

Imaginary Year

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"Eight hours a day of it"

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Thanks for reading.

JANINE

WORK (FOUR)

001: My name is Janine Tellier, and I work as a studio manager for the Big Shoulders Media Group.

002: Mainly that entails glorified secretarial duties. Maintaining the schedule, sending out reminders about upcoming deadlines, fielding calls from clients, that sort of stuff.

003: Uh, I don't know. Every once in a while there's a meeting, I guess . . . ? I surf the Net a lot . . . Is that the kind of thing you want to hear about?

004: I read, uh, Salon . . . there's a site called the Morning News that I look at, it's really good . . . at sodaplay.com you can make these little, I don't know, creatures, that's a good site. Oh, yeah, e-mail, don't forget that, I e-mail people all the time.

005: Oh, sure, it's a blast. It's *exactly* how I thought I'd spend my thirties. Spending all day making little computer things walk around. It's a laugh a minute.

006: Well, sure, I mean I could be working in a diamond mine. And I'm not, and I'm glad. But anything you do like this, day in and day out, it's going to take a toll on you. I mean, this place has never even *heard* of ergonomics. And all this computer use, eight hours a day of it, it fucks you up.

007: Well, mentally, yeah, but I meant physically . . . I mean, my wrist . . . well, let me see, here, bring that mic closer. Let me see if I can get it to do it . . . [cracking sound]

008: [laughter] I don't know if that picked up or not. But, I mean, you can see, that's not right. A healthy wrist doesn't sound like that. My wrist didn't sound like that before I started working jobs where I used computers all day. And now it sounds like that all the time.

009: If I was still in grad school I'd say something like this is evidence of how the corporation inscribes itself on the bodies of its workers . . . but let me ask you a question. What are you doing this for?

010: Yeah, yeah, you already said that. But what are you doing *that* for? I mean, what do you hope the *end result* will be?

011: So, OK, you go around, you interview all these people about their jobs. And I imagine they all say the same thing, or some version of the same thing, which is that they hate their jobs, their jobs suck, whatever.

012: I mean- I'm not trying to be harsh here, I'm just trying to think it through -it just seems like your project, ultimately, is going to tell us something that we already know. That most jobs are shitty and that most people feel powerless within them. And it seems like *hearing* the finished project isn't going to *help* people, it seems like what it will do is just *confirm* these feelings of powerlessness.

013: How *I* would do it? Oh, I don't know, I'm probably the wrong person to ask.

014: Because I wouldn't do a project about *work* at all. I'd do a project about *play*. I wouldn't focus on the ways that people feel unhappy and powerless: I'd focus on how people bring joy *back into* their lives.

015: Because that's news you can use! We all know that the modern world sucks, right? OK, yes, it's very sad, boo-fucking-hoo, right? Hearing about that in greater detail *doesn't help us*. What might help us is hearing how people escape it. How do you avoid becoming an automaton? What gets you out of depression? What are your strategies for survival? I think the answers can be found in how we play.

016: Who, me? [laughs]

017: Uh, for me *play* has a lot to do with sex. But that's a whole other interview. [laughs]

FREYA

WHAT TO SAY

Last week, on Thanksgiving morning, Freya stood in the kitchen of her mom's place, helping get the dinner together, speaking cheerfully and pleasantly, determined to appear like a well-adjusted adult. She knows the importance of vigilantly defending this illusion. If any tear appears in the screen of her confidence, her mother will seize the edge of it and rip wide, trying to get to the fifteen-year-old Freya who lives back there, the Freya who can be manipulated, the Freya who wants to please but can't, the Freya who feels clumsy, awkward, inept, stupid, ugly, fat. The Freya that Freya wants to forget.

So she churned the stuffing and mashed the potatoes and even was brave enough to request a glass of wine, and when her mother said *I hope you're getting enough exercise* Freya pretended she didn't hear and instead she changed the subject, saying *How's Tim?* And when her mother started in on bemoaning Tim's slipping grades, lack of interest in school, and doubtful future, Freya muttered disapprovingly and shook her head, providing exactly the sympathetic response that she knew her mother would want. The response that would prove that Freya's priorities were in order.

—Tim has a *cell phone* now, Mom had said, rolling her eyes.

—Oh really? Freya had said.

—Really. You don't have one, do you?

—No.

—I don't really think it's good for kids to be spending so much time on the phone, she said. —But Tim just kept saying about how *all the other kids* had them, and I thought, well, if I *give in* on this, at least I'll be able to get in touch with him--because, you know, he goes *out* with these strange people, sometimes he's gone for *hours* and I don't know where he is, and I thought, well, this way I can at least call him up and, you know, *check in*. Cause Lord knows he won't do it on his *own* volition.

—Right, Freya said.

—Has he even been *down* here today?

—I think I saw him down here a little earlier.

—He should come down here. He gets to see his big sister only twice a year, you'd think he'd want to see you. You'd think a visit from his big sister would get him to come out of his room for a change. Would you go up there and get him?

—Sure, said Freya.

And so up she went. The door was open so she went in. Tim was lying in bed, perusing a skateboarding magazine that he had spread out on his pillow.

—Ew, Freya said. —It smells like farts in here.

Tim whirled around to glare at her. —*You* smell like farts, he said.

—Yeah? Freya said. She turned around, began backing her rear end towards him. —Look out, she said. —I feel one coming.

—No, Tim said, sliding across the bed.

—Here it comes, Freya said.

—No, Tim said, starting to laugh. He kept sliding away until he reached the bed's far edge. Displaced CDs slid down between the mattress and the wall. Freya sat down and punched him in the shoulder.

—Ow, Tim said. —Bitch.

—You're *my* bitch, Freya said.

—*You're my bitch*, Tim repeated, in a mincing, mimicking voice. Freya punched him again, harder, and he made as if to punch her back and she grabbed his wrist and pinned his arm.

—Listen, fartmonkey, she said. —Mom wants you downstairs.

—Mom can blow me, Tim said.

—Ew, Freya said.

She made sure, before they went downstairs, to ask for his cell phone number.

—Well, I *would* give it to you, he said, —Except this number is strictly for my mad bitches.

—Just give it to me, she said.

—What the hell are *you* gonna use it for?

—What the hell do you think?

He thought for a moment, and apparently no quip came to mind, because he finally said: —Get me a pen.

And now, one week later, Friday night, she sits in her apartment, drinking a beer and smoking a cigarette, looking out the window, watching snow fall through amber lamplight, and she thinks of Tim, and wonders what he's doing, and whether she should call him, and what she would say.

LYDIA

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

—So, says Anita, —have you seen the new guy in Human Resources?

—Who? That guy? What's-his-name? Greg?

—*Yeah*, Greg. Unless there's some other Human Resources hottie that I don't know about.

—Uh, Lydia says. She's trying to spear the last crouton out of her bowl.
—You think Greg is hot?

—Well, duh, Anita says.

Duh? Lydia pictures the guy: on the pudgy side, goatee, short dishwater hair worn spiked, fancy glasses with rectangular frames. Nothing too special.

—I never really noticed, I guess? Lydia says. She pushes with her fork and the crouton detonates.

Anita raises her eyebrows. —A fine specimen like that and you didn't notice? she says. —I'm surprised.

—Well, Lydia says. —It's not exactly like I'm *looking*. I mean, I'm seeing this guy—

—Oh, sure, Anita says. —But just because you're seeing a guy doesn't mean that you stop *looking*. I mean, do you think that *guys* stop looking?

—Uh, Lydia says. —I don't know.

—I was *married* for three *years*, Anita says. —And so I can tell you: even when they're married, guys *look*.

—Uh huh, Lydia says.

She has trouble, actually, thinking of Austin looking at other women. She thinks about where Austin's attention goes when it's not on her, and the things that come to mind are his guitar, his records, his cat. At times, she has felt each of these things eclipse her, but not other women.

Lydia might feel *better*, actually, if Austin showed attention to other women. It might reassure her that he has an appetite for them. Sometimes it seems like Austin would rather spend time with Darren than with her. It's suspicious. She's heard him talk a lot about his old bands but he doesn't talk much about his ex-girlfriends—she's only ever heard him mention one, Rose somebody. She keeps meaning to talk to Paul about this—she figures he'll have some insight—but she hardly ever sees Paul anymore. That's part of why she started going out to lunch with Anita more often. Just to have someone to talk to.

Lydia checks her watch. She's due back at the office in five minutes.

—I guess we should head out, Lydia says.

—In a rush to get back? Anita says.

—Well, yeah, our break's just about over, Lydia says.

—You think anyone cares? I mean, does anyone check to make sure that you're back at exactly the time you said you'd be back?

—Uh, Lydia says, —I don't know. I mean, people call—

—Honey, Anita says, —that's what voicemail is *for*. You're *away from your desk*. That's the ultimate cover. If anyone asks, say you were making photocopies. Or going to the bathroom. Or whatever. Nobody *cares*.

Lydia listens.

—I take like an extra twenty minutes on my break *every day*, Anita says. —I stop off at the Walgreen's; I go look at shoes; I stand out in the plaza and check out the buff little bods of the bike messengers. You know how often anybody has said anything to me about it?

—How often?

Anita puts her thumb and forefinger together to make a zero. She looks intently at Lydia through its center.

—That's the big secret of this place, Anita says. —Nobody cares what anybody else does. You learn that, you'll have *plenty of time* to check out the boys. And then we'll have something to talk about, you and me.

—Right, Lydia says.

AUSTIN

OLD STYLE

Darren and Austin sit on stools at opposite ends of the room and run through six songs. They sing songs from the old, weird America, songs about locomotives, about marriage, about labor and death. Halfway through "Dog and Gun" Austin flubs some notes and loses the rhythm. He slaps the side of his guitar.

—Break time, he declares. He wiggles his fingers, sets the guitar on the floor.

—Sounding good tonight, says Darren.

Austin takes a long draw from his bottle of Anchor Steam. —Thanks, he says. —You too.

Darren picks up his own bottle; it's empty. —I'll be right back, he says. —Thanks again for bringing the beer, by the way.

—No problem, Austin says.

Darren disappears around the corner. Austin listens to his footsteps, the sounds of him opening the fridge and cracking the cap off of a new beer. *Just like old times*, he thinks. He looks at his bottle of Anchor Steam and thinks back to when he and Darren first started playing together, in the Social Retards, along with Lucas, their drummer; the three of them got together every Saturday during the summer of '98, in Lucas' garage, polishing off a case of Old Style over the course of an afternoon, getting progressively drunker and grimmer as the afternoon progressed. He remembers lying on his back on an oily rug, pointing his head at his cranked amp, holding the guitar up over his face, trying to play the strings with his bare feet.

Darren returns.

—Hey, he says. —I forgot.

–What?

–I needed to tell you something.

–What is it?

–Rose called me.

This is not a sentence that Austin was expecting to hear. It is as though Darren has reached into him and removed some key piece, for he suddenly feels like his entire emotional structure is trembling and buckling, in danger of imminent collapse. Things shift. The structure groans. He blinks. He thinks nothing.

–Really, he says.

–Yeah, it surprised me, too. It's been like, what, two years.

–Yeah, Austin says. –Longer.

The last time he saw her was New Year's Eve, 1999. At a party. They'd been broken up for a month. He was drunk and the two of them were up on a corner of the roof and the streets below were a clamor of car horns and firecrackers.

–I'm freezing, she said.

–Come here, he said. He opened up his heavy peacoat and drew her against him. She clasped her hands together at the small of his back and rested her head against his chest and he leaned down to smell her hair. He could feel her body jerk and he knew that she was crying.

–Ssh, he said. –Ssh.

Austin drains the last of his beer. –Where even is she these days? he says.

–Well, Darren says. –She moved back to Minneapolis for a while, back in with her folks. You knew that, right?

Austin shrugs. –Sort of. I mean, I guess I heard that.

–And, I don't know, she's still out there, not with her folks any more, she got her own place, I guess, I didn't really get all the details. But she's planning to come out here. For a visit.

—Really, Austin says again.

—Yeah, Darren says. —She asked about you. I think she wants to see you.

Austin puts the empty bottle up to his mouth and tilts it back.

—What did you tell her? he asks.

—Nothing, Darren says. —That you and I were playing together again. That you were doing OK.

—Give her my number, he says. —She can call me if she wants.

He doesn't ask for hers. He doesn't think he wants to have it. Not yet.

FLETCHER & CLARK

SOMEONE TO KISS AT MIDNIGHT

Clark and Fletcher are at the laundromat. They sit in uncomfortable plastic chairs. Fletcher looks down at the orange tiles beneath his feet, which are filthy with winter scut: salt, grit, grime the color of car exhaust.

—So what do you want for Christmas? asks Fletcher.

—I'd ask for *peace on Earth, good will towards men*, but I don't think I'm going to get it, says Clark. —At this point about all I can hope for is that we don't start bombing Iraq on *Christmas Day* itself. She rubs her face. —I don't know, she says. —What do you want?

—Not much. True love.

—So you've got about as much chance as I have, Clark says.

—Hey, Fletcher says.

Clark shrugs, leans over, and takes a cigarette out of her pack with her mouth.

—I'll have you know that *I* have a date, he says.

—I heard that, Clark says, around the cigarette. She flicks her lighter until she gets flame. They come to this crummy laundromat only because it has ashtrays. She drags, then exhales a great loopy cloud. —Is this from your online dating thing?

—Yeah, Fletcher says. —Somebody finally responded to my ad. We're getting together this weekend.

—Cool, Clark says. —What's her name?

—Charlotte, Fletcher says.

—Nice name, Clark says.

—That's what I thought.

—What do you know about her?

—Not much, Fletcher says. —I've seen a picture of her. She's cute.

—Cute is good, Clark says.

—This is my logic, Fletcher says. He tries to remember the picture. A mass of dark curly hair. A simple black T-shirt. A grin that reminds him obscurely of girls he knew in high school. She looks like she might have once sang in the school musical. There is nothing unattractive about her, but if he saw her on the subway or in the grocery store she probably would not register. He supposes the word that best describes her is *plain*. But in the background of the picture he can see a reproduction of one of Jasper Johns' flag paintings, and this serves as evidence of an intriguing inner life. Plus she knows about poetry.

—She knows about poetry, he says.

Clark nods, then releases a lungful of smoke. —That's cool, she says.

At least Fletcher thinks she knows about poetry. In Fletcher's ad he specified: *successful applicants will have a favorite contemporary poet*. Charlotte said that her favorite contemporary poet was E. E. Cummings. A respectable enough poet, but when Fletcher says *contemporary* what he really means is a poet who is still alive, not one that's been dead for forty years. He wonders how much of Cummings she's read. He knows that there are people out there who think that Cummings is their favorite poet because they were struck by "in Just—" in the one Intro to Poetry course they took. But he'll give her the benefit of the doubt. He can't afford not to.

—If it goes well I'll have a date for New Year's for the first time in, uh, a long time. You planning to go to Freya's party? Fletcher asks.

—Yeah. And I hope *not* to have a date. I never really got why it's so *important* to have a date for New Year's Eve.

—You need someone to kiss at midnight, Fletcher says.

—Whatever, Clark says. —All I really want is to be around friends. Last year I spent New Year's Eve drinking with a bunch of Economics guys. That sucked.

—I bet, Fletcher says.

He goes over to the dryer and waits out the last few seconds of the cycle. The machine clicks and his clothes come to rest. He gathers them up; they are hot in his arms. For a moment he is filled with the urge to press them up against his face. To relax into their warmth.

LYDIA & AUSTIN

THE DETAILED MESSAGE

Lydia and Austin are huddled together on the couch, under Austin's big red flannel blanket. Lydia loves this blanket: it's cozy and soft and it has a bold plaid pattern that strikes her as masculine. It seems like the sort of blanket that a man like Austin would have, and so she loves it as she is coming to love him.

Is that what this is? she wonders. Love? Is that what this comfort is? She has not used the word with him yet, even though they have been involved for almost a year.

She wiggles an arm out to retrieve some more popcorn from the bowl. They are watching *Eight Legged Freaks*. Spiders leap at hapless small-town folk. The small-town folk retaliate by blasting at the spiders with shotguns. Lydia thinks the thing is a hoot, but it makes Austin feel slightly squeamish: when the spiders are shot they burst hideously, spraying forth a fetid goo that makes Austin think of cancer, that reawakens his awareness of the toxins accumulating in the depths of his own body. In one scene, slime leaking from a spider's swollen abdomen drips into the mouth of a local sheriff. Austin's stomach heaves.

Towards the end of the movie the phone rings. Austin ignores the first ring, but as it rings a second time he shifts on the couch anxiously.

—Let me just see who it is, he says.

He goes into the kitchen to answer it.

—Hey, Austin, says an uncertain voice, and he knows who it is even before she says —It's Rose.

He sticks his index finger in his free ear to block out the sounds of the movie from the other room.

—Hey, he says.

—Darren gave me your new number, she says. —I hope you don't mind...

—No, says Austin. —That's great. I mean, I wanted him to. I just . . . I guess I wanted to talk to you.

—Yeah, Rose says. —I wanted to talk to you, too.

And then there is a moment where neither of them say anything. And both of them laugh.

—Listen, Austin says. —Now maybe isn't the best time. I have a friend over.

—Oh, Rose says.

—But I hear you're coming in for a visit? Austin says.

—Yeah, Rose says. —Um, probably around late January, early February? I'm still trying to work out the details with work, but I'm working all through Christmas and New Year's, so I should be able to take my vacation time then.

—Cool, Austin says. —Cause, uh, I'd really like to see you.

—Yeah, Rose says. —I'd like to see you, too.

—So, uh, where are you working these days, anyway?

—I'm working for a counseling center. In Minneapolis. Doing, um, pastoral counseling?

—Oh, cool, Austin says. —How'd you end up doing that?

—It's kind of a long story, Rose says.

—Yeah, and I should, uh, get back to my friend.

—Yeah, Rose says. —You do that.

They exchange a few more words; Austin gets her current contact information. —I have a roommate, Rose says. —Mary. But she's doing her residency right now, so she's like *never* here. You can call any time.

–OK, says Austin. –Maybe I will. It'd be good to catch up a bit, before you're–

–Yeah, says Rose.

–That way when you're here we wouldn't need to spend all the time–

–Yeah, says Rose.

–OK then, says Austin. –I guess I'll talk to you, uh, soon.

–Yes, says Rose. –It'll be good.

Austin gets off the phone and returns to the living room, crawls back under the blanket with Lydia. Fire is pouring through a mineshaft.

–Who was that? asks Lydia.

–Huh? Austin asks.

–On the phone, Lydia says.

–Oh, Austin says. –It was a, friend of Craig's.

–Oh, Lydia says.

–He wanted to leave kind of a detailed message.

–Uh huh, Lydia says.

–I had to, like, find a pen and all that.

–Uh huh, Lydia says.

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