

This is an excerpt from *Imaginary Year*, a work of serial fiction by Jeremy P. Bushnell. Visit the *Imaginary Year* website (<http://www.imaginaryyear.com>) on Mondays and Fridays for new updates.

19 / IMPULSES AND SCENTS

Their plan tonight is to eat sushi and watch Kurosawa's *Dreams*. Two plastic boxes of California rolls, artfully assembled by someone working at Dominick's, lie stacked in the refrigerator. The video sits on the coffee table. Thomas lights a cube-shaped candle and puts on a CD—disc one of the new double album by Stars of the Lid. The room's air thickens, takes on an autumnal richness. Brian Eno: We are moving towards a position of using music and recorded sound with the variety of options that we presently use color—we might simply use it to tint the environment. The future will be like perfume.

Janine shows up, fresh from self-defense class: Thomas comes towards her for an embrace and she dodges, grabs his arm and twists it around behind him. He makes a tiny, surprised *ah!*

—Hi there, she says.

He can smell the dizzying tang of her sweat. She leans in to kiss him on the cheek. Then she lets go his arm, moves past him into the apartment. It was like an unexpected dance. The motion of bodies in proximity. The touch and release, the mix of tenderness and a potential for violence. The odor of her is still in his nose. She throws her coat over his desk chair, ruffles her hair with her palm, and turns to face him. He is painfully aware of the shape of her breasts in her shirt.

He wonders whether they're going to have sex tonight. He is never quite sure. She is the one who controls whether they have sex or not: sometimes she will come over, hang

out for a while, and leave; other times she will stay the night, but go to sleep without even kissing him; other times she will want to have sex right away. He plays along diligently. He feels, every time, as though he is having sex due purely to alien luck. Her sexuality seems utterly beyond his comprehension: he doesn't have the foggiest idea what makes it function, or how he could possibly influence its workings. He is like the opposite of a hardened Vegas gambler: when faced with a system of suitable complexity, he develops no method to master it, instead he decides that its operations are aleatoric, driven entirely by randomness.

He is not complaining. He has not yet fully mapped out how his own sexuality functions. His desire seems to be completely contingent: when Janine wants to have sex, he wants to also, and the rest of the time he doesn't. Or perhaps it is not that he doesn't want to, but just that it seems so impossible: he cannot figure out how he could even *begin* to take this person, standing there across the room from him, talking about her day, and just *direct her* into the bedroom. And yet she successfully manages to direct him all the time. There are things he could learn from her.

—Hey, she says, sticking her head into his refrigerator. —Remember that job that I told you about? They called me today; want me to come in for an interview.

—That's cool, Thomas says.

—Yeah, we'll see how it goes.

They sit on the sofa and eat sushi. Violins enter the room's atmosphere. Janine cocks her head to listen.

—I like this, Janine says. —Who is it?

—Stars of the Lid, Janine says.

—I really like it, Janine says. —It's so warm. You should get me this for Christmas.

—Really? Thomas says.

—Sure.

Thomas shakes his head. —You know, he says, —I've known you for, what, two years now? And I still don't really get your tastes in music.

—I don't know, says Janine. —I like a little bit of everything. She smiles. —I just like what's good.

To Thomas, this seems strange: he has always thought of his musical taste as a key element of his identity. He feels like someone could look at his CDs and conclude something about him. He looks over: there they are, hundreds of them, on a shelf that runs from one end of the wall to the other. He has thoughts and opinions about each one. Taken together, then, they add up to something, a narrative about his mind. There are themes that run through the collection. Certain discs have been brought in solely to develop some argument, to flesh out his understanding of the zeitgeist, to connect two disparate traditions. He has trouble imagining someone who would request music as a gift strictly on the impulse of a moment, simply because they like it. And yet here she is.

Again: there are things he could learn from her.

They put in the movie. He leans against her. The air on screen fills with whirling petals.