

## **Nothing, Inc.**

Richard Oxenberg

David Krueller, who was ordinarily a very sound sleeper, awoke suddenly and sat upright on his bed. Anyone looking at him might have supposed he'd been startled by a loud noise, perhaps a heavy object had fallen to the floor, or an automobile had screeched its breaks on the street outside. But the truth of the matter was that just the opposite had occurred. He'd been awoken by a sudden, and altogether disconcerting, absence of sound. It was a sensation that was not entirely unfamiliar to him. Certainly he had experienced, in the past, dozing off in front of the television set, or while listening to a radio broadcast, only to be awoken abruptly the instant that the sound was switched off. At those moments the sudden absence of noise can be quite as irritating to a sleeper as a loud noise in the midst of silence. But David had neither a radio nor a television in his room, and he had fallen asleep to the music of his own thoughts. They were not particularly pleasant thoughts, but probably all the more persistent for that -- they were about his fiancée whom he would be seeing in the morning for the first time in a month, and about the plans for the wedding which would take place in approximately a week.

David had spent the preceding month on business in Oregon. He had stayed in a town called Sunnyside which, David thought, must have been christened by a man with a keen sense of irony, for Sunnyside Oregon saw about as much sunshine as a broom closet in a bomb shelter. The sky was forever overcast and gloomy and if, perchance, a few hours passed without rain one counted it a blessing. The local joke was that originally the town was to have had an abundance of sunshine but the town planners had erred in their

calculations and had placed Sunnyside on the wrong side. It was not a terribly funny joke but it generally served to lighten the dampened spirits. It didn't serve to lighten David's and he had spent the month restlessly hoping the days away -- wearily trudging back and forth between the factory and his little room in the hotel, where he would lie on his bed and gaze at the hardened globs of white paint on the ceiling, which seemed to him like an inverted moonscape, especially when he could spy a spider or insect of some sort crawling across.

David needn't have been confined to such cramped quarters. He might have taken a much larger room. In fact, the owner of the hotel, a short bustling man with a protruding stomach whose short sleeve shirts always had huge sweat stains under the arms, had all but insisted on it. The man was an old acquaintance of David's father and when he had heard that David was going to spend some time there had bustled about nervously for a week in advance preparing the finest room in the house. David took one look at it, shook his head, and said quietly that he certainly didn't want to put the man to any bother but he would prefer a smaller room. The little man was somewhat taken aback by this and David, in order to console him, began to explain that at home he lived in a very large room in a very large house and because the room was so very large he always felt as if half of it didn't really belong to him, an unpleasant feeling to say the least, and so whenever he was away from home he chose to stay in small compact rooms which helped him to feel not so much the 'visitor'. He might have gone on to explain about the coffee table and the rocking chair but he noticed that the little man, who had been listening to him with knitted brows and had even nodded his head once or twice in sympathy, had, nevertheless, not understood a word he'd said. David merely looked at the floor and said,

"In any event, I would prefer something smaller." This the little man understood entirely and, with a sigh that expressed a little man's world of little woes, closed the door to the large suite and conducted David to something less extravagant.

The factory where David had worked concerned itself exclusively with the manufacture of nuts and bolts, and was owned by David's father Arnold, and was called, accordingly, Arnold Krueller's Nuts and Bolts, Inc. It was the westcoast version of the eastcoast Arnold Krueller's Nuts and Bolts, Inc. which had been founded while David was still a small boy and had its headquarters in Levittown, Long Island.

David had never, as a boy, intended to take up his father's business. David's passion, even as a young child, had been painting. He loved the sense of abandon he experienced when sketching a tree, or a face, or some strange image that had managed to implant itself in his mind. In those moments he felt as if he could escape the confines of his human separateness and mingle freely with the world about him. He did not merely paint the tree but, in some peculiar fashion, he became it. He became the dark branches straining toward the looming sky. He became the thin leaves quaking in the gusty breeze. And he would feel a tingling at his core, the tingling of life rushing through each cell of his body and flowing beyond into the neighboring world. But as time progressed he found himself more and more absorbed with painting scenes that never occurred in nature but made their appearance only in the deep recesses of his own mind. Precisely what they signified David himself could not tell, but suddenly his canvasses were filling with weird distorted figures with oversized heads and rubbery limbs -- tall trees with anguished faces etched in the trunks, their branches like a thousand twisting arms competing each with the other for dominance. One of his most eerie drawings was a study of three dwarf-like

men working diligently beside a gargantuan piece of machinery. The features of the men were not easily discernible but if one looked closely enough one saw that they had no eyes, but merely deep dark sockets above pallid cheeks. They wore black coveralls with pointed black hoods and each had a rather macabre smile on his lips. They were feeding bloody pieces of old men's bodies into one side of the machine and out the other came naked howling babies. David entitled the picture 'Nothing, Inc.' and when he first drew it, around the age of fifteen, it filled him with a vague apprehension. Now it rested in his bedroom closet with the rest of his sketches, he had all but forgotten it.

When he first entered college David had planned to major in art but in his sophomore year he began to see the impracticality of such a major. It was not a realization that came to him all at once but one that crept upon him slowly and which he accepted hesitantly -- helped along by the promptings of his father who explained, in the most reasonable terms, David's father being a very reasonable man, that the requisites of making a living and establishing himself as a contributing member of society must take top priority in David's educational plans. David had many long conversations about this very topic with his father, but the one that remained most prominent in his mind was one that took place shortly before his return to school after the summer vacation of his freshman year. David had been up in his room packing his bag, anxious over his imminent departure, and his father called him into the den.

"You know, David," he began, leaning back on a beige leather chair and puffing nervously on a cigarette, "you may think of me as a man who has no interest in the arts at all, but when I was a young man, not much older than yourself, I used to...well, I never had a flair for painting, but I used to do a bit of writing. Oh, yes, you're surprised at the

old man, eh? No, no, I wasn't always a business man. Sometime, you'll remind me, sometime I'll show you some of the letters I used to write home during the war. Oh, I suppose by your standards they'd seem a bit corny, sentimentalism and all that, yes, but...well, things were different in those days...ah, I think your grandmother may still have a few, she keeps things like that. Anyway, David, I'm not quite the hard-nosed business man you may think me, not by a long shot. Not that I'm apologizing, not for a minute! No, no, I've built up a business from out of nothing and it's allowed us to live quite well -- we can afford this beautiful house which your mother loves so much -- we have a beautiful back yard -- oh, business has been very good to me, very good...new challenges every day, decisions to make, it's not quite so cut and dried as you think. There's a good deal of creativity in business, you'd be surprised. Now I'm not talking about nuts and bolts...I don't deal with nuts and bolts...I'm a business man, I'm talking about business, you understand?

"But all that's beside the point. I just want you to know that I can understand a young man's yearning to follow his 'true calling' and I wouldn't stand in the way of it for a minute, not for a minute. That is, of course, assuming that the young man is completely sure of what his 'true calling' is."

David began to interrupt but his father held out his hand.

"Now I'm not necessarily talking about *you* David. Just bear with me for a minute. All I'm saying is that when you're young the whole world seems to be before you, you can try a little of this, a little of that. But when you get older, David, things are not quite as simple as that. A man has to make a living, support himself and his family, and youth...although, if you want you should certainly explore all the interests you have, I'm

not saying you shouldn't...but youth, David, is the time when you have to prepare the foundation for what's to come. Life is like a building, David, and it has to rest on a solid foundation otherwise it can't stand. Do you understand what I'm saying?

"Now I'm going to be honest with you David. I've always believed in being up-front with you. I'm just a little bit worried at present, just a little concerned, that you might not be preparing that foundation as solidly as you can. I have the greatest respect for artists and for art, and you are, without doubt, a very talented individual -- I don't say that you're not --- maybe some of your art to me is a little kooky -- well, I'm no expert. But I'm just saying, David, that maybe you ought to consider majoring in something a little more practical. Now hold on a minute, I'm not saying that this is what you *should* do, I wouldn't say that, I'm only saying that it's something that you should *consider*. I mean, there's no harm in considering it, is there? It's certainly worth considering, don't you think?"

David shrugged, "I suppose it's worth considering."

His father smiled and lit up another cigarette. "Well, then, let's consider it. Okay, right now, at this point in your life, and you're still very young, you have an interest in art. Right now, this is what you think you want to do with your life. And there's nothing wrong with that at all -- in fact, just the contrary -- I think it's very healthy for you to have such an interest -- it's always good to have interests -- they help to build the character -- of course, that doesn't mean that you have to spend your life at it. But, David, the point is, don't you think you ought to give some consideration to what you are going to do with your art? I mean, if you were interested in commercial art that would be another thing. I mean, that's a trade, something solid. But the type of painting that you do,

David, is there a market for it? I hate to be so crass but sometimes you have to think about practical things. I just think that there are certain realities that, unpleasant as they may be -- and, mind you, I'm not saying that they're all that unpleasant either -- but there are certain realities, David, that just have to be faced squarely.

"Well, David, I'm going to give you my opinion and then you can do with it as you see fit. You know how I hate to beat around the bush. I am, after all, footing the bill for your schooling, and it's not cheap, as you know -- not that I'm complaining, I'm happy to do it, and I don't ask for thanks -- but I do feel I have the right to put my two cents in, don't you? David, I believe that a change in major would be in order. I believe that you should begin thinking along more pragmatic lines. You know, I still don't think you've given business a fair shake -- but we'll hold that for another discussion. And that's not to say that you should give up painting entirely -- No, paint! Paint to your heart's content -- but as for your major, I think you need to consider something more realistic. Now, I have all the faith in the world in you, David, and I'm going to leave the decision in your hands for now. I've always known you to be a very bright boy and I'm sure you'll do the right thing. And I don't ask you to decide right at this moment, but think about it -- think about it and we'll talk again." He paused, took a deep breath and blew it out. "Well, this has been a very nice conversation, don't you think? I'm glad we had it."

A conversation such as the above ensued each time David returned home for vacation, with a portfolio of new works he was excited to exhibit to his parents. After a period of much vacillation, however, David came to realize the soundness of his father's advice and succumbed to its logic. He switched his major to business administration, and, although he did not particularly enjoy the courses, derived some satisfaction from knowing that his

future would be, at least, secure. He had not planned on giving up painting altogether but as time progressed he found that he had fewer and fewer opportunities to avail himself of this luxury, what with the pressure of his business courses imposing itself constantly, and after a while he even began to feel his desire to paint diminish -- a fact that his father, with a philosophical smile playing at the corner of his lips, was always wont to point out as an example of how wrong one can be about one's 'true calling' when one is still very young and impressionable.

After college David spent a number of months searching, rather halfheartedly, for a job as a commercial artist of some sort, but without any luck, and then, gradually, but quite naturally, he gravitated into his father's business.

David left for Oregon the day after he had celebrated his twenty-seventh birthday, and the trip was to be his initiation into the administrative end of the business. The factory in Oregon had begun to have financial difficulties and David had been sent to see what the situation was and, if possible, correct it. Unfortunately, the trip had to be called short due to certain unforeseen circumstances. Due to these same circumstances David called home and told his father that he must return immediately and could not, by any means, complete the work he'd been sent out there to do. He hung up before his father had a chance to respond or even digest what David had told him. Following this he called Linda, the girl he'd been seeing for the past two years, and asked her to marry him.

"Marry you?" she said, "Well, of course I'll marry you, David, we've decided that already but..."

"I mean now."



"Now? But David you're in Oregon..."

"I mean, in a week from now. I'm coming home."

"David, what's gotten into..."

"Will you marry me?"

"David, of course I'll marry you, but..."

"In a week from today?"

"David, I don't understand."

"Will you?"

"Well, David...yes, all right? But..."

"You will?"

"Yes, I suppose so, but David, would you please..."

"I can't tell you anything now. I'm taking a plane home tonight. We'll talk in the morning."

"David!"

"All right?"

"David, will you stop..."

"Okay?"

"Okay, but listen, David..."

"Okay, I'll see you then. Good-bye."

The unforeseen circumstances which had caused all this upset were these: Prior to the two telephone calls, and after an utterly fatiguing day at the factory, poring over financial records and employee files, he had sat down for a moment on one of the benches outside the building. The sky was very hazy, and the humidity caused beads of perspiration to

form on his brow and roll down his cheeks. He sat and watched vacantly as large trucks pulled in and out of the factory parking lot. And then he saw a very curious thing. A truck pulled up next to him that looked, in every essential, exactly like all the other trucks he had seen that day, except that where the sign on the side should have read 'Arnold Krueller's Nuts and Bolts, Inc.', he saw instead, in big black letters 'Nothing, Inc.'. And when he looked again he noticed that the usual driver could not be seen through the window. Rather he saw, or thought he saw, after all he could not be completely sure, a small man wearing a black coverall with a black pointed hood wrapped tightly around his head. The little man had no eyes. He smiled eerily at David, and waved, and drove away.

So it was that when David Krueller, now in the security and comfort of his own home and bed, was awoken without warning by a sudden, and altogether disconcerting, absence of sound; and without having any radio or television on which to blame this unlikely occurrence, he began to wonder if the foundations of his mind weren't crumbling beneath him. He sat erect on his bed and glanced quickly around the large room, looking at the wooden desk and the small coffee table, and at the ceiling and the walls, and most especially the corners of the walls, in an attempt to discover something that would explain what had happened so simply and clearly that, upon noticing it, he would be able to smile to himself, laugh lightly, and say, "Of course! Look how I've frightened myself over nothing." But he knew even before he began his search that it would be a search in vain. For the absence of sound that had overtaken him was entirely distinguishable from any silence he had hitherto experienced. Rather, it was as if the entire world, with the exception of David, had conspired together to observe, upon some signal unbeknownst to

him, a moment of absolute quiet. But not even this expressed it properly. It was as if some mellow tone, of such extraordinary subtlety and persistence that one would never know of its existence unless it were to suddenly stop sounding, had, for an instant, done just that. It was not as though his ears had ceased to hear but as though the dimension of sound had ceased to be. And because, at the base, all the many dimensions are interconnected, this gap in the existence of sound threatened the existence of everything else as well.

All of this, taken together with the strange happenings of the previous day, served to disturb David so thoroughly that he could not get back to sleep. He got down from his bed and began pacing the floor to and fro, his eyes flitting about, trying to catch any transformation in the room. But there had been no transformation, no change, everything was as it had always been. He began to pace more slowly, and started to hum to himself, a tune he had heard on the earphones while coming home on the plane. It was a tune he was not particularly fond of but one that, somehow or other, as tunes do, had become stuck in his mind and had played itself over and over, quite to David's irritation, for the entire duration of the trip. Now David could think of nothing better than that the tune should implant itself in his mind again and, however grating, play itself on and on without end. He would like to have shouted at the top of his lungs, and might have too, if it weren't for his parents sleeping in the next room and his desire not to disturb them, whom he had, after all, disturbed enough already by his unexpected homecoming.

Finally David realized that his fervent pacing up and down was only increasing his anxiety. So he crossed over to the far end of the room and sat upon the wicker rocking chair in the corner, once his grandmother's, which had been placed in his room after her

death. Humming his tune to himself David began to rock monotonously back and forth, back and forth, and gazed out the window, eyes wide, awaiting the day.

The morning did not come easily. In fact, it was so long in coming that David began to wonder if his experience that night had been, perhaps, not an entirely subjective event, but rather an unexplainable phenomenon that had swept across the whole of the universe, rippling time in its wake, and so upsetting the natural order that morning might not come at all. He gave the matter a good deal of serious thought, and was just about to conclude that this is precisely what must have happened, when he noticed the first pale light of day illumine his window. His initial reaction to this was one of slight disappointment, but as the light gradually brightened so did David's hopes, and when the morning had fully arrived, and he was able to look out the window to the backyard and observe the bushes and large willow tree swaying in the breeze, he began to think that finally things were returning to normal and perhaps the night had been no more than an overreaction to a bad dream. "A mistaken image in a parking lot, and a bad dream, and suddenly I'm in such a tumult I don't know where I am." He laughed slightly and shook his head at his foolishness. His body felt somewhat cramped from the long night in the rocking chair. He stood up, put his hands on his back, stretched and yawned widely. Well, it was not the first sleepless night he had lived through.

There was a knock on his door, a gentle rapping, he saw the knob turn and watched his mother enter the room. David's mother was a woman of average height, with short curly brown hair which framed her face in a series of small ringlets. During the day, in the

house, she generally wore a loose flowing housecoat spotted with red and turquoise flowers of an impossible genus. Her droopy housecoat and her sagging face, much of the skin of which had long ago fallen and was now hanging in folds beneath her chin, combined with the way she would often twirl a ringlet of hair around her index finger and stare vacuously into space, gave her the appearance, at times, of a wax figure melting in the sun. On the other hand, she was admirably capable of playing the socialite -- dressing up in a long evening gown, sipping a martini, and laughing too loudly at one of her husband's business friend's jokes. She was a woman of many sides. The side that David saw now, though, was of the concerned mother and somewhat harried wife. She had picked David up at the airport when he had arrived late last night, although they didn't say very many words to each other. David had protested that he was tired and didn't want to talk and since, when he entered his house, his father had already gone to sleep, David had been able to go into his room, close the door, and turn the family off for the night. But no more. His mother pressed in on him and sat down upon one of the small chairs around the coffee table in the center of the room. The coffee table, wooden with three squat plastic chairs, had once been used in the den, and had been placed in David's room when his mother redecorated. She motioned David to a seat next to her, but he declined.

His mother sighed and wiped her forehead. "It looks like it's going to be another warm day...Oh, God...I don't know how it was in Oregon but here we've had nothing but heat, nothing but heat...The weather was hot in Oregon too?"

"A lot of rain." said David.

"Yes, well, I only wish you could have brought some with you...cool things off a bit. So...David, let me look at you...It's been a whole month!"

David let her look at him.

"You look a little tired, David, a little tired. Have you been taking care of yourself?"

David nodded.

"Well! I must say that you created quite a stir here. What with that crazy phone call yesterday and coming home in the middle of the night." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I have to tell you, David, that your father is a little upset at you. He doesn't say anything but..." Here her voice trailed off and she stared for a moment into vacancy.

"You know how things are, David, I don't have to tell you..." She shook her head slowly and glanced at her son. David nodded, although he really hadn't the first idea how things were, nor what 'things' she was referring to. Now she looked away and resumed her ordinary voice. "Well, I just thought you should know, that's all."

"I wasn't feeling well." said David.

"Yes! You look a little pale, you do! What's wrong, David, are you running a fever?"

"I've just been tired."

"Why don't you sit down, David. Maybe we should call the doctor -- its nothing serious, I hope. You know, your father had a nasty cold last week but..."

"I'll be all right."

"Well, I certainly hope so! You haven't been taking care of yourself, I knew it the minute you walked off the plane!" She sighed and began twirling one of her curls. "Oh God, what's to be..." For a moment there was silence.

"I'm getting married," said David, "In a week."

His mother looked up. "Getting married? David, what are you saying?"

"To Linda, we've decided."

"Well, David, you know that I love Linda very much. But in a week? Don't be foolish. Well, I'm sure we'll have to talk about this...Anyway, come down and have some breakfast." His mother stood up and flattened her housecoat with her hands. She walked toward the door, but then turned to David and whispered. "David," she said, "I just want you to know that your father is downstairs eating now. I just thought you should know."

David entered the kitchen behind his mother. It was a large room, with a U-shaped yellow counter and a dining section set off to the side. His father was sitting at the head of the table drinking from a tall glass of milk. When David walked in, his father looked up, nodded, and continued with his breakfast. David sat down in a chair to his father's right.

"David, what will you eat?" said his mother from behind the counter.

"Nothing, I'm not really very hungry." said David.

For a long moment there was silence, as David propped his elbows on the table, clasped his hands together, and rested his head upon them. David's father continued eating his breakfast, a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon, and did not look at David until the last morsel had been consumed. He wiped his mouth with his napkin and turned to his son.

"Well, David," he said, "I'm certainly glad to see you, but I don't completely understand why you had to come home in such a hurry, after all..."

"I needed to come home. I was very..."

"You had a job to do out there, David. That's really no way..."

"I just..."

"David, please don't interrupt me. That's really no way to conduct a business. I think..."

"I did what I did because I needed to do it!"

"Now, David, we're reasonable people, aren't we? Do we need to shout at each other?"

"Arnold, he's not well, let him be. David are you feeling all right?"

David's father glanced at his wife. "If David's not well he's perfectly able to say so himself. In any event I see no need for the type of phone call we received yesterday. David, are you not feeling well?"

"I'm not...I'm not feeling entirely well, no..."

"What's the problem, David?"

"I don't know...I'm just..."

"If there's something troubling you, David, you can tell me. I hope you know that."

"You see, yesterday..."

"Sometimes, though, even if we're not feeling a hundred percent we still have to get up and do a job."

"I...maybe...I don't know...I suppose I shouldn't have come home."

"Now I'm not saying that either, David. I mean, if you're really not feeling well..."

"I'm just so tired lately. You see, yesterday..."

His father groaned loudly, put both hands on the table, and stood up. "Well, you think about it, David. Meanwhile, I have an appointment." He slapped David on the back and smiled. "Some of us still have to work for a living, you know."

As his father walked about the kitchen, straightening his tie (which he always did nervously, whether his tie was straight or not) and gathering his papers together, David



began to realize that the kitchen was immensely large and far away. The U-shaped counter which, by any objective standard, was only a few feet from where he sat, seemed to him a matter of incalculable miles. He watched his father, or rather his father's legs, as they took enormous strides, moving from one end to the other in a few quick steps. To David it seemed an impossible feat to traverse such huge distances so quickly and easily. In fact, he felt as if he already had to sprint at top speed, with an exhausting expenditure of energy, simply to remain where he was. He closed his eyes and shook his head. He could hear the beating of his heart, loud and incessant, pounding ever faster, the sound of feet thumping on the ground, straining to make one more mile. He could scarcely imagine the sort of effort it would take, the extra burst of speed that would be needed, to get him up and moving about. He stopped thinking altogether and listened to the thumping, the running. One more mile, one more mile, and one more after that. Does no one ever rest? He wanted to stop and to rest. He wanted a cessation of this endless thumping. He wanted some time to breathe, to stop and look around. To veer off the road for an instant and lie amidst the grass and the flowers. The cloud-spotted sky overhead, and yellow bees buzzing from flower to flower, dancing in air above the cup of a tulip, casting tiny shadows upon glistening grass. And the trees, tall, with leaves rustling, each leaf a world unto itself. To stop an instant and watch. And how he would lie back, showered in sun-warmth, and paint the world's proliferation. The butterflies flitting 'twixt green-smelling foliage, the trill song of scarlet robins, blue-jays gliding beneath haze blue sky, and he, in naked wonderment, laughing and painting, eyes shining full and alive -- alive -- only to stop running and pounding and puffing...only to stop running...only to...

The telephone rang. David awoke with a start, focused his eyes, and saw that the kitchen had shrunk back to its previous dimensions.

"This phone!" said his mother, "It never stops. All day long -- and all night too. In fact, just the other night it woke us up at three in the morning, the wrong number yet, and your father...well..." She picked up the receiver. "Hello?...Oh, *hello*, dear...yes, yes...Just last night...yes...yes...no, no, no. Well, we don't know yet. You see, dear, he..." Now she lowered her voice to a whisper so that David could not understand her words. She spoke rapidly into the receiver, nodding her head occasionally with great emphasis. Finally her voice grew louder. "Well, you know, we're all trying, we're all trying...Yes, he's right here, one moment, dear." She turned to her son and held out the receiver. "David, for you...it's Linda."

For a moment David just sat there, looking at his mother. Then he rubbed his fingers over his eyelids, stood up, and walked to the telephone. "Hello?" he said, and immediately felt a sense of dread at the thought of now having to talk to Linda, and having to affect an exuberant facade when all he felt was weariness. "How are you?" he said in a slightly louder tone, but then, feeling that this 'How are you' was much too formal a greeting to give to one's fiancée, he tried to soften it somewhat, "I mean, how do you *feel*?" which sounded warmer but somehow inappropriate. He had put too much stress on the word 'feel' and it came out sounding like an inquiry into the health of someone who had been long ill. But what could be done?

"I'm feeling fine, David, I've been so worried about you."

"Worried?" said David. It did not really surprise him that anyone should be worried about him. But for some reason, he felt he should act as if it did.

"Well, you came home so suddenly, David, I wasn't expecting you for another two weeks. And that marriage proposal over the phone, I mean, really... David, what's going on?"

"You don't want to get married?"

"David, we can't get married in a week -- that's ridiculous!"

"You said you would."

"I didn't know *what* I was saying. I was just trying to..."

"You don't want to?"

"David, why don't you come over and we'll talk about it, all right? I haven't seen you in so long"

"You're not working?"

"I have to go in this afternoon, but this morning I'm all yours. All right?"

"Yes...all right. I'll be over." He hung up the phone.

David borrowed the keys to his mother's car and proceeded to Linda's apartment, a few towns distance from his house. Linda, for the past two years, had been working as a receptionist in a dentist's office. She was tall and thin and was not beautiful, although she possessed a sort of slinky prettiness that waxed and waned depending on the perspective and mood of the observer. David had reason to believe that she was not altogether unintelligent, but most of the time she liked to play the 'little girl', cuddling up close and speaking in a babyish banter. The two of them met at a dinner party in David's home, and they had not met by chance. When David had returned home from school his social contacts had diminished greatly, and David's father, concerned about this, arranged the

party for the express purpose of David's meeting Linda, who was the daughter of one of his father's business associates. Their relationship was not, and never had been, a torrid love affair. David had had his one impassioned romance in college, and had been deeply hurt by its demise, as his parents had warned, and David was not one to ignore the lessons of experience. Linda, likewise, was not looking for rhapsodic bliss. She had agreed to marry David because he was considerate and intelligent and had good prospects for the future. As for why David had agreed to marry Linda? -- He had never been altogether sure -- he was marrying her because she was there.

As David drove along the road he found that, due to his weariness, he was having difficulty focusing his eyes. Furthermore, the sun was oppressively bright and the glare on the windshield was impairing his vision. Perhaps it was for this reason that David began to see small black spots in front of him. And, strangely, it wasn't as if the spots were merely hiding the world from his view, but rather as if they were small dark tunnels of infinite depth -- vacuums that had sucked up the world around them and left only a black void. David blinked and squinted and rubbed his eyes, but the dark tunnels did not disappear. On the contrary, they grew larger and larger, sucking up more and more of the world, until David could see nothing in front of him but an endless expanse of darkness. This lasted only a moment and then the darkness was gone, the world reemerged, and David found himself once again behind the wheel of his car. He quickly pulled the car to the side of the road and stepped out. He leaned against the hood, hot from the pounding sun, and buried his face in his hands. "Ah, God..." he moaned. And yet, in spite of this reaction he was not feeling overly distressed at what had happened. He merely felt that he

*should* be feeling distressed. But when he looked honestly at his feelings he found he was really rather calm. Yet this calmness itself disturbed him.

"Well..." he said, lifting his eyebrows and gazing at the cars speeding passed him on the road. He said nothing but 'well', and thought nothing but 'well', yet this 'well' was gravid with significance. If it could have been rendered into words it would have sounded thus: 'Well...some very strange things are happening to me now, and I do not entirely understand them. But then, this world has always seemed very strange, and alien, and utterly incomprehensible, and it is not, after all, so very peculiar that the world should become stranger still. I suppose I am just entering into another phase." All of this was contained in the single word 'well'. David spoke it again, lifted himself from the hood, and got back into the car.

When David stood in front of the door to Linda's apartment he suddenly found himself wishing that he had not come. He was in no mood to see her, and he gazed indecisively at the doorbell -- contemplating making a retreat and heading back home. The musty odor of the apartment building turned his stomach. The faded orange of the carpet, and the dirty plaster of the walls, cracked in places, added to his malaise. He turned from the door and walked to the window at the center of the hallway. There he rested his hands upon the sill and gazed out at the small cement courtyard, no more than an alley really, over which the window looked. The glass was spotted with dust, the pale sunlight scarcely penetrated. A spider crawled across the sill. But he must have this encounter with Linda if he was to marry her in a week. And he must marry her, for otherwise... He turned from the window, walked back to the door, and rang the bell.

"David!" Linda threw her arms around his neck and kissed him on the mouth. Then she stepped back. "You look tired."

David didn't say anything. He walked passed her and stepped into the small apartment. David had never particularly liked Linda's apartment. It was old, the furniture worn, and the floor, originally linoleum which Linda had covered with a blue rug, creaked loudly when someone walked across it. Linda seemed skinnier than David remembered her. She had always been thin, but now she appeared positively angular. She was wearing a loose flowing white blouse which accented her angularity. The blouse did not flow, it hung.

"So..." said David, trying to smile, "It's good to see you."

"I have to go to work in a few hours. The apartment's a mess today. Sit down. Do you want some coffee? I just made some."

"All right," said David. He sat on the green couch behind the tottering coffee table. The table had one leg slightly shorter than the others so that nothing could rest upon it securely. Linda was always saying that she must get it fixed but she never did. David sat back on the couch and began pulling softly at a mass of white fluff pushing out of a rip in the arm.

"So how was Oregon?" said Linda from the kitchen, "It's supposed to be beautiful. Was it beautiful?"

"It rained," said David.

"How was the factory?"

"The factory?" said David, "It was...a factory."

She walked back into the living room balancing two saucers in either hand and placed them on the coffee table, which swayed back and forth a few times before arriving at a tenuous equilibrium. She sat next to David.

"Stop pulling on the couch, you make it worse!"

David lifted his hand from the rip and flattened it on the arm of the couch.

"You know, David, I've been thinking about what you said on the phone, I have. You don't really think we can get married in a week, do you? I mean, there's so much to do and... well... I thought we were going to wait until you got *settled* a little more. You're really not settled yet, are you David? I spoke to your mother about it and she..."

"You spoke to my mother?"

"Well, yes! Your call was so sudden and..."

"Linda, I need to get married. I need...*something*. I...I don't know...I didn't get any sleep last night and..."

"But David, this is silly. There are invitations to send out and..."

"Listen to me!" David stood up and began pacing back and forth in front of the coffee table. "I have a question to ask you."

"All right, David, I'm listening."

"Linda..." He stopped his pacing and looked closely at his fiancée. "What do you want?"

"What do I want?"

"That's right."

"What do I want?"

"Yes, that's what I said."

"But David, I don't know what you're talking about. I don't want to get married in a week if that's what you're talking about. There are so many things to..."

"That's not what I mean!" He rubbed his hand over his mouth, "I mean...what do you want...from *life*. That's what I mean. What do you want from *life*?"

"David, is something wrong?"

"Just answer my question."

"David, if something is the matter..."

"Just answer my question!"

"But, David, that's not the sort of question that you can just answer. I mean...what do I want?...I don't know, David. This is so silly...I want...I suppose I want to be happy, and to have a home and a family...I want...I want to live comfortably...Well, I don't know, David...what do *you* want?"

David bowed his head. He walked to the couch, sank into it and said nothing for a while, feeling utterly drained and beaten.

"What do you want, David?"

He didn't answer. He began plucking at the fluff in the arm of the couch. They sat in silence for a long time. Finally he spoke, but very softly, more to himself than to Linda.

"I used to think...when I was young...I used to think that there would *be* something, you know? Something real. I used to think that I would wake up one morning and I would know it. It would be revealed to me. I used to think that it was some deep dark secret only adults possessed, which kept them going, and when I grew older I would understand. I used to believe that. But there really isn't anything, is there? There really isn't anything at all."



Linda stood up. She flattened her skirt with her hands. "David, you're just tired. Why didn't you sleep last night? What you need is a good night's sleep."

He didn't respond.

"You can sleep here if you like. I have to go to work, no one will disturb you. I'll tell you what -- you go to sleep and when I come back I'll cook dinner. We'll talk about all this then."

"I have to go home," said David.

"Why, what's waiting for you at home?"

"I have to go home." He stood up weakly and walked toward the door.

"Will you come to dinner?" said Linda. "I'll call you when I get out of work. Around 7:30. Okay?"

David opened the door to the apartment and walked out.

David stepped into his bedroom feeling utterly exhausted. Perhaps, after all, Linda was right. Perhaps what he really needed were a few hours' sleep. It's true that he hadn't slept very well in Oregon, and what with last night's sleeplessness, it did not seem at all unlikely that his troubles might be attributable to simple fatigue. He pulled off his shoes and got into bed, clutching the covers tight around his neck, the way his mother had tucked him in years ago when he was still a small boy. This gave him some small comfort. He closed his eyes, but when he did he felt a very uncomfortable sensation of dizziness. He tried to ignore it and fall asleep, but the dizziness, combined with a loud creaking noise he supposed was coming from outside, would not permit him to do so. He sat up in the bed and the dizziness seemed to disperse, but the creaking only grew louder.

It took David some time to realize that it was coming from the wicker rocking chair in the corner. He stood up and looked closely at the chair, watching it dip back and forth, seemingly of its own inertia. As it did he noticed that the chair was becoming darker and darker, as if the shadow of some immense bird were passing over it -- this being all the more strange for the fact that the corner was situated directly by a window and there was nothing to obstruct the sunlight from coming through. He walked to the door and switched on the light in order to dispel the shadows, but this had quite the opposite effect. The shadows, with the lightened room for contrast, now seemed even darker.

David sat upon the edge of the bed and stared at the corner, listening to the rocking chair creak rhythmically. He pressed his fingers against his eyes, sighed, and looked down at the floor. When he looked up again the shadows were gone and in their place, rocking to and fro upon the chair, sat a small impish creature dressed in black coveralls, with dark holes where there should have been eyes. The creature smiled at David.

"Greetings!" said the imp.

David was too stunned to say anything. He sat on the edge of the bed and stared.

"No need to feel startled," said the imp, "Nothing to fear!" With this he let out a shrill giggle and hopped off the chair.

"Who are you?" said David.

"Ah, yes," said the imp, "Let me introduce myself. My name is Gabriel." With this he performed a mock bow. "Perhaps you've heard of me. I am a junior executive for Nothing, Inc. Our card." The imp walked up to David and produced a small rectangular card. On the face of it, in bold print, were the words 'Nothing, Inc.' and just beneath it in smaller type, 'We produce nothing in all shapes and sizes'. David just continued to stare.

"You mustn't be distressed," said Gabriel, "I've come to save you!"

"Where do you come from?" said David, "What do you want with me?"

"But I've already told you. Nothing, Inc."

"And where is that?"

"Where?" said Gabriel, "Everywhere, nowhere – it's all the same. Everything is nothing, in different configurations. There really isn't anything at all. Didn't you say that?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you do," said Gabriel, "But perhaps you are not yet prepared to admit it. No matter! I shall explain." Gabriel stretched out his left leg. Under the hem of the coveralls was a dark black shoe which David might have mistaken for patent leather but for the fact that the shoe had no glitter. Rather than reflecting the light it seemed to be absorbing it utterly. "Take a look at my leg." said Gabriel, "What do you see?"

As David watched, the leg began slowly to fade away, until it disappeared entirely. "It's gone," said David.

"Quite right!" chirped Gabriel, "But look again."

David looked and saw the leg begin to reemerge, gradually, starting from the toe. But instead of its original black the leg appeared as a multitude of swirling colors. The colors grew, in the shape of a leg, until they attached themselves to Gabriel's hip. But the colors did not stop. They continued up Gabriel's body until the imp was a confluence of churning color, beaming through the room. David sat rigid on the bed and stared at the figure before him, radiating an assortment of rainbow hues. Suddenly the colors were gone and Gabriel appeared in his previous form.

"You see," said Gabriel, "the beauty of nothing is its malleability. It can be molded into anything you please. But of course you've got to make *something* of it. Everything is nothing, viewed from a certain perspective of course. On the other hand, nothing is everything! We at Nothing, Inc. reduce everything to its elementary nothingness and transform it into something else. Quite simple, really."

"But what do you want with me?"

"The question, my boy, is what do you want with us. You've been hovering over the void for quite a while now, haven't you?"

Suddenly David's face turned red, "I don't know what you're talking about! I'm getting married in a week. I have a good job with my father. I've been a bit tired lately, it's true, but..."

"Oh, come, come," said Gabriel, "You don't believe that, do you? Sometimes people stray a little too close to our province. At that point there is nothing for us to do but invite them in. We invite them in and finish the job for them."

David was silent. He sat still on the bed and gazed down at the woolly carpet under his feet. He looked at the rocking chair in the corner and then at the coffee table, with the small white seats surrounding it. He pressed his hand to his forehead and felt that it was damp with sweat.

"You mean...you're going to kill me?"

"Oh, so dramatic!" said Gabriel, "Let us say, we will relieve you of yourself."

"But I don't want...I don't want..."

"What *do* you want?" said Gabriel, looking at David intently.

"I don't know."

“Exactly!” With that, Gabriel performed another little mock bow and walked over to the wicker rocking chair. As he sat down the chair was darkened again by thick shadows. Of a sudden the shadows were gone. Everything resumed the appearance of normalcy.

David laid back on his bed and sunk his head into his pillow. He could still hear the sound of Gabriel's voice reverberating in his ears. “There really isn't anything at all!” David shut his eyes tight and concentrated, trying to close the sound out. But his efforts were to no avail. The dark beneath his eyelids reminded him of Gabriel's dark raiment. He bolted upright on his bed, his brow damp with cool sweat. “What does he want with me?” he said. He groaned and rubbed his eyes. “I must get some sleep. It is all a lack of sleep.” But the thought of sleep filled him with dread. “And what if they come for me in the night?” David lifted his hands to his face and then dropped them to his lap. The hands were quivering, as though animated by an electric current. He sat and watched them tremble, but he felt somehow detached from them. “Ah, what is this now? Has it come to this? Am I hallucinating now?”

David stood from the bed and walked out the door, to the bathroom at the end of the hallway. He turned on the faucet and splashed cold water onto his face. His hope was that the water would serve to wake him up, and help him clarify his thoughts. Instead it merely stung his face. He gazed at his image in the mirror above the sink, as the water dripped from his chin onto the floor. David's face seemed to him very pale, the skin yellowish, almost translucent. Deep furrows had appeared beneath his eyes. His hair seemed sinewy and knotted. “What do they want from me?” he said to himself.

The telephone rang. David listened to the ringing for a moment before answering it. He did not want to speak to anyone. He did not feel entirely capable of speaking to anyone, for he felt a great distance growing between himself and what had hitherto been his world. A deep gaping abyss out of which Gabriel had arisen and over which he would have to hurdle if he were to make it to the stolid reality of the other side. "And what if I fall and am lost forever?" he thought.

But the trill of the telephone was insistent, it was not to be put off -- a machine, after all, that can give no thought to human ailment.

"David," said the voice at the other end, after he had lifted the receiver and answered with a weak "Hello." It was a bad connection, quite a lot of static, and it was difficult to distinguish clearly between the static and the voice itself. But then, rather abruptly, the static was gone and David could recognize the voice of his father.

"David," he said, "I'm glad I caught you in. There are a few questions that have come up here at the office concerning your trip to Oregon which simply can't be put off. Now, if you aren't doing anything this afternoon why don't you come..."

"Dad, I...I can't come this afternoon. You see...Linda invited me for dinner and..."

"Well now, you'll certainly be finished in time for dinner."

"No, you don't understand...There are things that...I have a lot to think about this afternoon...You see, Linda...Did I tell you about my marriage plans?"

"David, if you absolutely can't make it I suppose you can give me some of the information over the phone and I can handle the paper work.. But I imagined that you were conscientious enough to want to do it yourself. After all..."

"I do! I want to do it. But can't it wait...Just, this afternoon..."

"David, I appreciate that you have things to think over but the world can't stop every time..."

"All right! Listen...I'll be over...I'll come to the office...I have to get my papers together and I'll be over."

"Now David, I don't want you to come against your will. As I say, I'm entirely capable of doing it myself. I don't want you to feel that I'm twisting your arm."

"No, no...I want to come, I do."

"Of course, there's a time and place for thinking things over, and during working hours a man..."

"I said I would come!"

"I say, a man must set his priorities in order, don't you think?"

"I'll be there in half an hour."

"All right, David, just so as you understand me. I'll be waiting for you."

Arnold Krueller's office was situated on the ground floor of the factory, set off to the far side of the building so that the clamor from the machinery would not be audible. It was a very large room with wood paneling and rich royal blue carpeting. Arnold's desk, grained mahogany, occupied an entire corner of the office, with two telephones, one beige, one black, for internal and external calls respectively, resting on either side like bookends.

When David trudged into the office he saw his father leaning over some papers on the desk, writing rapidly. He did not seem to have heard David enter, but went on with his work, stopping occasionally to press a finger to his lips in thought, then proceeding.

Finally he shot a quick glance at his son across the desk. "David, I'll be right with you. Have a seat." His father leaned again over his work and David looked about the office to see where he would sit. He did not like sitting in his father's office. All the chairs were exceptionally low and when seated one's knees shot up into the air in a most awkward and uncomfortable manner. David decided to forego the chairs and sit on the long couch against the far wall. This too was low, but to a lesser extent than the chairs, and when seated one could lean back against the couch, spread one's arms to the side, stretch one's legs, and it was not quite so bad.

David sat and watched his father work. He was, by now, beyond fatigue. His eyes felt heavy and he had trouble focusing. The activity of his father along with the fervor of the factory he had just passed through made his weariness all the more palpable. 'How does the man go on?' he asked himself, watching his father pore over the papers on his desk. 'What moves him? He has no hobbies, no good friends to speak of, no interest outside his work -- why does he continue?' David could not recall ever seeing his father simply enjoying himself. Never a smile that was not tinged with sardonic irony. Never a good hearty laugh. 'And yet he is effective. He gets things done. Gabriel would never come knocking at his door.'

At last his father seemed finished. He placed his pen carefully on the green blotter before him, checking to assure that it was laid parallel with the pile of papers in the center -- and when he saw that it was not perfectly even he straightened it and checked again, as one might straighten a tilted painting on a wall. He sat back in his chair and looked at his son across the office.



"I have the papers here," said David, lifting up a manila folder in which he'd gathered the financial reports he'd worked on in Oregon.

"That's fine," said his father absently. He reached over the desk for a pack of cigarettes lying on the side. He lit one and leaned back again, pursing his lips tightly, seemingly deep in reflection. "David," he finally said, "I believe there is something we should discuss."

Immediately David's heart sank. More than anything he wanted to finish the Oregon business quickly and escape the stifling atmosphere of the factory, so he could try and come to terms with what had been happening to him. He was all too familiar with the tone of his father's voice. He had heard it many times before. It was the prelude to one of his long, tedious sermons about the requisites of reality -- a reality which David felt slipping further away with each passing moment.

"Dad...I...Can't we save it for another day? I have a lot of things..."

"Everything can't be saved for another day, young man. That's one of the things you've yet to learn, among many others."

"Dad..."

"I hope you realize that if you'd been working for another company you'd have been out on your ass a long time ago. I hope you realize that. Do you suppose that another employer would put up with your nonsense? I sent you to Oregon to do a job for me, an important job. I needn't have sent you. There are quite a few competent men working here that I could have sent. But I thought if I trusted you with a responsible job you might rise to the occasion. Apparently not. David, I really don't know what to do with you. Your attitude is entirely unacceptable. Entirely unacceptable! And I tell you this not

because I'm angry with you -- although I certainly have reason to be -- but my feelings are beside the point. I tell you this for your own good. You're not a child anymore, David, and ..."

David began feeling a hard knot tightening in his stomach. "Dad, I...I wasn't feeling well in Oregon. I've been sick...I came home because I was sick."

"Are you sick? Have you been to the doctor? You can't have been so very sick if you were able to go to your girlfriend's this morning -- I spoke to your mother. And you're planning on going out again this evening, am I right? David, how very sick can you be?"

"No, you don't understand..."

"I think I understand perfectly well. But I'm not concerned with why you came home from Oregon. That's one small incident. I'm talking about a general attitude you've exhibited ever since you came to work here. I don't know how you acquired this attitude. You certainly didn't get it from me. Although, maybe, after all, I am partly to blame. I've been too generous with you. I gave you too much. Maybe if I had held a little back you'd have learned that a man has to earn his living, life does not come for free. Maybe I was too big-hearted with you. Well, it's my nature to be big-hearted and if that was my fault all I can do is apologize. But you can't spend your life blaming your parents, David. Eventually you have to accept the blame yourself."

"The blame?"

"Yes, indeed!"

"Dad, listen...I came home from Oregon because..."

"I'm not talking about Oregon."

"Then what *are* you talking about?"

"I'm talking about your attitude, David. Your attitude! Your irresponsibility! Your refusal to face up to what is required of you! Your complete lack of discipline! Every week I write you out a check and every week I wonder whether you've earned it or not. Do you ever wonder that? I don't suppose you do. I'm talking about your *attitude*, David."

"I don't know what my attitude is."

"Well, David, in that case you're headed for a lot of trouble, a lot of trouble!"

There was silence for a long while after this. David sat on the couch, his eyes half closed, and felt very hot, despite the fact that the office was air conditioned. It was not that he couldn't feel the cool air on his skin -- it touched him and chilled him -- but somehow the coolness did not penetrate. The source of heat lay deep within. His father sat up close to the desk, puffing rapidly at a cigarette. He was perusing, once again, the material in front of him -- lifting the pen he'd arranged so carefully on the blotter in order to make a few short corrections.

After some time of this David's father looked up again. "I'll see those papers of yours now," he said.

David pushed himself from the couch with difficulty and walked to the desk, dropping the manila folder on the blotter. He stood there and gazed wearily about the office, not looking at anything in particular, but simply taking it all in. When he turned again to his father he saw a look of revulsion twisting the man's lips.

"What is this?" he said, holding up one of the pages by its edge.

"What's wrong?" said David.

"What is this?" said his father. "What did you bring me here?" He turned the manila folder around so that David could inspect its contents. There were no financial reports to be seen. The folder was full of pencil sketches.

"Where did these...?" David picked up the folder and looked at it with concern. He leafed through the pages and saw a variety of drawings -- a large redwood tree with a thick crusty bark -- the portly manager of the Sunnyside hotel -- a young girl with large eyes and long dark hair. Then he remembered. He had done them during his leisure time in Oregon. They were no more than elaborate doodles really but at first he had wanted to keep them, and had placed them in one of the folders he'd gotten from the factory. On the night he left, however, he decided he had no use for them after all, and though he couldn't bring himself to throw them out altogether, he left them on a bench outside the hotel -- or thought he had. But now he saw clearly what must have happened. In his haste to leave Oregon he'd mistakenly packed the sketches and left the financial reports behind.

"I must have grabbed the wrong folder!" he said.

His father looked at him with disgust. "What do you mean you must have grabbed the wrong folder? Where is the *right* folder?"

"I must have...I must have left it in Oregon."

"You left it in Oregon? David, this is really unbelievable! Where in Oregon?"

"I grabbed...I grabbed the wrong folder. I left one on a bench in front of the hotel and..."

"On a bench? You left it on a bench? Well, it's probably been thrown out by now!"

"I..." David could think of nothing to say. He looked down at his father with wide eyes and was silent.

"It must have been thrown out by now!" his father repeated. "Do you know what this means? Do you know what you've done? All your work in Oregon has gone to waste! The entire month has gone for nothing! Now see what your irresponsibility has cost you! I'll try and get the hotel on the phone and see if someone found the folder. But I doubt it! David, this is unbelievable!"

David tried very hard to stifle it. He pressed his lips together and tightened the muscles of his throat, but it was no use. He could not contain it. He began to laugh. Softly at first, with his mouth closed, so that the laughter came out in short spurts that sounded like coughing. But finally it burst free and David was howling. Suddenly everything seemed very funny. Not just the sketches, but everything that had happened to him since he first saw the darkly cloaked imp in the truck. And more than this. His whole life seemed suddenly hilarious. His years of college, his business courses, his relationship with Linda, his employment with his father -- it all seemed a vastly funny joke. The laughter tore from his throat with a violence that was almost frightening. His father watched him, seething, but said nothing.

When the laughter finally ended there was nothing left. The exertion had spent David's last bit of energy, and now he was fully exhausted. He looked at his father and felt a sadness coming over him the likes of which he had never experienced. A deep, flowing sadness that washed through him and seemed to be sweeping him away. His father was speaking but David could not make out the words. He gazed at the man across the desk and saw that he was becoming very, very small and distant. His voice seemed the squeaking of a tiny, frantic, mouse, growing ever more faint and indistinct. He stood for a while and watched his father dwindle before his eyes.

"I have to go now," he said after a time, though he was certain his words would never bridge the chasm between them. He turned and left the office.

It had been a long day but it was finally nearing its end. David had driven home from the factory but did not enter the house. He sat on the brick stoop in front of the door and watched the sun, glowing red, prepare to set. He was too tired to think. He felt himself floating on a river of sadness, the current sweeping him away from everything he had ever known. He had no strength left to resist, no power to swim against the flow, or even to wonder where it would take him. He surrendered himself to it, drifted with the stream, and there was something about this surrender that was very soothing. It was out of his hands now, he could just relax into it, he would follow the current where it led.

It was not long before he noticed a dark shadow falling across his feet on the stoop. He looked up and saw Gabriel standing beside him.

"Greetings," said the imp.

David did not say anything. He closed his eyes and put his face in his hands. Then he opened them again and looked down at the ground. "What are you going to do with me?"

"What would you like done with you, David?"

David shook his head and was silent for a long time. "I'm good for nothing, I suppose. I can't even make nuts and bolts."

Gabriel chuckled, "Man does not live by nuts and bolts alone, you know."

David stared in front of him. "I suppose it would be best to just end it."

"End what?" said Gabriel.

"Me. End me."

"Is that what you think would be best?"

"I don't know."

"Nothing ever ends, David. But everything changes. You've been due for a change for a long time now."

"But how can I change? I can't seem to change. I can't become what everyone wants. And he'll never forgive me."

"Who?"

"My father."

Gabriel smiled, "Perhaps you must forgive him."

David looked up at Gabriel. Something was different. The imp's eyes were no longer hollow in the way they had been. Deep within the hollowness was a faint, soft, light, scarcely visible, but discernible through the darkness.

"Who are you?" said David.

"Who are *you*?" said Gabriel.

"I don't know who I am!" David's eyes welled with tears. "I don't think I've ever known." He clenched his fists and shook his head. "I want...I want..."

"What *do* you want, David?"

"I don't know what I want!"

"Don't you?"

"I want...I want..."

"Your work, David, don't you want to do your work?"

"My work? I've tried to do my work! Or maybe I haven't really tried. My father doesn't think I've tried. I can't seem to try. My father is right I suppose. I'm

irresponsible. I hate the work I do. I go to work in the morning and can't wait to get home. I come home and dread having to go back in the morning."

"Your work isn't nuts and bolts, David."

David suddenly remembered the sketches he had placed on his father's desk, the sketches he had almost left in Oregon. "But. . . but... that's irresponsible. . . an indulgence. It's..."

"David," said Gabriel, "have you never noticed how small you are?"

David shrugged his shoulders, "I've spent my whole life feeling small."

"Oh, yes, you have filled the entire universe with your smallness until there is nothing left for you but smallness. But have you never noticed how *small* your smallness is?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Haven't you noticed how much lies *beyond* your smallness? You've put such a burden on your smallness, David, as if it had to support the whole world. You must allow your smallness to be small. That's the first thing. You don't have to give birth to the meaning of life, David, you just have to give heed to it."

"Heed?"

Just then the telephone rang. David could hear the faint trill sounding from inside the house. He listened to it ring a few times.

"That must be Linda. She told me she'd call. She's making dinner for me."

"Are you going to answer it?" said Gabriel.

"I can't answer it. I don't know what to say to her. I don't want to see her."

"Do you care for her?" asked Gabriel.



"I don't even *know* her. My father brought us together. I look at her and see him."

"Yes, the one thing you've made bigger than your own smallness is your father's smallness. You've been buried in smallness, David."

David took a deep breath of air and noticed that his eyes were moist with tears. He wiped the wetness with his hand. Gabriel took a step back from him. The twilight of the evening had turned to darkness, and yet all was not dark. David could now discern a strange luminance about the figure of Gabriel. The faint light he had seen earlier through the hollow of Gabriel's eyes had grown brighter. And the imp's whole figure was now encased in a soft blue radiance.

"Even darkness isn't what it appears to be, David. You don't realize what a shadow you cast. Only when you step out of your own shadow can you begin to see the light." The blue luminance surrounding Gabriel grew brighter and brighter, turning to white, until Gabriel's whole body was a radiant glow of white light. Then, slowly, the light dissipated into the surrounding air. Gabriel was gone.

David sat on the stoop and felt a soft breeze blow across his neck. He could hear crickets chirping. The telephone had stopped ringing and for a moment there was silence, but then the ringing began again. David knew it was Linda, and suddenly began to wonder about her. Who was this woman he had known for two years but had never known at all? David realized that he had never really looked at her. Never once. And then a feeling of buoyancy entered his chest, something he had not felt since. . . and he couldn't remember since when. Yes, it would be enough. It would be enough for this evening to just look at her. Perhaps. . . perhaps he would sketch her. He could envision

her straight brown hair falling over her forehead in thin strands, the angularity of her nose and chin, the delicacy of her eyelashes. Yes, that would be sufficient for tonight. To look at her, to sketch her. And tomorrow...his father, his work, his career...well, tomorrow would take care of itself.

David stood up, brushed himself off, and went in to answer the call.