

Personal

Dear Tonta, Tonta, Tontala

ōx vey -- do I
have a story for
you.

Enjoy!

Read it in good health.

Love + kisses

your less than twice
your age Niece

(who by the way is a
tonta tonta (two/too!!))

Time & the Riddle

thirty-one zen stories



Howard Fast

The Vision of Milty Boil

NAPOLEON, Stalin, Hitler, and Mussolini all had one thing in common with Milton Boil: they were short men. But the most explosive moments in human history have often been the result of an absent six or seven inches in height, and while it is hardly profitable it is certainly interesting to speculate upon what might have been man's destiny had Milton Boil been six feet and one inch instead of five feet and one inch—with a name like Smith or Jones or Goldberg instead of Boil.

But at his maturity he was five feet and one inch, and his name had already caused him so much small suffering that no force on earth would have persuaded him to change it. All his life he had been stuck with pins, pinched and punned upon because of his name and his height; no wonder he was a millionaire before he reached thirty.

He was born in 1940 and he grew up in the time of affluence. His father was a builder of small apartment houses. Milton (or Milty, as he came to be known the world over) came out of college, spent a year learning more about his father's business than the old man ever knew, and then parted company with his father and built his first big apartment house. Milty was a genius. By 1970 he had become the largest builder of apartment houses in New York City. He married Joan Pebbleman, whose father was one of the country's largest builders of office buildings, and they had three lovely children. Joan worked in charitable efforts. Her name was in *The New York Times* at least once a week. She was only four feet and

ten inches tall, so from a reasonable distance they were a very handsome couple indeed.

Milty respected money, rich people, brains, organizational drive, very rich people, the government, the church, and millionaires. In an interview, he was asked what he considered the first necessary attribute of a young man who desired to become a millionaire. "Ambition," he replied promptly. He respected ambition. "And after that?"

"Influence," he replied. "Proper friends."

And Milty made friends and built influence. By 1975, at the age of thirty-five, he was considered the most influential man in New York City. His influence was such that he was able to have a number of significant changes made in the building code—among them the lowering of the minimum height of the ceilings to seven feet. With this achieved, he built the first one-hundred-story apartment house in New York. In 1980, riding the crest of the wave created by the population explosion, Milty Boil managed to have the city council pass an ordinance permitting ceilings of six feet in all apartment buildings over fifty stories high.

Rival builders sneered at Milty's new house, claiming that no one would be so damn foolish as to rent an apartment with six-foot ceilings, but such was the housing shortage by then that the entire building, with its seven hundred apartments, was fully rented in sixty days.

The cash flow that passed through Milty's deserving hands had by now become so enormous that he was known throughout the business as the "golden boy" or, more often, "the golden boil"; but Milty was beyond the barbs of name-calling. His vision and imagination had lifted him to unprecedented heights, and once again he brought his influence to bear upon the lawmakers. In 1982 his workmen broke ground for a new building of one hundred stories, with ceilings five feet high. Biographers recall this as a moment of great crisis in the life of Milty Boil, and historians look back upon it as a turning point in man's destiny. Suddenly all the forces of conservatism focused upon Milty; he was called everything from a depraved proficere to public enemy number one; he was abused in the press, in Congress, on the air. There were, of course, a handful of farsighted people who applauded Milty's courage and creativity, but mostly it was abuse that he received. And to this, at his now historic press conference, Milty replied simply and with dignity:

"I give people a place to live at a reasonable rent. Especially the young people, who so desperately desire an urban condition. I give them a place to live at a rent they can afford."

"Do you, sir?" demanded the representative of *The New York Times*, bold and caustic as befitting his place, leading the attack upon Milty. "How can you say that in the light of the fact that we Americans are the tallest people on earth, especially our youth?"

"I agree," Milty replied. "This height is a tribute to the American way of life. All my life I have upheld the American way of life."

"That hardly answers the question," said a CBS man.

"I intend to answer it," Milty assured them. "I have never been less than forthright about my plans. I have submitted this problem to a panel of forty-two physicians. They all agree that bending, crouching, and occasional creeping can only be beneficial to human health. Thereby a whole series of muscles formerly ignored are brought into play, and thus my own efforts coincide with the President's plan for physical fitness. As for the defense of democracy on an international scale, nothing better develops a man for jungle combat than the alertness produced by life in a five-foot-high apartment. I have here a statement from the Secretary of Defense—mimeographed copies available—which says in part: 'The constant concerns for his country's welfare which dominate the thinking of Milton Boil deserves special mention and commendation.' I also have statements from Generals Bosch and Korpulant, both of them experts—"

"Mr. Boil," he was interrupted, "are you trying to tell us that these low ceilings constitute a positive progressive feature in apartment construction?"

"They do indeed. Furthermore, an apartment is not a place where one lives vertically. We have conducted a survey of the habits of over ten thousand apartment dwellers, and the results show that ninety-two point eight percent of their hours spent in the apartment are spent in a sitting or reclining or prone position. With young married couples, the percentage is a trifle higher—"

So did Milty Boil defend himself, a man alone fighting off the forces of reaction and always contemplating the gigantic profit produced by a building consisting of five-foot-high apartments. But a day later, at his regular board of directors' meeting, Milty found that even those who shared the profits had their doubts.

"It won't work."

"Milty—you can't go on this way. I hear Washington intends to step in."

"Did you hear what *Pravda* has to say? I have the translation here—the final step in the decadence of the United States.' Well, it gives one pause."

"I don't say it wasn't a brilliant step, Milty. I simply ask: will it work? Can it work? *Life* is not *Pravda*, but listen to its editorial: 'Has Milty finally flipped? We don't hold with those who characterize Milton Boil as a madman or public enemy. We recognize that the greatest builder of modern America does not make decisions lightly. But if Milton Boil is not mad, neither are Americans three feet tall. If—'"

"No, no!" Milty cried, finally coming to life in his place at the head of the table. "Hold it right there. Read that last sentence again."

"What last sentence?"

"You know—that business about three feet tall."

"You mean this—'But if Milton Boil is not mad, neither are Americans three feet tall—'"

"Right! Right you are! There it is!"

"There what is?" asked one of the older members, less able because of his age to follow the pyrotechnics of Milty's thought.

"The whole thing. The whole answer. The key to everything. Milty's very real excitement began to permeate the others."

"What key, Milty? Don't be so damned mysterious."

"All right. But tell me this. What is the number one problem of the world today?"

"Communism," half a dozen board members replied eagerly.

"Nuts! Communism is a word. We licked them in space and we licked them in everything else down here. Our houses are better and our roads are better and our factories are better."

"Disease," someone said hopefully.

"Did you ever hear of antibiotics? Not disease."

"War, Milty?"

"Since when is war a problem?"

"Inflation?"

"You should talk—you made millions out of inflation. Come on, come on, use your heads—there's only one number one problem in the world today, and if we lick it, it licks us, and if we destroy it, it destroys us—until now, until right this minute when your uncle

Milty Boil solved it, and we're going to lick it and it's not going to destroy us."

They spread their hands hopelessly. They looked at Milty in defeat, knowing how much he enjoyed winning.

"Milty, let us in, tell us where the action is," his first vice-president pleaded.

"All right." Milty Boil leaned forward. His face hardened; his voice became precise and crisp. He was all mind now, a cold, beautiful, hard-core calculating machine. They knew that look on Milty's face; they knew it meant a breakthrough, action, action and more action. The silence at the board table became a thing in itself.

"All right. World's number one problem—over-population, namely the population explosion. Next—what is our market for anything? People. And how do you increase the market? More people. But with more people you got the population explosion. Mankind trapped. Finis. Over. The earth starves."

"Right, Milty," the board whispered.

"But there's a way."

The board waited.

Slowly, measuring each word, Milty said, "Double the size of the earth. That's the solution. That takes care of the next hundred years."

The members of the board relaxed, looked at each other, grinned, and then burst into laughter. Only Milty didn't laugh. His face stony-set and cold as ice, he regarded them without pleasure and waited. They saw his expression finally, and the laughter died away. Milty pointed one finger at his second vice-president, who was in charge of purchasing, and asked evenly:

"Just what in hell do you find so funny?"

"The jest, Milty. We're laughing with you."

"Why?"

"Because it's a yuk, Milty, a tribute, so as to speak. You got a sense of humor like nobody else."

"I don't think it's funny," Milty said.

"No? But you got to be kidding, Milty. The earth is what it is. Twenty-five thousand miles in circumference. That's fourth-grade stuff."

"And you got a fourth-grade mind."

"Milty, Milty," said the oldest member in a fatherly way, "Milty, you have a fine mind, but nobody makes the earth larger."

"No?"

"No, Milty, I am afraid not."

"All right," Milty said, unperturbed by the oldest member and smiling slightly. "Nobody makes the earth larger. But tell me this—suppose, just for the sake of argument, that the average man was three feet tall. Now if he kept the same scale in relation to himself, everything would be reduced by half. Six inches would be a foot, and a mile would become two miles. In other words, if the man is reduced in size to one-half, then so are all his measurements. Suddenly the world is not twenty-five thousand miles in circumference but fifty thousand miles in circumference. We have doubled the size of the earth."

"Milty, Milty," said the oldest member, still in a fatherly way, "Milty, you got a brain like a steel trap. But all you are actually doing is to buttress one impossible statement with another. To make men three feet tall is as impossible as to make the earth fifty thousand miles in diameter."

"Who says?"

"I say, Milty," continued the oldest member. "I was a friend of your father, may he rest in peace, so I have the right."

"Good," Milty said. "You got the right. Now shut up." And to the rest of the board:

"I say we can produce a three-foot man."

"How, Milty?" asked the youngest member of the board. He was with Milty all the way.

"How? First I ask this: what in hell is so great about tall? Tall, tall, tall—that's all you hear. Why? Was Adolf Hitler tall? Was Napoleon tall? Was Onassis tall? Was Willie Shoemaker tall? And do you know how much prize money he took? Over thirty million, that's all. How about art—was Toulouse-Lautrec tall? You know how tall they believe Shakespeare was? Five feet four inches. Tall is for basketball players."

"But people think tall, Milty."

"Then we change their thinking. They think tall because everywhere the propaganda says that tall is good. We change that. We show them that tall is for clods. The men who make the world go round are small. The men women prefer are small. The men who become top dog are small. It's a small man's world. That's what we show the world—that it's a small man's world, and the smaller the better."

"But, Milty," the older member of the board said patiently, "suppose we demonstrate all that. We still can't make men smaller."

"No?" Milty smiled. Years later, remembering that smile, some of the younger board members spoke about a "Gioconda" quality, but that was in retrospect and after Milty had gone to whatever rewards the next world provides for such genius. At the moment, then in 1982, Milty's smile was a smile of sheer superior knowledge.

"No—no, we can't make men smaller, but they can, can't they?"

"How, Milty?"

"By wanting it. Men have increased their height by over a foot in the past two hundred years. Suppose they start to decrease it—"

A month later, in the same board room, facing the representatives of the twelve largest advertising agencies in the world and the seventeen largest public relations firms, Milty Boil put his plan on its proper level.

"We are here, ladies and gentlemen," he said, "to serve mankind. In the name of mankind, its purpose and its survival, I call this meeting to order. Our goal, my friends, is to double the size of the earth."

Then, to the silent—silent, that is, until he had finished—admiration of those assembled there, Milty presented his plan; and then even those hard-bitten, cynical representatives of the one business that makes the earth turn broke into cheers and applause. Milty rose and nodded modestly; he was not egotistical, but neither was he one to hide his light under a bushel.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "And now the floor is open for ideas and questions."

No stodgy board of directors were these twenty-nine representatives of advertising and public relations. Their minds were as hard and bright as quartz. The first to rise was Jack Aberdeen, the young wonder boy of Carrol, Carrol, Carrol and Quince. Even as he snapped his fingers, Milty could see his mind crackle and snap.

"Got it, Mr. Boil. Round number one. You know the way the Kellogg Company pushes its cornflakes as the food that makes kids tall. Union Mills is our account. I see a new competitive product. *Timies*. I got the slogan—'Small and tight.' Every company will have to fall in line. 'Are you afraid of the big bully? *Timies* will reduce your muscles to knots of steel. Tiny knots of steel. Small and

tight.' I got a tune for it—'Small and tight, small and tight, who the hell needs height, if only I am small and tight?'" Of course we got to find something like an anti-vitamin, but we represent Associated Labs, and I'll get them to work on it."

Milty could have hugged the kid, but already Steve Johnson of Kelly, Cohen and Clark was on his feet and speaking. He represented some of the biggest airlines on earth.

"Milty," he said, "may we call you Milty?"

"Call me Milty, Steve. By all means."

"Two things, Milty, you have just kicked off the biggest chance in the history of airlines. That's number one. I got the slogan—'Weigh less, pay less.' Why not? The small man weighs less, he pays less. Put a premium on small."

Johnson, Milty noted, was no taller than himself.

"Second thing—flights to the moon and Mars. All the airlines have been discussing the prospect of putting these flights on a tourist basis. But the cost is terrifying. We make it a bonus thing: 'Do you want to see the moon? You can't—you're too tall. But your kids can. Keep them small. Feed them anti-vitamins. So that they may have what you never dreamed of having—a flight to the moon or Mars—a step into tomorrow, a glimpse of man's glorious future. No tourist who is taller than five feet can get into outer space.' How about that—is it not beautiful?"

Cathy Brodie, public relations for Jones and Keppleman, the largest ethical drug house in the world, leaped to her feet now and cried out:

"Moon pills—does that ever send me! It means the lab boys have to really dig for something to control height, but they've found everything else. Why not? Moon pills."

"Moon pills," Milty repeated, smiling.

Tab Henderson, who managed promotion for over eight hundred large hospitals, not to mention three of the leading insurance companies, jumped right into the gap Cathy Brodie had opened.

"We could just overlook the biggest little inducement in this whole splendid project. I mean health. Long life. Added years. We have statistical charts to show that over six feet three inches, life expectancy begins to decrease. We look at it the other way. Be small and stay healthy."

There were a few sour faces, a few spoil-sports, but most of the team assembled threw their hats into the ring, and the plans came thick and fast.

"Tall, dark, and handsome—that must go. Small for tall—'Small, dark and handsome.'"

"Beautiful."

"Get the sex angle. 'Sex is better with a small man or a small woman.'"

"Try it with both—make your own decision.' That gives it a do-it-yourself feeling."

"How about this—'Close the generation gap!' For the past three or four generations the kids have all been bigger than their parents. No wonder a father can't lay down the law. Now we reverse it, each generation smaller than the one that preceded it. We reestablish the authority of the father. The home once again becomes the sanctuary it was in the olden times."

One after another the ideas sparkled forth, until the beginnings of an entire world program began to take shape there in the board room of Boil Enterprises. Rome wasn't built in a day, and neither was the pattern of world psychology that reduced practically all the human race to half of its size; but there the foundation was laid—and there Milty Boil became Milty Boil, benefactor, underwriting that first, initial effort with a cool twenty million dollars of his own money.

For the rest of his life Milty had a goal—a reason and a meaning for the tremendous effort that produced one of the great fortunes of our time. Cynical people say that the first five years of the program created a condition where Milty Boil could begin to build his gigantic structures—one hundred floors with ceilings only four feet and six inches high—without opposition. Others—so-called reformers—held that it was an indignity for man to spend his life in a place where he could never hope to stand up straight, but Milty answered that charge with his ringing Declaration of Purpose, a document which takes its place in American history alongside the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address. I quote only the first paragraph of Milty's Declaration, for I am sure that most of my readers know it by heart.

"Life without purpose," wrote Milty (or some unknown ghost writer who took his inspiration from the dynamic leadership of Milton Boil), "is neither life nor death but a dull and wretched existence unworthy of man. Man must have a goal, a purpose, a destination, a shining goal for which he struggles. We saw in the hapless youth of the sixties and seventies what it meant to be without purpose in life; but never again shall the world face that

quandary. People—shameless people—have accused me of building for profit; they charge that I reduce man with my low ceilings, that I take away his dignity. But the reverse is true. Through my splendid houses, man has found both dignity and purpose—the purpose to be small and to raise small children, so that the world may increase in size, and the dignity of men who must always fight their environment, who cannot stand in decadent comfort, who must struggle and grow through struggle.”

In the year 2010, when Milty was seventy years old, he achieved his ultimate goal. Through his ever expanding influence, he persuaded the New York City Council to pass a law cutting Central Park in half, granting all that part of it north of Eighty-second Street and south of Ninety-eighth Street to Milton Boil, so that he might fulfill his lifelong dream and build an apartment house two hundred stories tall with ceilings three feet and six inches high. Over a hundred people were killed in the riots that followed this action of the City Council, but progress is never achieved without paying a price, and Milty saw to it that no widow or child of those who had perished went hungry. Also, he guaranteed living space in his new buildings to all those made fatherless by the riots—at one-half the rent paid by the regular tenants.

After that, only fanatics and hippies would deny that Milty was the gentlest and kindest of landlords in all the history of landlordism. Indeed, after his death, the Pope instituted proceedings that would result in Milty's eventually becoming the patron saint of all landlords; but this is still in the future—with many thorns strewn on the path of sainthood, not to mention certain confusion about Milty's religion, that is, considering that he had any.

Milty died in his eighty-seventh year, and we can be pleased that he lived long enough to see his dream begin to come to fruition. His coffin was carried by eight young men, no one of them more than four feet eight inches in height, and here and there in the audience that packed the chapel were grown men and women no taller than four feet. Of course, these were the exceptions, and it was not until almost half a century later that the first generation of adults who were less than three feet tall reached their maturity.

But we must not abandon this small tribute without noting that when Milty's will was read, it disposed of no more than a few thousand dollars and a handful of things that were beloved of him.

Such was the nature of the man who earned millions only to give them away. Naturally, there are those who claim that since reading a book in his very early youth, titled *How to Avoid Probate*, Milty was never subsequently without it—that is, without this precious volume—and that eventually he memorized all of its contents and could quote chapter and verse at will.

But where is there a great man who has not suffered the barbs of envy and hatred? Slander is the burden the great must carry, and Milton Boil carried it as silently and patiently as any man.

On the modest headstone that graces his final resting place, an epitaph written by Milty himself is carved:

“He found them tall and left them small.”

To which our generation, standing erect and proud under our three-foot ceilings, can only add a grateful amen.

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