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book two
games and poems

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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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1 / GETTING BACK TO NORMAL

Two weeks after the attacks the radio begins to instruct us that life is returning to normal. Airlines are resuming flights, late-night television hosts are returning to their monologues. Fletcher writes 'normal' on a Post-It Note and sticks it on his refrigerator, where it joins some of the words Bush used in his speech last week, and a taped-up snippet of *Tribune* headline. *An open wound forever.*

There are some bottles of Heineken in the refrigerator, and he helps himself to one.

The ascendance of *normal* in the cloud of discourse is curious to him; it serves counterpoint to the other national theme of the moment, that of *Everything Has Changed*. When one of the guests at Clark's birthday party suggested that it was nice that things seemed to be returning to normal, Clark had delivered one of her offhand savagings: *right, right, normal, except for the fact that our country has basically just authorized a shadow government to indulge in a state of permanent war.* Spoken around a cigarette, while trying to get her lighter to ignite. Flick. Acid, but acidity has always struck him as attractive. Of course, it helps that he finds her physically attractive, too. Simple haircut, no makeup, black clothes: she could be a French student radical. Flick. Sitting out in the dusk, watching her make sparks.

He understood her desire to resist this language, the language of *getting back to normal*, although he does find it more interesting than the language of the Bush speech, political language, words that have lost their meaning, that have been worn blank, like a coin smoothed by the texture of too many hands and too much time. *Freedom. Fear.* These are words he tells his students not to use.

His sympathies to Clark aside, he must admit that really does feel normal. Entire nations are in the grip of geopolitical turmoil but the direct effects upon him are minimal. The sum total? A few extra hours of listening to NPR, slightly more anxiety regarding air travel, a different set of words traveling into the fields of his poetry. Otherwise? Otherwise he goes to a party and drinks beer and cracks irreverent jokes and tries to score. And now: at home, he sits on the couch, takes a sip of the Heineken, and pulls a xeroxed poem out of the mess in his briefcase. It is Jane Hirshfield's "Poem With Two Endings;" something one of his colleagues stuck in his mailbox. This is all normal.

(He feels guilty sometimes, as though he should have suffered more. He's heard some of his colleagues talking about their grief, describing episodes of breaking down in tears in front of the TV—these people have not lost a friend, or a friend of a friend: he has trouble understanding what has affected them so profoundly. Perhaps he is jaded, but six thousand more dead does not surprise him. To him it just seems like another part of the world's sad story.)

He begins to read the poem:

Say "death" and the whole room freezes—
even the couches stop moving,
even the lamps.
Like a squirrel suddenly aware it is being looked at.

Say the word continuously,
and things begin to go forward.

2 / EDEN

It is a Wednesday night in this time, this most recent iteration of the new world order, and Clark, born Maureen Jane Clark in September 1971, stands at the Centipede machine in the Empty Bottle, thirty years old, still trapped in the history of empires, a Camel in her mouth, her right hand on the trackball, her left on the fire button, twitching out rapidfire death to any creature that disturbs the brightly-colored mushroom field on her screen. *Thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump thump* goes the soundtrack, except when one of those bouncing spiders appears, and then it goes *oogly oogly oogly*. Die, Clark thinks. She has already scored over 40,000 points.

She is in Centipede gamespace. She learned how to negotiate the rules of its environment way back when she was twelve, at a machine that lived at the 7-11 on the corner. She never forgot the strategies she learned then, during that training funded with allowance quarters. Still, in a few minutes she will lose her last exterminating ship, and she will gather herself out of gamespace, and while she wends her way through the milling crowd, the structures that grad school built in her mind will reestablish themselves, and by the time she finds Elliot at the bar, she will have partially analyzed the game's system of meaning. She will have considered how the goal of the player is to restore order to a turbulent world, to return that assailed space back to an idyllic prehistory, no centipede, no plummeting fleas, just a ship alone in the garden. The game cries back to Eden.

She knows that this is a human yearning. For thousands of years, people have longed to recreate an untroubled world. Lately as much as ever. Words in the air: *America has lost its innocence*. She reads the news: Feds in the airports, ID cards for the immigrants,

wiretaps in the phones. Anything that could make the world safe again is up for discussion. But there is no Eden to return to. There never was an untroubled world, there is no primal state to recreate. America was never innocent. At age fifteen she saw skinheads throw a cinderblock through her friend's driver's-side window; they dragged him out of the car, shoved him up against the wall and broke his nose. The world has never been safe.

And she knows what happens in the name of Edens. She watched prisons rise as an instrument of social control in the 80's; and watched people celebrate the rebirth of the city in the 1990's, once an entire class had been decimated. *We can never be guaranteed safety*, Clark thinks, *only additional layers of control*. She will watch carefully this time. She will resist what needs to be resisted.

Finger on the Fire button.

3 / STRANGE ALLIES

Jackets move in the dusk accumulating outside the bar window. The pitcher a brimming amber cylinder between them, holding the promise of a conversation not yet had.

A tree near Clark's apartment building shifted suddenly into red this week, and she has held its image in her memory all day.

Fletcher pours. —So, he says. —This week I saw my first "Attack on America" T-shirts. They had a picture of the burning Trade Towers on them.

—That seems like an odd thing to want to wear on your body, Clark says.

—Indeed.

They lift their mugs, chatting genially between sips. They are at the Old Town Ale House, a bar on North that they claim to favor because it has bookshelves as part of its decor. Active bookshelves: a paper sign encourages you to take a book and leave a book. Occasionally one can make an interesting find in there amongst the Clancy, Cornwall and other bestseller residue: Fletcher once found a copy of *Reported Sightings*, a book of John Ashbery's art criticism. Lacking a book to leave behind, he palmed the Ashbery, recognizably violating the terms of the arrangement and incurring a karmic debt about which Clark continues to nag him to this day, eventually eliciting from him a half-mock promise that, should he ever publish a book of poetry, he will leave one copy of it here for every year between the year when he stole the Ashbery (1999) and the year of publication of his own book.

Clark and Fletcher did their MFAs at the same time; that was how they met. Her background—punk and political activism in the stormy Chicago 80s—could not have been

more different from Fletcher's whitebread Evanston upbringing, but they had each reached the same basic conclusion about poetry. Namely, that narrative poems were all contrived junk. Neither of them were interested in writing poems which told tidy little stories tied up with crappy observations about human universals. The first thing Fletcher can recall Clark saying in class was *narratives are only able to tell stories about particular types of social interactions; and those types of social interactions are ones that I'm simply not interested in*, and if you'd asked him what experiences in her life led her to that conclusion, he would not even have been able to make the first sketch of the necessary diagram: all he knew was that he agreed, and he was so *grateful* to come across someone who he actually *agreed* with. Workshops make strange allies of people. At the end of the program Fletcher went on for his Ph.D., and Clark instead took her MFA and went out and got a job with Perihelion, but they remain in close touch, and he still thinks of her as being one of the best of his readers.

And has a crush on her. He can't tell her. She has a boyfriend; this guy Elliot, who she's been dating for maybe six months now. He doesn't want to get in the way. Even if she didn't have a boyfriend, he still probably wouldn't be able to tell her: he's never really figured out the trick of letting a woman know that he's interested. As a result, the women he generally ends up involved with, these days, aren't women he's got any particular interest in. They express an interest in him and he just sort of *goes along with it*. It doesn't take them long to figure out that something's off, though: all of the relationships he's had since college have died off somewhere between the two-week mark and the four-month mark, during the period that he has grimly nicknamed the *larval stage*.

—So, he asks her. —How are things with Elliot?

She smiles, and there is some mix of emotions in the smile that he can't quite decode, and she looks down into her beer, shrugging. —Fine, I guess, she says.

He arches his eyebrows, waiting for more, but no more seems to be forthcoming.

She is not in the mood to talk about Elliot. She wants to talk about images, the images of the autumn that surround her. A burst of foliage, crimson in the mind. Footage of tanks on the Korean news station.

4 / NERVES

Jesus, I'm all nerves tonight, Janine thinks, and she envisions her old high school Health textbook, and its diagram of the nervous system, stringy fibers dangling from a lump of brain. The image makes her feel nauseous. After dinner she made up a pot of tea, and while it cooled on the counter she grew tangled in the process of bill-paying, leaving the tea to settle inexorably towards room temperature, forgotten. She walks into the kitchen now, and sees the pot; remembrance shudders into her. She momentarily contemplates drinking the tea anyway. Her stomach twists at the notion. She opens the pot, stares into it for a moment, then dumps it all down into the sink. And this action suddenly strikes her as totally, hugely indicative of her larger failings as a person. *Forgetful. Wasteful. Fails to follow through.* Within her, some hidden fragile piece seems to splinter. She presses her fingers up into her face.

She returns to her desk, looks down at the stack of bills. She needs only to finish putting the checks and payment slips in the envelopes, but she cannot seem, somehow, to manage it. She has begun to think about her job, which, lately, leads directly into thoughts of being unemployed. The company had been struggling along even before 9/11, and since 9/11 things have taken a turn for the worse: one of their biggest accounts had been a cruise line, which took a huge financial hit when the entire nation suddenly decided to be skittish about going abroad. They reorganized their marketing strategies for the upcoming year, which included canceling much of the work that Janine and Lee, her fellow designer, had formerly been paid to do. The recirculated office air is full of muttering these days—she has heard the phrases *cutting back* and *tighten our belt*—and tasks in the Designer House have

begun to get completed without new ones coming in to take their place, and so Janine and Lee have begun to ration out the work they have to do, trying to make it stretch until the end of the day, and they have begun to eye one another uncomfortably, trying to assess which one of them is the redundant one.

Lee has worked there for a year and a half longer.

Janine wishes, all of a sudden, that the phone would ring, and that it would be Ingrid, but Ingrid is gone. She flew back to Germany on Sunday. At the time, Janine was glad to see her go. Last week, Ingrid began to hint broadly that she might stick around: she would call Janine up and elaborate endlessly on her anxieties about flying—she seemed absolutely certain that terrorists had chosen her flight as the next one to seize. After a while, Janine began to sense that these conversations were about something else, she was never quite clear on what, but she definitely began to get the sense that Ingrid was setting her up, providing her with opportunities to say some particular desired thing. Janine would utter phrases, and these would seem to be the wrong ones, and, after a time, the conversation would simply reset itself. This could go on for an hour or more before Janine could figure out a way to hang up. After the peculiar loop had played out two or three times Janine began to get the feeling that what Ingrid was looking for was *encouragement*, and not encouragement to go to Germany. Encouragement to stay in America. To break off her engagement.

Janine did not offer this.

Ingrid's last night in the States, this past Saturday, they ended up spending together, and Sunday morning Ingrid did not want Janine to get out of bed. She went so far as to grab Janine by the wrist and physically pull her back into the bed. (Janine had relented, but not without cringing inwardly at Ingrid's use of force. The gesture may have appeared affectionate, but Janine could perceive the current of power, insistent, flaring at the edges

of its shape.) That evening Janine accompanied Ingrid to O'Hare, and the two of them got as far as a security checkpoint, beyond which only ticketed passengers would be admitted, and Janine attempted an awkward farewell speech while Ingrid negotiated with the security guard, explaining that she'd expected Janine to accompany her all the way to the gate, to sit with her until the time of boarding. These negotiations grew more brittle until finally Janine turned, walking off, separating from her friend. She had wanted to feel sad, but instead she felt relieved, as though talons had just been pulled out of her heart.

But now she is feeling the space that they have left behind. A wound.

5 / INSOMNIA

It is three am and Clark lies awake. Faraway missiles are striking airports and even though Clark is safe in a bed in Chicago, with her lover a quiet warm shape next to her, she cannot stop thinking about the missiles, falling on the other side of the world.

It is ten pm and she sits in front of the TV with a mug of coffee, watching the news. The programmers have titled this segment America Strikes Back; she thinks of Darth Vader. The newscasters use up all the known facts about the bombing in five minutes, then shift to coverage of the reaction of Chicago Muslims, the Friends Committee, random Chicagoans with an opinion. And then a move into coverage of the Chicago marathon, then weather. Clark flips channels impatiently, looking for some station that has devoted itself to continuous coverage, some station nowhere to be found. —This is important, she says, out loud. Elliott is reading a book in the other room. —They probably don't know any more than you do, he says.

It is midnight and she frowns at CNN.com, pulls up maps and timelines and video clips. None of this data tells her what she wants most to know, namely, what it is like right now to be a subjective entity on the ground in Afghanistan. A civilian. Any civilian. A woman, awakened from sleep by explosions. She's found the website for the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, but it's out of date, it doesn't yet mention any airstrikes. —I'm going to go to bed, Elliott says. —I'll be in in a minute, Clark says.

It is four am and she lies awake, glad that her schedule at Perihelion is reasonably flexible, figuring now that she'll go in at ten, maybe eleven, rather than her normal eight-thirty. She rolls over, closes her eyes, focuses on her breathing. Counts. Looks at the

clock's red digits. Tries to ignore the sense of black futility that swells inside her. Listens to the occasional car passing by beneath her window.

It is nine am and she sits at the table in her kitchen with Elliott, who has the day off. He got up at around seven and went for a jog, returning with bagels, as well as a copy of the *Tribune* for her, and a copy of the *Wall Street Journal* for himself. She looks at her paper for a few minutes, and finds, to her disappointment, that she can glean very little new information from it. She nibbles at her bagel, groggily gropes for her coffee cup.

—I couldn't sleep at all last night, she says.

From behind the paper: —You know what you need?

To herself: *What I need is for guys like you to stop telling me what I need.* Out loud: —
What?

—You need to normalize your sleep schedule. If you went to sleep at the same time every night and got up around the same time every day you wouldn't have this problem.

—Thanks for the tip, she says, resisting the urge to overturn the table. She returns to her bagel, but for a minute she tries to imagine living within that kind of tidy pattern of being, tries to imagine what she would need in order to develop regular habits that would guide her nightly into sleep. She would need an orderly world, a quiet world, a world where nobody comes up to you and tells you that shit somewhere is exploding. She would need to live in a world at peace.

6 / HOW TO USE A PAIR OF SCISSORS

Chains taut against muscle. Furs heaped on broad shoulders. A barbarian stands in Paul's mind, wielding a great scarred ax under a red sky. Screaming the name of his forgotten god—Yc'toth! Paul lifts the tea ball out of his steaming mug, rinses it in the sink—as best as he can around Marvin's heaps of dirty dishes—taps the film of moisture from it with a dishtowel, and returns it to its spot in the drawer. He holds the mug close to his face. Floral scents rise.

He carries the mug down towards his bedroom at the far end of the hall; he has some Perihelion work to finish up on his laptop. On his way there he pads past the room of his roommate, Lydia. Her door is open; her light is on; he looks in. She is lying in bed. It is a little after seven. She is playing with a little plastic horse, held together by strings: by manipulating the pedestal it stands upon, Lydia can make the horse rise and collapse. He watches her collapse it and then look up at him. He raises his hand.

—Hey, he says.

—Hey, she says.

—You all right?

—I guess.

He comes in, pulls the chair away from her desk and sits in it. He looks around for a spot to put his tea, and in doing so, he thinks, and he proffers the mug to Lydia.

—Want some tea?

—No thanks.

—I can make some more, he says. —Not an issue.

—No, really. she says. —Thank you though.

He puts his lips on the mug's rim, and blows, cooling the surface of the tea enough to sip off of it. He is quiet. He looks around the room, examining the posters, even though he's seen them a thousand times. *Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman*. Another sip of tea.

Lydia watches him, wondering if he's going to prompt her further. She knows him well enough to know that he probably won't. She also knows that he would leave if she asked for privacy, but that he won't leave if she doesn't say this. She inspects herself, trying to figure out what would seem to be the plainest of things: whether or not she wants to be alone.

If it were Marvin she'd chase him out. She feels dismal and bloated, sunken deep into a cloudy mood. She doesn't want to be seen. But Paul isn't looking at her; he is looking at her bookshelves, as though he just came in here because he wanted something to read.

She sighs. —I don't know, she says. —I just feel. She hesitates. She doesn't want to say how she is feeling—it almost hurts to say—but now that she's gotten started with it she might as well complete her thought. —I just feel *ugly*.

Paul nods. —That's an awful feeling, he says.

Paul is still able to surprise Lydia in some ways. In the past, when she's talked to guys about feeling ugly, they usually immediately say something like *well, you're not ugly*, or *I think you're beautiful*. They generally seem to miss the point—if they expected that one reassurance would make the scales fall from her eyes, they dramatically overestimated the worth of their words. When guys say things like that what she mainly hears is them saying *you're wrong*, and, really, how helpful is that? Paul, on the other hand, has gotten it right—and he gets it right often enough that she almost feels suspicious of him, as though at some

future moment he will suddenly rip off his face and reveal that he really *is* an alien after all. This image makes her smirk, in spite of herself.

—I just look at myself and think *bleah*, she says. —I've got this short, stubby body: *bleah*. She sits up, pokes her arm with a finger, watches the flesh indent. The softness revolts her. —*Bleah*, she says again. —I look at my face in the mirror, *bleah*. This hairdo, *bleah*.

Paul knows that Lydia had spent the last few months involved with this guy, Thomas, and he knows that things recently ended, and that being single again is hard for anyone's self-esteem. He knows this better than anyone. He's not sure how much those circumstances have to do with this current dip in Lydia's mood, however, so he remains quiet on the topic.

—I just want some kind of change, she says. —I'm sick of the way I look.

—I could cut your hair, Paul says.

Suspicion again. —I didn't know that you knew how to cut hair, she says.

—I grew up with three sisters, he says. —You learn how to use a pair of scissors.

She thinks about this. —Yeah, OK, she says. —I want it short.

—Sporty? Paul asks.

She smiles. Something about the word is so dumb; its a word that she would never have applied to herself. And yet something about that is appealing. —Yeah, she says.

Paul returns to his room and gets out the scissors and a drop cloth. They set up in the bathroom: Lydia sits on a stool and Paul goes to work, cracking her up with stories that she's heard a million times before.

Fifteen minutes later, she slaps her hand on the back of her neck, which tingles with post-haircut prickle. For the first time in years that skin is open to the air. She looks at herself in the mirror and smiles; she looks new. Ready—

7 / THE AX

The *Tribune* on her desk. A chart indicates the locations and status of forty-six people who have been exposed to anthrax. Five infected, one dead.

Her hands are shaking. She blames the coffee. It's not even noon and she's already drank too much coffee.

She has been working with Lee on a promotional turkey-themed animation, a Thanksgiving tie-in, needs to be in the hands of the client before Halloween. Lee showed up to work a few days ago with an armful of turkey-related reference materials. Photos from an old *National Geographic*. Stickers depicting turkeys dressed in Pilgrim garb, which he'd picked up from an educational supply store. These images are affixed all around Designer House, among the xerox art and the various mnemonics jotted on Post-It Notes. Turkeys. At first she'd enjoyed the whimsy of their appearance: her first remark was *You should have brought in a bottle of Wild Turkey*. But today they seem oppressive somehow; their beady eyes seem mindless; their wattles leave her feeling revolted. And she is all too aware that right now there are thousands—millions probably—of turkeys somewhere, caged, living out their last weeks. Janine enjoys some fish or chicken every once in a while, she was a vegetarian back in college but has since relaxed her stance a bit—but she can't help but still feel a bit sickened at the notion of a continent full of turkeys, deeply enmeshed in an engine of consumption that they cannot comprehend, and the ax that awaits them.

Last week, staring into the field of her computer screen, she spoke, as though in a trance, to Lee: —I know one of us is going to be fired, she said. He began to speak, and managed to utter only a single nonsensical syllable before stopping again. She continued,

not looking at him: —And I want you to know that I'm not going to play any office games on you. We get along, you and I, I like you the most out of all the people who work here, and I just want you to know that I feel like I owe you that much, not to stab you in the back. If it turns out that I'm the one who has to go, then, oh well.

The Walgreens near her apartment is fully outfitted for Halloween. Rows of plastic pumpkin buckets, bright orange, with grinning faces. The same ones she's seen every year for as long as she can remember. This year something about them disturbs her. The ceaseless replication of mouths.

What is happening to her?

At home: stutter tone: a message on the voicemail. Ingrid, from Germany. *Well, I made it out here, and everything's fine. I just wanted to say that, um, I'm glad everything turned out the way it did between us, these last couple of months. I really, um, it meant a lot to me.* Janine doesn't have a clue what it might have meant to her. She has not yet called Ingrid back.

She wonders how long it will be before she finds her next lover. Between Lila and Ingrid she went almost a year without anyone. There were times in that year when she wanted a body to be next to hers. There were times in that year when she felt that everyone around her had inspected her, assessed her, and found her lacking.

She looks up at a turkey. She stares into its empty, insane eye and forgets what she is supposed to be doing.

A knock at the edge of the doorway: it's Benjamin, the Projects Coordinator. A forty-five year old guy, looks a bit like a friendly psychologist, a salt-and-pepper beard, a little fat around the waist. Lee and Janine turn to look: normally he doesn't drop by like this, just checks in with them at meetings.

—Janine, he says.

She smiles. —Yeah, she says.

—Could I talk to you?

She knows what this is. She has reached the end of this particular series of conveyors. All that is left is the ax.

—Sure, she says. She places her hands on her desk— her desk —and rises. She looks down at the paper, and reads the words in the headline. *Officials try to stem fear.*

8 / MONDAY MEETING

The Monday meeting at Perihelion. Five people around a glass-topped table. As the Chief World Editor, Clark has the misfortune to be the Monday meeting representative from World; she needs to sit here, pay attention as well as she's able, listening for details that might be pertinent to report back to any of her teams. These details are few and far between. Mainly she checks on whether the funding is still coming, shares the week's interesting bits of story, makes sure that the boys from Tech haven't rejected any of last week's bits as too impossible to generate, and then spends the rest of the hour trying to surreptitiously entertain herself with her cup of coffee, pen, and legal tablet. Sip. Her coffee is dropping fast towards room temperature, which means, officially, that she's been in this meeting for too long. Her bladder throbs dully.

David, the CEO, is talking, filling them in on his schedule for the week, for no reason that strikes her as immediately obvious. She's been at this job for almost two years now, meaning that she's sat through somewhere close to a hundred of these meetings, and yet she still can't adjust to seeing David in his fancy Italian suits. She remembers David the college kid, all pimples, stringy hair, and cigarettes, wearing heavy spectacles held together with electrical tape and gas station service attendant shirts. Summer afternoons spent in his basement: a worktable heaped with soldering equipment and wire. She sat on the couch and put on one **Big Black** EP after another, immersing herself in screech and clatter, while he put his high school vo-tech experience to work, turning fireworks and model rocketry parts into crude pyrotechnic weapons. She remembers 1996 David, fresh out of school, his first apartment, the stack of pizza boxes heaped in the living room. She remembers evenings

where she didn't want to go home, going instead to his place after some punk rock show, already blithering drunk, fumbling at the door with her set of his keys for five minutes, not wanting to wake him by knocking, only to come in to find him sitting indian-style on the institutional gray carpet, glaring at the TV in an otherwise dark room, a cushion from the sofa jammed under his ass, a sprawl of Nintendo 64 wires around him. Staying up until dawn playing Killer Instinct Gold and drinking gin from the bottle. Punching him in the arm, as hard as she could, for no good reason; wrestling; fucking. Catching an hour of half-sleep and then getting *on her bike* and riding in to work in the goddamn hospital mailroom, to spend six hours sorting envelopes, feeling like she'd been dragged out of her grave.

It was not a bad time. The romantic part of it eventually ended. Actually, Clark wouldn't really say that it *ended*—to end, something must *begin*, and their relationship never got as far as taking on even the illusion of any permanent form. By the time they had found a language to discuss how they felt about one another, they didn't feel that way any more. David fell for a woman studying herbal medicine who softened the rough metal of his edges; he followed her to San Francisco, and Clark lost touch with him until he returned to Chicago, with the funding to launch Perihelion, a company which plans to produce an online roleplaying world, for release in 2002.

The flaxen-haired doe-eyed herbologist girlfriend is gone, and it doesn't appear that anyone's taken her place. Which makes Clark wonder. When David called her up, after three years of absolute silence, to see whether she wanted to work in his company, Clark immediately suspected that the offer was part of ploy to rekindle something. But so far she's got no evidence: even the times they've gotten together for drinks and such, he hasn't even made so much as an *entendre*. Clark's glad—she doesn't look forward to having to reject the advances of someone who is now her boss.

Because she would reject them. She's not very interested in the New Millennium David. She doesn't like the way that money has changed him, endeared him towards Chicago's fine restaurants and chic bars, given him a new interest in the elite, a tendency to namedrop. Copies of *Vanity Fair* on his desk.

If the truth be told, she'd rather hang out with Paul, a young guy, new with the company, hired on mainly as a translator, someone who could walk with one foot in Tech and one foot in World, and speak the languages of both. A communicator. He's a bit straight-laced for her tastes, but after a few weeks, he came out with her and a couple of the other World people, and once they got a few vodka tonics in him he began to tell funny stories about the Tech people, and by the end of the evening her sides ached from laughing so hard.

She sips her coffee. Bitterly cold; she has to resist the urge to spit it out. She wants a cigarette.

She draws a collection of points on the tablet and connects them with lines.

She catches herself slouching, forces herself to sit up straight. She looks down at the doodle with shame, wants to cover it up. *God. So juvenile.* She would have thought she was someone different by now. She's thirty years old, and has a Master's degree, and she still gets bored when someone talks to her for more than ten minutes; she still doodles and fidgets and waits for a chance to catch an illicit smoke; she still gets together with people after work and bitches about the day. Even though her boss is someone she has once kissed. Someone who is younger than her.

9 / CATCHING UP

They are sitting together on the couch. She turns to him. —So how are you, she asks.

She has just raised the remote control and terminated *Survivor*, right in the middle of the opening credits. —Aren't we... are we not going to watch that? Thomas asks.

—No, she says. —I don't think so. I only watched it last season to keep up with the conversations at work. And now...

She flicks her hand open, implying rapid dissolution, a thing flying apart. She was fired a week ago. On Sunday, intending to look at job listings, she picked up a copy of the *Tribune*, but when she got it home she set it on the kitchen table, and there it remains, utterly immobile for four days now, an incriminating heap, jobs buried somewhere within its strata.

—So, she says, summing up, —forget it. A pause. —Unless you want to watch it.

—No, Thomas says. It's true, he doesn't. (The only reason he watched the show last season was because he enjoyed spending his Thursday evenings with her.)

—So, she asks again. —How are you?

He shrugs. —I'm fine, I guess.

Actually, he is not fine. He is a twenty-seven-year-old virgin, a virgin who is a month away from twenty-eight, and he has grown weary of this status, weary from the weight of the secret, an enormous, crushing weight, which he seems unable to shed, which seems like something he will never be rid of. He can remember the warm and urgent kisses that Lydia bestowed to him in the dark, the gentle motion of her hand on his cock. But he did not know how to respond, how to build his half of the latticework, and so he found himself

sitting in front of his computer this week, still a virgin, deleting e-mails she had once sent him, twenty-six all together. Sitting there, reading them all in a row for the first time ever, he could see the attack and decay of the relationship so plainly, a diagram, charting where he had failed.

Janine had once offered to have sex with him; she just asked him point blank, and he turned her down. Which now he regrets. He looks down at the beer bottle in his hand, works his thumbnail under the edge of the label.

—Janine? he asks.

—What? she says.

It takes all his courage to look at her face. He expects an expression of disgust or amusement to cross it any moment now. But she only looks interested: her eyebrows convey nothing but intrigue. —Do you remember, he begins. And then starts again. —Do you remember a while ago, over the summer, you asked me—(*must be careful here*, he thinks)—you said that you could, uh, help me? That you would be willing to, uh—

She suspects that she knows what this is about, and she comes to his aid. —Is this about sex? she asks. He nods, staring intently at the beer bottle again. —I remember, she says. —And, you know, the offer still stands.

He has been so primed to hear rejection that the sentence doesn't make sense to him at first. He looks up, checking for signs of sarcasm. —Really? he asks.

—Yeah, she says. —Really. You want to?

—Um, he says. —I don't know.

—You want to give it a shot?

—Um, he says, —I don't know if I'll, uh, be very good.

—It's OK, she says. —We can take it slow.

Suddenly the prospect begins to seem pleasant. —Um, he says, —I don't know how we, uh, how do we, you know, get, uh, started?

—Here, she says, repositioning herself on the couch slightly. —Let me show you. She takes his hand and places it on her thigh, far up. He can feel her warmth.

—Now, she says. —Squeeze.

He does.

—Oh, he says.

10 / EMERGENCY

In the end he is not that bad.

Inexperienced, sure, and that has its drawbacks— she has to remind him to slow down at least five times over the course of an hour and a half —but Janine is good at giving instructions, and Thomas, bless his soul, was good at following them. For some guys that's a big issue: you say *do this* or *don't do that* in the context of the bedroom and they get all bent, as though you are interrupting them while they're trying to read or something.

Janine stretches in her half of the bed, sticks her toes out from underneath the purple blanket, waggles them, testing the ambient temperature of the apartment. It's chillier than she'd like, and the bed, having been warmed all night by two bodies, applies a certain seduction, which she duly fights. It's nine, and she knows herself well enough to know that if she stays in bed much past nine she'll fall into depression. Nine is the time that she used to have to be in to work. An image, here, of Lee, her former co-worker, sitting at his computer, his hair all tousled, looking, for all the world, like a sleepy little boy. She looks over at Thomas' head on the pillow. His black cowlicks point at the ceiling.

She heads for the kitchen. Thomas feels her go and stirs. He is in a dream, a dream, actually, of dying. In the dream his body is buried in a grave, only it has been covered with Styrofoam packing peanuts instead of earth. He knows that the peanuts will not hold him in the grave, that after a time he will rise, but he also understands that some part of himself will need to be left behind, will need to stay here, buried.

Janine goes into the kitchen. Agh; the floor is cold on her feet. The *Tribune* with the job listings, nearly a week old now, sits on her desk, radiating criticism. Her conscious mind

ignores it, steers her instead to the glass-fronted cabinet, where she pulls out two cobalt tumblers. She fills them with water from the Brita-equipped sink tap.

She thinks of last night, the strange sexiness of Thomas' inexperience. His head between her legs. He hesitated at first, not knowing what, exactly, to do, but she was prepared for that, happy to be the director for an evening. *Higher, higher, ah, there*—it ended up sounding like she was trying get an elusive itch scratched. Which, in a sense, she was. He didn't get her off that way—she ended up relying on her own hand for that. Which was fine. *This is not to say that I'm not enjoying what you're doing*, she'd said, to ease the transition. And then—into the bedside table's single drawer for a condom. *Hold still*, she told him, while she put it on. And she lay back and guided him in. And he shifted from one state of being into another.

In his dream, Thomas is emerging from his grave. His fingers go up to his eye. But there is no eye, only a socket. He reaches into this socket and pulls out a stone, alabaster, white as an egg. It is inlaid with a pattern of tiny jeweled lines, like veins. He returns this to the grave, packs it carefully in the styrofoam peanuts, and rises—

He is awake. A rhombus of light hovers on the sky-blue wall. He does not recognize the wall at first, and there is a second of *where am I?*, during which his memory of the dream goes to tatters. He doesn't fully understand where he is until he sees Janine sits on the edge of the bed in a kimonolike robe.

—I brought you some water, she says.

He has already forgotten much of the dream, but the word in his mind is *ablution*.