

# Imaginary Year

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"their index of active minds"

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Thanks for reading.

FREYA &amp; DENISE

**SEPIA; GRAY**

It is morning, but the sky is a slab of wet slate hanging over Chicago. Freya and Denise move sluggishly in the pallid aisles of the record shop, looking out the front windows at the dark gray mural of the world outside, in winter.

When Freya opened the store this morning, she put on the Red House Painters. She sips her coffee and listens. She chose an album from their early sequence of self-titled albums: the one with the sepia-toned photo of the bridge on the cover. Normally, Freya has little patience with “sensitive boy” music — the pains and indignities that men select as evidence of their profound suffering seem unremarkable to her, precious even. For the most part she prefers classic rock, male music that luxuriates in its power: give her the motherfucking Rolling Stones, at least she knows that they’re playing with all the cards out on the table.

She likes Mark Kozelek, the lead singer from the Painters, because he’s doesn’t reject the rock tradition; he accepts the world his fathers made; he covers songs by AC/DC, Kiss, Paul McCartney, Yes. But he slows these songs until a new emotional landscape emerges from their centers. It’s like watching someone enlarge a halftone photo over and over again, coaxing out the previously unseen details, the hidden forms. The power of the songs crumbles, revealing an entire somber architecture of sorrow; and she begins to understand how masculinity could be a burden, a series of demands and expectations that any given man could not possibly live up to. And that helps her, more than the faux powerlessness and wounded croonings of a hundred other singers, to understand what is going on in the minds of the men around her. She thinks, here, of Jakob, of his series of tentative moves and immediate retreats.

She turns towards Denise and faces a pair of sunglassed eyes. Even though it’s a dark day everywhere. But fuck it. She’s hit upon a point in her introspection which she’ll be able to communicate.

—So I got together with that guy who gave me his number, Freya says.

Denise cocks her head but doesn’t say anything.

—Oh, Freya says. —Maybe you weren’t there. Some guy came into the store, I don’t know, two or three weeks ago, and gave me his number?

—Yeah, Denise says. —I think I remember.

Freya continues. She’s been determined, for a while now, to reach through to Denise; she’s willing to reveal parts of her private self, a sort of offering.

—Yeah, well, we got together. I don’t mean like ‘got together,’ got together: we just went out for a couple of beers. But I think he’s interested.

Denise is quiet and still.

—And, you know, I think I might be interested, back. I mean, he's OK-looking. And, well, it's been a while since I've gotten any action. I mean, I'm not like, climbing the walls or anything, but it's nice, you know, in winter—I mean, it gets chilly at night, you know?

Denise is thinking. It's not her intent to be rude with silence. She is considering things to say and almost saying them and then clamping down. The last person she slept with was Toy, one of her roommates. His actual name is "Troy," but everybody calls him "Toy;" the story involves a younger brother who couldn't pronounce the name right. Toy had come home super-drunk and stood in the doorway of her bedroom, and he'd asked, in a voice that seemed to come from a six-year old somewhere inside him, if he could sleep in her bed tonight. She didn't think it was a good idea— she knew he had a girlfriend —but the way she imagined things would play out if she said *no* seemed so tiresome. It was 3:09 in the morning. Why not? She thought maybe he would just lay down next to her and sleep. When he began to touch her she realized that she hadn't really thought that.

They didn't use a condom. She'd asked him about that in the morning. *Why didn't you use a condom?* she'd said. He'd looked at her with shock. *You didn't say anything*, he said. *I figured if you wanted me to you would have said something.* After a few minutes he said *I figured you were on the pill* and when she didn't say anything he got out of the bed and shouted *why didn't you say something if you weren't on the pill?*

She doesn't want to tell Freya this. Not because she's embarrassed but because she doesn't want to weigh Freya with concerns. She kind of likes Freya, and she knows how easy it is to want to care for someone in trouble.

She didn't give Toy an answer. Her answer is that it doesn't really matter. She spends so much time distancing herself from herself: everything that happens seems to happen millions of miles away. She wouldn't have minded becoming pregnant. She can see herself as being the type of person who would put a baby in a dumpster. The stranger the things are that happen, the easier it is to feel distant from them. She looks at the Red House Painters CD case on the counter, examines the sepia photo, listens to the air. There is so little red in this music. It is all sepia. The photo on the cover is well chosen, she thinks, as her eyes, behind a layer of smoky plastic, move over it.

FREYA & JAKOB

## LISTENERS

Freya chews her sandwich (turkey on sourdough, chipotle spread). Jakob had called her a few days ago: —Are you working on Friday? he'd asked. When she said she would be, he responded: —I'll be in the neighborhood; I've got a few errands to run? But anyway, I was wondering if you'd maybe want to meet up for lunch? She'd agreed, and here they are. They've just sat down, next to a guy nattering away on his cell phone, offering affirmatives. (—Uh-huh, he says. —Right.)

Jakob looks up from his plate, meets her eye and smiles — for one moment looks like he'll begin to start a conversation — then looks back down at the plate again. Calling her up this time had been difficult, because he was requesting to meet with her one on one, without Fletcher's mediating presence, and he knew that this would reveal at least a hint of his intentions. He's not fully ready to tip his hand. He's trying for a *subtle* approach. He doesn't know that Freya's been aware of his intentions for some time now. She sees him approaching as clearly as she would if he were an elephant rampaging across a plain. (What he thinks of as *subtlety* strikes her as *timidity* — if he's an elephant, she must look a whole lot like a mouse. She doesn't mind this: it's a pleasant change from appreciation of the *nice tits* variety. Or the chest-stares that she gets with some regularity. Walking down the street at night and having guys drive past and blow their horns at her. Someone screaming *hey, mama* from the window.)

Jakob looks up again, gives it a second try, this time gets a sentence out. —So, he says. —How's life at the record store?

Freya swallows her bite of sandwich. —Not bad, she says. —I mean, yeah, it's a job. The guy with the cell phone is still going on: —Yes. Yes. That's already gone through. Freya watches Jakob nod sympathetically, but he doesn't seem to have anything to add. She realizes she hasn't given him very much to go on yet. —I'm sorry, she says, —that wasn't a very good answer. I'm just having a little trouble *focusing*. She points with her eyes over to the guy with the phone, who is performing little karate-chops to accompany what he's saying into the phone. —Yes. The paperwork on that went through yesterday. I'm absolutely, yes; yeah, I handed it to him myself.

Jakob smiles, mouths a silent *ah* of comprehension.

Freya leans in so she can whisper across the table. Jakob leans in too, close to her now, and some chemical system telegraphs a flurried excitement all throughout him. —I just, Freya says, —I just don't get those things. I can't imagine feeling so . . . self-important as all that. You know?

Jakob contemplates his response for a second and Freya's eyes get wide.  
—Oh my God, she says. —You don't have one, do you?

—No, he says, no, I don't.

—Thank God, Freya says. —For a minute I was thinking I was just sitting here insulting you. *Cell phone users are such assholes, blah blah blah.* That's totally something I would do.

—My *students*, on the other hand, Jakob says. —They love 'em. I have to, like, make an announcement at the beginning of class to get people to turn 'em off. Otherwise I'm in the middle of trying to teach something and, all of a sudden, it's like "Turkey In The Straw" starts going.

—Oh my God, Freya says. —I would flip. I— seriously —I would have to kill somebody. She looks around as if searching for a victim. —Where is that guy, anyway? (He's up and headed for the door, still speaking into his tiny appliance.) —We don't even let people use them in the store.

—Yeah, Jakob says. —I saw the sign. (*No Cell Phones In The Store Ever!!*, Sharpie-markered onto a square of cardboard.) —Why is that, anyway?

—Because I would have to kill, Freya says.

Jakob makes a meek-looking face. —Oh, he says. After a moment: —I actually don't mind them too much. I find it kind of interesting to see where they're appearing and stuff. It kind of fits in with this project I'm working on.

—Oh yeah? she says. —What's that?

—Oh, he says. —It's going to make me sound like a big dork.

—Give, she says.

—Well, Jakob says. —I've been thinking for a while about doing this science fiction thing. Um, a novel. It's kind of based, a little bit, on how we live in this world that's like blanketed with communications and transmissions and stuff. The book—the book sort of imagines that that trend will continue until you can just pull any kind of information you want right out of the air if you've got the right sort of receiver.

—Wow, Freya says. —That's pretty interesting.

—Yeah, it's got like, telepathy in it, too, that kind of stuff. Pretty dorky, I know. Blame it on too much Dungeons and Dragons when I was a kid.

—No, no, Freya says. —It actually sounds really cool.

—It's not too much more than a pile of notes at this point, Jakob says.

Freya snaps her fingers. —You know what you should hear? she says. —If you haven't already?

—What?

—This guy Scanner. Jakob shakes his head, to indicate *I don't know him*.

—It's this guy, an electronic musician from London, he goes around with some kind of handheld device, a scanner, I guess it's called, and he listens in to these cell phone conversations. And he records them and uses them in his music as a kind of, I don't know, a kind of texture?

—Wow, Jakob says. —Um, yeah, I'd like to hear that. It really sounds like it would fit in well with what I'm working on.

—I think we have a copy of some of his stuff in at the store, Freya says.  
—You should come back with me when we're through here and check it out.

For just a second he stares at her with an admiration that borders on awe. He's always been impressed by people with a wide musical knowledge, and this moment illuminates exactly why: they have access to the perspectives of all different sorts of people, and they have the ability to sift through their index of active minds in order to find a worldview or an aesthetic appropriate to the moment. He looks at her and he sees a listener, a personality capable of shift and contradiction, a polymorphing receiver, able to pick up on any band of the world's information. And that flurry of excitement surges within him again. It is a feeling that he can not quite identify yet with a single word.

## JAKOB

## HUMAN DYSTOPIA

*So now OK so now what?*

After Jakob and Freya got done having lunch, he'd walked with her, back to Tympanum, and she'd navigated him through the store's electronic music section. (The proliferation of categories there took him aback: seeing that genres like Gabber and IDM and Glitch each have their own distinct section astonished and humbled him — these are genres he's never even *heard of*.)

*Heidi. OK.*

Freya found a disc, *Delivery*, by that guy Scanner that she'd been telling him about (in the "Illbient" section) and she pulled it out, shrugged. *Here it is, if you want it.* He did. He's in his apartment now, listening to it, sitting in a beat-up armchair that he's hauled around since college.

*It doesn't give me the right to uh OK it doesn't.* And a smattering of applause.

The pale sky outside the window deepens.

The dance-oriented songs on the album strike Jakob as pretty plain, but he likes the more atmospheric pieces. They sound creepy, like music from an ominous sequence in a dystopian film. But what makes them even creepier is the human element, the incorporated snatches of conversation that Scanner has literally pulled out of the city air. He's currently listening to one half of a troubling conversation.

*Let me tell you all I want from you Heidi. I don't want nothing else from you apart from this one thing I'm asking from you. OK?*

Humans have made the dystopia on this album, built it from the material of all their everyday misunderstandings and woundings. That is what makes it real.

*I'm asking just one thing Heidi, I've always asked you for Heidi; Heidi, don't lie to me.*

Distantly he has some issues with this: taking someone's private conversations, without permission, and using them for a commercial product, for — essentially — their entertainment value? Ethical considerations arise.

*Constantly constantly constantly constantly constantly you lying.*

But the ethical murkiness of communication technology underpins his proposed novel. This is going to be *useful*, he's thinking, as he listens to some unnamed Londoner harangue his girlfriend.

*Tell me, tell me everything, tell me that you freaking that you slept with a billion guys Heidi, but you tell me, don't let me find out.*

And on another level he's simply engrossed, experiencing a simple emotional fascination, giving in to his aural voyeurism. He admits it. The applause that Scanner's laid down on the track underlines its intention.



*I know I've hurt I know I've hurt you OK? I know I have hurt you. But why not be a voyeur?*

Listening to this argument refreshes him on a certain particular type of human interaction, reminds him of the different paths that relationships can take. (It's been almost two years since his last one ended.)

*And you might not believe it but when I say I'm sorry, I'm sorry, OK? I mean it. I'm sorry.*

The words begin to disintegrate, into static.

DENISE

## LANDING HARMLESSLY

It's late now and it's begun to snow. She looks up into it and smiles; sometimes the world is beautiful. She'd heard on the radio that eight to ten inches were expected, and she has tomorrow off. She'd like to get up early, go down the street to the tiny park, and play in the snow. Run around like crazy and slip and fall and land harmlessly in the powder. Safely. But she knows that she's twenty-two—an adult—and she knows that once you're an adult you don't get to do that again. Maybe you get to when you have kids, except for she's certain it's different then; she's certain that it must feel one layer removed. And, thinking on that, nothing seems beautiful anymore; everything seems cold and gray, and she wonders if that's the way that most people see everything all the time and she wonders whether she's just weird for sometimes seeing it that other way, that way that she can't seem to hold onto for more than a few seconds anymore. Then she feels knotted up and wants to cry.

Every time she has ever tried to explain these feelings to her parents or counselors or well-meaning boyfriends (even Johnny) they have always said that she is "depressed," as though these flaws and faults start out inside her and only then seep out to taint the world; no one has ever just agreed with her, agreed that terrible things happen to people, to us, and that the proper response to that is to feel small and sad. *No one has ever just agreed*; she has always had trouble trying to figure out why. She's lately given up on trying to explain the feelings to anyone.

She looks down at the garbage on the street. A crumpled bag from McDonald's. We love to see you smile. Fucking shit. A circular draincap set into the sidewalk holds a curled-up six-inch length of leftover Christmas garland. It looks like some freakish centipede, curled and dead. She remembers finding a dead rabbit once, in high school, during gym class, in the high grass at the edge of the outfield. When she was younger she'd loved bunnies; she'd always wanted to touch them (one of her earliest memories is of stroking the rabbitskin lining of a pair of her mother's gloves, the precise nature of that feeling). So when she found this bunny, lying there almost perfect, some glassy structure of fascination rose within her; time seemed to slow down, the rest of her softball team disappeared, along with the game itself, the stupid mesh of laws and moves that everyone seemed to agree was important, and she crouched down next to the rabbit, touching it with two trembling fingers, gently, as though it might wake up—

—What the *fuck* are you doing?

—Nothing. Nothing!

She doesn't want to think about that anymore. She doesn't want to think about anything. She wants to disappear. She gets the keys out of her pocket and walks to the front door.

JAKOB

## SIGNALS AND ANTENNAS

Snow quiets a city. Heaps of it muffle the sidewalks and streets — the flat planes that normally send sound waves bouncing. But the snow silences in ways beyond the acoustic. It cloaks. In the *Star Trek* sense of making invisible. A particular layer of data is absent. New snow erases a strata of wrappers and trash, and won't reveal it again until spring. Jakob moves through the quiet streets, towards the L stop (on his way in to campus to teach), noting (and enjoying) the decrease in visual noise. Of course, a new layer of litter has already begun to form on top of the snow— the cheap pachinko colors of a discarded scratch-off ticket, the abstract cardinal of a Marlboro package. But these pieces stand out conspicuously against their background as though their individual signals are *amplified*.

At the moment, Jakob isn't thinking about Freya. He's thinking about signals. This morning, he heard a piece on WBEZ about researchers who had figured out how to transmit more information on a single radio frequency. It involved— he wrote it down—transmitting different signals simultaneously on the same frequency but polarizing the signals differently by aiming them at different angles. The different signals are pulled out of the air by multiple antennas but then they're overlapped to create a single signal. Researchers took a Joan Miro painting, broke it down into fields of red and green and blue, encoded each of those fields as a separate radio signal, and sent each of them down a hallway: the same frequency, different polarizations. Antennas pulled the painting out of the air and put it back together.

This radio segment interested Jakob because it feeds into his book idea. He is making notes for a future world awash in signals. Information pirates, suction-cupped to the sides of buildings, sticking antennas out into the radiophonic ether, tapping illicitly into closed channels, pulling programming out of the air, circulating their finds in a black market tape underground. There are telepaths in this world, too, nascent, still weak, their signals prone to scattering, dropouts. They amplify their signals by growing biochemical antennas in their bodies. There are whole new industries, surging into power at the gesture of venture capitalists. But the pirates are out there with their surveillance dishes, bootlegging human thought, working secretly to create a new Fanning Market, a Napster of the mind. The working title is *Dense Air*.

He passes under Metra tracks, and the pavement reappears briefly, slick and green with fresh pigeonshit. He's teaching today. He contemplates briefly what the experience of being a telepathic teacher would be like. Is teaching not the

art of bringing the thoughts of a roomful of people into harmony with your own?  
(He'll write that one down, later.) He comes out on the other side of the tracks,  
enters the edge of a bobbing field of pigeons. They notice him and, surprised, they  
burst into the air, as though they are a single thing.

FREYA, JAKOB &amp; FLETCHER

## ANTIMONUMENT

ANother Friday night at the Gold Star. Fletcher has collected their money and gone up to pay the tab. Jakob and Freya don their coats, with a familiar semidrunken struggle. Freya fishes a crumpled pack of American Spirits out of her pocket, examines it, and flings it onto the table.

Freya: Empty.

Jakob: Kicked.

Freya: Cashed. [She pauses.] Do you realize I've been smoking for fourteen years? That's half my life.

Jakob: You know. I heard them saying on the radio. The fifteenth anniversary of the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster is coming up in, like, a month.

Freya: Jesus, only fifteen years ago? That seems like forever ago.

Jakob: Fifteen years is half your life.

Freya: Over half my life.

Jakob: You just said so.

Freya: I just—I remember myself then—I was such a *kid*.

Jakob: We all were. I think—[he gropes for the words]—I think that there's something important about it; I think it was significant for us for a reason; it was—it was, like, the first time we realized that the structures of order could fuck up.

Freya: Oh, um, no. I realized that a lot earlier.

Jakob: Oh? How?

Freya: Um. My dad.

Jakob: Oh.

Fletcher returns, pulling his hat on.

Fletcher: What are you guys talking about?

Freya: Space Shuttle Challenger.

Jakob: Fifteen years ago now.

Fletcher: Oh.

Jakob: Man, I'll always remember that *shape*—you know what I'm talking about? That shape of the explosion?

They all will. That glyph of smoke and fire in the sky is written into each of their brains. It is one of the characters in their shared secret alphabet.

Freya: Antimonument.

Fletcher: You know, I still *remember* all those Christa MacAuliffe jokes—

Freya: Don't.

Fletcher: "What were Christa MacAuliffe's last words?"

Freya: Fletcher, just— don't.

Fletcher: All right, all right. Who's ready?

They thread through the crowd and push through the door out into the street. It has begun to snow.

Jakob: Hey— it's snowing.

He looks up. He has always loved looking upwards into a snowfall. He sees a million gray flecks swirling on the black field of the night sky. A huge and unmappable thing; every piece unique.

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