

## 9. It's All in How You Look at Things

Soon all traces of Dictionopolis had vanished in the distance and all those strange and unknown lands that lay between the kingdom of words and the kingdom of numbers stretched before them. It was late afternoon and the dark-orange sun floated heavily over the distant mountains. A friendly, cool breeze slapped playfully at the car, and the long shadows stretched out lazily from the trees and bushes.

"Ah, the open road!" exclaimed the Humbug, breathing deeply, for he now seemed happily resigned to the trip. "The spirit of adventure, the lure of the unknown, the thrill of a gallant quest. How very grand indeed." Then, pleased with himself, he folded his arms, sat back, and left it at that.

In a few more minutes they had left the open countryside and driven into a dense forest.

"THIS IS THE SCENIC ROUTE: STRAIGHT AHEAD TO POINT OF VIEW"

announced a rather large road sign; but, contrary to its statement, all that could be seen were more trees. As the car rushed along, the trees grew thicker and taller and leafier until, just as they'd hidden the sky completely, the forest abruptly ended and the road bent itself around a broad promontory. Stretching below, to the left, the right, and straight ahead, as far as anyone could see, lay the rich green landscape through which they had been traveling.

"Remarkable view," announced the Humbug, bouncing from the car as if he were responsible for the whole thing.

"Isn't it beautiful?" gasped Milo.

"Oh, I don't know," answered a strange voice. "It's all in the way you look at things."

"I beg your pardon?" said Milo, for he didn't see who had spoken.

"I said it's all in how you look at things," repeated the voice.

Milo turned around and found himself staring at two



very neatly polished brown shoes, for standing directly in front of him (if you can use the word “standing” for anyone **suspended** in mid-air) was another boy just about his age, whose feet were easily three feet off the ground.





“For instance,” continued the boy, “if you happened to like deserts, you might not think this was beautiful at all.”

“That’s true,” said the Humbug, who didn’t like to **contradict** anyone whose feet were that far off the ground.

“For instance,” said the boy again, “if Christmas trees were people and people were Christmas trees, we’d all be chopped down, put up in the living room, and covered with tinsel, while the trees opened our presents.”

“What does that have to do with it?” asked Milo.

“Nothing at all,” he answered, “but it’s an interesting possibility, don’t you think?”

“How do you manage to stand up there?” asked Milo, for this was the subject which most interested him.

“I was about to ask you a similar question,” answered the boy, “for you must be much older than you look to be standing on the ground.”

“What do you mean?” Milo asked.

“Well,” said the boy, “in my family everyone is born in the air, with his head at exactly the height it’s going to be when he’s an adult, and then we all grow toward the ground. When we’re fully grown up or, as you can see, grown down, our feet finally touch. Of course,

there are a few of us whose feet never reach the ground no matter how old we get, but I suppose it’s the same in every family.”

He hopped a few steps in the air, skipped back to where he started, and then began again.



“You certainly must be very old to have reached the ground already.”

“Oh no,” said Milo seriously. “In my family we all start on the ground and grow up, and we never know



how far until we actually get there.”

“What a silly system.” The boy laughed. “Then your head keeps changing its height and you always see things in a different way? Why, when you’re fifteen things won’t look at all the way they did when you were ten, and at twenty everything will change again.”

“I suppose so,” replied Milo, for he had never really thought about the matter.

“We always see things from the same angle,” the boy continued. “It’s much less trouble that way. Besides, it makes more sense to grow down and not up. When you’re very young, you can never hurt yourself falling down if you’re in mid-air, and you certainly can’t get into trouble for scuffing up your shoes or marking the floor if there’s nothing to scuff them on and the floor is three feet away.”

“That’s very true,” thought Tock, who wondered how the dogs in the family liked the arrangement.

“But there are many other ways to look at things,” remarked the boy. “For instance, you had orange juice, boiled eggs, toast and jam, and milk for breakfast,” he said, turning to Milo. “And you are always worried about people wasting time,” he said to Tock. “And you are almost never right about anything,” he said, pointing at the Humbug, “and, when you are, it’s usually an

accident.”

“A gross exaggeration,” protested the furious bug, who didn’t realize that so much was visible to the naked eye.

“Amazing,” gasped Tock.

“How do you know all that?” asked Milo.

“Simple,” he said proudly. “I’m Alec Bings; I see through things. I can see whatever is inside, behind, around, covered by, or subsequent to anything else. In fact, the only thing I can’t see is whatever happens to be right in front of my nose.”

“Isn’t that a little inconvenient?” asked Milo, whose neck was becoming quite stiff from looking up.

“It is a little,” replied Alec, “but it is quite important to know what lies behind things, and the family helps me take care of the rest. My father sees to things, my mother looks after things, my brother sees beyond things, my uncle sees the other side of every question, and my little sister Alice sees under things.”

“How can she see under things if she’s all the way up there?” growled the Humbug.

“Well,” added Alec, turning a neat cartwheel, “whatever she can’t see under, she overlooks.”

“Would it be possible for me to see something from up there?” asked Milo politely.



“You could,” said Alec, “but only if you try very hard to look at things as an adult does.”

Milo tried as hard as he could, and, as he did, his feet floated slowly off the ground until he was standing in the air next to Alec Bings. He looked around very quickly and, an instant later, crashed back down to earth again.

“Interesting, wasn’t it?” asked Alec.

“Yes, it was,” agreed Milo, rubbing his head and dusting himself off, “but I think I’ll continue to see things as a child. It’s not so far to fall.”

“A wise decision, at least for the time being,” said Alec. “Everyone should have his own point of view.”

“Isn’t this everyone’s Point of View?” asked Tock, looking around curiously.

“Of course not,” replied Alec, sitting himself down on nothing. “It’s only mine, and you certainly can’t always look at things from someone else’s Point of View. For instance, from here that looks like a bucket of water,” he said, pointing to a bucket of water; “but from an ant’s point of view it’s a vast ocean, from an elephant’s just a cool drink, and to a fish, of course, it’s home. So, you see, the way you see things depends a great deal on where you look at them from. Now, come along and I’ll show you the rest of the forest.”

He ran quickly through the air, stopping occasionally to beckon Milo, Tock, and the Humbug along, and they followed as well as anyone who had to stay on the ground could.

“Does everyone here grow the way you do?” puffed Milo when he had caught up.

“Almost everyone,” replied Alec, and then he stopped a moment and thought. “Now and then, though, someone does begin to grow differently. Instead of down, his feet grow up toward the sky. But we do our best to discourage awkward things like that.”

“What happens to *them*?” insisted Milo.

“Oddly enough, they often grow ten times the size of everyone else,” said Alec thoughtfully, “and I’ve heard that **they walk among the stars.**” And with that he skipped off once again toward the waiting woods.



## 10. A Colorful Symphony

As they ran, tall trees closed in around them and arched gracefully toward the sky. The late-afternoon sunlight leaped lightly from leaf to leaf, slid along branches and down trunks, and dropped finally to the ground in warm, **luminous** patches. A soft glow filled the air with the kind of light that made everything look sharp and clear and close enough to reach out and touch.

Alec raced ahead, laughing and shouting, but soon encountered serious difficulties; for, while he could always see the tree behind the next one, he could never see the next one itself and was continually crashing into it. After several minutes of wildly dashing about, they all stopped for a breath of air.

“I think we’re lost,” panted the Humbug, collapsing into a large berrybush.



“Nonsense!” shouted Alec from the high branch on which he sat.

“Do you know where we are?” asked Milo.

“Certainly,” he replied, “we’re right here on this very spot. Besides, being lost is never a matter of not knowing where you are; it’s a matter of not knowing where you aren’t—and I don’t care at all about where I’m not.”

This was much too complicated for the bug to figure out, and Milo had just begun repeating it to himself when Alec said, “If you don’t believe me, ask the giant,” and he pointed to a small house tucked neatly



between two of the largest trees.

Milo and Tock walked up to the door, whose brass name plate read simply "THE GIANT," and knocked.

"Good afternoon," said the perfectly ordinary-sized man who answered the door.



"Are you the giant?" asked Tock doubtfully.

"To be sure," he replied proudly. "I'm the smallest giant in the world. What can I do for you?"

"Are we lost?" said Milo.

"That's a difficult question," said the giant. "Why don't you go around back and ask the midget?" And he

closed the door.

They walked to the rear of the house, which looked exactly like the front, and knocked at the door, whose name plate read "THE MIDGET"

"How are you?" inquired the man, who looked exactly like the giant.

"Are you the midget?" asked Tock again, with a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

"Unquestionably," he answered. "I'm the tallest midget in the world. May I help you?"



"Do you think we're lost?" repeated Milo.



“That’s a very complicated problem,” he said. “Why don’t you go around to the side and ask the fat man?” And he, too, quickly disappeared.

The side of the house looked very like the front and back, and the door flew open the very instant they knocked.

“How nice of you to come by,” exclaimed the man, who could have been the midget’s twin brother.

“You must be the fat man,” said Tock, learning not to count too much on appearance.

“The **thinnest** one in the world,” he replied brightly; “but if you have any questions, I suggest you try the thin man, on the other side of the house.”

Just as they suspected, the other side of the house looked the same as the front, the back, and the side, and the door was again answered by a man who looked precisely like the other three.



“What a pleasant surprise!” he cried happily. “I haven’t had a visitor in as long as I can remember.”

“How long is that?” asked Milo.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” he replied. “Now pardon me; I have to answer the door.”

“But you just did,” said Tock.

“Oh yes, I’d forgotten.”

“Are you the **fattest thin man** in the world?” asked Tock.

“Do you know one that’s fatter?” he asked impatiently.

“I think you’re all the same man,” said Milo



emphatically.

“S-S-S-S-S-H-H-H-H-H-H-H-H,” he cautioned, putting his finger up to his lips and drawing Milo closer. “Do you want to ruin everything? You see, to tall men I’m a midget, and to short men I’m a giant; to the skinny ones I’m a fat man, and to the fat ones I’m a thin man. That way I can hold four jobs at once. As you can see, though, I’m neither tall nor short nor fat nor thin. In fact, I’m quite ordinary, but there are so many ordinary men that no one asks their opinion about anything. Now what is your question?”

“Are we lost?” asked Milo once again.

“H-m-m-m,” said the man, scratching his head. “I haven’t had such a difficult question in as long as I can remember. Would you mind repeating it? It’s slipped my mind.”

Milo asked the question again.

“My, my,” the man mumbled. “I know one thing for certain; it’s much harder to tell whether you *are* lost than whether you *were* lost, for, on many occasions, where you’re going is exactly where you are. On the other hand, you often find that where you’ve been is not at all where you should have gone, and, since it’s much more difficult to find your way back from someplace you’ve never left, I suggest you go there immedi-

ately and then decide. If you have any more questions, please ask the giant.” And he slammed his door and pulled down the shade.

“I hope you’re satisfied,” said Alec when they’d returned from the house, and he bounced to his feet, bent down to awaken the snoring Humbug, and started off, more slowly this time, in the direction of a large clearing.

“Do many people live here in the forest?” asked Milo as they trotted along together.

“Oh yes, they live in a wonderful city called Reality,” he announced, smashing into one of the smaller trees and sending a cascade of nuts and leaves to the ground. “It’s right this way.”

In a few more steps the forest opened before them, and off to the left a magnificent metropolis appeared. The rooftops shone like mirrors, the walls glistened with thousands of precious stones, and the broad avenues were paved in silver.

“Is that it?” shouted Milo, running toward the shining streets.

“Oh no, that’s only Illusions,” said Alec. “The real city is over there.”

“What are Illusions?” Milo asked, for it was the loveliest city he’d ever seen.



“Illusions,” explained Alec, “are like mirages,” and, realizing that this didn’t help much, he continued: “And mirages are things that aren’t really there that you can see very clearly.”

“How can you see something that isn’t there?” yawned the Humbug, who wasn’t fully awake yet.

“Sometimes it’s much simpler than seeing things that are,” he said. “For instance, if something is there, you can only see it with your eyes open, but if it isn’t there, you can see it just as well with your eyes closed. That’s why imaginary things are often easier to see than real ones.”

“Then where is Reality?” barked Tock.

“Right here,” cried Alec, waving his arms. “You’re standing in the middle of Main Street.”

They looked around very carefully. Tock sniffed suspiciously at the wind and the Humbug gingerly stabbed his cane in the air, but there was nothing at all to see.

“It’s really a very pleasant city,” said Alec as he strolled down the street, pointing out several of the sights, which didn’t seem to be there, and tipping his cap to the passers-by. There were great crowds of people rushing along with their heads down, and they all appeared to know exactly where they were going as they darted down and around the nonexistent streets

and in and out of the missing buildings.



“I don’t see any city,” said Milo very softly.

“Neither do they,” Alec remarked sadly, “but it hardly matters, for they don’t miss it at all.”

“It must be very difficult to live in a city you can’t see,” Milo insisted, jumping aside as a line of cars and trucks went by.

“Not at all, once you get used to it,” said Alec. “But let me tell you how it happened.” And, as they strolled along the bustling and busy avenue, he began.



“Many years ago, on this very spot, there was a beautiful city of fine houses and inviting spaces, and no one who lived here was ever in a hurry. The streets were full of wonderful things to see and the people would often stop to look at them.”

“Didn’t they have any place to go?” asked Milo.

“To be sure,” continued Alec; “but, as you know, the most important reason for going from one place to another is to see what’s in between, and they took great pleasure in doing just that. Then one day someone discovered that if you walked as fast as possible and looked at nothing but your shoes you would arrive at your destination much more quickly. Soon everyone was doing it. They all rushed down the avenues and hurried along the boulevards seeing nothing of the wonders and beauties of their city as they went.”

Milo remembered the many times he’d done the very same thing; and, as hard as he tried, there were even things on his own street that he couldn’t remember.

“No one paid any attention to how things looked, and as they moved faster and faster everything grew uglier and dirtier, and as everything grew uglier and dirtier they moved faster and faster, and at last a very strange thing began to happen. Because nobody cared, the city slowly began to disappear. Day by day the

buildings grew fainter and fainter, and the streets faded away, until at last it was entirely invisible. There was nothing to see at all.”

“What did they do?” the Humbug inquired, suddenly taking an interest in things.

“Nothing at all,” continued Alec. “They went right on living here just as they’d always done, in the houses they could no longer see and on the streets which had vanished, because nobody had noticed a thing. And that’s the way they have lived to this very day.”

“Hasn’t anyone told them?” asked Milo.

“It doesn’t do any good,” Alec replied, “for they can never see what they’re in too much of a hurry to look for.”

“Why don’t they live in Illusions?” suggested the Humbug. “It’s much prettier.”

“Many of them do,” he answered, walking in the direction of the forest once again, “but it’s just as bad to live in a place where what you do see isn’t there as it is to live in one where what you don’t see is.”

“Perhaps someday you can have one city as easy to see as Illusions and as hard to forget as Reality,” Milo remarked.

“That will happen only when you bring back Rhyme and Reason,” said Alec, smiling, for he had seen right



through Milo's plans. "Now let's hurry or we'll miss the evening concert."

They followed him quickly up a flight of steps which couldn't be seen and through a door which didn't exist. In a moment they had left Reality (which is sometimes a hard thing to tell) and stood in a completely different part of the forest.

The sun was dropping slowly from sight, and stripes of purple and orange and crimson and gold piled themselves on top of the distant hills. The last shafts of light waited patiently for a flight of wrens to find their way home, and a group of anxious stars had already taken their places.

"Here we are!" cried Alec, and, with a sweep of his arm, he pointed toward an enormous symphony orchestra. "Isn't it a grand sight?"

There were at least a thousand musicians ranged in a great arc before them. To the left and right were the violins and cellos, whose bows moved in great waves, and behind them in numberless profusion the piccolos, flutes, clarinets, oboes, bassoons, horns, trumpets, trombones, and tubas were all playing at once. At the very rear, so far away that they could hardly be seen, were the percussion instruments, and lastly, in a long line up one side of a steep slope, were the solemn bass

fiddles.





On a high podium in front stood the conductor, a tall, gaunt man with dark deep-set eyes and a thin mouth placed carelessly between his long pointed nose and his long pointed chin. He used no baton, but conducted with large, sweeping movements which seemed to start at his toes and work slowly up through his body and along his slender arms and end finally at the tips of his graceful fingers.

“I don’t hear any music,” said Milo.

“That’s right,” said Alec; “you don’t listen to this concert—you watch it. Now, pay attention.”

As the conductor waved his arms, he molded the air like handfuls of soft clay, and the musicians carefully followed his every direction.

“What are they playing?” asked Tock, looking up inquisitively at Alec.

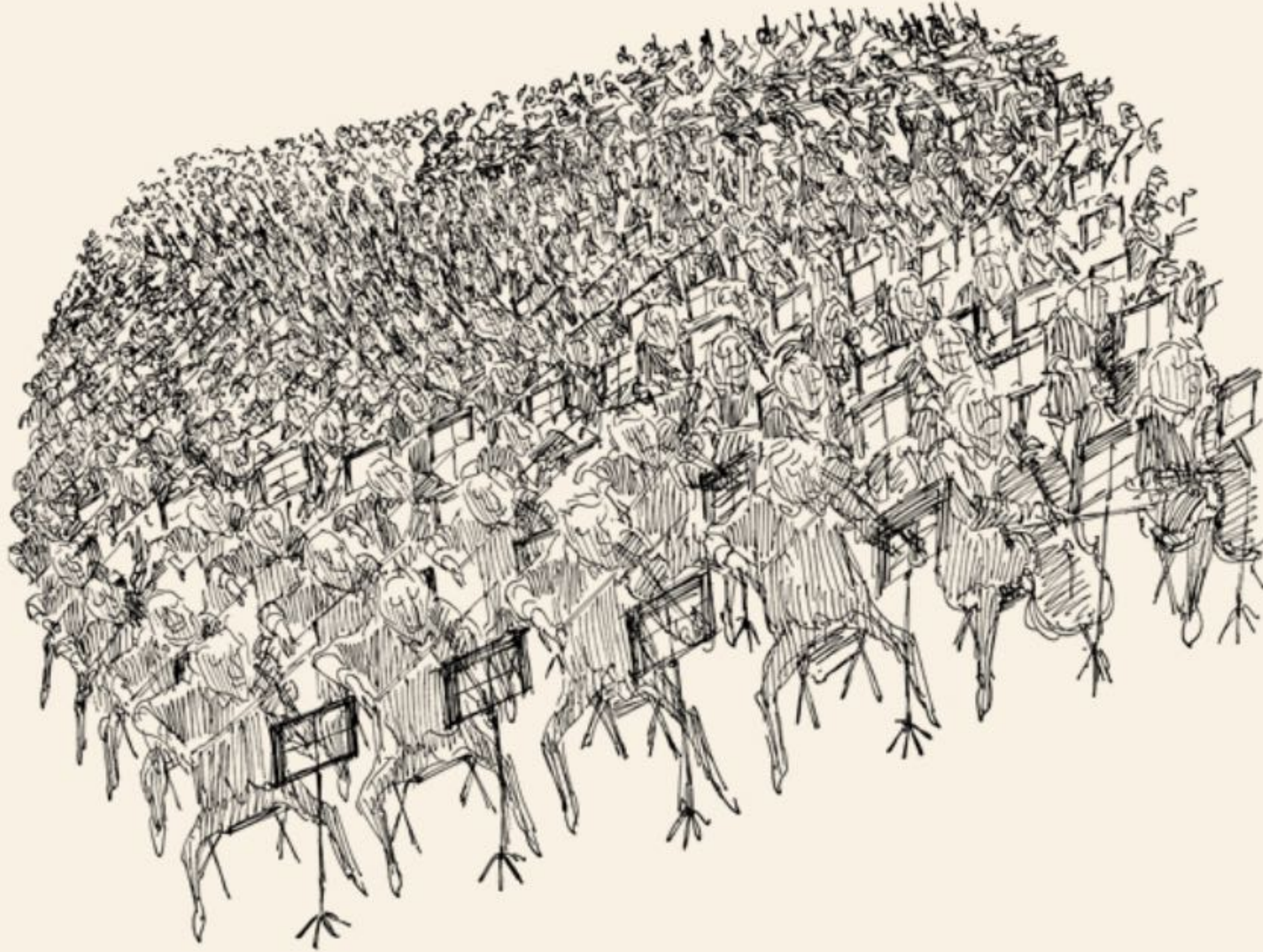
“The sunset, of course. They play it every evening, about this time.”

“They do?” said Milo quizzically.

“Naturally,” answered Alec; “and they also play morning, noon, and night, when, of course, it’s morning, noon, or night. Why, there wouldn’t be any color in the world unless they played it. Each instrument plays a different one,” he explained, “and depending, of course, on what season it is and how the weather’s to



be, the conductor chooses his score and directs the day. But watch: the sun has almost set, and in a moment you can ask Chroma himself.”



The last colors slowly faded from the western sky, and, as they did, one by one the instruments stopped, until only the bass fiddles, in their somber slow movement, were left to play the night and a single set of silver bells brightened the constellations. The conductor let his arms fall limply at his sides and stood quite still as darkness claimed the forest.

“That was a very beautiful sunset,” said Milo, walking to the podium.

“It should be,” was the reply; “we’ve been practicing since the world began.” And, reaching down, the speaker picked Milo off the ground and set him on the music stand. “I am Chroma the Great,” he continued, gesturing broadly with his hands, “conductor of color, maestro of pigment, and director of the entire spectrum.”

“Do you play all day long?” asked Milo when he had introduced himself.

“Ah yes, all day, every day,” he sang out, then pirouetted gracefully around the platform. “I rest only at night, and even then *they* play on.”

“What would happen if you stopped?” asked Milo, who didn’t quite believe that color happened that way.

“See for yourself!” roared Chroma, and he raised both hands high over his head. Immediately the instruments that were playing stopped, and at once all color vanished. The world looked like an enormous coloring book that had never been used. Everything appeared in simple black outlines, and it looked as if someone with a set of paints the size of a house and a brush as wide could stay happily occupied for years. Then Chroma lowered his arms. The instruments began again and the



color returned.

“You see what a dull place the world would be without color?” he said, bowing until his chin almost touched the ground. “But what pleasure to lead my violins in a serenade of spring green or hear my trumpets blare out the blue sea and then watch the oboes tint it all in warm yellow sunshine. And rainbows are best of all—and blazing neon signs, and taxicabs with stripes, and the soft, muted tones of a foggy day. We play them all.”

As Chroma spoke, Milo sat with his eyes open wide, and Alec, Tock, and the Humbug looked on in wonder.

“Now I really must get some sleep.” Chroma yawned. “We’ve had lightning, fireworks, and parades for the last few nights, and I’ve had to be up to conduct them. But tonight is sure to be quiet.” Then, putting his large hand on Milo’s shoulder, he said, “Be a good fellow and watch my orchestra till morning, will you? And be sure to wake me at 5:23 for the sunrise. Good night, good night, good night.”

With that he leaped lightly from the podium and, in three long steps, vanished into the forest.

“That’s a good idea,” said Tock, making himself comfortable in the grass as the bug grumbled himself quickly to sleep and Alec stretched out in mid-air.

And Milo, full of thoughts and questions, curled up on the pages of tomorrow’s music and eagerly awaited the dawn.

