had become aware of the irrelevance of the church through observing how devoutly his father had produced the window images that once might have inspired many with religious meaning, but which were now regarded as mere designs. He had noted also how his father had persisted in reading everything that refuted his religious views, while asserting to his son that nonetheless he “believed,” (as his father explained himself in his humble manner, never assuming his ideas had value beyond the place they occupied in his private searching).

The son, also, by temperament and disposition, was inclined to ponder and remark on matters of this kind, and Jacques had listened to his son's remarks and had given them great importance, inclined as he was to see signs and harbingers everywhere and to regard the boy as destined for greatness.

Such has been the case, as the old artist has perceived it, from the birth of the boy and even before. That was another part of their story, father and son. How it had happened,—that he had even had a son, after years of being single,—Jacques often wondered, looking back. He had been already 50 years old, and, with his bald pate on top his crazy hair, and his not so dashing form, he had not been an even match for a woman with the physical allure of the boy's future mother. She had been then almost two decades younger than Jacques, in her early 30's, with exquisite dark features and the shapely form that her training as an aerialist had earned her. Not a match at all, but she had been as much an artist of space and motion as had he of two-dimensional depictions, and she had seen that quality in his window designs and in his expressive face glowing with visions.

Then, just months after the boy's birth, she had left. Heartbroken, Jacques had gone looking for her, leaving the

boy with the priests, and two weeks later he had found her, injured from a fall in an act. He had not seen her fall, but he had heard her say again she loved him.

"I couldn't live without my old world," she had told him. "Jacques, forgive me, I meant to return."

Soon later she had died.

After that Jacques had returned to his home and settled in with his marvelous child in a new situation in which the loss of the mother persisted with epic significance. A portrait of her done by Jacques hung like an icon on the wall between the windows that looked out to the church.

Father and son were at this time both sleeping in the upper room of the two-room house, as earlier described, with a curtain hung from the ceiling creating a small bedroom for the boy and a larger room where were the father's larger bed, with his black-and-white pen drawings and his oil-painted or chalk-drawn sketches of future works stacked by the bench shared by both father and son. The son, too, even as a child of 3 years of age, had his drawings there, stacked like those of his father,—many, many drawings because Justin was never satisfied with what he had done,—and Justin kept the curtain at the head of his bed pulled back so that he could see the spired windows of the church flickering with candle light.

Father and son often talked from their respective rooms, and then, around the age of 5, Justin started to be afraid of being alone in the dark, and he would come running across to jump on his father's chest, saying, "You are my father! I love my father!"

To which the old man would reply in his sweet voice: "And you are my son, little Justin! You are my treasure, little Justin! You are my gift from God!"

Here, too, in this setting, the boy, piece by piece, had disclosed his personality with its precocious attentiveness and obsessive questioning about reality. From the start, the boy had been drawn to books that he identified as important in the adult world, and these books he seldom read alone but always with his father and with no one else.

As in his artwork, the boy was never satisfied with his

own reading, an attitude verging on obsession, for he read many sections of books over and over, and such was the case with individual sentences, also. What was reading, he asked himself, how did he know that he had understood what he had read? Gradually this attitude extended to other things such as to signs passed on the road when he and his father were walking. What had that last sign really said, he often inquired as he doubled back to look at the sign a second time.

So it had gone until the year when Justin was 13 when the first signs of giantness had presented. Then, following his visit to Dr. Saban for medical guidance, Justin went with his father to seek spiritual guidance from the rector of the church visible from the Girard's windows.

At once, the boy brought up the idea of monstrosity that he had described to the doctor.

"Well, this book by Charles Darwin is not a book for a child," the priest admonished. "Why do you dwell on this, Justin?"

"Because it brings up the question of whether God's hand is in it at all, and, if not..."

"Justin, my son," the priest pronounced, "God paints the markings on every sparrow's wings, and thereby He displays His amazing complexity and loving attention to detail. God has made your giantness. But why, I don't know."

Later the boy expressed his turbulent thoughts about this same matter at great length to his father, as the two of them sat in the living room of their home with the fire burning in the fireplace. The father would recall for many years this interaction because it was the first time he really saw how the emerging giantness was affecting his son's physical appearance. Justin sat on the double bench required for his growing mid-section, clenching his hands into enormous fists. His face had become larger. His eyebrows seemed to never stop scowling along the protruding line of his brow, and yet the good will and idealism still shone in his bright boyish eyes,

"The way I understand it, Father," Justin ventured, "a 'monstrosity is an aberration. It is something not meant to

be. Life is replicating in order to produce new, good creatures, but, in this case, it has gone wrong...”

Then came the boy’s 14th birthday, celebrated by a little group of clergy and artists in the courtyard behind the church, and there the father saw a white pigeon, a pure white pigeon, on the tile roof of the apse. Like the white dove that had appeared above John the Baptist and Jesus Christ by the Jordan River, Jacques thought, though he reassured himself that certainly he did not place his son on that level; still the white bird was a good omen.

On this occasion, the father took his son into a side aisle of the church where he had just completed his window depicting the boy David and the giant Goliath. Against a mosaic of dark and light blue pieces of glass, beside which, in purple, the mountains were depicted that Goliath had descended from for the fight, a bearded face of God was shown,—a face notably kind in appearance, and looking concerned,— behind the main scene depicting David, sling in hand, alongside the fallen Goliath, only not in a sinister posture, either, as if about to slay him, but bent forward with compassion, a yellow tear on his cheek, as he offered the giant some kind of drink in a gourd.

The boy said nothing as he gazed at this and listened to his father’s remarks: “You are now 14, my son, and I am so proud of you! I feel in my heart that next year will be a great year for you, Justin, a year in which you come into your greatness!”

As for the old artist himself, as he was falling asleep that night, he recalled how important his son had been to him throughout these formative years and how he had said to him: “You are my little Justin, my gift from God.”

3

For “Justin the Giant,” as he was being called by those who knew him, (and by an ever increasing number who had merely heard of him,) that year when he was 14 was a year of prodigious growth and the year of his first shaming.

In that year, also, when he was 14, and so observant of his own condition, Justin Girard presented with another

astounding departure from the usual clinical picture for giants: he had a normal interest in girls and sex, or maybe even an exaggerated interest,—an interest highly unusual for a giant, since, in all other known cases, the tumor-caused changes in the brain had suppressed sexual development. Related to this, apparently, based on his own reports, Justin was experiencing a magnified perception of everything he encountered through his senses.

“It is a condition of acute sensibility,” the eminent Dr. Jean Saban observed in his dry, exact manner, “‘Giant sensibility,’ to put it in context, and maybe it is brought on and magnified by self-containment, Justin, since you are alone in your uniqueness.”

“Giant sensibility”—it was a new term that Justin took into his mind and began to turn around as he had done with the term “monstrosity.” He knew at once exactly what the doctor was referring to, as he had lately been increasingly aware of this faculty of sensual perception gaining power within him, with the result that his experience of the people and places in his life had become ever more disturbing and sometimes even painful, due to feeling more aware of reality while at the same time more detached from it because of its increasing strangeness.

Justin’s body was changing, also, in consort with these perceptual changes. His boyish face was larger because his entire body was larger, but it was also proportionately larger with respect to his shoulders and the rest of his body. His hands, compared to the proportionate size of normal hands on a normal body, were also larger, lacking the elegance of his father’s artistic hands. His hands were as thick and broad across as hams. His flat, wide feet required shoes twice as big as normal shoes. Despite his efforts to move at a normal gait, he clunked along with a comical motion.

The boy giant observed evidence each day of the “giant sensibility” that the doctor had announced. Human faces and facial expressions loomed up with added meaning, as he passed through the village, seeming to express contempt or ridicule, while common objects like weeds on the side of the road, or even trash,—for example, a discarded bottle he

came upon,—throbbed with the immanence of a sculpture and shone with silent beauty he had not noticed before.

“The reason for this, Justin,” the father explained in his humble, fervent manner after listening to his son’s account, “is ‘the godhead in every object’. In the discarded bottle, as much as in a church, God is present. Not alongside the bottle, but in it. All of God is in the bottle, no less than in the Sacrament. For myself, I can only say I sense this presence in every object I look at with full attention. And I think that is why they say,—I heard this once,—‘attentiveness is the greatest prayer.’ You will see this presence, Justin, when you create your own art. I know that you will! You will express this attentiveness! But, for now, you must make yourself a part of life, Justin, whatever may be the pain of that! You must have courage, Justin!”

“The godhead in every object. Attentiveness is the greatest prayer,” the boy giant repeated as he walked through the village alone, and often he went out into the public areas, interacting clumsily with anyone who would engage with him at all, because it seemed now that the more of a giant he became, the more lonely and cut off from others he became, also, despite all of his efforts to just be normal.

Sometimes, also, father and son talked about the boy’s mother, on the rare times when they talked at all about the feminine world,—and it was always on an elevated level, never disrespected with crudity or even with any practical or common sense comprehension,—“Your mother and I, we shared our sense of the artistic world. Though her art was motion, sketched out in space, while my art was drawing, sketched on a flat surface. You, when you reach your maturity, will absorb that, also.

“Oh, I believe that you will, Justin! There is something in you, something grand, my son, waiting to come out when your time has come!”

Then came the village spring dance, attended by all, and Justin Girard, with trepidation, determined to act like a normal person, entered the square alone to the notice of all, thinking that this was an occasion such as he needed to endure to break out of his loneliness.

For much of the time he sat hardly speaking to anyone and watching the girls dancing until a particular girl who made him nearly speechless came over to him. She was a bright-faced, healthy-looking girl 14 years of age, same as he, with brown hair and brown eyes, and, most strikingly, long slender, shapely legs and arms, and high, perky breasts upon which the nipples stuck out beneath her blouse. All the boys were after her, from her own age up to the age of young men, and she smiled at everyone, never seemed vain, and was nice to everyone, as she was to Justin also, in her democratic way.

This girl, too, had a further powerful effect on Justin because her dark eyes and hair, though not matching exactly the dark hair and eyes shown in the portrait of his mother that hung in the Girard home on the wall looking out to the church, were close enough in resemblance for Justin to think that this girl was of the type of his mother's people. He didn't know that for sure; he just suspected it, but that was still enough to establish a connection going back in his mind to these people who had been his people, also.

He saw her bouncing across to him; she often seemed at the point of skipping or whirling, though not in show, it appeared, but from her delight in life.

"I know your name is Justin," she said.

"Yes," was all he could answer as he bowed, his head bent low with the bushy, frowning almost eyebrows seeming pushed lower still in anger, though everyone knew that he was seldom angry. His feet felt wide and flat against the brick of the courtyard as in fact they were.

Then the call for a dance came around, and there he was directly in front of her. She took his hands and guided him toward the center of the plaza, while he surveyed around him at the faces and eyes, amidst which were bodies rising up to join the dance. Not knowing how to escape, he let himself be drawn into the circle, as she said, "My name is Renee."

Of course, the boy giant was aware of that. He had long before noticed the beauty of her lean, energetic form. It was a joyous dance, exuberant and intoxicating. He swayed into it on his flat feet and allowed Renee to turn him around,

never mocking him, so far as he could determine. She was wearing a full-skirted dress and, when she whirled, the arc of its travel revealed her shapely legs right up to the area so mysterious to his boy's mind, the area that he had never seen.

Renee's hips were swaying. He felt overwhelmed. He could hardly believe how he was stomping his clunky shoes on the brick surface of the plaza, making a clunk-clunk noise in time with the music as he spun around. "How absurd I must look," he told himself as he held his immense hands out to both sides, while scrutinizing the faces around him, once the faces of friends, but now the inscrutable faces of former friends who seemed amused by him or contemptuous of his giantness.

And so it went. A single dance, and then Renee with her flushed face and her ever pleasant smile, directed to anyone who looked at her, was swept away, though in withdrawing she called out in her sweet voice, "That was real nice, Justin. We can dance again some other time."

After the dance and festivities were over, with memories of his movement reverberating in his mind, Justin walked down a nearby street to a depot where he picked up art supplies sent to his father. From the dark alley there by the depot, he overheard a conversation then seized his complete attention,

"Well, Renee, now is Justin your sweetheart?"

"He is a nice boy. And he is only a boy," she said. "But how could Justin be my sweetheart? I would be looking way up in the sky!"

"Big as he is," he heard someone say, a playful feminine voice, amidst laughter, "think of you know what!"

"Don't make fun of him," he heard the reply from Renee in a soft, concerned tone.

"There is a point where big becomes ugly," another voice said,

Justin grasped in a flash the implication of this not truly mean, but still inconsiderate, banter. Renee had stated clearly that she could never accept him as a romantic partner, and she had said just as clearly that her reason for regarding him

as unacceptable was his size. True, in her admonishment of the girl who had made fun of him, there had been regard for his feelings. Yet, as Justin had feared, he had been shoved aside for being a monstrosity.

4

“There is a point where big becomes ugly,” Justin kept repeating in his mind in the days and weeks after his public dance.

The truth was he had fondled himself sometimes, Justin acknowledged, and thereby had gotten pleasure from his own body. The truth was he had done so while imagining himself with Renee. Now he understood that, as she had implied, when forced into stating how impossible he would be as a partner because of his size, his sex was a monstrosity like the rest of him. It was the result of a natural design gone awry, as he had averred to the doctor and priest. To think he had hidden away to demean himself like that! He felt such shame!

Yet was it not true that the dance itself had been good? He had never felt such joy as in those moments of whirling around, with Renee looking at him as if she had liked being with him. The dance in itself had been good! What had been bad, he decided, was that people had recognized that he was a monstrosity and had made fun of him because of a condition he could not escape.

His loyal father, finding him in such an enduring mood and not knowing the exact reason for it, sought his son out, wherever he was, in an effort to break the spell of whatever was afflicting him. Then, finally, he asked one of his son’s former friends and heard about the dance and how Justin had danced in such a manner that the others had laughed at him. This was how the other boy had described it, that Justin had played the fool.

Often in the evening, down through the years, the father and son had gone on walks on a path that followed the river just across from the town. From that path, where it began near the town bridge, the central bell tower of the church could be seen, but, further along the path, the trees were

thicker on both sides and the town could no longer be seen.

Here often lately the father found Justin walking with his head bent down, and he would join in with Justin on the path, trying with all his might to find some hope that he could present to his son. But he felt as if he and his son were in a tunnel of darkness that pressed down upon them.

Wherever they turned, the gloom of the boy's disconsolate mood was there, and it seemed to the father at such moments that there was no route of escape as he sought in a high, plaintive tone to present to his son some consideration that he had seized from mid-air to dispel the dark mood.

"Do you remember the face of God that I showed in my window of David and Goliath?" the father asked in such an effort to point to a cause of hope.

"Yes, of course," Justin replied.

"It is not the face of God of the Old Testament, Justin. God never showed His face in that time. Even Moses was told to look away when God passed by. This face in the window is the face of Jesus Christ. In Christ, we see the loving face of God."

"Father, you are such a good man," the son answered. "You are a saint maybe. But the face of God? That He even has a face is an antique notion."

"Oh, yes, I know that, Justin! It is an antique notion! A vision of reality rooted in the past! And, literally, it does not make sense, this or any such vision. But, somehow, in my intellect and in my heart,—in my whole being, Justin!—I know that, because of our visions, reality makes sense. This is our vocation, our human task, to make it make sense! Even God, I suspect, is struggling to get it right. That is why God sent Jesus,—I humbly believe this, Lord, forgive me if I speak in pride!—to correct the error of His former severity."

"You speak always of religion, and I know it is because you are so devout, Father," Justin said. "But I ask myself a question, and I can no longer find an answer."

"What is this question?"

"Do I even have a soul?"

"Do you have a soul? Justin, my son, don't throw away the grandness inside you! Let me try again to make myself

clear! The way I look upon it, all I am good for is my art, and I know my art is flawed, but I believe that my soul is in my flawed art and in my flawed thinking. Because I am always trying, Justin. Yes, in some strange way, my son, it is the act of trying that gives me a soul! It is my attitude that I accept reality as it is because I see the beauty everywhere I have told you about. Have you ever thought about that, Justin? To accept life as it is,—beyond our control, regardless of who or what has made it,—just to accept it, is somehow a noble act! It is a noble act!” the old man cried, taken up with the hope of this idea. “And by doing this noble act, we become noble ourselves! I see this as true, my son, and I want you to see it! With or without God,—and for myself I do believe in God, I must tell you, to set the case right!—but, with or without God, to accept and keep trying is a noble act! And if God is a person, and a good person, and a good artist,—the best of artists, as He must be,—then He sees the nobility even as we see it! It is a matter of acceptance! We must accept. Accept that we doubt, accept that we err, and God,—if He exists!—can accept,—like an artist, too,—that sometimes even He has not been perfect... Have you ever thought of that?”

“God is by definition perfect,” the son replied.

“Yes, I know! But why then are you and I not perfect, whom He made, and who want so much to act correctly? Maybe God wants to be noble enough to accept his own imperfection.”

“God wants to be noble?”

“Maybe God looked out one day and realized that, like a good artist,—like the best of artists!—He has fallen short.”

“God has fallen short?”

“Did Christ not say, ‘My Father works even until now and I work?’ He says, in other words, that His and His Father’s work is not done... But, as for us, Justin, all we can do is accept! Accept! And accept what may come as we keep trying, sometimes without encouragement, or without others beside us, and maybe, also, while alone and unloved.

“I hope to God it will not be the case for you, Justin, but I cannot remain with you forever. You must accept and keep trying!”

The boy shuffled forward, seldom looking around. They were walking through a scene of glittering river, sunlit trees, and light-dappled flowers. But for Justin the sun never broke through, and Jacques remained in the same mood in his determination to lead his son out of it.

The next day Justin went off alone and the father was consumed with worry that his son had given up and had done himself harm. But where could he be? Where could a giant hide and be undetected? It turned out Justin was in the middle of the church below the highest arches. In mid-week, it was the most isolated place in the village, as no one ever went there.

Jacques attempted to converse with his son, but Justin would not reply. For more than two months, he remained seated in the middle of the church, and remained there even when the usual scattering of people attended Sunday mass. Everyone was soon aware of his silent hulking form in the middle of the church, with the stained glass window visible that his father had created depicting David and Goliath.

Justin grew every day like the fabled corn that squeaks as it inches up in plain view. His stomach had increased in size, though he looked more like a balloon than a fat person. His bushy brow ridge jutted forward more, above his still boyish but more troubled eyes.

He appeared to never stop glowering. His upper teeth had swung outward in his puffy gums, buck tooth fashion, overlapping his lower teeth. His upper lip had been pushed by that into an upward curl.

Then one day toward evening Jacques saw the boy giant emerging from the front door of the church and he watched him as he lumbered down the path like a circus bear into the front door of the Girard cottage where the father was sitting in the upper level on the top of the stairs between the two levels of the building.

Justin came in and stood in the lower room, so large by this time that his head touched the beams that supported the roof. "I have decided to accept, Father, though I don't know if anyone hears me but you," he declared, and then he hung down his immense head, clasped together his great hands,

and wept, with his enormous shoulders shaking, as he felt, as never before, the weight of his giantness.

“I accept!”

Brought down then by the burden of his massive frame, Justin Girard crumbled into his father’s harboring arms while the old man said again and again in his soft, plaintive, sweet voice: “You are a true giant, little Justin! You are my giant, little Justin! You are a giant in your soul!”