

Imaginary Year

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"it was quiet and beautiful"

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Thanks for reading.

LYDIA

GENERATIVE LIFE

It's 9:30 am or so and soon Lydia is going to need to really buckle down and work. She's already reviewed the day's schedule on her computer, checked the voicemails and e-mails that came in last night after she left, and rearranged the Post-It Notes on her memo board, ranking them in order of priority. Follow the notes through their descent and you get a rough approximation of the day she imagines for herself. The memo board is a map of time. *George's letter. Turn over new resumes to Larry in HR. Meeting at two.*

Sip of coffee. Blank mind. Her days often run like this. A flurry of activity at the beginning of the day, quick tasks, emptying, clearing, organizing. She doesn't really count any of it as *work*; it's more like a precursor to work. A period of preparation. Then there's this pause. She'll drink her coffee, hit Yahoo and read headlines, check her personal e-mail, sneak in what she can. Around ten she'll sink into the duties of the day, do the stuff that consumes time and attention.

Right now she is playing with AudioMulch, a sound manipulation program that she's downloaded, half-illicitly, onto her work computer. She has a tiny computer headphone plugged into one ear and a (currently inert) phone headset clapped over the other. She's setting up a simple patch in the Patcher pane. A tiny web charts the sound: some drum loops, running through a flanger and a phaser. AudioMulch starts playing the loops she's selected and they filter through her chosen set of contraptions, shifting in minutely unpredictable ways. This is generative music: select a few simple governing rules and let the algorithms do the rest. She'll let a patch run in her ear for maybe an hour, reaching up to tweak some variable every ten minutes or so. The patterns of drums govern the atmosphere of her workspace in ways that operate below her threshold of conscious awareness.

Maybe that's not saying much. Sometimes she feels like work keeps her in a permanent state of semi-consciousness. Her job is tolerable, but it isn't really what she hoped she'd be doing with her life. She wanted to work in broadcasting. Chicago's got good radio: she loves WBEZ's *This American Life* and WNUR, "Chicago's Sound Experiment," is exemplary—but her degree in Communication and her few semesters of college radio experience haven't exactly helped her get her foot in those doors. So she's working as an administrative assistant (*secretary*, her mind whispers evilly at times) for one department of a management research center. Answering phones, constructing memos, managing the e-mail lists of the

department. Using her communications skills to create a clear channel between an addressee and their audience. The actual content of most of the communications that she facilitates is of absolutely no consequence to her; half the time she doesn't even have access to it. And that's fine with her; it all pretty much bores her silly.

Drums reverberate in her left ear. This is her life. She's not sure what to do next or where she's going. She has a resume up on monster.com and a few other sites; she feels a distant hope that some weird nexus will bring her and her dream employer together in cyberspace. But no luck so far. Unseen_girl, indeed.

She tries to cheer herself by thinking about Thomas; but she feels somewhat disoriented even about him. She'd figured that their kiss at the Phill Niblock show had marked a shift into a relationship; she'd figured that something would follow—a night spent at his house, a conversation about their new status, *something*. But no. She'd driven him home, expecting him to invite her in, but instead he'd just kissed her awkwardly at the corner of his mouth, said *I had a really nice time* and went in. The next weekend they planned to get together via e-mails but she got busy with work towards the end of the week and failed to make the plan into coalesce. And this week his e-mails have been infrequent, distant-sounding. Reference to their kiss or any kind of new status to their relationship is conspicuously absent. And now she doesn't want to e-mail him because she doesn't really know what the fuck is going on in his head. Gah.

She looks at the web of sound and she envies its elegance, its reliance on just a few simple rules. She would give a lot, right now, to be able to find a few basic parameters that she could accept as governing principles for her life. Then she could let all the details fall into place, generate up from them. But what could those principles be?

The phone headset chirrs. She punches a button.

—Delphi Management Resources, she says. —How may I direct your call?

JANINE

**LOVE. UNDERSTANDING.
ALL THAT CRAP.**

The major disadvantage of being a designer is that you begin to realize how few well-designed objects there are in the world.

The major *advantage* of being a designer is that you get paid enough to afford a few of them. Case in point: Janine's overstuffed velvet armchair. A collection of straight lines and curves playing together. Because of its brilliant saturated blue, Janine selected this chair for her living room, which has pumpkin-colored walls: the chair seems to optically vibrate in space. When you sit in it—as Janine is doing now—you can feel that the designer has anticipated the way a skeleton comes to rest: it's less a chair that you sit down on and more a chair that catches you as you fall into it. She spotted the chair in a Wicker Park home furnishings store and for the better part of a month agonized over the price tag. At the end of that month she received news that she and her fellow designer Lee were both receiving raises, and the first thing she did was go out and buy the chair. *You don't want to know* is what she tells people when they ask about the price.

In front of the chair is a low glass-topped table piled with magazines: the design magazine *ID* and *Bust*, which lately has begun to make Janine feel old in some ill-defined way. She is thirty. She is sitting in her armchair, talking on the telephone to her friend Ingrid.

Ingrid was one of the women Janine met in grad school. She was doing a dissertation on the origins of German feminism. About three years ago she went over to Berlin for nine months on a grant, spent her time there photographing factories and getting involved with a woman named Elsa. She got back around the same time Janine dropped out of grad school and started waiting tables at the hotel.

They still keep in touch fairly regularly: they get together for a weekend lunch maybe once a month. It's not the same as when they were both involved in the same program, of course: Janine has to get up for work in the mornings and she can't really spend her evenings staying up till two at some greasy spoon or another, hunched over a pile of books and index cards, periodically reading some passage out loud across the table to Ingrid. Janine still enjoys reading, she still thinks an

understanding of theory is crucial to an understanding of contemporary gender politics, but she no longer finds herself in positions where she *needs* to finish a book before the end of the week, so she's finding that Ingrid has a familiarity with contemporary developments in academic arguments that she just doesn't share. They used to be able to have conversations about theory so easily, but now those conversations contain a faint faultline, a zone where the two of them fail to connect properly: almost imperceptible, but there, undeniably there.

But they're still good listeners to one another. Janine listens to Ingrid talk about what's coming up for her—she's done with her dissertation, and she's planning, on the first of October, to move back to Germany to get married to Elsa. Janine gives her the normal well-wishes and then it's Ingrid's turn to listen to what's going on with Janine. Mostly Janine's fine: she's out of debt, she's in good health, her job is occasionally annoying but whose job isn't? Her only entertaining drama is the lack of activity in her love life: it's been almost a year without even so much as a one night stand.

—I just can't believe it, she says. —I used to have to practically *fight* people off. And now? Nothing. I'd chalk it up to the national climate if it weren't for everyone *around* me getting laid. For God's sake, even *Thomas* is scoring. Do you know my friend Thomas?

—He's a guy you worked with at the hotel, right? Asian guy?

—Yeah.

—I think I met him at one of your parties.

—He's a good guy; I like him a lot. But *totally* shy. It's taken me like *two years* to get him to even talk to me a *little bit* and *he* just somehow got into a relationship. I don't know. Maybe I've become seriously socially retarded and I just haven't noticed.

Ingrid laughs.

—I mean, jeez. They say that guys just want cheap sex, no strings attached. Where are all these guys? I'm telling you: cheap sex? That'd be *fine* with me. That's be *ideal* for me. I'm a busy woman. Love, understanding, all that crap? I don't need it. Not in the market for it. Just give me somebody I can frickin' *page* when I need to get off.

She pauses, then continues:

—Maybe it's just as well. I'm burnt out on guys anyway. They say that guys have, like, this fear of commitment and all that, but, I'm telling you, they lie. Guys are

fricking *needy*. I can't tell you how many times I've been in a relationship with a guy where two or three weeks into it it's like *I feel uncomfortable with the idea of you seeing other people*. Guys want *wives*; don't let anybody tell you any different.

—So what about girls?

—Oh, girls? I'm burnt out on girls in a whole different way. I'm just tired of dealing with them. I've never—I'm serious, *never*—been involved with a woman who just communicated with me directly. You've got to figure out how they feel from, I don't know, *inference* or something. You remember that woman I was involved with when you got back from Berlin? Lila?

—Yeah.

—She was like, miserable the whole time we were going out. But yet she'd never tell me, like, what I was *doing* that was making her unhappy. I spent like a *year* trying to figure her out just on the basis of, like, *inflections*. They say that women are better at expressing their feelings, but, I don't know, that sure hasn't been true in my experience.

—That's what I love about you, Ingrid says. —You shattering gender stereotypes left and right.

—Yeah, Janine says, dryly. —That explains why I can't get a date. I'm going to have to find some transgender person; maybe that'll work out.

Ingrid laughs.

—I know there are people I knew back in the program who would have slept with me, Janine continues, but I just don't feel like it'd be exactly *appropriate* to, you know, call them up out of the blue and say *hey, now's your chance*. I'm not in touch with any of them anymore.

—I don't know, Ingrid says. —I would have slept with you back then.

This gives Janine pause. —Reeeally, she says.

—Yeah, sure, Ingrid says. —Didn't you know that?

—No, Janine says. She pauses again. —You never said anything.

—Nah, says Ingrid. —Your love life was just so *busy* then; there were always like four people interested in you at any given moment. I just figured you didn't also need to hear that *I* was attracted to you, too. I mean, it wasn't like I was walking

around with this like *repressed love* or anything: there was some sexual attraction there, but I'm a little bit sexually attracted to all my friends. We were so close as friends that I felt, I don't know, *satisfied* without having to ever bring up that whole sexual angle.

—I'm always the last to know, Janine says.

—Yeah, well, says Ingrid. —I still think you're attractive.

—Right, says Janine. —Fat lot of good it does me *now*.

Now. She is sitting in a chair. She is thinking. She is revising the past. Her mind is making room for new information.

JAKOB & FREYA

REMEMBER TOYO ITO

Jakob wakes up at 8:20 to Freya kissing his head. Glowing red clock digits. He can hear the deep murmur of National Public Radio's Bob Edwards from his kitchen.

He lifts his head a bit, to look around. Freya is standing by the side of the bed, rising out of the kiss. She is wearing a tight Guns N' Roses T-shirt; looks sexy. He's in a pair of boxer shorts, all tangled around his hips.

—I gotta go, sugar, she says. —I need to open the store.

—Nh, he says. He lays his head back against the pillow and breathes. The smell of coffee on the air.

—Mmm, he says. —Coffee.

She looks in the mirror on the back of his door, plucks at some of her curls.

—Yeah, she says, —I used your coffeemaker. Hope you don't mind.

—No, he says.

—Want me to bring you a cup?

—Mm, he says. —Angel.

—OK, she says. —Hang on.

And she heads for the kitchen. This is her second time staying over at his place: now she knows which cabinet the coffeemugs are in. She selects one that has a picture of Franz Kafka on it and fills it. Last night was the fourth time that they'd spent the night together, but the first one where she got him to take off his pants and fuck her. She's a little bit relieved. The first night they stayed together, she thought his shyness was surprising but touching, but the third time they were fooling around he still wouldn't strip down past his boxers and she had begun to wonder if everything was all right with him. He'd let her get him off that third time, though—her hand beneath his waistband—so she'd known at least that the parts were all there, and functional. And last night things were, well, delightful. So she's not sure what he was worried about.

—OK, she says, coming back into the bedroom. —Here you go.

She places it on the edge of the table by the side of the bed, next to the stack of books.

—I brought you some Kafka, she says. —Don't go turning into a giant bug on me.

—Don't worry, he mumbles.

—OK, she says, —I gotta run.

He sits up and rubs his eyes, looking like he's about five. Only unshaven. He holds the coffeemug in both hands and takes a sip. —Mmm, he says. —Metamorphoriffic.

—How did you ever get along without me? she asks him.

—Good question.

—Good luck on your paper, she says. —I'm taking my lunch break at noon; if you want to take a break, think about coming down around then and we can have lunch together.

—Maybe I will, he says. —That'd be nice.

She comes in and kisses him again. —See ya, Mister Brownstone, she says. He's learned that this is from a Guns N Roses song.

—See ya, sexy, he says. And she's gone.

Mister Brownstone. To think that there was once a time where he was ashamed to tell her that he liked the songwriters of classic rock: Bob Dylan, Elvis Costello. He was surprised to learn that her tastes didn't tend towards any new underground indie outfit but rather towards metal and cock-rock: Guns N Roses, AC/DC. The second time he stayed over at her house she put on *Back In Black* and danced around at the foot of the bed in her bra. A thing that he's noticed: a heavy woman that knows how to move her body is sexy.

He's set today aside to work on his paper. He's supposed to present it at a conference later on this summer: this thing on the contemporary city, at Michigan State. His proposal stated that he'd be providing an overview of the development of "information architecture" in the twentieth century: that is—deep breath—architectural spaces designed to facilitate the deployment of certain sorts of mediated information. A movie theater, for instance. Or those buildings in New York where

the day's headlines circulate the building's perimeter in lights. He wants to look more into the work of that guy, Toyo Ito, whose name he came across in *Adbusters* last month. For a month now, he's been telling himself: *remember Toyo Ito.*

#

An hour or so later. Jakob, now showered, is staring into the Internet. Through America Online. He's found an interesting page on Ito, an interview where they talk to him about a building called the Tower of Winds. Ito: *This project is a conversion of the invisible rhythm and color of the city, which our bodies are subconsciously aware of, into a variable pattern of light. It is in that sense like an environmental music.* Environmental music? He has made a mental note to ask Freya about that later.

He's returned to Google and refined his search, looking just for more information on the Tower of Winds. And, strangely, he's come up with a bunch of record reviews. He scans a few of them—it appears that two musicians, Savvas Ysatis and Taylor Deupree, have done a musical interpretation of the Tower of Winds. Weird. How does someone transform a building into music? And then there's Ito, from that interview again: *I have been wanting to create an architectural space that is like a space in musical sound.*

What does that mean? Does it mean anything?

He scrolls down to the bottom of the page, scanning the review quickly as he goes. He hits the bottom of the page and stares at the screen for a minute, biting down on his pen. *Reviews on this site provided by Thomas Wakatami of Chicago, IL. Please e-mail me with your comments or questions.*

Thomas Wakatami? Isn't that that guy Freya was talking about? He checks the URL, and, sure enough, the review he's reading is part of that site that Freya had told him about. That's too weird. He reads the name again to make sure.

The name is a link. Out of pure curiosity he clicks it, and an e-mail window pops up. An invitation for communication. Holding nothing but possibility.

FLETCHER & FREYA

GARBLED

—So, Freya says. —Are you teaching this summer?

—What? Fletcher says.

Beer. Fletcher's on his third. Bubbles, barely visible in the halfdark of the bar, traveling upwards. There's a small votive candle on the table. Fletcher has been holding up his pint glass, positioning it between the candle and his eye. Using its shape as an amber lens. A second after he says *what* he realizes that he actually heard what she asked. Processing lag.

—Oh, he says. —No; I needed a break. I couldn't read any more bad student writing.

—So what are you doing?

Freya's just joined Fletcher recently, fresh off a shift at the record store. She's only starting her first beer. It's been a long time since the two of them have gotten together by themselves— for the better part of this last year Fletcher had been serving as the matchmaker between Freya and Jakob, so they tended to meet up as a group of three. But now Freya and Jakob have found their way to some sort of relationship, and Fletcher's out of his interlocutor job. So Freya sort of made a point of getting together with him one-on-one tonight: she doesn't want him to feel like he's become irrelevant.

—It's kind of awful, actually, Fletcher says. —I'm working for my dad's company. They put out this yearly catalog that gets sent out to their, whatchamacallim, vendors, I guess. They need someone every summer to put together product descriptions; do some editing, some updating. Dad basically looks at the problem, sees words, and goes: Fletcher knows about words! That kid. Always with the words. So I got the job.

—Keeping it in the family, eh? says Freya.

—Yeah, says Fletcher. —I guess it's his way of subsidizing me into my early middle age.

Fletcher and Freya have known one another for a long time. They met in high school so it must be, what, over ten years now. There are blank spots in their shared chronology, patches of time during which they didn't communicate much, but they always eventually return to one another's company, taking comfort in the familiarity to be found there. Fletcher has talked to Freya about his father hundreds of times, and she's met the man on at least two dozen occasions, so when Fletcher says *my dad*, the words are surrounded by a whole cloud of remembered images and stories, a context. And there's something about that that feels pleasing.

—It's kind of depressing, though, Fletcher says. —To think that my primary literary output from this year is going to be a bunch of technical descriptions of capacitors and shit like that.

—Any chance of using some of that to fuel some poems? (Freya has read some of Fletcher's poems: she knows that they bring in language from all sorts of sources, including ones that she wouldn't normally think of as being very "poetic.")

—Heh, Fletcher says. —Well, I'd thought about that. Some of the language is great: it's all "RF noise suppression" and "high K substrates." But, I don't know. When I use too much of that the poems seem too, I don't know...

—Clinical?

—No; too autobiographical! It becomes less a poem about how language works in the world and more a poem about me and my crappy job. Just me dumping words out of my head without having to go through the effort of finding the right ones. It's, yeah, it'd be confessional. And you know how I feel about confessional poetry.

She does. It's not good.

Fletcher looks through his beer again. He's beginning to feel a little wobbly. But happy. He's glad that Freya has gotten together with Jakob; he feels like Jakob might really be good for her. And he feels a kinship with Jakob, so when Jakob and Freya get involved it's a bit like if he were to get involved with Freya himself. Which is something that he wanted, a long time ago.

—I do believe, he says, —that I will get drunk tonight.

—You're already well on the way, Freya says.

—Thank you, Fletcher says. He drinks.

—I've noticed, he says, —that we think of certain drugs as being 'consciousness-expanding,' and other ones, presumably, as being 'non-consciousness-expanding.'

I must say, I think that this is a false dichotomy. All drugs expand consciousness. All of them bring their user into an altered state of one form or another. It seems to me that it is this very *passage into a new state* that expands consciousness, not any particular superficial characteristic of the state itself.

—Uh huh, Freya says, bemused by the shift in conversation.

—It is conceivable, Fletcher says, emphatically, —that one could go into drunkenness in the same way that one enters the psychedelic state: with the hopes of finding and learning. To approach the passage as a sort of quest. Who knows what secrets we might learn from drunkenness?

—You’ve been drunk enough times, Freya says. —You know what’s there to be found: you, hanging onto the rim of the toilet for dear life.

—Perhaps that is the price one must pay for wisdom, Fletcher says.

—What wisdom? Freya says. —You get drunk, you act like an asshole, you hit sloppily on people. There’s no wisdom there.

—Very true. But perhaps that comes from entering the drunken state in the wrong mindset. The Sufis, you know, they believed in the mystical virtues of the drunken state. Perhaps we enter it with our eye towards the wrong things. The tempting breasts of our neighbor at the bar.

He turns to look leeringly down the bar, and, after a moment, returns his attention to her.

—Perhaps, he says, —we should forgo the tempting breast.

—Good idea, says Freya.

—Perhaps we should find where the wisdom lies in drunkenness. Perhaps the wisdom lies not in the attractiveness of local breasts and, uh, penises, I guess, but in the other aspects of drunkenness. The euphoria, certainly. The vertigo. The particular spin to a room, a restroom. The restroom at this very bar.

—How about the babble, Freya says.

—The babble, yes! Fletcher exclaims. —The way we speak to one another when we are garbled by alcohol reveals a truth to poets. The way our language decays reveals its underlying structure. Truly, truly you are a sage lass. It is imperative for poets to record the way they speak while drunk.

—Should I be writing this down?

—I've got it, says Fletcher, fishing in his pocket for a pen.

—I think I'd better have another, says Freya. She tilts her glass back.

THOMAS

TABULA RASA

Arvo Pärt: Estonian composer: “In the Soviet Union once, I spoke with a monk and asked him how, as a composer, one can improve oneself. He answered me by saying that he knew of no solution. I told him that I also wrote prayers, and set prayers and the texts of psalms to music, and that perhaps this would be of help to me as a composer. To this he said ‘No, you are wrong. All the prayers have already been written. You don’t need to write any more. Everything has been prepared. Now you have to prepare yourself.’”

It’s late. The auto shops and industrial supply warehouses outside Thomas’ window are silent and dark. The room glows with the light from a screen. Arvo Pärt is on the stereo, a piece entitled *Tabula Rasa*. A swarming field of beauty and action; massed layers of strings. And then the layers crack open, revealing behind them—silence. Shaped only by the dull mumble of a prepared piano; the thin voices of one, two violins.

The piece is crushingly sad; it has that capacity for immense sorrow that Thomas has mapped onto Eastern Europe. Pärt, in the ECM liner notes: “When the musicians saw the score, they cried out: ‘Where is the music?’ But then they went on to play it very well. It was beautiful; it was quiet and beautiful.”

Blank slate. A music that is no music. A creator told not to create. *Everything has been prepared*. There is a comfort to that idea, but, like all religious ideas, the comfort only cushions the first step on a challenging path. *Now you have to prepare yourself*.

Thomas is checking his e-mail. There are two, one from an e-mail address he doesn’t recognize, and one from Lydia. Something seizes in him at the sight of this last one: he knows he has neglected his relationship with her, and he suspects that at some point she will take him to task for it. Perhaps tonight?

Pärt: Tintinnabulation is an area I sometimes wander into when I am searching for answers — in my life, my music, my work. In my dark hours, I have the certain feeling that everything outside this one thing has no meaning. The complex and many-faceted only confuses me, and I must search for unity. What is it, this one thing, and how do I find my way to it? Traces of this perfect thing appear in many guises — and everything that is unimportant falls away.

What Thomas wants is to dissolve.

There is a discipline involved. This is apparent in the things Pärt says. And it is here where Thomas finds himself the most confused. He has studied drones and trance states, he has recorded his dreams, he has filled notebooks with information, and yet he has found access to no experience that he could genuinely describe as *transcendent*.

He wonders about sex. He is twenty-seven and a virgin. He had a handful of relatively chaste relationships in high school and then in college he spent most of his time studying, he didn't really pursue relationships very zealously. In his senior year he began to study with Rachel, a pretty, shy young woman who was suffering through the early stages of muscular dystrophy. After graduation they became involved romantically, and they remained so for about a year and a half, but between his timidity and the physical difficulties involved with the disease, they never managed to get to sex.

It was something that she wanted. She told him this on a handful of occasions, but he balked time and time again, and she eventually came to resent his chronic hesitation. He remembers conversations over the dinner table, remembers the tight, clipped voice she would use to speak to him. *If you love me you'll work with me on this*. He would look down at his plate. These conversations left him with a deep sense of shame, which only compounded his reluctance, which inflamed her frustration, until there was nothing left to do but end the relationship.

He was reassured for a while by his study of magical traditions, which led him to the discovery of the so-called right-hand path disciplines, which advocate sexual abstinence. But he is aware also of the left hand path disciplines—which encourage the integration of lovemaking into the pursuit of higher states of consciousness. He has, of course, noticed that people say that sex joins two people in a transcendent unity. And so he wonders if he needs to integrate sex into his discipline. (The drones he's so enamored of combine several parts into a whole.) He has another opportunity now, with Lydia. But when he considers it, attempts to prepare himself, he feels— well, afraid.

Afraid of what?

He opens her e-mail first. It reads:

Hey Thomas, haven't heard from you lately, what's up?

Drop me a line. I just want to know what's going on.

He clicks Reply, and a new blank window opens. He stares at it for a minute, listening to the Pärt build in intensity around him. He doesn't know what to say. He feels like he will, in the end, be useless to her; he feels like he may be best off just leaving her alone. He minimizes the window and opens the other e-mail:

Hi, Thomas. My name is Jakob; I'm a friend of Freya's. She mentioned a while ago that she gave you my number, in reference to a "sound map" project you were working on. I was going to get in touch with you about that, and then I stumbled upon a page of your website where you review a piece of music that's an interpretation of Toyo Ito's Tower of Winds. I've been doing research on the Tower, and I'd be interested to hear the piece, and also to talk to you more about what you think of the relationship between architecture and music. Let me know if you'd be interested in going out sometime and grabbing a drink.

The sound map project: he hasn't thought about that in a while. Maybe working on that will bring him closer to what he wants. Adding a new section to the website.

He looks at his Inbox. There are eighty-nine messages in it. Eighty-nine points of connection with other people and he still doesn't feel like he's discovered what he wants to discover. To entering the world that contains the world. He thinks about the pile of webpages he's created and wonders whether any of it is worth it, what any of it is for. He momentarily fantasizes about wiping it all clean. You don't need to write any more. Everything has been prepared. Now you have to prepare yourself. He believes this. But he does not know how to begin.

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