



1

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listeners and readers

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ABOUT IMAGINARY YEAR

Imaginary Year is a work of serial fiction, written by Jeremy P. Bushnell. It began in September 2000, and is renewed each September.

New entries appear each Monday and Friday on the *Imaginary Year* website (www.ImaginaryYear.com). Printable versions of the entire story to date, such as the one that you are holding, are available through that site as well.

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53 / STRENGTH THROUGH SECRECY

Denise is listening to the Mogwai record *Come On Die Young*. *Sad songs remind me of friends*. She sits at her desk, in a space she's created under her loft bed. The hot temperatures of the summer unexpectedly broke this week, and cool evening wind snaps in through the window's screen, lifting a few envelopes off of her shelf and sending them drifting to the floor.

A few minutes ago Toy came in here, uninvited, was sort of hanging out, small-talking. Picking up a magazine off of her floor and flipping through it. Looking at her. Sometimes these small apartment interactions will shift abruptly: he'll begin insulting her, calling her crazy, pretending he's only *joking around; kidding*. Other times he'll try to put his arms around her or, if she's sitting against the wall, he'll sit next to her in such a way that their legs are touching. This time, when she heard him coming towards her room she grabbed the nearest book on her desk (*The Photomontages of Hannah Hoch*) and opened it up to the introductory essay. After he was in the room for a minute she said *Hey, I'm kind of in the middle of reading this*. And then stopped. Sometimes it's important to know when to stop talking. He'd said *oh* and muttered something about needing to get this month's rent money from her. *It's on the fridge*, she'd said, not looking up from the book. And then he left.

It's easy, she realizes, to repel him as long as she's strong. And it's easier for her to be strong when she has a secret.

This goes way back for her. When she was a baby, she had a treasured soft blanket, Blue. (It was named after some old song—she has a memory of her dad, holding the blanket, rubbing it against her nose, singing *you know that Blue was a good old dog*.)

She thought, back then, that she would have Blue forever. But when she turned eight and it had begun to go to rags her mom began to say things like *we're going to have to get rid of that ratty old blanket sometime*. Denise protested, but even at age eight she could recognize the granite tone that entered her mother's voice sometimes—the tone that indicated that she would not yield. She began to have dreams about Blue being taken away from her, and she'd wake up and clutch out for it, almost in a panic until she'd find it, in the crease between the bed and the wall, and then she'd nuzzle her face into it and, comforted, she'd fall gradually back into sleep.

But the dreams made their impression, and so when an eight-inch swatch of the blanket fell off, she took it and hid it in a carrying case intended for My Little Ponies. She would take it out when she was alone in her room and she would hold it for a few minutes before returning it to the case. When the blanket finally disappeared, just as she'd expected, it didn't really matter. By that point she had decided that the swatch was Blue, not the blanket. She had the thing that was important. Even into junior high she would still take Blue out almost every night, before bed, and rub it up and down on her cheek.

It was having maintained a secret from her mother—*against* her mother, really—for all those years that helped her most when things began to get bad between them. She had learned that she did not always need to bend to her mother's will. Even more importantly: she had learned how to *appear to bend* while actually acting on her own will.

She still has Blue.

And lately she has been thinking about Gabriel. She has only had two conversations with him, but she feels as though, in those conversations, she has opened up a part of herself that has remained closed to everyone since Johnny. A tiny vulnerability. But she hasn't

talked about him at all, not to Toy, not to Mark. She is vulnerable at a particular point, but *it is a point that they do not know about.*

If she can keep that secret from them, then there are other things that she can keep secret from them as well. Which means that she can make a plan.

She has been looking in the *Reader* for new apartments.

Secrets accrue more secrets. A fortress.

54 / AVOIDANCE STRATEGY

Right now Freya is in the bathroom, cleaning the toilet. This is a task that she never does unless there is something else that she wants to do even less. The toilet's handle is stamped with the word *Mansfield*. She has the Ramones' "I Wanna Be Sedated" in her head. Just put me in a wheelchair / get me to the plane / hurry hurry hurry / before I go insane. She shakes some Comet into the bowl in time with her internal percussion.

The thing that she wants to do even less is return her mother's phone call.

Answering machine message: Freya, honey, hi, it's Mom. [deep exhalation] Would you call here? Timmy's gotten himself in trouble. I need your advice. I just can't figure out what that kid is thinking. Maybe you can make some *sense* of the whole thing. Anyway, look, just call here, as soon as you can. I love you. Bye.

This message drove Freya straight to a cigarette. After she smoked that one she smoked another one. Then she went into the bathroom to splash some water on her face and thought *oh, look, the sink's dirty*. And once you've gone to the trouble to get the Comet and the scrub brush out, you might as well do the other porcelain surfaces as well. She'll do the tub next, and after that it'll definitely be too late to call her mom back. Which is a Good Thing.

Especially if Tim's in trouble. Tim is her half-brother, age fifteen. In any conflict between him and Mom, she *always* finds herself siding internally with him, but Mom has a way of backing Freya into a position where she's forced to fake some sympathy. When she can pull it off, the lie of it makes her feel physically sick. When she can't pull it off, she's looking at a one-hour fight.

What she'd really like to do is call home and talk to Tim and give him strategies for how to deal with Mom. Freya has enough stored up from her own stormy adolescence; some of them must be still useful. But Tim doesn't have his own cell phone—not until he's older—and there's no good way to call the house without running the risk of having to talk to the maternal unit. Bom bom bom bom / ba-bom bom bom / I wanna be sedated!

Freya could use some strategies herself. She once thought that once she became an adult, her relationship with her mom would magically smooth out. But that hasn't happened. Her mom continuously bugs her on the issues of boyfriend and particularly *school*; she never really recovered from when Freya dropped out of college in her second year in order to play drums. In a fit of exasperation, years ago, Freya once mentioned that she might go back to school "if the paperwork wasn't such a pain in the ass": her mom decided to "help her," going so far as to send her an envelope full of partially-filled-out FAFSA forms that year. Ever since then, the line *if you need my help getting back to your education, just let me know* has been a regular staple of their conversations.

Then there's the Boyfriend Conversation. She might actually be able to make some headway there, now that she's going out with Jakob, a guy her mom might actually like. But she knows the questions that her mom will inevitably ask. Questions she doesn't have the answers to. *Is it serious?* and the related etcetera. She and Jakob have not yet had any sort of conversation about what their relationship "means," and she likes it that way. They get together, they do something, they make out, fuck, have breakfast: then later they do it all over again. And it makes her happy. It seems so simple and easy in her own head, but she *knows* (from experience) that she will find herself strangely unable to convey that perfect alignment to her mother. Arrrrgh.

Twenty twenty twenty four hours to go! She flushes.

55 / WHAT'S GOING ON IN THERE?

It's the first time that they've gotten together in a while. They're sitting out on Janine's tiny back deck. The evening is uncomfortably humid, but it's even more stuffy inside the apartment (no AC). At least outside there's the faintest thinnest breeze. They're each working on their second Corona. Lime pulp swirls cloudily in the necks of the bottles. *Cervesa mas fina.*

—So, says Janine. —How's Lydia?

A pained expression crosses Thomas' face. —Um, he says, and then he falls into silence. He looks down at his beer, runs the ragged shred of his fingernail over the printing on the bottle. —I don't know, he says. —I don't think we're seeing one another anymore.

—What? Janine says. —Really? Why?

—I don't know, Thomas says.

Oh, poor Thomas, she thinks. —Jesus, Thomas, I'm sorry. Did you guys have a fight or something?

—No, no, nothing like that. And then he looks up and stares out at the confusion of garages, alleys and fences.

She reaches out and touches his arm. —Thomas, she says.

He nods. He looks miserable. His face is all tightened up as though he is holding back tears. He half-looks away.

—Thomas, she says, what's going on in there?

In a very small voice he says: —I just got scared.

—Scared? she says. —Scared of what?

—I've never, he says.

She cranes her head to listen. He takes a deep breath.

—I'm a virgin, he says. —I've never slept with anyone before.

He looks up at her now, straight on, mouth pursed, prepared to receive ridicule. But none arrives: her face and her pose convey nothing but sympathy. He breathes.

—Oh, Thomas, she says. —I didn't know that.

—I know, he says.

It makes a lot of things make sense, though, she thinks. It explains why Thomas breaks apart in conversation the way he does. She believes that sex is a form of communication between people, a system of exchanges, and she believes that learning the vocabulary that happens between bodies helps you in your life, enriches your ability to communicate in other ways, other languages. Some strange sadness dawns within her.

—It might be none of my business, she says, —but... was this a conscious choice? Sometimes people might—

—Yeah, Thomas interrupts, —I know. No, though. It wasn't. Deliberate, I mean.

—Look, she says. —Is it just something that you want to be rid of?

He feels like it is something that hangs around his neck. A weight that he has carried for nearly thirty years. He can't imagine what his life would be like were that to crumble.

In part that is why he is afraid to lose it. Losing it will mean entering the world of people who are sexually active. He knows that this will introduce him to new sets of problems, anxieties, difficulties. In that world he is a novice; he will not know, at first, how to surmount those obstacles. Whereas in the world of the virgins, he is a veteran.

Janine's hand is still on his arm.

—Because, she says, —I could help you. It doesn't need to be some huge deal, all serious like that. We could have fun with it.

He feels blood suddenly rush into his face. He looks at her. He wants to be certain that she means what he thinks she means—

A shelf piled high with graphic design books and stock photography catalogs. Taped to it are a dozen self-portraits of Janine and Lee, made by squashing their faces up against photocopier glass and then marking elaborate designs on the output. When it's slow here in the Designer House, they can get away with anything.

Things are not slow right now. They're trying to finish up a project that they're already a week behind on. Lee went out an hour ago to meet with Colin, their project coordinator, and now he's back.

—Hey, Lee says. —Colin says that Benjamin wants to implement the new directory of the Klein site today; he wants you to forward on those fixed GIFs as soon as you can. Like, before lunch.

—Yeah, yeah, I'm on it, Janine says. She is working in Photoshop 6.0 with a half-dozen document windows open. —I'm still getting those transparencies to look right.

—Colin says that if you can't get them done before lunch, then he wants you to send an e-mail out to Benjamin letting him know when you *will* be able to get them done.

—Colin can blow me, Janine says. This is a frequent refrain around Designer House, alternated sometimes with *Colin can suck my left nut*. In reality, though, she would never let Colin touch her; he has a patronizing, unctuous way about him that makes her feel like she needs a bath every time he finishes talking to her. He seems very sure of himself, confident, and, for Janine, the more sure a guy seems of himself, the more slime he seems to exude. She prefers a guy like Thomas, a guy who's a little less certain.

She would have let Thomas touch her, if he'd wanted. She's still a little bit surprised that she propositioned him. And she's still a little surprised that he said no. She thinks that

saying no was the wrong decision. OK, yes, maybe it's presumptuous for her to make determinations about what's right or wrong for Thomas, but she really feels like this whole virginity thing is tripping him up. It's hard to know what sex *is* when you've never had it. If you imagine it as this heavy, intense, sober thing, then it's going to seem pretty intimidating, and she can see how that would fuck you up if you were going into an adult relationship. Thomas is fucked up because Lydia expects him to have sex, and Thomas doesn't know what that means.

For Janine, sexuality means communication, play, and she thinks that if she could get that across to Thomas, then he'd feel a lot more ready to try it with other people. But the only way she can get that across is by going to bed with him. And he said no. She can't very well force him.

Losing your virginity. People talk about it like it's some kind of fucking surgical procedure. Having your appendix removed—losing your virginity. What the fuck does *losing your virginity* even *mean*? It's not like there's some *physical part of you* that disappears. (Don't give her that shit about the hymen: she broke hers when she was fifteen, trying to do a skateboard trick, and she wasn't sexually active then—not until the end of that particular summer. And it's *Thomas'* virginity that she's thinking about, anyway.) She supposes that it has to do with some heterosexual bullshit, some magic act involving a penis going into a vagina, but as a bisexual who has spent most of her adult life hanging out with one queer posse or another, that particular piece of alchemy holds no tremendous significance for her.

—I'm going to make a pot of coffee, Lee says. —Do you want some?

—Yeah, says Janine.

57 / 60DUM [RETURN]

Lydia walks into 6Odum, pays her admission, and picks up a square blue flyer off of the info table. The flyer is advertising some upcoming festival, Trans 004. It looks kind of interesting, but the light in here is dim, as always, so she can't make out any of the details—she folds the flyer in half and sticks it in her pocket for another time.

She pushes through a door into the main performance space. There's some weak AC in here; she's grateful. Some bright lights are on up at the front of the room, where a few people mill about, adjusting the arrangement of their computers before the show begins. Playing tonight: Ian Epps, Ian Nagoski, Rafael Toral.

She's loosely familiar with Toral's work. She first read about him on Thomas' website. Speaking of Thomas: she bets he's here. She scans the people sitting in the chairs that line the room's edges, and, sure enough, she spots him. He hasn't seen her yet: he is staring up at the front.

Anxiety billows through her. What should she do? She hasn't seen him since the Niblock show, almost two *months* ago now. In the past few weeks she's barely even *heard* from him. She knows when to take a hint. She supposes it's about time to write off the relationship as dead. She looks away, searches for a seat on the other side of the room.

But things were so *good* at that show. And she can't, for the life of her, figure out why things went sour after it. She wants to know. She *has* to know. She sent him an e-mail a while ago, asking him just to let her know what the deal was: he never responded. She'll be fucked if she lets him just drive her away with silence. And so she heads over there.

—Thomas, is how she greets him.

He looks up and sees her. Some complex feeling surges up: if he had to identify it, he would likely call it *shame*. He has tried, lately, to just let go of her. And yet here she is, before him, and all at once he understands the inadequacy of that strategy of release; he becomes aware of all the buried points which still connect them. Attempting to forget those points will not stop them from existing.

He says her name. He can barely get it out. She can detect pain in him: a tangle so expansive that his form seems hardly able to contain it. She had imagined that this conversation would call upon her to be assertive, incisive, perhaps cold to the point of a small cruelty: instead she finds herself choked up.

—Listen, she says. —I just want to talk to you.

He nods *OK* and she sits down next to him.

—I need you to talk to me, she says. —What's going on?

—I don't know, he says. —I'm sorry. I'm just—I'm not very good at relationships.

His language is failing him. He doesn't have time to think about the right words. (This is why he doesn't like using the phone.) His trouble with this relationship is inextricably wound up in his fear of losing his virginity, which in turn is wound up in the dormant troubles of his long-ago relationship with Rachel. But when he tries to explain that to Lydia, the words get lost in some kind of mental labyrinth; they can't find their way to his mouth. *I'm not very good at relationships* is the only summary he can articulate, and he knows it's a cop-out: it reveals so little of what is important.

—Look, she says. —It's OK. I mean, that kind of stuff, we can try to work it out. If you want to. I just need to know whether you're interested in working with me. I don't even know if you want to keep *going* in this relationship. I don't even know if we *have* a relationship. I mean, if you don't want to see me anymore, just *tell* me.

—No, says Thomas, quietly. —No, I want to see you. I thought—I thought it was *you* who wouldn't want to stay in a relationship with *me*.

—Thomas, *why*? Why would you think that?

—I don't know, he says. —I guess because—I guess because I'm so—fucked up.

—Yeah, Lydia says. —Who isn't? That's what relationships are *about*: two fucked-up people trying to find their way *to* one another. Do you want to try?

—Yes, he says.

—OK, Lydia says. —We can try. But you *have* to be willing to *talk* to me.

—OK, Thomas says.

And then there is a long silence. Thomas wonders if he should change the subject. He wants to just say something like *I'm really excited about this show*. But somehow that seems mundane, out of keeping with the line of conversation which just ended: he desperately needs a transition and he cannot find one.

The show is about to begin; Ian Epps sits down in front of his computer. The lights go out.

58 / ANOTHER PERSON'S LIFE

—So, yeah, this is the place.

—Uh huh.

Denise is being shown an apartment. She's already looked at two but this one is a little bit quirky in a way that she likes. Old quirky. The windows in the living room, with their heavy molding, seem vaguely like they're the wrong size— they're too near the floor — it is sort of as if they developed independently of the room. She doesn't mind that. It strikes her as organic.

—You can see, there's a closet here, it's pretty big, it can store a pretty good amount of stuff.

—Mm, Denise says.

She is trying to envision where she place her things into this apartment, if it were hers. But she's distracted. The woman who is showing her the apartment—Jane—is clearly also the current occupant: the apartment is still very much being used as a living space. (It becomes available September 1st.) Denise finds herself investigating the way that Jane lives; assessing whether she would like her if she knew her better. She's taking the opportunity to see into another person's life. A big poster on one wall reads: Convergence Against Capitalism! With a picture of a fairy princess grinning impishly and holding a monkey wrench. Denise looks at Jane, tries to imagine whether she imagines herself as the princess in the poster. She is wearing a loose-fitting white tank top and jeans; she has a tiny tattoo of a toothed gear on her shoulder.

—So, anyway, here's the bedroom.

The place is pretty tiny; one small living room, a kitchen which is essentially in an alcove, and now this small bedroom. But Denise doesn't have a whole lot of stuff: it wasn't that long ago that she was living in a dorm. On the table near the bed are a half-dozen candles and a book called *Questions and Swords*, with an oil painting of a human figure on the cover. On the wall hangs an enormous batch of some herb, dried and bundled. A batik-print cloth, electric-blue, is draped over the window.

—I really like this place, says Jane. —I'm almost sad that I have to leave.

—Where are you going? asks Denise.

—Mexico, says Jane. —I'm actually breaking the lease. But the landlord's been pretty cool about it. She's pretty great, actually, really responsive to any problems that you might have. She'll reimburse you for any work you do around the place.

Mexico? thinks Denise. She wants to ask why, but doesn't. Jane kind of shrugs, winds a finger through a curl of her hair.

I could live here, Denise thinks. She still hasn't mentally overlapped her belongings and these rooms, but now she feels she does not need to, because she can see herself in these rooms *as they are now*, with these candles and posters and books, this precarious stack of CDs, this sequence of photos taped up by the light switch, this postcard of a chili-ringed Virgin Mary tacked up over the bed. She can see herself with this life. And if the person with this life, Jane, could live here, than Denise feels certain that she could too.

59 / YOUR BASIC MOM

Jakob and Freya are waiting at the bus stop. They're headed out to an Indian restaurant, one of the places up on Devon. Jakob is holding a brown paper bag containing a six of Leinenkugel's. Jakob's only been up to the Indian neighborhood in the high northern reaches of Chicago once before, but he really enjoyed it. He grew up in Ohio suburbs, a place where ethnicity was regulated to Chinese restaurants in stripmalls, and now here he is in Chicago, where there exist entire enclaves with singular identities. Indian restaurants and video stores and music shops. On a street where people wear saris, he is the alien: the urban landscape once again becomes strange, he temporarily regains the ability to see the city with clarity. He loves that.

Despite that, he's crabbier than he'd like to be. He's hot and the air is humid and he feels covered with a sheen of sweat and city grime. Three buses have gone by in other directions. (Advertisements: Eat the World: Foodlife at Water Tower Plaza. Rule the Planet. 7.27.01. Also an outdated *Moulin Rouge* one.) Plus he's half-thinking about this paper he needs to write for this conference— it's currently little more than just a mess of notes. And once he starts thinking about that he starts thinking about how, immediately after that conference, he's going to need to jump back into teaching. He hasn't designed a syllabus for next semester: in fact he has only the most hazy idea of what he wants to cover. His life feels dominated by a whole series of separate ideas that don't connect; designs that cannot be interlocked into a pleasing larger pattern. He feels disassembled, incomplete. He tried to talk to Freya about this but she only responded with noncommittal noises: *mmm*. *Mhm?* This only served to compound his irritation. What he really wanted was for her to help him talk through it. Sometimes he has a feeling that a woman who was also in grad

school might be able to understand him better: he secretly feels a bit appalled that Freya never even finished college. But even if she wasn't able to talk him through it, she could at least have changed the subject: even that would have helped.

What Freya is thinking about is her half-brother. She finally called her mom back to figure out how Tim had gotten into trouble. The news was worse than she thought. Normally it's something that Freya thinks is not really a very big deal: he dyes his hair blue without asking, or he gets in trouble with the principal for skateboarding down the junior high's front steps. (*For fuck's sake*, Freya had thought: *you build this oppressive prisonlike environment, and then you expect the kids to **respect** it?*) But this time she's actually worried a bit. Tim had gotten caught selling Internet pornography to the other kids at school. She's not sure if he was selling disks or printouts or what, because she only got her mom's pretty hysterical version of the whole thing. *I thought you needed a credit card to get at that—that stuff*, her mom had said. *Timmy doesn't have a credit card. How could he find that stuff—that—that filth?* Freya didn't feel like giving her mom a primer on the abundance of free pornographic images: what she really felt like doing was getting through to Tim and figuring out just what was going on with him, why he did it. *Can I talk to Tim?* Freya had said. *Let me talk to Tim.* But Tim was out with Paul, his dad (her stepdad). *Will you have him call me?* Freya asked. *Maybe I can make some sense of this whole thing.* —*Well*, her mother responded, *I hope you can, Freya. I sincerely hope you can.* Terse. As though the suggestion was brazen. What the fuck?

She has about zero hope that her mom will actually pass on the message. Or she'll pass it on in some way that garbles the message: *your sister wants to have a word with you about this whole business.* Freya wants to reach Tim, sort him out, help him find a rightful way through this world. She supported Tim when he dyed his hair and skated on school property: she thinks those are valid strategies for dealing. (She remembers telling Tim the story of how

Mom freaked out when she got the big tattoo on her left shoulder.) She thinks that this porn business, on the other hand, is probably not so cool. She'd like to hear what he has to say about it. But she knows that this desire is at cross-purposes to what her mom desires, which is to hear Freya sympathize: to get Freya to agree that Tim is a bad kid; to get Freya to admire Mom's stoic heroism in bearing up under the burden. *Thank God he's still a minor*, her mom had said, *otherwise this might be in the papers. The papers!*

—Hey, she says to Jakob.

—What, Jakob says.

—What's your mom like?

Jakob thinks for a second. That's a big question, completely out of the blue. There is, of course, a whole vast database of memory to rifle through, indexed along chains that follow an inarticulable order. An image of his mom tending to day lilies behind the garage flickers here. A grimy green bucket that he thinks of as his mother's gardening bucket, a pair of shears. Getting a haircut from her in a 1970s kitchen. Wallpaper with orange lozenges. A sentence: *who's my best boy?* A memory of her in a severe suit, going off to a new office job in what must have been the mid-1980s. Jakob in a room with his first girlfriend, Sarah, his hand on Sarah's lanky legs, Sarah's shorts unbuttoned: Mom here is a knock at the door and a voice. *Jakob? Jakob?* Mom here is a catalyst to frenzy. Opening the door finally, exasperated—*what?* His mom regarding him with a complex expression which he still cannot fully interpret. He does not know how to sum up these various threads and he is too cranky to try.

—I don't know, he says. —She's just your basic Mom, I guess.

60 / THE WORLDS WE CHOOSE

Fletcher pushes through the door into Tympanum. A basic alternarock / indiepop store like Tympanum is not really the world he frequently inhabits. His parents raised him on classical (dad) and jazz (mom): in junior high, when other kids were listening to Madonna, he was playing the clarinet in junior high band. By the time he was a senior in high school he was playing alto sax in the jazz ensemble. And his friends—most of them—were also band geeks, with a relatively faint interest in contemporary pop or rock. When he was in college the predominant musical flavor in the air was grunge, which he never really got. He hardly partied during that time, either. He was happy to spend those years at his desk, reading books, with Ornette Coleman or Anthony Braxton pouring in through the headphones clamped over his ears.

Freya's been his one connection to that other musical world. He met her in high school; she played drums in the band for a year or so. (She quit, Fletcher remembers, because the music teacher at the school—this skinny Italian named Mr. DeNardo—gave Freya a lot of trouble about playing the drums. He thought they weren't *feminine* enough or something — Fletcher can't recall the exact details.) Freya was the only person he knew back then who liked punk rock. (He detested it at the time, but now he lends it a crumb of grudging admiration, mostly because he's noticed how the outer edges of free jazz intersect with the fringes of the hardcore punk scene. When he went to see John Zorn's Masada Project play in Grant Park two years ago, there were a ton of punks in evidence.) But, despite their differences in taste, Fletcher and Freya ended up becoming friends anyway—he spent a lot of time in high school developing a personality built on advanced irreverence, and this intersected well with Freya's fledgling antiestablishment stances. He would imitate

their teachers and bandmates and get her to crack up, to the point where she'd be gasping for breath, tears streaming down her face.

—Hey, baby! Freya says when she sees him. She is at the register, ringing up a pile of CDs for some guy.

—Hey, he says. —I was in the neighborhood and I thought I'd stop in and say 'hi.'

—Hang on one sec, she says.

She's glad to see him. She's been hoping he could give her some insight about what's going on with Jakob. In particular, she's worried that Jakob thinks she's stupid. She can pick up on it in subtle ways. He doesn't seem to like to talk to her about books—sometimes, when she's over at his apartment, she'll do something like pick up a book lying out. There'll then be a conversation that goes like this:

Freya: Are you reading this?

Jakob [takes it out of her hands]: This? Oh, yeah.

Freya: What's it about?

Jakob: Oh, I don't know, it's— it's theory.

This has happened, almost identically, twice now, and variations on it have occurred maybe a dozen times. She feels like he doesn't think she could handle the books. She feels like he doesn't think of her as a reader. She didn't finish college, so she doesn't have the questionable benefits of a liberal arts background—but she does read. It's true that she doesn't have a lot of books around her apartment: her sprawling record collection has taught her the hassles of building a personal library, so she mainly borrows books from friends, or buys them used and then sells them back or gives them away. But she does read. And she doesn't read crap. She's read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; *Manufacturing Consent*. She reads *The Baffler* when it comes out. (She's got a copy of the new issue sitting in the break room.)

She has smart friends, and she listens to them talk about the books that they think are good, and she pays attention and will actually make the effort to track the books down. But Jakob never seems to want to make recommendations to her. She feels like he doesn't want to let her see his more intellectual side, and she feels like he's holding back on that because he thinks he would outpace her. And this drives her nuts.

She rings up the last of the CDs of her customer. —That's \$35.72, she says.

Fletcher watches her. He still thinks that she is beautiful. He had a crush on her back in the Mr. DeNardo era, but he never told her about it. Her boyfriends at that time were all older guys with like *mohawks* and shit, and he knew that he could not possibly compete. So his sixteen-year-old mind reasoned that if he could not have her, he could at least come up with a way to bask frequently in her presence. He chose to be the confidant, the asexual friend: he sensed that that would be a way for him to get close to her and remain there. And—the truth is—in the intervening years, living out that role has brought him a great deal of comfort and happiness. The residue of the crush has never completely disappeared, but he no longer wants to act upon it: the relationship that they currently have is more important to him than the pleasure of sexual release or the consummation of long-running desire: he is not willing to make any trade. All the same, he felt a pang of vicarious joy when she got involved with Jakob, because he felt like she had chosen Jakob because he is a guy with Fletcherlike qualities. He felt, finally, as though he had won out over the guys who Freya had been involved with in the past.

—What's new? she says to him.

—Nothing, he says.

61 / ETHICS

Janine watches Ingrid raise her bleached hair and fan the back of her neck. —Jesus, she says. —It's hot in here.

A throng of dim bodies surround them. They were fortunate enough to score one of the last remaining tables before the place filled up. Janine is drinking Honey Weiss and Ingrid is drinking Beck's. The blackboard behind the bar, bearing the names and prices of three dozen beers, is surrounded by tiny Christmas lights, which cast rosy light onto Ingrid's skin.

It's weird that Ingrid asked her to get together at this bar. Usually the two of them just get together for lunch: they haven't gone out together to a bar since they were both in grad school. She has distantly considered the possibility that the shift from cafe to bar may be related to Ingrid's recent confession of attraction, but the confession still seems unreal enough that no connection between it and anything else seems fully plausible.

In two months Ingrid will be going back to Berlin to marry Elsa.

Sometimes Janine senses that huge forces are moving in her life and she does not have the time to be fully aware of them. On some mental layer that notion terrifies her, makes her feel completely out of control. She has a pack of Camel Turkish Gold cigarettes of the pack that was given to her by some guy hired to give away promotional packs of cigarettes at bars. She taps one out, lights up with her Eightball Zippo, which has a Clowes drawing of a geeky-looking female devil on it, and proffers the pack to Ingrid.

—Want one?

—Sure.

She leans over and lights Ingrid's cigarette for her. They both drag.

—So look, Ingrid says. Janine waits. She has a sense that she knows what is coming. Unspoken words have been drawing together all evening, massing.

—I'm just gonna ask you straight out, Ingrid says. Janine watches her blue eyes. The light of so much intelligence within them. —Do you want to come home with me tonight?

Janine draws back a few inches, as if to better survey the view. An entire system of ethics flickers on in her brain, disassembling the components of the situation and holding them up for analysis. (A somewhat confused analysis, given that she's in the early phases of drunkenness.) She immediately grins, to show Ingrid that the idea itself is pleasing (it is). Then she takes a long drag on her cigarette, to buy time.

Some years back, Janine identified strongly as a lesbian, and her social group was composed almost entirely of lesbians: during that period she swore she would not get involved with someone who was already involved. She had had unpleasant experiences with the whole game where a rival gets close to your lover and undercuts your image in their eyes: that game seemed a remnant from the heterosexual world, and Janine believed it had no place in lesbian relationships. (At that time she'd been reading a lot of Monique Wittig. From *The Straight Mind: it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for 'woman' has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women.*)

Since then, she's reinterpreted the Wittig somewhat: she's come to believe that it's monogamy itself that is the remnant of heterosexuality, monogamy itself which could serve to be eliminated amongst lesbians and bisexuals. She has found there to be a certain liquid (nonmasculine) pleasure in multiple simultaneous connections. But she's never felt like Ingrid shared that view; for fuck's sake, Ingrid is *moving to another country* just so she can be

married, and if anything there's anything on this planet that Janine would describe as a remnant of heterosexual economic systems, it's *marriage*.

She exhales. —Everything's all right between you and Elsa, right? Janine asks. — Still planning to go over there and all that?

—Yeah, says Ingrid. —So this would basically be a short-term kind of thing. It wouldn't have anything to do with her, really.

Hmm. Would it? Janine suddenly wants to know whether Ingrid has told Elsa that she has been thinking about doing this. But she resists asking. What Ingrid and Elsa decide to tell one another is none of her business. Ingrid is a human being capable of making her own choices.

—If you don't want to, Ingrid says, —it's OK. I'm mostly just curious. We've known one another for such a long time; I just wonder what it would be like.

Janine wonders too. Ingrid is a human being capable of making her own choices. That's basically what it comes down to: that's the ethical rule that trumps all others this evening. Janine knows that she wants to spend the night with Ingrid; she knows that Ingrid wants to spend the night with her. Janine is worried about how this will affect the relationship between Ingrid and Elsa, but ultimately she has to leave that whole process of risk-assessment up to Ingrid, and Ingrid seems to have already completed that process. To say *I don't think we should do this because of Elsa* would be to assume that she has the power to make superior decisions in matters between two people, neither of which are her. A kind of arrogance.

—No, says Janine. —I want to.