



# IMAGINARY YEAR

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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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## 23 / CHORDWORLD

Janine walks past a fenced-in lot full of second-hand radiators and she stops, tries to remember the address that she got from that guy David over the phone, when he called to let her know that the job was hers. The neighborhood's a little more low-rent than she'd expected: it hardly seems like the kind of place you'd hide a company doing something as flashy as multiplayer video games. (Although the block is not without its signs of approaching gentrification: on the corner is a rather upscale-looking Italian restaurant, directly adjacent to a battered service garage.)

She digs her planner out of her purse and fumbles it open to the page where she wrote down Perihelion's address. She checks it against the address painted on the radiator lot's chipped metal sign. It seems like the place should be right across the street. She looks over there, and sees a small, nondescript building. She looks through the window and can make out what maybe looks like a conference room: maybe this is the right place. As she crosses towards the building, the trendier details of the conference room begin to come into focus: the chairs are of avant-garde Danish design, the table's surface is a single slab of glass. This is *definitely* the right place.

The door has a plate with the word PERIHELION engraved on it in small caps. She doesn't see any buzzer or anything, so she knocks, and after a minute or two she just pushes in. She finds herself standing directly in the conference room, which seems to double as the lobby. She looks around for a receptionist, but there is none. On the phone, David had said *When you get here just report to me. My office is the one down at the far end of the hall;*

*double doors; just come on in.* So she starts off down the hall, feeling, somehow, like she's doing something illicit, like she's going to get in trouble if she gets caught.

On her way down towards the double doors some unshaven guy sticks his head out of his office and says —Hello?

—Hi, Janine says. She clutches her purse against her stomach. —My name's Janine Tellier? I'm here to meet with David Czierwiensky?

—He's the door at the end of the hall, says the guy. He gestures the way with a ruler.

—Thanks, she says.

She gets to the doors and knocks, rather timidly.

—Come in.

She pushes her way in. There's a gangly-looking guy sitting at a desk, staring down into a file folder and frowning. Behind him hangs a poster-size reproduction of a Don Caballero album cover. The cover art depicts a person whose gender cannot be determined: his or her face is pointed away from the camera, so that you can only see long hair.

Androgyny helps to make Janine feel comfortable.

The guy at the desk looks up and sees her and his face lights up into a smile.

—Hey, says David, —you must be Janine. Nice to meet you!

He extends his hand across the granite slab of his desk, and she reaches forward to shake it. She's surprised to see that he's so young—he's maybe five years older than her. (If that: her assessment of his age is more based on the fineness of his suit than anything else.)

He sits back down and gestures at the chair next to her; she sits.

—Okay, says David. —How's your day going?

—Fine, Janine says.

—Great, David says. —Listen, this meeting will be pretty quick—in a little bit I'll have Paul take you down to your office; he'll really get you started on the paperwork and all that. Have you met Paul yet?

—No, sir, says Janine.

—Paul's a good guy; Paul's a good guy, says David. —He'll introduce you around. But I wanted you to meet with me first so I could see you face to face and tell you a few things about our project; help give you to get a sense of how things function around here. I guess we talked about this some in the interview?

—Some, Janine says. —Yeah, I guess.

—OK, David says. —So forgive me if I repeat myself, here, I can't really remember what we talked about and what we didn't. The important thing is that what we're working on is an online multiplayer video game, called Chordworld. But Chordworld isn't really your normal sort of video game. It's abstract, almost, uh, *theoretical*. Here—this is the “rant” portion of our program—here we believe that video games are going to be the preeminent art form of the twenty-first century. What film was to the twentieth century. It's hard to see the truth of that right now, since most video games on the market right now are being made for teenagers. Twenty years of progress in the field and you're still hard-pressed to find a video game that operates at above a high school level. We're trying to make a game that will appeal to adults. Sophisticated adults. People who go to museums, who think about art. Chordworld is being written and designed by people who know about more than video games. You saw this in our ad, I guess. We want people who know about film theory, music theory. The production is going well. We're planning to go live in September of this year. What I need, though, is someone who can design ads that will appeal to those

sophisticated adults. Ads that will get them interested in playing a video game. I've seen your work; I've talked to you about your interests. I think you can do it.

—Thank you, sir, says Janine.

—David, please, says David. —Anyway, the game has a story; it's complicated; I'm not going to go into it right now. You'll be meeting next week with Clark, she's our World Editor, she'll fill you in on all that. You can use elements of the story in the ads if you want, but you don't have to; I don't want the ads to try to, you know, do too much, you know what I mean? I want them to be kind of subtle.

—Sure, says Janine. —Sophisticated.

—Right, says David. —Ah, listen to me. I'm talking like I know how to do your job. If you catch me doing that again, just say *listen, David, leave the designing to me*.

—OK, says Janine, although she can actually envision herself saying no such thing.

—Great, says David. He stands. —Let's go find Paul.

## 24 / QUEERING ECONOMICS

A few weeks after the scene at the restaurant went down, Clark made a New Year's resolution: to break off her relationship with Elliot if things did not improve.

He is over at her apartment now. He is sitting at the dining room table, paging through one of his notebooks, while Clark fixes a new bobbin into her sewing machine. When she's done she takes a sip of her tea, and she looks at him, as though taking measure.

The two of them quietly sitting. There is a domestic delicacy to this moment that she is unaccustomed to, a calm that her previous relationships never seemed to find. Most of the boys she's dated were full of restless energy: she imagines them here in this still room, leaping up, pacing back and forth, needing to toss off a few games of something on the Playstation, to go out to the noise and jostle of a bar—to find *stimulation*, somehow, anywhere. But Elliot—he sits. His hand rests loosely around his teacup. He flips a page in his notes. Clark watches him, and thinks about how this is a new kind of evening for her, one she does not necessarily find unpleasant. She has learned something from this relationship, perhaps, only not exactly what she had expected to learn.

They have stopped having the kind of political conversations that they had when the relationship started. They seemed unable to find a way to disagree without getting angry.

They have not had sex in a long time.

Clark thinks about these things, and she sees the future of their relationship as a succession of these sorts of evenings, silent, polite, and suddenly she feels like an animal in a cage. She feels surprised that she stuck with it for this long.

Perhaps the relationship is already over, and all that remains is the need to speak that truth.

He must feel her eyes upon him, for he looks up at her. Their eyes meet. He smiles, as though pleased to find that she is here. Neither of them say anything.

She thinks about Vonda.

Vonda is a friend of Clark's, who now lives out in San Francisco, in a lesbian collective house. Over Christmas she was back in town; she stayed with Clark for a night. They sat on cushions on the living room floor and passed a bottle of wine back and forth. *So I'm going out with this guy who's an economics student*, Clark had said. *If you can believe that*. Vonda lit up, began talking enthusiastically about the queer theory's critiques of political economy, recommending authors and articles. They pursued these points for close to an hour. The ideas poured so smoothly between them.

She tries. —So, she says to Eliot. —Are you at all familiar with the work of J. K. Gibson-Graham? This is one of the names that Vonda gave her.

Elliot frowns, looks puzzled. —No, he says.

—She's an economic critic, Clark says. —She's in favor of creating a queer economics.

Elliot looks skeptical. —What on earth do you mean?

—Um, Clark says. (She hasn't read any of Gibson-Graham's works; she is basing her paraphrase on the paraphrase that Vonda gave her.) —I mean that capitalism is conceived of as heterosexual and masculine. You know: it penetrates other economies, but is resistant to, uh, *being* penetrated? A more *fluid* conception of capitalism might help to create a space within which non-capitalist activities could more easily survive.



Elliot looks troubled. He knits his brow, lifts his pen and presses it against the bridge of his nose.

—I don't get it, he says. —I mean, I don't necessarily object to the *conceptualizing*, but I don't see the practical value. In order for the space that you're talking about to exist, to actually *be created* (and here he taps the pen on his notebook), who is supposed to hold this conception? Academics? Economists? Merchants? Shoppers? It would really have to be all of the above, and, I don't know, I just don't see that happening.

Clark shuts up. And she understands, suddenly, why ideas fail to flow between her and Elliot: it is because he values pragmatism over idealism. He is more interested in the way the world exists than in the way the world *could* exist. For Clark, there is value in imaginary spaces: they highlight the way the spaces of the world-as-it-is fail us, they show us what we still need. They contain hope, and so they are beautiful.

This is what sex is about for her, too: the attempt to break through into a better, more ecstatic world. Pragmatic sex is never good sex.

She thinks it again: the relationship is already over. All that remains is the need to speak that truth.

—Elliot, she says. —I need to talk to you about something.

## 25 / SILVER CLOUD

Friday night. After work Paul and Clark hail a cab and head over to the Silver Cloud, on Damen north of North, hoping to drink until their memories of the most recent week's worth of work have blurred. They bring Janine, the new girl, along with them. They both have a feeling that they will like her. Janine's flinty manner seems to harmonize well with the witty, disgruntled aura that they cultivate. They want to bring her on board. They want to teach the right way to suffer.

But they've dropped the workplace gossip for the time being: Clark is talking about how she dumped her now-ex-boyfriend Elliot.

—So, yeah, she explains, —the straw that broke the camel's back?: I was trying to talk about some queer theory, and he was all like *Hub?* And I just basically thought why am I even *with* this person?

The reference to theory makes Janine take note. Ever since she got her Master's she hasn't encountered too many theoryheads, and she certainly didn't expect to encounter any at this job. Especially not a *queer* theoryhead. She takes a second to check Clark out. She liked Clark before, in a she-seems-pleasant-enough kind of way, but this new knowledge causes her to revise her assessment upwards. She wonders, momentarily, whether Clark might be bisexual. She wants to ask Clark about the theory she's read, to see how much overlap the two of them share, but the breakup conversation has already moved on:

—How did he take it? asks Paul, raising a chicken wing to his mouth.

—Very pragmatically, says Clark. —You know, all *well I guess it's for the best*. I don't think his facial expression even changed.

Paul snorts. –Well, he says, –I’m always happy to see another man out there on the market. Maybe you should give me his number.

Paul can barely believe that he is here, in this bar, just *saying* things that identify him as gay. This is new for him. He did not exactly feel comfortable doing that back in Indiana, not even in gay-friendly Bloomington. He’s not even really out to his roommates. But Clark asked him, and he told her the truth, and ever since then he has enjoyed these after-work bull sessions even more than he had before, because he gets to try out being an openly gay male. It is like flexing new wings.

–No, no, Clark says. –*Believe* me, you do *not* want to be involved with this guy.

–I have news for you, darling, Paul says. –It’s been a long time since I’ve gotten any action. I am no longer exactly, shall we say, *discriminating* in my affections.

–Paul, says Clark. –*Believe* me. We can find a better guy for you.

Janine recognizes that the *we* is her cue. –Yeah, she says. –There are lots of guys in Chicago who I’ll bet are *dying* for a piece of Paul Sutherland.

–I’ll take that bet, says Paul.

## 26 / AMATEURISM; EXPERTISE

Lydia and Austin had plans to get together before Christmastime, but they fell through. He'd called her up (at work again: she has learned the hard way not to give out her home phone number too early) and apologized. *Things are just getting a little crazy around here, but maybe when I get back? Sure, she'd said. Want to grab a coffee after work some day?*

They had previously only talked about possibly meeting for lunch. She made the shift to *after work* deliberately; she wants the open-endedness of an evening at her disposal, just to see what might happen. Things can't get too interesting during an hour-long lunch, safely bracketed at both ends by administrative assisting.

He'd agreed. It took a few attempts to coordinate a suitable Friday night, but now they are sitting here, eating coffeeshop bruschetta and sipping beverages.

The evening got off to a weird start: Lydia had ordered a coffee; Austin had asked for a ginger ale, and then, by way of explanation, had said *I don't drink caffeine anymore. I started to worry that it was doing something to my heart.* Lydia had found that to be an odd thing to say, and she hadn't known how to respond, and, furthermore, she suddenly felt guilty about having suggested that they go out for coffee in the first place. She was struck with an urge to apologize but then thought that an apology might seem weird, as though she was trying too hard. *Be cool,* Paul had told her, and she wants badly to take this advice. So there was a minute—probably only a few seconds, but excruciating ones—where neither of them said anything.

But now they've loosened up a bit, and the conversation has turned to music. To some degree, she felt nervous about broaching the subject: this guy is a performing musician,

and, although a thoughtful listener, Lydia doesn't have much experience with actually playing music: she's done some amateur experiments with sound software, but that's about it. All the same, ever since she saw Austin play that show last month, using dice and a modified guitar, she's been wanting to talk to him about it, and she'll be damned if she spends the whole evening small-talking around the subject. So she brings it up.

—Yeah, Austin says. —It's kind of an indeterminacy thing? For that piece I have eight different, uh, melodic cycles that I can play on the guitar? I call them "modules." And I roll a die and that determines which of the modules I'm going to play; and then I roll another die and *that* determines how many times I'll repeat the module before re-rolling. So the piece is, you know, a little bit different every time?

—Yeah, Lydia says. —I get that. It's kind of like generative music. You know what I mean? Where you set up like a series of rules to guide the music and the music kind of, creates *itself* from those rules? [She pauses here, thinks about what she just said, second-guesses herself.] —Not to say that you're not the one creating the music, I mean, you're the one up there with the guitar—

—No, no, Austin says. —You had the right idea. I mean, I'm playing the modules, and I wrote them, I guess, but the performance is guided by other forces, forces that are really not under my control, you know? I've written the rules—what I like to think of as the *programming* of the piece—but I can't always really predict what kind of *effect* those rules will create. It's like, I don't know, a game of chess in that way. Like there's this basic set of rules, but like an *infinite* number of games that those rules can, yeah, generate, like you said.

—It's funny that you should use that word *programming*, says Lydia. —There's this program that I use sometimes, it's called AudioMulch? It kind of works that same way:

where you set up this system of effects and the sound kind of cascades through them and is modified in ways that are really unpredictable and kind of neat.

—Yeah, Austin says. —I know some people who play around with that kind of stuff, but I haven't used any of it myself.

It is here that Lydia begins to realize that perhaps she is not as much of an amateur as she thought. She may not have performed as much, but she has been thinking about music for close to a decade now, and she suddenly becomes aware that her structures for thinking about it are sophisticated, that they are areas of expertise.

Austin, for his part, is thinking *this is a girl that I could really see myself liking*.

## 27 / INTEREST

—So what's Freya been up to? Fletcher asks. —I haven't seen her around much lately. He licks the joint closed, tastes the thin flavor of rolling paper glue on his tongue.

—Yeah, Jakob says, she's been kind of busy. They made her assistant manager at the record shop.

Fletcher lights his lighter and uses it to toast the joint's moist seam dry. —Oh yeah? he says.

—Yeah, Jakob says. —She's been there longer than anybody.

—That's cool. Fletcher offers the joint and lighter over to Jakob, who accepts them. —Things still going well between you two?

There is a pause while Jakob inhales. He holds the smoke in his lungs for five seconds or so, then exhales. —Yeah, yeah, things are going fine, he says. (A few remembered conflicts flicker dimly in his mind, but in the end he decides that his statement is essentially true. He does not want to bore Fletcher by expounding upon each minor aberration from that basic truth.)

Now it is Fletcher's turn to take a hit, and Jakob takes the opportunity to ask: —And you? How are things going with *your* love life?

Fletcher makes a flat plane of his hand, and tilts it back and forth. Exhales. —Eh, he says.

—How about the crush with Isabelle? Jakob asks. —How did that work out?

—Well, says Fletcher, passing the joint, —my crushes don't exactly *work out*. I don't know that they're even *meant* to work out, really.

—How do you mean? Jakob asks.

—You hear people sometimes talk about *interest bets*? Fletcher says. —A bet that you make on something—anything, really. It could be, I don't know, *I bet I'll make it across the street before the light changes*, or *I'll bet you that so-and-so is wearing that same green hat today*, or whatever. These kinds of bets, you don't make them because you particularly *care* about the outcome or because you feel *certain* about something; you make them because it makes your day a little more interesting. You feel that little extra margin of *investment* in the way that things turn out?

—Sure, Jakob says. —I guess.

—That's kind of the way that I am with crushes, Fletcher says. —I don't necessarily expect them to *work out*: I don't even know that I really *want* them to work out. I certainly don't put in much serious effort towards that end. But having a crush gives me that extra *investment* that I was talking about. You know, a normal day, me walking around the English Department: I get to think: Will I see her? If I wander by her office, will she be there? Maybe I'll stick my head in—will I be able to think of something to say? Will I score a point or will I lose a point? It just makes my day a little bit more interesting. It's basically a game. Speaking of which.

He turns on the TV. It is 6:05 in Chicago, and if it were not football season, they would be five minutes into *Futurama*, the first of the Sunday night shows that Fletcher and Jakob sometimes get together to watch. (The lineup: *Futurama*, *King of the Hill*, *The Simpsons*, *Malcolm In the Middle*, and *The X-Files*.) But the game has pushed into *Futurama*'s slot, as it has done almost every Sunday night this fall. Fletcher leaves the TV on and just turns the sound down. He turns and sees that Jakob is looking at him with a somewhat worried expression on his face.



—What? Fletcher says.

—I don't know, man, Jakob says. —I mean, interest crushes, sure, but—don't you ever get lonely?

Fletcher shrugs. —I don't know, he says. —I've pretty much resigned myself to the fact that I'll be dying alone.

—Shut up, Jakob says.

—No, man, Fletcher says. —I mean, you know, I was an only child; I'm kind of used to it. This is just, you know, the way things kind of *are* for me. It doesn't seem *lonely* or *not lonely*; it just seems like, you know—

He falls into watching the silent TV. Jakob watches the green of football field gleam in his glasses.

Fletcher thinks of the strong women who he has known, Freya, Clark, thinks of the romantic interest that he developed for them, an interest that, in each case, felt so different from a crush. He thinks of the way that he corralled this interest off, created a place where nothing could touch it, a sealed chamber in which it was safe and from where it could not be heard.

The joint, held in his fingers, smolders. Curls of smoke unspool in the air.

## 28 / PROBABLY

Janine puts a whiskey and soda in Thomas' hand.

—Thanks, he says. It's become a habit for him to drink whiskey with Janine when he's over at her place. Maker's Mark. He moves the glass in a circle and listens to the ice clink.

Janine goes back to the kitchen, opens up a bag of walnuts and throws them into the salad-in-progress. —So, she calls to Thomas. —There's this woman at work? She pauses for confirmation.

—Yeah? comes Thomas' voice from the other room.

—Yeah. Her name is Clark; she seems pretty cool. I think she and I are into the same bodies of theory.

—Uh huh, says Thomas.

There are two things that immediately make him feel nervous.

- 1) He knows that Janine is bisexual.
- 2) He knows that Janine's relationships are nonmonogamous.

It is true that Janine has not taken other lovers in the four months or so that she has been having sex with him, and this has been convenient, it has allowed him to operate as though Point 2 were not true, to fully sidestep the question of what he would do if she took another lover. How he would feel. And yet a part of his mind always knew that she could, that, eventually, she *would*. He has kept one eye open for signs. He wonders if this is the first.

—I don't know, Janine says, from the kitchen. —She just seems cool, is all. I've hung out with her and this other guy Paul a couple of times after work. I think it would be good for me to hang out with someone who knew some more theory; all my old grad school books are just gathering dust around here.

—Yeah, Thomas says. —You're probably right.

He sips his drink.

## 29 / BE SURE TO LOOP

It is late Sunday night and Jakob comes over. He doesn't teach or have classes on Mondays this semester, and Freya works through the busy weekend but then has Monday and Tuesday off, so a habit has begun to emerge: they have begun to think of Monday as a day to spend together, starting Sunday night. Freya is sitting on the sofa, wearing her glasses, reading Michael Chabon's *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. She looks up when Jakob comes in. He has his own key now.

—How was Fletcher's? she asks.

—Fine, Jakob says. —He keeps asking about you. I think he wants to see you.

Freya puts her hands over her face. —I know, she says through them. —Sunday nights are no good for me, though: I finish up with these weekend shifts and I just want an evening to *myself*, you know? And then the rest of the weekend goes by so *fast* and I just never seem to have *time* during the week.

—I know, Jakob says.

She lets her hand drop. —I'll give him a call, she says. —Maybe I can meet with him for a beer or something some evening.

—I think he'd like that, says Jakob.

Secretly he worries: he knows Fletcher spends a lot of time alone, and he thinks that spending a lot of time alone has long-term effects, and he feels he can see hints of them in Fletcher. A certain superiority marks his tone sometimes, a certain glibness infects his manner, as though he's already figured everything out and grown exasperated with those who haven't. Jakob thinks that this is what happens when people spend too much time in

their own heads: they reduce the world to a model based on a few key premises, an easy bauble, and they ultimately grow smug and detached, bored. Jakob thinks that spending time with other people—bumping up against their inscrutability, their mysteries—cures these symptoms, and so he makes a point of spending extra time with Fletcher. He wishes that other people would too.

—So how were the shows? Freya asks.

—Eh, Jakob says. —*Futurama* and *King of the Hill* were bumped because of football: since we're so close to the Super Bowl the post-game show has gotten pretty long. *The Simpsons* was funny, but, you know, that's basically a given. *The X-Files* was, eh, OK—it was a loop episode: people get killed, and then they're reincarnated, and then they're killed again. The killer commits suicide each time he offs his victims, and then he, too, reincarnates, so that he can kill the reincarnated victims again. It's kind of a (he churns the air with his hand while he gropes for the words) vengeance pact story.

Freya shrugs. —I feel like I've seen that one already.

—Well, Jakob says (and here he comes over to kiss her on the head) —it got me to thinking. There *do* seem to have been a lot of these types of episodes on TV, not just on *The X-Files* but on some other shows, too. These shows where like the characters are stuck in a loop and they have to break it, or figure something out in order to escape it.

—*Groundhog Day*, Freya says.

—Well, yeah, Jakob says. —Hey, that's coming up, isn't it?

—Yep, Freya says. —I have to remember to call my friend Sharon; it's her birthday.

—But anyway, Jakob says, —this loop motif keeps appearing, again and again—

—Almost like—a *loop!* Freya says, in a faux-dramatic voice.

Jakob smirks. —Ha ha. But I just got to thinking, where does it come from? Who used it first? Have there been more of these recently than there were before? What does it reflect about our culture that we find these kinds of stories compelling? The sheer repetitive nature of life in postindustrial society? Something to do with computers? It seems to connect so up to so many things: why, the loop could be a *twentieth-century motif!*

Freya raises her eyebrows.

—Hey, Jakob says. —These are the sorts of ideas that can make an academic's career.

—I can see it now, Freya says. —"Loop studies."

—Exactly, Jakob says.

—No, seriously, though, Freya says. —You might be on to something here. I mean, the loop is a big component of twentieth-century music: tape loops, digital loops. (She snaps her fingers.) Do you know OOIOO's song "Be Sure 'To Loop?"

—I don't know, Jakob says. —I only know what you play for me.

She smiles. She spends most of her week, every week, with people who base their self-worth on the number of obscure bands they have crossreferenced in their skull. It is refreshing to spend time with someone who doesn't know anything and doesn't feel ashamed to say so.

—OK, she says. —Listen to this. This is like an anthem for loopers.

She pulls a CD out of the racks, stacked high within an armoire. He catches a glimpse of the cover, which seems to be covered in rainbows and spangles. She puts the disc in and hits Play.

—Listen, she says.

Sounds flutter and assemble. There are birdcalls, and drums, and a woman's voice saying "be sure to loop" over and over again, periodically breaking into a chant that goes like this: Loop loop loop loop loop loop loop loop loop loop!

—Wow, Jakob says.