

Imaginary Year

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"It's going to get harder and harder to tell"

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Imaginary Year is a work of serial fiction by
Jeremy P. Bushnell. It began in September 2000, and is renewed each September.

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Thanks for reading.

THOMAS

UNSEEN_GIRL

He has a phone that he rarely uses, It's not his preferred interface. He's not good on it; he is shy and halting even with people he has known for years, even with his parents. He likes to think things through before he speaks and the phone makes no allowance for this. This is why telemarketers always get the best of him. He's too polite or too slow to just hang up on them, and even though he may have no interest in whatever set of benefits they have to offer he can never articulate his objections quickly enough or well enough to avoid having to concede. Distant entities have worked out a plan for him: easiest, perhaps, to just go along with it.

He could probably do without the actual object of the phone entirely. He has one because, well, who doesn't have one?

This is not to say that he could be free of phone *service*. He needs the *jack*. He sees this as an entirely different appliance, the point of entry into an entirely different media—the Web—which is free of the demands of instantaneity. This is the way he can put his words into the discussion. The only way he can do it comfortably.

He is on. He is in. He opens up his Netscape inbox. He needs to reply to an e-mail that Derek sent him a while ago: one of those “Hey, sorry I haven't been in touch lately, what's new with you?” kinds of e-mails. Part of the problem is that not much is new, or, more accurately— well—information is any difference that makes a difference, and Thomas isn't sure what differences will bear any relevance to Derek. Derek is married, works in an office, is thinking about having a kid. Thomas isn't sure where their lives overlap anymore.

Thomas' week looks like this: he works on the website, he reviews music that Derek no longer cares about, he compares notes with other drone fans from all over, he wastes four nights by going out and waiting tables, he sees an occasional show, and, well, that's about it. (Oh, and the episodes of loneliness, the afternoons and evenings where he lies on the sofa, mildly crippled, staring at the ceiling, letting his mental energy fizz with no direction or point.)

He has a new message: *have you seen this?* from *unseen_girl*. Unseen_girl? He doesn't recognize the handle. He opens the message and what he sees gives him a jolt of excitement:

Hey. Love your site; check in all the time. You listen to a lot of digital music; ever make any yourself? I like playing around with AudioMulch:

<http://download.cnet.com/downloads/0-1896426-100-3954350.html>

or

<http://www.audiomulch.com>

although that seems to be down lately...

Are you in Chicago? (I'm guessing because your show writeups are usually Chicago shows, although I haven't seen a new one lately.) You should drop me a line at unseen_girl@yahoo.com if you are, cause I am.

He stares at the screen in a kind of quiet amazement. He will respond. But first he has to think about what to say.

JANINE & THOMAS

PERVERTS

Janine mutes the commercials. The first time she did it Thomas must have glanced askance at her because she offered an almost apologetic explanation: —Oh, God, I *have* to. If I don't, I'll be up all night plotting out a revolution. And I have to work tomorrow.

She's invited him over to her place to watch the new season of *Survivor*. —I have to watch this show, she said. —If I don't, I'll go all season without knowing what *anybody* at work is talking about. *Oh, don't be such a Richard*. What? It's like they gave everybody a whole new packet of nouns except for me. Although, later, she confesses: —This show is a serious guilty pleasure. My one concession to pop culture. I was going to choose *Temptation Island* but those *people*. My God.

Commercials. A portion of a blue Volkswagen fills the screen. Reflected cityscape flows silently across its contours. During the last set of commercials, he told her about the e-mail he got from *unseen_girl*, and now Janine starts the discussion up again.

—So what's so special about this e-mail? she says. —I thought you said you got a lot of mail because of the site?

—This is different, he says. —Most of that e-mail is from people far away, and, most of it, is, um.

—What?

—Well, most of it is from men.

Now it's her turn to look askance at him. —You've got a crush on this girl? Tell me again what she sent you so far? Fifteen words and a link?

He stares down at the rim of his beer bottle. He feels flushed and embarrassed, like he always does around Janine. (He likes it, the way she disquiets him: he intuits that it's somehow good for him.) —Hey, he says. —You can tell a lot about a person from a link. I can tell a lot about a person just from their visiting my site.

—Bah, says Janine. —I would never have taught you HTML if I knew you weren't going to use it wisely. (Thomas tries to interpret this statement: she sounds ironic, but the statement may be one of those that goes completely around the circle: so ironic that it reveals sincerity.)

He shrugs, takes a slug from his beer. (He often adopts the strategy of playing it cool and glib with Janine, as a way of masking his complete self-consciousness. He doesn't think this strategy actually works; he imagines his "coolness" comes off as completely forced and stilted. But she tolerates the illusion. She seems, in fact, to *enjoy* tolerating it, so despite the fact that everything he does

seems utterly foolish to him he actually ends up feeling *cooler* when he talks to Janine than he does at any other time in his life. Even alone he tends to feel awkward.)

—It's true, though, he says. —People who like my site like difficult music. People who like difficult music tend to be intellectually formidable. And intellectually formidable women are...

—Sexy? Janine fills in. —Ha! What you're really in love with is a screen that talks back to you. (All sorts of weird images are pouring into the room through the TV here: while she banters with Thomas she is watching, through her peripheral vision, a clip of animal liberation activists breaking dogs out of cages, which in the end appears to be part of a Reebok commercial.) —You don't know anything about her. For Christ's sake, you don't even know that she's a *woman*.

—Well, Thomas said. —I'd thought of that.

—*That*, my friend, is because you suffer from Heterosexual Fear. I say, if you're going to love someone based on words and links, then love someone based on words and links. Hell, if you're going to love people based on their— what was it? —intellectual *formidability*, then love people based on their intellectual *formidability*. Get over this whole boy-girl thing. Gender's a fiction; haven't you heard?

—Well, Thomas says, —I don't know, I really think I want a girl—

—Hey, she says, —It's going to get harder and harder to tell. The Net is going to raise a whole generation of perverts. All that interlinking? The profusion of entrances and exits? The total play of permeable membranes, the absence of phallic unity, etcetera etcetera? You know what the whole thing smacks of? One big poly *orgy*. And you know what? I'm for it. I call for—more perverts!

She looks squarely at him.

He hardly knows what she's talking about.

—I'll see what I can do, he says.

—Ha! she shouts.

The commercials are over and she unmutes the TV. The room fills with grunting didgeridoo.

—Oh, God, she says. —I can't *believe*.

THOMAS

PLAYING WITH THE TOY FOR NARCISSISTS

It's time to reply to her. He loops the pointer over the Subject field, clicks, and types: *thanks for the mail*. Then he contemplates this for a moment: perhaps he should say something less generic, more clever?

He moves on. A flurry of hand movements and words appear on the screen. *Thanks for the information about AudioMulch: I haven't gotten a chance to download it yet but I'll check it out soon.*

He pauses, looks at what he's written, touches his index finger to his lips. Considers the impression that it might make. He wants to make a good impression on her. (Him?) Apparently someone *can* develop a crush based on fifteen words and a link.

He knows why. E-mails leave out a lot. And he knows that people tend to fill in the blanks with whatever details they would find *most favorable*; this is why people find themselves falling deeply in love with someone they've only been e-mailing for a couple of days.

What you're really in love with is a screen that talks back to you.

Thomas has already begun to think that this woman is like him. It's an assumption. But at least it's an assumption that he knows he's making. This will hopefully instill some caution in him.

Turning a person into a mirror, and then falling in love with that mirror — he wonders if this makes him a narcissist. Janine has said to him that the Web is the ultimate toy for narcissists: it provides the instant illusion that everyone on the globe might pay attention to whatever they have to say. He's worried before about whether he has narcissistic tendencies, whether that's part of why he hasn't managed to make his relationships last. His experiences of listening to drone music are experiences of immersion and introspection: perhaps they indicate a certain overabundance of self-love? In the latest issue of *TheWire* about a band, Reynolds, who have released a CD called *Blank Tapes*, constructed from the omnipresent hiss found on unused audiotape. He'd thought *wow I want that* and then had had to laugh at the pure absurdity of that desire. That didn't stop him from wanting it. He's deep enough into his investigations that the acquisition would make sense. But sitting there, in his armchair, listening to blank tapes and nodding meaningfully: this image strikes him now as a vivid portrait of self-absorption. He can tell himself that writing e-mail is social, but he knows that he enjoys it because it's also

introspective: he can pause, contemplate, re-think, re-write—

He types: I haven't fooled around too much with making my own music; mostly I'm a listener. But I've been getting more and more interested in giving it a try. What about you? From your e-mail it sounded like you'd made some music.

OK, he's introspective. But (he argues to himself) that doesn't necessarily indicate narcissism. (When he clams up around Janine, retreating from the conversation in order to pursue a circle of thought in his own head, Janine sometimes will prod him with her foot and accuse him of suffering from "male autism," which doesn't sound great but at least sounds like something other than narcissism.) His tendency to withdraw from the world may indicate not self-love, but a surfeit of self-deprecation. (This raises the question for him of whether self-deprecation is not, in fact, the flip side of self-love, the end result of being unable to fulfill your own sense of vanity, which, in turn, is closely linked to the thought that only narcissists bother to take the time to try to dissect whether they are narcissists.)

He types: Anyway. Drop me a line when you can; I'm always looking for people who might be interested in going to see some shows.

He thinks for a few moments about whether to replace "shows" with "performances" and considers the associations of each. In the end he sticks with "shows." He hovers the pointer over Send and clicks. His transmission goes out. It will be filed somewhere, his energy stored in it as though it were a battery. At some point in the future it will be read. At that moment he will become social.

JANINE

SUFFERER OF CLOWNS

Janine has Billie Holiday in her head. *I fell in love with you the first time I looked into: them there eyes. And you've got a certain little, cute way of flirtin' with: them there eyes.* What she is actually looking into at the moment is not anyone's eyes at all— not yet —but rather her computer screen, which shows a mass of bezier lines and anchor points, blown up 300% in Adobe Illustrator. The company she works for does design for a bunch of e-commerce sites. One of those sites has some kind of St. Patrick's Day-themed sale coming up, and so they want images of leprechauns. Playing, frolicking, holding bags of cash. The task of designing these has fallen to her. She's having trouble getting the eyes right, getting them to have a certain mischievous sparkle. She's done a few preliminary leprechaun-heads and dragged them, half-finished, out into the junkspace that surrounds the Illustrator artboard. The eyes of one of her nascent 'chauns look like raisins pressed into a misshapen lump of dough, the eyes of the other are trapezoidal, and lend a frightening cyborg look.

When she'd first gotten the assignment she'd nodded and grinned (her *sure, I can do that grin-and-nod*, a maneuver in her repertoire which this corporate job has made all too familiar). She'd then returned to the Designer House and said to Lee: —They want me to do leprechauns. I don't know how to draw a leprechaun. Lee responded, without even turning away from his own screen: —Let me run home and get my *Monster Manual*.

He's off at lunch now (and she doesn't think he's coming back with the *Monster Manual*, although now she kind of wishes he was). She zooms out for a second, to get some perspective. She's been working from nine to noon—closer to twelve-thirty, now—and she's come up with two messed-up heads, the one she's working on now (which looks a bit like a red-headed cartoon beaver and may also end up in the messed-up pile), and a heavily-aliased “reference leprechaun” that she found through Alta Vista's Image Search, copied to her hard drive, and pasted into her Illustrator document. She'd really like to just sharpen the reference leprechaun and turn him in, but there's the copyright infringement problem there. Outside of the Illustrator window she has a Netscape window open which contains a tutorial on how to draw anime eyes — she dug that up and used it to draw the eyes for this third head, although she's starting to think that putting Western eyes drawn in a Japanese style on her American version of an Irish folklore figure will cause her leprechaun to implode under the weight of competing cultural traditions.

She's thirty and is spending her day trying to draw a leprechaun. She's reminded of a line from *Spinal Tap*: *Too much, too much fucking perspective!* She zooms

back in to tweak the eyes some more. One part of her brain keeps belting out Holiday and another part reviews various elements of a joke about some hapless guy getting sodomized by a midget. *I can't believe you thought I was a leprechaun!* God. The things you pick up.

Colin from down the hall sticks his head in. —Hey, he says. She jumps a bit, pulling a direction point a bit further than she'd intended, looping her line accidentally, putting what looks like a wicked rip into the corner of her leprechaun's eye. She clenches her back teeth and a throb ebbs slowly into her head. —What, she says. She doesn't turn around.

—I'm running down to McDonald's, Colin says. —Want anything?

—Clown food?, she says. —That's for first graders. Take it elsewhere.

—Ohh-kay, says Colin, and he disappears from the Designer's House doorway. She envisions him with a thought balloon that says *bitch* in it. *You are a bitch, she thinks, it's no wonder that nobody around here likes you. Why do you have to keep saying stuff like that to people?*

It doesn't matter. She doesn't care. She doesn't *want* the people around here to like her. She's rebuffed Colin ten thousand times in the past year and she still feels certain that if she asked him to dinner he would eagerly go. Her constant sarcasm isolates her from the other people who work on this floor of this building, she knows this, but that isolation leaves her a space inside that is hers and hers alone, a private space, a sector of herself that she has not yet offered up to the company. She does not yet fully belong. And she will work to keep it that way.

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.