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YEAR

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7

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games and poems

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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.

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45 / UNASKABLE

Jakob is sitting at his kitchen table in his bathrobe, gathering papers together and placing them in file folders. Student drafts, quizzes, surplus handouts. When he's done he'll place them all in an accordion file to bring to school.

But he is thinking about something else. He doesn't really feel like he needs to use much of his brain to do this kind of thing, sorting paper. (This is probably why he is always leaving behind some important document.) He is thinking about Freya, and specifically he is thinking about her dad.

He really only thinks about her dad on unfocused mornings like this, when he can follow a thought to its neighbor without something in the world interrupting. He began by thinking idly about whether he and Freya will ever get married, by trying to envision what their life as a married couple would be like. This led him to wonder whether Freya's dad would show up at the wedding, which reminded him that it's weird, that he knows so little about her dad.

(Or is it? He's not really sure how much people in their thirties actually talk to one another about their parents.)

He's met her mom and her stepdad and her half-brother; he went out to their place for Thanksgiving and introduced himself around. He liked those people OK. Her stepdad was friendly and gruff: he offered his right hand to Jakob to shake and used his left to get a grip on Jakob's shoulder. (Jakob had never before felt so literally *sized up*.) Her mom spent the whole afternoon feeding Jakob tiny hors d'ouvres. He didn't protest—hey, they were

tasty—although he could tell that the dotting embarrassed Freya: —*Mom*, she said at one point, —*could you just leave him **alone**? He'll eat when he's hungry.*

So he's met that side. But he's never met her dad. And she doesn't ever really talk about him. He knows that her parents split up when she was pretty young, and that her dad moved out to Dallas, to live with his brother for a while (Freya's uncle?) He knows that her dad is still out there in Texas and that she gets a call from him every now and then. Jakob can remember two incidents, maybe three. Each time she seemed troubled, disturbed. Jakob: *What's wrong?* Freya: *Oh*—and a complicated expression on her face, as though she were trying to recall the details of a bad dream—*my dad called.*

Jakob knows that she thinks of her dad as a *creep*, a *scumbag*. These are the words she uses. He remembers that she once said that the first time she realized adults were fallible had to do with something with her dad, when she was young. He knows the dark turns that a relationship between a father and a daughter can take, and he wonders exactly what she has lived through.

He wants to know: he thinks it is odd that he is in love with this woman, and yet there are these *shapes* in her background, shapes of terrible meaning, that he cannot fully discern. But he does not want to pry. He will not pry. It is not his place. But he realizes, as he puts his papers in their proper folders, that parts of her are a mystery to him, and this frightens him somehow, here, in the morning.

46/ GOOD GIRLS, BAD GIRLS

On the other end of the line, Fletcher's mom says: —So, have you met any nice girls?

—No, Fletcher says.

Which, OK, isn't quite true, because the English Department at the school where Fletcher is enrolled is full of nice girls (*nice women*, he corrects himself). Some of them are even interesting, although his tastes run more towards the handful of bad girls, like Clark. But he knows that what his mom means is *have you met anyone who you could settle down with?* And the answer to that is definitively *no*.

His mom clucks her tongue.

She asks this question, or some variant on it, just about every time they're on the phone together, and Fletcher's answer (at least since around 1991 when he met Lynn) is always the same. Sometimes he'll dress it up a little bit, or dodge the question, but this afternoon he's actually in the middle of three things—talking to his mom, periodically stirring a pot of chili on the stove, and organizing a series of slips of paper on his coffee table—and this leads him towards bluntness.

He is working on a poem about truth. That's what the pieces of paper are for. He spent an afternoon writing down maybe fifty simple assertive statements about himself, trying only to record ones which he could say were unambiguously true. I AM A WHITE AMERICAN MALE. I VOTED FOR AL GORE. I OWN TWO TELEVISIONS.

—Oh, Fletcher, his mom says. —Maybe you need to try getting out more. I always said it wasn't good for you to spend all that time *cooped up*.

—No, mom, he says. —It's OK.

This is also true. Slip of paper: I DO NOT PLAN ON GETTING MARRIED.
(Another: I DO NOT PLAN ON HAVING CHILDREN.) Way back in high school, Fletcher had already begun to seriously consider the notion that his creative work was going to be a lifelong project, and he knew that solitude, lots of solitude, *the kind of solitude that would preclude a family*, was integral to that project. He has never really reversed course. This is part of why his success with “nice girls” over the past decade has been so limited. At age 19 it was hard for Fletcher to find nice girls who didn't have one eye pointed towards wedding and family; at age 29 it is hard for Fletcher to find nice girls who aren't already married. So it looks like it's bad girls from here on out.

(Fletcher is always a little bit surprised when a bad girl accepts him, even though it's been happening more-or-less reliably ever since he was sixteen and he made friends with Freya. He doesn't think of himself as being *edgy* or *hip* or *dark* or *dangerous* or any of the things that he thinks would appeal to them. He is just an overintellectual suburban smartass. There is a puzzle here that he cannot quite figure.)

He has not yet told his mom that he does not plan on getting married. Much less the thing about not having kids. He picks up the two slips of paper with those truths written on them and places them in a separate pile. He mentally designates this pile as the pile of *truths I cannot tell my mom*.

—I don't see how it could be OK, his mom says. —Don't you get lonely?

Fletcher gets up, goes into the kitchen. —No, mom, really, he says. He sticks a wooden spoon into the bubbling chili and stirs. —It's fine. I mean, I'm really busy with school and stuff.

It's fine. This is half-true. He hasn't gotten laid in two years now, and this concerns him. There don't seem to be as many bad girls around now as there were when he was 21.

When he tries to think the phrase *bad women*, instead of *bad girls*, it doesn't quite sound right. Where are they all? Did they burn out? Did they settle down? Do they just inhabit a world that he has no access to? Or are they just all around him, in disguise? (He sometimes thinks that Audrey Lemmon might be one, but he can't be sure.)

So, yes, he is sometimes lonely, despite what he's told some of his friends in the past. And he wonders whether his solitary path will lead him into emotional dangers that he cannot yet discern. He recently looked at a Depression Self-Assessment Test, on Prozac's website. Clark pointed him over there: she thought he might be able to use some of the language from it. (She stole some phrases from their site for a poem of her own, "Feeling Better is Not Enough.") Some slips of paper he generated from the experience: I FEEL DOWNHEARTED, BLUE AND SAD. I DO NOT FEEL USEFUL AND NEEDED.

He moves these slips to a separate pile. He mentally designates this pile as the pile of *truths I cannot tell anyone*.

47 / THE CONTEXT

—I was wondering if I could ask you guys advice on something, Paul says.

Janine grins. —Well, I don't know, she says. —We're normally pretty stingy about giving advice.

Clark swallows her mouthful of beer. —Yeah, she says. —Tight-lipped.

—Oh, yeah, Paul says. —I've really noticed that about you two. Especially after you've had a few beers? To illustrate, he rolls his eyes, and lets his tongue protrude slightly, running his face through a parody of drunkenness. And he holds up his hand and claps his fingers against his thumb, to indicate a loose, flapping mouth.

—Oh ho ho! says Janine. —Keep up *that* act, mister, and see what kind of advice you end up with.

—OK, Paul says. —But, no. Seriously.

—OK, Clark says. —Serious now. She adopts a grim, determined expression, which sets them all to laughing again.

—So anyway, Paul says, when they've all calmed a bit. —I live with these two other people. A guy and a girl.

—Uh oh, Clark says.

—Yeah. They're people who I knew from Bloomington, when we were in college together. And we all kind of came up here together, and I guess we kind of had this expectation that we'd all be hanging out together all the time, and stuff. But it hasn't really worked out that way.

—Uh huh, Janine says.

—I don't even know why we had that expectation, Paul says. —I mean, Marvin—that's the guy—he and I go way back, but Lydia—she's the girl—she hung out with us in college, but she had like other circles of friends and stuff, and we should have *expected* that the same would be true when we got here. I mean, I guess I kind of *did* expect it, but, so, yeah, that's the problem, we've been here for two years now, and Lydia has this new boyfriend, and she's been spending a lot of time with him, and Marvin just seems kind of *bent out of shape* about the whole thing.

—Number one question, Janine says.

—Yeah, Paul says.

—Do you think Marvin is interested in Lydia?

Paul's immediate gut feeling is *no*. Marvin was reluctant to invite Lydia into the Dungeons and Dragons campaign; he never asks her if she wants to go a few rounds on the Playstation; mostly, he seems to treat her as though she doesn't exist. But right as Paul opens his mouth to say *no*, he second-guesses himself, and sits there instead with his mouth open, thinking. Perhaps Marvin's chilliness towards Lydia is a result of having a romantic interest in her and no good way to express it. He points at Janine with his fork and concludes: —I don't know.

—Find out, Janine says. —It's the key to understanding the whole situation.

—I'll try, Paul says. —Marvin's not always, uh, *forthcoming* on those sorts of details.

(*Like you're one to talk*, Paul chides himself—he still has not come out to his roommates, even though he's been intending to for weeks now.) —But, so, I don't know, I guess the question I'm wondering about is do you guys think it's *wrong* for a person to kind of give her old friends the slip a little bit when she gets involved in a new relationship?

—Well, Clark says, —*wrong*, you know, that's kind of—I just don't really feel that most human behaviors can be grouped into *right* or *wrong*; I kind of think that they depend on the context?

—To a certain degree what you're talking about is kind of inevitable, Janine says. —I mean, new relationships, they're *exciting*, right? So it's kind of *normal* for a person to want to be spending more time with the new relationship. How long have they been involved?

Paul shrugs. —She met him just before Christmas, I guess? But they didn't get involved until I think February sometime?

—Oh, so, two months? Janine says. —Yeah, they're still in that *exciting new* stage. Things will probably settle. On the other hand—well, have you met the guy?

—No, Paul says. —Lydia hasn't brought him over yet; I'm not really sure why.

—Well, OK, Janine says. —Here's something you should be on the lookout for. Sometimes monogamous relationships can be sort of funny. Like, OK, the relationship gets started, right? And, I don't know, people in those sorts of relationships really focus on *fidelity*. Fidelity is like the big symbol of those sorts of relationships. You know: Commitment! And sometimes, sometimes you get a guy or a girl who really takes this commitment thing to the max, who starts feeling threatened any time the person they're with shows *any* kind of engagement with *anybody* else. I'm not just talking sexual engagement; I mean *emotional* engagement, too. And they start to *pressure* the person not to hang out with their old friends, and sometimes the person will give in to that, you know?

Janine half-turns to Clark, and delivers the next part of the explanation to her: — That's why I'm in the kind of relationship that I'm in, Janine says. —In a nonmonogamous relationship, that emphasis on *fidelity* is instead replaced by an emphasis on *trust*, and you

don't get these weird kinds of fallout effects, where a person tries to control the ins and outs of the other person's relationships.

Paul notices that Janine seems to be explaining this last bit to Clark. He considers making a bid for attention—*hello? Over here?*—but then he realizes that there's something going on. He's not sure what it is, but he feels like he should not interfere with it. Instead he sips his beer.

Clark notices as well, and she puts a name to it: *Janine is making a move on me.*

48 / DONE

Freya came over to Jakob's tonight. He was working on the computer and when she arrived he gave her a quick kiss and said *hang on one minute*. That was maybe half an hour ago. But she doesn't mind. She can entertain herself no problem. (She's sitting on the couch right now, reading Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*.) Eventually she'll want a little attention, but she knows this routine well enough to know that eventually she'll get it. Besides, it's actually kind of *nice* to be ignored: she spent all day in the record store, and every goggle-eyed moron in the entire city came in and stared at her breasts (a sign that spring, officially, is here). She had walked out of there feeling kind of scattered, almost as though a little bit of her had been taken by every guy who had looked at her all day. A thousand pilfered Freyas, dispersed all across the city. So it feels good, to sit here on the couch, regathering herself.

Jakob's voice, from the other room: —I think I'm done.

She knows he's been working on a big paper since January—the qualifying paper that he needs to turn in to get his Master's degree. —Done? she says.

Jakob walks into the living room, rubbing his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. —I think so, he says. —I mean, it's a draft, a pretty rough one, I need to, uh, tighten up the arguments in a few spots, but I think...yeah, I'm basically at the end of it.

—Well, Freya says. —This calls for a celebration.

—Um, Jakob says. —I think I want a beer.

He doesn't have any beer in the fridge (in fact there's little in there besides condiments, a dented pizza box, and a bunch of celery that's seen better days) so they go walk up to the corner store and Freya lays out for a six-pack of Negro Modelo. They also

stop off at the fruteria and grab some limes. The evening is gorgeous: balmy. They *remember* balmy, but it's been a long time since they last felt it.

And so, winter finally over, they end up sitting out on Jakob's little back deck, next to the rock salt and the snowshovel. The clouds are pink and the night sky is purple, lit by the Chicago beneath it. Planes pass through periodically, reminding Jakob dimly that, somewhere out there, America is in the midst of dismantling and reassembling the governments of other countries. They sit with their backs against the house and they drink their beers quietly.

—So this is it, Jakob says.

—What do you mean? Freya says.

—This is our lives, Jakob says.

—Yeah, she says. —I guess it is.

Her life. She still doesn't know what she's going to do with it, whether she's just going to stay at the record store, assistant-managing forever, or whether she's going to go back to school, or what. (She won't be going back this fall; the time when she would have needed to make that decision has already passed.) But she sips her beer, and it tastes good, and for now that seems like enough.

—So strange, Jakob says. He squints out into the neighborhood. He sees young people walking on the street with cigarettes. He sees someone walking a dog. He hears hysterical laughter from somewhere. He wonders what will happen next.

49 / SHIT AND GARBAGE

—Shit, Lydia says. It's Friday night and she's running late and everything is shit.

It had been such a simple plan: get out of work at five, head straight to Austin's place, meet him there at 5:30. He was going to make dinner, and then they were going to spend the evening relaxing, watching a movie, maybe snuggling? But this morning when she went off to work she forgot her dad's birthday gift—left it sitting right there on the table by the door, wrapped in brown kraft paper and stamped and addressed and utterly fucking unmailed. She remembered the package's existence at lunchtime, in the middle of a crowd riding the elevator to street level; she thinks she actually audibly uttered the word *fuck*.

OK, she told herself, think. The package is already late—she'd have needed to have mailed it on Wednesday in order for it to have arrived on time. The important thing is for it not to get any later. So: new plan. Call Austin, let him know she'll be late, get out of work at five, head home, pick up the package, then head to Austin's. She should be able to be there by seven and then she can mail it from the post office in his neighborhood on Saturday.

But then the bus was unnaturally late and crowded, and she got stuck next to someone who stank of wine, and by the time she made it home she felt grimy and dirty and decided that as long as she was home anyway she should put on a change of clothes, so now it's 6:20, and she's in her own kitchen, miles away from where she wants to be, and she's not even going to make it there by seven.

But OK. She's got tomorrow's change of clothes in a backpack, along with the fucking birthday gift (an enormous can of macadamia nuts). She's got her keys in her hand. She's ready to go.

Her nostrils twitch. It's the kitchen's garbage can. She's not sure what might be rotting away in its depths—she has a dim memory of Marvin eating hot wings over the can a week ago—but whatever it is, she can *smell* it. Fucking disgusting. It was crammed to full capacity two days ago, and since then *someone* has managed to find some unexploited crevasse and wedge still more garbage into it, including a Lucky Charms box which has been *folded into thirds* in order to fit.

Midweek, she swore up and down that she was *not* going to be the one to take the garbage out this time. She's *always* the one who takes the garbage out, and she's probably the one who produces the *least* garbage. And so she decided *fuck it, I can live in sloth just as long as they can*. But that is beginning to look less true. Yesterday she almost cracked, but she managed to hold firm. She looks at the can, smells its funky composting odor, and imagines coming back to it tomorrow, and her resolve begins to cave. She pauses on her way towards the door.

Marvin and Paul are out tonight; they went to catch that *Frailty* movie. She begins to compose a note for them in her head (it goes *TAKE THIS OUT!!*) but then it seems like just taking it out herself would involve about the same expenditure of effort, and at least she wouldn't have to listen to Marvin bellyache later on about how snippy her note was.

So: fine. She finds the drawstrings and pulls them, heaves the stinking column of trash out of the can.

While juggling her key in the lock, which sticks, she comes to be holding the garbage bag by only one of the two plastic loops. So when she's halfway down the stairs and that loop suddenly snaps in her hand, she has only enough time to shout *no* and make a grab for the bag with her other hand before gravity yanks it free. It hits the step with a beer-bottle

clank and then continues downwards, end over end, opening wider and wider, issuing forth coffee grounds, tissue, and all its other contents.

—No, no! Lydia shouts. And eventually the bag does come to rest, although its gotten far enough down the stairs that she can't even pretend that her insistence meant anything.

—Fuck, she says. —Fuck, fuck. This is going to be a drag-out-the-vacuum, get-on-your-hands-and-knees kind of cleanup job. For one hysterical moment she just considers leaving the mess there on the steps. Let Marvin and Paul clean the shit up. But no, they would think she had finally lost it. She sits on the step and presses her face into her hands.

Eventually she fishes out her cell and calls Austin.

—Where are you? he asks.

—I'm still at home, Lydia says. She feels a lump rise in her throat. (Stupid, she thinks, stupid!) —Listen, she says. —There's been a—things are all fucked up over here. It's going to be a while yet before I can get out the door.

—Everything OK? Austin asks.

—Yeah, Lydia says. —No. Everything is shit. I mean, it's nothing, but—

—Listen, Austin says. —Do you just want me to come down there? I could pick up some Thai food; stop by Pot Pan or something?

He still has never been inside her place. She has kept him away somewhat deliberately, embarrassed about her roommates. But tonight—tonight she is too weary to resist this suggestion.

—How soon can you be here? she says.

50 / GAMES

Grey clouds mass high above Chicago. The sunlight which reaches earth seems thin and petty: it hits the cold surface of a rain-flecked window and dies there. A chilly, pale shape hanging in a room.

Paul gets out of bed, sees bare, wet branches through the glass. He scratches and grimaces. He finds a pair of sweatpants and pulls them on, then looks around until he finds a clean sweatshirt too. (It is always this way. He dresses fully before leaving his bedroom. He doesn't want his roommates to see the fat that hangs at his waist, or the soft deposits in his breasts.)

Paul passes Lydia's room. Inside, she's asleep, tangled in blankets. Austin is next to her; through the wall he hears Paul's footsteps, and although the sound does not register consciously, it rouses him, and he wakes up in this room—her room—for the first time ever. His eyes focus on the ceiling. A tiny stuffed monkey dangles towards him, hanging from a ribbon. *Any day that begins with a monkey can't be all bad*, he thinks. He shifts in the bed and notices the heaviness of his bladder. Remembers all that green tea he drank last night.

He kind of thinks he should wait for Lydia to wake up before he gets out of bed, but he has a thing about holding wastes in the body. He doesn't think you should ignore the body's signals about a thing like that; it seems like a good way to poison yourself.

—Lydia? he whispers. He touches her shoulder.

She mutters a syllable, but during the night she pressed her face deep into her pillow, so all he can hear is *nh*.

—Hey, he says, a little louder. —I'm going to go use your bathroom, OK?

Nb again.

He takes this as a *yes*, gets up, pulls on his jeans. Skips underwear, and shirt. He wonders if her roommates are around this morning. He didn't hear anyone come in last night, although he and Lydia went to bed pretty early, exhausted from the stresses of the day. He cracks open her bedroom door, peeks through into the hallway. No sign of anyone. He slips out.

Down the hallway, into the living room. What time is it, anyway? His body clock and the light suggest that it's around 9 am.

He takes a quick detour into the kitchen to check the clock. 9:10. Not bad. He is about to head for the bathroom when he notices a pile of books on the counter. The one on top is a Dungeons and Dragons book, the *Player's Handbook*.

Meanwhile, in the bathroom, Paul flushes, stares into the mirror, rubs at the baggy violet flesh hanging under his eyes. He shouldn't have let Marvin talk him into going out to the bar after the movie. Neither of them are really what Paul would consider *bar people*. He remembers Marvin flirting clumsily with the barmaid, and he groans. He sticks out his tongue; it looks furry and gray. He needs water. He heads for the kitchen.

When he gets there, he is startled by a blonde guy, who is standing there reading the *Player's Handbook* with no shirt on.

—Uh, hi, Paul says.

—Oh, Austin says. He slams the book down on the counter. —Uh, hi. I'm Austin. Lydia's friend?

—Oh, Paul says. That makes sense. For a moment, he thought he must actually still be asleep and dreaming. —Yes. I've, uh, heard a lot about you. I'm Paul; one of the roommates.

Paul extends his hand, and there is something dainty about the way he does it, which fills Austin with a weird urge to lift the hand up and kiss it. But his wits prevail and he instead shakes it in the traditional manner. —Hi, he says.

Paul hangs on to the handshake for maybe an instant too long, gazes for just a moment at Austin's skinny chest and tiny nipples. It has been a while since Paul has been around a semi-naked man. *Damn*, he thinks.

—So, Austin says. —This, uh, *Player's Handbook*, is this yours?

—Oh, uh, no, that's Marvin's. Mine's, uh,—he checks to gauge Austin's response—mine's in my room.

—That's cool, says Austin. —I heard they had a new edition out.

—Yeah, Paul says, —Third Edition. That's the, uh, Third Edition *Handbook*.

—Fancy, says Austin. —Man, I used to be *crazy* about this game.

—Oh yeah? Paul says. He brightens a bit, pours himself that glass of water.

—Yeah, Austin says. —I ended up giving my books away to my cousin. I kind of regret it, you know? Those old books were pretty cool.

—Yeah, Paul says.

—Still have my dice, though. I actually use them in some of the music that I work on. As like, a, compositional tool?

—Oh, Paul says. —That's interesting. (It is, although he doesn't really know what more to say about it.) —So what kind of character did you play?

Austin smirks. —I always wanted to play a Thief, he says.

—They're called Rogues now, Paul says.

—Really? Austin says.

Lydia walks into the room. She looks from Paul to Austin to Paul again. It is strange to see the two of them together. It seems as though some odd superimposition is at work: two separate worlds collapsing into one.

—What are you two talking about? she asks.

51 / TEMPORARY STATES

Janine comes over for a few hours.

Thomas makes a stir-fry (snow peas, tofu, water chestnuts, red pepper) and they eat it on the couch, watching TV. Janine takes control of the remote, and she scrolls through Thomas' handful of non-cable channels all evening.

She's done this before—it is probably her primary way of watching TV—but it never ceases to surprise Thomas. He mainly uses his TV as a key piece of the VCR, as a window onto big contiguous narratives that he can immerse himself in for a few hours straight. He forgets that people can use it as a box which produces random sounds and images. Janine shuffles through the layers, making snarky comments as she rises and falls. There is no show. She is the show.

—Oh my God, Janine says. Some actress or pop star—Thomas doesn't know which—is on the screen. —Look at that. *Look* at that. Oh honey. Your star is in decline.

—That's fortune, Thomas says. —Ever rising, ever falling.

—Yeah, hers is definitely falling, Janine says. —For God's *sake*, who let her out with that *hair*? These people *pay* people to make sure they don't go out with hair that looks like that. Someone was asleep at the switch on that one.

Thomas smirks, but inside he is thinking about rising fortune, falling fortune.

—So, he says. —Do you think you're going to stay over here tonight?

Janine presses her lips together and screws them up to one side, thinking it over. Then she stretches her arms out and rolls both her hands (an alarming crunching sound comes out of her wrist).

—I don't know, she says. —I probably shouldn't. My apartment's a dump. I should probably clean it up this weekend; next week's going to be crazy with this work thing. Those *Artforum* ads have to go out...

—Uh huh, Thomas says.

It's been two solid weeks since they last spent the night together, even longer since they last had sex. Something is different between them—something has been different ever since that discussion back in March. He feels as though he is on probation.

He remembers the last time he spent the night over at her place, the first real warm day of the spring. They'd gone out to dinner: afterwards they walked through the streets, happy, a bit dizzy from the wine she'd splurged on. The trees on her street bursting into green.

Back at her place, he helped to unzip her dress. She stepped out of it and then sat on the edge of her bed, and he just looked at her for a minute and marveled. He marveled at the shape of her breasts and her legs; he marveled at the contrast the glossy darkness of her bra and panties made against the near-luminescence of her skin. He was seized, in that instant, by a flood of visual pleasure: you couldn't have asked him to imagine a sight more perfect.

He desired her then, as he desires her now, but he still has not learned how to translate desire into action. He wanted to reach out to touch her—wanted it more badly than anything—and he found, once again, that he could not. He waited, once again, for her to touch him, to invite him to touch her back.

She looked at him then, and their eyes met, and some series of calculations flickered in the space between them. A flurry of significant math. At the time, he felt like he

understood: a series of meanings and ramifications were transmitted perfectly from her to him, even though he cannot, even now, articulate what those meanings might be.

She stretched and said *I'm feeling pretty beat.*

A description of a temporary state. And yet since then the moment has seemed to accrue a certain peculiar finality. And so: the image from that evening—her there on the edge of the bed? He holds it precious in his mind. He fears that he will not see her in her unguarded body again. And so he cherishes the image of it, as one would cherish the last of any thing.

52 / TIRED OF MEN

Clark is tired of men.

She's tired of men in politics. Right now she is looking into the trash can in her office and Dick Cheney stares up at her. She has thrown away an old issue of *Vanity Fair* that she found lying out in the reception area: it has a photo of Cheney, George Bush Jr., and Colin Powell on the cover, and a big pictorial of “the White House during wartime” on the inside. Even under the best of circumstances, she thinks of *Vanity Fair* as a magazine written entirely by sycophants, people who believe that flattery will be their ticket into the aristocracy. Even so, the utter bald-facedness of this particular display of submission before power struck her as particularly icky. Pulling the magazine out of the reception area and throwing it away is almost not enough. She is tempted to flick a match into the can and watch it ignite.

She remembers when she was younger, still living at home: she had a dartboard up in her room (she kept it up over the protestations of her parents, who didn't like seeing dart-holes accumulate in the walls). For a time the dartboard was adorned by a full-page photograph of Ronald Reagan. He served as the target of her frustrations for months, until she had him eaten down to a pockmarked ruin.

She's tired of men at work. She's recently been struggling, in particular, with this one guy, Bjorn, a guy who works *underneath* her, a guy who she is officially the *boss* of.

Clark is Chief World Editor here at Perihelion. Right now Perihelion has only one World for her to work on: Chordworld. Everything in Chordworld that falls under her jurisdiction can basically be considered to belong to one of four groups: Rooms, Objects, Puzzles, and Quests. Rooms are places that the players experience, regardless of whether

they're actually rooms, or outdoor spaces (forests and grasslands factor highly into the game, and Clark is working on developing a sea) or even abstract environments (the advanced levels of the game have you exploring the interior of particular colors and sounds). Objects are items that exist within Rooms, which can be manipulated by players in various ways. A Puzzle is a problem, generally located within a single Room, which requires the players to perform a particular sequence of actions before they can receive some kind of reward (generally either useful information or access to another Room or Object). And Quests are larger goals for the players: completing them generally involves moving through many Rooms and solving several Puzzles. Some can be completed in an afternoon or so, and others are complex enough that they should take months even for the hard-core players.

She can make up as many Rooms, Objects, Puzzles and Quests as she likes, but her job—the job she was *hired* and is *paid* to do—is to approve bits written by the two other writers and, perhaps most importantly, to *deny* approval to any bits inconsistent with the overall continuity and quality of Chordworld's Story. She is an Editor, so she bloody well has to edit.

Clark has always edited out all Quests that are any sort of variation on a rescue-the-princess / get-the-girl kind of storyline. It's a small point of pride. She thinks of herself as a person who is highly political, and some days she wakes up and thinks about the fact that she is going in to spend eight hours working on a multiplayer videogame, and she has trouble thinking of anything she could work on that could be *further* from her political ideals. (She does it mainly because the money is good and as a favor to David, the CEO, who she has history with.) But other times she thinks about videogames as one more arena where the politics of representation play out, and she knows that there needs to be more women, political women, active in that arena, and so she edits with that in mind.

Bjorn is one of her writers, 23, fresh out of the Art Institute, and he seems determined to develop a damsel-in-distress Quest somewhere in Chordworld. She rejected the first two he turned in, without really explaining why—*they just don't really seem to fit the overall feel of the world*, was all she'd said, figuring that he'd get it. When he turned in a third Quest along those lines, and she rejected it as well, Bjorn came into her office and demanded, with visible irritation, to know why. *I think it's some of my best work*, he'd said. Clark had sighed and said, *frankly, I find it to be sexist*. Bjorn had rolled his eyes and made a kind of *pff* sound through his lips, and if Clark had the power to fire him she might have fired him right at that very moment, to teach this little fuck a lesson, but instead she counted backwards from ten (this is what people without power have to do) and she gave him a quick, pointed lecture: Issues in Gender Representation 101. And after that he seemed to cool down: he spent a lot of time building a forest and developing a suitably complex and weird Quest for the regions of Pale Green and A Major, and Clark approved all of it happily, feeling that perhaps they had come to some sort of understanding.

But then recently, in a conversation with David, David mentioned that he really enjoyed some bits of World that Bjorn had submitted directly to him. Clark was like *what?* and David pulled some World forms out of a file. Clark flipped through these forms, and quickly realized that the Quest outlined in them basically constituted a slight cosmetic alteration of Bjorn's first damsel-in-distress Quest, which she'd rejected. *These don't have my approval*, Clark said. *He submitted them directly to you?*

Yeah, David said. *They're not bad*, he said. *I think that they should go in*.

For Bjorn to submit World to David directly is a significant violation of protocol. Clark is not always a blind believer in protocol: she thinks that often it is used as a justification for further disciplining the powerless in a workplace. But here was an instance

where a man, refusing to acknowledge her power, was doing a run around her, taking his case directly to another man, forming a circuit of power-flow that bypassed her, an instance which protocol should have prevented, and David didn't even blink. *Protocol is on her side*, and yet somehow she lacks the ability to invoke it. It is because invoking protocol is the prerogative of men. Oh, she could have insisted, probably—demanded that Bjorn be fired or reprimanded, but she wonders how David would have responded. She suspects he would have doubted her *rightness* in this situation, and written her off instead as hysterical. Premenstrual.

And so now there is this glitch in continuity, a glitch which takes away the moral edge to her work, and there is a corresponding glitch in her authority, and she can see that Bjorn knows this when he looks at her or addresses her, and this is now a thing that she will need to figure out a way to *work around*, because it is women, in this world, who need to figure out ways to *work around* men, not the reverse, never the reverse.

And she is tired of men in bed. Tired of their grim relentlessness. She broke up with Elliot in January and they'd stopped having sex a while before that, so it's been probably six months since she last got laid. She can't even really say that she misses it.

She wonders about Janine. Clark feels pretty certain that Janine is interested in her. She can't really recall a conversation where Janine definitively identified herself as bisexual, but she gets that feeling—she catches Janine looking at her often enough, and she remembers that Janine once mentioned, rather pointedly, that she was involved in a relationship, but a nonmonogamous one.

She wonders what it would be like. She has never had her clothes off with another woman in a sexual context. And she wonders if thirty is too old to experiment around with her sexual orientation: she thinks of that as being a younger person's game.

But she thinks of the women she has known who were bisexual, or lesbians. She thinks of Vonda and Doris. (A momentary regret, here, about Doris, a fleeting wish that the two of them were back to being on good terms, the way they were years ago.) Vonda and Doris are some of the strongest women she knows. She sometimes feels like she lacks the strength that she admires in them: especially times like now when she feels broken-down, frustrated, tired. And she wonders if a relationship with a woman might help to change that. Maybe not. But maybe so.