

# Imaginary Year

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"everything was going to crack open"

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Thanks for reading.

DENISE

# THE PROBLEM WITH EMPATHY

The nice thing about Denise's apartment is that it's on the top floor of the building, and her room actually has a skylight. It's just a tiny plastic bubble-dome, the easiest thing in the world to never notice after moving in, except that she's set her room up in a loft style—the bed raised to fit a little desk beneath it—so, at night, she stares out at lit air. It never gets dark enough in Chicago to see stars, but she feels comforted just by her awareness of being surrounded by gulf.

She lies in bed, cold even under two blankets, and she listens to Toy and Mark out in the common room, going up against one another on the Playstation. Laughter and curses. Whitenoise explosions and the snare of automatic weapons fire, on a TV jacked up loud.

She used to feel like things were migrating through the land: people, ideas. Johnny had known about a group of kids who had trained themselves in pyrotechnic arts and were traveling around the country in two vans, cobbling together momentary festivals of pagan intensity in city after city, planting germs of carnival brilliance throughout America like gutterpunk Appleseeds. Johnny had known about a punk house in Philadelphia where everyone lived for free, which drew visionary crazies from everywhere: he kept promising that he would take her. But now everyone seems so sedentary, so tethered; she wonders what has inhibited that flow of nomads. It had really seemed, for a time, like everything was going to crack open. Chaos never died.

She used to attend the School of the Art Institute at Chicago. It had been exciting at first but she'd gotten bored with the whole deal pretty fast, the bland visions of the other students, the arrays of tedious requirements. And then she'd met Johnny, a little scowling clown with self-cut hair and razor marks up and down his arms, and Johnny felt bored and stifled, too, and one night, when they were coming back from somebody's party, stoned and drunk and fucked-up, they stumbled into the dinged-up metal box of the elevator and she backed him up into the corner and they started to make out urgently. By the time they got to his floor he already had one hand in her jeans. She spent the night with him, and she remembers, that first

night, that he didn't come, but even that felt right to her in some weird way. He got her to come, no other guy had done that before, and the fact that he himself didn't seemed to obscurely balance things out, realign the tally sheets.

She used to practically live with him. He dropped out of SAIC and got an apartment. (She'd stayed enrolled but only to get student loan money and take advantage of the room and board for which her parents were footing the bill. She stopped going to classes entirely, though, so that scheme fell apart after a single semester.) They told themselves that just going to Barnes and Noble and reading the art books would teach them more about art than the SAIC, and for a while they were diligent about doing just that. (Sometimes they stole. Denise especially. She still looked mostly like a sweet blonde high school girl: she could hold a book in her arms and walk right through the security gates; when the alarm would go off they'd just wave her on her way.) But then the drugs started to be a bigger part of their time, and she went into the slow world a certain distance and then held there, orbiting, but Johnny went further in. Things began to complicate then. He stopped answering his phone, and one time he was in the shower and the phone rang and she picked it up out of pure sickness of listening to it and found herself connected to Johnny's worried parents. They spoke in a tentative way, as though afraid of offending her, and listening to them was agonizing; she understood completely that they would try forever to figure out what was happening to their son and she understood completely that, if they continued in this gentle and useless way, they would never even get close. She felt hopeless on their behalf, and then became angry that they couldn't even perceive the hopelessness of their own attempts, and she finally blurted it out, again and again. *Your son is a junkie. Do you understand?*

She used to, she used to.

They came and took him. It may have been the next day. They drove out from Ohio and negotiated him into the car. She only learned about it from a confused message on her answering machine. *The key is under the mat.* There was shouting in the background: between the mom and dad, it seemed like. *Come take what you want; they won't let me bring it. I love you baby. The key is under the mat, OK? Take what you want. I'm going to be back real soon. They're taking me; there's not enough room in the car for everything. Love you.*

She was living in a dorm room with one other girl and she was going to be kicked out in another month. She let herself into his apartment. The major stuff was gone: the stereo, the TV, most of the CDs. The floor was littered with books and papers and clothes and half-finished assemblages. She took as many of the books as she could carry in a single trip. She'd meant to go back and take more— even if she didn't have the room she could maybe sell them to a used book shop—but she didn't go back. It just seemed too hard. She wishes that she'd taken some of his art, even a single piece of sculpture, just so she could have something to remind

her of him. She's not sure why she didn't. Maybe she really did believe he was coming back. The landlord probably threw it all out once he realized he'd been stiffed. It was only once she'd begun to think of all that art being tossed that Johnny began to seem dead to her. It was only then that she began to realize that there might be a problem with empathy.

For her the catastrophe is remaining alive.

Earlier tonight, after *The Simpsons*, there was this other show on, some stupid thing; nobody was really watching it but the TV was just on. She'd paid attention during one brief moment when the father of the show explained to his son about empathy. *Empathy is putting yourself in the position of other people. So that when they feel bad, you feel bad.* The son responded: *then why would you want empathy?*

She's begun to drift off despite the sounds of interpersonal annihilation emitting from the common room. She looks out through the skylight at the expanse of empty space above her. When she closes her eyes then opens them again it is still there. Even though it is nothing.

## THOMAS &amp; JANINE

## HOW WILL I KNOW YOU?

Bass & Co's Pale Ale, with the red triangle that is England's First Registered Trademark. Janine's put an open one into his hand; he draws from it: delicious. He missed *Survivor* last week because they'd moved it to Wednesday and he'd had to work.

—Alicia got it last week, Janine says.

She perches on the edge of the sofa, leans forward to grab the remote, then settles in next to him.

—Alicia? Really?

The TV winks open: basketball.

—Yeah, Janine says, —they're just picking off those Kuchas one by one. She focuses in on the basketball. —What the fuck's this, she says.

They both watch it for a minute. People run one way and then the other. That's about as well as Thomas understands it. A klaxon goes off and Janine hits Mute.

—Fuck, she says. —I forgot. The NCAA shit has screwed everything up.

Thomas watches her concentrate on the players maneuvering through their silenced world. A petite tongue tip appears at the corner of her mouth. She reveals a certain casual grace in her every unconscious gesture: the way she rubs her eye or scratches at her clavicle. Thomas has noted her beauty many times; he notes it again now, almost absently. There are books stacked on the table by the sofa. After a few seconds he turns his attention to them. *Cyborgs, Simians, and Women. The Reinvention of Nature.* He picks it up and flips it over. Janine, still staring at the TV: —No, wait, what am I doing?

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—So, she says. —How are things with the e-mail crush?

—Good, Thomas says. —We actually have some plans to try and get together.

There's this thing coming up next weekend, a LAMPO thing, at 60dum; they're bringing in this band Mirror, they're going to do some kind of quadrasonic drone performance—

He notices Janine smiling wryly. —Yeah, well, for *some* of us, it would make an *ideal* date, he says.

—Ha! Janine says. —No, really, I'm sure it will. I'm not trying to make fun. She grins impishly. Thomas raises his eyebrows to indicate his skepticism and takes another draw from the Bass. He told Janine the truth, mostly: things with unseen\_girl *are* going well, e-mails have gone back and forth fairly regularly over the last few weeks. There are a few things that seem weird to him, like the fact that he doesn't know her real name yet —she knows his, after all; it's on his website. He guesses it makes sense, though: if he were a woman he's not sure he'd feel quite so comfortable giving out his name to people who are more or less strangers. Although she doesn't quite feel like a stranger to him. He's been surprised, in fact, at the depth of feeling he has been able to manifest towards her. He has discovered a reservoir of emotion that he had apparently set aside for a woman interested in the same music as him. He was unaware that that secret reserve existed, but now that unseen\_girl has triggered his awareness of it, he feels like inviting her to enjoy as much of it as she would like. But first he wants to know what she looks like. Unseen. After she agreed to meet him at the show, he'd sent her an e-mail that asked *how will I know you?* She hasn't responded yet. He's sort of — well, he doesn't want to find her physically unattractive, he is, yes, *afraid* of the prospect that he might. He doesn't know how his feelings towards her will change if that happens; if it *does* happen and his feelings *do* change, then the genuineness of his feelings—feelings which feel quite real to him now—will be called into question. And he's grown tired of self-questioning. He craves a certain stability, a reliable quiet core; he wants certain things about himself to just *be*. He doesn't want to go out on a date and come home with his sense of integrity usurped.

Janine watches him. He's staring down at his bottle of beer, clearly turning something over in his mind. She likes Thomas, she has ever since they were working together at the hotel restaurant, but she's always wanted to draw him out of his shell, to get him to stop withdrawing into the safety of his own head and start engaging with the people around him. She sees it as a project or game. She teases him, torments him, flirts with him, creates situations that he must respond to, but it's been two years now and sometimes he still draws away in this style.

If she could break him of that habit, she'd consider getting involved with him. He's a little strange-looking, but that's not a point against him. And he has a faintly androgynous gentleness about him that she finds very appealing.

He looks up at her, smiles. —So, yeah, he says, —everything's going fine with that.

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He goes into the bathroom. While he's peeing he looks at a postcard taped up over the toilet, which depicts a woman's pelvis, wrapped in red latex. Beneath the latex the woman's hand splays across her own pubic mound, every contour intimately limned. Each time Thomas uses Janine's bathroom — often, since every week he drinks too much alcohol while he's visiting — he looks at this postcard, wonders what it means to her, why she chose to hang it, why here. Wonders what sex means to her. He knows that she was working on a Women's Studies degree for a while, and he's always generally thought of her as a feminist, but he'd always thought that feminists didn't go for these kinds of pictures of the body. There are nuances that he does not follow, that he recognizes he does not follow. He wants to talk to her about it but he doesn't even really know where to begin.

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—Why do you even still work there? she asks him. —I mean, you never really struck me as the waiter type.

—I can do it, Thomas says. —It's easy. “Hi, my name is Thomas, and I'll be your server this evening. Perhaps some drinks to get you started?” He shrugs. —Most people are pretty used to, you know, the deferential Asian or whatever, so, I don't know, I guess I fit the image OK.

—Yeah, but, Janine says. —I don't know. How long have you been there now?

—Four years.

—I mean, there are other jobs out there that you're qualified for, better jobs. I've read some of those reviews on your website, they're good. I mean, really thoughtful. There's lots of places that need writing right now...

—I don't know, Thomas says. —I've just gotten used to the idea that my job doesn't have anything to do with my life. You were the only person there who I ever hung out with outside of work. So I go, I switch on to autopilot, I do my thing, then I go home and my life turns on again. The job pays the bills and I don't need to think about it when I'm not there, so... why switch? I mean, I guess it's kind of weird to have this kind of “two life” thing going on...

—Yeah, says Janine. —But the idea of the unitary self is a fiction anyway.



—Yeah, says Thomas. He half-believes her. He knows that we are made up of fragments. But he believes that they are all contained in a single thing. He believes that we are bowls full of stones. What he wants in his own life is to be aware of the form of the bowl—

FREYA

## GENTLE PRESSURE

Freya opens the refrigerator door onto the play of brands. Minute Maid Premium Original; Athenos Mediterranean Spreads Hummus; Land O Lakes Sweet Cream Salted Butter. Blue sky. Halved orange. Map of islands. Architectural structure. Indian maiden. She ignores the careful balance of these iconographies today, tunes out everything except for the familiar shape of the styrofoam egg carton. Shafer's Pick of the Chick. An quick image here of chickens in wire cages limed with shit. She knows she could buy free range if she'd go down to the Whole Foods every once in a while. But going to the Whole Foods means a journey straight into Chicago's yuppie center, and a special trip at that. She lifts the carton: it's lighter than she'd expected. She pops it open: two. That's perfect. She's already set the pan of cold water on the stovetop: she sets the eggs into it and fires up the gas. The empty egg carton goes into the trash.

A blue glass bowl (IKEA) sits on the kitchen shelf, next to a small array of plants. Freya has placed things on that shelf deliberately so that they will catch the light that falls through the window. (The days have been hitting fifty lately; warm weather is finally returning. When the air turns mild she will closet her heavy winter coat and her woolen hat and let cool wind move over her arms and through her hair. Her body and mind both ache for it.) In the glass bowl is a warm California avocado that she's been watching for the last few days. Ripe when yields to gentle pressure. She lifts it, squeezes to test, although she knows it's ready.

She thinks of her old friend Melissa. Melissa had spent the first summer out of college down in South America, following some love interest who'd embarked on an ill-defined mission of self-discovery. By summer's end, Melissa had returned, without him, but with a selection of colorful sweaters and a clever tin box packed with smuggled weed. It seemed like those might serve as a defense against fall. Freya places the avocado's wrinkled mass on the cutting board, tries to remember the guy's name. Kevin something?

Not long after her return, Melissa had spent a day hanging out with Freya; they drank red wine in the afternoon and smoked some of the weed and Melissa had made sandwiches that she'd first had in South America: ham, avocado, lettuce, and hard-boiled egg. The sandwiches had been incredibly delicious, in the way that food tastes when you're stoned, and the avocado-and-egg combination thereafter became a semi-regular element of Freya's diet.

By winter the weed was gone and Melissa had returned to Prozac, which she'd showily announced that she quit when she first got involved with the love interest. That seemed to denote her final reabsorption into the culture of the United States. It's been a couple of months since Freya last talked to her. Time advances. She wonders how she is these days.

A day off. Freya guides the paring knife soundlessly into the avocado and twists. A second time, and a wedge of avocado comes free. Brilliant green, solar energy translated into flesh. She checks on the pan. A day with nothing in particular planned. Warming weather. The entire world, waking up. She feels connected to its green and growing thrum at a thousand points. The water and the eggs begin to shiver.

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