



# IMAGINARY YEAR

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# 2

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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](http://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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## 11 / STOPPED

Fletcher and Clark meet up at the Old Town Ale House, same as every week. He makes some joke; she laughs. He watches her. He can see her teeth and this makes him think *sexy*. He doesn't know how he can possibly find a woman's *teeth* sexy, but here he is, with the evidence before him.

He has jerked off thinking about her before: she doesn't know that, of course, and he imagines that, if she did, her reaction would be one of horror.

—So, she says. —Did you have a good Halloween?

Fletcher tilts his bottle of Leinenkugel's from side to side, as if weighing his answer. —I guess.

—Did you dress up? she asks.

—Yeah, he says, smirking. —I went as someone who still cares about life.

Her face goes serious. —Stop, she says.

He stops. *Only kidding*, he wants to say. *Just joking around*. Fletcher has a reputation as a joker; nobody takes anything he says entirely seriously. Paradoxically, this means he can often say exactly what he thinks. If you can fit an uncomfortable truth into the rhythm of a joke, you can say it, and people will laugh. They only see the confection, and miss the biting edge buried in the center. Fletcher has noticed that people—most people—don't actually pay any attention at all to what other people say. They just laugh at the cues and nod in the right places.

When Fletcher thinks about this, despair rushes into him like a cold tide, because he writes poems; he designs tiny, fragile vehicles meant to carry ideas subtly into the world, and

yet, when he watches people, what he sees mostly is that they don't notice the subtle, no, in fact, mostly, they don't notice anything. This is what makes him want to die. This is what makes him feel like he understands what drives people to shoot up their workplaces, their schools. Sticking a gun in someone's face speaks loud and clear; it cannot be misinterpreted.

*Hear me.*

But that's the thing about Clark. She hears him. He can't say *only kidding*. She can hear the truth in there. He has said something about the way he feels these days, alone, dead, and she has heard him.

And yet, she stopped him. She locked him in place with a word.

He raises his eyebrows and looks at her. She looks back at him, her serious face still on. She appears to be making some assessment of him, working towards some inscrutable conclusion.

Later tonight he will envision the slope of her neck, imagine tracing its contour with his mouth, following the break line of her collar. He will imagine his fingers on the tiny pearlescent buttons of her black shirt, undoing them; he will imagine his hands, lifting the shirt over her shoulders. He will imagine flesh as pale and as luminous as the moon. In that nightworld, all his, an invention, she will not say *stop*.

She breaks the eye contact, looks down, digs a cigarette packet out of her tote bag. —Fuck, she says. —I'm out. She flings the crumpled, empty thing onto the table, between them.

## 12 / THE CAMPAIGN

Marvin takes a bite from his enormous burrito. —So, he says, between chews, —I'm thinking of starting up the campaign again.

Paul is sitting at the kitchen counter, balancing his checkbook. When he hears this, he lifts his pen, twiddles it between his fingers nervously. In Paul's mind, Adi-Kaya rises, shaking the loose debris of the past year off of his broad shoulders. —Really?

—Yeah, Marvin says. —Maybe Tuesday nights? How do Tuesday nights work for you?

Paul mentally flits through a short litany of Adi-Kaya's adventures. He recalls their assault on Castle Xexelothanth, a massive fortress shaped like an antelope's skull, lodged in the bottom of a deep chasm. Perilously, on ropes, they lowered themselves towards the tip of one of the antelope's horns, seeking entry to a rumored staircase that spiraled down, into the warren of the skull's interior chambers. They were halfway down when they learned that the opposite face of the chasm was riddled with goblin caves. Suddenly the air was lethal—Adi-Kaya clung to the rope as a rain of arrows thudded dully into the furs and leather strapped across his back—a few piercing the flesh beneath—

—Tuesdays work. Who's going to be DMing? Paul asks.

DMing: Dungeon Mastering. Paul has been using the character of Adi-Kaya on and off in Dungeons and Dragons games for almost a full decade now. (The name was pulled from the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*, which Paul did a report on for a unit on Mythology when he was a junior in high school.)

—I'll be DMing, says Marvin.

The question is important. When Marvin, Paul and Lydia first moved up to Chicago from Bloomington, IN, Marvin drove out to the hobby and game store and put an index card up on the bulletin board. *Experienced Players Looking To Join Chicago Campaign*. It didn't take long for a group of college freshmen to contact them. Marvin and Paul both felt apprehensive about the age difference—freshmen?—but they agreed to give it a chance.

The first night, they'd been signed into the dorms for only about an hour, hadn't even started playing yet, when one of the guys booted up his computer and showed them a jerky video of a woman masturbating a dog. Paul hung back, watched them laughing, ended up eating half a bag of Cheetos. Eventually Marvin looked over, and met Paul's eyes with his own. He must have seen some kind of pain there, for he erred on the side of diplomacy for once in his life and suggested *maybe we should get to playing*.

Over the next few weeks, Paul grew weary of the sniggering ignorance that these guys demonstrated towards practically everything outside of the game. Conversations about science fiction movies or videos or books would periodically grow spirited, but turn it to music or politics or relationships, and you could watch the interest instantly wither. It bothered Paul that they weren't interested in talking about those things, but it bothered him even worse that they seemed to wear their lack of interest as a badge of *superiority*, as though those things interested only lesser beings.

Paul might have overlooked these faults, were it not for the fact that he didn't feel he could play Adi-Kaya the way he'd grown accustomed to. Adi-Kaya is a northern barbarian, slow, mighty, brutal, but Paul had decided long ago that Adi-Kaya was also homosexual, that he came from a group of barbarians where homosexual love was part of a masculine code of honor. It didn't usually come up too much when they'd be down in a dungeon fighting ghouls or whatnot, but periodically, especially during some slow town episode, Adi-Kaya

would take the opportunity to seek out homosexual encounters. This often developed into engaging mini-adventures: depending on the reaction of the townspeople and the ingenuity of the DM, Adi-Kaya could be forced to narrowly escape being burned as a heretic, or could grow entangled in a secret network of homosexual assassins (this last one was an inspired invention of Marvin's: the Order of the Lavender Hand). But, with this new group, Paul couldn't bring himself to reveal Adi-Kaya's homosexuality. For the first time, he felt like he had to keep *Adi-Kaya in the closet*.

This was unacceptable. Paul gets enough of in the closet in real life.

The fourth week he simply refused to go, and that was the end of that. They have not played since, although Marvin has continued to buy the new Third Edition rulebooks as they come out.

—You have players? Paul asks.

Marvin scratches his head. —Yeah, I know a couple of guys from work who are interested.

—We should see if Lydia wants to play, Paul says.

—Lydia? Marvin asks, as though he has forgotten that they have another roommate.

—Yeah, she's played with us before.

It's true. They rolled her up a character in college and she played a couple of times. But she never played with them regularly, never was really a member of the party. Her character—a rogue—had her own agenda, and served as their ally only in occasional circumstances, when this agenda overlapped with their own.

—I guess, says Marvin.

—See if she wants to, says Paul. —But, sure, I'll play. I'm always willing to play.

—OK, says Marvin.

## 13 / OUT

Depeche Mode is on the jukebox. *Never again is what you swore the time before.* Even back when Clark was in high school she didn't like Depeche Mode or any of those other types of bands. She knew girls who did, though—they were the same girls who would hint semi-publicly that they were interested in sadomasochism. Clark gave them a wide berth. Fuck your gloom disco sexuality. At the time, she was all about punk sexuality, which mainly involved drinking too much Old Style and then going at it on a mattress in the corner. The only other furniture a stack of milkcrates. A carpet of records and zines.

She and Elliot haven't had sex in two months now. They've only been involved for like six months, so that means, what, an entire *third* of their relationship has been sexless? She wonders if she should be worried about that. It's complicated by the fact that Elliot isn't exactly the kind of guy who she normally dates. For one thing, he's a grad student, and she mostly didn't date grad students even when she herself was in grad school. More notably, he's a grad student in *economics*, and Clark spent much of her adolescence loudly advocating the destruction of all economic systems. But strangely, one evening, there she was, sitting in a kitchen nook at one of those placid grad school parties, listening to this rather beige fellow talk about economics, and she realized two things: one, that she really didn't know much about how economics worked and, two, that she wanted to. If only to focus her critique.

She got together with him a few times for dinner or drinks, and once she began to tease out his particular take—neoinstitutional economics, a branch that treats economies as ecologies, all dynamic systems and nonlinear combinatorics—she rediscovered something that she learned a long time ago: if you let a guy talk about what he feels passionate about,



before too long he'll want to sleep with you. At the restaurant he tapped the point of his knife decisively against the surface of his napkin and he said *I'm finding myself strangely attracted to you*. And she thought about what it might be like to sleep with him and she concluded *why not? It'll at least be different*.

But the thing is, it hasn't been different. She's having the same trouble with him in bed as she's had with each of her other lovers. She could characterize them best by saying that they're *relentless*. She wants a lovemaking that contains detours, digressions, a sexuality that drifts, not this singleminded zeroing in on her cunt that she's grown, sadly, to expect. Sometimes she finds herself thinking about the footage of the "smart" bombs dropped in the Gulf War, drawn to their target as if on invisible wire. This image doesn't do much for her enthusiasm. She hasn't brought this up with Elliot—she knows she should, but, argh, she really doesn't want to take on the role of being someone's sexual instructor: there's a whole-*nother* set of problems that comes with *that*.

*You'll see your problems multiplied / If you continually decide / To faithfully pursue / The policy of truth.*

She's out after work, with Paul; he is doing a little play about Perihelion using tableware; she is drinking vodka tonics, and eventually she decides that she wants to explain her situation to him. She thinks that as a gay man he may have an interesting perspective on it. She wonders if these problems are peculiar to heterosexual sex, *breeder sex* as they call it, whether it's different in sex between men, or sex between women. Problem, though: she hasn't ever officially confirmed that Paul is gay. She personally feels pretty sure—his motions are marked by a certain delicacy, he is surrounded by an aura of grace that doesn't normally adhere to heavy men—but he has never spoken overtly of a boyfriend or anything like that. She has considered various tactful ways of getting at the matter, but she still

considers tact to be something of a bourgeois relic, and, consequently, she believes that the straightforward approach is often the best.

Thus: —Paul. You're gay, right?

Paul sucks in sharply and draws two fingers up to cover his nostrils, as though he's afraid that he may eject his last mouthful of scotch out through his sinuses.

Fact is, Clark is not wrong, but Paul is not accustomed to talking about his homosexuality, unless it is through the character of Adi-Kaya. (Clark knows that Paul "games," but she doesn't know about Adi-Kaya; you could say that she and Adi-Kaya have not yet been formally introduced.) Paul has never even come out to Marvin or Lydia. He assumes that they know, but they don't ask him about it, and now he's been friends with them for so long (Marvin for six years, Lydia for three) that he believes bringing it up could only have two possible effects. Either they already know, and have known for long enough that a confession would strike them as absurdly unnecessary (maybe they would laugh at him), or they don't know, and they would be hurt by his confession, they would wonder why he hadn't trusted them enough to mention it earlier (maybe they wouldn't like him anymore).

Coming out to his parents? Oh, God, the very idea makes him ill. Heavy-duty Catholics. (Paul is the youngest of four.) Paul's dad was mainly interested in hockey, woodcrafting, and repairing electronics, and Paul remembers his dad trying to interest him in these things, taking him out down to the basement on Sunday afternoons and showing him how to plane a board. But during the week, Paul's attention belonged completely to his sisters. They would spend entire afternoons showing Paul their jewelry and makeup and clothes, getting him to help them dress their dolls. (Eventually Paul's dad told him he couldn't play with the dolls anymore, so Paul switched over to action figures, which were regarded only marginally less cautiously by his dad.) When Paul became an adolescent, his

weight became the major point of contention in the house. His dad regularly suggested athletics as the solution, a suggestion Paul resolutely ignored, and as the idea waned and finally disappeared, so did the overall ability of Paul to communicate meaningfully with his dad. Coming out is out of the question.

Even Paul's small, cherished set of sexual encounters with other boys have mostly been wordless. So when Clark asks her question, in this completely offhand fashion, she may be the first person to ever call upon him to verbally acknowledge his identity as a gay man, and he is brought up short: for a moment he literally does not know how to respond.

—Um, yeah, he says. —I guess.

*You guess?* Clark thinks, and an inkling of what she's done glimmers for a moment. A surging feeling of guilt is coupled with her memory of an old *Onion* headline: *Area Homosexual Thinks He's Still In The Closet*. And her mind seizes inappropriately on that, and she can't think of anything else to say. Elliot, the whole matter of male sexuality—these are now gone from her mind.

—That's cool, she says, and she tears her napkin into shreds.

## 14 / ZEN FLESH

The first thing Thomas realizes after he loses his virginity is that he doesn't feel any different. The second thing he realizes is how different he feels.

It is as though he has remembered that he has a body.

In the week that followed, he began to detect a line running through him. He can trace this force: it seems to begin in his skull, then flow down through his chest, down to a point below his navel but above his groin, a point which seems to have opened. Like a fist has relaxed in his body.

Thomas heads into the Loop, wearing waitersuit under overcoat. As the train roars and shakes through darkness he tries to remain aware of the way he held his body, aware of the way his spine met the plastic seat. Mindfulness.

That evening, at the hotel, Thomas puzzles over how to be a mindful waiter. It seems impossible: the only reason that he, normally shy, can be a waiter at all is because he doesn't need to think about it, he only needs to follow the script. He heads to the kitchen, pausing to check on the businessmen at Table Eight. They want more bread. *I'll have that right out for you. And you, sir? Another Heineken?*

A segment of breakroom shelf has been designated his by a strip of masking tape, on which the word WAKATAMI has been Sharpie'd. His overcoat, folded into a neat square, sits there, and, atop it, a copy of *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. This is a book he hadn't looked at in some years, but he drew it from his bookshelf tonight and read bits of it on the subway. The chapter on "Centering" reminded him of how much of the practice is bodily. *Consider your essence as light rays rising from center to center up the vertebrae, and so rises **livingness** in you.*

He carries a heavy tray laden with plates of prime rib and corn. He feels his spine compress and torque. He tries to block it out. He has to get through the night somehow.

*Feel your substance, bones, flesh, blood, saturated with **cosmic essence**.*

He thinks about his practice; how it will progress differently, with Janine as a catalyst. He has only just begun. The idea makes him giddy, excited, as though he has made a breakthrough.

He feels grateful, and eager.

He has plans to head over to her place tonight after he gets done. *Blessed one, as senses are absorbed in heart, reach the **center** of the lotus.*

## 15 / CONFIDENCE

The last shot in this episode of *Buffy* is of Buffy and Spike, standing in a dark corner of a club, making out. Lydia shifts irritably on the couch: she feels slightly turned on. She grumbles.

Paul mutes the TV, which has switched to commercials. —What? he says.

—Nothing, Lydia says. She pokes around in her pipe with the nail of her pinkie finger to see if there's anything left in there besides cinders.

—All right, says Paul, willing to let it drop. He tilts the bowl of leftover Halloween candy towards him, sifts through the layers until he finds a Hershey's Special Dark bar.

Lydia takes one last hit just to confirm that the pipe really is cashed. —I don't know, she says.

Paul, chewing, puts his hand over his mouth and says —What?

Lydia draws her knees up to her chest and hugs them there, sitting on the couch now in a compact ball. —I'm starting to think that I should write off my love life as just being basically, you know, over, she says.

Even half-stoned, she knows that this is an exaggeration. It's only been three months since she and Thomas split up. *But Thomas barely even counts*, she tells herself. And three months feels like a long time, when you're looking.

She feels a little bit weird talking about this to Paul: she's known him for three *years* and never seen *him* involved with anybody. He could pull rank on her, trump her loneliness with his own; she knows this. But she also knows that it's not in Paul's nature to be petty.

—Darlin', says Paul, in a mock-Southern accent, all you need is a shot of confidence.

Lydia claps her hands to her forehead. —Make it a double, she says.

Confidence. Where the fuck did it go? Age fifteen: there had been this guy she'd wanted, Alestier Jones, and so she'd sent her friend, Amanda Drexel, off to do recon, to assess the viability of this desire. Alestier told Amanda, that he didn't want to have anything to do with *some ugly Rican girl*, and Amanda chose to report this precise phrase back to Lydia, which left Lydia protesting *I'm only **half** Puerto Rican*, over and over again, in her own head. (Left her steamed at her dad, too, for a good long while.) That was a blow. But: age sixteen, one year later, she's standing in front of her mirror, done up in a rubberized yellow raincoat. Glitter on her cheeks and thick rings of eyeliner. Pink hair (she'd had to bleach the fuck out of it before the pink would take). Hot. She remembers herself looking hot and she remembers that she *knew it*, she felt completely confident, as if this thing with Alestier Jones had never happened. So why can't she find her way back to that now?

—What do you think when you look at yourself in the mirror? Paul asks. Do you think I! Am! Lydia! Ramirez!? And look out Chicago, 'cause I came here to take you by storm!?

—No, says Lydia.

—Couldn't hurt, Paul says.

What she thinks is closer to *who **is** this mousy thing?*

—What about you? Lydia asks. —When you look in the mirror, do you think, I! Am! Paul! Sutherland!?

—No, Paul says.

What he thinks is closer to *look at the disgusting fat gayboy.*

—Well, she says. —We're quite a pair.

## 16 / THANKSGIVING

—Listen, man, Jakob says, do you have somewhere to go tonight? Cause you could come out with us if you wanted to. Freya says it's no problem. Fletcher listens to the phone line humming between them, pauses a moment before answering, considering not so much the offer but rather the way that the offer serves as evidence, evidence that Jakob, in a word, cares. Fletcher frowns, as if puzzled, double-checks his interpretation of the gesture. Then, finally, he smiles. Sometimes he thinks that he alienated all the people who cared about him long ago, and evidence to the contrary is always welcome. —No, no, thanks, Fletcher says. —I'm cool. Esmat is having people over.

Esmat is a grad student, like Jakob and Fletcher, and she has been away from her family for a decade (they're in Iran). So, every year, she holds Thanksgiving dinner at her house, taking in other lost grad students. It's a potluck: everyone brings food drawn from their own tradition. Reportedly Esmat's Iranian dishes are delicious. Fletcher feels a little bit weird, actually, only preparing to bring mashed potatoes and gravy, but his tradition is that of suburban WASP America: even the most inventive genealogy would not permit him to pretend otherwise. Normally, in fact, he would be driving out to Evanston to spend Thanksgiving with his parents, a quiet dinner, just the three of them (only child) and the occasional aunt and uncle in town for a visit. But this year, his parents, newly retired, decided they were going to go spend a week in Spain, apparently a place they'd both always wanted to visit, so, at age 29, Fletcher, somewhat surprisingly, found himself on his own, needing, at last, to fall back on Esmat's perennial invitation.

—You're going to see my hometown tonight, Fletcher says. —That's so weird.



—Yeah, it is kind of weird, Jakob says. He doesn't know Chicago's surrounding landscape with the same intimacy with which he knows suburban Ohio. In the part of Ohio where he grew up, every high school has at least one name and face attached to it; every lousy 24-hour diner has a story; even the McDonald's have memories linked to them. That world helped to make him, in ways that he cannot begin to fully draw out. And tonight he will see the world that helped make Freya, for the first time. He will see her hometown. He will meet her mom, her stepdad, her brother.

It's 2 pm; Fletcher is supposed to be over at Esmat's by 4, and he hasn't yet started cooking the potatoes. —Look, he says, you have a good time. I gotta get moving.

—Yeah, OK, says Jakob. —Take care.

—I will, says Fletcher. And he knows that Jakob means it. And he thinks of the day and he says: —Thanks.

## 17 / DREAM JOB

She stirs granola into a bowl of plain yogurt. She is reminded of Ed, a bartender who she spent some time with a few years ago—when she quit waiting tables and went into corporate graphic design he joked about giving up bartending in order to work as a copywriter. He used to slip in and out of copywriter-speak in order to make her laugh: she remembers him holding up a bowl of morning yogurt and saying "YogurtCo: Bringing You the Latest in Yogurt Technology!" Funny guy; she wonders what he's up to these days.

She carries the yogurt into her bedroom. Sky-blue walls, the indigo I Mac at her little computer desk. She needs to get started with this job search. She has not been particularly diligent about it—the decent severance package that came with her layoff helped—but, still, she's been out of work for over a month now, and has begun to dip into her meager savings just a little too often. She has reached the point where stuff she bought while employed now stimulates feelings of guilt, simply because it is not money in the bank. (*Why* did I buy flatware from the MCA gift shop? Did I really need *another* black dress?)

She told herself *I'll start after Thanksgiving*, and she kind of extended Thanksgiving into a four-day holiday. But now it is Monday and she is ready. She has put together a good portfolio of designs that she did for the Woolcot Group. She has bought a new legal tablet and written "Job" at the top of it. She has sharpened six pencils. She spent yesterday cleaning the apartment so there would be no dusty surfaces left to distract her.

She has decided, this time, to avoid the paper version of the Sunday *Tribune*—its solid gray mass accentuated the depressing elements of the task. Instead, she is going to peruse their online listings. She eats her yogurt while the Mac is starting up. Connects.

Types "designer" into the Keyword blank in their interface. The interface is labeled "Find your Dream Job," which makes her cringe. She has no hope that this machine will actually help her find her dream job—especially since she's not even sure what that would be. She will settle for anything that doesn't make her want to commit suicide (or run back to graduate school).

The first listing is for Engineering Mechanical Designers. No good; she scrolls down the page. The Global Fire Prevention Company is looking for a Graphic Designer of Fire Sprinkler Systems. Uh, interesting, but she doesn't think it's for her.

Here's something.

*Graphic Designer - Peribellion Productions. Chicago company seeks a talented graphic designer for its in-house creative department. We specialize in immersive media games targeted to a culturally sophisticated audience—applicants should be familiar not only with QuarkXpress, Photoshop and Illustrator but also with the work of Sergei Eisenstein, Wassily Kandinsky, and Brian Eno.*

Hm. She taps her pencil against her lips. That sounds OK. She can do art-geek when necessary. It's not her main hat, but it's one she knows how to wear.

She pulls the legal tablet into her lap and writes down the details. A tiny sense of accomplishment rises in her. *I found one, she thinks, can I go play now?*