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ABOUT IMAGINARY YEAR

Imaginary Year is a work of serial fiction, written by Jeremy P. Bushnell. It began in September 2000, and is renewed each September.

New entries appear each Monday and Friday on the *Imaginary Year* website (www.ImaginaryYear.com). Printable versions of the entire story to date, such as the one that you are holding, are available through that site as well.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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58 / WHAT HE IS GOING TO DO

Jakob sits in a cafe, reading an article on *Minority Report* in the newest issue of *Wired*. His hand loose around a glass of iced coffee which has grown studded with condensation. His plate dotted with bagel particles.

He received his Master's Degree in American Studies exactly one month ago. There was a graduation ceremony; which he skipped, spending that morning instead in this very cafe. Thinking about what he is going to do.

He has decided not to jump into anything right away. He has some leftover student loan money which will hold him for a while, so he's decided to take the summer off, to not take a job until September. He's spent eighteen of his thirty years as a student: September, for him, is the month when work is supposed to start.

There are things that he should be doing. Freya's begun to regard his time with a suspicious eye, as though his days were little more than extravagant pastures of leisure. Jakob can't fault her for that—not when she's stuck giving up forty hours of her life to the record store each week—but he wishes that he could make clear to her all that he hopes to do this summer. He's not on vacation. He needs to organize material of a considerable depth. He needs to look at the Employment section in the paper, study the websites of local organizations, review the interlocking systems and forces that make up Chicago and figure out if there is a place there that he can sanely inhabit.

If there isn't he needs to make his own way. He has toyed with these ideas: starting a nonprofit, a collective, a think tank. Maybe now is the time that he should be investigating

the processes by which these things happen. He could be exploring grant opportunities. He has notes for a novel. He could get far on a novel during a summer.

A month has already gone by.

He turns a page in the magazine.

Tiny globes of condensation grow full, tremble, then slide down to join the puddle forming beneath his glass.

59 / OUT [III]

Paul comes home, whistling. He's made up his mind to do something, something he's put off doing for a long time.

He was afraid. He was afraid that his roommates would be repulsed by what he had to tell them, or hurt by the fact that he hadn't let them know earlier: in short, he feared that his news might *complicate* things. Paul has never enjoyed complicating things. In fact he prides himself on his ability to *simplify* things, to make daily life *easier* for the people around him. And he still fears telling them, but at least by the end of the day he will know whether his news will complicate things or not, either way at least the question will be settled, and this knowledge has already provided him a substantial amount of relief, and it is this relief that accounts for his jaunty walk, the happy tune that he whistles as he sets his briefcase on the counter and heads down towards Lydia's room.

He peeks his head around her doorjamb. She's sitting on the bed, still wearing her work outfit, all except the shoes, which she's removed so that she can rub her feet.

—Hey, she says.

—Hey, he says. —Can I talk to you for a minute?

—Sure, she says.

Clark and Janine put him up to making the decision. It was easy to be out around them, and the more fun he had being out around them the more he wanted to be out to his roommates, so he could just be out all the time, rather than having to switch into his heterosexual disguise every time he walked in the front door of home.

But it's more than that. He's taken a special pleasure, these last few weeks, noticing the little moments of affection that open up between Clark and Janine at work. In the

Perihelion kitchen, Janine presses her face up against Clark's neck. One tender second and Paul feels like cheering. He feels happy for them. Hell, he feels *proud* of them. And, by association, he is able to feel proud about his own sexuality, and it is this pride has allowed him to begin to blasting away at ten years' worth of shame that has accumulated up inside him like shit on a statue.

—I need to tell you something, Paul says. And Lydia gets an expectant look, so he forges on: —I'm gay.

A pause for reaction time. Probably not even a second but long enough for Paul to think *oh damnit I shouldn't have said it—*

—Yay! Lydia shrieks, and she jumps up and throws her arms around him and kisses him on the cheek. —I knew it, I knew it, she says, close to his ear.

—I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier, he says, quietly.

—It doesn't matter, she says. She stands back, with her hands on his shoulders, looks him straight in the face, and begins to jump up and down. —Yay, yay! she says.

—This is so great. Paul scratches the back of his neck, a little confused.

—How long have you known? Lydia asks. —Have you, like, had a *boyfriend* that you've been keeping from us? Oh, *man*, she says, pressing her hands up against her face.

—There's just *so much* that I want to know.

—I'd better sit down, Paul says.

When he's settled on her bed, she sits at his feet, leaning her head back against his knees. She looks up at him, and he looks down at her. —I want to hear *all about it*, she says.

—Will you tell me?

—Sure, Paul says.

She looks up at him and smiles sweetly, as if knowing that she's about to get away with something. —Will you brush my hair?

—Sure, Paul says. He finds the brush on the bed and begins to work it into her hair. —So, I don't know exactly where to start—

They hear the front door open and close; it must be Marvin. Lydia looks up at Paul, a little frantically.

—Does Marvin know? she asks, as they hear him approach.

—Not yet, Paul says. —But I think he suspects; I've been playing a gay Dungeons and Dragons character for like five years now.

Marvin looks in and surveys the scene. Paul is sitting there, brush in hand, with Lydia's hand affectionately on his knee. They both look up at Marvin, and they look at one another, conspiracy written all over their faces.

—What are you two up to in here? Marvin asks.

—Do you want the long answer or the short one? Paul asks.

—I don't know, Marvin says warily.

—I think, says Paul, —I'd better give you the long one.

60 / CLEANING HOUSE

Thomas is working his way across the surface of his desk. Picking up things, inspecting them, dropping them into an open trash bag that he holds at his side. Part of his spring cleaning project. This bag is his third: two others sit by the door, already packed with detritus. It kind of appalled him to learn that his apartment held so much junk. Magazines from 1996, bought during a layover in some airport? A feather pillow, stained with old drool and left in the back of his closet? Some shirts he wore in college during a brief dalliance with psychedelic fashion? These items are not a part of the minimal, stripped-down life that he desires for himself.

He felt a profound sense of satisfaction after filling the first bag, and it made him curious: just how much stuff *can* he manage to rid himself of? The second bag increased his sense of determination. And so now he is running a dispassionate search-and-destroy mission across the desk, throwing away not only the truly useless items (outdated offers that he received in the mail) but also things that might still possess some conceivable value or utility (the instruction booklet for the SONY MiniDisc Recorder that he bought on Ebay a few months back).

He gets to a particular piece of paper, a pink Post-It Note folded in half; opens it. Written on it is the phone number of this guy Jakob, a guy Thomas got together with, once, last September. Thomas thinks about it for a second, and then drops it into the garbage bag.

It's not that he didn't like the guy. He did. They'd planned to get together again, in fact, but then the attacks threw everybody off, and then things with Lydia went sour, and it wasn't too long after that that Thomas got involved with Janine, and he just got caught up in that—

Not that that is anywhere now, now that Thomas has had a chance to fuck it up. After he last weekend, he finally caught up with Janine on the phone, and he began to play his cards wrong right from the very first words he said to her: *so where were you all weekend?*

She told him.

At first he put on the angry face—*how could you do this to me?*—but it is not a face that he knows how to wear well. It rotted off of him, all his fury and righteousness sloughing into self-deprecation—*I can't take this, Janine, I'm not strong enough to take this. Don't do this to me.* She'd made a few comforting gestures, but he responded to each one by just begging more plangently, until finally she'd said *I think you'd better take some time to think things over before this conversation goes any further.*

He's had time since then. Plenty of time. Nothing but. He's been so lonely that he's even taken to going out with the other waiters from the hotel, heading to some Loop bar with them at the end of his shift, and sitting there sullenly drinking one whiskey and soda after another, listening to the speculation about which absent coworker has the worst cocaine habit. He doesn't enjoy these nights (and he always feels like death the next day, he stays inside with the curtains drawn so that the sunlight will not pound into his head through his eyes) but they are better than the nights without conversation, the nights of sitting around listening to records by himself.

He just wants someone to talk to.

He reaches into the garbage bag and sifts until he finds the pink note. He unfolds it and looks at the digits there. And he considers reconsidering.

61 / ANGER

Jakob is over at Freya's apartment. They've both just finished dinner. (Pasta salad: it's hot outside.) Freya begins to gather up her plate.

—Here, says Jakob. —Let me.

He takes his plate and hers into the kitchen. But when he gets to the sink he sees that it's already jammed full of dirty dishes. They form a kind of archaeology of the week: deep in there he can see bowls coated with spaghetti residue, from a dinner Freya had made five days ago. He considers being a good boyfriend and washing the whole batch, but the sink is so full that there's not enough space left to get even a single saucer under the faucet. He takes a few of the dirty plates and tries to pull them free from the heap, a preliminary effort towards reorganizing the mess, but the motion disturbs a few tiny flies feeding in the depths, and as they swirl up at him, his stomach turns.

He can't understand how Freya can let her dishes get this bad. His sink is always pretty clean.

—Jeez, he says. —You plan on getting to these dishes anytime soon?

Freya's in no mood. She worked from nine to six today at the record store, and during today's shift she argued with Don, the manager, about exactly what the store buyers should be buying (a recurring argument, this). She also had to fight with one of the new clerks; he'd requested off July 4th through July 7th, a holiday *and* a weekend; other people wanted those same days off, too, and when she's making up the schedule she has to give preference to people with seniority, so, sorry, but this new clerk had complained about it, had the fucking *indignity* to complain right to her face, to *bitch her out as though she wasn't his*

boss. So she'd already been pretty annoyed when she got home to Jakob reading a book on her couch and running her air conditioner. So what she says is —Fuck you.

Jakob, in the kitchen, freezes.

—I'll get to them when I feel like it, Freya says. —Cause, let me tell you something, I work for a living? I know it's been a while since you've done that, but maybe you should try to remember what it's like.

Jakob grew up in the Ohio suburbs, the child of white-collar parents. His father is an optician, and his mother works as an advocate for the local heritage preservation foundation. They hardly ever raised their voices in anger: not at the television, not at other drivers on the road, not at one another, and certainly not at him. So usually when Freya does it, he's surprised, startled even, and he tends to quail, to go conciliatory immediately. But he's been less surprised lately: he's not sure if it's because Freya feels stalled, or because she has these misapprehensions that he's enjoying a summer of leisure, or what, but she's been getting angry more often, and this has begun to concern him, and this time he is not just going to cower—

—You know, he says, —Maybe you should see a counselor or something about all this anger you seem to have stored up. You just seem perfectly willing to *lash out* at me like it's nothing—

He goes on for a bit, but Freya barely hears him, past when he said that she *lashes out*. That almost seems funny to her. She's used to guys who hit. An image: her ex-boyfriend Mike, drunk, straddling her on the bathroom floor, pulling his fist back and aiming it carefully at her face while she squirmed and thrashed. *That's lashing out, Jakob*, she thinks. *Not a few angry words.*

An image: Freya's dad has her mom up against the door, his hand around her throat. Freya runs into the room crying, gets pushed, falls to the floor with the sidetable and the lamp and the phone directory. Dad kicks her in the tailbone, once, hard enough that her head bangs into the wall. That was the first time she realized adults were fallible. When she saw that *anger*.

She's never told Jakob about her ex-boyfriends. She's never told Jakob about her dad. She doesn't see the point of telling him. He'll only respond with pity, and she doesn't want that, she hasn't come this far and gotten her shit together this much just to have someone treat her with pity.

Jakob's monologue trails off and he waits cautiously for her response. She drinks her beer. Neither of them speak. Finally he sighs and says —Alright. Alright. Listen. I have a lot of work to do tonight; I'm not going to waste my time with this bullshit. Call me later if you want to talk.

—I will, Freya says.

When he's at the door he pauses for a moment, and then he turns to look over his shoulder and he says —I love you.

—I love you too, she says.

He shrugs and he heads out, hoping, all the way until he turns the corner, that she will come out chasing after him, eager to make up, bearing apologies. But she doesn't.

When he gets to his apartment he sees that the light is blinking on his answering machine. He's certain that it's her, calling because she was unable to stand the disharmony for any longer, because she wanted to sort things out before even one more minute passed.

But the message isn't from her. It's from Thomas.

62 / SOUNDWALKING

Jakob returns Thomas' call, and on Saturday they meet up at the Flying Saucer, on California, and Thomas shows Jakob how to use the MiniDisc recorder.

After brunch, they are going to make a soundmap. They discussed this before, long ago, but now they actually plan to do it, to walk through a portion of Chicago, pausing periodically to record any interesting environmental noises that they hear. Thomas will copy their path onto his legal pad. Later he'll draw out a more polished version of the route, using the computer. He'll mark the locations where they recorded with a tiny star. When he puts it up on his website, someone in New Jersey or New Zealand will be able to click on a star and hear the archived sound of that Chicago location.

Thomas is interested in documenting the urban dronescape. For a long time he has held a theory that the music he likes is a response to a world where drones make up a considerable portion of the sonic environment.

—You'll probably hear a lot of that kind of stuff, Thomas says, explaining. — Sounds like cars going by, airplanes overhead, fans, vents, air conditioners--almost all of these, at their fundament, create a kind of stable, continuous hum.

—Do you want me to *only* record drones? Jakob asks. He wants to be a good playmate, so he's willing to cooperate with whatever Thomas has in mind. —Or can I record other sounds as well?

—I want you to feel free to record whatever you like, says Thomas. —Whatever interests you.

What interests Jakob is the way that a project like this might help to enable a different conceptualization of the city. The city as fortress, as hub of commerce, as theme

park—Jakob would like to see these old conceptions give way, replaced by one ultimately more liberating: the city as *sensorium*, an ever-changing field of impressions through which one could drift, experiencing. He records the tattooed waiter asking them if they're done with their plates. The clatter of silverware on ceramic.

Thomas draws the Flying Saucer on his map.

They exit into the hot space of a June Saturday. Cars bearing giant Puerto Rican flags drive up the street, headed towards the Puerto Rico Day festival in Humbolt Park. Drivers honk their horns in jubilation; girls emerge from the sunroofs to shriek. A block away a string of firecrackers explodes.

—Wow, Thomas says. —We'd better get started.

63 / THE ONE WHO IS LOVED LESS

The launch of *Chordworld* is supposed to be less than three months away, and so things at the company are getting busy. Clark's been trying harriedly to repair the continuity errors, to work out the last Quests, to insure that there is enough World for hundreds of players to explore concomitantly. When she isn't working late nights at Perihelion, she's been giving her free hours over to Janine. All this business has forced her to cancel her normal weekly drinking session with Fletcher for the past two weeks, but tonight she has managed to get out to the Old Town Ale House to meet him.

She's been giving him the lowdown on work. —So, yeah, she says. —I'm still not convinced that we have enough material generated. The gameworld is supposed to feel sparsely populated. You don't want players constantly bumping elbows with other players. *Oops, excuse me.*

Fletcher nods. Actually, Clark isn't at all sure that overpopulation will be a real issue: the mutterings she's heard indicate that the current number of registered players lags significantly behind the numbers that the company had projected. But that isn't her problem.

—Whatever, says Clark. —I'm sure we'll work it out.

—So, Fletcher asks, after swallowing a mouthful of beer. —How are things with Janine? Going well?

—Hmm, Clark says. She hesitates, squints, sips from her bottle.

—Not going well? Fletcher asks.

—Hang on a minute, Clark says.

She's been spending a lot of time with Janine lately, but she wonders why. She wonders how much she's been doing it because she really *wants* to spend time with Janine, and how much she's doing it out of a sense of *obligation*. She doesn't *mind* going over there, it's convenient, pleasant, but she doesn't *long* to see Janine. Same with the sex. She likes being with Janine, but being overworked has dragged her sex drive down; she always sort of feels like she should be *getting something done* instead of dallying in the bedroom. She feels like she consents to it because that's what's expected of her—because that's her *role* here. She wishes that she could uncover a strong streak of lust within her, but she can find no trace of it, and its absence makes her feel ashamed, as though she might be deficient.

How much of this Fletcher needs to know is another question entirely.

—Let me put it to you this way, Clark says.

—I'm listening, Fletcher says.

—You know how, in every relationship, there's, like, one person who is the person who is loved *more* and one person who is the person who is loved *less*?

—Well, ideally, Fletcher says, —both people would love one another the same.

—Thanks, Sherlock. How often do you know *that* to have happened, though?

—I grant the point.

—So here's a question. Which do you feel more comfortable being: the person who is loved more or the person who is loved less?

Fletcher thinks about the women who have loved him more. He remembers going out with Lynn, in college, and he remembers the way he drew away from her when he began to find other women who shared her good qualities. She tried to hang onto him, but eventually his distance made that impossible. After Lynn, he dated a sequence of younger women—college freshmen impressed by his meager accomplishments as a poet. He can

remember how attentive they were to him after he had won them over. The feeling of suffocation.

Then he thinks of Freya, and Clark, women who he has had secret crushes on for years. He's certain that these crushes are unrequited, and yet he has never grown tired of the company of these women. And so he knows the answer.

—Loved less, he answers.

—Yeah, Clark says. She makes a pained face. —Me too.

—And with Janine you feel like you're... loved more?

She keeps the pained face up. —Yeah.

—Ah, says Fletcher. He sips his beer, swallows. —That's tough, he says.

—Yeah, Clark says.