



8

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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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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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53 / FEELING SOMETHING

Lydia changes out of her work clothes in Austin's bedroom. She keeps some casual clothes at his place now: a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, a few T-shirts. They sit in a tidy pile against the baseboard.

She feels a small sense of satisfaction when she sees them. The pile gives her a certain sense of permanence, the impression that Austin expects her to return, and return again. That's useful, given that she and Austin have not yet really talked about the long-term potential for their relationship. Sometimes she wants to ask, but she resists: she knows all too well what happens when women bring that kind of stuff up too early with men. She can't say she never worries that he might only be in it for the short term, just tiding himself over with some springtime fucking. But her clothes are here, right where she left them. He has allowed her to consistently leave her things in one square foot of his floorspace. It's not much, but, hey, one square foot of commitment is one square foot of commitment. She'll take it.

She pulls on her jeans. From the kitchen she can hear the sizzle of something striking hot oil in a pan. She can smell ginger in the air. She wants to be out there, watching Austin cook, but she's only half-dressed, and she's worried that his roommate might be around.

She opens the door a crack and calls out. —Hey, she says.

Austin's voice from the kitchen: —Yeah?

—Is Craig around?

—No, says Austin. —He's over at Debra's tonight.

Cool. She walks out and leans up against the kitchen's doorframe, wearing only her jeans. Austin looks away from what he's doing at the stove and raises his eyebrows.

—Hey, Lydia says.

—Hey, Austin says.

Then he goes back to stirring stuff around in the wok. Lydia feels a momentary jab of disappointment: she had kind of been working up a making-out-against-the-kitchen-wall fantasy. The two of them, swept up in a sudden warm gust of passion, knocking utensils off the countertop, while the dinner, forgotten, burns behind them. But no dice, apparently. She unfolds the shirt that she has in her hand—an olive tee with an image of a panda bear on the front—and she pulls it on.

—So I didn't tell you about Craig and Debra, did I?

She comes up behind him, wraps her arms around his waist, and kisses him lightly on the ear. —No, she says.

He kind of breaks out of her squeeze, twists around so that he can face her.

—They're getting married.

—Really? Lydia says. —That's great.

—Yeah, Austin says. —I'm happy for them; I think they'll make a good couple.

Lydia has never met Debra, but she's met Craig a handful of times. Mainly she just thinks of him as *Austin's roommate*, but he seems nice enough. She's not really sure what he's into or anything. —When are they getting married? she asks.

—Well, they're not really sure yet. Probably not until next spring. The lease on this place runs out in February and I think they're going to move in together then, but they don't want to get married in the middle of winter. They're thinking about something outdoors...

—Oh, Lydia says. —So that kind of leaves you... I mean—well—what are you planning to do when he moves out?

—I don't know, Austin says. He prods at frying vegetables. —I can't afford this place by myself, so I guess I'll either need to move into a smaller place or find another roommate. I'll figure something out. It's not a big deal. I mean, I can't exactly say, *hey, man, you can't get married; I need you to split the rent!*

—No, Lydia says, I suppose you can't. She is turning over an idea in her mind. February seems a long way off, but she wonders—

—Hey, Austin says. —Speaking of roommates; I really enjoyed meeting yours last weekend.

Lydia snaps out of the future that she is imagining, returns to the present. —What? Oh. Yeah?

—Yeah, he says. —They're cool.

—What? Lydia says. —I'm sorry. For a minute there I thought you said my roommates were cool.

—They are cool, Austin says.

—I'm sorry, Lydia says. —But, like, Dungeons and Dragons and movies about, like, I don't know what, giant *robots*, are *not* cool.

—Why? Austin says. —What do *you* think is cool?

Lydia presses the balls of her hands up against her eyes and rubs. She had a long day at work and doesn't really feel like having this discussion right now.

—I don't know, she says. —Music. Fuckin'... rock and roll.

Austin makes a skeptical face.

—What? she says. —You play the guitar. Tell me you don't feel cool when you, like, *rock out*.

—Yeah, I guess I do, he says. —But nowadays, there's this whole *culture* built up around cool, that I just can't stand. It's like, people think *cool* is all about wearing the right kinds of clothes—you know, like those thrift store sweaters—those kinds of clothes that are just enough outside of the mainstream to make you seem like a confident iconoclast? It's all part of this greater system of conformity that we call *cool*, which is all about liking the right sorts of clothes and the right sorts of records and having the right sorts of emotional responses. That's why people who *set out* to be cool are always so ironic about everything, so detached—it's all defense. Because God forbid they actually *feel* an actual human feeling and put it on display before checking out how other people are going to respond to it. And we've come to think of that irony and detachment as what cool is, but that's really a kind of, I don't know, *pseudo-cool*. And the real cool is, yeah, *rocking out*, just having this genuine feeling inside and not being afraid to just let it go *blargh!* out into the world.

—So what does this have to do with my roommates? Lydia asks.

—Well, that kind of stuff that you're talking about, Austin says. —The D&D and the giant robot movies? That kind of stuff is so *deeply uncool*—it doesn't even have, like, camp value—that if someone is into it, they must really be into it because they really love it. And a genuine expression of *love* is always cool.

—So let me get this straight, Lydia says. —It's cool to like something uncool, if that uncool thing reveals some kind of deeper *sincerity*?

—Yeah, says Austin. He turns the heat off on the stove.

—But wouldn't that make, like, people who buy Hallmark cards, and who like really really *mean* it, who like read them and find them seriously, sincerely *heartwarming*--wouldn't that make them the coolest people of all?

Austin stops for a minute.

—I hadn't thought about that, he says.

54 / CELEBRATION

Weeks ago, Janine went out to the Baker's Lake Nature Preserve for the day and shot two rolls of film. She scanned the images into her work computer and for days she tinkered with them in Photoshop, eventually choosing to blur out every detail of nature except the hues, which, in combination, still unmistakably evoke savannah and sky. These diffuse colorsapes became the backdrop for three ads designed to run in three subsequent issues of *Artforum*. Last week, the mockups passed review, and today, before lunch, she e-mailed the finished ads to the *Artforum* production editors, and after lunch she filled a FedEx envelope with hard copies of the ads, as well as a Zip disk containing the files, source images, and fonts.

She places a check in the appropriate box. Standard overnight service by 3pm next business day. And then she seals the envelope, takes it up to the front, and drops it in the outgoing FedEx bin.

And then that's it. She's done. This calls for a celebration.

A cigarette. (*Isn't it about time you thought about quitting smoking?*, says that voice. *Fuck it*, she retorts.)

She steps outside and finds Clark out there, finishing up a cigarette of her own.

They greet one another; Clark gives Janine a light; they chat.

—I'm glad that those ads are done, Janine says. —For a while I felt a lot of pressure about them. I mean, I kept thinking, *this is going to appear in fucking Artforum*, you know? It's not like at my old job where I was just designing ads that were going to appear in the back of some in-flight magazine. But now it's *done*, and I just get to be like *hey! My ad is going to appear in fucking Artforum!*

—Pretty cool, Clark says. —You should do something to celebrate.

—Well, I was thinking that, Janine says. And, for a moment, she thinks. The wind kicks up and Clark's hair snaps around her head like dark fire.

—What are you doing tonight? Janine asks.

Clark shrugs. —Nothing, really. I thought I'd go home and read or something.

—Well, Janine says. —I wouldn't want to disrupt your reading, but, do you want to come home with me?

Clark raises her eyebrows. For the merest instant she isn't sure whether Janine is propositioning her or not. She is about to ask for some sort of clarification—*you mean come home with you come home with you?*—when she realizes that there's really no need. Janine's expression is equal parts disclosure and desire: Clark just has to look at it for confirmation. And she doesn't need much in the way of confirmation anyhow: something has been developing between them for weeks, maybe months. Just because it has never before been spoken does not mean that she has not been aware of it, thought about it, tried it out in her mind at night...

But Janine is waiting for an answer. And Clark has not yet made a decision. She's not used to being asked directly like this. Normally she just stays up late with someone, drinks too much, and falls into bed with the other person when the tension grows unbearable. Talking about it usually only comes later, if it comes at all. That's what she's accustomed to, but she'd be hard-pressed to say that she prefers it, or finds it a particularly advisable strategy.

But Janine is waiting for an answer.

But Clark has not yet made a decision.

—I don't know, Clark says.

Disappointment flickers across Janine's face for a second. —Oh, she says.

—I mean, I want to, Clark says. —But, um, can we talk about it some more?

—Sure, says Janine.

—Let's, um, let's talk about it over a drink. It's what, four now?

—Four, yeah, around there.

—Meet me in my office at five, Clark says.

—OK, Janine says.

—I should really, uh, Clark says. A pained, apologetic expression crosses her face.

—I should get back in there.

Janine still looks somewhat disappointed. Clark is filled with a sudden impulse to grab her and kiss her, to reassure her, to say *yes, the answer is yes*. But she does not want to decide on impulse here, not with this decision, no. —Look, Clark says, —we'll talk, OK?

A weak smile crosses Janine's face. —Sure, sure, she says. —It's fine. You should go.

Clark reaches out, squeezes Janine's shoulder, and heads inside.

Janine takes the final drag off of her cigarette and flicks the butt out into the street.

Damnit, she thinks.

55 / THE MIDDLE OF SOMETHING

Paul finishes typing up the Friday meeting minutes and he e-mails them to the company's nine employees, and he leans back in his chair and informally commences his weekend.

He looks at the clock; it's 4:45. Puzzling: normally by this time on a Friday one of the girls has come by to let him know where they'll be going to drink.

He supposes he could just go down to one of their offices and ask, but he's feeling sedentary: instead he re-checks his e-mail (nothing), then surfs over to Free Will Astrology to check his horoscope. This week, Rob Brezny starts off by quoting a Sufi poet—"I know the way you can get / When you have not had a drink of Love"—before encouraging Paul (and Geminis everywhere) to get started on hunting down such a drink. Paul mentally complains *I've been trying **that** for months now* before he gets to the last line: *If you're fixated on thinking that it has to come from a romantic or sexual encounter, it will elude you.*

Hmm. He's going to have to think on that one.

Now it's almost five and still no word. Time to figure out what's going on. He shuts the computer down, shovels his junk into his tote bag, throws his overcoat across the crook of his arm, and heads down the hallway to Clark's office. When he gets there, he raps on the door and calls —Yoo hoo, darling, it's me.

A second later Clark opens up. Over her shoulder he can see Janine, sitting on the desk. This is not particularly curious; all of them hang out in one another's offices a fair deal, but he still picks up some weird vibe.

—Hi, Paul says.

—Hi, both of them say. They are both wearing the exact same expression, one that is a little bit baffled and a little bit frantic. They look as though they are mentally shifting gears. Paul misses a beat as he tries to figure out what's going on.

—I was, he says. —I just wanted to see if. (He points behind him with his thumb, trying to indicate his unarticulated idea with his body.) —If, uh, you guys were planning to go out for drinks tonight.

—Oh, Clark says. She looks to Janine for confirmation.

—Uh, says Janine.

A lightbulb begins to slowly sputter on over Paul's head. This isn't the first time that he's had a suspicion that something is going on between them. —You guys, he says. —Uh. He pauses, starts again. —I'm coming in right in the middle of something, aren't I?

Both of them open their mouths as though to say *no* and then both of them hedge, as though trying to think of a way to say *yes* without making it look like they're telling him to get lost. Paul breaks into a smile. The lightbulb is on.

—I think, he says, —that this is my cue to just head on home.

—No, begins Clark. She looks genuinely horrified. —I mean, you don't have to—

—It's cool, says Paul. —But remember, I'm living vicariously through you two, so if there's any juicy details, I expect a full report on Monday.

Clark and Janine exchange a look.

—Well, Janine says, —we don't know *just* yet if there will be any *details*, but we'll try to accommodate you.

Paul fixes her with a mock-stern look.

—How many times do I have to tell you people? he says. —There is no try. Only do.

56 / SOLILOQUIES

At around 7 pm Thomas calls Janine's cell phone. Her voicemail answers. He always feels awkward talking on the phone, and he especially detests talking to answering technology; his awkwardness becomes even more pronounced when he realizes that it's being documented for later. But he manages to stammer something out:

—Hey, Janine, it's me, uh, Thomas. I just wanted to touch base with you and see what you were up to this weekend; see if you wanted to get together. Uh, I'm working Saturday and Sunday nights at the hotel but I'm free, uh, tonight—I know that's short notice, sorry, it's not a big deal if you can't do it tonight, but, uh, also I'm free, uh, Saturday and Sunday during the day, if you wanted to do something then, like brunch or something? If you wanted. Um, call me. My number is: well, you have it. Sorry. Uh, I'll be around tonight, so call me if you can. Bye.

By the time he hangs up he feels like he's about to break into a sweat.

He wonders where she is. He guesses she's gone out with those people from work; she's taken to doing that most Fridays. But he can't be sure. She could even be at home. If you call someone on an old-fashioned land line and there's no answer you at least have a pretty good idea of where they're *not*. With a cell you just can't be sure. He doesn't even know what it *means* when voicemail answers at a cell phone number. Out of range? Phone turned off? Batteries dead? Line busy? Any or all of the above? He doesn't have a cell phone himself, so they still seem completely mysterious to him.

By midnight she still hasn't called.

Usually when she goes out drinking with her work friends she's back at home by nine or ten at the latest, and she generally calls, just to check in, *especially* if he's called and left her a message.

Around ten he began to worry that she may be dead, grabbed off the street by some guys in a van. This is Chicago, after all, a big city, stuff like that happens, every once in a while, he guesses.

But before he had finished thinking through the ramifications of that melodramatic theory, he began to consider another possibility: that tonight is the night that Janine finally decided to sleep with that woman from work, Clark. As soon as he thinks it he is certain that this is what has happened. The idea has the gutpunch of truth about it.

It's plausible: he's been sensing its approach for months, and the last time he talked to Janine about it she got him to agree that she should do what she wanted, and that they'd work through the aftereffects as they arose. But the past few weeks lulled him into a sense of security—these *Artforum* ads that Janine had been designing left her stressed out, without much time or emotional energy to spare, certainly not enough to take on a new lover. But he remembers she was planning to finish the ads and mail them out this week—

Were an observer to look in on him between the hours of ten and midnight he would appear to be sitting placidly in his living room, listening to some new CDs, and taking notes on them. In reality he is not taking notes; he is absently tracing out a rough diamond shape onto the pad, drawing each edge and corner over and over again, until the tip of the pen begins to gouge the paper. And in reality he is not listening to anything but the sequence of interlocked internal monologues that he is trapped within.

For instance The Angry Monologue: I can't believe she would do this. She knew that this would hurt me and she chose to do it anyway.

The Angry Monologue leads directly into the Self-Pitying Monologue: She's probably doing this because you can't satisfy her. She's so experienced and you—you were a *virgin* when you got together with her. How did you think you were going to pull this off? Stupid. Stupid.

When that one overheats, he allows himself to descend into the coolant bath of the Rational Monologue: you don't *know* that she's done *anything*. You don't have any information. She could just be [what?].

But the Rational Monologue leads into the Convincing Monologue: where else could she *be*? She got off of work at five—it's now, what, eleven-thirty? She's not going to sit at the bar for *six and a half hours*. And she would *call* you if she'd gotten home.

Repeat.

57 / DETAILS

It is Monday morning, and Paul wants the details. He is in Clark's office; she sits in her chair, coolly regarding him.

—So, Paul says.

—Yes, Clark says.

—So you slept with the new girl.

Clark smiles broadly, and then, suddenly embarrassed by this display, she claps her hands over her face. Slowly, she tilts her head back, until she's looking up at the ceiling lights and her hands are pressed to both sides of her throat. She is still smiling.

This sequence of actions is about the most girlish thing she's done in forever.

—You did! Paul says. —Details. You promised me the details.

—I never agreed to that, Clark says.

—C'mon, Paul says. — *I'm* not getting any, so I'm *relying* on you guys to have an interesting sex life, so I can at *least* participate voyeuristically. So, come on, make with the hot tales of girl-on-girl action.

Clark pulls a fresh Post-It Note out of the dispenser and begins to wad it up. —You don't even *like* girls, she says.

—I like you guys.

—That's not what I mean.

—Let's not split hairs, not when there are *sexy details* waiting to be disclosed.

—What do you want to know? she asks.

—Everything, he says.

She flicks the wadded Post-It Note at him: it hits his chest and bounces down towards his lap.

—OK, he says. —Let's start with the broad outline here. Did you guys go out on Friday after work?

—Yes, Clark says, drawing out her answer. She idly stretches a rubber band around the fingers of her left hand.

—And, ah, how shall we say, when did this date end?

—Uh, Clark says. She pulls on the band. She screws her face up as though she is counting. —Sunday afternoon.

—Sweet Jesus! Paul says.

—Yeah, Clark says. —It was pretty, um, intense.

—Tell me more, Paul says.

She forms a launcher with the rubber band and loads a paper clip into it. —I can't, she says. —Monday meeting is in five minutes.

—But you'll tell me more later? Paul says.

Clark fires the paper clip, and Paul performs an effective block with the back of his hand. —Maybe, she says.

—Maybe? Paul whines.

There is more that she could tell him. There are kisses that could be described, caresses. She could describe the way they disrobed, and the tentative discoveries, the actions and reactions that accompanied each step in that sequence. She could try to describe the sensation of being touched by Janine, the sheer electricity of it, the way her nervous system pulsed and yearned in response.

And she could tell him that she feels like something *unlocked* within her this weekend, that, for the first time in as long as she can remember, she doesn't feel angry, she doesn't feel as though the world might need to be destroyed before it can be redeemed.

But instead she shrugs and says: —There's not really that much more to tell.

—Liar, Paul says. He picks the Post-It wad out of his lap and flicks it back at her.