

The World's Youngest Man

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Who was it that said, "Show me the child at seven and I'll show you the man"? When I was half that age, I was named the World's Youngest Man, a title that I hold to this day. My entire life had built to that crowning achievement, and for many years after it seemed destined to be my only legacy.

Many people assume it was my parents who pushed me into the spotlight, folded my small palm around the handle of my briefcase and adjusted my tie before I stepped onto that stage, but in plain fact I was already working at my father's company, by choice, at the age of sixteen months. I was no preschool beauty contestant; I was a man, a true man.

An unusually bright child, I was able to read at the age of six months, received my high school equivalency degree shortly after my first birthday and published my first book of essays, *Not Soon Enough*, a few months later to generally positive reviews.

My parents were simple folk: my father was a young man in his own right, who left home at the age of eight to work at Mississippi Chemical in Yazoo. Each month he sent his meager earnings to his parents and seven siblings back home in Tishomingo; five years after his arrival, he owned the company. My mother worked at the plant as a lab assistant: a Little Person by birth, she stood on a stepstool and fed preservatives to mice. Though she was a dozen years my father's senior, she gave him seven children of his own, though I alone lived past infancy.

By any measure apart from chronology, I was a man several months before I even heard of the award: at three, I had been promoted to Executive Vice President in charge of Productivity, I had made my first million in the futures markets, and had moved out of my parent's home into a large doghouse in the back yard. But true contentment eluded me.

The day my father told me of the award, my eyes widened: it had been established in 1929 by Nestor Cogg, an industrialist who made his fortune in textiles. Cogg had dedicated his life to the repeal of child labor laws, founded the Cogg Institute for Early Development, and presented the award, according to the inscription, "To the Youth whose Labors Lower the Bar for All Men." At the time, the youngest man to receive the award was a six year-old math professor from Pittsburgh.

A chord had been struck. The same laws Cogg railed against had restricted me to working a scant six hours a day at the chemical plant, an injustice I cursed daily. I climbed out of my chair and paced the carpet of my office. "Father, I must win that award," I said. He nodded, but said nothing.

The months leading up to the award were a blizzard of activity: I landed myself in as many newspapers as possible, lecturing at preschools around the country on the virtues of capitalism. I worked briefly as a commentator for the Children's Television Workshop. I met senators and captains of industry, brushed against the hems of the great and powerful.

A few weeks before the awards ceremony, I had a brief but torrid affair with my father's secretary. I remember how she knelt on the boardroom floor to embrace me, her eyes shy, averted – how many times I have seen that look since. To this day I don't know whether the old man put her up to it hoping to secure me the prize, or whether she sensed a power about me, a potential for greatness that proved irresistible. She left town shortly after, and I never had the chance to ask her.

On the night of the ceremony, my father led me backstage and introduced me to the old industrialist. Palsied with age, Cogg stooped down to shake my hand but grimaced at its touch. "Your hands are so soft," he said disapprovingly, "like a child's!" His ire subsided when he learned that I worked in management. "One of the new breed," he said. "You would have been a boon in my cotton mills, but I suppose those days are gone forever."

"Not if I can help it, sir."

The old man's eyes welled with tears, and he sighed. Standing behind the red velvet of the theater curtain, he looked me square in the eye. "The youth of today don't know the meaning of the word work. But I foresee great things for you, my lad. You'll bestride the earth like the proverbial Colossus, mark my words."

How bitterly ironic those words would later seem. Within a year of accepting my award, I found myself confronting an ashen-faced pediatrician as he struggled in vain to explain my condition: for reasons medical science has yet to sufficiently explain to me, my body stopped developing at age four, a growth-related disorder previously unknown to science. It has been variously blamed on my mother's dwarfism, the presence of chemicals at my workplace, and an early exposure to stress – but at the time, I blamed only myself.

The next decade of my life passed in a painful blur. I began to feel as though life had passed me by. I watched other prodigies mature, and became insanely jealous. I picked fights with child actors, made drunken prank calls to young violinists late at night. There were days in my teens when I was sullen and apathetic for reasons unknown to me. Even my work at the company began to suffer.

Then, on my sixteenth birthday, my father called me into his office. He told me he had a special present for me: the company had spun off a subsidiary in India, and was looking for a plant manager. Would I be interested in the position?

Now, as I look back at age 18 on the road I have traveled, I feel in some ways as though my life has just begun. The Bhopal plant has succeeded beyond anyone's wildest expectations, and India's labor laws have proved conducive to my hiring practices. And, like kindly old Nestor Cogg before me, I find my interests shifting to the philanthropic: it seems an unusual number of children in this city are born with my own mysterious condition, and several of them seem unusually bright for their age. Perhaps, under my tutelage, one of them may even snatch my title from me. I would consider it a fitting legacy.