

# Imaginary Year

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"she wants an entirely different world"

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Thanks for reading.

PAUL

## WORK [VIII]

My name is Paul Sutherland, and I am a Telephone Support Specialist for Pascal Information Technology Solutions.

002: Yeah, that guy who people call when they need someone to scream at? That's me.

003: [laughs] No, actually, it's not as bad as all that.

004: Oh, sure, don't get me wrong, most of the people who call are *upset*—

005: See, here's what you have to remember about doing telephone support. You have to remember that the people *don't want to call*. Just *making the call in the first place* is an inconvenience to them. They have to put *down* what they're doing, go *find* the phone number—little things, but they add up. So you can pretty much safely assume that people don't bother to call until they're at their *wits' end*.

006: Sure. And that's the thing that most of my co-workers—if I can speak frankly here—that's the thing that most of my co-workers forget. Because half the time the problem that the callers have is something totally basic and obvious. *Did you remember to turn the power on?* [pause] *You should be seeing a big button? Marked POWER?* [laughs]

007: Right, so it's not *easy* for us to *remember* that these people are actually *suffering*. Most tech support people are like *why are you bothering me with this question that you could have figured out super easily if—if you'd just spent your entire life fooling around with computers like us* [laughs]

008: And most of the people calling in *know* that the tech support people are going to be looking down on them like that, and that gets them annoyed, *on top of whatever annoyance drove them to call tech support in the first place, they lost a bunch of data or whatever, and on top of that they usually have to wait on hold for a while, especially now that they laid off about half of the support staff.*

009: So, yeah, it makes *sense* that they'd be upset. And so my *job* as a phone support guy—the way I see it, my job is to make them feel *less upset*. And actually fixing their problem is only one part of how I can do that.

010: I can try to *understand why* they're upset. I can make them feel like they're *within their rights* to be upset, like that's OK? I can listen to them, and do my best to respond to them at their own level? I can help them to understand that I don't think they're stupid?

011: It's actually very easy. I can usually defuse even the angriest caller in, I don't know, thirty seconds. A minute.

012: I just have a good ability to understand people, I guess.

013: Do I *like* it? Uh. It's OK? I mean, I like helping people to feel better. But do I want to be doing night shift phone support for the rest of my life? [laughs]

014: That's a good question. Let me think about that one for a second.

015: I'd like to be a Morale Officer.

016: Yeah, you know, with the economy so bad and all these layoffs and everything morale everywhere is just really down.

017: Oh, you know, I would be in charge of like setting up theme days. We could do, like, Pirate Day. Arr!

018: Or we could have afternoon parties where people could have tea. And some little gingersnaps?

019: Or when I wasn't planning stuff like that out I could just walk around, you know, circulate among the offices, building better morale through compliments. *Hey, nice tie! Lookin' sharp! Hey, Jane, that new haircut is really flattering!*

020: No, I'd be totally *sincere!* It's not hard to find something nice to say about someone if you think about it for a second.

021: I really think that this is my calling.

FREYA

## MINOR EVENINGS

Freya sits in the back room at Tympanum, and she holds a pencil in her fist and pushes against its point with her thumb. There's a window in this room that looks out onto the floor. A minute ago, Freya looked up at the exactly *wrong* moment and through this window she watched Joshua back Denise up against the counter and do something to her neck with his mouth: kiss it, or bite it, or something, Freya couldn't tell, and she doesn't want to know.

She presses harder on the pencil, and it snaps in the middle. She flings the two halves down at the desk and throws her head back and exhales at the crummy ducts above her and tries to figure out why she feels bad. She's not jealous; it can't be that. Joshua is a twit; she wouldn't want him if she had him. She doesn't want him. She's never really wanted him. Besides, she has Jakob.

Oh how she has Jakob. Lately she has more of Jakob than ever. As though he is making a point of his devotion. She finds herself missing the days when he was still in grad school, working on his thesis—back when he would *disappear* every once in a while. She can remember him cloistering up for a month at a time, researching, taking himself out of the picture for days and days—and then some morning she'd come out of the back room and there he'd be, emerged from his burrow, standing at the counter, ruffled-looking, hair standing straight up, blinking uncertainly at the posters and shelves as though these trappings were fantastically new. Some feeling inside her would rise. This is what she gradually learned to identify as love.

But his absences then allowed her to feel like she had a life of her own, and it still felt like in that life *anything could happen*. She could drag her drums out of her parents' basement and get back into a band. She could quit her job. She could find some guy with tattoos and a motorcycle, seduce him, fuck him, kick him out of bed the next morning and leave him crying for more.

Now she feels like she's traded in that life for this one, with Jakob. A life of minor evenings. They have dinner. They air their complaints to one another (Jakob's involve the small-minded pettiness of office life; hers involve the new clerks she's hired, who seem to become more unreliable and shifty each day). They sit on the couch, and watch the latest footage from Iraq in silence. They go to bed and do not have sex.

Last night, in a small voice, Jakob said: —I think we need to work on some things. And she thought *so my life has come to this*. A place where things are complicated. Where they need to be *worked out* through *talking* and respecting the other person's *feelings* and all that phenomenal horseshit. It was late. She could pretend to be asleep.

—Freya? he'd said.

She remembers her last boyfriend, Mike, remembers the way things ended with him. His red face coming across the room at her. She thought *if he gets his hands on me he will kill me*, and as he began to lunge she hit him across the bridge of his nose with his own baseball bat. It made a sound that reminded her of kicking in a jack-o'-lantern. Shock made his eyes go unfocused; a curtain of black blood rolled down his face. He dropped to his knees and she cracked him above the ear: at the last second she suddenly had an involuntary fear that the blow might permanently deafen him, and she pulled back, still connecting hard enough to knock him over. His head hit the floor and bounced. Ultimately, there was nothing that needed to be *worked out*.

DENISE

# DON'T

She's at the register and Joshua walks up to her and presses her against the counter with his hips, brings his mouth close to her ear.

—Hey, he whispers.

—Don't, she says. She puts her hand against his chest and pushes limply. She worries that customers are watching, turns her head to look over her shoulder, to check. Nobody seems to be paying any attention. While she has her head turned he leans in and bites her gently on the neck.

—Hey! She turns back to him and pushes a little harder. —I said *don't*, she says.

—What if I'm not listening? he says, although he lets go of her and take a step back.

—You *have* to listen to me, she says. —I'm the assistant manager.

—Maybe I don't care.

—Then maybe I'll fire you.

—You can't.

—Yes I can.

—You need to get Freya's permission.

—No I don't.

—Yes you do.

—No I don't.

—I think you do.

—You think she wouldn't let me fire you?

—Nah, says Joshua. —She's hot for me.

—Shut up, Denise says.

—You shut up, says Joshua.

—Make me.

—Maybe I will.

—Maybe you should.

He steps up to her again, starts to slide his arm around her waist, and she knocks it away. —Get off, she says, and he adopts a look of such stupid consternation that she starts to laugh right in his face.

He opens his mouth to say something and she says —Go do your work. And, miraculously, he goes.

She's beginning to find a certain delight in bossing him around like this. The discovery that she could get away with it surprised her. She began to figure it out the night the war began, the night she stayed with him.

They'd gone back to his place, and they sat with his roommate around a table in the kitchen, knocking back cans of Budweiser while listening to the radio recite the same few pieces of information over and over. It reminded her of living with Toy and Mark, and she thought *I am not going to end up back there again.*

After the roommate crept off she stood in the hallway and let Joshua kiss her against the wall but when he began to lift up her shirt she took hold of him by the wrists and said *no*. She was fully ready for him to say *you fucking tease* or something like that but instead he said *ok* in a surprisingly meek voice and the two of them went off to bed, fully clothed (she did take off her sunglasses, set them on his bedside table, on top of his copy of Genet's *Thief's Journal*). They kissed a little bit more and then she set her head on his chest and fell asleep.

The next morning she was getting ready to leave and he asked *can I call you?* She said *sure*, and he found an ATM envelope and she wrote her number on it, but when she handed it back to him she said *I don't always answer my phone*. Since then he's called her twice; she's noticed him on the caller ID and not answered. She's been painting in the mornings. She has a huge canvases set up in her kitchen right now, entirely blocking her back door; she's been adding strokes to it ever since the war began, building up an impasto of red and black. She imagines it as a forest fire. It grows thicker and thicker.

LYDIA

**STANDBY**

Austin's place is dark when she lets herself in; she flips on the lights and turns up the heat. Tonight's Tuesday; Austin is over at Darren's. He won't be back until ten or so. It used to be that she wouldn't have bothered coming over on a night when Austin has band practice, but she doesn't want to go home; she doesn't want to see Marvin, not after that business with the girls. Even thinking about it skeeves her. So she stays at Austin's as often as she can now.

Which is to say *as often as he'll let her*. Sometimes she'll call him in the morning to ask about what he wants for dinner and he'll say something like *tonight's not good; I've got some stuff I need to catch up on*. Stuff. Quote unquote. He never says what. Sometimes she'll ask and he'll get annoyed and huffy: *I don't know. Just stuff. I need to, you know, wash the dishes, clean up my room*. What she thinks is *you can do those things with me there* but she's learned enough not to say something like that. When a guy asks for space you just have to suck up and *give it to him*; trying to *negotiate* with him will only lead to disaster.

Blob, the cat, pads into the kitchen and looks up at her with a look of grouchy incomprehension, the look a crusty old man would give to a nurse who has roused him from reverie.

—Hey, Blob, she says, and she goes to scratch him on the head. He pulls away. When she tries again he opens his mouth and shows his tiny cat teeth and tries to bite the flesh between her thumb and her hand.

—Fine, she says. —Fuck you then.

She heads into the living room, puts My Bloody Valentine's *Loveless* into the CD player, and sits on the sofa for a bit. She takes off her shoes and socks and checks out how the black polish is holding up on her toenails. She tries to read her book but for some reason she can't concentrate on the words.

She decides she'll check her e-mail, even though she checked it ceaselessly throughout the day at work. Maybe she'll send some. She's owed mail to her old friend Maria for a while now.

She goes over to the computer; Austin has left it in standby mode. She smiles, because it's familiar. Austin is always leaving things half-finished; he can be right in the middle of working on some project and he'll get up and walk away from it, distracted by something else. *It's easier to pick it up again later*, he's claimed; she thinks he's just absent-minded.

The screen snaps on and she sees that Outlook Express, his e-mail program, is open. She slides the mouse pointer up to the upper-right-hand corner, preparing to minimize the window, or close it, but she pauses; something has caught her eye: maybe half of the e-mails visible on the screen are from someone named Rose Thaden. She stops.

*What the fuck?* she thinks.

She's heard Austin mention someone named Rose before, some ex from the distant past.

Slowly, she scrolls down through all the e-mails in his Inbox. There's probably fifty e-mails in there from Rose Thaden. She stares at the subject lines. *Why you matter* is the one that stands out to her.

*Don't do this*, she says to herself. But she clicks on the e-mail, and she reads it. When she's done she moves on to the next.

LYDIA &amp; AUSTIN

## EVIDENCE

She's not done when she hears the door open downstairs, in the vestibule; she still has maybe ten or fifteen left to print. A disappointment; she would have liked to have been able to show him the complete stack. But the sheaf she has now is sizeable. It makes the point. She gathers the pages together, raps them against her knees, and waits. Listens to the sound of his approach.

Austin climbs towards his door, carrying his guitar with him. It's around midnight; he's tired and a little bit drunk. He knows that Lydia is waiting for him, and the thought makes him smile—sure, there are times when he wishes she'd give him a little more room to breathe but he has to admit that there are times when it's nice just to have someone in your bed. A warm body waiting for you. He considers, once again, what it would be like, living with her. It would definitely have some plusses—he would have someone to pick up Craig's share of the rent, for one thing, and that would mean that he wouldn't need to move out come summer. But then there's Rose. He can't see himself living with Lydia feeling the way he does about Rose. Feeling—*devoted* to her. That's the word that he settles on, every time, even though he knows that it's insane to describe yourself as *devoted* to someone when you're spending almost every night with someone else, *sleeping* with someone else, for fuck's sake. Insane. And yet he can imagine this scene: himself in bed, in the dark, talking to Rose over the phone, saying *I am devoted to you. Completely.* The scene is so clear to him; the words he says in it feel so true. This why he's been sending Lydia away lately. When he does it, it feels like a marker of his devotion. Like a piece of evidence.

He expects that the door will be unlocked, and it is, and he enters the apartment, calling —Hello?

And he sees Lydia there, sitting at his computer, with a grave look that he has never seen on her face before, and pile of papers in her lap. She lifts the papers and thrusts them towards him.

—What the fuck is this? she says. And immediately he knows what has happened, what she's seen. He opens his mouth.

—What the fuck is this? she says again, louder. And then she screams it.

—Jesus, quiet down, he says. —My neighbors—

—You think I give a *fuck* about your *neighbors*? she says, in a low voice.

—We can talk about this, he says. —We can talk about this, but I need you to just *calm down*—

—Calm down? she says. —You want me to *calm down*? I'm sorry, but after reading eighty-nine *love letters* that you wrote to some fucking *whore* I just don't feel too fucking *calm*.

—It's not— he tries —It's not what it looks like—

—Not what it *looks like*? she says. She looks down at the pile. —I think about you every day, she reads. —All day. You are always—and here her voice begins to break—you are always close to my heart. How is that not what it *looks like*? Tell me. Tell me, Austin, I'm curious.

He doesn't answer and she shouts —Why don't you fucking *tell me* and she flings the pile at him and the air in the room explodes it; pages go everywhere.

—Hey, he says. —Hey. You have to stop.

—Tell me, she says, and she tries to print out another one; she moves the mouse in her hand but she can't tell what she's doing because she can't see the screen anymore because she's started to cry even though she promised herself promised herself *promised herself* that she wouldn't. She knocks the mouse off the desk. She pulls the keyboard off the desk and it hangs stupidly in the air, dangling from its cord. She grabs the monitor; she just wants to send everything down to the floor. But Austin's reached her, he grabs her wrists and pulls her away and she falls out of the chair onto the floor and Austin's down there with her saying *listen, listen*, but she doesn't want to listen, she doesn't want him to see her, snot and water are coming out of her face, she's embarrassed and she just can't stop sobbing.

—Why can't you just tell me? she says. She makes a fist and pounds it weakly on the floorboards. —Why can't you just tell me that you love me?

—I don't know, he mumbles.

LYDIA &amp; PAUL

## MOVING ON

The next morning she goes into the bathroom and looks at her swollen face and thinks *no way am I going in to work today*. She knows that if she goes in to work looking like she's been up all night crying she'll end up the topic of today's office gossip, and *that's* one thing she doesn't need, not on top of everything else, but there's nothing in her basket of makeup that will make her look otherwise.

So she's not going. She skips taking a shower and just walks out into the living room in her bathrobe. She sits down on the couch (trying not to think about whether she's sitting on the spot where Marvin's naked ass might have been) and picks up the cordless phone and calls in. She doesn't even have to lie. —I'm sorry, she says. —I'm just not feeling very well today. Then she hangs up and sits there with the phone in her lap, and starts to cry again.

She hates this. She hates being so *weak*. She hates Austin for *making her weak*. She wants to be a strong woman, wants to be the kind of woman who can go through this kind of thing without blinking, who can respond to this kind of thing by just *moving on*. That's what she needs to do. She just needs to *move on*. *There are plenty of other guys out there, she thinks. Surely you can find a guy who won't fucking sleep with you for a whole year—over a year—and never tell you that he loves you and meanwhile he's e-mailing his ex five times a day telling her how bad he wants to see her.* But she doesn't want some other guy. She wants Austin. She just wants an Austin who hasn't done the things that this one has done. So basically she wants an entirely different world. Good fucking luck.

She blots her eyes with the cuffs of her bathrobe. She should probably go get the box of tissues from the kitchen but the act of getting up and walking from here to there while feeling like this just seems insurmountable.

She wants to eat an entire box of ice cream. *That's great, she thinks, just great. You're going to end up even fatter than you are now. Then no guy will want you.*

No guy wants you now.

Crying again. Time passes in this fashion. Eventually Paul comes in, shirtless, scratching his hairy belly. He turns and sees her and blurts out a shriek.

—Oh, God, Lydia, he says. —You scared the bejesus out of me. How come you're not at work?

—Called out, she says.

He gets a better look at her and sees that something's wrong. —Are you OK? he says. She shakes her head *no*. When she opens her mouth to try to explain she feels her throat close up.

—Let me go put on a shirt, he says. —I'll be right back. Then you can tell me all about it.

And he comes back (with the box of tissues, no less) and she gives him a rundown of the whole situation. She rests her head in his lap and he strokes her hair.

—I just don't want to have to start all *over again*, she says. —Austin wasn't perfect but, you know, most of the time he was at least *decent*. He was nice; he wasn't *too* neurotic; he wasn't *totally* self-obsessed; he was pretty good in bed—it's hard to find a guy who's got even *that much* going for him.

—Tell me about it, says Paul.

—And, God, just the idea of having to *start over*, God, how *exhausting*.

—You'll find somebody, says Paul. —Any guy who can't see what a catch you are has got to be a damn fool.

—Oh, Paul, Lydia sighs. —I'm going to miss you.

—You're still planning to move out, then?

Lydia thinks on this. —Yeah, she says. —I think I have to. I just can't stand living with Marvin anymore. Things haven't been good between us for a long time.

—Yeah, Paul says. —I know.

—I'm sorry to do it, cause I know it screws you, I mean, I know it means that you guys need to move, too.

—That's not a big deal, says Paul. —I'm sick of this place anyway.

—I just don't know what I'm going to do without you, she says. —Are you sure you don't want to come with me? You and I would be great roommates.

—Oh, honey, Paul says. —I can see it? And it would be great? But I need to stick with Marvin. I'm trying to teach him how not to be a complete asshole.

—You've got a long way to go, she says.

—Yeah, Paul says. —I know.

FLETCHER

## INTERIOR PEOPLE

Leander is away with his dad for the weekend—that's how it works, one weekend a month—and so Fletcher gets to spend the night with Cassandra.

—Come on, honey, she says, while he's on top of her. He's inside her for the first time. He has her hair in his fist. —Come on, baby, she says. —I want you to come. And he does.

—My God, he says, after he's rolled off of her. —You're amazing.

—I bet you say that to all the girls, she says, and she sticks her finger in his ear.

—It's been so long I can't even *remember* what I say, he says.

—Hmm, she says.

—Sorry if I'm a little rusty, he says. (He doesn't think that she got off, and he's worried about that: he's not sure if he should be doing something more now or what.)

—Honey, she says, —you were a star.

—Is there anything, he says, —that you want me to do?

—No, baby, she says. —You just rest.

He removes the condom and she takes it from him, and heads off into the kitchen.

—Water, she says, as she goes.

He tells himself that he'll start things up again when she comes back: he really thinks he could maybe bring her to some state of *animal passion*. He'd like that: that way he could be sure that she was *really* having a good time, and not just humoring him. He's worried that she's standing out there in the kitchen thinking *oh my God that was the worst time I ever had*.

She climbs back into bed next to him and passes him a glass of water. He tries to

drink without sitting up, by lifting his head just slightly; water runs out of the corners of his mouth and down the sides of his neck. —Hey, Cassandra protests. —Drink right.

—Not thirsty, he mumbles. And he drapes his arm across her belly. *Okay, let's go,* he tells himself. *Time for round two.* But then he closes his eyes and drifts off into sleep. When he opens them again he thinks *you just fell asleep.* And then he closes them again.

He wakes up some time later and gropes out for her but she's not in the bed with him. The light is on in the front room; he can hear fingers striking a computer keyboard. —Hello? he calls blearily.

—I'm out here, she says. —I'm just putting together some notes.

—OK, he says, and he falls back into sleep.

When the smell of coffee wakes him in the morning he's still alone in the bed. He pulls on his boxer shorts and goes into the kitchen and finds that a coffeemaker that's started automatically. He has to retrace his steps before he can find her: she's asleep on the couch, entirely hidden beneath an afghan. He clears a spot on the coffee table: the *clunk* her mug makes when he sets it down causes her to stir slightly. She pokes her face out, blinks, groans, pulls the blanket up again. A book slides out from under her head and hits the floor.

Fletcher picks it up: it's a book on Eva Hesse, who he doesn't know anything about. He sits down and flips it over, reads words on the back. *In many ways, her works were "psychic models," as Robert Smithson has suggested, of "a very interior person."*

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