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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](http://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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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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## 64/ RULES

Janine sits in damp heat. She has the windowbox air conditioner set to full blast, but it barely stirs the oppressive atmosphere that hangs around her. Chicago weather has been in the lower nineties for the past several days. And humid. The humidity makes her hair get curly at the ends; which she hates.

She pulls out her cell phone, flips it open, runs her thumb over the buttons. It's 9 pm on a Friday and she's by herself. Earlier today, at work, Janine invited Clark to come over and spend the night, but Clark said that she'd be working late again, trying to finish some writing to hand off to programmers. *How about you come over after you get off?* Janine had said, intending the entendre, leaning down to nibble on Clark's ear. Clark brushed her away. *I'll have to see, she said. This week has really burned me out.*

OK. So fine. So Janine's here by herself, hot, bored, sitting on the sofa, trying to ignore the moisture gathering in her armpits. (If she had her way, she'd never have to think about her armpits ever again.) She flings the cell phone down onto the coffee table and picks up the remote, flipping through the channels, but the array of available stuff looks pretty dire: *20/20*, *Fox News*, what appears to be a *Murder, She Wrote* re-run. She watches five minutes or so of this last one before she feels enough contempt to switch the TV off.

She feels boring as well as bored. Unappealing, unattractive. She wishes Thomas were over; he always makes her feel like she's funny and sexy. Almost always. She's actually still kind of pissed at him. She ended their last conversation by cutting him off, telling him to take some time, call her when he'd gotten his shit together. She's surprised that he hasn't

called her yet. It's been two weeks. She can't remember the last time they went two weeks without getting together, much less without talking.

She regards the phone where it rests, up against her oblong lime-green ashtray. She's annoyed about having to call him; she doesn't want it to look like she's crawling back. She's not going to apologize to him. She thinks Thomas was wrong to pull his whole *how could you do this to me* schtick. She was within her rights to sleep with Clark. Thomas knew that she was nonmonogamous when they first got involved; he doesn't get to *change the rules on her* when he feels like they don't suit him. That's not the deal.

And yet she misses having him around. She's pissed at him, yeah, but it was supposed to be let's-take-twenty-four-hours-to-cool-off pissed, not this-friendship-is-over pissed. She figures that he hasn't called her because he's scared, tangled up in a combination of feeling hurt and wanting to apologize. Sometimes he has trouble expressing himself, and the thornier the sentiment, the greater his difficulty. Traditionally, in their relationship, she has helped him find his way to the right words.

She sighs. It's hard to always have to be the brave one. But that's another one of the rules of their relationship, and she doesn't get to change them either, she supposes. She picks up the phone and autodials his number. Across the city his phone rings.

## 65 / DISAPPEARANCE

Austin and Lydia drink from bottles of Rolling Rock. They're at the Hideout, a cottage tucked away among the warehouses and the massive industrial sheds of River North. They're watching a band called the Double Leopards, five people crouching over their tools, filling the room with sound. It is as though a moist curtain of grainy black silt were pouring out of the PA.

Austin cannot imagine being more happy. Sitting here, drinking a beer on a hot summer night, listening to the delicious thick sound the Leopards are generating, three more bands yet to come, an attractive young woman by his side—really, what more could anyone reasonably desire?

Lydia puts her hand over her forehead as though shielding her eyes and she looks down at the table. Austin can hear her say something like *oh my God*.

—What? he says.

She looks up for a moment, then looks down again. —Don't look, she says, —but that guy over there is my ex-boyfriend.

Of course Austin immediately looks. Lydia kicks him under the table, and he returns to looking at her. She rolls her eyes. —I said *don't look*, she says.

—Which guy? Austin asks.

—The... Asian guy, sitting on the floor. But for God's sake, be subtle. I don't want him to see us.

*Asian guy?* Austin thinks. He begins to make an elaborate show of looking nonchalantly around the room, examining the marlins mounted on the walls, eventually

passing his eyes quickly across the Asian guy sitting on the floor. Average-looking guy, kind of skinny, nodding his head in time with some pulse he detects in the music.

*Asian*, Austin thinks. *Hm*. He didn't realize that Lydia had dated guys from outside her race. Then, of course, he remembers that she's kind of dating outside her race right now, and so is he. Ramirez. Her dad is Puerto Rican. He guesses that he means he didn't realize that she had dated guys that weren't Caucasian.

Hell, he didn't realize that she'd dated other guys at all, not really. She's 22, so logically he *knows* that she must have dated other guys before him; every once in a while she'll even say something like *oh, God, that reminds me of this guy I once dated* or something like that, but none of those guys seemed quite *real*; they seemed *hypothetical*, as though they had once existed but had since vanished from the face of the earth.

—I don't want to have to talk to him, Lydia says. —It didn't exactly end well between us.

—It's cool, Austin says. He looks over at the guy again. —He's not looking over here.

She looks, to check. Austin's right; Thomas seems pretty focused on the band. The Hideout is a small place, though; if he took a survey of the room he would probably spot her. She doesn't know what she'd say if he came over. Lydia puts her hand up, between them, so that her face will be hidden.

Austin watches her for a moment, then looks back at the band. He drifts into their gritty pattern, and he begins to wonder about what it would be like if he ran into one of his own ex-girlfriends. There are some that he hasn't seen in a long time. He still assumes that they're around Chicago. He thinks of Rose. He wonders what she's up to these days, where she's disappeared to.

## 66 / COMBATANTS

Clark is in her office, looking up documents in Google. She's researching the status of the “enemy combatants”—U.S. citizens detained because of their involvement with terrorists. *Alleged* involvement. Yasser Esam Hamdi, born in Louisiana, found fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Jose Padilla, born in Brooklyn, detained forty-five minutes away from her apartment, at Chicago's O'Hare airport, on suspicion of involvement with a bomb plot. Her research so far has revealed nothing about either of them being charged with any crimes, or any details about when either of them will go to trial or receive counsel.

How is that legal? It seems obvious to her that it can't be legal. They're citizens, and citizens have Constitutional rights. But no. Google tells her that on June 19 the government released a brief stating that enemy combatants do not have the right to a lawyer, and that the American judiciary has no standing to intervene. Hamdi had a hearing scheduled for June 20, during which the government was expected to indicate what charges it may file against him: she can't figure out if it ever took place.

She wants to know how this is legal. (The government has dragged out a precedent, something about an American who was working for the Nazis during WWII.) She wants to know if they could do it to her, to her friends who are activists. She knows people who were arrested, in Philly, during the Republican National Convention in 2000. Police raided the Ministry of Puppetganda warehouse, destroyed the puppets, arrested about seventy puppet-makers—charged them with trumped-up weapons charges, which were dropped months later because of the lack of evidence. She thinks about things like that and she wonders if she will wake up one morning to learn that the government has performed a handkerchief

trick and reclassified her and her friends as enemy combatants, locking them away until the time when America sees fit to declare the War on Terrorism over.

Sometimes she worries about that. Other times she figures that she's protected because she's middle-class and white, unlike Hamdi and Padilla. But that thought is hardly a comfort.

She memorizes the names of her enemies, feeds them back into Google to learn more. Paul J. McNulty, a U.S. attorney who has argued, on behalf of Don Rumsfeld, that meetings between enemy combatants and lawyers could allow vital information to be transmitted to terrorists. Elsewhere he's prosecuted software pirates. Deputy Solicitor Paul D. Clement, the author of the June 19 brief. Elsewhere he's argued that school-wide drug testing would be Constitutional.

She is deep in the middle of this process, building up a red pyramid of rage inside her, when Janine comes in. —Hey, Janine says.

Clark has a pen clenched in her teeth. —Mm, she says.

—Good to see you, says Janine. She puts her hands on Clark's shoulders and begins to rub. But Clark is in no mood to be touched. She pulls the pen out and flicks it down onto her desk.

—Listen, Clark says. —Could you not?

Janine puts her hands up, backs away. —*Sorry*, she says icily, drawing the word out exaggeratedly, until it has stretched over three syllables.

—Sorry, says Clark. —It's just—I'm just feeling tense right now.

—Yeah, Janine says. —I figure, you know, a backrub generally *helps* with tension?

—No, I mean, yeah, sure, says Clark, pinching the bridge of her nose. She agrees, of course. But she does not want to relax. She has learned, over the years, to use her tension



as energy. She has learned that it can set her in motion, as though she were a crankshaft, turned by the explosion behind a piston. But this is a hard thing to explain: say to someone *I want to be tense* and they will think you are crazy.

—I'm just, Clark says, —I'm just not in the mood.

—OK, Janine says. What she thinks is *you're never in the mood, anymore*. —I'll see you later. She turns, and goes back out the door.

—Hey, Clark says. She feels as though she's been misunderstood, and this pains her.

—Hey, she says again. But Janine either doesn't hear, or she pretends that she doesn't.

Either way, she does not come back.

## 67 / HOUSEHOLD DRONES

Thomas is in his kitchen, crouching on the floor, holding a microphone up to the box fan.

The soundwalk that he took with Jakob a few weeks ago went well. They recorded maybe fifteen sound-events within a square mile: firecrackers, bells on an ice-cream vendor's cart, the sputter and brap of a passing motorcycle. The experience of listening so actively resensitized his ears. When he came home he put water on, for tea, and he became entranced by the whistling kettle. He had not previously noticed the nuance and variety of the sound. He pulled a stool into the kitchen and sat there for maybe twenty minutes, just listening.

In the time since then he's been taking special note of the drones that occur within his apartment. The whining pipe in his shower. The chilly hiss of his toilet tank refilling. The white noise of his box fan.

He's been recording these sounds. He's not sure what he's going to do with them. He put the soundwalk files up on his website along with a map of the Chicago streets where they were recorded, but he's not interested in doing the same with these new recordings. In a way they're personal.

He remembers that there's a sound program out there, AudioMulch, that allows its user to make loops. He'd like to make some loops made from these household drones, then layer them: see what that would sound like. He's wanted to play with AudioMulch for almost a year, but he's held off, mainly because Lydia, his ex-girlfriend, introduced him to the program, and every time he thinks about her he forgets what he's doing and his mind

spins off into recrimination and regret. He wishes things had gone better. He wishes he could still see her every now and again. He wonders what she's up to.

No, OK, back to the layered drones. He's been having strange dreams lately, recurring dreams about dimensional travel. In these dreams, there are an infinite number of dimensions, and they all exist concurrently, in the same place at the same time. They each vibrate at a different frequency; that's what keeps everything from colliding. But in the dreams one can travel between dimensions by means of a process of *tuning*. This is what happens: his body harmonizes with another dimension's frequency and the world around him dissolves into another. Then he wakes up, filled with a sense of promise and hope that slips away immediately.

But in the dreams layering drones is the key. Two tones give birth to a third. The music is a means of systematically exploring the combinations, in search of the ones that will open gateways; the musicians are scientists of dimensional travel.

He wonders if there's something to this. Although he doesn't want to disappear as badly as he once did. He actually feels kind of happy these days. Janine called him a while back and the two of them made up. They didn't discuss Clark, but he's okay with that for the time being; he doesn't feel quite ready to try to work through his feelings about the whole deal just yet. They've been getting along OK without discussing it. They've been hanging out, having dinner together, watching movies, like before. No sex, though. She hasn't offered and he hasn't asked. He doesn't want to push his luck.

Still. He feels pretty happy. He's reluctant to acknowledge it, though; he knows he'll jinx it somehow, spoil this dimension accidentally, and be left putting sounds together, trying to break through to some elsewhere, for refuge.

## 68 / FORGOTTEN DOCUMENTS

It's Monday, and Clark starts off her workweek by rallying against the piles of paper that have slowly been conquering the territory of her desk. This papermass was manageable, once, back when there were only a few piles, each one thematically distinguished from the others. But then something came along, some document didn't sensibly fit with any of the existing piles, so a new pile had to be made, and then something else came along, and then something else—soon the number of piles had outgrown the amount of available desk space. So she began to stack. The beginning of the end. Now she finds herself confronted by a huge stratified history of the year, and there is no way of knowing where one layer ends and another begins. She has begun to think that torching the whole thing with a flamethrower may be a viable option.

But instead she picks along, diligent bee, freeing documents from the heap. She finds books of poetry; she finds memos that remind her to do things that she never did. She finds outlines of Chordworld quests; she finds color xeroxes of the liner notes of CDs that she burned off of David. For every piece she examines, she makes a snap decision to place it in one of three categories: Keep It, Trash It, or Deal With It Then Trash It. If it needs to be kept she makes a spot for it. She files it in the cabinet or puts it in her bag to take home. If it needs to be dealt with she tries to deal with it right away. She pays the bills; she looks over forms and offers that she intended to look over a long time ago; she copies contact information down into her Rolodex and thus eliminates an entire tiny galaxy of scraps bearing scribbled phone numbers.

The mass is slowly diminishing. Then she pulls out a piece of paper and feels her stomach drop.

It's a printout of a racy e-mail that Janine sent her a few weeks ago, when things were better between them. Clark skims the words. *I want to feel your fingertips moving up my thighs.* She'd deleted the original message—she has a faint suspicion that David monitors the company e-mail—but kept the printout nearby. For a while she was opening it at various points in the day, just to read a few lines and feel the flush of pleasure rise in her. Then it got lost in the shuffle.

She reads it, and finds herself touching her mouth absently. Then she shakes her head and puts the note down.

For a moment she thinks about throwing it away. Instead she folds it in half and tucks it inside a book she's freed from the pile, Medbh McGuckian's *Captain Lavender*, and she puts both in her bag to take home.

She cleans for a while more.

She sees the corner of a sheet of yellow legal paper, and she tugs on it until the note comes free. It says *TO DO* at the top of it, and then, underneath that, *find guy for Paul*. She can dimly remember writing this down, months ago, and promising that he would see the results of her diligence. She can't say that she's exactly made good on this promise.

This isn't the only To Do note she's found forgotten in the pile. She's been consolidating them all into a single master list. She amends *find guy for Paul* to *talk to Paul about guys*, and copies it down. She wads up the original note and pitches it into the recycling bin.

She looks the task over again. She wants to be good, to find a way to remember the needs and the desires of people she cares about. It isn't always easy. Half the time she feels

too used up to even take her own desires and needs into account. The world exhausts people who care about things, about anything.

She reads the words. *Talk to Paul about guys.* She underlines them. Then she underlines them again, and enters a compact star next to their left. *Remember.*

## 69 / OMISSIONS

This new guy, Joshua, got hired at the record store around two weeks ago.

He looks different from the other boys Freya works with, the non-threatening indie types. For one thing, he's muscular: not like bodybuilder muscular, but, you know, rocker muscular, she can see him out in a garage, punching holes in an amp like Link Wray or something. He's always wearing these tight white T-shirts; showing off his chest, his arms. He wears his hair in a kind of shaggy cut that she likes. It's glossy; it gives off a hint that it might be slightly greasy. She finds herself wanting to take up a great handful of it. He's got these intense eyes, too, dark, a brown that's nearly black. Sometimes she catches him looking at her, and when she makes eye contact with him he doesn't always immediately look away.

Since he started working, there have been a couple of times where she's gone out for a smoke break and he's come out for a smoke break too, shortly thereafter. Too often for it to just be a coincidence. He doesn't say much when they're out there: mainly he just says *hey*, lights up, and squints off into the distance.

They were out there together one time last week and he looked at her and said *some of my friends and me are meeting up at the Bottle later on tonight; you want to come?* She politely declined. A few days later he asked her out to a different show and again she refused. But the thing is: she said that she was worn out. She didn't say that she has a boyfriend. Kind of a conspicuous omission, now that she looks back on it.

Not that things have exactly been going great between her and Jakob. They had that fight a couple of weeks ago—they made up, but things between them are still kind of tense. Last night, bored and hot, they decided to play Monopoly, and after the first hour it was

apparent that Jakob was going to win—he already had Boardwalk and Park Place and that batch of green properties, and she only had those low-rent pale blue ones—but when she quit Jakob begged *no, don't quit!* and so she soldiered on. Every time she thought about asserting herself and just firmly saying *no, I don't want to play any more*, she remembered the fight, remembers that Jakob gets upset when she's angry. She's not sure that she knows where *firm* ends for him, and *angry* begins. She wanted to be good, so she just stayed quiet, and kept playing; it was another hour and a half before Jakob finally won. She thinks about that now and it fills her with rage. *Fuck keeping quiet.*

She's mad at Jakob. Joshua has been flirting with her. Two facts. In her mind they're connected by a thread that she does not want to identify. But she can identify it well enough to think *be careful. One of these things is not a solution to the other.*

Tonight: Joshua's headed out. She'll follow before long; she's just now handing off her register key to the evening shift supervisor. Joshua turns around, still walking towards the door, backwards, and he looks at her as he's feeling for the door handle and he says — Hey, Freya, some people are getting together at the Fireside in an hour or so, Sweep The Leg Johnny is playing. It's probably their last show, so...I'm just probably going to grab a bite to eat and head over there; you want to come with?

—Sure, she says.



## 70 / SOMEBODY

They go to the Fireside, where it's dingy and crowded and hot. They don't spend much time watching the bands: they spend most of the show in the bar. She cools her neck by pressing a Red Stripe bottle up against it. They talk above muffled rock thumping through the walls.

He doesn't ask her if she has a boyfriend, and she doesn't tell him that she does.

She gets his story, what of it there is: he's 21, fresh out of Northwestern. He studied philosophy. He plays the bass in a band. (She asks *what band?* and he waves off the question and just says *we suck.*)

—I used to play the drums, Freya offers.

—Oh yeah?

—This was like, ten years ago.

—You still have them? Joshua asks.

—I think they're in my mom's basement.

—You should drag them out and we'll play sometime. Some friends and I have a practice space; it would be cool.

She takes a slug of Red Stripe from her bottle and regards him bemusedly. She can't quite believe she's having this conversation. She can't believe that he's flirting so *blatantly* with someone who is basically *his boss*. He's direct, earnest: almost arrogantly so. Very 21. She's 28. Someone like Melissa would say she was *robbing the cradle*. *Ab*, she tells herself, *it'd be good for you. You could probably use somebody who you could slap around a bit.*

Except. Except no. There won't be any *slapping around* of anybody. This entire conversation is just *play*, just something she's doing because it feels good to be the target of a good-looking young man's attention. She is *in a relationship* with Jakob.

Although, she asks herself, where exactly is that relationship going? They've been dating for, what?, a year and a half now? They haven't ever talked about moving in together or getting married. (*Don't think about this now*, says the rational voice in her brain, *now is not the time to be thinking about this*.) Jakob doesn't really show much interest in music, which is the main thing that she's interested in. He hasn't encouraged her to break out the drums again. And the two of them *never* go out to see bands—this is the first show she's been to in maybe six months; she had almost forgotten how much she enjoys it. What do they do instead? She goes over to Jakob's place, or he comes over to hers, and they watch a movie, or they sit around and read, then they go to bed, cuddle a bit, maybe fuck, and then the next day they do it all over again. Its main merit is that it's *comfortable*.

And Joshua makes her uncomfortable.

She catches him staring at her. She looks back at him. They look in one another's eyes for maybe three whole seconds. She feels faintly like she may be falling.

She slaps her hand down on the table. —It's getting late, she says. —I'm going to go.

—We could— Joshua begins.

—No, Freya says. She stands. —I, really, I should go. You working Monday? (She knows he is; she made up his schedule.)

—Yeah, he says.

—I'll see you then, she says.

She's a bit drunk by this point, so she catches a cab home. She staggers up two flights of stairs and fumbles her keys into the lock. On her way into the bathroom she picks up the cordless phone and gets the stutter tone that indicates *voicemail*. She sits on the toilet and dials her mailbox number.

Two new messages.

The first is Jakob:

*Hey, Freya, it's me. It's about... eight o'clock. Just wondering where you are. Maybe you're working? I thought you were only on until six. Whatever, give me a call.* She scowls.

The second one is from her mom. *Oh, great*, Freya thinks, *some crisis*.

*Hey, Freya. It's Mom. Listen, there's something I need to talk to you about.*

Her mom's voice sounds more stilted than usual, and Freya's first thought is: *somebody died*.

*Maybe you should call here when you get in, but, uh, it's about your father. I got a call from your Uncle Bill today, in Dallas?, and he told me that there had been, well, an accident, the police found him, they found him in his car, and there had been, um, a wound, a, um, from a gun?, they think it might have been self-inflicted, nobody's really sure of anything. And, um, Bill wants you to call him, they're trying to make the arrangements, if you don't have his number it's \_\_\_\_\_. And, um, call me, too, when you get this message, sweetie, I— really need to talk to you—*

These last words are pinched, as though a column of sorrow were filling her, so that words could only squeak out around its edges. A recorded voice speaks: *to play the message again, press one*.

She hangs up the phone. The apartment is quiet. *Fuck*, she thinks. Blank. The apartment is quiet. *Fuck*, she thinks. Sink. Bathmat. Shower curtain. Soaps in a wire basket. Nail polish. A lipstick kiss on the wall's plaster. Towels hanging on the towel bar.

Turquoise razor in its caddy. Everything in its place. And yet she feels the growing pressure of teeming darkness, all around her, ready, at any moment, to burst inward on this world.

To drown her in black noise and madness.

## 71 / PASSAGE

Jakob and Thomas stand in the underpass, at the base of a concrete slope. Interstate 90/94 hangs above their heads, surging with trafficflow, and the oceanic hiss of tires on pavement drifts down to Thomas' microphone. A metal seam, which buckles together two segments of highway, produces a sequence of two rapid *thunks* every time a vehicle passes over it. Front tires, back tires. *Thunk-thunk!*

Jakob feels slightly anxious. He keeps one eye on the small catacomb that exists where the concrete slope meets the interstate's underside. There's a homeless guy up there, sitting on a mattress, watching them.

Maybe Jakob shouldn't have even come out today. He feels like he belongs with Freya right now, after this thing with her dad. His death. His suicide. *That's fucked up*, Jakob thinks.

Freya's off in Texas right now. The funeral should be today. Maybe he should have gone with her. She asked him to, two days ago, when she was making the arrangements. — I'm dreading it, she'd said. —I haven't seen anybody from that side of the family in years. I think most of them see me as *that bitch's daughter*. I just want to know that someone there is going to be on my side.

He couldn't go. He couldn't justify the expense of the plane tickets. Not while he's unemployed. It would have used up the last of his saved student loan money, and he *needs* that money to carry him to September. He could have charged the tickets to his credit card, he guesses, but he's not carrying any debt on his cards right now, amazingly enough, and he's made a promise to himself to try to keep it that way. Surely someone else would be on her side: —Isn't your mom going? he'd asked.

—No, Freya said. —She fucking hates my dad. They haven't spoken in, like, over ten years.

—Hmm, he'd said. —Look, I want to go—

—Forget it.

—Maybe I could—

—No. No. Just forget it.

She left yesterday. She called him from her uncle's, in Dallas, just to let him know that she'd arrived safely. The conversation was terse, and she sounded miserable, and he wished that he could have gone. He was still wishing that this morning: he'd been wandering around his apartment in his bathrobe, unsettled, unable to engage with his work, and he felt grateful that Thomas had called, offering distractions.

They talked about Freya's dad, only briefly, when they first met up: Thomas asked something innocuous: *so how are you?* and Jakob had answered honestly, spilling the news and his feelings of guilt about not going. Thomas hadn't had much to say, but he's thinking about it now, as he listens to the passage of traffic overhead. It's weird—he's known Freya ever since Tympanum opened, three years now, but he's never known her well, she's just the nice woman who works at the record shop, the one who knows his tastes, the one who he can talk to about what's come in that week. It's weird for him to be granted this glimpse of her existence outside of the shop; weird for him to remember that she exists as a human being in the world, with her own set of obligations and entanglements and tragedies.

This knowledge—that someone else has her own life—is applicable, of course, to everyone. Thomas imagines the drivers of the cars above, and, as he listens to their tires thunk across the metal seam, he tries to imagine a life for each of them, he tries to envision each person's array of memories and impulses, and he expands from there, trying to envision

all the arrays massed on this highway, at this moment. But his mind can not conceive so much existence. The sheer scope. The magnitude.