The Eyeflash Miracles

Gene Wolfe

"*I cannot call him to mind.*"

—ANATOLE FRANCE, *The Procurator of Judea*

Little Tib heard the train coming while it was still a long way away, and he felt it in his feet. He stepped off the track onto a prestressed concrete tie, listening. Then he put one ear to the endless steel and listened to that sing, louder and louder. Only when he began to feel the ground shake under him did he lift his head at last and make his way down the embankment through the tall, prickly weeds, probing the slope with his stick.

The stick splashed water. He could not hear it because of the noise the train made roaring by; but he knew the feel of it, the kind of drag it made when he tried to move the end of the stick. He laid it down and felt with his hands where his knees would be when he knelt, and it felt all right. A little soft, but not broken glass. He knelt then and sniffed the water, and it smelled good and was cool to his fingers, so he drank, bending down and sucking up the water with his mouth, then splashing it on his face and the back of his neck.

"Say!" an authoritative voice called. "Say, you boy!"

Little Tib straightened up, picking up his stick again. He thought, This could be Sugarland. He said, "Are you a policeman, sir?"

"I am the superintendent."

That was almost as good. Little Tib tilted his head back so the voice could see his eyes. He had often imagined coming to Sugarland and how it would be there; but he had never considered just what it was he should say when he arrived. He said, "My card . . ." The train was still rumbling away, not too far off.

Another voice said: "Now don't you hurt that child." It was not authoritative. There was the sound of responsibility in it.

"You ought to be in school, young man," the first voice said. "Do you know who I am?"

Little Tib nodded. "The superintendent."

"That's right, I'm the superintendent. I'm Mr. Parker himself. Your teacher has told you about me, I'm sure."

"Now don't hurt that child," the second voice said again. "He never did hurt you."

"Playing hooky. I understand that's what the children call it. We never use such a term ourselves, of course. You will be referred to as an absentee. What's your name?"

"George Tibbs."

"I see. I am Mr. Parker, the superintendent. This is my valet; his name is Nitty."

"Hello," Little Tib said.

"Mr. Parker, maybe this absentee boy would like to have something to eat. He looks to me like he has been absentee a long while."

"Fishing," Mr. Parker said. "I believe that's what most of them do."

"You can't see, can you?" A hand closed on Little Tib's arm. The hand was large and hard, but it did not bear down. "You can cross right here. There's a rock in the middle—step on that."

Little Tib found the rock with his stick and put one foot there. The hand on his arm seemed to lift him across. He stood on the rock for a moment with his stick in the water, touching bottom to steady himself. "Now a great big step." His shoe touched the soft bank on the other side. "We got a camp right over here. Mr. Parker, don't you think this absentee boy would like a sweet roll?"

Little Tib said, "Yes, I would."

"I would too," Nitty told him.

"Now, young man, why aren't you in school?"

"How is he going to see the board?"

"We have special facilities for the blind, Nitty. At Grovehurst there is a class tailored to make allowance for their disability. I can't at this moment recall the name of the teacher, but she is an exceedingly capable young woman."

Little Tib asked, "Is Grovehurst in Sugarland?"

"Grovehurst is in Martinsburg," Mr. Parker told him. "I am superintendent of the Martinsburg Public School System. How far are we from Martinsburg now, Nitty?"

"Two, three hundred kilometers, I guess."

"We will enter you in that class as soon as we reach Martinsburg, young man."

Nitty said, "We're going to Macon—I keep on tellin' you."

"Your papers are all in order, I suppose? Your grade and attendance records from your previous school? Your withdrawal permit, birth certificate, and your retinal pattern card from the Federal Reserve?"

Little Tib sat mute. Someone pushed a sticky pastry into his hands, but he did not raise it to his mouth.

"Mr. Parker, I don't think he's got papers."

"That is a serious—"

"Why he got to have papers? He ain't no dog!"

Little Tib was weeping.

"I see!" Mr. Parker said. "He's blind; Nitty, I think his retinas have been destroyed. Why, he's not really here at all."

" 'Course he's here."

"A ghost. We're seeing a ghost, Nitty. Sociologically he's not real—he's been deprived of existence."

"I never in my whole life seen a ghost."

"You dumb bastard," Mr. Parker exploded.

"You don't have to talk to me like that, Mr. Parker."

"You dumb bastard. All my life there's been nobody around but dumb bastards like you." Mr. Parker was weeping too. Little Tib felt one of his tears, large and hot, fall on his hand. His own sobbing slowed, then faded away. It was outside his experience to hear grown people—men—cry. He took a bite from the roll he had been given, tasting the sweet, sticky icing and hoping for a raisin.

"Mr. Parker," Nitty said softly. "Mr. Parker."

After a time, Mr. Parker said, "Yes."

"He—this boy George—might be able to get them, Mr. Parker. You recall how you and me went to the building that time? We looked all around it a long while. And there was that window, that old window with

the iron over it and the latch broken. I pushed on it and you could see the glass move in a little. But couldn't either of us get between those bars."

"This boy is blind, Nitty," Mr. Parker said.

"Sure he is, Mr. Parker. But you know how dark it was in there. What is a man going to do? Turn on the lights? No, he's goin' to take a little bit of a flashlight and put tape or something over the end till it don't make no more light than a lightnin' bug. A blind person could do better with no light than a seeing one with just a little speck like that. I guess he's used to bein' blind by now. I guess he knows how to find his way around without eyes."

A hand touched Little Tib's shoulder. It seemed smaller and softer than the hand that had helped him across the creek. "He's crazy," Mr. Parker's voice said. "That Nitty. He's crazy. I'm crazy, I'm the one. But he's crazier than I am."

"He could do it, Mr. Parker. See how thin he is."

"Would you do it?" Mr. Parker asked.

Little Tib swallowed a wad of roll. "Do what?"

"Get something for us."

"I guess so."

"Nitty, build a fire," Mr. Parker said. "We won't be going any farther tonight."

"Won't be goin' this way at *all,"* Nitty said.

"You see, George," Mr. Parker said. "My authority has been temporarily abrogated. Sometimes I forget that."

Nitty chuckled somewhere farther away than Little Tib had thought he was. He must have left very silently.

"But when it is restored, I can do all the things I said I would do for you: get you into a special class for the blind, for example. You'd like that, wouldn't you, George?"

"Yes." A whippoorwill called far off to Little Tib's left, and he could hear Nitty breaking sticks.

"Have you run away from home, George?"

"Yes," Little Tib said again.

"Why?"

Little Tib shrugged. He was ready to cry again. Something was

thickening and tightening in his throat, and his eyes had begun to water.

"I think I know why," Mr. Parker said. "We might even be able to do something about that."

"Here we are," Nitty called. He dumped his load of sticks, rattling, more or less in front of Little Tib.

Later that night Little Tib lay on the ground with half of Nitty's blanket over him, and half under him. The fire was crackling not too far away. Nitty said the smoke would help to drive the mosquitoes off. Little Tib pushed the heels of his hands against his eyes and saw red and yellow flashes like a real fire. He did it again, and there was a gold nugget against a field of blue. Those were the last things he had been able to see for a long time, and he was afraid, each time he summoned them up, that they would not come. On the other side of the fire Mr. Parker breathed the heavy breath of sleep.

Nitty bent over Little Tib, smoothing his blanket, then pressing it in against his sides. "It's okay," Little Tib said.

"You're goin' back to Martinsburg with us," Nitty said.

"I'm going to Sugarland."

"After. What you want to go there for?"

Little Tib tried to explain about Sugarland, but could not find words. At last he said, "In Sugarland they know who you are."

"Guess it's too late then for me. Even if I found somebody knew who I was I wouldn't be them no more."

"You're Nitty," Little Tib said.

"That's right. You know I used to go out with those gals a lot. Know what they said? Said, 'You're the custodian over at the school, aren't you?' Or, 'You're the one that did for Buster Johnson.' Didn't none of them know who I was. Only ones that did was the little children."

Little Tib heard Nitty's clothes rustle as he stood up, then the sound his feet made walking softly away. He wondered if Nitty was going to stay awake all night; then he heard him lie down.

His father had him by the hand. They had left the hanging-down train, and were walking along one of the big streets. He could see. He knew he should not have been noticing that particularly, but he did, and far behind it somewhere was knowing that if he woke up he would not see. He looked into store windows, and he could see big dolls like girls' dolls wearing fur coats. Every hair on every coat stood out drenched with light. He looked at

the street and could see all the cars like big, bright-colored bugs. "Here," Big Tib said; they went into a glass thing that spun them around and dumped them out inside a building, then into an elevator all made of glass that climbed the inside wall almost like an ant, starting and stopping like an ant did. "We should buy one of these," Little Tib said. "Then we wouldn't have to climb the steps."

He looked up and saw that his father was crying. He took out his, Little Tib's, own card and put it in the machine, then made Little Tib sit down in the seat and look at the bright light. The machine was a man in a white coat who took off his glasses and said, "We don't know who this child is, but he certainly isn't anyone." "Look at the bright light again, Little Tib," his father said, and something in the way he said it told Little Tib that the man in the white coat was much stronger than he was. He looked at the bright light and tried to catch himself from falling.

And woke up. It was so dark that he wondered for a minute where the bright light went. Then he remembered. He rolled over a little and put his hand out toward the fire until he could feel some heat. He could hear it too when he listened. It crackled and snapped, but not very much. He lay the way he had been before, then turned over on his back. A train went past, and after a while an owl hooted.

He could see here too. Something inside him told him how lucky he was, seeing twice in one night. Then he forgot about it, looking at the flowers. They were big and round, growing on long stalks, and had yellow petals and dark brown centers, and when he was not looking at them, they whirled around and around. They could see him, because they all turned their faces toward him, and when he looked at them they stopped.

For a long way he walked through them. They came a little higher than his shoulder.

Then the city came down like a cloud and settled on a hill in front of him. As soon as it was there it pretended that it had been there all the time, but Little Tib could feel it laughing underneath. It had high, green walls that sloped in as they went up. Over the top of them were towers, much taller, that belonged to the city. Those were green too, and looked like glass.

Little Tib began to run, and was immediately in front of the gates. These were very high, but there was a window in them, just over his head, that the gate-man talked through. "I want to see the king," Little Tib said, and the gate-man reached down with a long, strong arm and picked him up and pulled him through the little window and set him down again

inside. "You have to wear these," he said, and took out a pair of toy glasses like the ones Little Tib had once had in his doctor set. But when he put them on Little Tib, they were not glasses at all, only lines painted on his face, circles around his eyes joined over his nose. The gate-man held up a mirror to show him, and he had the sudden, dizzying sensation of looking at his own face.

A moment later he was walking through the city. The houses had their gardens sidewise—running up the walls so that the trees thrust out like flagpoles. The water in the birdbaths never ran out until a bird landed in it. Then a fine spray of drops fell to the street like rain.

The palace had a wall too, but it was made by trees holding hands. Little Tib went through a gate of bowing elephants and saw a long, long stairway. It was so long and so high that it seemed that there was no palace at all, only the steps going up and up forever into the clouds, and then he remembered that the whole city had come down out of the clouds. The king was coming down those stairs, walking very slowly. She was a beautiful woman, and although she did not look at all like her, Little Tib knew that she was his mother.

He had been seeing so much while he was asleep that when he woke up he had to remember why it was so dark. Somewhere in the back of his mind there was still the idea that waking should be light and sleep dark, and not the other way around. Nitty said: "You ought to wash your face. Can you find the water all right?"

Little Tib was still thinking of the king, with her dress all made of Christmas-tree stuff; but he could. He splashed water on his face and arms while he thought about how to tell Nitty about his dream. By the time he had finished, everything in the dream was gone except for the king's face.

Most of the time Mr. Parker sounded like he was important and Nitty was not, but when he said, "Are we going to eat this morning, Nitty?" it was the other way around.

"We eat on the train," Nitty told him.

"We are going to catch a train, George, to Martinsburg," Mr. Parker told Little Tib.

Little Tib thought that the trains went too fast to be caught, but he did not say that.

"Should be one by here pretty soon," Nitty said. "They got to be going slow because there's a road crosses the tracks down there a way. They won't have no time to get the speed up again before they get here. You

won't have to run—I'll just pick you up an' carry you."

A rooster crowed way off somewhere.

Mr. Parker said: "When I was a young man, George, everyone thought all the trains would be gone soon. They never said what would replace them, however. Later it was believed that it would be all right to have trains, provided they were extremely modern in appearance. That was accomplished, as I suppose you learned last year, by substituting aluminum, fiberglass, and magnesium for much of the steel employed previously. That not only changed the image of the trains to something acceptable, but saved a great deal of energy by reducing weight—the ostensible purpose of the cosmetic redesign." Mr. Parker paused, and Little Tib could hear the water running past the place where they were sitting, and the sound the wind made blowing the trees.

"There only remained the awkward business of the crews," Mr. Parker continued. "Fortunately it was found that mechanisms of the same type that had already displaced educators and others could be substituted for railway engineers and brakemen. Who would have believed that running a train was as routine and mechanical a business as teaching a class? Yet it proved to be so."

"Wish they would do away with those railroad police," Nitty said.

"You, George, are a victim of the same system," Mr. Parker continued. "It was the wholesale displacement of labor, and the consequent nomadism, that resulted in the present reliance on retinal patterns as means of identification. Take Nitty and me, for example. We are going to Macon—"

"We're goin' to Martinsburg, Mr. Parker," Nitty said. "This train we'll be catching will be going the *other* way. We're goin' to get into that building and let you program, you remember?"

"I was hypothesizing," Mr. Parker said. "We are going—say—to Macon. There we can enter a store, register our retinal patterns, and receive goods to be charged to the funds which will by then have accumulated in our social relief accounts. No other method of identification is so certain, or so adaptable to data processing techniques."

"Used to have money you just handed around," Nitty said.

"The emperors of China used lumps of silver stamped with an imperial seal," Mr. Parker told him. "But by restricting money solely—in the final analysis—to entries kept by the Federal Reserve Bank, the entire cost of printing and coining is eliminated; and of course control for tax purposes

is complete. While for identification, retinal patterns are unsurpassed in every—"

Little Tib stopped listening. A train was coming. He could hear it far away, hear it go over a bridge somewhere, hear it coming closer. He felt around for his stick and got a good hold on it.

Then the train was louder, but the noise did not come as fast. He heard the whistle blow. Then Nitty was picking him up with one strong arm. There was a swoop and a jump and a swing, swing, swing, and they were on the train and Nitty set him down. "If you want to," Nitty said, "you can sit here at the edge and hang your feet over. But you be careful."

Little Tib was careful. "Where's Mr. Parker?"

"Laying down in the back. He's going to sleep—he sleeps a lot."

"Can he hear us?"

"You like sitting like this? This is one of my most favorite of all things to do. I know you can't see everything go by like I can, but I could tell you about it. You take right now. We are going up a long grade, with nothing but pinewoods on this side of the train. I bet you there is all kinds of animals in there. You like animals, George? Bears and big old cats."

"Can he hear us?" Little Tib asked again.

"I don't think so, because he usually goes to sleep right away. But it might be better to wait a little while, if you've got something you don't want him to hear."

"All right."

"Now there's one thing we've got to worry about. Sometimes there are railroad policemen on these trains. If someone is riding on them, they throw him off. I don't think they'd throw a little boy like you off, but they would throw Mr. Parker and me off. You they would probably take back with them and give over to the real police in the next town."

"They wouldn't want me," Little Tib said.

"How's that?"

"Sometimes they take me, but they don't know who I am. They always let me go again."

"I guess maybe you've been gone from home longer than what I thought. How long since you left your Mom and Dad?"

"I don't know."

"Must be some way of telling blind people. There's lots of blind people."

"The machine usually knows who blind people are. That's what they say. But it doesn't know me."

"They take pictures of your retinas—you know about that?"

Little Tib said nothing.

"That's the part inside your eye that sees the picture. If you think about your eye like it was a camera, you got a lens in the front, and then the film. Well, your retinas is the film. That's what they take a picture of. I guess yours is gone. You know what it is you got wrong with your eyes?"

"I'm blind."

"Yes, but you don't know what it is, do you, baby. Wish you could look out there now—we're going over a deep place; lots of trees, and rocks and water way down below."

"Can Mr. Parker hear us?" Little Tib asked again.

"Guess not. Looks like he's asleep by now."

"Who is he?"

"Like he told you. He's the superintendent; only they don't want him any more."

"Is he really crazy?"

"Sure. He's a dangerous man, too, when the fit comes on him. He got this little thing put into his head when he was superintendent to make him a better one—extra remembering and arithmetic, and things that would make him want to work more and do a good job. The school district paid for most of it; I don't know what you call them, but there's a lot of teenie little circuits in them."

"Didn't they take it out when he wasn't superintendent anymore?"

"Sure, but his head was used to it by then, I guess. Child, do you feel well?"

"I'm fine."

"You don't look so good. Kind of pale. I suppose it might just be that you washed off a lot of the dirt when I told you to wash that face. You think it could be that?"

"I feel all right."

"Here, let me see if you're hot." Little Tib felt Kitty's big, rough hand against his forehead. "You feel a bit hot to me."

"I'm not sick."

"Look there! You see that? There was a bear out there. A big old bear, black as could be."

"Probably it was a dog."

"You think I don't know a bear? It stood up and waved at us."

"Really, Nitty?"

"Well, not like a person would. It didn't say *bye-bye,* or *hi there.* But it held up one big old arm." Nitty's hands lifted Little Tib's right arm.

A strange voice, a lady's voice, Little Tib thought, said, "Hello there yourself." He heard the thump as somebody's feet hit the floor of the boxcar; then another thump as somebody else's did.

"Now wait a minute," Nitty said. "Now you look here."

"Don't get excited," another lady's voice told him.

"Don't you try to throw us off of this train. I got a little boy here, a little blind boy. He can't jump off no train."

Mr. Parker said, "What's going on here, Nitty?"

"Railroad police, Mr. Parker. They're going to make us jump off of this train."

Little Tib could hear the scraping sounds Mr. Parker made when he stood up, and wondered whether Mr. Parker was a big man or a little man, and how old he was. He had a pretty good idea about Nitty; but he was not sure of Mr. Parker, though he thought Mr. Parker was pretty young. He decided he was also medium-sized.

"Let me introduce myself," Mr. Parker said. "As superintendent, I am in charge of the three schools in the Martinsburg area."

"Hi," one of the ladies said.

"You will begin with the lower grades, as all of our new teachers do. As you gain seniority, you may move up if you wish. What are your specialties?"

"Are you playing a game?"

Nitty said: "He don't quite understand—he just woke up. You woke him up."

"Sure."

"You going to throw us off the train?"

"How far are you going?"

"Just to Howard. Only that far. Now you listen, this little boy is blind, and sick too. We want to take him to the doctor at Howard—he ran away from home."

Mr. Parker said, "I will not leave this school until I am ready. I am in charge of the entire district."

"Mr. Parker isn't exactly altogether well either," Nitty told the women.

"What has he been using?"

"He's just like that sometimes."

"He sounds like he's been shooting up on chalk."

Little Tib asked, "What's your name?"

"Say," Nitty said, "that's right. You know, I never did ask that. This little boy here is telling me I'm not polite."

"I'm Alice," one of the ladies said.

"Mickie," said the other.

"But we don't want to know your names," Alice continued. "See, suppose someway they heard you were on the train—we'd have to say who you were."

"And where you were going," Mickie put in.

"Nice people like you—why do you want to be railroad police?"

Alice laughed. "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this? I've heard that one before."

"Watch yourself, Alice," Mickie said. "He's trying to make out."

Alice said, "What'd you three want to be 'boes for?"

"We didn't. 'Cept maybe for this little boy here. He run away from home because the part of his eyes that they take pictures of is gone, and his momma and daddy couldn't get benefits. At least, that's what I think. Is that right, George?"

Mr. Parker said, "I'll introduce you to your classes in a moment."

"Him and me used to be in the school," Nitty continued. "Had good jobs there, or so we believed. Then one day that big computer downtown says, 'Don't need you no more,' and out we goes."

"You don't have to talk funny for us," Mickie said.

"Well, that's a relief. I always do it a little, though, for Mr. Parker. It makes him feel better."

"What was your job?"

"Buildings maintenance. I took care of the heating plant, and serviced the teaching and cleaning machines, and did the electrical repair work generally."

"Nitty!" Little Tib called.

"I'm here, li'l boy. I won't go way."

"Well, we have to go," Mickie said. "They'll miss us pretty soon if we don't get back to patrolling this train. You fellows remember you promised you'd get off at Howard. And try not to let anyone see you."

Mr. Parker said, "You may rely on our cooperation."

Little Tib could hear the sound of the women's boots on the boxcar floor, and the little grunt Alice gave as she took hold of the ladder outside the door and swung herself out. Then there was a popping noise, as though someone had opened a bottle of soda, and a bang and clatter when something struck the back of the car.

His lungs and nose and mouth all burned. He felt a rush of saliva too great to contain. It spilled out of his lips and down his shirt; he wanted to run, and he thought of the old place, where the creek cut (cold as ice) under banks of milkweed and goldenrod. Nitty was yelling: "Throw it out! Throw it out!" And somebody, he thought it was Mr. Parker, ran full tilt into the side of the car. Little Tib was on the hill above the creek again, looking down across the bluebonnets toward the surging, glass-dark water, and a kite-flying west wind was blowing.

He sat down again on the floor of the boxcar. Mr. Parker must not have been hurt too badly, because he could hear him moving around, as well as Nitty.

"You kick it out, Mr. Parker?" Nitty said. "That was good."

"Must have been the boy. Nitty—"

"Yes, Mr. Parker."

"We're on a train . . . The railroad police threw a gas bomb to get us off. Is that correct?"

"That's true sure enough, Mr. Parker."

"I had the strangest dream. I was standing in the center corridor of the Grovehurst school, with my back leaning against the lockers. I could feel them."

"Yeah."

"I was speaking to two new teachers—"

"I know." Little Tib could feel Nitty's fingers on his face, and Nitty's voice whispered, "You all right?"

"—giving them the usual orientation talk. I heard something make a loud noise, like a rocket. I looked up then, and saw that one of the children had thrown a stink bomb—it was flying over my head, laying a trail of smoke. I went after it like I used to go after a ball when I was an outfielder in college, and I ran right into the wall."

"You sure did. Your face looks pretty bad, Mr. Parker."

"Hurts too. Look, there it is."

"Sure enough. Nobody kick it out after all."

"No. Here, feel it; it's still warm. I suppose a chemical burns to generate the gas."

"You want to feel, George? Here, you can hold it."

Little Tib felt the warm metal cylinder pressed into his hands. There was a seam down the side, like a Coca-Cola can, and a funny-shaped thing on top.

Nitty said, "I wonder what happened to all the gas."

"It blew out," Mr. Parker told him.

"It shouldn't of done that. They threw it good—got it right back in the back of the car. It shouldn't blow out that fast, and those things go on making gas for a long time."

"It must have been defective," Mr. Parker said.

"Must have been." There was no expression in Nitty's voice.

Little Tib asked, "Did those ladies throw it?"

"Sure did. Came down here and talked to us real nice first, then to get up on top of the car and do something like that."

"Nitty, I'm thirsty."

"Sure you are. Feel of him, Mr. Parker. He's hot."

Mr. Parker's hand was softer and smaller than Nitty's. "Perhaps it was the gas."

"He was hot before."

"There's no nurse's office on this train, I'm afraid."

"There's a doctor in Howard. I thought to get him to Howard . . ."

"We haven't anything in our accounts now."

Little Tib was tired. He lay down on the floor of the car, and heard the empty gas canister roll away, too tired to care.

"... a sick child . . ." Nitty said. The boxcar rocked under him, and the wheels made a rhythmic roar like the rushing of blood in the heart of a giantess.

He was walking down a narrow dirt path. All the trees, on both sides of the path, had red leaves, and red grass grew around their roots. They had faces, too, in their trunks, and talked to one another as he passed. Apples and cherries hung from their boughs.

The path twisted around little hills, all covered with the red trees. Cardinals hopped in the branches, and one fluttered to his shoulder. Little Tib was very happy; he told the cardinal, "I don't want to go away—ever. I want to stay here, forever. Walking down this path."

"You will, my son," the cardinal said. It made the sign of the cross with one wing.

They went around a bend, and there was a tiny little house ahead, no bigger than the box a refrigerator comes in. It was painted with red and white stripes, and had a pointed roof. Little Tib did not like the look of it, but he took a step nearer.

A full-sized man came out of the little house. He was made all of copper, so he was coppery-red all over, like a new pipe for the bathroom. His body was round, and his head was round too, and they were joined by a real piece of bathroom pipe. He had a big mustache stamped right into the copper, and he was polishing himself with a rag. "Who are you?" he said.

Little Tib told him.

"I don't know you," the copper man said. "Come closer so I can recognize you."

Little Tib came closer. Something was hammering, *bam, bam, bam,* in the hills behind the red and white house. He tried to see what it was, but there was a mist over them, as though it were early morning. "What is that noise?" he asked the copper man.

"That is the giant," the copper man said. "Can't. . . you ... see ... her?"

Little Tib said that he could not.

"Then . . . wind ... my ... talking key . . . I'll ... tell ... you .. ."

The copper man turned around, and Little Tib saw that there were three keyholes in his back. The middle one had a neat copper label beside

it printed with the words "TALKING ACTION."

". . . about . . . her."

There was a key with a beautiful handle hanging on a hook beside the hole. He took it and began to wind the copper man.

"That's better," the copper man said. "My words— thanks to your fine winding—will blow away the mists, and you'll be able to see her. I can stop her; but if I don't, you'llbekilledthatsenough."

As the copper man had said, the mists were lifting. Some, however, did not seem to blow away—they were not mists at all, but a mountain. The mountain moved, and was not a mountain at all, but a big woman wreathed in mist, twice as high as the hills around her. She was holding a broom, and while Little Tib watched, a rat as big as a railroad train ran out of a cave in one of the hills. *Bam,* the woman struck at it with her broom; but it ran into another cave. In a moment it ran out again. *Bam!* The woman was his mother, but he sensed that she would not know him—that she was cut off from him in some way by the mists and the need to strike at the rat.

"That's my mother," he told the copper man. "And that rat was in our kitchen in the new place. But she didn't keep hitting at it and hitting at it like that."

"She is only hitting at it once," the copper man said, "but that once is over and over again. That's why she always misses it. But if you try to go any farther down this path, her broom will kill you and sweep you away. Unless I stop it."

"I could run between the swings," Little Tib said. He could have, too.

"The broom is bigger than you think," the copper man told him. "And you can't see it as well as you think you can."

"I want you to stop her," Little Tib said. He was sure he could run between the blows of the broom, but he was sorry for his mother, who had to hit at the rat all the time, and never rest.

"Then you must let me look at you."

"Go ahead," Little Tib said.

"You have to wind my motion key."

The lowest keyhole was labeled "MOVING ACTION." It was the largest of all. There was a big key hanging beside it, and Little Tib used it to wind the moving action, hearing a heavy pawl clack inside the copper man each time he turned the key. "That's enough," the copper man said. Little Tib

replaced the key, and the copper man turned around.

"Now I must look into your eyes," he said. His own eyes were stampings in the copper, but Little Tib knew that he could see out of them. He put his hands on Little Tib's face, one on each side. They were harder even than Nitty's, but smaller too, and very cold. Little Tib saw his eyes coming closer and closer.

He saw his own eyes reflected in the copper man's face as if they were in a mirror, and they had little flames in them like the flames of two candles in church; and the flames were going out. The copper man moved his face closer and closer to his own. It got darker and darker. Little Tib said, "Don't you know me?"

"You have to wind my thinking key," the copper man said.

Little Tib reached behind him, stretching his arms as far as they would go around the copper body. His fingers found the smallest hole of all, and a little hook beside it; but there was no key.

A baby was crying. There were medicine smells, and a strange woman's voice said, "There, there." Her hands touched his cheeks, the hard, cold hands of the copper man. Little Tib remembered that he could not really see at all, not any more.

"He *is* sick, isn't he," the woman said. "He's hot as fire. And screaming like that."

"Yes, ma'am," Nitty said. "He's sick sure enough."

A little girl's voice said, "What's wrong with him, Mamma?"

"He's running a fever, dear, and of course he's blind."

Little Tib said, "I'm all right."

Mr. Parker's voice told him, "You will be when the doctor sees you, George."

"I can stand up," Little Tib said. He had discovered that he was sitting on Nitty's lap, and it embarrassed him.

"You awake now?" Nitty asked.

Little Tib slid off his lap and felt around for his stick, but it was gone.

"You been sleepin' ever since we were on the train. Never did wake up more than halfway, even when we got off."

"Hello," the little girl said. *Bam. Bam. Bam.*

"Hello," Little Tib said back to her.

"Don't let him touch your face, dear. His hands are dirty."

Little Tib could hear Mr. Parker talking to Nitty, but he did not pay any attention to them.

"I have a baby," the girl told him, "and a dog. His name is Muggly. My baby's name is Virginia Jane." *Bam.*

"You walk funny," Little Tib said.

"I have to."

He bent down and touched her leg. Bending down made his head peculiar. There was a ringing sound he knew was not real, and it seemed to have fallen off him, and to be floating around in front of him somewhere. His fingers felt the edge of the little girl's skirt, then her leg, warm and dry, then a rubber thing with metal under it, and metal strips like the copper man's neck going down at the sides. He reached inside them and found her leg again, but it was smaller than his own arm.

"Don't let him hurt her," the woman said.

Nitty said, "Why, he won't hurt her. What are you afraid of? A little boy like that."

He thought of his own legs walking down the path, walking through the spinning flowers toward the green city. The little girl's leg was like them. It was bigger than he had thought, growing bigger under his fingers.

"Come on," the little girl said. "Mamma's got Virginia Jane. Want to see her?" *Bam.* "Momma, can I take my brace off?"

"No, dear."

"I take it off at home."

"That's when you're going to lie down, dear, or have a bath."

"I don't need it, Momma. I really don't. See?"

The woman screamed. Little Tib covered his ears. When they had still lived in the old place and his mother and father had talked too loudly, he had covered his ears like that, and they had seen him and become more quiet. It did not work with the woman. She kept on screaming.

A lady who worked for the doctor tried to quiet her, and at last the doctor herself came out and gave her something. Little Tib could not see what it was, but he heard her say over and over, "Take this, take this." And finally the woman took it.

Then they made the little girl and the woman go into the doctor's office. There were more people waiting than Little Tib had known about, and

they were all talking now. Nitty took him by the arm. "I don't want to sit in your lap," Little Tib said. "I don't like sitting in laps."

"You can sit here," Nitty said. He was almost whispering. "We'll move Virginia Jane over."

Little Tib climbed up into a padded plastic seat. Nitty was on one side of him, and Mr. Parker on the other.

"It's too bad," Nitty said, "You couldn't see that little girl's leg. I saw it. It was just a little matchstick-sized thing when we set down here. When they carried her in, it looked just like the other one."

"That's nice," Little Tib said.

"We were wondering—did you have something to do with that?"

Little Tib did not know, and so he sat silent.

"Don't push him, Nitty," Mr. Parker said.

"I'm not pushing him. I just asked. It's important."

"Yes, it is," Mr. Parker said. "You think about it, George, and if you have anything to tell us, let us know. We'll listen."

Little Tib sat there for a long time, and at last the lady who worked for the doctor came and said, "Is it the boy?"

"He has a fever," Mr. Parker told her.

"We have to get his pattern. Bring him over here."

Nitty said, "No use." And Mr. Parker said, "You won't be able to take his pattern—his retinas are gone."

The lady who worked for the doctor said nothing for a little while; then she said, "We'll try anyway," and took Little Tib's hand and led him to where a bright light machine was. He knew it was a bright light machine from the feel and smell of it, and the way it fitted around his face. After a while she let him pull his eyes away from the machine.

"He needs to see the doctor," Nitty said. "I know without a pattern you can't charge the government for it. But he is a sick child."

The lady said, "If I start a card on him, they'll want to know who he is."

"Feel his head. He's burning up."

"They'll think he might be in the country illegally. Once an investigation like that starts, you can never stop it."

Mr. Parker asked, "Can we talk to the doctor?"

"That's what I've been telling you. You can't see the doctor."

"What about me. I'm ill."

"I thought it was the boy."

"I'm ill too. Here." Mr. Parker's hands on his shoulders guided Little Tib out of the chair in front of the bright light machine, so that Mr. Parker could sit down himself instead. Mr. Parker leaned forward, and the machine hummed. "Of course," Mr. Parker said, "I'll have to take him in with me. He's too small to leave alone in the waiting room."

"This man could watch him."

"He has to go."

"Yes, ma'am," Nitty said, "I sure do. I shouldn't have stayed around this long, except this was all so interesting."

Little Tib took Mr. Parker's hand, and they went through narrow, twisty corridors into a little room to see the doctor.

"There's no complaint on this," the doctor said. "What's the trouble with you?"

Mr. Parker told her about Little Tib, and said that she could put down anything on his own card that she wanted.

"This is irregular," the doctor said. "I shouldn't be doing this. What's wrong with his eyes?"

"I don't know. Apparently he has no retinas."

"There are such things as retinal transplants. They aren't always effective."

"Would they permit him to be identified? The seeing's not really that important."

"I suppose so."

"Could you get him into a hospital?"

"No."

"Not without a pattern, you mean."

"That's right. I'd like to tell you otherwise, but it wouldn't be the truth. They'd never take him."

"I understand."

"I've got a lot of patients to see. I'm putting you down for influenza. Give him these, they ought to reduce his fever. If he's not better tomorrow,

come again."

Later, when things were cooling off, and the day-birds were all quiet, and the night-birds had not begun yet, and Nitty had made a fire and was cooking something, he said, "I don't understand why she wouldn't help the child."

"She gave him something for his fever."

"More than that. She should have done more than that."

"There are so many people—"

"I know that. I've heard all that. Not really that many at all. More in China and some other places. You think that medicine is helping him?"

Mr. Parker put his hand on Little Tib's head. "I think so."

"We goin' to stay here so we can take him, or keep on goin' back to Martinsburg?"

"We'll see how he is in the morning."

"You know, the way you are now, Mr. Parker, I think you might do it."

"I'm a good programmer, Nitty. I really am."

"I know you are. You work that program right, and that machine will find out they need a man running it again. Need a maintenance man too. Why does a man feel so bad if he don't have real payin' work to do—tell me that. Did I let them put something in my head like you?"

"You know as well as I," Mr. Parker said.

Little Tib was no longer listening to them. He was thinking about the little girl and her leg. I dreamed it, he thought. Nobody can do that. I dreamed that I only had to touch her, and it was all right. That means what is real is the other one, the copper man and the big woman with the broom.

An owl called, and he remembered the little buzzy clock that stood beside his mother's bed in the new place. Early in the morning the clock would ring, and then his father had to get up. When they had lived in the old place, and his father had a lot of work to do, he had not needed a clock. Owls must be the real clocks; they made their noise so he would wake up to the real place.

He slept. Then he was awake again, but he could not see. "You best eat something," Nitty said. "You didn't eat nothing last night. You went to sleep, and I didn't want to rouse you." He gave Little Tib a scrap of corn-bread, pressing it into his hands. "It's just leftovers now," he said,

"but it's good."

"Are we going to get on another train?"

"Train doesn't go to Martinsburg. Now, we don't have a plate, so I'm putting this on a piece of newspaper for you. You get your lap smoothed out so it doesn't fall off."

Little Tib straightened his legs. He was hungry, and he decided it was the first time he had been hungry in a long while. He asked, "Will we walk?"

"Too far. Going to hitchhike. All ready now? It's right in the middle." Little Tib felt the thick paper, still cool from the night before, laid upon his thighs. There was weight in the center; he moved his fingers to it and found a yam. The skin was still on it, but it had been cut in two. "Baked that in the fire last night," Nitty said. "There's a piece of ham there too that we saved for you. Don't miss that."

Little Tib held the half yam like an ice cream cone in one hand, and peeled back the skin with the other. It was loose from having been in the coals, and crackly and hard. It broke away in flakes and chips like the bark of an old sycamore. He bit into the yam and it was soft but stringy, and its goodness made him want a drink of water.

"Went to a poor woman's house," Nitty said. "That's where you go if you want something to eat for sure. A rich person is afraid of you. Mr. Parker and I, we can't buy anything. We haven't got credit for September yet—we were figuring we'd have that in Macon."

"They won't give anything for me," Little Tib said. "Mama had to feed me out of hers."

"That's only because they can't get no pattern. Anyway, what difference does it make? That credit's so little-bitty that you almost might not have anything. Mr. Parker gets a better draw than I do because he was making more when we were working, but that's not very much, and you wouldn't get but the minimum."

"Where is Mr. Parker?"

"Down a way, washing. See, hitchhiking is hard if you don't look clean. Nobody will pick you up. We got one of those disposable razor things last night, and he's using it now."

"Should I wash?"

"It couldn't hurt," Nitty said. "You got tear-streaks on your face from cryin' last night." He took Little Tib's hand and led him along a cool,

winding path with high weeds on the sides. The weeds were wet with dew, and the dew was icy cold. They met Mr. Parker at the edge of the water. Little Tib took off his shoes and clothes and waded in. It was cold, but not as cold as the dew had been. Nitty waded in after him and splashed him, and poured water from his cupped hands over his head, and at last ducked him under—telling him first— to get his hair clean. Then the two of them washed their clothes in the water and hung them on bushes to dry.

"Going to be hard, hitchhiking this morning," Nitty said.

Little Tib asked why.

"Too many of us. The more there is, the harder to get rides."

"We could separate," Mr. Parker suggested. "I'll draw straws with you to see who gets George."

"No."

"I'm all right. I'm fine."

"You're fine now."

Mr. Parker leaned forward. Little Tib knew because he could hear his clothes rustle, and his voice got closer as well as louder. "Nitty, who's the boss here?"

"You are, Mr. Parker. Only if you went off by yourself like that, I'd worry so I'd about go crazy. What have I ever done to you that you would want to worry me like that?"

Mr. Parker laughed. "All right, I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll try until ten o'clock together. If we haven't gotten a ride by then, I'll walk half a mile down the road and give the two of you the first shot at anything that comes along." Little Tib heard him get to his feet. "You think George's clothes are dry by now?"

"Still a little damp."

"I can wear them," Little Tib said. He had worn wet clothing before, when he had been drenched by rain.

"That's a good boy. Help him put them on, Nitty."

When they were walking out to the road, and he could tell that Mr. Parker was some distance ahead of them, Little Tib asked Nitty if he thought they would get a ride before ten.

"I know we will," Nitty said.

"How do you know?"

"Because I've been praying for it hard, and what I pray hard for I always get."

Little Tib thought about that. "You could pray for a job," he said. He remembered that Nitty had told him he wanted a job.

"I did that, right after I lost my old one. Then I saw Mr. Parker again and how he had got to be, and I started going around with him to look after him. So then I had a job—I've got it now. Mr. Parker's the one that doesn't have a job."

"You don't get paid," Little Tib said practically.

"We get our draws, and I use that—both of them together—for whatever we need; and if he kept his and I kept mine, he would have more than me. You be quiet now—we're coming to the road."

They stood there a long time. Occasionally a car or a truck went by. Little Tib began to wonder if Mr. Parker and Nitty were holding out their thumbs. He remembered seeing people holding out their thumbs when he and his parents were moving from the old place. He thought of what Nitty had said about praying and began to pray himself, thinking about God and asking that the next car stop.

For a long time more no cars stopped. Little Tib thought about a cattle truck stopping and told God he would ride with the cattle. He thought about a garbage truck stopping, and told God he would ride on top of the garbage. Then he heard something old coming down the road. It rattled, and the engine made a strange, high-pitched noise an engine should not make. "Looks like a old school bus," Nitty said. "But look at those pictures on the side."

"It's stopping," Mr. Parker said, and then Little Tib could hear the sound the doors made opening.

A new voice, high for a man's voice and talking fast, said, "You seek to go this way? You may come in. All are welcome in the temple of Deva."

Mr. Parker got in, and Nitty lifted Little Tib up the steps. The doors closed behind them. There was a peculiar smell in the air.

"You have a small boy. That is well. The god is most fond of small children and the aged. Small boys and girls have innocence. Old persons have tranquility and wisdom. These are the things that are pleasing to the god. We should strive without effort to retain innocence, and to attain tranquility and wisdom as soon as we can."

Nitty said, "Right on."

"He is a handsome boy." Little Tib felt the driver's breath, warm and sweet, on his face, and something dangling struck him lightly on the chest. He caught it, and found that it was a piece of wood with three crossbars, suspended from a thong. "Ah," the new voice said, "you have discovered my amulet."

"George can't see," Mr. Parker explained. "You'll have to excuse him."

"I am aware of this, having observed it earlier; but perhaps it is painful for him to hear it spoken of. And now I must go forward again before the police come to inquire why I have stopped. There are no seats—I have removed all the seats but this one. It is better that people take seats on the floor before Deva. But you may stand behind me if you wish. Is that agreeable?"

"We'll be happy to stand," Mr. Parker said.

The bus lurched into motion. Little Tib held onto Nitty with one hand and onto a pole he found with the other. "We are in motion again. That is fitting. It would be most fitting if we might move always, never stopping. I had thought to build my temple on a boat—a boat moves always because of the rocking of the waves. I may still do this."

"Are you going through Martinsburg?"

"Yes, yes, yes," the driver said. "Allow me to introduce myself: I am Dr. Prithivi."

Mr. Parker shook hands with Dr. Prithivi, and Little Tib felt the bus swerve from its lane. Mr. Parker yelled, and when the bus was straight again, he introduced Nitty and Little Tib.

"If you're a doctor," Nitty said, "you could maybe look at George sometime. He hasn't been well."

"I am not this sort of doctor," Dr. Prithivi explained. "Rather instead I am a doctor for the soul. I am a Doctor of Divinity of the University of Bombay. If someone is sick a physician should be summoned. Should they be evil they should summon me."

Nitty said, "Usually the family don't do that because they're so glad to see them finally making some money."

Dr. Prithivi laughed, a little high laugh like music. It seemed to Little Tib that it went skipping around the roof of the old bus, playing on a whistle. "But we are all evil," Dr. Prithivi said, "and so few of us make money. How do you explain that? That is the joke. I am a doctor for evil, and everyone in the world should be calling me even myself all the time. But I cannot come. Office hours nine to five, that is what my sign should

say. No house calls. But instead I bring my house, the house of the god, to everyone. Here I collect my fares, and I tell all who come to step to the back of my bus."

"We didn't know you had to pay," Little Tib said. He was worried because Nitty had told him that he and Mr. Parker had no money in their accounts.

"No one must pay—that is the beauty. Those who desire to buy near-diesel for the god may imprint their cards here, but all is voluntary and other things we accept too."

"Sure is dark back there," Nitty said.

"Let me show you. You see we are approaching a roadside park? So well is the universe regulated. There we will stop and recreate ourselves, and I will show you the god before proceeding again."

Little Tib felt the bus swerve with breathtaking suddenness. During the last year that they had lived at the old place, he had ridden a bus to school. He remembered how hot it had been, and how ordinary it had seemed after the first week; now he was dreaming of riding this strange-smelling old bus in the dark, but soon he would wake and be on that other bus again; then, when the doors opened, he would run through the hot, bright sunshine to the school.

The doors opened, clattering and grinding. "Let us go out," Dr. Prithivi said. "Let us recreate ourselves and see what is to be seen here."

"It's a lookout point," Mr. Parker told him. "You can see parts of seven counties from here." Little Tib felt himself lifted down the steps. There were other people around; he could hear their voices, though they were not close.

"It is so very beautiful," Dr. Prithivi said. "We have also beautiful mountains in India—the Himalayas, they are called. This fine view makes me think of them. When I was just a little boy, my father rented a house for summer in the Himalayas. Rhododendrons grew wild there, and once I saw a leopard in our garden."

A strange voice said: "You see mountain lions here. Early in the morning is the time for it—look up on the big rocks as you drive along."

"Exactly so!" Dr. Prithivi sounded excited. "It was very early when I saw the leopard."

Little Tib tried to remember what a leopard looked like, and found that he could not. Then he tried a cat, but it was not a very good cat. He felt hot and tired, and reminded himself that it had only been a little while ago

that Nitty had washed his clothes. The seam at the front of his shirt, where the buttons went, was still damp. When he had been able to see, he had known precisely what a cat looked like. He felt now that if only he could hold a cat in his arms he would know again. He imagined such a cat, large and long-haired. It was there, unexpectedly, standing in front of him. Not a cat, but a lion, standing on its hind feet. It had a long tail with a tuft at the end, and a red ribbon knotted in its mane. Its face was a kindly blur and it was dancing— dancing to the remembered flute-music of Dr. Prithivi's laughter—just out of reach.

Little Tib took a step toward it and found his way barred by two metal pipes. He slipped between them. The lion danced, hopping and skipping, striking poses without stopping; it bowed and jigged away, and Little Tib danced too, after it. It would be cheating to run or walk—he would lose the game, even if he caught the lion. It high-stepped, far away then back again almost close enough to touch, and he followed it.

Behind him he heard the gasp of the people, but it seemed dim and distant compared to the piping to which he danced. The lion jigged nearer and he caught its paws and the two of them romped up and down, its face growing clearer and clearer as they whirled and turned—it was a funny, friendly, frightening face.

It was as though he had backed into a bush whose leaves were hands. They clasped him everywhere, drawing him backward against hard metal bars. He could hear Nitty's voice, but Nitty was crying so that he could not tell what he said. A woman was crying too—no, several women; and a man whose voice he did not know was shouting: "We've got him! We've got him!" Little Tib was not sure who he was shouting to; perhaps to nobody.

A voice he did recognize, it was Dr. Prithivi's, was saying: "I have him. You must let go of him so that I may lift him over."

Little Tib's left foot reached out as if it were moving itself and felt in front of him. There was nothing there, nothing at all. The lion was gone, and he knew, now, where he was, on the edge of a mountain, and it went down and down for a long way. Fear came.

"Let go and I will lift him over," Dr. Prithivi told someone else. Little Tib thought of how small and boneless Dr. Prithivi's hands had felt. Then Nitty's big ones took him on one side, an arm and a leg, and the medium-sized hands of Mr. Parker (or someone like him) on the other. Then he was lifted up and back, and put down on the ground.

"He walked . . ." a woman said. "Danced."

"This boy must come with me," Dr. Prithivi piped, "Get out of the way,

please." He had Little Tib's left hand. Nitty was lifting him up again, and he felt Nitty's big head come up between his legs and he settled on his shoulders. He plunged his hands into Nitty's thick hair and held on. Other hands were reaching for him; when they found him, they only touched, as though they did not want to do anything more.

"Got to set you down," Nitty said, "or you'll hit your head." The steps of the bus were under his feet, and Dr. Prithivi was helping him up.

"You must be presented to the god," said Dr. Prithivi. The inside of the bus was stuffy and hot, with a strange, spicy, oppressive smell. "Here. Now you must pray. Have you anything with which to make an offering?"

"No," Little Tib said. People had followed them into the bus.

"Then only pray." Dr. Prithivi must have had a cigarette lighter—Little Tib heard the scratching sound it made. There was a soft, "oooah" sound from the people.

"Now you see Deva," Dr. Prithivi told them. "Because you are not accustomed to such things, the first thing you have noticed is that he has six arms. It is for that reason that I wear this cross, which has six arms also. You see I wish to relate Deva to Christianity here. You will note that one of Deva's hands holds a two-armed cross. The others—I will begin here and go around—hold the crescent of Islam, the star of David, a figure of the Buddha, a phallus, and a *katana* sword, which I have chosen to represent the faith of Shintoism."

Little Tib tried to pray, as Dr. Prithivi had directed. In one way he knew what he had been doing when he had been dancing with the lion, and in another he did not. Why hadn't he fallen? He thought of how the stones at the bottom would feel when they hit his face, and shivered.

Stones he remembered very well. Potato-shaped but much larger, hard and gray. He was lost in a rocky land where frowning walls of stone were everywhere, and no plant grew. He stood in the shadow of one of these walls to escape the heat; he could see the opposite wall, and the rubble of jumbled stones between, but this time the knowledge that he could see again gave him no pleasure. He was thirsty, and pressed farther back into the shadow, and found that there was no wall there. The shadow went back and back, farther and farther into the mountain. He followed it and, turning, saw the little wedge of daylight disappear behind him, and was blind again.

The cave—for he knew it was a cave now—went on and on into the rock. Despite the lack of sunlight, it seemed to Little Tib that it grew hotter and hotter. Then from somewhere far ahead he heard a tapping and rapping,

as though an entire bag of marbles had been poured on onto a stone floor and were bouncing up and down. The noise was so odd, and Little Tib was so tired, that he sat down to listen to it.

As if his sitting had been a signal, torches kindled— first one on one side of the cave, then another on the opposite side. Behind him a gate of close-set bars banged down, and toward him, like spiders, came two grotesque figures. Their bodies were small, yet fat; their arms and legs were long and thin; their faces were the faces of mad old men, popeyed and choleric and adorned with towering peaks of fantastic hair, and spreading mustaches like the feelers of night-crawling insects, and curling three-pointed beards that seemed to have a life of their own so that they twisted and twined like snakes. These men carried long-handled axes, and wore red clothes and the widest leather belts Little Tib had ever seen. "Halt," they cried. "Cease, hold, stop, and arrest yourself. You are trespassing in the realm of the Gnome King!"

"I have stopped," Little Tib said. "And I can't arrest myself because I'm not a policeman."

"That wasn't why we asked you to do it," one of the angry-faced men pointed out.

"But it *is* an offense," added the other. "We're a Police State, you know, and it's up to you to join the force."

"In your case," continued the first gnome, "it will be the labor force."

"Come with us," both of them exclaimed, and they seized him by the arms and began to drag him across the pile of rocks.

"Stop," Little Tib demanded, "you don't know who I am."

"We don't *care* who you am, either."

"If Nitty were here, he'd fix you. Or Mr. Parker."

"Then he'd better fix Mr. Parker, because we're not broken, and we're taking you to see the Gnome King."

They went down twisted sidewise caves with no lights but the eyes of the gnomes. And through big, echoing caves with mud floors, and streams of steaming water in the middle. Little Tib thought, at first, that it was rather fun, but it became realer and realer as they went along, as though the gnomes drew strength and realness from the heat, and at last he forgot that there had ever been anyplace else, and the things the gnomes said were no longer funny.

The Gnome King's throne-cavern was brilliantly lit, and crammed with

gold and jewels. The curtains were gold—not gold-colored cloth, but real gold—and the king sat on a bed covered with a spread of linked diamonds, crosslegged. "You have trespassed my dominions," he said. "How do you plead?" He looked like the other gnomes, but thinner and meaner.

"For mercy," Little Tib said.

"Then you are guilty?"

Little Tib shook his head.

"You have to be. Only the guilty can plead for mercy."

"You are supposed to forgive trespasses," Little Tib said, and as soon as he had said that, all the bright lamps in the throne room went out. His guards began to curse, and he could hear the whistle of their axes as they swung them in the dark, looking for him.

He ran, thinking he could hide behind one of the gold curtains; but his outstretched arms never found it. He ran on and on until at last he felt sure that he was no longer in the throne room. He was about to stop and rest then, when he saw a faint light—so faint a light that for a long time he was afraid it might be no more than a trick of his eyes, like the lights he saw when he ground his hands against them. This is my dream, he thought, and I can make the light to be whatever I want it to be. All right, it will be sunlight; and when I get out into it, it will be Nitty and Mr. Parker and me camped someplace—a pretty place next to a creek of cold water— and I'll be able to see.

The light grew brighter and brighter; it was gold-colored, like sunlight.

Then Little Tib saw trees, and he began to run. He was actually running among the trees before he realized that they were not real trees, and that the light he had seen came from them—the sky overhead was a vault of cold stone. He stopped, then. The trunks and branches of the trees were silver; the leaves were gold; the grass under his feet was not grass but a carpet of green gems, and birds with real rubies in their breasts twittered and flew among the trees—but they were not real birds, only toys. There was no Nitty and no Mr. Parker and no water.

He was about to cry when he noticed the fruit. It hung under the leaves, and was gold, as they were; but for fruit that did not look so unnatural. Each was about the size of a grapefruit. Little Tib wondered if he could pull them from the trees, and the first he touched fell into his hands. It was not heavy enough to be solid. After a moment he saw that it unscrewed in the center. He sat down on the grass (which had become real grass in some way, or perhaps a carpet or a bedspread) and opened it.

There was a meal inside, but all the food was too hot to eat. He looked and looked, hoping for a salad that would be wet and cool; but there was nothing but hot meat and gravy, and smoking hot cornmeal muffins, and boiled greens so hot and dry he did not even try to put them in his mouth.

At last he found a small cup with a lid on it. It held hot tea—tea so hot it seemed to blister his lips—but he managed to drink a little of it. He put down the cup and stood up to go on through the forest of gold and silver trees, and perhaps find a better place. But all the trees had vanished, and he was in the dark again. My eyes are gone, he thought, I'm waking up. Then he saw a circle of light ahead and heard the pounding; and he knew that it was not marbles dropped on a floor he heard, but the noise of hundreds and hundreds of picks, digging gold in the mines of the gnomes.

The light grew larger—but dimmed at the same time, as a star-shaped shadow grew in it. Then it was not a star at all, but a gnome coming after him. And then it was a whole army of gnomes, one behind the other, with their arms sticking out at every angle; so that it looked like one gnome with a hundred arms, all reaching for him.

Then he woke, and everything was dark.

He sat up. "You're awake now," Nitty said.

"Yes."

"How you feel?"

Little Tib did not answer. He was trying to find out where he was. It was a bed. There was a pillow behind him, and there were clean, starched sheets. He remembered what the doctor had said about the hospital, and asked, "Am I in the hospital?"

"No, we're in a motel. How do you feel?"

"All right, I guess."

"You remember about dancing out there on the air?"

"I thought I dreamed it."

"Well, I thought I dreamed it too—but you were really out there. Everybody saw it, everybody who was around there when you did it. And then when we got you to come in close enough that we could grab hold of you and pull you in, Dr. Prithivi got you to come back to his bus."

"I remember that," Little Tib said.

"And he explained about his work and all that, and he took up a collection for it and you went to sleep. You were running that fever again, and Mr. Parker and me couldn't wake you up much."

"I had a dream," Little Tib said, and then he told Nitty all about his dream.

"When you thought you were drinking that tea, that was me giving you your medicine, is what I think. Only it wasn't hot tea, it was ice water. And that wasn't a dream you had, it was a nightmare."

"I thought it was kind of nice," Little Tib said. "The king was right there, and you could talk to him and explain what had happened." His hands found a little table next to the bed. There was a lamp on it. He knew he could not see when the bulb lit, but he made the switch go click with his fingers anyway. "How did we get here?" he asked.

"Well, after the collection, when everybody had left, that Dr. Prithivi was hot to talk to you. But me and Mr. Parker said you were with us, and we wouldn't let him unless you had a place to sleep. We told him how you were sick, and all that. So he transferred some money to Mr. Parker's account, and we rented this room. He says he always sleeps in his bus to look after that Deva."

"Is that where he is now?"

"No, he's downtown talking to the people. Probably I should have told you, but it's the day after you did that, now. You slept a whole day full, and a little more."

"Where's Mr. Parker?"

"He's looking around."

"He wants to see if that latch on that window is still broken, doesn't he? And if I'm really little enough to get between those bars."

"That's one thing, yes."

"It was nice of you to stay with me."

"I'm supposed to tell Dr. Prithivi when you're awake. That was part of our deal."

"Would you have stayed anyway?" Little Tib was climbing out of bed. He had never been in a motel before, though he did not want to say so, and he was eager to explore this one.

"Somebody would have had to stay with you." Little Tib could hear the faint whistles of the numbers on the telephone.

Later, when Dr. Prithivi came, he made Little Tib sit in a big chair with puffy arms. Little Tib told him about the dancing and how it had felt.

"You can see a bit, I think. You are not entirely blind."

Little Tib said, "No," and Nitty said, "The doctor in Howard told us he didn't have any retinas. How is anybody going to see if they don't have retinas?"

"Ah, I understand, then. Someone told you, I think, about my bus—the pictures I have made on the sides of it. Yes, that must be it. Did they tell you?"

"Tell me about what?" Little Tib asked.

Talking to Nitty, Dr. Prithivi said, "You have described the paintings on the side of my bus to this child?"

"No," Nitty said. "I looked at them when I got in, but I never talked about them."

"Yes, indeed, I did not think so. It was not likely I think that you had seen it before I stopped for you on the road, and you were in my presence after that. Nevertheless, there is a picture on the left side of my bus that is a picture of a man with a lion's head. It is Vishnu destroying the demon Hiranyakasipu. Is it not interesting that this boy, arriving in a vehicle with such a picture should be led to dance on air by a lion-headed figure? It was Vishnu also who circled the universe in two strides; this is a kind of dancing on air, perhaps."

"Uh-huh," Nitty said. "But George here couldn't have seen that picture."

"But perhaps the picture saw him—that is the point you are missing. Still, the lion has many significations. Among the Jews, it is the emblem of the tribe of Judah. For this reason the Emperor of Ethiopia is styled Lion of Judah. Also the son-in-law of Mohammed, whose name I cannot recall now when I need it, was styled Lion of God. Christianity too is very rich in lions. You noticed perhaps that I asked the boy particularly if the lion he saw had wings. I did that because a winged lion is the badge of Saint Mark. But a lion without wings indicated the Christ—this is because of the old belief that the cubs of the lion are dead at birth, and are licked to life afterward by the lioness. In the writings of Sir C. S. Lewis a lion is used in that way; and in the prayers revealed to Saint Bridget of Sweden, the Christ is styled, 'Strong Lion, immortal and invincible King.''

"And it is the lion that will lay down with the lamb when the time comes," Nitty said. "I don't know much, maybe, about all this, but I know that. And the lamb is about the commonest symbol for Jesus. A little boy—that's a sign for Jesus too."

Mr. Parker's voice said, "How do either of you know God had anything

to do with it?" Little Tib could tell that it was a new voice to Nitty and Dr. Prithivi— besides, Mr. Parker was talking from farther away, and after he said that he came over and sat on the bed, so that he was closest of all.

"The hand of the god is in all, Mr. Parker," Dr. Prithivi told him. "Should you prove that it is not to be found, it would be the not-finding. And the not-found, also."

"All right, that's a philosophical position that cannot be attacked, since it already contains the refutation of any attack. But because it can't be attacked, it can't be demonstrated either—it's simply your private belief. My point is that that wasn't what you were talking about. You were trying to find a real, visible, apparent Hand of God—to take His fingerprints. I'm saying they may not be there. The dancing lion may be nothing more than a figment of George's imagination—a dancing lion. Levitation—which is what that was—has often been reported in connection with other paranormal abilities."

"This may be so," Dr. Prithivi said, "but possibly we should ask him. George, when you were dancing with the lion man, did you perhaps feel him to be the god?"

"No," Little Tib said, "an angel."

A long time later, after Dr. Prithivi had asked him a great many questions and left, Little Tib asked Nitty what they were going to do that night. He had not understood Dr. Prithivi.

Mr. Parker said, "You have to appear. You're going to be the boy Krishna."

"Just play like," Nitty added.

"It's supposed to be a masquerade, more or less. Dr. Prithivi has talked some people who are interested in his religion into playing the parts of various mythic figures. Everyone wants to see you, so the high spot will be when you appear as Krishna. He brought a costume for you."

"Where is it?" Little Tib asked.

"It might be better if you don't put it on yet. The important thing is that while everybody is watching you and Nitty and Dr. Prithivi and the other masquers, I'll have an opportunity to get into the County Administration Building and perform the reprogramming I have in mind."

"Sounds good," Nitty said. "You think you can do it all right?"

"It's just a matter of getting a print-out of the program, and adding a patch. It's set up now to eliminate personnel whenever the figures indicate

that their functions can be performed more economically by automation. The patch will exempt the school superintendent's job from the rule."

"And mine," Nitty said.

"Yes, of course. Anyway, it's highly unlikely that it will ever be noticed in that mass of assembler-language statements—certainly it won't be for many years, and then, when it is found, whoever comes across it will think that it reflects an administrative decision."

"Uh-huh."

"Then I'll add a once-through and erase subroutine that will rehire us and put George here in the blind program at Grovehurst. The whole thing ought not to take more than two hours at the outside."

"You know what I've been thinking?" Nitty said.

"What's that?"

"This little boy here—he's what you call a wonderworker."

"You mean the little girl's leg. There wasn't any dancing lion then."

"Before that. You remember when those railroad police ladies threw the gas-bomb at us?"

"I'm pretty vague on it, to tell the truth."

(Little Tib had gotten up. He had learned by this time that there was a kitchen in the motel, and he knew that Nitty had bought cola to put in the refrigerator. He wondered if they were looking at him.)

"Yeah," Nitty said. "Well, back before that happened—with the gas-bomb—you were feelin' bad a lot. You know what I mean? You would think that you were still superintendent, and sometimes you got real upset when somebody said something."

"I had emotional problems as a result of losing my position—maybe a little worse than most people would. But I got over it."

"Took you a long time."

"A few weeks, sure."

(Little Tib opened the door of the refrigerator as quietly as he could, hearing the light switch click on. He wondered if he should offer to get something for Nitty and Mr. Parker, but he decided it would be best if they did not notice him.)

" 'Bout three years."

(Little Tib's fingers found the cold cans on the top shelf. He took one out

and pulled the ring, opening it with a tiny pop. It smelled funny, and after a moment he knew that it was beer and put it back. A can from the next shelf down was cola. He closed the refrigerator.)

"Three years."

"Nearly that, yes."

There was a pause. Little Tib wondered why the men were not talking.

"You must be right. I can't remember what year it is. I could tell you the year I was born, and the year I graduated from college. But I don't know what year it is now. They're just numbers."

Nitty told him. Then for a long time, again, nobody said anything. Little Tib drank his cola, feeling it fizz on his tongue.

"I remember traveling around with you a lot, but it doesn't seem like . . ."

Nitty did not say anything.

"When I remember, it's always summer. How could it always be summer, if it's three years?"

"Winters we used to go down on the Gulf Coast. Biloxi, Mobile, Pascagoula. Sometimes we might go over to Panama City or Tallahassee. We did that one year."

"Well, I'm all right now."

"I know you are. I can see you are. What I'm talking about is that you weren't—not for a long time. Then those railroad police ladies threw that gas, and the gas disappeared and you were all right again. Both together."

"I got myself a pretty good knock on the head, running into the wall of that freight car."

"I don't think that was it."

"You mean you think George did it? Why don't you ask him?"

"He's been too sick; besides, I'm not sure he knows. He didn't know much about that little girl's leg, and I know he did that."

"George, did you make me feel better when we were on the train? Were you the one that made the gas go away?"

"Is it all right if I have this soda pop?"

"Yes. Did you do those things on the train?"

"I don't know," Little Tib said. He wondered if he should tell them about the beer.

Nitty asked, "How did you feel on the train?" His voice, which was always gentle, seemed gentler than ever.

"Funny."

"Naturally he felt funny," Mr. Parker said. "He was running a fever."

"Jesus didn't always know. 'Who touched me?' he said. He said, 'I felt power go out from me.'

"Matthew fourteen: five—Luke eighteen: two. In overtime."

"You don't have to believe he was God. He was a real man, and he did those things. He cured all those people, and he walked on that water."

"I wonder if he saw the lion."

"Saint Peter walked on it too. Saint Peter saw Him. But what I'm wondering about is, if it is the boy, what would happen to you if he was to go away?"

"Nothing would happen to me. If I'm all right, I'm all right. You think maybe he's Jesus or something. Nothing happened to those people Jesus cured when he died, did it?"

"I don't know," Nitty said. "It doesn't say."

"Anyway, why should he go away? We're going to take care of him, aren't we?"

"Sure we are."

"There you are, then. Are you going to put his costume on him before we go?"

"I'll wait until you're inside. Then when he comes out, I'll take him back here and get him dressed up and take him over to the meeting."

Little Tib heard the noise the blinds made when Mr. Parker pulled them up—a creaky, clattery little sound. Mr. Parker said, "Do you think it would be dark enough by the time we got over there?"

"No."

"I guess you're right. That window is still loose, and I think he can get through—get between the bars. How long ago was it we looked? Was that three years?"

"Last year," Nitty said. "Last summer."

"It still looks the same. George, all you really have to do is to let me in the building, but it would be better if I didn't come through the front door where people could see me. Do you understand?"

Little Tib said that he did.

"Now it's an old building, and all the windows on the first floor have bars on them; even if you unlocked some of the other windows from inside, I couldn't get through. But there is a side door that's only used for carrying in supplies. It's locked on the outside with a padlock. What I want you to do is to get the key to the padlock for me, and hand it to me through the window."

"Where is the computer?" Little Tib asked.

"That doesn't matter—I'll deal with the computer. All you have to do is let me in."

"I want to know where it is," Little Tib insisted.

Nitty said, "Why is that?"

"I'm scared of it."

"It can't hurt you," Nitty said. "It's just a big number-grinder. It will be turned off at night anyway, won't it, Mr. Parker?"

"Unless they're running an overnight job."

"Well, anyway you don't have to worry about it," Nitty said.

Then Mr. Parker told Little Tib where he thought the keys to the side door would be; and told him that if he could not find them, he was to unlock the front door from inside. Nitty asked if he would like to listen to the television, and he said yes, and they listened to a show that had country and western music, and then it was time to go. Nitty held Little Tib's hand as the three of them walked up the street. Little Tib could feel the tightness in Nitty. He knew that Nitty was thinking about what would happen if someone found them. He heard music—not country and western music like they had heard on the television—and to make Nitty talk so he would not worry so much, he asked what it was.

"That's Dr. Prithivi," Nitty told him. "He's playing that music so that people will come and hear his sermon, and see the people in the costumes."

"Is he playing it himself?"

"No, he's got it taped. There's a loudspeaker on the top of the bus."

Little Tib listened. The music was a long way away, but it sounded as if it were even farther away than it was. As if it did not belong here in Martinsburg at all. He asked Nitty about that.

Mr. Parker said, "What you sense is remoteness in time, George. That

Indian flute music belongs, perhaps, to the fifth century A.D. Or possibly the fifth century B.C., or the fifteenth. It's like an old, old thing that never knew when to die, that's still wandering over the earth."

"It never was here before, was it?" Little Tib asked. Mr. Parker said that that was correct, and then Little Tib said, "Then maybe it isn't an old thing at all." Mr. Parker laughed, but Little Tib thought of the time when the lady down the road had had her new baby. It had been weak and small and toothless, like his own grandmother; and he had thought that it was old until everyone told him it was very new, and it would be alive, probably, when its mother was an old woman and dead. He wondered who would be alive a long time from now—Mr. Parker, or Dr. Prithivi.

They turned a corner. "Just a little way farther," Nitty said.

"Is anybody here to watch us?"

"Don't you worry. We won't do anything if anybody's here."

Quite suddenly, Mr. Parker's hands were moving up and down his body. "He'll be able to get through," Mr. Parker said. "Feel how thin he is."

They turned another corner, and there were dead leaves and old newspapers under Little Tib's feet. "Sure is dark in here," Nitty whispered.

"You see," Mr. Parker said, "no one can see us. It's right here, George." He took one of Little Tib's hands and moved it until it touched an iron bar. "Now, remember, through the storeroom, out to the main hall, turn right, past six doors—I think it is—and down half a flight of stairs. That will be the boiler room, and the janitor's desk is against the wall to your right. The keys should be hanging on a hook near the desk. Bring them back here and give them to me. If you can't find them, come back here and I'll tell you how to get to the front door and open it."

"Will you put the keys back?" Little Tib asked. He was getting his left leg between two of the bars, which was easy. His hips slid in after it. He felt the heavy, rusty window swing in as he pushed against it.

"Yes, the first thing I'll do after you let me in is go back to the boiler room and hang the keys back up."

"That's good," Little Tib said. His mother had told him that you must never steal, though he had taken things since he had run away.

For a little while he was afraid he was going to scrape his ears off. Then the wide part of his head was through, and everything was easy. The window pushed back, and he let his legs down onto the floor. He wanted to ask Mr. Parker where the door to this room was, but that would look as if

he were afraid. He put one hand on the wall, and the other one out in front of him, and began to feel his way along. He wished he had his stick, but he could not even remember, now, where he had left it.

"Let me go ahead of you."

It was the funniest-looking man Little Tib had ever seen.

"I'm soft. If I bump into anything, I won't be hurt."

Not a man at all, Little Tib thought. Just clothes padded out, with a painted face at the top. "Why can I see you?" Little Tib said.

"You're in the dark, aren't you?"

"I guess so," Little Tib admitted. "I can't tell."

"Exactly. Now, when people who can see are in the light, they can see things that *are* there. And when they're in the dark, why, they *can't* see them. Isn't that correct?"

"I suppose so."

"But when *you're* in the light you can't see things. So naturally when you're in the dark, you see things that *aren't* there. You see how simple it is?"

"Yes," Little Tib said, not understanding.

"There. That proves it. You *can* see it, and it *isn't* really simple at all." The Clothes Man had his hand—it was an old glove, Little Tib noticed—on the knob of a big metal door now. When he touched it, Little Tib could see that too. "It's locked," the Clothes Man said.

Little Tib was still thinking about what he had said before. "You're smart," he told the Clothes Man.

"That's because I have the best brain in the entire world. It was given to me by the great and powerful Wizard himself."

"Are you smarter than the computer?"

"Much, much smarter than the Computer. But I don't know how to open this door."

"Have you been trying?"

"Well, I've been shaking the knob—only it won't shake. And I've been feeling around for a catch. That's trying, I suppose."

"I think it is," Little Tib said.

"Ah, you're thinking—that's good." Little Tib had reached the door, and the Clothes Man moved to one side to let him feel it. "If you had the ruby

slippers," the Clothes Man continued, "you could just click your heels three times and wish, and you'd be on the other side. Of course, you're on the other side now."

"No, I'm not," Little Tib told him.

"Yes, you are," the Clothes Man said. "Over *there* is where you want to be—that's on *that* side. So this is the *other* side."

"You're right," Little Tib admitted. "But I still can't get through the door."

"You don't have to, now," the Clothes Man told him. "You're already on the other side. Just don't trip over the steps."

"What steps?" Little Tib asked. As he did, he took a step backward. His heel bumped something he did not expect, and he sat down hard on something else that was higher up than the floor should have been.

"Those steps," the Clothes Man said mildly.

Little Tib was feeling them with his hands. They were sidewalk-stuff, with metal edges; and they felt almost as hard and real to his fingers as they had a moment ago when he sat down on them without wanting to. "I don't remember going down these," he said.

"You didn't. But now you have to go up them to get to the upper room."

"What upper room?"

"The one with the door that goes out into the corridor," the Clothes Man told him. "You go into the corridor, and turn *that* way, and—"

"I know," Little Tib said. "Mr. Parker told me. Over and over. But he didn't tell me about that door that was locked, or these steps."

"It may be that Mr. Parker doesn't remember the inside of this building quite as well as he thinks he does."

"He used to work here. He told me." Little Tib was going up the stairs. There was an iron rail on one side. He was afraid that if he did not talk to the Clothes Man, he would go away. But he could not think of anything to say, and nothing of the kind happened. Then he remembered that he had not talked to the lion at all.

"I could find the keys for you," the Clothes Man said. "I could bring them back to you."

"I don't want you to leave," Little Tib told him.

"It would just take a moment. I fall down a lot, but keys wouldn't break."

"No," Little Tib said. The Clothes Man looked so hurt that he added, "I'm afraid . . ."

"You can't be afraid of the dark. Are you afraid of being alone?"

"A little. But I'm afraid you couldn't really bring them to me. I'm afraid you're not real, and I want you to be real."

"I could bring them." The Clothes Man threw out his chest and struck a heroic pose, but the dry grass that was his stuffing made a small, sad, rustling sound. "I *am* real. Try me."

There was another door—Little Tib's fingers found it. This one was not locked, and when he went out it, the floor changed from sidewalk to smooth stone. "I, too, am real," a strange voice said. The Clothes Man was still there when the strange voice spoke, but he seemed dimmer.

"Who are you?" Little Tib asked, and there was a sound like thunder. He had hated the strange voice from the beginning, but until he heard the thunder-sound he had not really known how much. It was not really like thunder, he thought. He remembered his dream about the gnomes, though this was much worse. It seemed to him that it was like big stones grinding together at the bottom of the deepest hole in the world. It was worse than that, really.

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you," the Clothes Man said.

"If the keys are in there, I'll have to go in and get them," Little Tib replied.

"They're not in there at all. In fact, they're not even close to there—they're several doors down. All you have to do is walk past the door."

"Who is it?"

"It's the Computer," the Clothes Man told him.

"I didn't think they talked like that."

"Only to you. And not all of them talk at all. Just don't go in and it will be all right."

"Suppose it comes out here after me?"

"It won't do that. It is as frightened of you as you are of it."

"I won't go in," Little Tib promised.

When he was opposite the door where the thing was, he heard it groaning as if it were in torture; and he turned and went in. He was very frightened to find himself there; but he knew he was not in the wrong

place— he had done the right thing, and not the wrong thing. Still, he was very frightened. The horrible voice said: "What have we to do with you? Have you come to torment us?"

"What is your name?" Little Tib asked.

The thundering, grinding noise came a second time, and this time Little Tib thought he heard in it the sound of many voices, perhaps hundreds or thousands, all speaking at once.

"Answer me," Little Tib said. He walked forward until he could put his hands on the cabinet of the machine. He felt frightened, but he knew the Clothes Man had been right—the Computer was as frightened of him as he was of it. He knew that the Clothes Man was standing behind him, and he wondered if he would have dared to do this if someone else had not been watching.

"We are legion," the horrible voice said. "Very many."

"Get out!" There was a moaning that might have come from deep inside the earth. Something made of glass that had been on furniture fell over and rolled and crashed to the floor.

"They are gone," the Clothes Man said. He sat on the cabinet of the computer so Little Tib could see it, and he looked brighter than ever.

"Where did they go?" Little Tib asked.

"I don't know. You will probably meet them again." As if he had just thought of it, he said, "You were very brave."

"I was scared. I'm still scared—the worst since I left the new place."

"I wish I could tell you that you didn't have to be afraid of them," the Clothes Man said, "or of anybody. But it wouldn't be true. Still, I can tell you something that is really better than that—that it will all come out right in the end." He took off the big, floppy black hat he wore, and Little Tib saw that his bald head was really only a sack. "You wouldn't let me bring the keys before, but how about now? Or would you be afraid with me away?"

"No," Little Tib said, "but I'll get the keys myself."

At once the Clothes Man was gone. Little Tib felt the smooth, cool metal of the computer under his hands. In the blackness, it was the only reality there was.

He did not bother to find the window again; instead, he unlocked another, and called Nitty and Mr. Parker to it, smelling as he did the cool, damp air of spring. At the opening, he thrust the keys through first, then

squeezed himself between the bars. By the time he was outside, he could hear Mr. Parker unlocking the side door.

"You were a long time," Nitty said. "Was it bad in there by yourself?"

"I wasn't by myself," Little Tib said.

"I'm not even goin' to ask you about that. I used to be a fool, but I know better now. You still want to go to Dr. Prithivi's meetin'?"

"He wants us to come, doesn't he?"

"You are the big star, the main event. If you don't come, it's going to be like no potato salad at a picnic."

They walked back to the motel in silence. The flute music they had heard before was louder and faster now, with the clangs of gongs interspersed in its shrill wailings. Little Tib stood on a footstool while Nitty took his clothes away and wrapped a piece of cloth around his waist, and another around his head, and hung his neck with beads, and painted something on his forehead.

"There, you look just ever so fine," Nitty said.

"I feel silly," Little Tib told him.

Nitty said that that did not matter, and they left the motel again and walked several blocks. Little Tib heard the crowd, and the loud sounds of the music, and then smelled the familiar dark, sweet smell of Dr. Prithivi's bus; he asked Nitty if the people had not seen him, and Nitty said that they had not, that they were watching something taking place on a stage outside.

"Ah," Dr. Prithivi said. "You are here, and you are just in time."

Nitty asked him if Little Tib looked all right.

"His appearance is very fine indeed, but he must have his instrument." He put a long, light stick into Little Tib's hands. It had a great many little holes in it. Little Tib was happy to have it, knowing that he could use it to feel his way if necessary.

"Now it is time you met your fellow performer," Dr. Prithivi said. "Boy Krishna, this is the god Indra. Indra, it has given me the greatest pleasure to introduce to you the god Krishna, most charming of the incarnations of Vishnu."

"Hello," a strange, deep voice said.

"You are doubtless familiar already with the story, but I will tell it to you again in order to refresh your memories before you must appear on

my little stage. Krishna is the son of Queen Devaki, and this lady is the sister of the wicked King Kamsa who kills all her children when they are born. To save Krishna, the good Queen places him among villagers. There he offends Indra, who comes to destroy him. ..."

Little Tib listened with only half his mind, certain that he could never remember the whole story. He had forgotten the Queen's name already. The wood of the flute was smooth and cool under his fingers, the air in the bus hot and heavy, freighted with strange, sleepy odors.

"I am King Kamsa," Dr. Prithivi was saying, "and when I am through being he, I will be a cowherd, so I can tell you what to do. Remember not to drop the mountain when you lift it."

"I'll be careful," Little Tib said. He had learned to say that in school.

"Now I must go forth and prepare for you. When you hear the great gong struck three times, come out. Your friend will be waiting there to take you to the stage."

Little Tib heard the door of the bus open and close. "Where's Nitty?" he asked.

The deep voice of Indra—a hard, dry voice, it seemed to Little Tib—said: "He has gone to help."

"I don't like being alone here."

"You are not alone," Indra said. "I'm with you."

"Yes."

"Did you like the story of Krishna and Indra? I will tell you another story. Once, in a village not too far away from here—"

"You aren't from around here, are you?" Little Tib asked. "Because you don't talk like it. Everybody here talks like Nitty or like Mr. Parker except Dr. Prithivi, and he's from India. Can I feel your face?"

"No, I'm not from around here," Indra said. "I am from Niagara. Do you know what that is?"

Little Tib said, "No."

"It is the capital of this nation—the seat of government. Here, you may feel my face."

Little Tib reached upward; but Indra's face was smooth, cool wood, like the flute. "You don't have a face," he said.

"That is because I am wearing the mask of Indra. Once, in a village not too far from here, there were a great many women who wanted to do

something nice for the whole world. So they offered their bodies for certain experiments. Do you know what an experiment is?"

"No," said Little Tib.

"Biologists took parts of these women's bodies— parts that would later become boys and girls. And they reached down inside the tiniest places in those parts and made improvements."

"What kind of improvements?" Little Tib asked.

"Things that would make the girls and boys smarter and stronger and healthier—that kind of improvement. Now these good women were mostly teachers in a college, and the wives of college teachers."

"I understand," Little Tib said. Outside, the people were singing.

"However, when those girls and boys were born, the biologists decided that they needed more children to study—children who had not been improved, so that they could compare them to the ones who had."

"There must have been a lot of those," Little Tib ventured.

"The biologists offered money to people who would bring their children in to be studied, and a great many people did—farm and ranch and factory people, some of them from neighboring towns." Indra paused. Little Tib thought he smelled like cologne; but like oil and iron too. Just when he thought the story was finished, Indra began to speak again.

"Everything went smoothly until the boys and girls were six years old. Then at the center—the experiments were made at the medical center, in Houston—strange things started to happen. Dangerous things. Things that no one could explain." As though he expected Little Tib to ask what these inexplicable things were, Indra waited; but Little Tib said nothing.

At last Indra continued. "People and animals— sometimes even monsters—were seen in the corridors and therapy rooms who had never entered the complex and were never observed to leave it. Experimental animals were freed—apparently without their cages having been opened. Furniture was rearranged, and on several different occasions large quantities of food that could not be accounted for was found in the common rooms.

"When it became apparent that these events were not isolated occurrences, but part of a recurring pattern, they were coded and fed to a computer—together with all the other events of the medical center schedule. It was immediately apparent that they coincided with the periodic examinations given the genetically improved children."

"I'm not one of those," Little Tib said.

"The children were examined carefully. Thousands of man-hours were spent in checking them for paranormal abilities; none were uncovered. It was decided that only half the group should be brought in each time. I'm sure you understand the principle behind that—if paranormal activity had occurred when one half was present, but not when the other half was, we would have isolated the disturbing individual to some extent. It didn't work. The phenomena occurred when each half-group was present."

"I understand."

The door of the bus opened, letting in fresh night air. Nitty's voice said, "You two ready? Going to have to come on pretty soon now."

"We're ready," Indra told him. The door closed again, and Indra said: "Our agency felt certain that the fact that the phenomena took place whenever either half of the group was present indicated that several individuals were involved. Which meant the problem was more critical then we supposed. Then one of the biologists who had been involved originally—by that time we had taken charge of the project, you understand— pointed out in the course of a casual conversation with one of our people that the genetic improvements they had made could occur spontaneously. I want you to listen carefully now. This is important."

"I'm listening," Little Tib told him dutifully.

"A certain group of us were very concerned about this. We—are you familiar with the central data processing unit that provides identification and administers social benefits to the unemployed?"

"You look in it, and it's supposed to tell who you are," Little Tib said.

"Yes. It already included a system for the detection of fugitives. We added a new routine that we hoped would be sensitive to potential paranormalities. The biologists indicated that a paranormal individual might possess certain retinal peculiarities, since such people notoriously see phenomena, like Kirlian auras, that are invisible to normal sight. The central data bank was given the capability of detecting such abnormalities through its remote terminals."

"It would look into his eyes and know what he was," Little Tib said. And after a moment, "You should have done that with the boys and girls."

"We did," Indra told him. "No abnormalities were detected, and the phenomena persisted." His voice grew deeper and more solemn than ever. "We reported this to the President. He was extremely concerned, feeling that under the present unsettled economic conditions, the appearance of

such an individual might trigger domestic disorder. It was decided to terminate the experiment."

"Just forget about it?" Little Tib asked.

"The experimental material would be sacrificed to prevent the continuance and possible further development of the phenomena."

"I don't understand."

"The brains and spinal cords of the boys and girls involved would be turned over to the biologists for examination."

"Oh, I know this story," Little Tib said. "The three Wise Men come and warn Joseph and Mary, and they take baby Jesus to the Land of Egypt on a donkey."

"No," Indra told him, "that isn't this story at all. The experiment was ended, and the phenomena ceased. But a few weeks later the alert built into the central data system triggered. A paranormal individual had been identified, almost five hundred kilometers from the scene of the experiment. Several agents were dispatched to detain him; but he could not be found. It was at this point that we realized we had made a serious mistake. We had utilized the method of detention and identification already used in criminal cases— destruction of the retina. That meant the subject could not be so identified again."

"I see," Little Tib said.

"This method had proved to be quite practical with felons—the subject could be identified by other means, and the resulting blindness prevented escape and effective resistance. Of course, the real reason for adopting it was that it could be employed without any substantial increase in the mechanical capabilities of the remote terminals—a brief overvoltage to the sodium vapor light normally used for retinal photography was all that was required.

"This time, however, the system seemed to have worked against us. By the time the agents arrived, the subject was gone. There had been no complaints, no shouting and stumbling. The people in charge of the terminal facility didn't even know what had occurred. It was possible, however, to examine the records of those who had preceded and followed the person we wanted, however. Do you know what we found?"

Little Tib, who knew that they had found that it was he, said, "No."

"We found that it was one of the children who had been part of the experiment." Indra smiled. Little Tib could not see his smile, but he could feel it. "Isn't that odd? One of the boys who had been part of the

experiment."

"I thought they were all dead."

"So did we, until we understood what had happened. But you see, the ones who were sacrificed were those who had undergone genetic improvement before birth. The *controls* were not dead, and this was one of them."

"The other children," Little Tib said.

"Yes. The poor children, whose mothers had brought them in for the money. That was why dividing the group had not worked—the controls were brought in with both halves. It could not be true, of course."

Little Tib said, "What?"

"It could not be true—we all agreed on that. It could not be one of the controls. It was too much of a coincidence. It had to be that one of the mothers—possibly one of the fathers, but more likely one of the mothers—saw it coming a long way off and exchanged infants to save her own. It must have happened years before."

"Like Krishna's mother," Little Tib said, remembering Dr. Prithivi's story.

"Yes. Gods aren't born in cowsheds."

"Are you going to kill this last boy too—when you find him?"

"I know that you are the last of the children."

There was no hope of escaping a seeing person in the enclosed interior of the bus, but Little Tib bolted anyway. He had not taken three steps before Indra had him by the shoulders and forced him back into his seat.

"Are you going to kill me now?"

"No."

Thunder banged outside. Little Tib jumped, thinking for an instant that Indra had fired a gun. "Not now," Indra told him, "but soon."

The door opened again, and Nitty said: "Come on out. It's goin' to rain, and Dr. Prithivi wants to get the big show on before it does." With Indra close behind him, Little Tib let Nitty help him down the steps and out the door of the bus. There were hundreds of people outside—he could hear the shuffling of their feet, and the sound of their voices. Some were talking to each other and some were singing; but they became quiet as he, with Nitty and Indra, passed through them. The air was heavy with the coming storm, and there were gusts of wind.

"Here," Nitty said, "high step up. Watch out."

They were rough wooden stairs, seven steps. He climbed the last one, and . . .

He could see.

For a moment (though it was only a moment) he thought that he was no longer blind. He was in a village of mud houses, and there were people all around him, brown-skinned people with large, soft, brown eyes— men with red and yellow and blue cloths wrapped about their heads, women with beautiful black hair and colored dresses. There was a cow-smell and a dust-smell and a cooking-smell all at once; and just beyond the village a single mountain perfect and pure as an ice cream cone; and beyond the mountain a marvelous sky full of palaces and chariots and painted elephants; and beyond the sky, more faces than he could count.

Then he knew that it was only imagination, only a dream; not his dream this time, but Dr. Prithivi's dream. Perhaps Dr. Prithivi could dream the way he did, so strongly that the angels came to make the dreams true; perhaps it was only Dr. Prithivi's dream working through him. He thought of what Indra had said—that his mother was not his real mother, and knew that that could not be so.

A brown-skinned, brown-eyed woman with a pretty, heart-shaped face said, "Pipe for us," and he remembered that he still had the wooden flute. He raised it to his lips, not certain that he could play it, and wonderful music began. It was not his, but he fingered the flute pretending that it was his, and danced. The women danced with him, sometimes joining hands, sometimes ringing little bells.

It seemed to him that they had been dancing for only a moment when Indra came. He was bigger than Little Tib's father, and his face was a carved, hook-nosed mask. In his right hand he had a cruel sword that curved and recurved like a snake, and in his left a glittering eye. When Little Tib saw the eye, he knew why it was that Indra had not killed him while they were alone in the bus. Someone far away was watching through that eye, and until he had seen him do the things he was able, sometimes, to do, make things appear and disappear, bring the angels, Indra could not use his sword. I just won't do it, he thought; but he knew he could not always stop what happened—that the happenings sometimes carried him with them.

The thunder boomed then, and Dr. Prithivi's voice said: "Play up to it! Up to the storm. That is ideal for what we are trying to do!"

Indra stood in front of Little Tib and said something about bringing so

much rain that it would drown the village; and Dr. Prithivi's voice told Little Tib to lift the mountain.

Little Tib looked and saw a real mountain, far off and perfect; he knew he could not lift it.

Then the rain came, and the lights went out, and they were standing on the stage in the dark, with icy water beating against their faces. The lightning flashed and Little Tib saw hundreds of people running for their cars; among them were a man with a monkey's head, and another with an elephant's, and a man with nine faces.

And then he was blind again, and there was nothing left but the rough feel of wood underfoot, and the beating of the rain, and the knowledge that Indra was still before him, holding his sword and the eye.

And then a man made all of metal (so that the rain drummed on him) stood there too. He held an ax, and wore a pointed hat; and by the light that shone from his polished surface, Little Tib could see Indra too, and the eye.

"Who are you?" Indra said. He was talking to the Metal Man.

"Who are *you?"* the Metal Man answered. "I can't see your face behind that wooden mask—but wood has never stood for long against me." He struck Indra's mask with his ax; a big chip flew from it, and the string that held it in place broke, and it went clattering down.

Little Tib saw his father's face, with the rain running from it. "Who are you?" his father said to the Metal Man again.

"Don't you know me, Georgie?" the Metal Man said. "Why we used to be old friends, once. I have—if I may say so—a very sympathetic heart, and when—"

"Daddy!" Little Tib yelled.

His father looked at him and said, "Hello, Little Tib."

"Daddy, if I had known you were Indra I wouldn't have been scared at all. That mask made your voice sound different."

"You don't have to be afraid any longer, son," his father said. He took two steps toward Little Tib, and then, almost too quickly to see, his sword blade came up and flashed down.

The Metal Man's ax was even quicker. It came up and stayed up; Indra's sword struck it with a crash.

"That won't help him," Little Tib's father said. "They've seen him, and they've seen you. I wanted to get it over with."

"They haven't seen me," the Metal Man said. "It's darker here than you think."

At once it *was* dark. The rain stopped—or if it continued, Little Tib was not conscious of it. He did not know why he knew, but he knew where he was: he was standing, still standing, in front of the computer, with the devils not yet driven out.

Then the rain was back and his father was there again, but the Metal Man was gone, and the dark came back with a rush until he was blind again. "Are you still going to kill me, Father?" he asked.

There was no reply, and he repeated his question.

"Not now," his father said.

"Later?"

"Come here." He felt his father's hand on his arm, the way it used to be. "Let's sit down." It drew him to the edge of the platform and helped him to seat himself with his legs dangling over.

"Are you all right?" Little Tib asked.

"Yes," his father told him.

"Then why do you want to kill me?"

"I don't *want* to." Suddenly his father sounded angry. "I never said I *wanted* to. I have to do it, that's all. Look at us, look at what we been. Moving from place to place, working construction, working the land, worshiping the Lord like it was a hundred years ago. You know what we are? We're jackrabbits. You recall jackrabbits, Little Tib?"

"No."

"That was before your day. Big old long-legg'd rabbits with long ears like a jackass's. Back before you were born they decided they weren't any good, and they all died. For about a year I'd find them on the place, dead, and then there wasn't any more. They waited to join until it was too late, you see. Or maybe they couldn't. That's what's going to happen to people like us. I mean our family. What do you suppose we've been?"

Little Tib, who did not understand the question, said nothing.

"When I was a boy and used to go to school I would hear about all these great men and kings and queens and Presidents, and I liked to think that maybe some were family. That isn't so, and I know it now. If you could go back to Bible times, you'd find our people living in the woods like Indians."

"I'd like that," Little Tib said.

"Well, they cut down those woods so we couldn't do that any more; and we began scratching a living out of the ground. We've been doing that ever since and paying taxes, do you understand me? That's all we've ever done. And pretty soon now there won't be any call at all for people to do that. We've got to join them before it's too late—do you see?"

"No," Little Tib said.

"You're the one. You're a prodigy and a healer, and so they want you dead. You're our ticket. Everybody was born for something, and that was what you were born for, son. Just because of you, the family is going to get in before it's too late."

"But if I'm dead . . ." Little Tib tried to get his thoughts in order. "You and Mama don't have any other children."

"You don't understand, do you?"

Little Tib's father had put his arm around Little Tib, and now he leaned down until their faces touched. But when they did, it seemed to Little Tib that his father's face did not feel as it should. He reached up and felt it with both hands, and it came off in his hands, feeling like the plastic vegetables came in at the new place; perhaps this was Big Tib's dream.

"You shouldn't have done that," his father said.

Little Tib reached up to find who had been pretending to be his father. The new face was metal, hard and cold.

"I am the President's man now. I didn't want you to know that, because I thought that it might upset you. The President is handling the situation personally."

"Is Mama still at home?" Little Tib asked. He meant the new place.

"No. She's in a different division—gee-seven. But I still see her sometimes. I think she's in Atlanta now."

"Looking for me?"

"She wouldn't tell me."

Something inside Little Tib, just under the hard place in the middle of his chest where all the ribs came together, began to get tighter and tighter, like a balloon being blown up too far. He felt that when it burst, he would burst too. It made it impossible to take more than tiny breaths, and it pressed against the voice-thing in his neck so he could not speak. Inside himself he said forever that that was not his real mother, and this was not his real father; that his real mother and father were the mother and father

he had had at the old place; he would keep them inside for always, his real mother and father. The rain beat against his face; his nose was full of mucus; he had to breathe through his mouth, but his mouth was filling with saliva, which ran down his chin and made him ashamed.

Then the tears came in a hot flood on his cold cheeks, and the metal face fell off Indra like an old pie pan from a shelf, and went rattling and clanging across the blacktop under the stage.

He reached up to his father's face again, and it was his father's face, but his father said: "Little Tib, can't you understand? It's the Federal Reserve Card. It's the goddamned card. It's having no money, and nothing to do, and spending your whole life like a goddamn whipped dog. I only got in because of you—saying I'd hunt for you. We had training and all that, Skinnerian conditioning and deep hypnosis, they saw to that—but in the end it's the damn card." And while he said that, Little Tib could hear Indra's sword, scraping and scraping, ever so slowly, across the boards of the stage. He jumped down and ran, not knowing or caring whether he was going to run into something.

In the end, he ran into Nitty. Nitty no longer had his sweat and woodsmoke smell, because of the rain; but he still had the same feel, and the same voice when he said: *"There* you are. I been lookin' just everyplace for you. I thought somebody had run off with you to get you out of the wet. Where you been?" He raised Little Tib on his shoulders.

Little Tib plunged his hands into the thick, wet hair and hung on. "On the stage," he said.

"On the stage still? Well, I swear." Nitty was walking fast, taking big, long strides. Little Tib's body rocked with the swing of them. "That was the one place I never thought to look for you. I thought you would have come off there fast, looking for me, or someplace dry. But I guess you were afraid of falling off."

"Yes," Little Tib said, "I was afraid of falling off." Running in the rain had let all the air out of the balloon; he felt empty inside, and like he had no bones at all. Twice he nearly slid from Nitty's shoulders, but each time Nitty's big hands reached up and caught him.

The next morning a good-smelling woman came from the school for him. Little Tib was still in bed when she knocked on the door; but he heard Nitty open it, and her say, "I believe you have a blind child here."

"Yes'm," Nitty said.

"Mr. Parker—the new acting superintendent?— asked me to come over

and escort him myself the first day. I'm Ms. Munson. I teach the blind class."

"I'm not sure he's got clothes fit for school," Nitty told her.

"Oh, they come in just anything these days," Ms. Munson said, and then she saw Little Tib, who had gotten out of bed when he heard the door open, and said, "I see what you mean. Is he dressed for a play?"

"Last night," Nitty told her.

"Oh. I heard about it, but I wasn't there."

Then Little Tib knew he still had the skirt-thing on that they had given him—but it was not; it was a dry, woolly towel. But he still had beads on, and metal bracelets on his arm.

"His others are real ragged."

"I'm afraid he'll have to wear them anyway," Ms. Munson said. Nitty took him into the bathroom and took the beads and bracelets and towel off, and dressed him in his usual clothes. Then Ms. Munson led him out of the motel and opened the door of her little electric car for him.

"Did Mr. Parker get his job again?" Little Tib asked when the car bounced out of the motel lot and onto the street.

"I don't know about *again,"* Ms. Munson said. "Did he have it before? But I understand he's extremely well qualified in educational programming; and when they found out this morning that the computer was inoperative, he presented his credentials and offered to help. He called me about ten o'clock and asked me to go for you, but I couldn't get away from the school until now."

"It's noon, isn't it," Little Tib said. "It's too hot for morning."

That afternoon he sat in Ms. Munson's room with eight other blind children while a machine moved his hand over little dots on paper and told him what they were. When school was over and he could hear the seeing children milling in the hall outside, a woman older and thicker than Ms. Munson came for him and took him to a house where other, seeing, children larger than he lived. He ate there; the thick woman was angry once because he pushed his beets, by accident, off his plate. That night he slept in a narrow bed.

The next three days were all the same. In the morning the thick woman took him to school. In the evening she came for him. There was a television at the thick woman's house—Little Tib could never remember her name afterward—and when supper was over, the children listened to

television.

On the fifth day of school he heard his father's voice in the corridor outside, and then his father came into Ms. Munson's room with a man from the school, who sounded important.

"This is Mr. Jefferson," the man from the school told Ms. Munson. "He's from the Government. You are to release one of your students to his care. Do you have a George Tibbs here?"

Little Tib felt his father's hand close on his shoulder. "I have him," his father said. They went out the front door, and down the steps, and then along the side. "There's been a change in orders, son; I'm to bring you to Niagara for examination."

"All right."

"There's no place to park around this damn school. I had to park a block away."

Little Tib remembered the rattley truck his father had when they lived at the old place; but he knew somehow that the truck was gone like the old place itself, belonging to the real father locked in his memory. The father of now would have a nice car.

He heard footsteps, and then there was a man he could see walking in front of them—a man so small he was hardly taller than Little Tib himself. He had a shiny bald head with upcurling hair at the sides of it; and a bright green coat with two long coattails and two sparkling green buttons. When he turned around to face them (skipping backwards to keep up), Little Tib saw that his face was all red and white except for two little, dark eyes that almost seemed to shoot out sparks. He had a big, hooked nose like Indra's, but on him it did not look cruel. "And what can I do for you?" he asked Little Tib.

"Get me loose," Little Tib said. "Make him let go of me."

"And then what?"

"I don't know," Little Tib confessed.

The man in the green coat nodded to himself as if he had guessed that all along, and took an envelope of silver paper out of his inside coat pocket. "If you are *caught* again," he said, "it will be for good. Understand? Running is for people who are not helped." He tore one end of the envelope open. It was full of glittering powder, as Little Tib saw when he poured it out into his hand. "You remind me," he said, "of a friend of mine named *Tip*. Tip with a *p*. A *b* is just a *p* turned upside down." He threw the glittering powder into the air, and spoke a word Little Tib could not quite

hear.

For just a second there were two things at once. There was the sidewalk and the row of cars on one side and the lawns on the other; and there was Ms. Munson's room, with the sounds of the other children, and the mopped-floor smell. He looked around at the light on the cars, and then it was gone and there was only the sound of his father's voice in the hall outside, and the feel of the school desk and the paper with dots in it. The voice of the man in the green coat (as if he had not gone away at all) said, "Tip turned out to be the ruler of all of us in the end, you know." Then there was the beating of big wings. And then it was all gone, gone completely. The classroom door opened, and a man from the school who sounded important said, "Ms. Munson, I have a gentleman here who states that he is the father of one of your pupils.

"Would you give me your name again, sir?"

"George Tibbs. My boy's name is George Tibbs too."

"Is this your father, George?" Ms. Munson said.

"How would he know? He's blind."

Little Tib said nothing, and the Important Man said, "Perhaps we'd better all go up to the office. You say that you're with the Federal Government, Mr. Tibbs?"

"The Office of Biogenetic Improvement. I suppose you're surprised, seeing that I'm nothing but a dirt farmer—but I got into it through the Agricultural Program."

"Ah."

Ms. Munson, who was holding Little Tib's hand, led him around a corner.

"I'm working on a case now. Perhaps it would be better if the boy waited outside."

A door opened. "We haven't been able to identify him, you understand," the Important Man said. "His retinas are gone. That's the reason for all this red tape."

Ms. Munson helped Little Tib find a chair, and said, "Wait here." Then the door closed and everyone was gone. He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, and for an instant there were points of light like the glittering dust the man in the green coat had thrown. He thought about what he was going to do, and not running. Then about Krishna, because he had been Krishna. Had Krishna run? Or had he gone back to fight the king who had

wanted to kill him? He could not be sure, but he did not think Krishna had run. Jesus had fled into Egypt, he remembered that. But he had come back. Not to Bethlehem where he had run from, but to Nazareth, because that was his real home. He remembered talking about the Jesus story to his father, when they were sitting on the stage. His father had brushed it aside; but Little Tib felt it might be important somehow. He put his chin on his hands to think about it.

The chair was hard—harder than any rock he had ever sat on. He felt the unyielding wood of its arms stretching to either side of him while he thought. There was something horrible about those arms, something he could not remember. Just outside the door the bell rang, and he could hear the noise the children's feet made in the hall. It was recess; they were pouring out the doors, pouring out into the warm fragrance of spring outside.

He got up, and found the door-edge with his fingers. He did not know whether anyone was seeing him or not. In an instant he was in the crowd of pushing children. He let them carry him down the steps.

Outside, games went on all around him. He stopped shuffling and shoving now, and began to walk. With the first step he knew that he would go on walking like this all day. It felt better than anything else he had ever done. He walked through all the games until he found the fence around the schoolyard; then down the fence until he found a gate, then out the gate and down the road.

I'll have to get a stick, he thought.

When he had gone about five kilometers, as well as he could judge, he heard the whistle of a train far off and turned toward it. Railroad tracks were better than roads—he had learned that months ago. He was less likely to meet people, and trains only went by once in a while. Cars and trucks went by all the time, and any one of them could kill.

After a while he picked up a good stick—light but flexible, and just the right length. He climbed the embankment then, and began to walk where he wanted to walk, on the rails, balancing with his stick. There was a little girl ahead of him, and he could see her, so he knew she was an angel. "What's your name?" he said.

"I mustn't tell you," she answered, "but you can call me Dorothy." She asked his, and he did not say George Tibbs but Little Tib, which was what his mother and father had always called him.

"You fixed my leg, so I'm going with you," Dorothy announced. (She did not really sound like the same girl.) After a time she added: "I can help you

a lot. I can tell you what to look out for."

"I know you can," Little Tib said humbly.

"Like now. There's a man up ahead of us."

"A bad man?" Little Tib asked, "or a good man?"

"A nice man. A shaggy man."

"Hello." It was Nitty's voice. "I didn't really expect to see you here, George, but I guess I should have."

Little Tib said, "I don't like school."

"That's just the different of me. I do like it, only it seems like they don't like me."

"Didn't Mr. Parker get you your job back?"

"I think Mr. Parker kind of forgot me."

"He shouldn't have done that," Little Tib said.

"Well, little blind boy, Mr. Parker is white, you know. And when a white man has been helped out by a black one, he likes to forget it sometimes."

"I see," Little Tib said, though he did not. Black and white seemed very unimportant to him.

"I hear it works the other way too." Nitty laughed.

"This is Dorothy," Little Tib said.

Nitty said, "I can't see any Dorothy, George." His voice sounded funny.

"Well, I can't see you," Little Tib told him.

"I guess that's right. Hello, Dorothy. Where are you an' George goin'?"

"We're going to Sugarland," Little Tib told him. "In Sugarland they know who you are."

"Is Sugarland for real?" Nitty asked. "I always thought it was just some place you made up."

"No, Sugarland is in Texas."

"How about that," Nitty said. The light of the sun, now setting, made the railroad ties as yellow as butter. Nitty took Little Tib's hand, and Little Tib took Dorothy's, and the three of them walked between the rails. Nitty took up a lot of room, but Little Tib did not take much, and Dorothy hardly took any at all.

When they had gone half a kilometer, they began to skip.

The End