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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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## 37 / TAKING BREAKS

Sometimes Janine wonders whether Perihelion will ever make any money at all. She was hired on to do a print ad campaign, and within the first two weeks she was told by David, her boss, that they really weren't planning to run any ads until summertime. In the meantime they'll have her prepare some mock-ups; Jean-Pierre, their primary investor, will pay for some focus groups to come in and take a look at them, but even that won't be for another few months. So for now, Janine finds herself written into the budget, with a tidy salary (although a bit less than she was making before), forty hours a week to fill, and not much to do.

Half feeling like she should be honest, and half afraid that she'd be caught slacking off, she asked David about what, exactly, she should be working on. He asked her if she knew how to use Macromedia Flash; *not really*, she answered. He pulled a copy out of a storage cabinet, installed it on her machine, and told her to spend some time playing around with it. So for the past month she's been spending her mornings drinking espresso and reading graphic design magazines, then spending her afternoon teaching herself Flash on the company's dime. *Jean-Pierre likes our team members to maximize their skillset*, David had said. She makes abstract animations, horizontal lines rising and receding on a green field.

Hey. It's not a bad way to spend her time. But one can find moving lines on a screen interesting for only so long. She's committed to sitting in this building for eight hours a day, regardless of whether or not she's actually working, and sometimes the dullness of not *needing* to do anything begins to get to her. At these times she finds herself missing the deadlines of her old job, the days where she and Lee would need to sit down for twelve

hours straight and crank out hackwork. At least at the end of it all you had a pile of stuff that proved you'd done something.

Here there are days that are so boring and formless that she'll get up and wander around just for the sake of wandering. Like today. She finds Clark and Paul in the kitchen, sitting around the table drinking Diet Cokes. Some curried Thai dish is revolving in the microwave, filling the room with tangy scent. They exchange greetings, and Janine sits down and joins them.

—We were just talking about guys, Paul says.

—Guys, Clark says. Her most recent relationship came to an end just recently.

—Hmph. I'm taking a break from guys; they're nothing but trouble. I'm going back to girls.

—Would that I had that option, Paul says.

Clark's comment makes Janine raise her eyebrows. She had wondered, before, about the exact nature of Clark's sexuality. She has found herself slightly drawn to the plain pale beauty of Clark's makeupless face; she has found herself, at odd hours, envisioning the slightly crooked incisor in Clark's mouth.

—We can find you a guy, Clark says. —We're going to make that a top priority.

—Guys are easy, Janine adds.

Clark tears a sheet off of the pad affixed to the front of the refrigerator, and she writes TO DO at the top of it. Underneath that, she writes *find guy for Paul*.

She was being slightly glib when she said she was going back to girls. Fact is, she has never been in a bisexual relationship, not really. She experimented around a bit in high school, kissing her friend Doris just to see what it was all about; they spent a few afternoons that way, but it never went much beyond kissing and when Doris began to talk about the relationship between the two of them as if it were, well, a relationship, Clark quickly (and, it

seems now in retrospect, cruelly) put an end to those illusions. Since then, Clark has halfheartedly identified as bisexual, more for political reasons than out of actual bisexual practice. But she said what she said just now not for any political reason but because she wanted to see how Janine would react. That interested-looking eyebrow-raise was not lost on her.

She shows her To Do note to Paul. —Okay, Clark says. —I'm going to go hang this up at my desk. And you're going to see results!

—Well, Paul says. —Let me tell you. I can't wait.

The microwave dings.

—That's me, says Clark.

## 38 / PICKING UP THE GUITAR

It is Sunday night, around eleven, and Austin is brushing his teeth. Tom's of Maine Natural Toothpaste; Gingermint. The sound of bristles on teeth fills his skull. He listens to it, finds that it sounds like records scratched by a turntablist. He alters the pattern of his brushing to amplify this effect. *Shukka shukka shuk! sha-shuk sha-shukka shuk shuk.*

This makes him think of an animated commercial that's been on TV lately, where a grocery store checkout girl scans something (a pack of gum?) and the bar code makes a turntable flare as it passes over the scanner. She notices, and so she scribbles the commodity back and forth, back and forth, and the supermarket turns into a dance party. Hipsters. Lasers. Austin thinks the commercial could have been more cool if it had built its rhythms from the actual synthetic tones of a bar code scanner. He remembers that sneaker commercial from a while back (Nike?) which constructed an impressively complex soundtrack exclusively from the sounds of basketball. Soles squeaking on a waxed floor; textured rubber thumping against flesh. It was compelling, almost compelling enough to make him forget what scumbags the sneaker companies actually are.

He spits.

He heads back into the bedroom. Outside of the window he can see tree branches, arced from the weight of ice-limned snow. Gorgeous actually. Wind rattles the pane. For a while it looked like this winter would never get cold, but it finally has: tonight the wind chill makes it like fifteen below zero.

Lydia sits on the edge of his bed. She is staying over at his place tonight, and she'll be going straight in to work tomorrow from here. When he called her up in the afternoon and said *why don't you come over?* they kind of treated it as a given that she'd stay the night.

They've been involved for a month or so now, and she's staying over about two times a week, on average. She's taken to bringing a set of work clothes with her in a garment bag. He wonders if he should just encourage her to keep a spare set here.

He has yet to even see her place. He asks every once in a while and she usually blows it off, saying something about *two roommates* and *privacy*, and he lets it drop.

Also in the bed is one of his guitars, an acoustic. Lydia is looking at the guitar, tracing the contour of its rib with her fingertips. When she looks up and notices him she moves her hand away, puts it in her lap.

He nods at the guitar. —Do you want to play it? he asks.

—Oh, she says. —No. I couldn't. I mean, I can't.

—Sure you can, Austin says. —I don't mind.

—I wouldn't want to screw up your tuning, she says.

He smiles, sits on the bed next to her. —It's an instrument, he says. —It doesn't fly out of tune the second you begin to play it.

He grabs the guitar by the neck and places the body in her lap.

—Go ahead, he says.

—*No*, she says. She almost seems frantic. —I mean, I don't—I've never *played* a guitar; I don't know *how* to play a guitar. I just... I just don't know what I'd *do*.

He nods. —Yeah, he says. —That kept me from trying it out for a long time. I didn't start playing until after I got out of college, actually. And it was just kind of like, I don't know, it seemed when I was younger I would just try *anything*, you know? People would say *hey, we're going to get together and do*, I don't know, *oil painting*, and I'd be like *OK, let me try*. But as I got older that kind of got harder; I seemed to get more concerned that I'd be *bad* at the thing, whatever it was, and I was real self-conscious about that, I became real

*embarrassed* about trying stuff in front of other people, like I'd try it and they'd *laugh* at me. And, I mean, I *wanted* to play the guitar, badly, but I knew all these people who were *good* at it, but they really intimidated me, and I couldn't ask them for help because I just thought they'd be *totally impatient* with me, that I'd try to play a note and this *horrible sound* would come out and everybody would just look at me and go *ugh*.

Lydia smirks. She knows what he means. She actually feels afraid to even touch the thing in her lap. —Yeah, she says. —So what did you finally do to get past that?

—Oh, well, I'd been reading a lot of stuff about John Cage, and, well, you know, he's got this whole philosophy about the inclusion of all possible sounds into music, that there is no such thing as a horrible sound. (Lydia nods.) That really freed me up. And around that time I was going to be housesitting for a friend and he had a guitar and I asked him if I could play it while he was gone and he said sure, so the first day I was there I looked at the guitar and kind of said *OK, guitar, it's just you and me now*, and I spent like a month locked in this guy's house, watering his plants, feeding the cat, and playing guitar like all day.

—Hm, says Lydia. —That sounds nice.

—It was pretty great, Austin says. —I still couldn't play like a master at the end of the month, of course, but that was OK. I'd been reading this book called *Zen Guitar* which was all about like *being in the present* with your playing, to use the guitar as a tool of self-expression rather than imitation, trying to be aware of your level of ability, to play *within that*, rather than overreaching. And that was helpful to me, because I was kind of at this point where I couldn't even *think* about being able to play like Jimmy Page or Hendrix or whoever, because I was still trying to figure out just the very *basics* of getting sound out of the thing. I kind of had to give up thinking of the guitar as a guitar: you think *guitar* and all of a sudden



you're saddled with all the *baggage* that comes from having lived in a century with a thousand superstar guitarists. You kind of have to think of it as a six-stringed object.

—Heh, says Lydia.

—But the beautiful thing about the guitar as an object, Austin says, —is that, it's an exceptionally beautiful object. If it's in tune you really have to try *hard* to get it to *make* an ugly sound. I could just sit there all day strumming E and just be like *oh pretty*.

—E? Lydia asks.

—This one, he says. He puts her thumb on the string.

She strums, and warm sound moves the air.

*It is pretty*, she thinks.

## 39 / BARDO WORLDS

Tonight, in Chicago, Bardo Pond is playing at the Empty Bottle. Thomas had heard of them: in particular, he'd heard that they layered guitar sounds in order to create intense drones. As a public devotee of drone music, Thomas wondered whether he should make the effort to attend, familiarize himself with their work. He threw the question out, via e-mail, to some people he knows from the DroneOn mailing list, and they urged him to go.

But their urgings didn't make him feel any more certain that he'd enjoy it. One of them used the words "colossal psychedelic cacophony," and Thomas' tastes in drones have always run more towards the minimal, the stark. Imaginary landscapes made of feedback and sampled sinewaves. His reluctance was further compounded by the cold weather and the inevitable wait for the Division bus. He would rather spend his night off staying at home, sitting with Janine on the couch, both of them reading books and drinking mugs of something warm.

But by the time he called Janine, she'd already made plans to go out after work with her work friends. She's been doing that more and more lately. *Oh*, Thomas had said, masking his hurt feelings. *OK*. He wonders whether she's doing this because she wants to spend more time with Clark, the interesting co-worker she'd mentioned. He wonders if she's doing this because she wants to spend less time with him.

He spent a while moping around his apartment. Then he chastised himself for feeling bad: *you shouldn't just assume that she can come out anytime you call*, he thought; *if you wanted to hang out with her you should have called her earlier*. But then this led to *but she knew I had off tonight and she can hang out with those people any night and now I won't get to see her until the weekend*. At the center of this solar system of irritations and anxieties whirls a dark mass, he refuses to

fully acknowledge it, he averts his gaze from it repeatedly, but each time he is drawn back into contemplating it, this fundamental fear, the fear of *what will happen* if Janine sleeps with Clark.

Finally he gets sick of thinking about it, and he catches the bus and goes to the Bardo Pond show. Not that this really helps; he is now just thinking about it in a new place. Every time he catches a glimpse of the clock behind the bar—11:45; 12:31—he worries that Janine and Clark might be sleeping together even now. He had hoped that Bardo Pond might create a drone into which he could immerse himself, a womblike space which he could inhabit, safely, for a few hours. Instead they stick fairly closely to rock-and-roll structures, sounding more like Black Sabbath than anything else, and there is no space within that for him to disappear into.

*Bardo.* An interval between two things. He knows the word from his investigative forays into Tibetan Buddhism. The first major bardo we experience is the *che shi bardo*: the interval between birth and death. Thomas slams back another whiskey and soda (his third). This, he reflects, is apparently how he has chosen to spend this portion of the *che shi bardo*.

Maybe, he thinks drunkenly, maybe he should just get out of his relationship with Janine, escape before he gets hurt. But once he did that he would be alone, and he doesn't have any idea how to go about finding a new girlfriend. Within the past two years he's dated two women, but does not feel like he chose either of them; they chose him. He looks around, sees a pretty Japanese girl standing by herself, listening, and he thinks, *what about her?*, *that could be great*, but he feels like approaching her is utterly outside the possible options available to him in this universe.

The *si pa bardo* is the Bardo of Possibility, a period, after death, during which our next existence is not yet determined. Many different existences are open to us. Only the enlightened, however, are able to select from the available choices.

## 40 / FALLING

Thomas examines the heavy glass in his hand. He moves it in a circle, watches the ice cubes slide along the tumbler's endless circumference. It makes him think of falling. He stops, lets the system come to rest, sips, tastes the sweetness of the RC. and the wiry bite of the whiskey.

He is with Janine, in her kitchen. He watches her prod and chop the contents of a frying pan (tofu, vegetables) with the end of a slotted turner, watches her pinch some yellow spice out of a cellophane bag and flick it into the mix. To him, these gestures seem infused with grace, as though they have been practiced over and over again, refined to the point where no superfluous bit of movement remains.

He has also noticed this elegance when they are in bed. Her hand, her tongue: either can bring him straight to the edge of trembling awe with a single deft motion. He imagines that many other women and men may share her ability, but he does not count himself among them. He feels weak and clumsy in bed, a hopeless jumble of uncoordinated parts.

He worries that Janine will sleep with this woman Clark and find something in her that he is unable to offer. He has felt the warning tremors every time Janine has mentioned Clark's name, every time the two of them have gone out drinking. He has wanted, again and again, to talk to Janine about what he fears she will do, to seek comfort by asking her not to do it, begging her not to do it.

He knows that this is exactly what he should not do. He knows that Janine's relationships are not monogamous, and he knows that she has no plans to change that. He knows that his relationship with her is based, in part, around his implicit acceptance of those facts, and he knows that withdrawing that acceptance is like going back on a deal. He knows

that there may be ramifications. But he stands with her here, in the kitchen, the smell of spices and greens rising around them, and he contemplates sharing moments like this, and he feels unsteady and troubled.

He stares down into his glass: races the ice cubes around the edge again. Focusing his attention there keeps him from having to look at her while he speaks.

—Janine? he says.

—Yeah, she says.

—Can I ask you something?

—Sure.

—Are you planning to sleep with Clark?

—Uh, she says immediately, and then she pauses for what seems like a long time.

He changes the pattern of his wrist rotation: makes the ice cubes go the other way.

—I don't know, says Janine. —I haven't really thought about it. But I might. Yeah, I'd have to say that I might.

Thomas nods. —I wish that you wouldn't, he says.

He is still not looking at her, but he can feel her stiffen. It is as though the air has gone brittle between them. The pan sizzles.

—*I wish that you hadn't just said that*, she says.

—I know, Thomas says.

—You can't tell me what to do, she says. —I mean, I like you; I care about you a whole bunch, and when you *say* something like that, sure, it makes me not want to do it. But it's so *manipulative*. The whole reason I have nonmonogamous relationships is to *avoid* that kind of manipulation. And so that makes me want to just say *fuck you*, and just *do* it. But now, now, either way, whether I do it or *not*, it's less about *me* and what *I* want, and it's more

about *you*, you see? Now I have to think about my desires in relation to *yours*. Do you see that?

He can feel her looking at him, so he nods.

—Yeah. Well, that sucks, Thomas. Can I just tell you that? That really sucks.

He nods again. He feels slightly sick to his stomach. He feared it might go this way: he knew that as soon as he opened his mouth he might be in trouble, and now he is. A lot hinges on how he responds over the next few minutes. And he has never really known how to handle interpersonal tension gracefully: he is ready to write himself off as doomed right now. And this leaves him sad and afraid, but at the same time he notices that he feels somewhat abstracted from the entire conversation, one degree removed. He finds one part of his brain comparing it to other points of reference, other tense dinnertime conversations, ones he had with Rachel, his first serious girlfriend, when their relationship was splintering under the strain of their failures.

How long ago was that now? Six years? Seven? That was the first time that he felt the bottom drop out like this, and—he has to admit it—it was worse then. He had been all naive; he had believed that his relationship with Rachel was something that would not break, and then it broke, and he felt confused and terrified, as though he were living through the end of the world. He learned lessons then about what language could not do, about how two people who loved each other could fail, ultimately, to make one another happy. Hard lessons. They have apparently tempered him. He cares for Janine, but not in the same way that he cared for Rachel; he would be sad if this relationship ended, but he knows—a part of him knows—that it would not cause him to lie in his room for weeks, blinking and stunned, sifting through shards in his mind trying to figure out why they will not fit back together.

He wonders if this is part of getting older.

Janine is quiet. She is waiting for him to speak.



## 41 / WOMEN (OLDER / YOUNGER)

Fletcher heads down to the departmental lounge, hoping for coffee. (It's less because he needs the caffeine and more because he enjoys the simple cycle of it—lift the mug, sip, taste, place the mug down again. He enjoys having warmth, right there at hand, enjoys the way the heat settles slowly back to cold, marking time.) But today there is no coffee. The grimy plastic coffeemaker sits there in its usual corner, amidst packets of Equal and a cylinder of Coffeemate; the burner is even on, but it heats nothing more than an empty decanter, a layer of blackening resin coating the bottom.

Audrey Lemmon is also in the lounge, feet propped on the low table, reading *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

—Now who would do this? Fletcher asks. He gestures at the coffeemaker as Audrey looks up. —I mean, I can understand taking the last of the coffee and not making more. I don't condone it, mind you, but I can see it happening. But this, this taking the last cup and then putting the empty thing back on the burner, that I just don't get. There's a sick mind at work here.

—I think it's still on from yesterday, Audrey says. —You know, maybe there was a cup left yesterday and it just kind of baked away overnight?

—Ugh, Fletcher says. — We've got to run a tighter ship around here. He turns off the burner and thrusts the hot decanter into the sink.

Fletcher's glad to have run into Audrey: there's something about her that he finds kind of hot. He's noticed this before about her, but it kind of surprises him each time. She's older. Fletcher's twenty-nine; he would guess that Audrey is maybe fifty, or more.

He glances over at her as he scours away at the burnt coffee. She has nice legs and knee-high boots. Her hair is in a short, stylish cut, and it looks good; its auburn is all shot through with a silver that he finds distinctive, and, yeah, he has to admit it—sexy.

When Fletcher first entered graduate school and became a TA, some of his friends teased him by suggesting that he'd sleep with his students. Not that far-fetched, maybe—Lynn was really the last woman his own age that he'd dated, and after they broke up, Fletcher had gone on to date a whole chain of undergraduates, throughout his senior year and on into the few years he spent out of school. Two years after graduation he still found himself hanging around the college, smoking cigarettes with eighteen-year-old girls and impressing them with his poems. It was easy to get involved with them, but sustaining his interest was harder: he found himself frequently restless, bored with the deep conversations of eighteen-year-olds, bored with people discovering anarchism or Beat poetry or magical realism for the first time, bored with the whole exciting collegiate process that he himself had been excited to go through just a few years earlier. This was a big part of why he went to graduate school: to catch up on conversations of his peers.

And so perhaps this is why he doesn't find himself attracted to his students, and instead finds himself attracted to Audrey's silver hair and faintly lined face: these things signify a woman who has her shit together, who has moved on to the next level.

He has looked for a wedding ring before and not seen one. He wonders about what she would be like in bed. Shy? Wild?

He adds her to the list of interest crushes and turns off the water.

—I'm going to make another pot, he says. —Do you want some?

## 42 / TALKING ABOUT THE WEATHER

Janine and Clark are together in the office, sharing a bag of microwave popcorn, their fingers shiny from butter-flavored oil. There is work that probably needs to be done, but no one seems to feel like doing it.

—So, you write? Janine asks. She knows that Clark is the primary individual in charge of continuity for Chordworld's narrative, but she recalls having heard Clark talk before about writing she did on her own.

—Yeah, Clark says. She throws a piece of popcorn up into the air and catches it in her mouth, chews it while she speaks. —I'm working on these poetry pieces, it's kind of a long sequence about war, it deals with this current *war on terrorism* thing, but it really goes back to the Gulf War, and especially the way the military operations continued over there, even once the war was officially over?

She swallows the popcorn, and waits. Janine nods, so she continues. —So—and stop me if this is boring—it's sort of about the way that war disappears for us, even at the same time that it's everywhere. The war continues, but people mostly stop talking about it, stop thinking about it. And yet we're still surrounded by the details of it; I mean you look in the newspaper, the details are in there. *Continuing firefights in Khost* or whatever. These details surround us even though we're no longer attentive to them; they become almost like an atmosphere that we move through, an atmosphere of total war, like a weather...

—Except not even a weather, Janine says. —Because people actually *talk* about the weather.

—Yeah, Clark says. —No, you're right.

Janine remembers when the bombings began in the fall, remembers how that time was one of awful depression for her. Mostly she doesn't connect that depression to the war, these days: now she mostly thinks it had more to do with getting laid off, but thinking back on it, in light of Clark's comments, she can remember the thick feeling of death that seemed to surround her at that time. The feeling went away: she got involved with Thomas, got a new job. But she has never really talked to anyone about it, and she no longer talks about what helped contribute to it: the bombings, the anthrax cases, the awful resonance of the thousands who died in the Trade Towers. Clark is right, though: none of those things have ever been resolved. They just operate now in the background.

Janine wonders, once again, what it would be like to sleep with Clark. She's been working up the nerve to make a proposition, although it's been complicated by Thomas suddenly getting the monogamy urge. She probably should have seen that coming. But fuck it, she is not going to let him stop her. He's just going to have to deal. OK, OK, if she's totally honest with herself she knows that she can help him—when they discussed it last week he eventually agreed to let her do what she wanted and promised to try not to sulk about it; but he also confessed a fear that he'd pale in comparison, sexually, and that she'd leave him. She reminded him, as gently as possible, that her whole nonmonogamous approach to relationships means that she doesn't have to make a choice between lovers, so she doesn't need to compare them. *If I'm not leaving you now*, she'd said, *I'm not going to leave you if I sleep with Clark. That's a whole other thing; it doesn't have anything to do with you.* She thinks she convinced him: after the chilly hour-long discussion they ended up having pretty good sex.

Sex, relationships—these are the things she feels able to talk about easily. She's lucky to have that, she supposes. It'll be easy for her to proposition Clark, when the time comes.

Is it now?

She selects a piece of popcorn and places it into her mouth. The pause between them has grown long.

—So, Clark says, —speaking of weather, can you *believe* this is spring? She gestures out the window. Snow whirls.

## 43 / OBLIGATIONS

It's a chilly Saturday afternoon and Lydia lets herself in, bearing an awkward armload of groceries and mail. Jesus *Christ* it's cold out there. She sucks in the apartment's warmth, shallowly the first time, then again, deeper. She dumps everything on the counter, unwinds her scarf, removes her hat, wriggles out of her coat.

She slides a bottle of Woodbridge Cabernet out of one of her grocery bags, and inspects its label. She'll be bringing it over to Austin's tonight; he's making some kind of pasta dinner for her. She hopes the wine is OK. She's 22, and mainly used to just buying whatever would get her and a handful of buddies shitface drunk cheaply. She figures she's safe, because she picked a bottle that was kind of expensive and had a favorable-sounding clipping from a wine guide or something taped up next to it. It's probably not swill.

She puts her hands on her cheeks; they're still cold. She's not looking forward to the trip up to Austin's tonight: she and Paul and Marvin live all the way down here in Hyde Park, way south of Chicago's center, so the trip up to Logan Square is a long one on public transportation, with some standing-on-the-freezing-corner-waiting-for-the-bus involved in it. She wishes, sometimes, that they'd decided on a more central location: it was just that the college-town environment surrounding the University of Chicago had felt like a more urban version of Bloomington, a place they'd grown accustomed to, and so it had quickly felt comfortable and familiar. But tonight she'll be paying for it.

She supposes that she could claim that it's her turn to use the car—they try to split ownership among the three of them, and she hasn't called it in much lately. But if she uses it tonight she'll feel pressure bring it back promptly tomorrow, and what she's really hoping for is a long Sunday morning in bed. They've had some really nice Sunday mornings over the

past month. Vegan scones, the *New York Times*, Austin's cat curled up with them—lovely, but the I-need-to-get-home feeling doesn't really fit with that picture.

She knows that Austin would offer to drive her—he finally got the fuel pump on the van fixed, and he's pretty gentlemanly about things like that—but she is cautious here: she worries that if she accepts rides too often, Austin will eventually feel some sort of obligation to give her a ride, and she's learned (the hard way) that *obligations* are high up on that list of things that make guys Get Weird. Even if the obligations only exist in the guy's own head. She doesn't get the feeling that Austin is going to get weird on her, but it's early in the relationship, and she is not going to take any chances. Not with this guy.

She supposes she could have Austin come down here and stay with her. He's never spent the night at her house. He seems eager enough to, but she can't figure out how it would work. She and Austin wouldn't have any privacy: she imagines the two of them, closed claustrophobically into her bedroom, trying to block out the sounds of Paul and Marvin clomping around. Or, worse, the sounds of Paul and Marvin playing *Baldur's Gate* on the Playstation: Marvin screaming *fuck yeah! Die! Die, you fucking fuck!*

Austin has a roommate, too, this guy Craig, but Craig has a girlfriend, and so he's often away when Lydia's over. And even when he's around, he just seems kind of quiet, basically friendly, but not too interested in her. He's neatly dressed; he has a tidy beard. He's kind of cool. She has a hard time thinking that Austin would find Paul and Marvin very cool. She comes home sometimes and sees the two of them sitting on the couch, immobile, like two huge sacks of flour, and they'll be watching some anime movie or something, and she tries to imagine bringing Austin into the place, and she feels *embarrassed*, as though they'd reflect badly on her. Christ, on Saturday the two of them play *Dungeons and Dragons* (and, Christ, for a while she was playing *with* them). If Austin came over on a Friday and stayed

with her, and then walked out into a middle of a Dungeons and Dragons game—? Little lead figurines all over the table? Marvin getting pumped up on Pepsi and doing shrill goblin voices? She just thinks he would be like *what have I gotten myself into with this girl?*

It's Saturday today, actually. Mid-afternoon. She should be hearing gaming. She pulls a Pria bar out of the cupboard and unwraps it as she walks towards the living room.

Marvin is in there, lying on the couch, reading the new issue of *Dark Knight II*.

—Hey, Lydia says.

Marvin tilts the comic so he can see her over its upper edge. —Hey, he says.

—Where's Paul? she asks.

—Do I have a sign on me that says *Paul's Keeper?* Marvin says.

—No, Lydia says. —But, is it not Saturday? It is. Do you guys not normally play on Saturday? You do. So...

—Where have you been? Marvin says. —We haven't played for the past two weeks.

—Oh, Lydia says. She bites into the Pria bar, chews. —How come? she asks, around a mouthful.

—It's just not as fun with only one player, he says.

—Oh, Lydia says. She swallows. —I see. (She does. This is an attempt to make her feel guilty for dropping out of the campaign. She decides she's just not going to engage it.) —Well, if you see him, tell him—

—He's probably in his room, Marvin says, tilting the comic book back in front of his face. —Why don't you go in there and check?

*Fuck you*, Lydia thinks. —OK, she says. —I will.

—Good, Marvin says.



## 44 / INTERLOCKING PARTS

Austin sits on a low three-legged stool, his head directly in front of the black face of the stereo receiver. He has his Minidisc recorder wired up to play through the speakers, and he is currently listening to a piece that he's been working out this morning.

The first thing he recorded was a minimal guitar melody, no chords, just fingerpicking. For maybe five minutes he repeated the same two vaguely mathematical bars, varying only the inflection. Then he transferred this five-minute chunk to audiotape, and played it back, and as he listened he improvised a new melody on top of it, recording the resultant duet to Minidisc in a kind of low-fidelity overdub.

In his second improvisation, he tried to create melodic fragments that would interlock interestingly with the repetitive patterns of the first. Once he nails it, he'll move it to tape, play it back and improvise another layer on top, and so on. He knows that the multiple re-recordings will cause the original line to degrade. But the notion of generation loss doesn't bother him. He has long been attracted to things that are weathered. Ancient statues scoured away by time. Images photocopied and rephotocopied until corroded. Abandoned buildings. When he first learned that Lydia had grown up in Detroit he got excited; he wanted to ply her for firsthand descriptions of the crumbling industrial landscape. (He can still remember the fascination with which he explored a site on the Internet a few years back: *The Fabulous Ruins of Detroit*.)

Austin reaches down and scratches Blob, his cat, who has seen Austin closer to the floor than normal, and has taken this opportunity to wander over for attention. Blob flattens his ears and pushes his face forwards into the cup of Austin's hand. —Gotcha, Austin says, gently moving Blob's head back and forth. Blob just purrs.

The take that Austin's listening to isn't really great—it fails more than it works—but it hits a stride around three minutes in: it enters a period where the harmonizing pieces fit, and create something interesting. This will be the starting point for his next take.

He thinks, here, about Lydia. It's weird—in some of his past relationships, this point, the two-month mark, would be about the point where things would start going awry. But he doesn't see much sign of that here: the time they've spent together has grown progressively more comfortable, not less.

The age thing is a little bit weird—Austin's 30, and he can perceive the age difference between them, for sure—but her youth mainly shows up in her as a kind of energy and enthusiasm. He's seen her, more than once, pull one of his records out of its crate and hug it to herself, hopping up and down, saying *can we please listen to this?* Sure. Why not. He finds himself bemused by it, but it's hard not to get swept up in her zeal. It's helped to make some of his music collection exciting again. He had begun becoming more and more of a somber reptile, thinking of the music room as a kind of study, listening to records with his hand on his chin. *Hmm. Yes. Very interesting.* Fuck, it feels good just to have someone around with whom he can laugh a little bit.

He catches himself wondering if this is the early onset of some kind of midlife crisis. He doesn't want to be dating 22-year-old women when he's 40. At least that's what he's telling himself now while he's 30.

The track runs out. He hooks the microphone back into the Minidisc player, rewinds the tape back to the beginning. Brings the guitar back into his lap, and begins again.