

# Imaginary Year

VOLUME THREE

ISSUE FOUR

"circling closer and closer to the actual act"

DECEMBER 2002

*Imaginary Year* is a work of serial fiction 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 are available through that site as well.

*Imaginary Year* is free, and copies of it may be made in whole or in part by any individual for noncommercial purposes, provided that those copies retain the full text of this notice.

Thanks for reading.

THOMAS &amp; DENISE

# NEW YEAR'S EVE

## (ONE)

Thomas feels like he shouldn't be here. Cushions seem to be conspiring underneath him, shifting him inexorably into a fissure at the collapsed center of this couch. He twists at the waist, trying to find a comfortable spot. The whiskey in his plastic cup whirls, threatens to leap the rim. He holds it, watches it: it stills, and he drinks.

It's New Year's Eve and he's at Freya's, watching a cluster of record store people laugh about something. That girl with the sunglasses is there. Lola. Denise. Whatever her name is. When she came in she shot him a tentative wave but he hasn't had the opportunity to go over and talk to her. Instead he's been sitting here, on this unstable couch, drinking. This is his third—his fourth?—and it's only a little after 11.

He could be working—the hotel restaurant is always busy on New Year's Eve. He requested off because he thought he'd spend New Year's Eve with Janine, watching old movies, like they did last year. But Janine already had plans—to spend New Year's Eve with Ingrid, her old lover, who is back from Frankfurt for a week or so. So when Jakob asked him if he wanted to come to Freya's party he said *sure*.

He's pretty sure that Janine and Ingrid doing it. They're probably doing it right now. *Fucking*.

It used to bother him a lot more when Janine slept with other women. He remembers Clark, that whole nightmare. Now it doesn't bother him so much. It hardly bothers him at all.

He sits on the couch and watches Lola. Denise. He should go over and talk to her. She recognized him, obviously.

A guy says something to her; she laughs. The guy is young and handsome.

Maybe one more drink, for courage.

He struggles to rise from the sofa.

Denise listens to Joshua talk and talk. He's telling her about this trip he took to New York last summer, hanging out in Williamsburg at some writer's place. Drinking wine up on the rooftop and taking off their clothes. The story is interesting and funny: it's easy for her to nod and laugh. But a part of her keeps looking for a part of him that's not hidden behind stories of the cool people he knows and the cool things he's done. A part of him that's not guarded, that can be playful, or sad. She can't see that part, but she knows it's there. Everyone has it. They must. Somewhere.

His eyes are on her. They look at her face and every now and again they drift down to examine her body. She has seen this sort of intense gaze before: Toy used to look at her the same way. She knows what it means. She wonders what it would be like to have sex with Joshua. Probably it would not be bad. But she doesn't really want to have sex with anyone right now. She is having difficulty lately remembering what the big fuss is about it, what the *point* of sex is.

She becomes aware of someone standing at her side. It's that guy, Thomas. He looks bad: sallow, and his skin seems coated with a sheen, as though he has been sweating. He holds a drink in one hand and wipes the back of his mouth with the other.

—Hey, she says.

—Lola, he says. There is something in his voice that sounds nasty.

—No, she says.

—Who's Lola? Joshua asks.

—So, Thomas says, loudly. —Good to see you again. He seems unsteady, as though he were trying to move his upper body in tiny circles.

—Yeah, Denise says. —Good to see you, too. Listen, are you feeling all right?

—Oh, yeah, Thomas says, even though he feels feverish and shaky. He looks off, making a show of considering the question. —Yeah, he says finally. —Never felt better. He holds up his plastic cup by way of indication. He

—Oh, Thomas says. —Oh, God.

—Let's get you to a bathroom, Denise says. —I'll be right back, she says to Joshua, who raises his eyebrows. Denise is not certain whether his expression is one of amusement, skepticism, or horror, or some combination of the three.

She steers Thomas to the bathroom, and she stands in the doorway while he gets down on his knees and pukes into the toilet. She pours the rest of his whiskey into the sink and refills the cup with water. When she hears him spit she hands it down to him.

—Drink this, she says. —It's water.

Thomas nods limply, sits on the edge of the tub, and drinks. Denise flushes the toilet.

—I'm sorry, Thomas says. —That's disgusting.

—It happens, Denise says.

FLETCHER & FREYA

## NEW YEAR'S EVE (TWO)

A crowd has gathered in front of the television. Fletcher stands in the back of the room. Emulating a Russian, he links his arm with Freya's, and drinks. She laughs, and grips his shoulder for balance; he puts his arm around her waist and draws her to his side.

—Having a good time? he asks.

—Well, she says. —None of my stuff is broken.

—True, Fletcher says.

—And only one person got *sick*, she continues.

—So far, Fletcher says.

—So far. So does that mean the party is good or bad?

—I don't know. I can, you know, throw somebody through a window if you wanted me to.

—Yeah, wouldja? Then we'll *really* be partying.

—Done, he says. He looks around, as if scoping for a victim.

—What about you? Freya asks.

—Yeah, Fletcher says. —I'm having fun.

—Where's your date?

—Clark is my date.

Freya frowns. —Clark? she says. —You guys aren't *dating*.

—Very perceptive, Fletcher says. —But she's who I came with, and unless something really dramatic happens, I'll be leaving with her, too. Thus: my date.

Freya points her finger up into Fletcher's face. —But you're not gonna *kiss* her, she says.

—It's doubtful, Fletcher says.

—But it's New Year's Eve, Freya protests. —You need someone to kiss at midnight.

—I made this exact point to her, Fletcher says. —But she wasn't having it.

—Stupid, Freya says.

Fletcher moves his head from side to side, as if weighing this assessment.

—I thought there was a woman, Freya says. —From online. Charlotte?

—Oh, *Charlotte*? Fletcher rolls his eyes. —We had dinner, he says. —It didn't really—let's just say that there wasn't exactly a *spark*.

—No? Freya says.

—No, Fletcher says. He doesn't really want to end the year talking about this. His watch reads 12:02; he checks it against the television. —Oh, look, he says. He turns Freya's head by pressing his index finger against her cheek; she snarls and grabs it. —The ball is dropping.

—Ten! The group on the couch leads the room into a countdown. Fletcher and Freya join in. She still has a grip on his finger. He still has his arm around her waist.

The room chants *one*, there is a beat, and then everyone explodes into cheers and twirls their cheap noisemakers. Someone tries to lead a round of "Auld Lang Syne." Fletcher turns to look at Freya; her face is close to his. Her eyes are half-closed. She is pressing against the back of his neck with her fist.

—I, Fletcher says, and then they are kissing.

It's just a moment's thing, really; their mouths only half-connect and then they both draw back for a second. Freya is laughing; Fletcher can't tell whether it's from surprise or delight or if she's ridiculing him. He can't believe it's over already—he has wanted to kiss her for so long, and it was over before he even knew it was happening.

But she is still standing here. Her hands on the sides of his head. And somehow he finds the courage to lean forward, and Freya shrugs, as if to say *what the hell*, and they kiss again, this time for real, her tongue is in his mouth and all he can think is *oh my God she is Frenching me*.



JAKOB

## WORK (FIVE)

001: [The sounds of kitchen noise can be heard.]

Coffee?

002: There's, uh, cream in the fridge if you want some, and the sugar is in that pourer there.

003: Yeah, I'm a bit, uh, that party really did a number on me.

004: Uh-huh. [pause] Have you started?

005: Oh, uh, OK. My name is Jakob Parsons, and I work for Madison and Cowley Temporary Staffing Services. As, well, a temp.

006: The entire time I've been there I've only had one assignment, and that's been over at Fieldhammer Investments. I've been there, I don't know, two months.

007: They've got me doing data entry.

008: Like, scanning documents, burning the scans onto CD-Rs.

009: Yeah, it's hell.

010: I don't know. Supposedly Fieldhammer is happy with my performance, I guess—I guess they get a lot of incompetents or whatever, I don't know, I've seen some people working there who aren't quite... all together? [laughs] So, yeah, supposedly there's a position opening up in Human Resources, and they're talking about hiring me away from the agency. That would be good, I guess, I mean at least I wouldn't be stuck in front of the scanner all day, but...

011: I don't know. I guess I never saw myself ending up at an investment firm.

012: Yeah, I mean, the whole reason I even *took* this job in the first place was because my girlfriend got sick of me moaning about being unemployed.

013: Yeah, Freya. [pause]

014: What?

015: Oh, nothing. But, so, yeah, as I was saying... it's just not what I really set out to do.

016: I don't know. I mean, it sounds stupid, but I just really was into the idea of being, like, a *scholar*.

017: Yeah, like, someone who studies for a living. I mean, that just seems *ideal*.

018: Yeah, but, no. Academia's really fucked right now.

019: Oh, there's no jobs for anybody; there are less and less tenure-track positions and more and more positions for like part-time teachers or just, like, I don't know, academic shit-workers, people hired for a semester here or there to pick up the courses that no one else wants to teach.

020: I guess it's *possible* to still get a tenure-track job, but it just seems like you need to specialize so insanely in one particular area of thought—you need to like stake out your little parcel of intellectual territory and like that's *it*—that's all you get to think about for the rest of your life. And that's not really what I'm into. I mean, I still like reading books for *pleasure*, you know?

021: No. I mean, I've seen what happens to the people who go down that route. Let me tell you, by and large they don't look like happy people.

022: They look *tired*.

023: Yeah. And I'm not talking about *tired* like *I stayed up too late last night, NewYear's Eve, partying* kind of tired. I'm talking *tired* like *tired of life* tired.

AUSTIN & LYDIA

# WANTING TO BE A DAD

—I want your cock inside me, Lydia breathes into Austin's ear.

—Yeah, he gasps. —Hang on.

Normally, when they're ready to fuck, he sits up and gets a condom out of the little African carved box, and she keeps her hand around his penis so that he doesn't lose his erection while he fumbles with the wrapper. It's a strategy that's become habit over the past year; it works. Only this time, as he begins to climb off of her, she grabs his shoulders, pulls him back down.

—No, wait, she says. —Just . . . go ahead.

—But, he says. —The condom.

—Don't worry about it, she says.

—No, he says. —Just let me. . . He tries again to get up; and as she releases him she sighs (he can hear the note of exasperation).

He gets the condom on; they fuck. After they finish they're lying there in the dark and she works up the nerve to ask.

—How come you always wear a condom when we fuck? she asks.

She can hear him laugh. A tiny laugh, bitter, almost a cough. —Uh, he says, —there's a little thing called *pregnancy*?

—I'm on the pill, Lydia says. —You know this. It's safe.

In order to say this she has to repress a minor surge of guilt: over the course of the past year she's gotten kind of lax about taking her pill every

day. It seems kind of redundant, because of the condom thing. She takes it almost every day, but some days she forgets—some mornings she takes two, attempting to catch up.

—Yeah, Austin says, but the way I figure it, condoms *with* the pill is safer than *just* condoms, or *just* the pill. I mean, I want to have kids someday, but— and he laughs that bitter cough-laugh again —not *now*.

He remembers Rose here. She had problems with birth control, too. She didn't like condoms, didn't want them in her place, didn't want to know that Austin had them. This was a remnant from her religious upbringing. She was in the middle of a program of getting away from her background—coming to Chicago was part of that plan; she thought that she could start over with a new self if only she could get away from her folks and from all the people who knew her as religious—but the program wasn't complete, and the combination of forces within her had driven her attitude towards sex into a complex grain that Austin could never quite fully map.

Rose's official position was that she wasn't ready to have sex; that they weren't having sex at all. Condoms compromised this policy and so she didn't want them around. But when she and Austin would end up in bed together, they'd spend hours circling closer and closer to the actual act of fucking, yearning for the release that they both knew could be found there. And there were times when she'd pull him inside her. This was how Austin lost his virginity. Sometimes she would let him in for only a second, the duration of one full, deep stroke. And sometimes he could stay in for longer. As long as he pulled out before he came it was OK. They weren't always careful.

He remembers trying to figure out what they should do. Looking down through the overpass fence at cars, angry, wanting to do something stupid and murderous, wanting to throw something heavy through someone's windshield. On one level wanting to be a dad.

—Well, *duh*, Lydia says. —I'm not ready to have kids *either*. But, I don't know, don't you want to be able to, like. . . *feel* me better?

—It's not just the pregnancy thing, Austin says. —I mean, there's also like the *disease* thing. . .

—You think I might be *diseased*? Lydia says.

—No, Austin says. He sighs. —But, I mean, I don't know. . . I just figure better safe than sorry. . .

—I can't believe that you've been thinking about me that way *all this time*, Lydia says. —That like *fucking me* is like a goddamn question of *risk management* for you.

Austin closes his eyes and wishes he was somewhere, anywhere, else.

He's talked to Rose twice since Christmas. The conversations have been tentative and brief, mainly just catching up, sharing their complaints about their respective jobs, joking about resolutions. She hasn't asked if he's involved with anyone, and he hasn't told her. She will be visiting in February.

LYDIA

## THE LOVE THING

Lydia and Anita are at lunch. Lydia's talking about Austin. She's already gone over the whole *condom* thing and the whole *disease* thing. Now she's on the love thing.

—So we've been going out for a year, Lydia says. —Almost. A year this February.

—Uh huh, Anita says. She's finished her meal and is putting on lipstick, checking herself in her compact mirror.

—And he's never told me that he loves me. Does that seem weird to you?

—A year is a long time, Anita says. She presses her lips against one another.

—A year *is* a long time, Lydia confirms. —Oh, God.

—Have you said it to him?

—*God*, no, says Lydia.

Anita snaps the compact shut and returns it to her purse. —But you *do* love him?

—What? Lydia says. —Oh, uh, yeah. Yeah, of course. She shoots Anita a look.

Anita shrugs. —Sometimes it's hard to be sure.

—Yeah, no, I get that. But no. I mean, I *do* love him— (it feels strange, to hear the words, to have them come out of her mouth) —but I don't want to, you know, *scare him off*. You know how guys are—

—Boy *do* I.

—But, I don't know. I actually don't think he's *scared* of commitment. It *has* been a year. And he seems pretty committed—

Anita makes a puzzled face. —Well, yeah, weren't— remind me —weren't the two of you thinking about moving in together at one point?

Lydia sighs. —Austin and his roommate just renewed their lease. But the roommate is getting married in April, so he's out. *My* lease runs out at the end of May, and, I don't know, we've talked—kind of?—about having me come in then, take over the roommate's half of the lease. But he always says *either that or I'll just break the lease and move into a place by myself*.

—So he's . . . noncommittal.

—Well, yeah. But he didn't run screaming for the hills when I mentioned the *idea* of us living together. That's *something*.

—No, Anita says, you're right.

Lydia sticks a fork into her salad and listlessly moves romaine leaves around. —I don't know, she says. —I just wish he would give me a *sign* or something.

—You said he was a musician? Anita says.

—Yeah, Lydia says. She drops her head in her hands. —Don't remind me.

DENISE & FREYA

## WHAT'S-HIS-FACE

—So who was that guy? Joshua asks. It's a slow morning, only two customers, academic-looking types rifling quietly through the jazz discs.

—What guy? Denise asks. She flips a record in her hands, the Fursaxa LP, on Ecstatic Peace.

—You know, Joshua asks. —Your friend.

—What friend? Denise asks.

—Your puking friend, Joshua says.

—Oh, Denise says. —Don't call him that.

—So who is he?

—None of your business, Denise says. She puts the needle down on the record and the space inside the store becomes a kind of dreamy haze.

Joshua rests on his forearms on the counter and nods sagely, as if she were right for once. He squints out onto the floor. After a few seconds of this he turns to her and says —So do you guys have something going on, or what?

—What? Denise says. —No. He's just some guy. He's a customer. Haven't you ever seen him in here before? He's only in here like *every week*.

Joshua turns around, puts his elbows behind him, rests the small of his back against the counter. He puts one combat boot on the rim of the trash can and tilts it down towards him, threatening to tip it over and spill receipts and shredded packaging onto the floor. He shrugs. —I don't know, he says. —I don't pay much attention to the people who come through here. Why should I care about them?



—I don't care about them either, says Denise, quietly.

—You know? he says. —I'm just like, *fuck them*.

Denise smiles politely. Her mom always said *make sure you smile*. She smiles and nods her head as though it were on a string.

—Anyway, Joshua says. —I think he likes you.

—What? Denise says.

—That guy. At the party. What's-his-face. He digs you.

—I don't think so, says Denise. She thinks about it. She could be wrong. She's always a bit surprised to learn that a guy is interested in her. It is as if they see something in her that she can not herself see.

—*Believe* me, Joshua says. —It was totally *obvious*.

Denise opens her mouth to protest, but she can't seem to summon up the conviction.

—What did he call you? That night?

—What? Denise says. —I don't remember—

—*Lola*?

—Oh, Denise says.

—What was *that* about?

—Nothing, Denise says.

Joshua gives her a *that's weird* face. That's when Freya comes out of the office. She looks unsettled. She steps up to Joshua and points to the bin of discs to be reshelfed.

—Those from last night? she asks.

—Uh, says Joshua. —I guess.

—Go put them out on the floor. She points back over her shoulder with her thumb. Her voice has a *don't fuck with me* quality to it. Denise finds that she envies that.

—Aye aye, says Joshua. He heaves up the bin and heads out.

Freya goes and stands in the spot where he was, leans on the counter and stares out onto the floor in the same way he had been doing. Denise goes and stands next to her.

—Hey, Freya says.

—Hey.

—How you doing?

—OK, Denise says. It takes her a moment to remember that it's polite to ask it back of people. —And you? she manages.

—OK, I guess, she says. She frowns. —Did you notice anything weird about Don when he came in today?

—Don? Denise says. —No. Why?

—Cause he's in his office like hunched over his desk, Freya says. —I think he's— and here her voice drops a notch —I think he's *crying*.

—Crying? Denise says.

FREYA &amp; JAKOB

## REASSURANCE

Freya throws chopped onion down into the oil and a sizzling fills the room. –So yeah, she says, –his girlfriend apparently met someone else down in Florida.

Jakob at the counter, his back to her, dicing long strips of red bell pepper. –Oh yeah? he says. He remembers New Year's Eve, remembers sitting on the couch and turning to her after the ball fell only to get treated to the sight of her kissing Fletcher. He has carried this image with him for a month now and not said anything of it.

–And apparently there had been this thing going on between them for a long time, where she like wanted him to leave Chicago, and come like *be with her* down there, and he kept saying *I will I will* but *just give me six more months*. Apparently this has been going on like this for *years*. She's been down there the whole time *I've* known him.

She pushes the softening onions with a wooden spoon. –So finally she got some leverage, I guess. She met somebody else and she was like *come down now or I'm gonna leave you*. And apparently he's going to go.

–Really? Jakob says. –Here. He passes the cutting board over to her and she tilts it, tumbling the diced pepper into the pan.

–Thanks, she says. –Yeah, she says. –He's leaving in, like, two weeks. He gave his notice and everything. She picks her glass of wine up off the stool and takes a sip from it, puts on a contemplative look for a second. –I think his girlfriend must have already slept with the guy, she says. –I mean, I don't know for sure, but Don looked pretty shaken up. He just looked like he needed to get the fuck down there *as soon as possible*.

Jakob imagines what it would be like, to learn that Freya had slept with Fletcher. He can feel his face glaze.

—So, yeah, Mark— the owner —is pretty pissed, Freya says. —But from my perspective things look pretty cool. I mean, I figure I'm the assistant manager, Don quits— that should mean I get to be the manager. Which would be *great*. I'd finally get to run the store the way I want. And I'd get a raise.

—You think it'll happen? Jakob says.

—It should, Freya says. —But I don't know. When Mark was in he was mainly trying to get Don not to quit. And, fuck, sure, for all I know the bastard might change his mind. And even if he does quit, there's no guarantee that Mark will make me the new manager.

—But you've been there the longest, haven't you?

—Yeah, yeah, Freya says. —I've been there the longest, I know how everything in the store runs, the other people there like me—it's smart to make me the new manager, but if Mark always did what was smart he would have fired Don and made me the manager a long time ago. She smiles grimly. —I don't know. Mark and I have never really gotten along too well; it's totally possible that he'd hire on someone new as the manager and keep me as the assistant. Which would fucking suck. It helps, though, that Don's leaving so suddenly: less time to look for a replacement, no time to train one. So I don't know. I think I have a pretty good shot.

—It would be cool if you got it, Jakob says, flatly.

—Yeah, Freya says. She notices that something's weird about his voice; he sounds slightly absent. Disconnected. She turns to look at him. He's staring down into his wineglass.

—Is everything all right? she asks. —You seem a little bit, I don't know, *off* tonight.

—Yeah, I guess, Jakob says.

—You guess?

—I need to talk to you about something, he says.

She turns back to the pan and begins prodding the vegetables around some more. The air in the kitchen is growing steamy, fragrant. —What's that? she asks, although she has a feeling.

—On New Year's Eve, he says. —I saw you kissing Fletcher.

—Yeah, she says. —I know.

—And I guess, he says, —I guess I just wanted to know why you would do that.

—Jakob, listen, she says. —I understand that it might have hurt you and I'm sorry. But it didn't mean anything. I was just *playing around*.

Mostly Jakob trusts Freya, and believes her, and so he knows, more or less, that what she is saying here is true, and he knows that one kiss between old friends at a New Year's Eve party really doesn't matter, and he knows that things will ultimately be easier if he chooses to *play it cool* here. He has been telling himself that for a month: *play it cool, let it slide, laugh it off*.

But it hurt him, to see Freya kissing Fletcher, and the part of him that was hurt is a part full of childish need, which cannot manage the complex trick of trust, which does not believe enough in her love to remember that it persists even outside of moments of demonstration, outside of acts of reassurance and attention. It is this part that was hurt, and it is this part that is about to take the floor, demanding to be comforted, although nothing can comfort it. He looks at the ice cubes in his wineglass, then up at her.

—Playing around? he says. —Playing *around*?

Jeremy P. Bushnell lives and works in Chicago, IL, where he helps to run Invisible City Productions, a collective dedicated to the promotion and distribution of independent media projects. He is the author of *Bombing Starbucks*, a freeware novel available for download at the Invisible City website ([www.invisible-city.com](http://www.invisible-city.com)).

He can be reached by e-mail at [jeremy@invisible-city.com](mailto:jeremy@invisible-city.com).