

# Imaginary Year

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ISSUE FIVE

"these faces would come out of the pattern"

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Thanks for reading.

MARVIN

**WORK (SIX)**

001: My name is Marvin Hoehn, and I work for Fieldhammer Investments.

002: As a Supervising Data Technician.

003: Mostly I prepare documents to be entered into the company database.

004: What? No, no, it's not that bad.

005: Where'd you hear that?

006: Oh, yeah, he does something different. He's a temp, the temps get the shittier part of the whole deal. They're all in like a, I don't know how you'd describe it, like one big room with different stations in it? They really can't like, slack off.

007: Yeah, totally! [laughs] I have an *office*.

008: Nah, I share it with one other guy. But he's cool. Most of the time we keep the door closed and play games.

009: Uh, I don't know. Lately we've been playing a lot of *Warcraft III*.

010: That's not a problem.

011: The company doesn't care as long as I get the shit done that they want me to do.

012: Oh, sure, it's easy. They think that this document prep thing takes way longer than it actually does.

013: I don't know. I think that they think that I'm doing it all by hand.

014: No, no. It's because-- [sighs] --people don't know how to use macros. I came in there and by the end of the first day I was like *oh, you could do this with a macro*. Getting the wildcards to work right was kind of a tricky bit, but now--I push a button and like half of my work is done.

015: Fuck, no.

016: Well, nobody asks. Like I said, all they care about is that the shit gets done; they don't care how I do it.

017: Oh, sure. But, see, there's a trick to it. It's like--they give you a certain amount of work to do in a day, and you do it. If you get done all that work by, say, noon, you don't go *hey, I'm done, give me something else to do*, because you *know* that what's going to happen there is soon they'll be expecting you to do *twice* the amount that you *were* doing. And that doesn't help anybody.

018: Well, sure, them, but, fuck them, they're rich. [laughs]

019: Right. So, bottom line: you know how much work they want you to do in a day, and if it only takes you a few hours you fill up the rest of the day with stuff you want to do. You do, say, an hour of work when you first get in, an hour right after lunch, and an hour in the afternoon. Maybe you do a little bit more than they expect of you so that you stay in their good graces. Then other days you do a little bit less so that you don't get them expecting *too* much.

020: The rest of the time, yeah, you spend surfing the web or playing games or whatever.

021: You could very legitimately say that the company employs me to destroy virtual orcs.

FLETCHER

# RATS LIVE ON NO EVIL STAR

Fletcher walks around his apartment in slippers, listening to Sunny Murray's *Sunshine and an Even Break*. His ankles are cold. He sips a beer, swills it around in his mouth, taps his pointer finger against his lips. The streets outside are bathed in the amber glow of municipal lamplight.

He's been corresponding lately with a woman who responded to his personal ad. *Jane Hirshfield is my favorite poet*, she wrote, in her initial communication. *What's your favorite palindrome?*

*Hirshfield*, he'd thought. *Good answer*. He located his copy of Hirshfield's book *The October Palace* on his shelf. It's on his desk right now, sitting on top of an unread sheaf of printouts about Iraq that Clark gave him, something about Oliver North and the Iran / Iraq war of the 80s. He's been using Hirshfield poem titles for the subject lines of his responses to this new woman, and she picked up on it, she's been doing the same right back. *Perceptibility Is a Kind of Attentiveness. A Recurring Possibility. The World.* Neither of them have acknowledged what they're doing. He considered titling his last response *The Answering Yes*, after the name of a section in Hirshfield's book, but he chickened out—it almost seems too bold, too naked an expression of interest. And he's not yet ready to tip his hand too much. He doesn't want to be vulnerable; he knows that things may well fall apart the first time they get together. He remembers his coffee date with Charlotte, just before New Year's Eve, talking to her about the Ph.D. program, going into layers of detail about his exams, approaching in March, watching her focus instead on the act of stirring her cocoa, watching her turn to look out the window at shoppers and dogs, and he knew she would rather be anywhere than here, listening to him, and he thought *sweet merciful fuck I am blowing this*.

He doesn't want to blow this one. He doesn't know much about her yet but what he does know he likes. He likes that she's finishing up getting her

graduate certificate in Theory and Criticism at the Art Institute right now. He likes it that she's been to Greece. He liked the question about the palindrome. He noticed that the name he knows her as, 8Cassandra8, the name she has chosen for herself here, has a palindromic quality in and of itself, a symmetry. Even the eights are symmetrical, along two axes. He answered *rats live on no evil star* and when she responded the next day with *satan, oscillate my metallic sonatas* something panged within him. The tiny pain that is the beginning of longing.

And so tonight he's walking around, staring up at the ceiling fan instead of writing to her again. He needs to think about his next move. Her last note to him contained only the following:

*Before this goes any further I have a question to ask you and I know it might sound weird but I need to know. How do you feel about kids?*

He's not really sure how he feels about kids. He knows that Clark doesn't want kids and so sometimes when he's walking somewhere with her and they pass a playground or something he'll say *oh, look at all the cute little parasites* but he doesn't get the feeling that that joke will go over well in this instance.

He sips his beer, and tries, seriously, to think about the idea of children but all he can summon to mind is the junk that seems to accompany them: brightly-colored plastic tubs, board books, a sprawl of strewn chunky toys, everything filmed with dried formula and drool. As a culture he can't say that it attracts him.

And yet he can see himself as a father. Or so he tells himself. When he attempts it, he finds that it takes surprising effort to get this vision to come through as anything stronger than a flicker. He can summon up a hazy rain of notions, but these do not congeal into an image; he cannot see this future clearly enough to feel drawn towards it.

He sits down at the computer; turns it on. He will try to feel his way to an answer; hopefully something that's better than *I've got nothing against kids*.

But he wonders. Why would she even ask such a thing? He's not sure he likes any of the possible answers.

## AUSTIN

## AFTER IT HAPPENED

—It's funny, Rose says. —After it happened there was a period where I thought that God was punishing me. She smirks and looks down at her hands. She is sitting on the couch, her legs tucked up underneath her. She plans to crash at her cousin's place tonight; that's where she's been staying.

—I mean, she says, —I had done this whole thing to like *get away* from God, and then it just turned out so *badly*.

—Yeah, says Austin. He wants to say *it wouldn't happen that way now*. In the years that have passed since then he has improved himself, he believes this, he has learned things about how to be a good man, and if the man he is now could impossible back in time and meet the Rose of the past he believes that they would find a way, together, to seek solace and comfort in one another. He would hold her in his arms. But they are in the present. Two bodies in a room. It is after dinner. A half-finished bottle of wine sits on the coffee table, along with two emptied glasses, set so that they are touching. He sits on a footstool, near her. She is looking at her hands. He takes them in his own, and she lets him, and then she begins to speak again.

—I thought about that for a long time when I got back to Minneapolis, she says. —I wanted *so badly* to be forgiven, so that the punishment would stop, so that this *feeling* would stop, and I kept thinking that I couldn't be forgiven until I found some way to make *amends*.

—To God? Austin says. He's cautious here, he isn't quite sure he understands what he's saying.

—Yeah, to God, Rose says. —And to, you know, the baby. And that's where I kept hitting this like *wall*. Because you *can't* make amends to the baby; I mean, the baby is gone. She makes a kind of laugh. —I was really a mess during that time. I was having these really fucked-up dreams, and because of that I wasn't sleeping very well, and so I'd walk around all day in this kind of dream-state, I'd just go like waste hours in cafes, drinking all of this coffee to try to stay awake, and I'd start seeing angels everywhere, I'd like—look down at the surface of the table and these *faces* would come out of the pattern? And I knew that the faces were angels, and at the same time they were kind of like, the faces of the baby? That the baby might

have had? And so it was also, like, my face, and your face, all like mixed together and coming through these angels? And all during this time I was like trying to *paint*—trying to get this *down* in an *image* and just like losing my *mind*—I wanted to make this enormous *sculpture*—God, I was just a *wreck*. A total *wreck*. She laughs again.

—That sounds really intense, Austin says.

—Yeah, yeah, she says. —It *was*. *Totally* intense. And then I began to get it, I guess, what the dreams were trying to tell me. I guess you could say I *remembered* it, because it was something I knew when I was younger, and then had lost sight of for a while.

—What was it? Austin says.

—I remembered, Rose says, —I remembered that God isn't interested in punishing us. That God is, I don't know, love, I guess. This reservoir of constant love. And so this whole matter of making *amends* was something that I felt like I had to do so I could feel better about *myself*—I didn't need to make amends *to God*. You know? Because God had already forgiven me. And I didn't need to make amends to the baby, either, because when I had the abortion the baby became like *part* of God again. *Forgive's* not even the right word, it's not a matter of *forgiveness*. None of us *need* to be forgiven because none of us ever fall out of grace. It's constant. We just have to choose to *accept* that grace. And after I went back to Minneapolis I kept *resisting* it—it's *easier* to resist it than it is to accept it, because to *accept* it we have to have faith that we deserve it; that we're worthy of it. And that's really hard, especially after you fuck up. You know?

—I think so, Austin says. He isn't sure. He's never really believed in God as a being. But what Rose is saying makes sense to him somehow, in a way that he doesn't quite understand. He thinks about playing the guitar: when he improvises he can get to a certain place; he's only gotten there a few times but he remembers it. In this place, he feels like he's working from pure intuition; he doesn't feel like the music is coming from him, he feels like it's coming from somewhere else, coming *through* him. As though his own body were being used as an instrument by some other force, something larger. And he feels like Rose is tuned in to that larger force all the time, and he thinks that maybe that is what she means when she speaks of God.

—So, Rose says. She squeezes Austin's hand. —So then everything kind of fell into place. That fall, fall of what, 2000, I guess, I started going back to school, and I got my Master's in Pastoral Counseling, and then I started working at the center last summer. And now I'm here.

—I'm glad, Austin says. He wants to ask her if she's seeing anyone. She hasn't



mentioned anyone. (But he hasn't either—and before she came over he put a pile of Lydia's clothes into a cardboard box and slid it way back in the closet.) He wonders what time she will want to head back out to Evanston, back to her cousin's place. It is already after nine. He holds her hand. They are both quiet. Outside, flakes of snow turn and weave in the wind.

## FREYA &amp; FLETCHER

## WORTH IT

—No, Freya sighs, there's no *reason* for it. Or, no, the *reason* is because he thinks that I'm like always *riding his ass* about stuff that he's done. I rode his ass about not having a job. I rode his ass about not coming with me to Texas. Now that he's finally *caught me* doing something quote unquote *wrong* I think he sees it as like a thing that he can finally ride *my ass* about. I think the motherfucker is actually *happy*.

Freya downs the last of her pint. —Happy? Fletcher says.

—Yeah, she says. She hails a waitress, indicates *two more* by pointing back and forth between her empty glass and Fletcher's. —You know, like he's finally scored a point against me or something? It seems to give him like some kind of *satisfaction*.

—So in a way, Fletcher says, —he should be thanking me.

—Ha! Well, you could bring that up to him, but I don't know how well it would go over. Actually, I don't really think he wants to see you at the moment. She puts a hand over her eyes. —God, she says. —That's so embarrassing to have to say. I can't believe that he's actually behaving in a way that's *embarrassing* to me.

Fletcher shrugs, looks down to bend a piece of foil.

—Whatever, Freya says. —He'll get over it.

—I'm not too worried, says Fletcher. *It was worth it*, he thinks.

New beers hit the table.

—So, Fletcher says, —Happy Valentine's Day.

—Yeah, right, Freya says. —Actually, there *is* some good news—I got the promotion.

—Hey, Fletcher says, —that's great.

—I start as manager on Monday.

They toast, and drink.

—So who's gonna be the new assistant manager? Fletcher asks.

—Uh, Freya says. —Do you know Denise?

—She was at your party? Fletcher asks.

—Yeah.

—Tallish girl? Blonde? With like— he waves his hand in front of his face.

—That's her, Freya says.

—She's kind of strange, Fletcher says.

—She's strange, Freya says. —But other than me she's been there the longest. She's been a shift supervisor for, I don't know, a year now? She's a little weird, but she'll do fine as the assistant manager; I'm not worried.

—OK, says Fletcher.

—So what's new with you? says Freya. —How's, uh, Charlotte?

—Cassandra, Fletcher says.

—Right, Cassandra, sorry.

—Charlotte was the other one, Fletcher says.

—Duly noted, Freya says. —So how are things, anyway?

—Uh, Fletcher says, —well, they're, uh, interesting.

—Interesting? Freya says. —Interesting how?

—She has a kid, Fletcher says.

—Oh, Freya says. —Well. That *is* interesting.

—Yeah, says Fletcher.

—How old?

—Four.

—Four, Freya says, as though trying it out. —Dad in the picture?

—They're divorced, Fletcher says. —I think he's still around in Chicago somewhere; I didn't really get the whole deal.

—Huh, Freya says. —Wow.

—Yeah, Fletcher says. He puts on a stoic face and nods. —Yep.

Freya watches him, and Fletcher can feel that she's assessing something, his mood, maybe his overall emotional state. He's not sure what. But he loves it when she looks at him this way, serious, concerned. It lets him know that he is cared for.

—How do you feel about it? she asks.

He claps his palms together and touches them to his lips, holds that pose for a long moment. —I don't know, he says.

CLARK

# CONTAINMENT

Clark sits in an office. A poster across from her depicts a straining group of whitewater rafters: the word ILLINOIS hangs in the air above them. She sips her brackish coffee and calls up the Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site to confirm their hours, which have been reduced, due to budget cuts. She notes the change and calls the next location on her list, the Fayette County Museum.

This is her new job. She's working as an Associate Editor for a company that publishes specialty magazines. The one she's working on now is a quarterly regional-interest thing, an inoffensive assemblage of coupons and event listings and generic photos of autumn woods which ends up distributed to local hotels, placed carefully in the desk drawer, next to the hotel stationery, to live in darkness, aspiring to nothing more than for some businessman to pick it up, flip through it idly, and maybe tear out a page for future reference. When she was first familiarizing herself with it, she noted with a depressed bemusement that the Chicago that appears in it is one that she does not inhabit: all high-end retail shops, Loop steakhouses, and big-name attractions like the Shedd Aquarium that she hasn't been to since junior high school. An official Chicago, a Chicago that she could not love.

She saw a different Chicago this past weekend, out at the F15 anti-war protest: thousands of people gathered on Devon Street, marching together in the freezing wind, carrying homemade signs, shouting, singing hymns, daring to feel jubilation in the face of the horror and death that may yet come.

That *is coming*, she corrects herself.

For it is coming. She cannot let herself believe that they have managed to contain it. On Sunday she got online and dug up coverage on the other demonstrations around the world: 600 cities, millions of protesters overall—when she began to see the numbers some optimistic voice inside her blurted out *maybe we are actually stopping this thing*. But to believe that overlooks the sheer momentum of the machinery already set into motion, not to mention the contempt the Bush Administration evinces towards all who would oppose it. It is not yet time to relax.

And yet. How good to see that she is not the only one. That is the knowledge that carries her through another week in this awful office. One window on her computer is open on the Poets Against the War website. Joan Retallack: Oh lucky lucky us that we know we are not alone in this. That we discover we are each other.

FLETCHER

## GETTING WARMER

Fletcher and Cassandra are at the end of their first date. In the subway station entryway Fletcher says —I had a nice time. Fletcher's not going home on the subway; once Cassandra goes through the turnstile he plans to walk back outside and hail a cab. He will sit in the back and think about her, replaying bits from the date and inspecting them for minor nuances, and when he gets home he will put on an album of ecstatic jazz, probably Ayler, and he will drink a beer and then a second one and he'll keep thinking about her, wondering how she feels about him, wondering how he feels about her, sifting the torrent of his own thoughts for any solid grams of certainty. He will fall asleep with his arms around his pillow, having forgotten to work out the details of his lesson plan, so that tomorrow he'll find himself standing up in front of the chalkboard explaining metonymy in the fuzziest possible way. But now he is standing here, while she delves into her purse for her farecard, and he is wanting very badly to kiss her, and wondering if he should try to, even though that would mean leaping through the forcefield of all the reasons why he shouldn't.

She looks down into her purse and he watches her thick black curls. Her hair awakens some craving in him for *more sense*. During the entire date he kept thinking about plunging his hands into it. Later, when he's being debriefed by Freya, he'll say *she was more good-looking than I expected; that threw off my whole game*. The scene: he's sitting there at the café, sipping ice water, flipping over the menu to read the back for the second time, and she comes in, and she's *tall*—he couldn't tell that she was tall from the photo she'd sent him—and she's wearing this enormous thick scarf and there's this *mass* of *curls* and he's like *whoa* and she says —You must be Fletcher, and he says —Um, yup, and nods like a moron and then he stands up and shakes her hand, feeling totally awkward, and he has to fight the urge to remark upon his own awkwardness because he's at least smart enough to know that that won't make him seem any *less* awkward. Dr. Awkward is a palindrome.

Things got better after they started talking. He decided to talk to her about Leander, her son—this was an easy way for him to seem bold, showing that her status as a mother doesn't make him feel apprehensive (although secretly it does, sometimes; before bed he will spend a lot of time trying to puzzle out how exactly he feels about it. The process will work exactly as well as if he were trying to see the inside of something opaque by holding it up to the light and squinting). She talked about Leander for a little bit, showing Fletcher the requisite photograph, which he praised,

somewhat automatically, although the kid did look cute, sort of. He asked about a sitter and she shook her head *no* and explained that she can usually get a friend to watch him. —Most of them are women in their thirties, academics, you know?, who don't have kids of their own; they've got these like *reserves* of maternal energy that they're actually *thrilled* to use. The kid is growing up with like five surrogate aunts. *And no dad*, Fletcher thought, but he kept that to himself.

As soon as she mentioned *academics* he felt like he was on more stable ground, and he asked her about her work—she talked about the relationships between Zen and modern art, particularly Fluxus; he made a joke about John Cage; she laughed, a beautiful kind of laugh that later he thinks of as *coltish*. She asked him about his poetry and he gave her a modest sketch of *Everything*. —I'd like to hear some of it sometime, she said. —Maybe when I know you a little better, he said.

And they finished up and paid (they split the bill) and now she has her farecard out. —Well, she says. —It was nice to finally meet you.

—Yeah, Fletcher says. —Maybe we can get together again sometime.

—I'd like that, she says.

And she gives him a quick hug and they do not kiss. And as he rides home in the cab he thinks about what that means, a date with no kiss, he does not know whether it matters or not, but he stays up too late thinking about it, and not doing his work. Eventually he collapses into bed in the darkness, with an aching body and a mind made mossy by beer. But in the morning, his alarm goes off, and he finds that it is already light outside, for the first time in weeks. The radio says that the day will reach a high of 45 degrees, which is warmer than it's been for a long time. *Spring*, he will think, *is coming*.



MARVIN

## MISINTERPRETATION

OK, yes, there was a time when he was interested in Lydia. He'd love to say that there wasn't—it seems so embarrassing to him now—but if you got him talking about it he'd explain. He'd say *just think for a minute*. You're single. And you live with a woman. And day in and day out she walks around in like her *bathrobe*. You can't help but notice that she's got legs, *nice* legs. Or you're sitting in your room and you see her walk by, she goes into the bathroom and you hear the shower come on. The next thing you know you're picturing her: steam, lather, wet skin, the whole deal. If you're a single guy living with a woman it's inevitable—you're going to wonder about what she would be like in bed. (OK, Paul wouldn't, obviously, but Paul's his own special deal, Marvin's talking about, you know, normal guys.)

For a while he wondered if Lydia was trying to give him a signal, trying to let him know that she was waiting for him to make a move. Like that night when they watched *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*: they're sitting there on the couch, kind of next to one another, and her arms disappeared inside her sweater and a minute later she pulled her bra out through her sleeve. She caught him looking at it, and she kind of shook it in his face before dropping it into her lap. And then there was like this *bra* sitting there and all he could think about were breasts. Her breasts. Cause she had just reminded him that they were like *in there*, under the sweater and the undershirt or whatever, and she must have *known* that he'd be sitting there thinking about them (or so he thought at the time), she must have *wanted him* to be sitting there thinking *wow, she's not wearing a bra* (that's what he thought, but he was wrong, that's the embarrassing part; when he looks back on it now he understands that she must have just *done* it without having thought at all about how he'd react, she took off her bra the same way he'd take off his shoes or something, but at the time he was *certain* that she was trying to trigger some kind of lust in him, and, dead wrong, he spent an hour trying to work up the nerve to move his hand to her leg. It blew the entire rest of the movie for him because his entire frame of attention became focused around the drama of the couch, him, her, the two of them so close that he could smell her shampoo. His hand just barely grazing the scalloped fold of her jeans at the knee. His mind full of questions—*Did she just shift? Towards me or away from me? Is it a sign? Does she want me to keep going?* Eventually the movie ended and she stood up and brushed herself off and said *well, I'm going to bed*, and even then he wondered if she was inviting him to follow.).

He figured it out. You go into someone's room late at night, you sit on the edge of her bed and make tiny offerings of small talk, you wait and wait for her to embrace you and eventually she says *I need to get some sleep; I'll see you tomorrow*. That can only happen so many times before you get the message. The message that she's not trying to send you a message.

It didn't hurt too bad, really. Even at his most optimistic he had always felt like she was out of his league. Look who she's dating now, this guy Austin, some fucking blond-haired *musician* who's probably got like *soulful eyes* or whatever—he can't compete with that, can't compete with a guy who can play the guitar, the kind of guys who are going to like Lydia with her fucking weird CDs; he knows it. Whatever.

It doesn't matter, actually. It all worked out for the best. If he hadn't given up on Lydia, he probably wouldn't have walked away from the Dungeons and Dragons campaign they'd started, and if he hadn't done that he wouldn't have started playing the vampire game, and if he hadn't done that he would never have met Astrid. And Astrid—well, Astrid is an unbelievable dream. The first time they fooled around, the day after Christmas, in her tiny purple room in the attic of her parents' house in Lincolnwood, they kissed for maybe fifteen minutes and then she said *OK, I want you to tie me up now*. He'd never done anything like that before. They'd never talked about it. But she pulled out this box from under her bed that was full of like handcuffs and restraints and leather straps—who knows where she got all this crap—and pretty soon he had her on her stomach with her dress hiked up and he was spanking her with a flat-backed hairbrush and he came without even taking his pants off, pretty much just from listening to her squeal into her pillow. *I'm never going to let go of this person*, he thought right then, lying splayed across her, exhausted.

Lately, Astrid's been talking a lot about Gloria, a tiny Central American girl who just joined the vampire game and who wears her hair in sweet pigtails. Tonight after the game they all went out to a diner and as Gloria was leaving Astrid leaned over and bit Marvin's ear and whispered *I want her; I want you to watch me take her*. And then he went home in a heady fever and lay in bed just thinking about it, thinking about it, thinking about it, trying not to let himself believe that it might actually happen.

He thinks about what she said. *I want you to watch me take her*. No room for misinterpretation there. This is the way every time. She says *I want this; do this*. And every time he has the same reaction: he says *Um, really?* and as soon as he's sure she's serious he says *OK*.

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