

GENE WOLFE - The man in the Pepper Mill

You really don't have to worry, Tippy," Tippy's mother said in her kindest, gentlest voice. "It was just a minor tremor, and they happen all the time. We've had worse ones. I'm surprised it woke you up."

Tippy stared at his green beans. "I thought she might've bumped the table. That's all."

"You thought who might have bumped the table?" Tippy's mother's voice was harder, the voice that led to slaps.

"Nobody."

"Were you talking about Catherine?"

"No," Tippy said, still not sure how Cathy, dead, had become Catherine. "No, ma'am."

"This hasn't been nearly as hard on you as it has on me, Tippy."

"No, ma'am."

"You hated Catherine. You're glad, I'm sure, that you'll never see her again. I loved her, and I'll always, always miss her."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Your birthday --" Tippy's mother started to cry. "Your birthday's Sunday. Day after tomorrow."

"Uh huh." The plate was brown but almost green, with little dark green branches around the rim.

"What would you like, Tippy?"

"Nothing."

Tippy's mother sighed, an overworked woman on whose tired shoulders another burden had been laid. "I'll have to shop for it, Tippy. I'll have to do it tomorrow. Go to the bank in the morning, and go to several stores. What do you want?"

"Nothing." To make a show of eating, Tippy plunged his fork into a green bean. It was hard, and he knew it would taste raw.

"You're just a little kid." This was the voice he liked again. "You've got all this to deal with, and you're just a little kid."

He nodded miserably.

"Catherine's funeral was very, very expensive, Tippy. It cost almost as much as a new car, and I'll be paying it off for years. So I'd appreciate it very much if you didn't ask for something too expensive. Just one present, an inexpensive one. Will you do that for me, Tippy?"

"Sure."

"If you don't know what you want, you can tell me in the morning. Let's wait till then. I think that would be better."

It was on the tip of Tippy's tongue to say that nothing didn't cost anything, but he knew he could not get the words to come out without crying, and he was already old enough to be shamed by his tears.

"You can go out and play now, if you want to."

He went up to his room instead, passing the closed door of the room that had been Catherine's when she was Cathy. "I didn't hate you," he whispered to her blank and silent door. "We just fought about stuff

sometimes. I never did hate you." He knew it was the truth, and that truth carried no force or authority whatsoever.

He went into his own room, shut the door, and opened his window. The house was air-conditioned so he was not supposed to; but he did it anyway, needing to see the world beyond the house, and the rose and purple glory of sunset, without the intervention of glass.

There were other houses all around; he counted them to find out how many he could see from his window. Thirteen. Many had two stories, like his. After school he had gone to several and touched them, and they had been perfectly solid, brick and wood and concrete and stone.

He wanted to go down to the kitchen and look yet again at Catherine's dollhouse, still standing untouched on the kitchen table; but his mother was probably putting dishes into the dishwasher, so it was impossible.

Awakened by a flash of light, he sat up in bed, certain it had happened again. Slipping from beneath the blankets, he went to the window. A house across the street had lights on, and he could see others, dark but quite definitely there. He raised the sash, admitting warm night air that was nicer than the cold refrigerator air of the house. Nothing moved outside but the wind, and even the wind was kind.

Smiling to himself, he went back to bed and slept; and when he woke up again it was not like that at all.

He knew. The world had vanished, and another had been substituted for it. Outside, something enormous moved with inaudible steps. Briefly he saw its eye fill the window and whispered, "Cathy! Cathy!" Then it was gone. Light flashed, then the light was gone too.

He got out of bed, shivering. The house was dark, and the light switches were only paint on the walls.

In his mother's bedroom his mother lay upon her back with both arms above the blanket, their smooth white flesh as hard as plastic. Light flashed at her window; he looked out, but could see nothing. A man with painted-on hair who was not quite his father lay beside his mother; touched, he shimmered and winked out.

The stairs were still there, and the banister and the front hall rug; but the TV would not come on, and the clicker was gone. It was funny, he thought, how some things changed when other things did not. The kitchen was about the same, with a lot of his toys (borrowed by Cathy without permission) still scattered on the table. Cathy's dollhouse was gone, except for being all around. It could not be inside itself, after all.

He went out the back door.

The whole back yard was gone, as he had expected, the toys huge now, the Red Power Ranger (still on its feet) at least twice his size.

If Cathy saw him, she would probably pick him up, he decided, and if she did not like him she might throw him down. But Cathy seemed to have gone someplace else.

Boldly, he walked to the edge and looked about him at the dim vastness of the kitchen, at the distant cabinets and far away moon-like whiteness of the stove. Light raced over the kitchen toward him, bathed him for an instant, and faded, clear butter-yellow light from a dark and almost invisible tower above the sink. As he wondered at it, he glimpsed a tiny figure, silhouetted as the beam swept toward him again.

"Breakfast," Tippy's mother called, her voice floating through the dining room and the living room, along the hall and up the stairs. "Breakfast, Tippy."

Tippy brought his book. "Look at this one, Mom. Isn't it cool?" His mother nodded without looking, busy with cold cereal, milk, and bowls.

"It's got those spikes, but it eats grass and stuff. I could ride on it."

"They're gone, Tippy. They're dead, all of them. As dead as -- never mind. What are you staring at in there?"

"Nothing."

"I thought perhaps you saw a dinosaur in the back yard."

"I was just looking at the thing that grinds up pepper," Tippy said, and added to himself, not now.

"Put down your book and eat your cereal." She set it before him.

"I wanted you to tell me how to say it. Please?"

She deigned to glance at the book. "Stegosaurus. You see a lot of them. I mean there are vitamin tablets and toys and so forth. Didn't you have a toy one?"

Tippy nodded. "Cathy took it." Obediently, he shut the book and spooned up Captain Crunch.

"You'll get it back eventually. I don't want you going into her room now. Do you understand?"

He nodded.

"Not to get back a toy, and not for any other purpose at all."

"Okay."

"Have you decided what you want for your birthday?"

"I think so. Can I go in the kitchen a minute?"

"No. Eat your breakfast."

"If I don't touch anything?"

"No. What is it you'd like?" Tippy's mother patted her lips with a napkin and looked up at him. "How about some more action figures?"

"Huh uh."

"It wouldn't have to be just one, and I saw Baron Brute in K-Mart, with snakes and fangs and everything. You always liked Baron Brute."

"No." Thinking about the dinosaur, Tippy made his voice as firm as he could.

"Well, remember what I said last night. You have to make up your mind this morning." Tippy's mother picked up her cup and set it back down. "Could you, please, Tippy? The can's on the drainboard. Use the hot beverage tap."

As he spooned instant coffee into her cup, he stared at the graceful cylinder of dark wood on the windowsill. Once he ventured to reach for it, standing on tiptoe, his hand trembling. When his fingertips were half an inch away, his courage failed.

"Tippy?"

"In a minute." Steaming water trickled into her cup; he stirred, and returned with it in triumph.

"Did you rinse the spoon?"

He had not. "I put it in the sink. Mom, what's that big thing over there," he pointed, "that tells the ships?"

His mother looked up without comprehension. "That tells the ships what?"

"About rocks and things, and other ships, I guess. Like a church."

"The old lighthouse. Is that what you mean? That's right, you can see it from your window, can't you?"

"Cathy could see it too. She liked it. We talked about it sometimes."

Interested, his mother sipped coffee without taking her eyes off him. "That's a good thing to remember. I'll always remember it, now that you've told me, and I want you to try to remember it, too, Tippy."

Encouraged, he nodded. "I know what I want now. Can I tell you?"

"A toy lighthouse? I doubt that I could find one. How about a flashlight, so you can play lighthouse? A flashlight would be easy."

He shook his head. "I want you to take me up there. So I can see the real one."

"Instead of a present?"

"That would be the present," he explained patiently. "Going up there."

"It's over on the other side of the bay." She spoke half to herself. "It would be a nice ride, I suppose."

It was. Down Latch Street to wide and busy Countryside, onto the Interstate and off again, and up Windpoint Road in a series of curves that were gracefully sweeping at first, then breathtaking. Tippy's mother put down all the windows and smiled out at the rocks and the dry brown hills, and Tippy thought how pretty she looked with her bright silk scarf at her throat and her feather earrings spinning around in the wind. Suddenly there were no more rocks or dead grass on his side of the car, only air and sky and tossing water.

"That's the ocean down there, Tippy." There was fear enough in her voice to make him uncomfortable. "It doesn't look like the water that comes out of the faucet at home, does it?"

Half dumb with wonder, he managed to say, "Huh uh."

"It is. Take out the salt, filter and chlorinate it, and it would be the same stuff. The only difference is that this water doesn't try to fool you. Your grandmother's bones are there, with the bones of thousands and thousands of other people"

She pointed. "Look up ahead. You can see the tower where the light is."

A square green sign beside the road announced WINDPOINT LIGHT 1/4 MILE in white letters of modest size.

A turn, a climb, and a wiggle, and a strip of asphalt scarcely wide enough for one car led them steeply toward the edge of a cliff. There was a small parking lot nestled among pines and white birches, and another sign, so modest as to seem ashamed.

ADMISSION \$1.25
SENIORS 50 cents
CHILDREN FREE

As they got out of the car, the pepper-mill man appeared in the doorway of the little wooden house attached to the brown tower. "Come on in!"

"Do you like this, Tippy?" Tippy's mother asked while they walked up a crunchy path of little rocks. "I hope you're not disappointed."

He nodded, puzzled; there had been thumps when the pepper-mill man stepped back from the doorway. Tippy's mother halted at the doorway to fumble in her purse. "A dollar and a quarter? Is that all? It seems very reasonable."

The pepper-mill man grinned, lifting the seaman's cap he wore and pushing gray-streaked hair beneath it as if he had just put it on. "Then you can buy something in our little store." He waved toward three display cases.

"We've got note cards and stationery with our lighthouse on them, postcards, even night lights. Books on the coast, and scientific coloring books for children. Anything you buy will help us preserve the lighthouse."

She handed him two dollars. "Would you like something, Tippy? That could be a birthday present, too. Or would you like to see the lighthouse first?"

That was easy. "The lighthouse," Tippy decided; but he grabbed up a book that looked interesting as he passed the rack.

The pepper-mill man followed him with a thump, and Tippy turned back to stare. "Like a pirate!"

"Exactly." The pepper-mill man's grin, which had been wide already, grew wider still. "Bit off by a whale, and a yo-ho-ho to ye, young Jim Hawkins."

"His name's Tippy," Tippy's mother said, and for some reason seemed almost unable to talk. "I -- I mean it's Tiptree, really. For the, you know, the writer. But she's dead, and -- and . . ."

"I owe you seventy-five cents." The pepper-mill man stopped to ring a cash register. "My name's Buster Hill." "He took a book." Tippy's mother spoke so softly that he could scarcely hear her. "I have to pay you for that,

too."

"Just to look at," Tippy explained. "I'll put it back after."

"Will -- will we have to, you know, climb up things? Or look down at the water? I wasn't afraid driving here, really I wasn't, but I don't like heights."

"You don't have to go up to the light if you don't want to," the pepper-mill man declared; and Tippy, deducing that it was possible to do so, dashed ahead.

A flight of iron steps shaped like slices of pie wound around an iron pole inside the lighthouse. They were narrow, which mattered not at all to his flying feet. They were also high, which mattered less if anything, because to a degree that he found wonderful they made it possible for him to climb with a most impressive rumble and roar despite his sneakers.

At the top, a little balcony with iron railings circled the huge light and its complicated-looking machinery. Tippy trotted around it several times looking at the brown land and the gloriously unquiet water, waved to his mother and the pepper-mill man far below, then sat down where he could not see them -- nor they him -- with his legs dangling from the balcony.

The book was easily twice as good as it had appeared, with many brightly colored pictures of strange ships with billowing sails and snapping banners. There were pirates, and men blacker than the man down the street Tippy's mother said was black even though he was not, and a captain with a long yellow robe with a black dragon on it and a long, long mustache. It was all interesting, and some of it was very interesting -- so interesting that Tippy kept going back to those pictures again and again so he could study them and then look out to sea and imagine himself on whatever kind of ship it was.

Still he smiled when he heard the thumps of the pepper-mill man's pirate leg on the iron steps. Tippy had wanted to leave his mother and the pepper-mill man alone together for a long while, and was glad to have done so; but he wanted to talk to the pepper-mill man, too.

"Hello," the pepper-mill man said when he reached the little balcony. "Are you afraid to climb down? I can carry you."

Tippy shook his head.

"Then get up and let's go. You can keep that book if you like it."

Tippy shook his head again. "I want to tell you."

"About what?" Holding onto the railing, the pepper-mill man crouched beside him.

"What happens at night. And ask you."

"What happens at night," the pepper-mill man said, and there was no question on the end of it.

"Yeah." Now that the moment had come, Tippy found it hard to choose the right words. "This is a -- a big brown thing then. On the windowsill."

For a second he was sure the pepper-mill man had not understood him, then the pepper-mill man sat down heavily beside him, letting his real leg and his pirate leg hang off just as Tippy's legs did. Then the pepper-mill man took a big, deep breath as if he were going to say something very important, and let it out, and took another one, and said, "Are you the little boy who lives in the dollhouse?"

Solemnly, Tippy nodded.

"You and your mother. She was looking back at the city and trying to show me where you live, and I got an idea she might be the one." Tippy shook his head. "She doesn't. I'm all alone in there." "In the dollhouse."

Tippy nodded, and after a long, long time the pepper-mill man said, "Do you know why it's happening?"

"I was going to ask you."

"I don't know." Suddenly the pepper-mill man's hand was holding Tippy's arm very tightly. "It's not a dream. I keep telling myself that it's just a dream, but it isn't." He let out air with a big whoosh.

"No," Tippy agreed.

"Did you see me last night? I saw you."

Tippy nodded. "That was the best I ever did. That was how I knew it was you when you were in your store."

"My job . . ." The pepper-mill man let the words trail off into the blue sky, and started over. "I live here all the time, Tippy. I sleep at night when the light's on, mostly, because we're closed then. But twice every night, at eleven and three, I've got to go up and inspect the light to make sure the gears are greased and everything's working."

Tippy nodded to show he understood.

"Usually I stay up until eleven watching TV. I make my eleven o'clock inspection and go to bed, with my alarm clock set for two forty-five. I get up then and make my second inspection. That's when it happens, when I get to the top and step out here."

"It's when I wake up way late at night," Tippy confided. "Then I can look up at the windowsill and see you, only it isn't a pepper mill any more, it's this -- only little like me."

The pepper-mill man was silent for a long time. At last he said, "That's your kitchen I see out there. The big white thing's your refrigerator, isn't it? It looks like one. And you don't understand what's been happening to us any better than I do."

"A little better, maybe."

"You know what I did last night? I stayed up all night. I'd been going back to bed after my three o'clock inspection the way I always did, and in the morning I'd tell myself it had been a dream."

"It's not," Tippy said softly.

"Last night, I waited right up here. I could go around on the other side and see your kitchen, and that's what I did, mostly. But when I was on this side, I could see the ocean and the stars like always. Around four-thirty the sun came up, and your kitchen was just mist, all the solid things my light had been showing, the doll house and the stove and refrigerator. Everything. It was only mist, and then they were gone and the town was there just like always."

"It's Cathy," Tippy explained. When he saw that the pepper-mill man did not understand he added, "It's her doll house."

"There's a real doll house then."

Tippy nodded.

"In your kitchen, on the kitchen table."

Tippy nodded again. "Mom won't move it or let me touch it. By-and-by is what she says."

The pepper-mill man sighed. "Cathy was your sister, two years older. Your mother told me while we were waiting for you to come down. She talked about how hard it had been for you, and her, too, and I'm sure it must have been. How long ago was it?"

Tippy lifted his small shoulders and let them fall. "Not very long."

"A week?"

"Longer than that."

"A month?"

"I don't think so."

"I ought to ask you about Cathy, since you say she's doing it." The pepper-mill man released Tippy's arm and wiped his hands on his faded jeans. "Where's your father, Tippy? Does he know about this?"

Tippy shook his head. "Mom made him go away. That's what she says." Then, unable to control himself, he blurted, "She likes you."

The pepper-mill man seemed not to have heard. "Was this before Cathy died?"

"A long time before. Before Christmas."

When the pepper-mill man said nothing Tippy returned to his previous topic. "Mom likes you."

The pepper-mill man shook his head. "I'm too old for her."

Offended by the necessity of making such things clear to a grown-up, Tippy explained very slowly, "You can't be too old if she likes you."

"It wouldn't work, young Jim."

"It would!"

"Before long she'd make me go away, just like she did your dad. That's if she ever let me into her house at all. I might not have the same things wrong with me your dad had, but to a woman, any woman, every man's got one thing wrong with him."

"It wouldn't be like that. You're just pretending."

The pepper-mill man declined to argue with a child. "You think your dead sister's doing it."

"She is. She thinks a whole lot about somebody being with Mom and me the way our dad used to be. And she likes you just like Morn does. You're the one."

Less distinctly than they heard the crashing of the waves on the rocks below, they could hear Tippy's mother calling to them from the solid, sheltered land on the far side of the light.

"She didn't want to come up here after you," the pepper-mill man told Tippy. "She's afraid of heights. She didn't want me to, either, because of my leg. I said I climbed up twice every night, but she still didn't want me to."

Tippy nodded solemnly. "I knew it would be like that. I wanted you and her to be by yourselves."

"Well, we were," the pepper-mill man acknowledged. And when they had both looked out to the horizon and listened to the faint and lonely cries of the gulls, he added, "We talked a little bit, that's all. We didn't kiss or anything."

"That's good," Tippy told him.

"Don't you like mushy stuff, young Jim?"

"I mean it's good you talked. Was your leg really bit off by a whale?"

The pepper-mill man shook his head. "A land mine. An anti-personnel mine."

Tippy nodded sympathetically.

"I've got a nice prosthetic leg the VA gave me. That's what I wear when I go into town. But out here I wear this and the sailor clothes, because that's what our visitors want to see. It helps."

"Do you like living here?" Tippy asked.

"Not really. Or anyhow not very much." The pepper-mill man cocked his head to listen as Tippy's mother

called again. "You think she'll come up after us in a minute?"

Tippy ignored the question. "Then come live with us. We've got a nice house."

"It wouldn't work, young Jim. You think she'll come?"

Tippy shook his head. "She might call the firemen or something."

The pepper-mill man grinned. "That ought to take a while."

"Tell more about your leg."

"There's not much more to tell, young Jim. When I got out of the Army hospital, I went back to college and studied journalism -- newspaper work. I had a job with a little paper down south for a while, and then with a magazine. But I didn't like the work or the people, so I went into public relations."

"What's that?" Tippy wanted to know.

"Helping people or companies deal with the press and so on, mostly it's with newspapers and the TV news departments. They'll crucify you if you let them, especially if you don't give them anything else to chew on."

Tippy nodded wisely. "Like, if somebody found a live dinosaur? A real one?"

"You've got it."

Tippy's mother called again, and the pepper-mill man prepared to stand up. "The agency I'd been with closed, and I got another job, but it only lasted a couple of months, so I applied to the Town Council here, and they gave me this. I was supposed to get a real public relations job pretty soon, but I've been here about two years. I deal with the public, so that's public relations, I guess, and sometimes some paper or magazine will do a story on the lighthouse"

"You ought to come and live where we do," Tippy insisted doggedly.

"It wouldn't work, young Jim, believe me." The pepper-mill man got up. "I'm too old for her, and I've got this leg and no good job."

Tippy stood too. "Yes, it would. Cathy thinks so, and so do I."

"You let me go down those steps first. If you slip or something, I don't want you falling down and off."

Tippy agreed disconsolately.

"You're sure it's your dead sister?" the pepper-mill man asked as they walked a quarter of the way around the light to the opening that returned them to the iron stair. "A little girl?"

"I see her sometimes," Tippy declared. "Sometimes she looks in through the window, and then she's real big. I'm afraid to go outside when she's out there."

The pepper-mill man glanced at him over his shoulder as he started down. "I suppose I would be, too. But couldn't somebody else be doing it? Maybe she's just in it the same way we are."

"It's how she played!" Tippy insisted; frustration was making him angry. "No other houses, because she didn't have any more doll houses to be them. There's a doll in the bed for More, because she had that doll and that's where she put it, in bed in her dollhouse. Only she doesn't have any for me and you, so we get to be really us. Don't you see?"

The pepper-mill man looked around again. "In the morning the mamma doll turns into your real mother?"

"Yes!"

From the bottom of the steps, Tippy's real mother called, "You're all right! I hear you?"

The pepper-mill man called back, "He's fine. We've been having a little talk."

"She's real pretty," Tippy reminded the pepper-mill man, sotto voce; impelled by his still-developing sense of honor, he added reluctantly, "She's sort of crazy though."

"They all are, young Jim," the pepper-mill man whispered back; there was a sorrow in his voice that Tippy did not understand, but after he had spoken they were too close to the ground and Tippy's mother to talk.

As the pepper-mill man took the last step down, holding onto the railing and groping for the floor with the leathershod tip of his pirate leg as he always did, he said, "We had a talk up there about some things that have been bothering Tippy. I hope you don't mind."

"That was very nice of you," Tippy's mother said, and her eyes shone.

"I'd like to think so, and I'd like to think I've done some good. I tried to explain to Tippy that people don't really die the way a flower does, or a fish, even if we use the same word for it. His sister's body is dead like that, but her soul hasn't died, and never will. It lives with God in Heaven."

Tippy understood that the explaining was really now. "She's real strong up there, too," he assured his mother.

"Most dead people aren't, but Cathy's really, really strong. Catherine, I mean."

"Loving, too," Tippy's mother murmured, "she always had so much love for all of us."

"It may simply be that she wants something very badly," the pepper-mill man told Tippy. When nobody was listening, Tippy said, I know what it is. But he said it to himself alone.

The pepper-mill man walked them to their car; and when she was ready to get into it, Tippy's mother offered him her hand. "Are you sure you won't let me pay for Tippy's book?"

He shook his head. "It's a birthday present from me to him, and if you paid that would spoil it."

"I want you to come for dinner sometime. If we have dinner at seven, you'll have plenty of time to get back up here."

"Okay," the pepper-mill man said, "that would be swell."

Tippy, listening from the car, felt certain that neither really meant it, so he knelt in the driver's seat and stuck his head out. "If we needed you bad, would you come to help about the TV people like you said?"

"Sure," the pepper-mill man told him.

"Like, if I find a real live dinosaur. There'll be lots of people from TV to take pictures and everything."

Tippy's mother laughed.

"If you find a live dinosaur," the pepper-mill man told Tippy, "I'll be there inside an hour, and that's a promise."

Tippy had to back away to let his mother get into the car. "I think I'm going to find one pretty soon, so don't forget."

"I won't!" the pepper-mill man called as they pulled away. He waved.

"Well," Tippy's mother said to Tippy when they had turned back onto Windpoint Road, "that was nicer than I expected. Did you have a good time?"

He nodded.

"You don't mind not having a party for your class this year?"

"No," Tippy said; and when the scary part of the road was over he added thoughtfully, "It was swell."

It had seemed so easy when he had gone to bed. Now he snuggled his head under the covers and tried to pretend he was still asleep while Cathy moved outside in the kitchen darkness, peering through the windows of her dollhouse, dead and yet so very much still there.

It would not work, he knew, and something terrible would happen instead, something awful beyond imagining -- it could not work. Slowly, he pushed away sheet and blankets, put his bare feet over the side of his bed, and stood up, becoming by that act of will and courage a small boy so nearly grown that he was practically a man.

Out in the light-brushed darkness beyond the kitchen door, toys (many of them his) littered the tabletop like tumbled monuments, the Red Power Ranger alone still upright. For a moment he stopped beside it, his hand caressing the smooth crimson plastic; but he came scarcely to its waist, and he knew that any attempt of his to lift and carry it would be futile.

Beyond it sprawled Spider-Man, and even more tempting, Luke Skywalker. Resolutely, Tippy passed them by.

A Scottie as big as a mastiff lay nose-to-nose with a West Highland White, impelled by the magnets at their feet; although he thought he might have managed one such dog, they could not be separated, and in combination would constitute an impossible load. They had been Cathy's, in any case. Cathy might object to his using her toys, he felt; but she could not reasonably resent his using his own.

The stegosaurus was pink and mercifully small, one of a set whose members were mostly lost; its tail spikes made fine handles, and made it possible for him to drag it behind him without much difficulty. Once when he stopped to catch his breath and get a better grip, he scanned the pepper mill that was now a lighthouse, perched upon its distant windowsill; it would be nice if the pepper-mill man saw what he was doing, Tippy thought, and waved. But the time for the pepper-mill man's inspection had not yet come, or had come and gone.

The step before the kitchen door presented Tippy with a major difficulty, and the doorway itself with another nearly as great. It proved necessary to lift the stegosaurus onto its wide pink feet, and then for him to heave with all his might -- grunting in unconscious imitation of his father -- with hands clasped beneath the stegosaurus's maddeningly smooth pink chin.

And thus at last, taking many short backward steps and somewhat aided by the counterweight of the tail, position the front feet before the doorway. And then to climb between the double rows of great, flat backplates to the tail, and lift there (it was heavier, but much easier to hold) and grunting again to push the entire bulky pink saurian into the kitchen, knocking over the kitchen table.

And last to run around to the front of the dollhouse and re-enter through the front door, and so upstairs and back to bed gasping.

When daylight through his window woke him it seemed a dream, exactly as the pepper-mill man had said.

For a minute that was in fact ten or more, Tippy lay on his back with his hands behind his head, blinking up at the bright posters on his ceiling and thinking about it.

To begin with, it hadn't happened, probably.

(Downstairs, something large and heavy moved in a small, slow way, so that the two-by-fours and four-by-fours, the plywood and sheetrock of the house creaked briefly like the timbers of a ship. Then it was still again.)

But if it had happened -- Tippy had remembered that the pepper-mill man had seen Cathy's dollhouse too -- it wouldn't work. A toy pink dinosaur in the kitchen would not and could not become a real dinosaur just because the Blue Velveteen Rabbit in that book had changed into a real rabbit. Real things could change into things in books, but book things could not, not ever, turn into really true things.

Not unless somebody made them.

(Tippy's mother's pink mules went clop-clop-clop down the stairs to fix breakfast. Soon -- very soon -- she would call him to come and eat, and she would expect him to be up and dressed. Today was Monday, a school day.)

Of course -- Tippy sighed and yawned, and sat up in bed rubbing his eyes -- the pink stegosaurus had not been in a book, and perhaps that made a difference. It had been a real toy animal. No, he thought, it still is. It's a real toy, and a stegosaurus. Was that the same as a stegosaur? Only not a real --

Tippy's mother screamed; and Tippy, hearing her, truly woke up and ran out of his room to tell her it was all right.

And though his feet flew, his mind flew faster. Would Cathy stop playing with her dollhouse when the pepper-mill man came? She probably would, Tippy decided, but it seemed a shame. Batman and Robin waited under the bed, and there was a super-cool dragon in Walgreens. But a dinosaur -- !

Was it still pink? The dinosaurs in books were gray, mostly. Tippy's mother was babbling into the telephone, so he went to look.