

Imaginary Year

VOLUME THREE

ISSUE ONE

"The leaves are still green"

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Thanks for reading.

1.

FREYA

WORK (ONE)

001: My name is Freya Glennon, and I work as the Assistant Manager at Typanum, a record store in the Lakeview area of Chicago.

002: I've been working there for three years, since it opened.

003: No, I was made assistant manager last fall.

004: I got the job because Barry, the old assistant manager, got sick of putting up with Don and finally quit.

005: The manager, yes.

006: I don't know. The normal kind of stuff. Puts off everything he doesn't want to do onto you, because you're the assistant.

007: Right. I'm probably more responsible for the day-to-day operations of the store than anybody else. I work with the clerks a lot. I make up their schedules, I help them tally their drawer, I make sure that they keep their sections organized—all that kind of stuff.

008: Don does the ordering for the store—which is frustrating, because the clerks are really the ones who know what people are in here looking for, or what's out of stock in their section, and Don seems to just order what he wants to hear; he more or less just disregards anybody else's input. He's also the only one authorized to buy used stuff for the store—same deal there. If it's something really good coming in he'll buy it himself directly from the person selling it, and then he'll turn around and sell it on eBay.

009: Yeah. Monitoring eBay auctions, talking on the phone to his girlfriend. Oh, and snorting cocaine.

010: His girlfriend, yeah. She's in Florida. Don't ask me how that works. He talks to her at work because the store budget pays for the phone bill.

011: The owner has no idea. He lives out in the burbs. He's in here once a week or so to make sure the whole place isn't going up in flames, but he doesn't know a *thing* about the day-to-day operations, not a thing, not shit. He's certainly not auditing the phone bill.

012: I could tell him, but, see, I don't care. The owner makes more money off of the store than either Don or I, and he does the least amount of work of all three of us.

013: Well, yeah, sure, but I don't see that there's a way around that. You're going to be exploited anywhere you go. At least at this job I can dress how I want, I don't have to hide my tattoos, and I can listen to records. Don leaves me alone, so—I don't know. Don't you think that's better than most jobs?

014: I don't know. I guess maybe it makes me more of a bitch than I'd be otherwise.

015: No, probably not. I think I'd be a pretty big bitch either way.
[laughs]

JAKOB

NOSTALGIA

Jakob looks at the ice cream shop and he remembers back when it was a gas station. It's been an ice cream shop for twenty years now, so his memories of it before have begun to tatter and fade: he wonders if he'd remember it at all if the place didn't still *look* like a gas station, if you couldn't look at the building and see exactly which part of it used to be the service garage, if you couldn't imagine exactly where the pumps used to stand just from looking at the layout of the parking lot. And yet sometimes a cluster of memory flares so brightly—he can remember, during the 1970s, being with his mom, waiting in line for gas at this exact station. It was an Exxon. He can recall everything about that moment: the upholstery of the car's back seat, the dust that sank through sunlit air, a faint odor of juice.

He's in Ohio, visiting the town that was *home* for the first 28 years of his life. It's just for a week, then he needs to head back to Chicago, find a job, let his summer vacation end. After all, it is officially autumn. The leaves are still green but the air has the first faint note of winter in it, and the stone bench he's sitting on chills his ass.

He's here with Melissa Flaum, a friend of his from high school, someone who he fooled around with the summer after graduation. They kept the romance casual—they knew that they'd get involved with other people when they went off to their separate colleges, and they hoped not to hurt one another when this happened. It worked: they stayed in touch, and they got together during the summers when they were home, and they each listened, without jealousy, to news of the other's relationships. An attraction continued to hum between them through all this, and occasionally, if it happened that they were both unclaimed during a summer, they would get together to watch a movie and find themselves making out on the couch an hour in, immersing themselves in the comfort of physical familiarity, taking solace from the closeness and the warmth of the other.

They caught up on the walk over here: he's told her how life in Chicago is treating him, how things are going with Freya, and, in return, she's told him stories about her clients at the mental health clinic, and, more solemnly, the tale of how her engagement disintegrated over the past year.

She watches a kid run around in the parking lot.

—Do you ever feel nostalgic? she asks.

He does. That's part of why he wanted to go to the ice cream shop, even though the air is cold and the shop is about to close for the season. He feels nostalgic for the time he spent here over the course of twenty summers. As a teenager, he loitered here, having conversations, gossiping, arguing. This is where he began to learn how to adjust the network of his allegiances. He remembers doing juvenile shit like fishing Reese's Pieces out of his sundae and flicking them at someone else, but he also remembers that a kind of intellectual curiosity awoke in him here; he had conversations with his friends about whether they believed in God, what they thought might happen after death. They shared a common interest in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and they discussed the political and ethical issues raised by the show. An argument about existentialism happened here after Jakob read *The Stranger*, another one about rationality and charity happened after someone else had fallen in love with *Atlas Shrugged*. He misses the freewheeling broad scope of those conversations: his past few years of academic study have revealed how infrequently people step outside of the space they've demarcated for themselves, how deeply they can retreat into the niche of a singular interest.

—Nostalgic? he says. —Yeah. I do. I'm a *totally* nostalgic person. I'm nostalgic for high school, nostalgic for college. Hell, I'm nostalgic for *right now*, sitting here, with you, eating ice cream. I can already tell that this is a moment that I'll miss when I go back to Chicago, and that makes me miss it right now, while it's happening.

He knows that Melissa's asking whether he feels nostalgic for her. Whether he misses her. And he does. He remembers making out with her on a dark jungle gym behind the elementary school; he remembers swimming naked in her pool one weekend while her parents were away somewhere. Furtive sessions, exciting—the risk and adventure, even in memory, make the events gleam in his mind. He does not see a return to those sorts of times in his future.

And, strangely, he misses not only the danger, but also the ease. Sometimes in his relationship with Freya he feels like he's treading through a brambled field, and just when he thinks he's found his way through, he hits the tripwire that causes the landscape to explode up in a curtain of hot mud. He's mapped out her head as well as he can, but he's unsure whether he's negotiating his way any better than he was two years ago. His times with Melissa seem breezy by comparison, effortless, and sometimes he yearns for that sort of ease, that comfort.

And yet he did not go to Chicago because he wanted to feel comfortable. He went because he wanted to learn, to face challenges. There are struggles, yes, but he believes that struggles have value. And this is why he does not want to return to Ohio. Not yet.

—But at the same time, Jakob continues, I think I'm pretty lucky. I've never wanted to go back to an age that I've already been. I wouldn't want to be a teenager again; I wouldn't want to be in my early twenties again. I'm *happy* to be almost thirty. I think I've got my shit together better than I ever have before. I may not have a job, or know what the hell I'm going to do next, but I think I'm going to do something good. I think I'm going to like my thirties.

Melissa looks at him. She seems ready to say something, but then she just studies his face for a while. When she finally speaks, she says: —Did you know you have a gray hair?

—This one? Jakob says. He points at his one stark white hair, the one that points out at a crazy angle from the rest of the hairs in his eyebrow.

—That's the one, Melissa says.

—Yeah, Jakob says. —I know it's there. But I kind of think it's cool. It's like a badge, you know? Like a sign that I've seen some stuff in my day. I'm kind of proud of it.

—I pluck mine out, says Melissa.

—You shouldn't, he says. —You would look great with gray hair.

—You're sweet, she says.

They look at one another for a while. It seems as though they can almost catch a glimpse of another possibility for them, as though the membrane that keeps the parallel universes separate has begun to wear through. But it passes. The membrane snaps opaque, and they are left with the only possibility they have: the one they have spent the last twelve years making for themselves.

Melissa points at his cone. —You're dripping, she says.

AUSTIN

ANTHOLOGIZED

Austin sits on his bed with his guitar. He's wearing a pair of headphones, and he's listening to the *Anthology of American Folk Music*, the fourth volume, the one that was never released by Smithsonian Folkways. The secret one that completes Harry Smith's plan.

He plucks along as he listens. He hits the wrong notes more often than the right ones, but he doesn't care too much, at this point he's just trying to play in time with the basic rhythm.

As he plays, he half-sings, half-speaks the lyrics: –I'm going where there's no Depression, to the lovely land that's free from care. I'll leave this world of toil and trouble. My home's in Heaven; I'm going there.

Darren's the one who burned him these CDs, stuck them in his hands a few weeks ago, down at the bar. –*Here's something you could listen to, maybe*, he'd said. –*If you get a chance*. –*Sure*, Austin had said.

–*Maybe*, Darren had said, –*maybe if you learn some of the songs we could get together and play again*.

The two of them were in a band once before, a free-noise combo called the Social Retards, that lived from 1998 to early 2000. They played a few shows, at places like the Bottle and the Fireside Bowl, and then Darren got involved with a nursing student, Alicia, and couldn't make it to rehearsal as often, and their drummer moved off to Portland, and that was pretty much it for the band. Austin retreated to the privacy of his bedroom, began writing involuted solo pieces for the acoustic guitar and experimenting with chance composition and low-fidelity recording techniques. And he was pretty happy.

Darren seems less happy. He got dumped by Alicia last winter, and sometime since then he bought a fiddle and began taking classes down at the Old Town School of Folk Music, learning how to play it. And then he started calling Austin a bit more often, asking to get together.

—*You know*, Darren had said. He pointed at the CDs. —*Like, we could be in a band that performs these old songs. I think that would be really cool.*

—*Yeah*, Austin had said. —*Yeah, maybe.*

He sings: —In that bright land there'll be no hunger. No orphan children crying for bread. No weeping widows toil or struggle. No shrouds, no coffins, and no dead.

DENISE

WORK (TWO)

My name is Denise Ross, and I work here, at this place. It's a record shop.

002: I was hired here in, oh, the summer of 2001, I guess.

003: Just as a . . . a clerk? A cashier. I handled money. [laughs]

004: No, I've been a shift supervisor for about a year.

005: Um, I don't know, it's OK?

006: Not really.

007: I don't talk to him much.

008: No, Freya was my old supervisor, so she was the one who I mainly, you know, dealt with?

009: Um, she's OK. She's nice. [pause] I think [inaudible]

010: I said I think she's sad. She seems sad. [pause] Don't you think so?

011: I don't know. This world does things to people. I look at the people who come in here, you know, and they just seem [pause] used up.

012: Like eaten up inside. It's like they have something inside that wants to get out, but it can't get out. All the ways out are locked, so it's like the thing is trapped there, you, know, inside, so it's like [pause] screaming? And people can't take it, you know, all that screaming, so they, uh.

013: They try to kill it. The thing.

014: I don't know. An angel.

015: Yes. No. Forget it.

016: No, forget it.

017: Um, I need to go now. I'm sorry.

018: It was nice talking to you, too.

THOMAS

DANCING ABOUT ARCHITECTURE

Thomas poises his hands above the keyboard and he stares into the white field of Word. Nothing comes. He begins to pick at a tiny scab on his arm.

After a minute or so he refocuses his energies. He pushes the keyboard aside and lays his legal tablet across the desk, flips to his notes on last weekend's Elaine Radigue show.

He's supposed to be posting a writeup of the show on his website. He's also supposed to be writing something on the three-CD set of her *Adnos* pieces. He coughed up the \$40 for it over a month ago, justifying the expense by telling himself that at least he'd be able to get a review out of it. But he has written no review. He hasn't put anything on the website in two months.

He sticks a pen into his mouth, holds it between his back teeth.

On Monday he received an e-mail inquiring whether the site was still active, which gave him an awful feeling that he had difficulty shaking. He also recently stumbled upon an online essay, Mark Bernstein, on "Writing the Living Web," which contains the admonishment: "If you are inconsistent, readers will conclude you are untrustworthy. If you are absent, readers will conclude you are gone." So this evening he's guiltily reporting to work, fully resolved to get something done and up there on the site. His triumphant return. Quote unquote.

He gets up and goes into the kitchen, looking for the bottle of Jameson's. He stares into the cabinet for a few seconds before he can retrieve the memory of finishing it off. He shakes his head, thinks *What's wrong with me?*

It's not that he didn't enjoy the show. He did. He always likes going to see shows at 60th, and he enjoyed this one even more due to the unprecedented attendance of a surprising number of attractive women. They were fashionable in a vaguely European way—he wondered if they were involved somehow with the French Cultural Center, which had helped finance bringing Radigue over from Paris. He found himself eyeing them throughout the course of the evening, checking to see whether they were being carried away by the lushness of the music. (This surprised him. He had always absently supposed that he would stop finding himself attracted to other women once he'd gotten into a sexually-active relationship; he figured that he would just filter out their physical traits, as a kind of irrelevant data. But that hasn't happened at all. Since he's gotten involved with Janine he has probably been more attentive than ever to the sensuality of the women around him. This makes him regret not having sex with Lydia, back when they were dating. He wonders how their relationship would have gone differently if he had entered it as he is now.)

But anyway—despite Bernstein's encouragement to "be sexy," Thomas doesn't really want to write about the erotic dimension of the evening. He wants to write about the performance, report to his readers on the quality of the drone that Radigue produced. He already has a whole page of notes, all he needs to do is string them together.

He returns to his desk, sticks the pen back into his mouth again, leans back in his chair and holds the legal pad up above his face.

This should be easy. He's never really bought into the whole idea that it's difficult to write about music. When Thomas was first learning HTML from Janine, he told her that he wanted to do a site of drone reviews, and she said *You know what they say: writing about music is like dancing about architecture*. If that's true, Thomas does the dance well—he's developed a whole set of ways to rhetorically approach a drone. He once made a list of these strategies; it's buried somewhere in one of his tablets:

- overall timbre; timbre of various phases (sterile? dirty? wet? buzzing?)
- discuss shifts from one phase to another (the transitions define the character of the drone?)
- effect on listener (trance? anxiety?)
- sound sources (what technology or object actually produced this sound?)
- metaphorical sound sources (what technology or object (or occurrence or animal) *could have* produced this sound?)
- drone as political statement
- drone as spiritual expression or spiritual tool (magic)

He reads through his notes: *an even tighter cycling—a thrum—eventually an almost percussive element enters—the sounds of distant impacts*. They're thorough, and they work to bring him back into the space of the performance, like they should. But for some reason he can't start sculpting them into a writeup. The field of Word remains blank.

He keeps thinking *why am I doing this?*

Great, he thinks, *I'm having my mid-life crisis at twenty-eight*. Of course, he felt like he had it at twenty-seven, too, and he can remember feeling like he was having one at twenty-one, and one at seventeen. Based on the reports he's heard, it seems that what triggers the mid-life crisis is an abrupt eruption of self-consciousness. But Thomas can't remember a time when he didn't struggle with the discomfort of abundant self-consciousness. There must have been a time—maybe before age twelve?

Perhaps this is worth further study. He flips to a new page on the tablet and writes *self-consciousness*. Then it seems stupid. He crosses it out.

JAKOB & FREYA

YIELDING

He sits at the table in her kitchen. He chats with her about her day, listens to her complain about the usual work tensions with Don, watches her prepare food. She slices potatoes and tumbles them into a pot of quivering water. She shreds a sphere of cabbage.

He likes watching her cook. He's no good at it himself. For him, cooking usually means slotting a frozen pizza into the oven, or tearing open the packet of seasonings that comes with his noodles. So he likes watching Freya reach directly into a hot skillet to fluff a heap of sizzling cabbage by hand. Contained in the gesture are a whole set of skills about which he knows nothing.

He thinks he'd be afraid to reach into the pan like that. But he knows that Freya has tough hands. He remembers that when they first began to touch one another he felt surprised at the hardness of her fingertips, at the way her palm and the ball of her thumb would not yield to his touch. His hands, by comparison, seemed babylike, and he began to wonder what makes hands different. Is it simply a matter of genetics? Or does it have something to do with the work one does through a lifetime?

The ingredients come together into a potato and cabbage stew, and Freya leaves it to simmer. She grips him by the muscle that joins his shoulder and his neck, and she moves it back and forth until a tension in it releases. —Ah, he says.

She presses her thumbs into aching spots behind his jaw and at the base of his skull.

—I love you, he says.

—You're a dork, she says.

—Yeah, he says dreamily.

—Hey, she says. —Have you heard about this new movie, *Secretary*?

He thinks. He remembers reading about it in the paper, some sort of S/M office comedy. —Yeah, he says. —It looked kind of interesting.

He gets hints, sometimes, that Freya has an interest in S/M. They've been having sex for over a year now and she's never broached the subject with him, not explicitly, although she often encourages him to be rougher. *Less lovemaking; more fucking*, she said to him once. And he has tried to oblige. He has trapped her between the wall and his body. He has bitten her in place of kissing her. He has held her wrists down against the mattress and forced himself into her.

He's not sure that he fully understands the rules of these moments. He knows that her struggling must be a kind of play-acting—after all, she's stronger than him, she could escape his grasp if she really wanted to. Hell, if she really wanted to, she could probably put him in the hospital. (Fletcher once darkly hinted to Jakob that at least one former boyfriend required stitches after some altercation. Jakob's never asked Freya to confirm this.)

—I have off on Saturday, Freya says. —You feel like going?

He's intrigued: maybe going to this movie would be a way to start a conversation on this topic. But his intrigue is eclipsed by the matter of money: he's unemployed, and he's begun to put things like groceries on his credit card to make the last of the money in his checking account stretch out a little bit longer. He knows he shouldn't ring up the credit card too high, and so he's been budgeting very carefully, and he's reluctant to cough up the dough for a movie.

—I don't know, says Jakob. —You know that I'm worried about this whole *money* thing...

—For fuck's sake, Freya says. She takes her hands off of him, and stomps across the room. She comes back a minute later and throws the Yellow Pages onto the table in front of him.

—If you're worried about money you get a job, she says. —Like the rest of us stupid fucks. You call the goddamn temp agency and you set up an appointment.

—But I-- Jakob says.

Freya gets the cordless telephone and drops it on the table next to him. —You wouldn't come to Texas with me when my goddamn *dad died* because you were watching your *money*. OK. That's fine. But I at least want a boyfriend who will go to the goddamn movies with me. I work fucking *forty hours a week* so that I can go out and *have fun* on my days off. Now I want to see you pick up that phone and I want to see you *call the goddamn temp agency*.

—Hey, Jakob says. —Hey. You can't just stand there and *tell* me to do something. I, I, I'm a grown man. I can make my own decisions about things.

—That's right, Freya says. She exhales, hard. —That's right. You can make your own decisions. That's true. But let me *impress upon you* the importance of thinking *very carefully* about how you'll make this *particular* decision.

Jakob opens his mouth, but he doesn't say anything. He looks at the phone book. He wonders whether temp agencies would be under T for Temporary or E for Employment.

DENISE

POTENTIAL

–I don't think Freya likes me, Joshua says.

–What? Denise asks.

Actually she heard him. She's just not sure that he's actually talking to her. He's not looking at her. Instead he is looking at the mobile of dangling rockstars that some employee made long ago out of surplus promo posters and cut-up record sleeves. He is aiming a rubber band at Kim Deal's face.

–Freya? Joshua says. –I don't think she likes me.

Denise considers this. She sees Joshua and Freya work together three times a week, and she hasn't noticed any strong evidence of animosity. If anything she would say the opposite: she has noticed that Freya lingers around him more than an assistant manager would normally be required to linger around a clerk. She has noticed a faint smoldering in the air between them.

–She doesn't seem to *dislike* you, Denise says.

–No, Joshua says. –I guess not. He releases the rubber band; it hits Kim Deal right between the eyes. The cutout face revolves towards Denise, who notices that someone has drawn a speech balloon coming out of its mouth that says FEED ME HEROIN.

–It's weird, Joshua says. –For a while Freya and I were, like, getting together, hanging out after work. He looks at Denise, as though to gauge her reaction, and she is once again glad to be wearing her sunglasses. She feels certain that they mask any sign of her surprise.

–But then she went away, back over the summer, and, I don't know, ever since then we haven't really hung out.

—Her dad died, Denise says.

—Yeah, I know, Joshua says. —I thought about that. But that was like three *months* ago. I mean, it's sad and all, but people get *over* it.

Do they? Denise thinks. She's not so sure. Her own dad died when she was nine; he ran a stoplight while drunk. Thirteen years have gone by since then, but she is aware that his death left something amorphous inside her, a cloudy mass. The part of her that is meant to be shaped by a father. If he had lived he might have taken the cloud and worked it into something solid, a column of rules, a code that would help her find her way in this world. He began this shaping but left it unfinished. This is the way. She got nine years: not much, although she knows that there are people who get less. But it would not have mattered if she got ten years, or twenty-five, or fifty. Parents never finish. There is always the potential for more work to be done, and when you lose a parent that potential is forever left unfulfilled, and you carry the work left undone with you, as a variable, an incalculable weight.

Joshua is still talking. —I kind of thought she was into me, he says.

—Oh, Denise says. —I think she has a boyfriend.

Joshua pauses; a troubled look passes across his face. —I don't think so, he says. —She didn't say anything to me about a boyfriend.

—I think she does, Denise says. —You know that guy who comes in here sometimes? Goes out to lunch with her?

—A guy...?, Joshua says. —No. I think she would have said something to me.

—Maybe he's just a friend, Denise says.

—Maybe, Joshua says. —I still don't know what guy you're talking about.

—Forget it, Denise says.

—OK, Joshua says. —So what about you? Any guys in your life?

There haven't been, not lately, not since she stopped sleeping with Toy and moved out into her own apartment. The spare time and the solitude led her to convert her kitchen into a kind of mini-studio: she set up an easel in there and she's produced a few small canvases, her first since she left SAIC.

Guys. She's felt a few flickers of interest here and there. That guy who came in and interviewed her was interesting. Just by asking one question after the next he got deeper into her than any guy since Johnny. She wishes that she hadn't panicked: it would have been interesting to see where the conversation might have ended up. Maybe she'll talk to him more if she ever sees him again. But she doesn't know if she will. It's like what happened with that guy Gabriel. She ran into him twice in one month and then never saw him again. She still feels her heart leap whenever she sees a tall guy with a brown leather coat, but it is never him.

Mostly she is disinterested in guys at the moment. Their emotions are too obvious. It almost embarrasses her, to look at them, and see desire on their faces so plainly. She looks at Joshua, and sees his coal-black eyes fixed on her. He is waiting for an answer.

—No, she says.

LYDIA & AUSTIN

A SPACE FOR A SELF

Lydia gets off from work and instead of heading home she decides to go to Austin's. He won't be home. It's Tuesday, and for the past month or so he's been getting together with his friend Darren on Tuesdays for band practice. But she doesn't think he'll mind if she lets herself in. She has her own set of keys.

She hears a gathering rumble as she's coming through the turnstile, and she says *fuck*, and hurries down the stairs while the train pulls in. She catches up to it in time, slipping into the last car a second before the doors close, finding a space for herself among the other people headed home from work. Coming into the electric warmth of the car after just having been out in the blustery Chicago weather makes her nose begin to run, gross. She blots it with the edge of her hand, hopes nobody notices. The train squeals and clatters.

She figures she'll let herself in, watch the new *Buffy* at seven, maybe with some dinner from the Thai place. She'll leave the leftovers for Austin; he'll like that. Afterwards she'll have a shower and curl up in his bed, read one of his books or something, wait for him to get home. He's usually home by ten on nights when he has practice. He'll be so pleased to come home and find her naked in his bed. Probably.

She's been having trouble, lately, feeling certain that Austin is attracted to her. They still have sex a lot, once a week probably on the average, but he never really seems to be *driven wild* by the idea of having sex with her. He just seems sort of *agreeable to the notion*. She wonders if that means that there's something wrong with her. Or maybe it's something wrong with him. *I'm attractive*, she thinks. *I'm twenty-two—in my prime. I've got nice tits—any guy would be happy with me. So what the hell?*

Her train moves northwest, in a line towards Austin, who sits on a stool in front of the stereo in his bedroom. Darren had to cancel practice tonight, on account of being ravaged by some virus, so Austin, lacking anything better to do, decided to practice anyway, by himself. He listens to songs on the *Folk Anthology*, plays along on the guitar, sings.

John Henry said to his captain / I am a Tennessee man / But before I let that steamer beat me down / Lord, I'll die with my hammer in my hand.

A song ends, and the next one begins. Even before any instruments enter Austin can hear recorded noise, crackle from the imperfect surface of a 78. He loves that crackle. It alone has the power to transport him into a different world, an earlier part of the century.

Sometimes he feels like he would love to be back there. The world that's evoked in these songs seems so real, so free of all the trivia of modern life. If he didn't have to know about the relationship between Ben Affleck and Jennifer Lopez, or the situation in Israel for that matter, if his mind wasn't polluted by his knowledge of these things, then he believes that he could concentrate more on the things that matter: work, and love, and death, and the joy of being alive. He sings: Ain't one hammer / in this tunnel / that rings like mine / that rings like mine / It rang like silver / and it shone like gold / it rang like silver / and it shone like gold.

He hears his front door open.

He turns off the stereo immediately, to listen. Who the fuck could be here? His roommate, Craig, is over at his fiancée's place tonight, same as he is just about every other night. He didn't have any plans with Lydia. Could it be a burglar? He's worried about crime ever since he moved into this neighborhood. He's no idiot—he's seen the kids that deal dope on the corner. One of them tried to sell him a bike once; he was sure it was stolen. He knows that they wouldn't think twice about taking his TV or his CDs if they could.

He puts the guitar down as quietly as he can, and creeps over to the bed. He keeps a two-foot length of heavy iron pipe under there. He found it on the street a few years ago and hauled it back to his apartment—he thought maybe he could use it as a sound source, tap on it with drumsticks or something. That never quite worked out, but he's kept it near his bed ever since; he figures that if some crack addict breaks into his house in the middle of the night, he could take him out with one good swing.

He hears footsteps coming towards him. He stands by the doorway, raises the pipe over his shoulder, ready.

Lydia comes in, sees him. He looks so wild-eyed that for a second she doesn't know who it is, all she knows is that she's about to be attacked. She screams. Her purse hits the floor.

—Oh, Austin says. He lowers the pipe. —I thought you were—

Flustered, she asks—What are you doing here?

—What am *I* doing here? he shouts. —I *live* here! What are *you* doing here?
I could've—

—Don't shout at me, she says.

—I'm sorry, he says. He sits down on the bed, shakes his head in an attempt to clear it. He puts the pipe down in his lap, then, after a second, he slides it back under the bed. —But since when do you just come over here unannounced and let yourself in? I could've—

—I just wanted to surprise you, she says. —I thought you'd like it. I thought it would be nice. And she begins to cry.

THOMAS

ESCAPE

The sun here, in the dream, is harsh; the sky glares like tin. Escape; he must escape. On the other side of this dune there's a way out; the map said so. He tries to climb but the sand is unstable; he sinks in up to his knees, and the loose face of the dune slides away from the summit, carrying him with it. Down, down. Maybe there's another way out? He needs to look at the map. But there is no map any more. Instead his hands are full of playing cards. He can't hold on; they spill into the wind. He has fewer and fewer to choose from. The right one may already be gone.

He wakes up. His mouth is sour with the taste of panic. He gets the microphone ready but he does not speak. After a long time he realizes that he's holding his breath.

He abandons the dream, gets up, splashes water on his face, fills the brass can so he can do the plants. He feels disrupted, as though he just lived through a week and then had all of his memories of it erased.

It's his day off and he has nothing to do. Janine's out of town, visiting her folks in Florida. He had plans to get together today with Jakob, go do one last soundwalk before the weather got too cold, but Jakob's starting a temp assignment this week and had to cancel. It's just as well: today, the soundmap project seems utterly pointless. As does most of the other stuff Thomas usually likes to do. He passes his computer and thinks of all the hours he's put in staring at that screen, wonders what else he could have done with that time. He can't really think of anything. *Hang gliding*, he finally suggests.

The coffee table in the living room is covered in legal tablets and CD cases: documents. Sometimes he feels so sick of documents, of all human endeavor. All this horrible clamor: what is it all *for*? He waters his fern and admires its relative lack of agenda. He sometimes imagines that he can perceive a pulse within plants, slow, serene. He would like to find a way to

synchronize to that beat. Even better, he would like to *be* a plant, to have no consciousness beyond a calm green center. He would like to die and be buried and rise up through the earth as grass.

There's a new bottle of Jameson's in the kitchen.

No. No. What he wants today is to be outside of himself, outside of the collection of habits that comprise him, and the drinking is as much a habit as anything else. He wants to do something different, something *unlike* what he would normally do. Once again he thinks of hang gliding.

Perhaps he'll go down to the park, let the sun bleach this rotten mood out of him. He's noticed that Chicago's leaves have begun to change. It would be nice to be somewhere among trees, to stand beneath a tattered canopy and breathe in the splendor of a dying season.

And if he goes to the park he'll be in the neighborhood of the record store. Maybe he'll drop by and see if anything new came in.

THOMAS & DENISE

OUTSIDE OF THE PATTERN

On his way to the park he goes into a little bakery that he's never been in before. The warmth of the space feels comforting after the chilliness of the walk over. He looks at the bread stacked in cloth-lined baskets, marvels at the different textures and colors, and remembers why it is important to occasionally get outside of the pattern of your days. He feels like everything in the world has a nourishing energy within it, and that when a thing becomes familiar, this energy gets obscured, goes inaccessible. At those times it is important to look at something new. These loaves. Each one is different. Each one has been made by human hands.

He buys a few sun-dried tomato rolls and a coffee and heads into the park to inspect the ruins of summer. He sits on the edge of a dry fountain and tries to get his coffee down to a drinkable temperature by blowing through the hole punched in the plastic lid.

He eats most of a roll, throwing a few shreds to a small group of gurgling pigeons. He has fed them most of his second roll when he hears a voice say: —Having fun?

He looks up. It's that girl from Typanum, the one who always wears sunglasses. He's embarrassed that she's seen him feeding the birds—it seems kind of like an old man thing to do. He sticks the roll back in his bag.

—I guess, he says.

—I like the pigeons, she says.

In fact she herself has spent many lunch hours feeding the pigeons in this park. She enjoys seeing animals, here in the city. Any kind of animals. Pigeons, squirrels, even the rats. She finds them all beautiful. Look at

these pigeons: the iridescence at this one's throat. The gray of this one, almost blue. This white one with occasional patches of toast-color. How could you hate them? And yet people do. She's seen guys try to kick them. A world that contains such unprovoked acts of malice seems to her, sometimes, like a world that cannot be redeemed. A world that needs to burn.

—Me too, Thomas says. —I guess. After a minute, he says: —My name's Thomas.

—I know, she says. —You put CDs on hold sometimes.

—Yeah, Thomas says. —I didn't know if you'd remember. I'm sure you guys must have a lot of regulars.

—I remember, she says.

—What's your name? he asks.

—Lola, she says.

—Well, hi, he says. —It's nice to meet you. For real, I mean.

She immediately feels guilty about her lie. —Hi, she says.

—Can I ask you a question? he asks.

She shrugs. —Sure, she says.

It is something he has wondered about for a long time, but has never wanted to ask. He fully expects that she may scowl, or say *none of your business*. But he figures today is a day all about breaking out of routines.

—Why do you wear sunglasses all the time?

—I don't, she says. —Not *all* the time.

And she takes them off. Stands there blinking in the wan light. She looks at him.

—See? she says.

He looks. He thinks she's very beautiful. And she can tell. She puts them back on.

—So there you go, she says.

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