

Imaginary Year

VOLUME THREE

ISSUE TWO

"She waits to feel some response"

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Thanks for reading.

FLETCHER

WORK (THREE)

001: I assume by "work" you mean what do I do that I get paid for?

002: OK. Cause I'm in kind of a unique position, in that what I really think of as my "work" isn't really something that makes me any money.

003: Yep, alright, got it.

004: My name is Fletcher Klingman, and I work at scenic Du Sable University, as a graduate employee.

005: Yes. I earned my Master's there in 2000, and I'm currently working towards my Ph.D..

006: I generally teach two courses a semester. They usually have me teaching Composition—Comp One, Comp Two—or sometimes they let me teach a Poetry course, Intro to Poetry, Intro to the Writing of Poetry, those sorts of things.

007: Yeah, see, when you ask about my *work* that's what I think of, the poems. But, you know, poets need to earn a living somehow.

008: Oh, no. No no no. The *vast* majority of the places that publish poetry don't pay anything. I'm talking *nothing at all*. So if you look at the stack of submissions coming in to the average literary magazine, you're looking at a big pile of poets competing against one another for the right to give their work away *for free*.

009: There are some fellowships out there, and some prizes, I guess, but unless you're winning the MacArthur your're talking about maybe five hundred bucks per contest? Even if you had a really good year and won, say, a contest every two months—and the odds are *seriously* stacked against you—you'd still come away with only, what, three grand? I'm telling you, there's no money in it. There's no money in writing it, and that's because

there's no money in publishing it. How many people out there do you think are buying poetry books? Barely any. And barely any of *them* are buying books from poets that haven't yet made a name for themselves. You're talking, like, a percent of a percent.

010: Right. So you need to find cash elsewhere. And the only place out there that hires poets *as poets* is academia. And even that's arguable; they're really hiring you on to teach. So it puts you in this awkward position, where the thing you *do*—teaching—isn't the same as what you're hired on to *be*—a poet.

011: No. In fact they're at cross-purposes to one another. Because all the time you spend grading or, I don't know what, answering student e-mails, making lesson plans, all of that time is time which you could be spending on writing, sending out poems, reading the work of other poets, etcetera.

012: Yeah, yeah, we get the summers off. But trying to set up your year in such a way that you do all of your writing in a concentrated three-month burst kind of sucks. And, actually, because we're so horribly paid, I do extra work over the summer.

013: Oh, technical writing, for my dad's company. It's—forget it, I don't want to go into it.

014: See, this is why I think my true calling is the get-rich-quick scheme. I figure I get one great idea out there, rake in a load of cash, retire on the proceeds, and then get started on the poems in earnest.

015: Oh, the *idea* isn't the hard part. I have *tons* of ideas that could a million bucks. The hard part is getting them out there.

016: Like, I don't know... New Age music for dogs and cats.

017: No, seriously. Think about it. People love their pets, and they enjoy spending money on them. And the kind of people who like New Age music are *exactly* the kind of people who seem overly willing to project their own tastes onto their pets, you know?

018: Right, but that's just one idea.

019: I actually have a system for it.

020: I should make you turn off the recorder first. This system, I'm telling you, it's gold.

021: Alright, alright. I call it the Dollar Store System of Product Design. It's where you take qualities from any two existing products and combine them into a new product.

022: Haven't you ever been in a dollar store?

023: Maybe I can better illustrate it if I describe how I came up with it. I was visiting a dollar store, OK, as I am wont to do, and I saw a toy called the Bubble Sword. OK? Think about this for a second. Bubble Sword. It's a plastic sword that you dip into bubble solution and as you, I don't know, *parry* or whatever, the sword blows bubbles. I guess. Now, this product makes no logical sense. It addresses no known human need. But somebody sat down and said *kids like blowing bubbles* and *kids like weapons* and they combined these two truths into something that *made them money*.

024: Yeah, you see this all over the place in dollar stores. Kids use pencils; kids like stuff that glows in the dark—glow-in-the-dark pencils!

025: Just think of any two things that people like. People like freshening their breath with mints. People like whitening their teeth. So—bam!—teeth-whitening mints! Has someone already done teeth-whitening mints?

026: Right, right, it's great, but I can't get the idea out there, because I don't know anyone who knows how to make mints, or anyone who knows how to make something that can whiten teeth, or anyone in, I don't even know what you'd call it, the *mint distribution industry*.

027: In six months there will be a teeth-whitening mint on the market and I'll shout *fuck! Some prick stole my idea!*

028: Probably some other poet. [laughs]

029: So, no, I mean, I don't know about mint distribution. I know about poetry. And I've been trying to apply the Dollar Store System to poetry somehow. Because, you know, people like poems, or at least they like being perceived as the kind of people who like poems. So I keep thinking OK, combine poetry with something else, some other human desire...

030: Oh, well, sex. Or avoiding taxes.

031: Well, with sex you could do a thing where you rent yourself out to write love poems for somebody else, a sort of Cyrano thing. You could do it by mail or over the Internet. The person submits a list of traits of their

032: The tax thing would be like you work out a system by which big corporations hire on a poet as, like, the staff poet. Mostly they'd just let him work alone in an office. Every once in a while they'd call him out to write a poem for a special occasion, a stockholder's meeting or whatever. Sort of like the old system of patronage for composers.

033: Oh, you wouldn't need to pay him very much.

034: True, so that's why you'd need to work it out where they'd get some kind of tax break for supporting the arts or some horseshit like that. But then *that* gets you all tied up in like corporate tax legislation, and the snarls *there* I just don't want to even *think* about. Better to stick with New Age music for dogs.

JAKOB

MAKING CONTACT

Jakob fishes a section of the *Tribune* of the disorganized pile of abandoned papers that lives in the employee lounge. He flips disinterestedly through the day's stories and then returns the section to the pile, preferring to stare at the mustard-colored walls. He's seven minutes through his fifteen minute afternoon break.

He smells the odor of simmering coffee and momentarily considers fixing himself another cup, but he still feels unsettled by the three he drank this morning. He hoped that the dry ham sandwich he downed at lunchtime would absorb the globe of acid that sloshes uneasily in his gut, but so far no luck. He eyes a package of Hostess cupcakes, slotted into a steel spiral, behind glass. He stands in front of the machine and begins to gather change from his pockets, but then the words *sugar crash* sound ominously in his mind, and he sits back down.

These piddly little fifteen-minute breaks really make him wish that he smoked. Then he could go stand out in the chilly wind with the rest of the huddled malcontents and psychos that work at this place. He supposes that there's nothing stopping him from going out there without a cigarette, but if he wasn't smoking he'd have to admit that he was doing it for the camaraderie, and there's something almost unbearably pathetic about admitting that he kind of enjoys listening to Marvin relate the latest Internet gossip about *Kill Bill*, an upcoming Quentin Tarantino movie that won't be out for at least another year, or—even worse—admitting that he's grown marginally interested in the twists and turns of the vampire role-playing campaign that Marvin's involved in. He doesn't need the human contact that bad.

Maybe he should call Freya. There's a pay phone right over there; he could call her and work out the plans on when they're going to get together next. When he wasn't working over the summer he was a lot more willing to take the two buses necessary to get from his place to hers. He'd head over there in the late afternoon, let himself in, visit with her in the evening over dinner. Then he'd stay over, sleep in a bit while she got ready for

work, get up around the time she left, wash whatever dishes they'd dirtied the night before, and then head out to get started on his own day. It was good. But now, after working all day, if he goes home after work he just wants to stay home. And she's not always thrilled about coming down to his place, either, even though she's got a car.

When his lease runs out in June he might move closer to where she is. But he likes his neighborhood, and what he really wishes is that she'd move closer to where he is. (He knows that she won't do this—she lives only a ten minute walk away from Tympanum, and she has no interest in adding time to her work commute.)

Sometimes he wonders if it isn't time for them to think about moving in together. They've been involved for a year and a half now and they still haven't discussed it. Jakob thinks about it a lot, and he wanted to bring it up before Freya renewed her lease, in August, but things were so crazy then with her dad and all, that there never seemed to be a good time to ask. It didn't help that his main argument for why they should do it hinged upon the good financial sense of splitting rent—back over the summer she'd tense up any time he mentioned anything having to do with saving money, since she was working, and he wasn't.

He counts out his change again: he has the fifty cents he'd need to make the call. But he can't remember Tympanum's phone number. 528 something. Fuck. He could maybe call Directory Assistance, but he can never remember if that's a free call or what, and he only has three minutes left before he has to get back to scanning documents. Fuck fuck. He feels stuck here in this room, in this building, surrounded by vending machines and storage media and girders and glass, and somewhere else in this city is a woman he wants to talk to, but he cannot find his way to her. He understands better now why people love their cell phones. He finds himself thinking that maybe they are worth what they cost after all.

FREYA & JAKOB

SEXY

—Hey, Freya says, into the phone. She looks out the the window. 5:30 pm and it's already almost pitch black outside. She hates the way Daylight Savings Time draws an early curtain on the fall.

—Hey, Jakob says.

—What are you doing?

—Making spaghetti.

—Mmm delicious.

—Yeah, right?

—Yeah. So what else are you doing tonight? You want to come by later?

— I can't, he says. —Thomas and I are supposed to be getting together tonight, remember? We've been meaning to listen to some of those recordings we made?

—Oh, she says. —Yeah.

—We've been meaning to do it for a while, Jakob says, but I kept having to put him off. It's been weird, trying to adjust to working forty hours a week again.

—Sure, sure, Freya says.

Jakob stirs his spaghetti with a wooden spoon.

—Listen, he says. — It shouldn't take us too long. He's going to be here around seven; we'll probably be through by ten or so. If you wanted to come over.

—I wouldn't want to intrude, Freya says.

—Pshaw, Jakob says. —You wouldn't be intruding. I think he'd be glad to see you; he likes you. And of course *I'd* be glad to see you. Sweet cookie bear.

—Mmm, Freya says, noncommittal.

—Are you my sweet cookie bear? Jakob says.

She pinches the bridge of her nose. She's not really in the mood for the cutey-cute stuff tonight. —Yeah, she says.

—You're, I don't know, she says. She churns the air with her free hand.
—You're my big panda man.

—Yeah, Jakob says, and the simpering tone in his voice makes her want to cringe. —Big panda man.

He tests a piece of spaghetti; it's still a bit too firm. —So what do you think? he says. —Coming over?

—Sure, Freya says. —Around what, ten?

—Sounds good, says Jakob.

—Alright, I'll see you then.

—Cool, Jakob says.

—Cool, Freya says.

—Bye-bye, cookie bear, he says.

—Right, bye, she says. She hangs up and sighs.

In the bathroom she looks at herself in the mirror and frowns. She thinks *fat*. She thinks *sweet bear*, and all she can envision is some hulking, lumbering beast.

She pulls her Guns N' Roses T-shirt over her head and looks at her belly. She puts both hands under it and lifts. It has a weight in her hands like so much dough; it disgusts her. She releases it and feels it fall back into place. She lifts her breasts, tries to imagine them as high and firm. Tries to remember the last time she really felt sexy.

She remembers the summer, when Joshua had his intense focus turned on her. She felt sexy then, kind of, although she also felt awkward, as though she had forgotten how to be the target of male attention. How to use it to her advantage.

He stopped flirting when summer collapsed into fall, and so that period now seems like an anomaly, a brief burst of flame that illuminated the cold surroundings for only a moment before winking out, leaving her only with a sense of the true size of the expanse she's mired in.

She knows why he stopped. She's not a fucking idiot; she can see what's right in front of her. She sees the way he is around Denise, the way he leans in towards her. She sees in it the fucking goddamn victory of twenty-two over twenty-nine. It annoys the shit out of her. Every week when she makes up the schedule she has to resist the urge to put the two of them on completely different shifts, separating them like an enraged parent spraying horny teenagers with a hose.

Maybe she shouldn't be looking to Joshua for that sort of affirmation anyway. After all, she has Jakob. Her big motherfucking *panda man*. And she loves Jakob, she does, and he compliments her on her looks and all that, like a good boyfriend, and it should help, but it doesn't. Not usually. In a way she doesn't trust his praise. She suspects that he maybe offers it out of habit, or, worse, out of duty, because it's what's expected, and because it's easy enough to give. He fucks her regularly enough, but same thing there: she can't be certain that it's not just automatic, a part of his routine.

This is part of why she wants him to be rough with her. She wants to know that he's not just fucking her to be *nice*, because he thinks she *wants him to*. What she wants is for him to be fucking her because he's completely, helplessly drawn to her, because he has no other course of action available. She wants to be certain that if she said *no* he would still fuck her. She wants to know that she can still drive a man to that point of desperation.

She wonders if she can. Her sexiest clothes don't fit anymore. Her tattoos have begun to go unfocused at their edges. She blows a big kiss at her reflected self. She waits to feel some response. Anything.

JAKOB, THOMAS & FREYA

LOLA

Thomas' MiniDisc recorder sits on Jakob's coffee table, among magazines. A wire connects it to the stereo. Jakob and Thomas sit on the couch and listen to recordings they made a few weeks ago. They frown in concentration and look at empty corners of the room. A power tool buzzes distantly. Feet move through fallen leaves, making a sound like static.

At around ten Freya shows up. Jakob kisses her on the cheek at the door. Thomas gathers up his stuff, pulls on his fleece-lined hunter's cap.

—You don't need to go just because I showed up, Freya says.

—Oh, I don't want to intrude, Thomas says.

—I'm the one who's intruding, Freya says.

Jakob sighs. —Nobody's *intruding*, he says.

Freya suggests a bar and a cautious agreement emerges. They suit up and head out.

In the dark booth, Jakob peels the label off of his beer bottle and talks about his temp assignment. —It may be the worst job I've ever had, he says. He plasters the label down onto the tabletop, smoothes out the wrinkles with the edge of his hand.

There's a pool game happening not far from where they're sitting. Freya hears the gunshot-sound of a precise break. She looks over at what she can see of the table, slices of green visible between the shapes of men. Smoke hovers beneath the light in loose layers. She used to be pretty good, but she hasn't played a game now in, what, three years. She unwraps a new pack of cigarettes, assents to another round.

Thomas leans forwards and beer spills over the rim of his pint glass. —So that girl, Lola, he says. —What's her deal?

Freya drags on her cigarette and a line appears between her eyebrows.
–Who's Lola? she says.

–You know, Thomas says. –She works with you. Blond girl?

–Denise? Freya asks.

–No, Thomas says. He has to shout to be heard over Black Sabbath's "Paranoid." –Lola. You know. Wears sunglasses all the time?

–That's Denise, Freya says.

Thomas drinks. He could have sworn that she said her name was Lola, that day in the park when they talked. But whatever. –OK, he says. –So, yeah, what's her story?

–I don't know, Freya says, shaking her head with distaste.

–She's interesting, Thomas says.

–I don't really see the appeal, Freya says. –I mean I just don't *get* it, what's so *special* about her that every guy is like, ready to cream their *jeans* over her. She's just like, I don't know, she's a bitch.

–She seems nice to me, Thomas says.

–Yeah, well, she's not, Freya says. She smashes her cigarette down into the ashtray.

A look of puzzlement crosses Jakob's face. He rifles through the slim collection of facts he knows about Thomas; something doesn't add up.
–Don't you have a girlfriend? he asks.

Thomas drinks. –It's complicated, he says.

JANINE

INDISPENSABLE

At her new job, Janine makes the coffee. It's not technically her responsibility, but she does it. And she doesn't use the freeze-dried grounds from the giant can, instead she brings beans from home, good beans, bought from Intelligentsia with her own money, and she grinds them at work with the grinder that she herself donated to the breakroom. She does these things so that people will notice her. Every morning she visits the offices of her supervisors and asks Can I get you a coffee? After the first week she memorized who takes cream and sugar and who likes it black. *Here you go*, she says. *Two sugars, just how you like it*. They drink and say *Mmm. Damn this is good. You're a saint. You're going to spoil me*.

Oh, it's my pleasure, she says.

Sometimes she brings in a box of Krispy Kremes to work, even though she doesn't eat them herself. It is all part of a campaign to make herself seem indispensable. This is new. Back when she was at the Woolcot Group she did her work, did it competently, turned it in on time, but she did little to directly ingratiate herself with her co-workers, or her supervisors. She privately thought of them as *drones*, and her distance from them served as a measure of her humanity. The less of herself she gave over to them, the more human she remained. Then she was laid off.

This time she will take no chances.

She sits down at her station, checks her work e-mail, deletes a reminder about the upcoming company social, deletes a message about an upcoming optional tutorial on how to use MS Access, deletes the random spams that have snuck past the company spam-block. Then she goes into Yahoo!Mail and checks her personal account.

There's a message in there from Ingrid.

Ingrid and Janine are e-mailing one another almost daily now. This began over the summer, when, one evening, feeling dull and lethargic, Janine found a short message from Frankfurt in her Inbox. *I miss you*, it read. *What's going on in your life?*

What was going on in her life was that things with Clark had soured, and things with Thomas were temporarily off, and Janine was lonely and bored and grateful for some attention. She wrote back, and she apologetically stressed that she'd been meaning to call (a small lie) but (a probable excuse) she'd been inhibited by the vagaries of intercontinental telecommunications, the difficulty of finding a convenient moment to call a city so many time zones away. Perhaps e-mail was better, Janine suggested.

This opened the gates. Ingrid responded with a long message detailing her unhappiness in Germany. Long-term exposure to the culture's sterile fussiness had worn her down more than she'd expected. Stresses had appeared in her relationship with Elsa, fault lines that had not been obvious when the relationship consisted entirely of phone calls and adoring letters. The marriage had been postponed for a year in order for them to work out these issues. Janine responded sympathetically, and Ingrid began sending details more regularly, giving Janine a play-by-play on the conflict of the week. Janine didn't mind. Around that time Perihelion had shut down, and she was unemployed again, and responding to Ingrid's daily mail helped to kill a little bit of the dead time.

She may be employed again, but there's still dead time that needs killing. She learned early on that there aren't really eight hours of work for her to do every day: being studio manager mostly means she needs to handle incoming phone calls from clients, and between these calls she doesn't have to do much more than sit around, available. Yet if she spends that time tapping away at the computer keyboard people will assume she's hard at work on something. All part of the plan.

She reads Ingrid's message. It says that she's officially decided to come home this Christmas, to see her family. *I'd love to get together with you, too, it says, if you could find some time in there somewhere.*

Janine sips her coffee, and thinks: *Hmm.*

LYDIA

GET OUT

She hardly ever sees Paul anymore. He does telephone support for an IT company now, and since he's new he got stuck with the shift nobody wants, 5 in the evening to 2 in the morning. When she gets home from Delphi he's already left; she's gone to bed by the time he gets back. They communicate mainly through notes that they leave to one another on the kitchen counter. Sometimes, late at night, deep in her cave of dreams, she will hear a sound, far away, a door opening and closing softly, a floorboard creaking in the hallway. She will understand his presence from this and a comfort will pass through her. She will roll over and fall deeper into sleep.

That's if she doesn't go to Austin's place. She finds herself wanting to spend the night there more and more often. She can usually manage two or three nights during the course of an average week—any more than that, though, and Austin starts to get antsy, as though he's worried that she's going to lose her mind and demand his hand in marriage. Typical guy behavior. They all think they're such *catches*. She'd love to tell him that she's spending the night over there not because he's so *great* but because the alternative—going home and having to spend the evening with Marvin—is so *lousy*.

Marvin's acted kind of testy with her ever since she quit the Dungeons and Dragons campaign, eight fucking *months* ago. Things have settled into a kind of uneasy truce, but she still detects a certain edge in almost everything he says: he seems to select his words based solely on their potential to irritate. *Are you finished in here?* And when Paul's not around to mitigate things between them it only gets worse.

Tonight she's closed herself into her room and is instant messaging Maria, an old friend of hers from Detroit. In the other room Marvin and his friends are laughing raucously.

God, Lydia types, I wish they would shut up.

These new friends—don't get her started. Over the summer, Marvin joined up with a group of University of Chicago students involved in a live-action role-playing game with a gothic horror theme, and ever since then, her apartment has been a central hangout for a group of college kids who dress up like vampires. Dorks in velvet shirts; skanky bitches wearing black gowns and too much eye makeup. Lydia can't abide any of them: when she comes home, after working all day, and finds all of them sitting around in the living room, waving around their stupid cigarette holders, she has to choke back the urge to scream *get out! All of you, out!*

He doesn't even ask, she types. Send. He just assumes it'll be OK. Send. To have like eight people over. Send. Without asking.

Oh God, Maria writes back. That sounds horrible.

Marvin rattles the doorknob. —Are you using the phone? he says.

—Go away, she says.

—Victoria needs to make a call, he says.

—I'm busy, she says.

Austin will need a new roommate in February, when Craig moves out. That's four months away. She plans to be ready.

FLETCHER & CLARK

FORMAL CONSTRAINTS

Pigeons congregate on the track and peck at the litter and gravel. Fletcher stands with Clark on the platform, and watches her watch them.

—Thanks for coming down here with me, she says.

—No problem, Fletcher says.

—I don't know why I just couldn't come down here myself. I just really wanted somebody to come with me.

—Glad I could help, Fletcher says.

—I think maybe I'm depressed, Clark says.

Fletcher weighs his responses for a minute. —I think maybe that's going around, he says.

—I wonder if this is how people feel at the onset of a totalitarian regime, she says. —You know? There's this sense that the gates are coming down, and that things are going to get worse before they get better, and that the smartest thing to do might be to run while we still can... Do you get that?

—Uh, Fletcher says. —I think I'm just lonely.

Clark looks over at him, squinting in the cold brightness.

—You know how long it's been since my last date? he says. —Two years.

What he wants to happen here is he wants Clark to snap her fingers and say something like *you know what? We should go out.* But he knows that this is pure fantasy. They've been friends for a damn long time and she's never

shown him even the faintest degree of attraction. But he secretly holds on to an eroded sliver of hope, and when he offers her an opportunity to express an interest in him—some interest that just might be there, that she has maybe somehow kept hidden for five years now—he feels the presence of that sliver. And when she passes those opportunities by he feels it twist within him.

—Two years, she says. —Wow.

—Tell me about it, Fletcher says. A secret rises slowly towards his surface. —I'm actually, he says. He can feel her attention on him. He toes a loose pebble, kicks it down onto the tracks. —I'm actually considering trying an online dating service.

—What? Clark says. —Really?

—Yeah, says Fletcher. —I've been looking at a couple of different online personals sites. It was, uh, originally— I mean the reason I *started* looking at them was not to find a date but because I was trying to get, you know, food for the poem. Language.

—OK, Clark says.

—But the sites are actually kind of interesting, he says.

—How so?

—Well, uh, they give you this questionnaire to fill out, right? You know, height, weight, turn-ons, turn-offs. And everybody tries to answer the questions in ways that will make them stand out, seem appealing, make them come off as, you know, clever, witty, sexy, whatever. So within the question-and-answer format, which is actually pretty restrictive, people demonstrate a lot of inventiveness. It's just like trying to work with a poetic form. How much individuality can you display within a formal constraint? After I read a few of these ads they began to seem like a contemporary version of the villanelle or the sonnet.

—Oh yeah?

—Yeah. So of course I decided to try it.

—So what does your ad say?

—I'm still revising it, he says. —What celebrity do you think I most resemble?

–You're asking the wrong person, she says.

–The best I've been able to come up with is Larry David.

–I don't even know who that is, she says.

FREYA & FLETCHER

DANGEROUS

Freya moves the phone from one ear to the other.

–So, she says, –what are your plans for Thanksgiving? Going over to Esmat's again?

–No, Fletcher says. –My parents are around this year, so I'll be going back to the old hometown.

–Me too, Freya says.

–Maybe I'll pass you on the highway, Fletcher says.

–Yeah right, Freya says.

–You'll be eating my dust.

–Yeah right.

–Trust me, you'll see.

–Sure.

–Jakob going with you?

–Yeah. That poor guy. He tolerates my family with the patience of a saint.

She thinks about her family for a second. Really the only one she wants to see is Tim, her half-brother. She used to feel like she really had a big sister thing going with him, that she was *showing him the ropes* or whatever, but she has trouble believing that anymore. He got busted for selling porn at school a while back, and she wasn't really ever able to talk to him about it. Ever since then she's felt pretty distant from him. She no longer has a sense of what is going on in his world, of how she can help.

–Hey, Fletcher says. –When you see Jakob, tell him to call me. I haven't heard from that dude in forever.

—It's his new job, Freya says. —It's kind of bumming him out.

Fletcher looks across the room, at a box that is piled to overflowing with ungraded student research projects. —Tell him to join the club, Fletcher says.

—Yeah, really.

Fletcher doubts that it's really just the job. If he were to graph his friendship with Jakob he would chart a steady ascent all through the fall semester of Jakob's first year in the grad program, followed by a long, steady decline beginning that spring. Specifically beginning in the moment when Jakob began sleeping with Freya. He feels like he was played, like maybe Jakob only made friends with him to gain access to an array of available women. Sometimes he finds himself thinking that if he'd known that Jakob and Freya's relationship was going to be so successful he would never have introduced them. If he'd only known that Freya was ready to settle with a smart, bookish guy he would have made his own intentions more plain. It was his *turn*, damnit, he was *next in line*. But now it's too late. Now Jakob and Freya are in *love*, and Fletcher is on the outside, feeling discarded.

—Hey, he says. —Can I ask you something?

—Sure.

—It's about this personal ad that I put up.

—Oh yeah, Freya says. —I meant to ask you how that was going.

—OK, I guess. If you'd consider *no responses* to be OK.

—You only put it up a couple of days ago, right?

—Yeah, Fletcher says, —and I'm still toying around with it. That's my question for you, actually.

—I'm listening, Freya says.

—What do you think women are looking for?

—Oh, God, Freya says.

—Do you think they're looking for someone . . . dangerous?

—Uh, Freya says.

—Because I can *do* dangerous.

—You can?

—Sure, I mean, I'm Jewish—that should count.

—Oh, Freya says. —You mean because of the whole international-conspiracy, you-killed-our-God thing?

—Well, there's that, Fletcher says. —Or, you know, the current situation in the Middle East. We're kicking *ass* over there, you know. You ladies gotta start paying attention!

—Uh, Freya says. —I don't think women want dangerous in the sense of Ariel Sharon dangerous.

—Women, Fletcher says. —Who can tell *what* you want?

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