

Imaginary Year

VOLUME THREE

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"Their weight will keep her from sleeping"

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Thanks for reading.

AUSTIN

WORK [VII]

001: My name is Austin Dandridge, and I work for the Ryerson Center.

002: It's kind of cool, actually. It's this after-school program, for kids where, you know, the parents both work, or there's only one parent in the picture. The Center has a bunch of audio-visual equipment, and I teach the kids how to use it.

003: Ages six through fourteen.

004: Oh, yeah, it's great. I love them; I mean, they're just hilarious.

005: I've always liked kids. I don't know, maybe it comes from having two younger sisters. I feel very comfortable being the one who's like *teaching*, turning people on to new things?

006: I think I *would* make a good dad. [laughs] I actually am really looking *forward* to—well, never mind, that's off the subject. [laughs]

007: Yeah, we do—well, this might be interesting to you: I have the kids do little documentaries.

008: Video documentaries. We have some camcorders, even a few old TV news cameras, one of the local networks donated them to us. So I train the kids in just the basics of it, where to point, where to look, how to shoot, and then I talk to them about what a documentary is; I talk to them about the different *types* of documentaries, and then I get them to do their own.

009: Oh, they're *hilarious*. I have a tape somewhere of some of them; I should show you. It's all like, uh, you know, one kid is really proud of his sneakers, so he did a documentary called *Shoes Day!* which is all like shots of him striking, I don't know, action poses, I guess? [laughs] Like kung-fu leaps and stuff? And in every shot he has the kid who's working the camera zoom in on his *feet*. It's like *twenty shots* of this.

010: Some are more traditional, I guess, kids interviewing other kids about like, *what do your parents do for a living* or whatever. The older kids especially are really

into trying to make it “real,” like other documentaries that they’ve seen on TV, or in school, I guess. But the documentaries they’re making at like age eight are totally brilliant and weird.

011: Yeah, I mean, *Shoes Day!* [laughs]

012: Let’s see, what else? Music videos, that’s a big one. Lots of twelve-year-old girls lip-synching to Christina Aguilera, working out dance moves, that kind of thing, very freaky.

013: Did you ever see that movie *Donnie Darko*?

014: Two words for you: Sparkle Magic.

015: [laughs] Yeah. Yeah. *Totally*. But, I don’t know, I shouldn’t make fun, I guess. I mean in its own way it’s really interesting. Like you have these girls, right, and they’re clearly trying to work something out here, like, uh, they’re *using* pop culture as a tool, a tool to help them figure out how they relate to the erotic power of their own bodies—oh, great, I think I just went on record as saying that twelve-year-old girls are erotic, there goes my job. [laughs] But you know what I mean.

016: Yeah, they’re on this like *cusp*—they’re just a few years away from being recognized by society as fully-functioning sexual beings, and it’s obvious that they’re already trying to think about what that means, and how they’re going to negotiate it, and I really feel like that process is *valuable*. So I throw this audio-visual stuff at them, and I guess at my most lofty I hope that they can use it to aid them in that process. But they use *everything*—all that pop culture crap that floats around them *all* gets brought into that process. They define themselves in *relationship* to it.

017: I guess I worry about that, yeah. But for every girl who will define herself by embracing it another will define herself by rejecting it. I think it’s important for them to be *aware* of these different roles, and, yeah, to try them out; if they try them out they have a better sense of *what* they’re rejecting, what it *means* to reject it.

018: Um, I guess you could describe it as a kind of play. Sure.

017: I don’t know. Adults definitely play less. And, yeah, they don’t seem to be as involved in the process of defining themselves; discovering themselves. Adults seem, ah, more *fixed*? Like they’ve already worked out their answers to these questions?

018: Uh, you know, like *what is the relationship to my own sexuality? What does it mean to be in this body in this world with other bodies?* Just, basically, *who am I?* As people

move into adulthood there's this notion that we're supposed to have these questions answered, and so we just grab an answer that seems to be working and we say *well, I'm going to stick with that one.*

019: I don't know. I mean, those are big questions [laughs]. I don't know that they can ever *really* be answered.

020: Oh no. I'm not *sure* of anything.

JAKOB

READING THE SIGNS

Jakob rides the El in to work, same as he does every day, one more body in the current that flows downtown in the mornings. The El is crowded. There's no real room to maneuver, and so there's nothing really to do with his hat and his gloves and his thick down coat other than to just leave them on. He stands there, looking hilariously fat in his puffy garb in the same way that toddlers do, as though he might tip over helplessly onto his back if you gave him enough of a nudge.

He grips a pole for balance and he reads what he can of other people's newspapers and magazines. He hates being the guy who reads over other people's shoulders—when he spots other people doing it he feels actual *contempt* for them—but as soon as he catches even a glance of what someone else is reading some channel opens in the air and locks his gaze in place. It doesn't matter if what he's looking at is something he'd normally be interested in or not. Today, for instance, he is examining a photo of the catcher's-mitt face of Bruce Willis.

(It's the same way with TV, he's noticed. He doesn't have a TV, so he's come to find them perversely intriguing—if he goes somewhere where there's one on, a bar or a sandwich shop or whatever, he falls into a trance the second he looks at it; he can't tear himself away from the endless stream of stupid shit funneling towards him, cars and meadows and bras. More than once Freya has had to wave her hand in front of his face and say *Hello?* in order to snap him back to this plane.)

Someone is reading the 'Cheers and Jeers' section of the *TV Guide*. He can't make out the text but he can see an image of a child sitting at a dining room table with his hands up. Maybe it's just because he hasn't had any coffee yet but the image seems meaningful somehow, it seems to symbolize the zeitgeist in a way that he can't articulate. What are we all if not just children making a perpetual gesture of surrender? No. Something.

He feels like something is going on in the world. A trend, or a secret, something that could be said in a single sentence of great magnitude. The key to it is everywhere. Everything points to it. He looks at the news. Wizards lose MJ and key game. Someone is reading a program for the European Union Film Festival. Outside graffiti rolls by: the French flag painted on the side of a building, along with the words *Thanks for showing some balls! Vive La France!* He imagines oracles of the past,

spreading out signs before them. Join any random assortment of items and the design that connects them will contain a larger design. That—the grand design—is what he feels like he might have been after with Thomas—this summer they put together five MiniDiscs full of sounds of the city, and thinking back on that now it is hard not to feel like they were making an attempt to accumulate some kind of totemic power.

He should give that guy a call sometime soon. Just to check in. It's been a long time since they've gotten together, and he worries that that friendship, tentative and awkward even at its best, might have completely fallen into disrepair. (His friendship with Fletcher seems to be doing the same thing.) These thoughts abruptly ground him, humble him, and he smirks—he's standing here trying to figure out some Secret of the World but in reality he's some guy on the subway, sweating beneath his coat, unable even to read the signs of what's going on in his own life.

Like with Freya. After he talked to her about what happened on New Year's Eve she eventually placated him by saying *the only reason I did it was because I've been feeling more and more serious about you, more and more like I'm settling down. And being serious scares me. Sometimes I want to run from it, and New Year's Eve I ran from it, I did, just for a minute I did. But the fact that I'm scared—you should take that as a positive sign. Because we're serious enough for me to be scared, and nobody else has ever gotten that far with me before. Nobody.*

You should take that as a positive sign. He decided he would. Freya kisses someone else—positive sign. Check. And a week after she told him to take it that way he asked her what she thought about living together. She seemed agreeable to the idea—that's a positive sign, too, it has to be, although he's not sure what to make of the blunt pragmatism that characterizes the conversation they had about it. It was all, *well, it would save us some money.* There was no pretense that the idea was, well, romantic.

They've stopped having sex. He's not sure what to make of that, either. They haven't had sex since the conversation. They still spend nights in the same bed, but he now finds himself uncertain of how to approach her: her body has become an unfamiliar landscape. He lies there and thinks about reaching out to touch her. And he lies there, and he thinks, and he does nothing. He thinks *she's going through a transition at work right now, a lot of stress with this new position. He thinks this will sort itself out.* But he can't help but feel like he's missing an important sign; he can sense it, right there in front of him, an inch away from his fingertips, untouchable, unreadable.

The train descends into darkness. —This is Division, its recorded voice says. —Doors open on the left at Division.

FLETCHER & CLARK

FEELING EXCITED IS DEATH

The cordless phone rings; it's Clark.

Fletcher splashes his free hand in the water. —I'm in the bath, he says.

—You're in the bath? Clark says.

—Yep, Fletcher says. Then, in a hushed, urgent tone: —Does that shock you? Clark responds by barking out a short laugh, and Fletcher smiles: as long as he can make her laugh he knows that everything in their relationship is operating as normal.

—So I have gossip, he says.

—Yeah, I got your message.

He sticks his foot into the air, contemplates his flexing toes. He loosely cups his free hand around his genitals. —It's about Cassandra, he says.

—Oh yeah?

—Yeah.

—So spill, says Clark.

—We kissed, Fletcher says.

—No fooling, says Clark.

—It was a soul kiss, Fletcher says, dragging out the vowel in *soul* like he's Barry White. Souuuul kiss.

—Gross, says Clark.

—It wasn't gross. It was . . . tender.

—Gross, says Clark. —So what happened?

—Well, uh, says Fletcher. —It was yesterday. She'd called just as he'd been about to dump some linguine into a pot of boiling water. He reached absently for the phone and fumbled it—he managed to catch it before it hit the floor but he tilted the open pasta box in the process, sending half the noodles down to the floor in a brittle rain. *Shit*, was the word with which he greeted her.

Once they got past that she had a proposition for him. *Hey*, she said, *I've got a quick break for dinner; I was wondering if you wanted to join me, but I need to pick Leander up in like an hour so you'd need to leave right away*. He reached out and turned off the stove and said *where?*

He met her at the same cafe where they'd met for their last date, and afterwards he walked her to the subway station, the same place where he had wanted to kiss her, but didn't.

—We were at, uh, the subway station.

Fletcher listens to the sound of Clark chewing. —Fletcher Klingman, she says, after she swallows. —You gave a woman a *soul kiss* at a *subway station*?

—Uh, he says. —It was more like *she* kissed *me*.

—I don't want to know, says Clark.

The scene: they're standing there, she's rooting through her big South American-looking purse; he's looking at her hair and thinking *Jesus*. She finds the card, holds it up next to her face, and smiles, showing her teeth.

—I'm glad you could make it on such short notice, she says.

—Yeah, Fletcher says. —Me too. He smiles and looks down the front of his coat.

—Come here, she says, and he goes to her, and she squeezes him, hard, and he squeezes her in return, and just at the point where it seems about time for them to let go he squeezes her harder. Then he lets go and he takes a step backwards and says, politely—well, I guess I'll talk to you later.

—You're a good man, she says.

—I'm a what? he says, and she smiles and her eyes lock with his and she takes a step towards him and puts her fist at the base of his neck, and he has time to think *oh, this is the moment when we're going to*— and then they're kissing.

Something in the station dings, an indication of an arriving train, and she lets go and points down and says —Uh, I need to be on that. But I'll call you.

Fletcher feels like he might drift away. —OK, he says. She grips both his shoulders and quick kisses him on the mouth again. —OK, she says. She looks down, clenches her fingers into him once, and says it again—OK. And then she lets go of him, and she passes through the turnstile and hurries down the stairs, turning once to fire him a quick wave *goodbye* and Fletcher walks out into the night and wishes that he could click his heels; he even makes a clumsy attempt at it, as if he might have spontaneously learned how in the past minute. Then he goes home, and pulverizes linguine under his boots as he walks across the kitchen to hit the light.

—Yeah, Fletcher says, —she was like *oh, stud*.

—*Stop*, Clark says. —I'm trying to eat here.

—What are you having?

—It's like a *ratatouille*, Clark says. —So, anyway, have you talked to her since then?

—No.

—Well, Clark says, —how do you feel about things?

—Awful.

—Awful?

—Awful.

—Awful how?

—I don't know. I mean, I think I like her. I'm starting to let myself feel excited. And feeling excited is death.

—Feeling excited is death?

—Yeah. I mean, you kiss someone, right?

—I don't.

—Yeah, yeah, I know *you* don't, I mean normal people, red-blooded Americans, stick with me here for a minute.

—OK. You kiss someone.

—You kiss someone.

—In a subway station.

—And they kiss you back. And so a couple of things are obvious. You like them. They like you. This is the part where you begin to feel excited. And then you start to worry.

—Worry, Clark says.

—Yeah. Like, you worry that she's mistaken. Like maybe you've tricked her. You've been putting your best foot forward all this time. And you start to think like maybe you can relax a little bit. But, my God, what if you let your guard down and she sees your *true self* and she's like *horrified*? She could realize that she's made some tremendous *mistake*.

—I find the notion of the true self problematic.

—Will you listen? I'm trying to get somewhere with this.

—Listening.

—Or maybe she's not the one who's mistaken. Maybe *I'm* mistaken. You get excited; you start to think, hey, this is working, could this be a long-term kind of thing? And then you start to worry about like little things about her, like, I don't know, she likes dogs or whatever, and you start to worry *could I really be in a long-term relationship with someone who likes dogs?*

—Or with someone who has a four-year-old kid.

—Or with someone who has a four-year-old kid!

—I think I'm beginning to see the problem, says Clark.

—Yeah, Fletcher says. —So the trick is to not let yourself feel excited.

—Uh-huh. So how's that working out for you? Clark asks.

—Badly, Fletcher says.

AUSTIN

SOMETHING SPECIAL

—So, Darren says. —I’ve been wondering something.

—What’s that? asks Austin.

Darren leans back; the chair creaks under his weight. He looks down at the fiddle in his lap and hooks a fingernail under one of the strings. He holds it there for a second and then plucks. The sound seems to take a long time to fade.

—Did you sleep with her? he finally asks.

—With who? Austin answers, before thinking.

—*With who*, Darren repeats, contemptuously. —Who the fuck do you *think* with who? Austin’s caught off guard by this hostility; he thinks *where the fuck did that come from?* He scrambles to think of what might be behind it. Protectiveness? Jealousy? Fact: Austin met Rose in the first place because she was a friend of Darren’s. Is there something back there in the history, some attraction left unvocalized? Has Darren always had some sense that he would have been the better choice? What the fuck is going on?

—Um, Austin says. —No. I didn’t. *We* didn’t.

Darren, still looking down at the fiddle, nods once.

—We talked about it, Austin says. It’s true, but he says it as sort of a test, to see how Darren will react.

—Really? Darren asks. His voice conveys neutral interest, that’s all, and Austin begins to wonder whether he didn’t imagine the hostility he heard a second ago—maybe Darren was just fucking around, that’s possible, they’re always talking trash to one another at these sessions.

—Yeah, Austin says. He strums the guitar, gathers it up out of his lap and sets it across his knee, looks down at his hands, and begins to play a chord progression as he speaks. —Yeah. She, uh— He gets distracted by what his fingers are doing on the strings and he drifts off. After a few seconds he slaps his hand down next to the

sound hole and returns to his thought. —She hasn't slept with anyone since she left Chicago. Since me, I guess.

—Oh, says Darren. —Interesting.

—Yeah, says Austin. He begins to play again. —So, yeah, we talked about it.

—What'd she say?

—What'd she say, repeats Austin. —She said— He pauses to sigh before continuing. —She said that she couldn't sleep with me unless we were in a relationship again. She said that the idea of starting things with me again *interested her*. But she won't do it long-distance, and she doesn't want to leave Minneapolis because she's got, you know, this thing going there, with the counseling center and all that. So— he stops playing again —that basically means that if I was interested I'd have to move to Minneapolis.

—Are you interested? Darren asks.

—I don't know, says Austin. —I mean, I like Rose, I mean, I think I love her, you know? Or, I don't know, I loved her once upon a time, probably more than I've ever loved anybody. And Minneapolis is pretty cool. But I like my job here— maybe I could find some kind of community arts thing to do in Minneapolis, I guess, but I don't really feel like having to start a job search all over new. Plus, the music scene here is better, and we have our thing going, and, I don't know, I've got this thing with Lydia—

—Yeah, Darren says, —You and her really have something special.

Austin frowns. He tries out the idea. *Lydia and I really have something special*. And the first thing he thinks in response is *OK, what?* And he can't come up with an answer. Then he thinks of Rose. In his mind she burns with light.

He will recall this image tomorrow, in the morning, squinting out the window into the glare of sun-drenched winter. He will turn on his computer, sit there with his cup of tea, and write her an e-mail. For the subject line he will choose the phrase *illuminate me*.

JANINE & THOMAS

HERE WE GO

Over the winter holidays, Ingrid, visiting from Germany, spent the night at Janine's apartment. They sat on the couch and drank glasses of wine and removed their shoes. Janine leaned back and placed her head on Ingrid's breastbone and Ingrid took up a fistful of Janine's hair and used her other hand to stroke Janine's throat. Something in Janine softened abruptly and she thought *oh, here we go*.

An hour later the tea lights began to gutter out, and they stretched out on the blanket on the floor and watched the shadows on the ceiling flicker, and Ingrid talked about the problems that her and Elsa have been having, the problems that have delayed their marriage.

—I think, she said, while Janine began to kiss a trail down her legs, —I think that part of her issue isn't so much *having a kid* as it is the fact that I wouldn't want to adopt. I'd want the child to be at least partially ours, you know, to have one of us in it? But the whole idea of *pregnancy* kind of wigs her out; any time I even bring up the *idea* of artificial insemination she's just like *no*.

Janine took her mouth off of Ingrid's toe and said —I could loan Thomas out to you. He's fun.

That was three months ago. Tonight: Janine backs Thomas up against the kitchen counter. —Kiss me, she says. —Kiss me like we're about to die.

Earlier she sat at her workstation, ten stories up, behind concrete and glass, drinking coffee and reading an e-mail from Ingrid. Outside spring has finally cracked through winter. A sparrow hops along the black metal of the window's ledge. Ingrid writes *I'm worried about you. I really think you should get out of the US while you can. I don't know how things look over there but from my perspective over here things look pretty bad. There's going to be fallout from this war. I can't predict what, but I wouldn't want to be in a US city right now*.

A co-worker's radio reports that foreign diplomats have begun evacuation of Iraq; citizens of Baghdad have begun hoarding food, fuel, medical supplies. She wishes that she could reach over and turn it off.

That night, standing against the counter, hips pressed together, she lets Thomas kiss her fiercely for a minute, before she turns him around, pulls his wrists behind his back, pushes his head down, forces him to bend over; he thrashes and hits a canister full of wooden spoons and ladles, knocking it over; shit clatters to the floor; she doesn't give a fuck; she holds his wrists with one hand and pushes the fingers of her other one into his mouth.

A few minutes later they will end up in bed; she will stick a silicone thing up his ass and then climb on top of him; they will not pause for a condom and they will both feel surprised by this, but not until after he comes inside her.

—I'm sorry, he says.

—Fuck it, she says, and she lifts herself off of his cock and slides up his chest, painting a wet stripe on him.

—But, he says.

—Don't worry about it, she says.

And she nestles in at his side and wonders what it would be like to be pregnant. She can't say that the idea doesn't appeal on some level. She has a definite sense of how a baby would feel inside her body; she can clearly imagine the erotic pulse of it. She almost wouldn't say *imagine*; she's quite sure that she *knows* how it would feel. She can't say where this knowledge comes from, but she's certain of its accuracy.

She begins to drift off, still indulging in thoughts of her and Thomas as parents, wondering what the baby would end up looking like. She sees it as beautiful, aligns it in her mind against the images of horror and death that creep inside her always, the black foam of skull-faces and emaciated bodies that bubbles and rises in her every time the newscasters talk about war. A beautiful baby, emerging slickly from her, black hair shining and gleaming. *We affirm life with the body*, she thinks. *With fucking. With procreating.*

She is almost asleep when Thomas gets up. She listens to him go rummaging in the kitchen. Glass clinking; the sound of the freezer opening. —You're out of gin, he calls, faintly, in the voice of a sad little boy.

DENISE

I DON'T WANT TO BE ALONE

Wednesday, March 19, 9:15 pm. They've shut down Tympanum for the night; Joshua's in the back counting out the drawer with Owen, the new clerk; Denise is vacuuming. She has to anchor the floor mat in place by keeping one foot planted on it, otherwise it'll adhere to the bottom of the vacuum and she'll just drag it around. Something outside flashes and she jumps. She has to look out at the rain-slick Chicago streets to confirm that she's only seeing lightning. All week long, her imagination has been filled with explosions.

That's when Joshua comes out of the back and says something that gets lost in the roar. She shuts off the vacuum. —What? she says.

—It's beginning, he says. —The war. They're talking about it on the radio.

—Shit, says Denise, and she presses her fingers into her forehead.

She sends Owen home and then goes into the back with Joshua; the two of them stand around the radio listening. There's not much information available, really. US forces have begun striking at selected targets. The President has addressed the nation; he's said *the disarmament of Iraq has begun*. Joshua shakes his head in disgust at this phrase.

—Fuckers, he says.

—Oh, God, Denise says. She finds her way down onto the chair and stares at the items on the desk in front of her with a kind of numbed horror. The radio covered with stickers, a clipboard, a stack of empty jewel cases, a coffee mug full of leaky ballpoint pens. All these objects seem suddenly meaningless. She wants to sweep them all to the floor. She wants to douse the entire store in gasoline and set it ablaze. Just to have the feeling of release.

She tries to imagine riding home. In a subway car surrounded by strangers. She imagines that they will all be acting normal. Reading books. Maybe joking around, laughing. The idea makes her feel hollowed out, weary.

And when she makes it home? Then what? She sees herself sitting in her apartment, listening to thunder shake the house. She knows the way that massed abstract dead of the future will roost in her mind. Their weight will keep her from sleeping.

Very quietly, she says —I don't want to go home. I don't want to be alone. Not tonight.

For a minute they listen to the reporters on the radio repeating the few lines of information that are known. And then Joshua says —My place is only a couple of blocks away. You could come over for a bit, if you wanted.

Her initial response is irritation. She's tempted to swat the air around her head and just say *no*. It's like he doesn't get what she means. She feels *alone*—alone so deeply that she suspects that being with someone else will only make her feel *more alone*. She wants him to *understand that*—but no one ever *understands* anything about her—

—I could make you a drink, he says. When she doesn't answer he says —I think we could both use one.

OK, she thinks. OK, OK, OK. Why the fuck not.

—All right, she says. She reaches out and snaps the radio off. —Let's go.

FLETCHER

A GOOD MAN

He hasn't seen Cassandra since the night they kissed. Sometimes he worries about that. But she's taken to calling him sometimes in the evenings, late-ish, after she's put Leander to bed, so he worries less. In these conversations they talk about what they're reading; they complain about whatever annoyance they encountered in the day; they remark bitterly on the latest war news. He imagines that they're the kind of conversations they'd have if they were living together. Sometimes he will hint at the potential breadth of his affection for her. To this she usually responds guardedly, with a not-displeased-sounding *hmm*.

He has come to expect her evening call, to look forward to it. When it gets to be around nine o'clock he has taken to pouring himself a scotch and sitting in his easy chair, with a book of poems in his hand, and the cordless phone in his lap. The nights when she doesn't call he feels somehow thwarted, as though something has been left unfinished. One those nights he usually begins to think that he's not going to hear from her around ten, although he keeps thinking *she could still call* until around midnight. Sometimes he'll carry the cordless to bed with him, although he wouldn't admit that to anybody. He knows he could call her but he worries about waking the kid, worries about seeming needy. He knows she's busy; he wants to respect that.

You're a good man, she said to him that night at the subway station.

Tonight they're talking.

—So, he asks, —are you talking to Leander much about the war?

—Ugh, she says. —Not as much as I could be, or should be? This—this sort of thing happens all the time, actually. Before you actually *become* a mother you have all these notions about the way you'll raise your kid? You get to be all like *I'll totally teach my kid the right things about war*, or whatever. I'll be this rad mom and I'll raise this rad kid, blah de blah de blah. Then the kid actually *comes* and then the war actually comes and you don't have the foggiest *notion* of what to say, or even the faintest *memory* of what thought you were *going* to say back when you thought you were going to be the rad mom. You just end up making it all up as you go along, and of course it never turns out as well as you'd hope. I just say something like—

God, I don't know—*sometimes our government can't solve a problem so we decide to kill people*. Ha! Go mom! Way to make your child feel like the world is a safe place that makes sense!

—But the world isn't a safe place that makes sense, Fletcher says.

—No, Cassandra says. —No. It isn't. In fact, it can be a real absurdist hellhole. But that's not something you really want to say as a *mom*.

—No, Fletcher says. —I guess it isn't.

They're both quiet for a minute.

—So when will I get a chance to meet the little guy? he says.

She holds her silence, for long enough that he begins to think that he might have said the wrong thing. —I mean, he begins—

—I don't know, she says. —When I got divorced I made myself a promise; I promised that I wouldn't let my kid grow up with like this perpetual *parade of dads*. That can be really hard for a kid. So I just want to be *sure* before I bring a guy over here, you know? I just want things to be *right*.

—Do you think, Fletcher says, —Do you think that things between you and I— I mean, do you think they might have the *potential* to be—?

—I don't know yet, she says. —Don't ask.

LYDIA

CLAWING OUT MY EYES

Lydia knocks on the frosted glass window set in Anita's office door. —You may enter, Anita calls.

—Hey, Lydia says, coming in. —Do you have a minute?

Anita takes the magazine she's reading by one corner, holds it up so Lydia can see it. It's an issue of *Lucky*. —Do I *have* a minute? she says. —Darling. For you, anything. She tosses the magazine onto her desk; it slides to a stop on her blotter. —What's up?

Lydia closes the door behind her and sits down. —I've made my decision, she says. —At the end of May? When my lease runs out? I'm moving.

—Oh, Anita says. —Moving in with the boy?

—Uh, Lydia says. —I don't know. We haven't— she winces, and moves her hands about in the air to indicate a kind of conceptual tangle. Austin, the boy, has been acting kind of weird lately, distant somehow, in a way that she can't put her finger on. He seems less prompt about returning her phone calls, and when she's over he seems faintly distracted, as though he's constantly reminding himself that he needs to do some minor errand, at about the order of remembering to set the VCR to tape a show he wants to watch later. —This isn't really *about* him, she says. —It's just—I just can't live in that house anymore.

—The place you're at now?

—Yeah, Lydia says. —I've just got to get out. I don't know if I can *wait* until the end of May. I just— and she drops her face into her hands.

—Did something happen? Anita asks.

—Uck, God, Lydia mutters into her hands. —I can't even *believe* it. I. Can't. Even. *Tell* you how *fucking*—I'm angry. I can't even tell you how *fucking angry* I am at—

Anita's phone rings once, then a second time. Lydia looks up to see whether she's going to answer it. —Voicemail, Anita says. —Caller, begone. She waves her hands over the phone as it rings for a third time and then it goes silent.

—So why don't you start from the beginning?

Lydia takes a deep breath. —You know I've got this roommate, Marvin?

—Sure, Anita says.

—Have I talked to you about this girl that he's been bringing around? Eighteen years old? High school dropout?

—I don't remember *that* series of unsavory details, Anita says.

—OK, well, that's basically her. He met her through this group of kids who play this like *vampire* game? Uch, I can't believe these people have like been in my *house*. So, yeah, he's been bringing this girl around, and the whole idea of there relationship kind of skeeves me even under the best of circumstances, there have been times when I've like *heard* shit coming out of their room or whatever? I'll spare you the details. OK, so that's bad enough, right? That *enough* is enough to make me want to move out and like never fucking return. But anyway. Friday night, I'm supposed to be staying over at Austin's place, but this movie is showing down at Doc Films, at U of C, Austin wants to go, so we go, whatever, it's fine. But we're like right in my neighborhood at this point, and Austin's like *I'm not feeling well, do you mind if I just drop you at home?* and I'm kind of like *that's lame* but, whatever, sure. So he drops me off and I *go in* and— OK. I open the door, and I walk in, and there's these two— these two *girls* on the floor? Like, making *out*? I mean, they're not making out any more, cause I just walked in? But they're like trying to cover themselves up with a blanket? And there's Marvin, and he's sitting on the couch, and he's like obviously trying to pull his *pants* up? And— oh, God, I'm just like *please, please, just let me go into my room so I can claw my eyes out*.

—God, Anita says. —So what did you do? Or what did he do?

Lydia laughs. —He's all like *what are you doing here?* and I'm like *I live here, you dumb shit*. I ended up locking myself in the *bathroom* and he was like knocking and knocking and being like *hey, let me explain* and I'm like running the *hairdryer* to try to drown out what he's saying and just shouting *just get them out of here*. It was a fucking mess. And eventually they went home, I guess, or something, and I came out of the bathroom and was like *don't talk to me* and then I said *I'm moving out*.

—Unbelievable, says Anita.

Lydia splays her fingers across her face. —You know the thing that gets me?
Lydia says. —You know the thing that gets me worst of all?

—What's that?

—It wasn't even his *couch*, she says. —It was *my* couch. And he didn't even like have a blanket down or anything. I can't even *look* at the couch anymore without thinking of like this pasty naked *ass* like *right on my couch!*

Anita begins to laugh. —I'm sorry, she says, still laughing. —It's not funny. She covers her mouth. And Lydia realizes just how the situation looks from the outside and she begins to laugh as well; she can't help it. She looks upwards, into the fluorescents. —Oh, God, she says, through giggles, —why? Why must you test me?

—Really, Lord, Anita says, joining in. —Don't you think she's suffered enough? And then they both bust out laughing again.

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