

Imaginary Year

VOLUME ONE

ISSUE ONE

"we cannot know this world completely"

SEPTEMBER 2000

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). 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.

JAKOB

SCHOLAR OF CITIES

Jakob stands on the platform and waits for the train that will carry him to another point in the city. An advertising placard on the other side of the tracks indicates that today is “Take Cyndi Lauper to Work Day.” Jakob thinks: *Oh daddy dear, you know you’re still number one.* A CTA train going in the wrong direction roars in and shudders into stillness. Passengers disembark, and a recorded voice speaks. Doors are closing, watch the closing doors.

Jakob thinks: *Girls just want to have fun, oh girls, they want to have fun. Great, now that’s going to be in my head all day.*

It doesn’t matter, he tells himself. *You’re supposed to be conscious of pop music; that’s part of what you do.* Jakob likes to envision himself as a scholar, and it’s okay, nowadays, for scholars to give their attention to any sort of message the culture generates. Someone in his program is doing their thesis on webpages dedicated to boy bands.

He’s in the second year of a Master’s program in American Studies, one of the scholarly disciplines that Marshall McLuhan cleared the way for back in the sixties. He feels like it’s all very legitimate, except for when he doesn’t. *American Studies,* the girl at that party had said, *what is that, anyway?* He had stared down at the words *Extra Pale* printed on his beer bottle and mumbled something. When he looked up again he realized she’d tuned out. He continued to speak anyway, and his attempt to provide a sensible answer grew more and more convoluted, until it became obvious that he was now *that guy*: that guy at every party who backs a woman into a corner and assaults her with far more detail than she could possibly have wanted. She nodded along diligently; bless her poor heart. Later he wished he had given her a sound-bite, something brief and cryptic that would have made him seem cool. *Looking at the field of information, trying to detect shifts.*

An image, here, of Freya. He thinks she’s working today. He can’t remember what days Fletcher told him. The wrong-direction train is long gone now. He can hear the grind of the new train coming before he sees it. Sound is a kind of television. *That’s what they really want—*

FREYA

VETERAN OF DISORDER

One hundred. Freya has finished counting out the drawer; she slots it into the register. They open in half an hour.

—Anything you want to hear? she calls to Don, her manager, as he walks by.

—Whatever, Don says, and he disappears into the back.

She rifles through the racks and selects Royal Trux's *Veterans of Disorder*, slaps it down on the store's turntable and fills the air with the sounds of retarded Glam guitar. Freya mouths the lyrics that Jennifer Herrema croaks out: *I wanna go to the waterpark. The water's cold but the sun is hot.*

Not quite apropos for the moment. The Chicago air has begun to turn chilly, and she's squandered any opportunity for mayhem that the summer may have held. She didn't spend a trashy day at a waterpark; she didn't get a new tattoo; she didn't drink enough to fall down; she didn't even make out with anybody. What the hell did she do all summer? She looks back over it: she sees herself working here, filing records, ringing up customers; sees herself at home, cooking stuff, paying bills, sorting laundry; sees herself out at a few shows, a few bars. You know, everyday life kind of stuff. She's 27, and she wonders whether her days of disorder are finally behind her. It would be a mixed blessing.

Disorder. She thinks of Mayor Richard Daley, the old Daley, his famous quote from '68: *the police are not here to cause disorder, they are here to preserve disorder.* She would have liked to have seen those days. She's seen the photos—an army of dirty hippies lined up along a police barricade, hollering taunts. Maybe *hippies* isn't the right word. Yippies. A good bit more muscular than your average hippie boy. Thuggier. Dumber. But smarter, too, in their particular way.

She thinks of the Stooges and a few lines by Iggy Pop float through her mind: *Well it's 1969 OK. War across the USA.* She thinks of the MC5, thinks of Detroit in the Sixties. A ruin even then, a wasteland of garages, a factory creating tough boys as its product. Welders and hockey players and guys who know how to use wrenches. She'd like to see more guys like that come into the store, instead of the endless stream of twee indie guys with ugly glasses. She sees dozens of thrift-store sweaters every day.

Coffee. She heads into the break room, pulls her coffeecup out of her locker. She's still thinking about 1968. She would have been negative six. Now she is the shift supervisor at a record store. There is no tear gas in the streets.

Iggy: *Another year with nothin to do.* From the floor Neil Hagerty sings: *but then you look at it, and then you stop.* She brings her unwashed cup over to the sink, but peers into it before she rinses it out. The residue in the bottom is beautiful, a nebula.

JAKOB

AEROGLYPHICS

When the subway enters light it becomes the elevated.

And this is Chicago: rooftops and skylights, wires and poles, an occasional billboard fit into the jumble. There are places in the layout for information. From where Jakob sits, he can read the word *Budweiser*.

He looks down from the L, observes alleys and dumpsters and people doing their morning work, extending their narratives, adding events to those already accumulated and arranged in their brains. He tilts his head, crooks his index finger, and runs it slowly up the back rim of his ear. Two Hispanic men unload a mattress from the back of a truck. The infamous Other? Chicago School, 1915: *The reason that the daily chronicle of the newspaper is so shocking, and at the same time so fascinating, to the average reader is because the average reader knows so little about the life of which the newspaper is the record.* Nothing's changed since then.

Jakob would like to truly know a city, all cities, a world. He thinks about the pleasures he got from the science fiction books he read when he was younger. The browns and oranges of Dune. He wants to be a scholar of human ecology. That's what he should have told that girl at the party. It's a good line; maybe he'll try it out on Freya.

He wants to impress her. He just moved here to Chicago about three months ago. He's gotten his boxes unpacked—mostly—and he's figured out things like where the grocery store is, but he hasn't really had time to set up a social life. Aside from this guy Fletcher. Fletcher kind of adopted him at the orientation, invited him into a small group of university malcontents who meet up for beers every other Friday. Last week Fletcher brought along some other friends, including Freya. She wore a sleeveless pink shirt with a leopard-skin print. One arm consumed to the elbow in the black fire of an elaborate tattoo. Jakob, well on his way to *drunk*, watched her bright dark eyes and her wide mouth and thought words like *sensual* until he realized that he might be staring. He switched to looking at her hands, examining the chipped polish.

He barely said two words to her.

That Monday Jakob ran into Fletcher in the hallway and said *Your friend Freya seems like an interesting woman.* Fletcher responded: *oh, you like her?* Jakob tried to act coy,

but Fletcher advanced: *she's not seeing anyone. Why don't you invite her to come out with us again?* Jakob had protested, but Fletcher told him where she worked, and when. *Drop by and ask her*, he said.

I don't know, Jakob said. *I don't want to seem—*

But here he is, a few days later, headed out to the record store. He rehearses in his mind. *A scholar of human ecology*. No, that sounds too pretentious.

The L passes over train tracks which curve through the city on the top of a wall. Jakob doesn't know where they end up. We cannot know this world completely. A concrete strip between the tracks is painted with names and intricate patterns. He can't make sense of the script. A message that he can't read, written right there on the skin of the city. It's a code: it communicates something, to someone, but Jakob has no way to comprehend it.

His stop is next and he still doesn't know what he will say to her.

He imagines a world of telepaths. Total communication everywhere, all the minds linked up. *Oh, girls just want to have fun*.

FREYA

EXTREMITY

Ten am. The store is open. Freya draws a stack of CD cases from the bin of stuff that needs to be reshelfed. This is how her days begin, five times a week. Reorganizing information.

Denise is on register, her face hidden by sunglasses. Huge lenses; white plastic frames. It kind of bugs Freya that Denise is always wearing those ugly things. She just can't figure it out—even on the sunniest days the windows don't let in too much light, and the registers don't face that direction anyway. Freya supposes she could just command Denise to take them off, in the name of *the customers*, but that's not her style. She thinks of herself as the "cool" supervisor and the cool supervisor doesn't bust someone's ass about what they're wearing. So she lets it go. But she sometimes finds herself wishing that Denise would acknowledge the concession somehow, even subtly.

That's never going to happen. Denise isn't what you'd call *a communicator*. When Denise came in Freya said *Hey, Denise, how's it going?* and Denise just nodded and looked down at the floor and headed back to her locker. When she came back out to get on register Freya said *been up to anything fun this week?* and Denise shrugged and said *I guess not*. It is like this every time they work together, until Freya finally gives up and just decides to pass the time by working.

She looks at the first CD case in her pile. *Extreme Music From Africa*. She goes to file it in Experimental Compilations. The cover depicts a woman with obsidian black skin, looking beaten, her head swaddled in a bloody bandage. It's obviously meant to be provocative, but Freya's not particularly impressed by it. She can remember what it's like to be hit, in the face, yes, in the stomach. She can remember a voice saying *Stand up, bitch. Stand up and face me*. It wasn't that long ago.

Extreme music. She's familiar with the genre. Every once in a while some clerk will put on a Merzbow record, punishing the customers by turning the store into a hot maelstrom of shredding metal. Those are moments where you'll see her use her supervisory authority. *Off*, she'll say. She doesn't feel bad about that: certain frequencies just *hurt*.

The dudes who buy the stuff are short and pale. Or else they're big somber guys who look like John Wayne Gacy. For a long time she thought these guys were

sadists. She's looked at the liner notes of some of these records, she's seen the photos in there: Japanese girls, bound. But she's had a reversed her thinking on it lately: if sadists make the music, wouldn't the buyers be masochists? It makes a kind of sense. She can see how these albums might appeal to people who don't otherwise experience much pain. They could remind you of your capacity to feel. But she has the memory, in her past, of being kicked across a floor. It wasn't that long ago. And she does not feel likely to forget it in the future. Drunk; fetal on the tile. *Fucking stupid bitch.*

A bell clatters, interrupts everything. The first customer of the day. She looks up. *Hey, she thinks, it's that guy.*

THOMAS

CONNOISSEUR OF DRONES

Vegetation. A bowl filled with pieces. And he wakes up into traffic.

East-West Tollway westbound heavy from before the Tri-State to just before the York Toll Plaza. An accident's been moved out of the left lane— still slow though, due to gaper's delay. Northbound Tri-State tollway slow from the Cermak Toll Plaza to the North Lake Watertower, recovering from an earlier accident there.

Thomas' first thought is *stop*. He reaches out, gropes for Off, silences the report. And then he closes his eyes, tries to remember. There was something there, before the radio poured words into his mind, something in the dream that he wants to bring out. A bowl filled with pieces. He reaches over again, and picks up his handheld Sony tape recorder. Then, on his back, he narrates:

—Um, dream, September the 22nd. A bowl, presented to me by someone, an old man? The bowl is full of pieces of something, milk-colored stone. Polished pieces broken.

He stops, rubs one eye, thinks. —The bowl is a model. We too are full of fragments; memories. Possible project: ask yourself: how are we affected by these pieces we carry with us? How do they alter our experience of the present? The doctrine of nonattachment: does it suggest that we should—(he churns the air with a hand here, looking for the words)—relinquish our *memories*, as well?

He thinks here of Rachel, and he feels haunted.

He pauses. OK stop. He will listen to that tape again later and decide if it makes sense then. He stands, shrugs into his robe, twists the rod that opens the louvers of his blinds. The room grows golden with the light of Chicago autumn.

It's his day off. He thinks he'll go in to the record store. He called Freya up on Wednesday to see if any new drone CDs came in with the week's shipment. She told him about a new Rafael Toral disc; *Cyclorama Lift 3*. He's heard *Cyclorama Lift 2* and *Cyclorama Lift 4* before; they're tracks on Toral's earlier release, *Aeriola Frequency*. They're shimmering, and sad, and he loves them. He's eager to hear the missing third piece.

Thomas needs a shower, but first he wants some music—he turns the CD player and the receiver on with two touches. Pushes play with a third. A moment—something whirs—and then forty voices rise. It's a Phill Niblock piece, a thick mass of sound, as textured and seemingly as solid as a slab of petrified wood. But the voices shift, and after a few minutes what seemed solid as stone reveals itself to be shot full of life. It changes. It grows. Thomas listens. An image of vegetation shines emerald in his mind.

FREYA & JAKOB

MESSAGE RECEIVED

—Hey, Freya says.

—Oh, hey, Jakob says, feigning surprise. *Jesus Christ she's gorgeous*, he thinks.

Freya remembers him: he's that guy from the Rainbow last week. He didn't say much, but she caught him looking at her a couple of times. She'd thought *this guy digs you*, and it was OK, it felt good to feel hot. It had been a while. She chalked his interest up mainly to the alcohol in his bloodstream and the semidarkness of the bar—the makeup of half-light can help anyone look beautiful. But now he's here. *Coincidence?*, she wonders.

—You're Freya, right? Fletcher's friend?

She wonders if this guy is a stalker, and she feels a vague sense of alarm. But this guy doesn't seem the type.

—That's right, she says. —And you're . . . help me out here?

He feels a pang. *This is a mistake*, he thinks. *If she was interested, she would have remembered my name.* —Oh, uh, my name's Jakob.

—Cool, she says. He nods. She nods.

She has a pile of CD cases in her hand that need to be shelved. And her body wants to follow the routines of work. But she feels like she should be making chitchat. She shifts from foot to foot, begins to look around the store.

He sees her glance down at the pile, and this gives him a direction. —So, he says. —Anything good come in lately?

—Depends, she says. What kind of thing are you looking for?

—Um, he says. —I dunno.

He doesn't. Music has somehow become irrelevant to him. He is twenty-nine years old and he has lost interest in young people's observations about love. That rules out a lot of music.

The last band he really liked was the Smiths. At age nineteen, he drove through the streets of Columbus, delivering pizzas, *Louder Than Bombs* jammed into the cassette player. He sang: *I know I'm unlovable / you don't have to tell me / message received, loud and clear, loud and clear / message received.* Ten years have passed since then, and in those ten years no new band has really come along and grabbed him. Instead he has come to like older music, anthologized music, the music that critics like to write about. Elvis Costello. Bob Dylan. But he's afraid to say Bob Dylan. He wants to give an answer that she will think is cool.

Girls just want to have fun, he thinks, helplessly. *Oh girls just want to have fun.* He can't even remember how the hell that even *got* in his head.

—Wellll, she says. She stretches the syllable to indicate that time is passing.

—What have *you* been listening to?

—Hmm, she says. —That new Queens of the Stone Age is pretty good. It's kind of like a stoner rock thing, if you're into that.

—Uh huh, he says. *Stoner rock?* He has no idea what that is, or whether he's into it or not. He imagines that it might be like Pink Floyd. —Listen, he says. —I should probably get moving. But, um, Fletcher and I and maybe some other people are going to get together at the Rainbow again next Friday. If you maybe felt like joining us again, that would be cool.

—Yeah, she says. Sure. That would be great.

—I'll give you my number, he says. —If you want to call to get, uh, the details.

Or I could just call Fletcher, she thinks. But she doesn't say that. She says: —Do you need a pen or something?

—No, I think I've got one: and he has one. He pulls a Walgreen's receipt out of his pocket and on it he writes his name and number.

—So maybe I'll see you then?

—Sure, she says.

—Grea t, he says. —Well, see ya.

—See ya, she says.

And he goes. *That wasn't a coincidence*, she thinks. He didn't look at even a single CD. She wonders if Fletcher ratted her out, told this guy where she works: it seems like something he would do. She'll talk to him, get the scoop what's going on with this guy. She looks at the guy's name on the receipt, and thinks it. Tries out the mental ring of the noun. Jakob.

He's not half bad looking.

DENISE

FORETELLER OF CATASTROPHE

She handles currency for a living. She stands at a register and people hand it over to her. They fish money from their wallets, from their pockets, sometimes, in the summer, from the moist space between sock and calf. They pass her bills which are wrinkled like skin, as human as flesh. She touches it and a certain intimacy spasms between her and the customer. Even the sunglasses she wears barely help.

At first this was difficult for her. She wants distance between her and other people. She wants them to be far away. Reality can be terrifying when you are too close to it, too much a part of it. There have been times when she has felt the border between her and the world bleed like watercolor. There have been times when she has experienced *too much reality*, when all she wanted was to put a stop to the incessant *data* surging in through her eyes and her ears and her body, to clamp off the magnitude and the volume of life. When all she wanted was distance.

She keeps up the distance between her and the customers by imagining them dead.

She's turned it into a register-game: Guess the Catastrophe. People come and buy their CDs, and she feels the texture of their money in her fingers, and she looks them in the face and envisions an accident for them. This guy, buying Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*: car wreck. Pinned between crushed door and steering column. Punctured lung. This guy, buying Thomas Brinkmann's *Pop Loops For Breakfast*: amphetamine-induced heart attack. A club. A hospital. The light gone glassy. The surfaces hard and cold. Slint, *Spiderland*. A dark blot spreading in the brain, no, a hundred tiny patches, scattered in the lungs, a flung handful of ashes.

—Do you need a bag for that?

Eventually her supervisor Freya tells her it's breaktime. She goes and stands in the bathroom. She gets a ten out of her wallet and holds it up against her forehead; she looks at Hamilton's face and then at her own. She tries to imagine the catastrophe in her future, and cannot. Her sunglasses mask her even from herself. For her, the catastrophe is remaining alive. This notion makes her laugh out loud.

She decides that she is in love with Alexander Hamilton. There is something attractive about his austerity.

THOMAS & DENISE

WHAT THE MIND DOES

Thomas enters the record store and heads up to the counter. There's a clerk there who he hasn't seen before, a blond girl, wearing sunglasses.

—Hi there, he says. —Is Freya around?

—No, says the girl. —She's at lunch.

—Oh, Thomas says. —I talked to her yesterday; she put a disc on hold for me?

—Okay... what's your name?

—Thomas Wakatami.

—I think I've seen you in here before, she says.

—That's possible, he says.

—I'll go check on that disc, she says.

Why the sunglasses? he wonders. He makes guesses; it's what the mind does.

He suspects that she may be damaged. That's why you would wear sunglasses indoors. Isn't it? One wears sunglasses to mask one's grief. But masking something conspicuously calls attention to it. The sunglasses, then, could be a sign, a warning. An announcement: *I am broken*. But we are all broken. He remembers his note from earlier today: we too are full of fragments.

Cute, she thinks of him, as she moves among the hold rack, reading the names. *I wonder if it's true that those quiet Japanese boys are all into, like, schoolgirls' panties and stuff*. An image, here, of a pair of panties that she owned when she was younger. A field of yellow dots: the tiny heads of cartoon lions. The idea that the sight (smell? texture?) of those cotton panties could provide someone with a sexual charge strikes her as utterly alien.

She finds the word *Thomas* on a slip rubberbanded to a bright green case.

—Here you go. She looks at him. She imagines him torn apart. *He will be*, she thinks. *He is*.

He inspects the disc. This'll be good. He needs something new to review for his site.

—Great, he says. I'll take it.

Denise rings him up, and he looks at the posters and the LP covers that cover every available bit of wall space. He reads the names of bands: *Pinebender*; *Isotope 217*. So many bits of information, so much to try to take in. He dreams of the sound that is threaded through all of this, the sound that makes it all one thing.

JAKOB

FROM THE STONE AGE

Jakob is trying to read a magazine. There is a fullness in his bladder that he is trying to ignore—a result of the large cup of coffee he finished twenty minutes ago. He picked up the magazine so that he'll have stuff to talk about in case Freya comes out with Fletcher and him tomorrow. She hasn't called him.

He's never really felt cool, but after talking to her, he feels less cool than ever. The Queens of the Stone Age? Stoner rock? *What even is that?* he thinks. *Do people still listen to, like, the Pixies?*

He's becoming the old person that he always felt sure he would never become. He sighs at the recognition, and he sighs again when he realizes that he can't gripe about it in a way that will make him seem attractively tortured. Angst at seventeen looks good; angst at thirty just makes you a cliché.

He looks back down at the magazine and tries desperately to read a sentence about electronic music from Cologne in a way that will enable him to care about it.

No luck. He thoroughly lacks whatever context would be necessary to make the sentence meaningful. He supposes he could get on the Internet and look for corroborating material: the Net's all about context, or so say the cyberculture theorists he's read, anyway. But in a way he doesn't trust the Net anymore; he's heard rumors that now there's nothing left but mall.

He flips away from the music article and finds himself instead in an article about a museum exhibit on athletic shoes. He's on more familiar ground here: he observed, some time ago, that museums had begun to stray away from showcasing the works of individual artists, and had instead begun to showcase the works of corporations and businesses. What would traditionally be called *products*. The Guggenheim's Art of the Motorcycle exhibition featuring the works of Yamaha and BMW. The Armani exhibit, sponsored in part by *InStyle*, a magazine owned by Time/Warner, a media empire owned by America Online. And now here's Nike and Puma, displaying the Air Kukini and the Monstro at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Cross-branding. Institutions building relationships with other institutions. No different, really, than McDonald's winning the rights to dispense a new batch of Rugrats toys.

Maybe he worries too much. He knows that there was probably never a time when art was not a product. And he knows that all of these exhibits have been popular. People seem to enjoy exactly what Jakob thinks is least good for them. It's like those commercials for the PlayStation 2 that have been running during *The Simpsons* lately: the ones that are done up like commercials from the future, advertisements for the PlayStation 9, a videogame system you inhale, a crystal full of cybernetic nanospores that interact directly with your dendrites and axons, plunging you into complete virtual world. The future world that the ad puts forth realizes every critique of virtuality that he's ever read. And yet this is a commercial, a future that Sony is selling. The beginning.

He has to admit that there's an appeal. The commercial is more entertaining than the surrounding program. It's a good quick chunk of science fiction inserted into the evening. But he's always wondered whether science fiction authors want to see their futures come to life. The world of *Neuromancer* doesn't seem desirable: its sky the color of television, tuned to a dead channel. And yet there are people he knew in high school who wanted nothing more than to be Case, and to have a Molly with razor-nailed fingers to call their own. He shifts in his seat, bladder telegraphing discomfort. Even the critics now seem to celebrate the development of a dystopian future. Look at Baudrillard for Christ's sake, a French genius seduced by the play of America's surfaces. To want to hold a paperclip, a mug, a stone, to desire something because it is solid and unchanging—that desire seems hopelessly out of step, makes him feel, well, old.

Do people desire virtuality? he wonders. *Do I?* He thinks about Freya, tomorrow's date, thinks about why he's interested in her. Is he interested in her, *actually*, or in the *idea* of her, what she *stands for*? The hot record-store girl? He doesn't know. Shit. This isn't something he would have had to think about when he was seventeen. He has to piss: can't ignore it any more. He gets up and heads into the bathroom. On his way past the sink he notices his toothbrush: it is shaped and striped like the athletic shoes in the magazine. Athletic-shoe-ified. He stops.

This means something. What does this mean?

FREYA

AMERICAN SPIRIT

There is a turbulence around her. She stands out in the alleyway behind Tympanum and exhales. Her breath makes spiraling white shapes in the chilly air: they dance for a moment, then dissipate into the whirl of the dark evening. She roots in the pocket of her ratty hunter's coat with two fingers and pulls out a two-thirds-empty pack of American Spirit cigarettes. She taps one into an open notch between the fingers of her other hand, guides it up to her lips. She turn her broad back to the wind and hollows her hands around her lighter. She drags, leans up against the wall's ragged concrete again, and looks over the crumpled cigarette pack, her mind hungry for something to read.

Surgeon General's Warning: Smoking Causes Lung Cancer, Heart Disease, Emphysema, And May Complicate Pregnancy. Uh-huh, she thinks.

Sales to Minors Prohibited. There's a goddamn laugh. She started smoking when she was fourteen. She's twenty-eight now: that means she's smoked for, holy shit, half her life. She remembers having her first cigarette outside a fucking *roller skating rink*. It left her loopy and dizzy, which seemed exactly the state that the roller skating and the disco lights had tried to inspire in her. It seems obvious now: if you want a boy to hold your hand you go roller skating. If you want an altered state, you take drugs.

She remembers how, in college, she and her friends would always discuss drugs with a mock wistfulness, saying things like, *Ah, drugs!*, as though drugs were an old friend, fondly remembered. This was probably a way to express genuine wonder, and perhaps fear, at all that drugs could do.

She shoves the pack back into her pocket. Down there there's another bit of paper, she can remember what it is without looking: it's the Walgreen's receipt with Jakob's phone number on it. She hasn't called him. She should: it's been six months since she's gotten laid, and he seems eager enough. In a way, though, it's hard for her to care about someone new. She's twenty-eight and she is full of so many people already. She reviews her dense field of memory. She remembers sitting in a bathroom stall in high school, smoking, her foot jammed up against the door because the administration had removed the fucking *locks*, attempting to discourage illicit activity with the constant threat of possible intrusion. You know what else she remembers? Smoking anyway.

She drags. She exhales. A cloud. Its erasure.

FREYA & JAKOB

POSSIBLE COMBINATIONS

It's Friday. Jakob and Fletcher will be getting together tonight at the Rainbo Club. She uses two crooked fingers to pull the curtain back; inspects the leaden sky.

She's not sure if she wants to go yet.

She *is* sure that Jakob's interested. Sniffing after info, she gave Fletcher a call last night. She didn't even have to twist his arm before he gave her the full deal: *Jakob? Nice guy, first year in grad school, just moved here from Ohio. Oh, and he likes you.*

The Walgreens receipt is by the phone. She picks it up, turns it over, inspects the reverse side absently. She considers going tonight, and she considers giving Jakob a call, to confirm that she'll be going. But it would do more than just confirm. It would communicate interest. And she's still not sure if she is actually interested.

A relationship is creaking into life here, the signs are all present: surreptitious glances, awkward small talk, the revelation of a kernel of interest. This is the part that's supposed to be the most fun, but she can't quite enjoy it, because all her other relationships began this way, too, and she knows how those ended up. She's been fed through the Relationship Machine so many times (she ignores an impulse to count the exact number) that she feels like she's seen every major relationship permutation possible. She feels like she's stuck in a Choose Your Own Adventure book that she's read too many times, and where every ending leaves you wanting. (She used to love those books, though, especially the one where you fly in a balloon over the Sahara.)

Across town, Jakob sits at his desk, and reads: *People are quite aware that some neighborhoods are sad and others pleasant. But they generally simply assume that elegant streets cause a feeling of satisfaction and that poor streets are depressing, and let it go at that. In fact, the variety of possible combinations of ambiances, analogous to the blending of pure chemicals in an infinite number of mixtures, gives rise to feelings as differentiated and complex as any other form of spectacle can evoke. Of all the affairs we participate in, with or without interest, the groping search for a new way of life is the only aspect still impassioning.*

FREYA, JAKOB & FLETCHER

DESIRING A PERFECT WORLD

Fletcher: So, *Requiem For a Dream*. Seen it?

Freya: Seen it.

Jakob: Seen it.

Fletcher: Well, what did you think?

Jakob: I don't know. I preferred *Pi*. In *Pi* you've got the stock market, you've got go, you've got Kabbalistic Jews — in *Requiem For a Dream* all you've got is a bunch of junkies.

Freya: Not a big fan of the junkie movie, eh?

Jakob: It's not that; it's just that I've already *seen* a lot of junkie movies. I was reading some paper and the critic wrote "Even junkies are now bored with junkie movies."

Fletcher: I liked Rosenbaum's thing in the *Reader*: "junkie movies tend to follow predictable patterns, just like junkies themselves."

Jakob: Yeah, exactly. You know how the thing's going to turn out before it gets very far. Say what you like about *Pi*, one thing is for sure: you don't know what's going to happen next.

Freya: But even the *title* basically lets you know that there's not going to be a *happy ending*, for God's sake. It's not like Aronofsky gives that away by *accident*. It's *necessary* to the film that we know what's going to happen. It's like, well, take *Romeo and Juliet* for example. It's obvious how *that's* going to end pretty early on, and yet it's a story that's stuck around for hundreds of years. So I don't think *Requiem for a Dream* is about *plot*; I think it's about the *characters*. It's about *identifying* with those people even though you *know* they're doomed.

Jakob: But I don't think we're meant to identify with those characters.

Freya: Oh, I do.

Jakob: Junkie movies are built around dramatic irony. We know that they're doomed, but they can't see it. They're inside of their little drug-world terrarium. They can't see out. The film *works* because it gives us knowledge that the characters don't have. That puts us in a position to feel smarter than them—basically *superior* to them. When we feel bad at the end of the movie, we feel bad in the same way we feel if we were watching somebody hit a dog with a stick.

Freya: No, I don't agree. Junkie movies are about desiring a perfect world. People will do a lot to live in a perfect world. They'll fucking destroy themselves for it. And the worse your world is, the more intense your desire becomes. I think that's very human behavior. I don't think I'm any smarter than those people. I think the difference between me and them is purely circumstantial. I think that's what the movie is trying to say.

Jakob: You mean, that if you—

Freya: I mean that I understand that kind of desperation. I identify. Really. I do.

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).

He can be reached by e-mail at jeremy@invisible-city.com.