

# Imaginary Year

VOLUME ONE

ISSUE SEVEN

"turned around and fucked up"

MAY 2001

*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](http://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.

THOMAS & JANINE

## HUMAN NUANCE

Thomas and Janine are watching the final episode of this season's *Survivor*. The final votes are cast, and then, in the space of a commercial break, the competitors are transported from Tribal Council in the Australian Outback to a Los Angeles soundstage, where they are surrounded by a studio audience, and accompanied by an ensemble performing a live rendition of the *Survivor* theme music.

—Oh my God, says Janine. —It's the Academy Awards!

The scene switches to an image of a helicopter, airlifting in the precious million-dollar votes. The skyline of Los Angeles glitters.

—No, says Thomas. —It's the opening scene to *Blade Runner*.

The scene switches back to the soundstage. Thomas and Janine are treated to a closer view of that live ensemble, including a guy playing the didgeridu.

—Oh no, the didge! Thomas says.

—You have a problem with didgeridus? Janine asks.

—No, I love the didgeridu, Thomas says. —It's a droning instrument.

—Oh, sure, Janine says.

—I just hate this—the way they're used for, you know, exotic flavor.

—Instant Australia, Janine says.

—Yeah, exactly, Thomas says. —It's such a wonderful instrument; it can be used for so much more. This guy Niblock who I like has a piece where he uses massed didgeridus. It's gorgeous.

—You should have brought it over, Janine says.

—Eh, Thomas says. He doesn't often play the music he likes for others. He knows

that the music he likes is hard for others to like, and he doesn't want to put his few friends in a position where they feel obligated to force an enthusiastic response.

—Niblock, Janine says. —That's the guy you and Lydia are going to see next week, right?

—Yup, Thomas says.

He's kept her up to date. Tonight, during *Survivor's* commercial breaks, Thomas talked to Janine about his concern about the age difference.

—What exactly are you worried about? Janine had asked him.

—I don't know, Thomas had said, picking at the edge of the label on his bottle of Heineken. —I just always found the whole older guy / younger girl thing to be creepy. Those guys always look like they're taking advantage of those girls.

—She's twenty-one, Janine had said. —You're *not* that much older. It's not like you're cruising around the junior high schools or anything.

—Yeah, yeah, I know.

—But there's something else going on here that troubles me, Janine says. —I mean, if you assume that if you and her get together it'll be because you *took advantage of her*, you're actually denying her her autonomy. You may actually be treating her with *less* respect than you would be if you just assumed she was capable of making her own decisions about you.

Thomas finds that he can't contest this, and yet he somehow doesn't feel relieved, which he takes as a sign that maybe he hasn't yet found what's really bothering him about the whole deal.

—On the other hand, Janine says, —you *should* keep in mind that sometimes twenty-one-year-olds are still trying a little bit to sort their shit out. They're just barely out of adolescence; they're still all turned around and fucked up. They're trying to figure out how to be adults. I'm not saying that that's necessarily something that You Must Avoid, I'm just saying to be prepared: that's an aspect of the relationship that you might need to deal with, and you don't want to go in not expecting it.

Janine stops there. She can see that Thomas' anxieties about the relationship run high; she's afraid to say anything too discouraging because she doesn't want to see him just drop the whole thing. Getting laid would do Thomas some good. In the two years since she met Thomas, she hasn't known him to be involved with anyone;

and the longer you go without dating, the harder dating becomes. You begin to forget the language, the motions, the entire system of choreography that governs a relationship.

The flip side of this is what Janine thinks of as the “when you’re hot, you’re hot” phenomenon; the perverse truth that when you’re in a relationship is when you are *best* equipped to take on other relationships. Around the time Janine quit working at the hotel she was involved with both Ed (bartender) and Lila (grad student); managing both of those relationships was simple, effortless even. But then Ed found the monogamous girlfriend he’d been looking for, and cut Janine out of the picture. Janine wasn’t too upset—she wished Ed well—but being with Ed had helped her to practice certain skills, and in the days and weeks following the breakup she could feel those skills begin to atrophy. Sure enough, things went out of whack with Lila soon after—couldn’t have been more than two months later. And ever since she started working at the Woolcot Group there’s been almost a year of nothing, a *total* dry spell.

And so she wants to encourage Thomas to date; even though she’s not certain that Lydia is the ideal candidate. She’d like to see him become more communicative, and being in the company of another would help with that, having to negotiate the complex topography of another person’s sexuality would help with that *especially*. In general, she’d like *everyone* to be having great sex; she wants everyone to be well-fucked, all the time. Sexuality is a high order of communication; learn how to be a good lay and you learn human nuance.

*Survivor*, live from LA: —How often do you get a chance where you get to have sixteen strangers, together, who are gonna ultimately give you their opinion, what they think about you, how you play, how you interact socially, who you are as a person, and then you get to watch it play out, learn what they think about you, and also view yourself and maybe gain some new insight into your own self-perception?

## JAKOB &amp; FLETCHER

## READERS

Jakob is sitting in a chair left out in a university hallway. He turned in his grades earlier this morning. He gave out mostly B's, a handful of C's and A's. He ended up flunking a few kids who stopped showing up halfway through the semester. (He knows the F may have negative repercussions for some of those students, and yet he only feels the most microscopic dot of guilt. He's surprised, momentarily, that he doesn't feel more.) After submitting his final paperwork he made a pass by Fletcher's office.

Fletcher sat at his desk, behind several piles of graded work, hastily punching figures into a calculator. —Hey, he said, without looking up.

—Cutting it close, eh? Jakob said.

—Yours are in, I suppose, Fletcher said.

—I just turned 'em in.

—Wait a second, Fletcher said. He looks at the calculator, compares it against a column of figures in his gradebook. —That can't be right.

—I'll get out of your hair, said Jakob.

—No, wait, said Fletcher. He finally looked up. —What are you doing right now?

—I don't know. I was thinking I'd go out and grab some lunch.

—I'll be done with this stuff in, I swear, like, twenty minutes. If you want to stick around I'll head out with you.

—OK, says Jakob.

So he went out into the hallway and grabbed a chair. It's easy for him to kill time; he's got reading material on hand. It's the new issue of *Adbusters*, a magazine that he'll glance through sometimes in the bookstore but doesn't normally buy. This issue is all about urbanism, though, about strategies for transforming cities, and since he's interested in those sorts of ideas, he wanted to see what they had in

mind. The issue arranges interesting quotes, images, and slogans into categories based around the type of space they remark upon. Dead Space: where the city forgets. Shared Space: where control fails. Some of the material in the magazine seems to contradict other material in the magazine, but that's OK. Complexity is born from interference. He's particularly interested in the quotes from this guy (architect?) Toyo Ito. Ito: *People today are equipped with an electronic body in which information circulates, and are thus linked to the world through a network of information by means of this other body.* Jakob is interested in how people think about networks, about information; he's hoping to spend some of this summer putting together the framework for his novel, which is about those exact topics.

He makes a mental note: Toyo Ito. He thinks here momentarily about this movie *Memento* that he and Fletcher went to see recently, when they were both burnt out from grading. (They'd called up Freya to see if she wanted to go, but she had to work.) He imagines tattooing *remember Toyo Ito* across his thigh.

In the office, Fletcher finishes filling out the grade forms. He affixes his signature to the bottom of the forms (done hurriedly, it looks like he's written F\_\_\_\_, but oh well who cares). He throws his coat over his arm and picks up his hand-me-down briefcase and heads out into the hallway. There's Jakob, hunched over a magazine, reading.

—What are you *reading* for? Fletcher says. —We're supposed to be on *summer vacation*. He holds the grade forms high.

Jakob snaps out of the magazine and looks up at Fletcher. —Ah, he says, —the work of the academic is never done. Summer vacation is just a chance for us to catch up on our reading.

—Professional readers, Fletcher says. —Is that what we are?

—That's what we are, says Jakob.

## DENISE

## INSTRUCTIONS?

It's a slow evening at Tympanum (a Monday). Denise is on register. A few of the normal types that come into the store are scouring through the bins, each according to their own particular method. As for what those methods might be, Denise couldn't care less. She leans on the counter and watches them from behind her sunglasses. One guy. A second guy. Interchangeable hipsters. She looks at the poster hanging across from the register: there's Stephen Malkmus, formerly of Pavement. He looks shaggy and tan like a surf bum. This job has taught her the details of his face.

Here's another guy, approaching her. This one looks like what she imagines photojournalists look like: thirtyish yet boyish, tall. Brown leather coat. A somewhat stunned look in the eyes. As though they once saw a thing that reached in and twisted the soul. A child stepping on a landmine and being blown upwards, blasted right out of the world. Meat and mist where once there was a human. She plays her game with him, Guess the Catastrophe, and she sees him sitting in a foreign hotel room with a gun in his mouth, plagued by beckoning images of the dead.

—Excuse me, he says.

She is wary. She pauses for a moment. —What.

—Could you, he says, and then he screws up his face and bites his lip. He reaches out and touches the counter with two fingers, as though to establish balance. —Is it daytime?

—What?

—It's not daytime, he says. —Is it? Your glasses.

—No, she says. She's not sure if this guy is just pulling her leg or what. —It's evening. I just like wearing sunglasses.

—It's bright here, he says. He looks up at the track lighting, squints. —It's because we're inside. It's evening. He says this as though seeking confirmation.

It is a simple thing to provide. There is no danger in it. —Yes, she says.



—I'm sorry, he says. —I'm not normally, I mean, I just, I get confused sometimes.

—I understand, she says. And she does. There have been times where she has felt so out of step with the world that she has held her own perceptions in doubt. She thinks something like that might be happening with this guy.

—This place, he says. He says this very quietly and with his eyes closed. She has to listen closely to hear him.

—Yes?

—What is it?

—It's a CD store.

—CDs. He says this with a kind of relief, as though the word is coming back to him from a far way off. He opens his eyes. There's a stack of CDs on the counter near them and he glances over at it. —Are they, he says, then he breaks off. —I'm sorry, he says, after a minute. —I'm just having trouble right now. I know what it looks like. Normally I'm not—

—It's OK, she says, needing to say something.

He's still looking at the stack of CDs. —They're, he says, —they're instructions of some sort.

—Instructions? she says.

—But I can't, I mean, I'm having trouble figuring out what they're trying to say. I mean, what they want me to do. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do.

He clenches his eyes shut. For one moment she feels as though he may begin to cry.

—No, she says. —They're not instructions. They're just music. People just— and she's at a loss for words for a moment —they just listen to them for fun.

—But what am I supposed to do? he says.

—You're not, she says, —you're not supposed to do anything. I mean, you can do whatever you want to.

He opens his eyes, looks across the counter at her. She can tell he's looking at her sunglasses; she can see an inquiry rise to the surface of his face. She knows it's

about the daytime / evening / inside / outside thing again, and she can see him stifle the question; he seems to remember that he's already asked it even though he no longer feels certain about the answer. *Give the guy a break*, she thinks. *You're clearly not helping him*. She closes her eyes, reaches up, and takes her sunglasses off, setting them on the counter between them. When she opens her eyes again she can see that a certain confusion has gone out of his face.

—There are no instructions, she says. She is trying to explain a design that is much larger than them. —The only instruction is that there are no instructions. That's, she says, that's what makes it so confusing.

He nods sadly. —That's right, he says. —I remember that. It's like a puzzle—

—Except there isn't a puzzle, she says.

—That's right, he says. —That *is* the puzzle.

—Yes, she says, and she truly believes that she understands what he means.

—OK, he says. —Thank you. He looks straight at her when he says this and there is a plain look of gratitude on his face. It is not an automatic politeness. It is not inflected with irony. His face just opens to her. Something passes invisibly between them. She can feel it with physical certainty, as though it were a wave of heavy bass, thumping up against her chest.

—It's no problem, she says. She wants to draw him to her. It is the first time in a long time that she can remember wanting anything.

—I should go, he says.

—Um, she says. In part she doesn't want him to. But what she wants more is for him to do what feels right. —OK, she says. —See you later.

—Thanks again, he says. The bell on the door clangs as he exits.

She watches as he goes, thinks. After a minute she looks away from the door. Her eyes return to Stephen Malkmus. Her hands find her sunglasses and the sunglasses find her face. And her world approximates its previous order.

## JAKOB &amp; FREYA

## INSTRUMENT

Jakob is sitting on Freya's couch with her, their shoulders touching, his hand resting against her thigh. *Instrument*, Jem Cohen's documentary about Fugazi, is playing on her television set. A film of lean and weathered bodies. Energy and motion as active textures. They got started late, after a few bottles of beer and a few hours of talking about work (Jakob's semester is over and he's hoping to spend the summer preparing some articles to send out to journals; Freya's predictable record-store routine makes her feel stabilized but bored). It's about 11:30 now. The streets outside are dark. Neither of them have any plans for tomorrow.

He glances quickly at her. Her soft profile lit by television. Her lips. He momentarily imagines doing something bold, brazen even: taking her shoulders in both his hands and kissing her. A certain cloud of desires galvanizing into behavior. Something stops him. The moment isn't right. *You'll know when it's time*, he tells himself. *Patience.*

He is enjoying the film; he likes the band. He hadn't listened to them before. The thing that surprises him is the lack of self-conscious irony on display, the seeming earnestness of everything Fugazi does in the film. Irony is an essential element in the gradschool world he inhabits, fundamental as iron: so strange to see into a world that is different. Bizarro World. A place of complete sincerity. He feels like this filmmaker, Cohen, is back from the front with observation.

Freya shifts. Her arm rests against his. She's ready. She won't let him leave tonight without kissing her. The throb of the music. Chicago is in full bloom.

THOMAS &amp; JANINE

# WHAT WE SOUND LIKE TO GOD

The air of the room is solid with sound. A dymaxion dymaxion map made of triangles of indigo cloth covers the gallery floor; Thomas and Lydia sit at its edge, immersed in tones. Surrounded by a dozen speakers. Phill Niblock sits at one end of the room. An avuncular figure despite the array of machines within his reach. The piece that he is playing is made of human voices. It sounds like hundreds. A man at a microphone, Thomas Buckner, sings, adding a live voice to the blend. It sounds like every vowel in the world sung simultaneously.

Thomas is happy to be here, happy to be spending face time with Lydia again—their e-mails of late had begun to feel strained. Over the past few weeks he's thought a lot about their first date and tried to figure out what he wants to see happen next. He has tried not to let that show through in his e-mails to her, and the effort of trying to write casually while secretly agonizing over the relationship had begun to wear on him. Now that they're together again in person, his anxieties don't seem to matter as much: he finds it easy to just *be himself* around her. Perhaps because they're out listening to music, and going out and listening to music is something that he knows how to do, a role that he can perform.

A handful of people are moving around the room. The harmonics sound different depending on where you are positioned. Lydia touches him on the shoulder and stands up, begins to walk. Thomas watches her make her way around the perimeter of the textile piece on the floor, smiling.

After a few minutes she's standing by the gallery entrance, listening. She's found a particular spot where the music rings around her in a particularly beautiful way. Thomas gets up and begins to move slowly towards her; she watches him draw near. Before long he is by her side again; she feels that she has drawn him to her, along some invisible thread that she has successfully wefted in amongst the warp of sounds in this room, in this building. She looks out the gallery doors, out into Cobb Hall: the sounds seem to fill that space as well. She leans over to Thomas.

—Follow me, she says, heading out into the hallway.

Thomas thinks of a drone as altering and augmenting the environment it exists within; he believes that the outer radius of this environment begins at the points where the drone first becomes audible. For him, then, this piece is rightfully “happening” not only in this gallery, but anywhere else in the surrounding environment where it can be heard. And so he follows her. Sound continues to richly envelop them. This music touches not only the head and the nerves but also the skin, the body. Thomas can feel the hum in his very heart.

—How about out through here? Lydia says, and she pushes through a heavy door into the building’s main stairwell.

They go down a few flights of stairs and stop on a landing which opens out into the building’s massive entry hall. They lean on the railing and look out into five stories of open space. Voices flow through it. The entire building acts as an instrument.

—It’s lovely, Lydia says.

—Unbelievably lovely.

—This is what we must sound like to God.

Thomas doesn’t believe in God. His parents practiced a loose mix of Shinto and Buddhism until they left Japan—there was no formal religious guidance from his parents while growing up. And yet he agrees with her. (He’s not sure whether she believes in God or not.) He is reminded of Rory Hamilton’s portrait of what the planet might sound like from space: the world’s national anthems all played simultaneously. But this music has a beauty, a certain calmness, that Hamilton’s piece doesn’t have. There is a kind of perfection in its polyvocality.

He looks at her and she looks back at him. Perfection; yes, the moment is perfect. He leans in; she tilts her head back. They would be foolish not to do what comes next. They kiss. He is timid at first, but her kiss has a certain thrust to it, a daring pulse, her hands find his belt loops and she pulls his hips against hers, play-fierce. Two minds, evanescent assemblages of fragments, thoughts and taste and memory, joining through the form of these two bodies, joining at mouth and hips, hands on ribs and neck. Voices are everywhere around them. They are kissing. Two people kissing in the midst of the world.

JAKOB &amp; FREYA

# ASSESSMENT OVER BREAKFAST

They woke up next to one another this morning. The tiny soft hairs on her breastbone golden with light. He was suffering the dull pound of hangover; his mouth was dry and the tissues in his head felt swollen; he'd slept in his jeans and they'd gotten twisted and bunched in the night. But he was next to her, his arm across her belly, his hand on her far hip, his skin against hers. He'd smiled. Nuzzled his face into her neck and kissed it.

Now they are at the pancake house on the corner, taking thin bitter sips of their coffees and looking at one another across the table. Hispanic and Greek men at the tables around them eat toast, complain about traffic court, read the *Sun-Times*. Jakob's on summer vacation and Freya has the day off. He yawns, scratches at his stubble, and looks out at her groggily.

—Oh, he says.

—Drink your coffee, she says, smiling.

He nods, wraps both hands around his cup, guides it to his mouth, and sips. She watches him and she keeps smiling. The morning after she hooks up with someone is always a strange time for her: she always reassesses the other person a bit after knowing what they're like in the sack. And she assumes that the other person does the same to her. She's seen guys make the awkward gestures of distance as early as the following morning, apparently deciding, after one quick-and-dirty fuck, that insuring a repeat performance just isn't worth the effort. She'd feel worse about it if she hadn't done the same: deciding, with a 2am bar mind, to hook up with a guy, and then finding the guy suspiciously effusive and clingy in the light of day—desperate, in a word. Desperate for someone to hang on to. The more the guy praises her—undeservingly, she feels, cause most of the time she hardly knows these guys—the more she feels like nothing more than a replacement mother, just the closest set of available big breasts.

With Jakob things seem OK. She still likes him, and he seems to still like her. Maybe it's because they didn't have sex. They began kissing on the couch about

halfway through *Instrument*, and, uncomfortable there, they moved to the floor, and grew tangled. Legs between legs. His hand up her shirt. His mouth moving over her neck, jaw and ear. His breath, its sound. The hot scent of beer on him. Drunk and hurried, she'd thought. She likes men that way. It reduces them down to an intensity of focus and she finds that desirable. To see Jakob, normally so diffuse and abstract, behave single-mindedly, like an animal: that is what she wants.

*Come to bed with me*, she'd said, and he'd followed her in there. She lit a candle and they got back into bed and made out some more: they took off one another's shirts. She teased the dark whorl of hair on his stomach, ran her tongue along the sensitive inch of skin between his navel and the band of his jeans. But when began to unzip him he tensed. *You okay with this?* she'd asked, gently, and he held the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes as though he were ashamed and said *I just don't know if I'm ready yet*.

*It's OK*, she'd said, *it's not a problem. Don't worry*. And she kissed him some more and after about two seconds of that he was back into it. Eventually she took off her pants. She asked first—*do you mind if I take these off?* He didn't. In fact he seemed happy to go down on her. His tongue and fingers there—intensity of focus—and a pair of her own fingers in her mouth brought her to orgasm. A series of contractions yielding sparks. They kissed for a while more and things tapered down into sleep.

She doesn't think he ever came. If it doesn't bother him—and it doesn't seem to—then it doesn't bother her. She'll give him an orgasm when he wants one. In a way it's a relief: it eclipses one of the normal questions that hovers over the morning-after breakfast: *what's next?* Once she's had sex with a person she has to deal with all the "relationship" questions: will we have sex again? When? Will I need to make concessions in order to continue this? Am I willing to make those concessions? What concessions will he be willing to make? Etcetera. And all those questions, for the moment, seem precluded.

She closes her eyes for a minute, listens to the sizzle and clatter of the space.

—Oh, she says, that reminds me.

—Mm?

—Did this guy Thomas ever call you?

—Thomas, Jakob says. —It's not ringing a bell.

—It's this guy I know through the record store, Freya says. —He's working on this project that I thought might interest you, something about mapping the sounds of the city.

—That does sound interesting, Jakob says.

—Well, I know that's the kind of thing you're interested in, so I gave him your number. But that was a couple of weeks ago.

—No, Jakob says. —I haven't heard from him. You say his name is Thomas?

—Yeah, Thomas. Thomas Wakatami. He does a website on drone music; [dronescape.org](http://dronescape.org) or something like that. Actually, he gave me his e-mail address to give to you, I left it at my desk, in the store. If you're interested I'll get it to you.

—OK, says Jakob.

The waitress comes by, places plates of eggs and potatoes and bacon down in front of them. —Here ya go, she says. —Enjoy.



DENISE

# CONNECTING AND TANGLING

Denise is walking past a McDonald's. She's on her lunch break. NEW 6 PC NUGGES HAPPY MEAL. Ew, no thank you. What she wants is coffee. There's usually a pot brewing in the back room of Tympanum, but Denise is on register all day today, and Freya, her supervisor, will be more-or-less obligated to enforce official store policy: no eating or drinking at the register. This is fine by Denise, actually: Denise doesn't really want the customers to have evidence of her humanity. She'd prefer them to think of her as some sort of robot. No connection. She can remember the first job she had after dropping out of SAIC: working behind the counter at Kinko's, spending all day tending to people, getting clear on the specifications for their jobs, handling a flow of their important material. A tiny pulse connected her to every customer she would work with. This was before she began to wear her sunglasses. She could feel her personality begin to take on the shape of theirs, especially when they'd have personally significant matter to duplicate: engagement notices, baby photos. (When she left Kinko's for the Tympanum job, she worried that the same thing would happen with the CDs people chose: that hasn't happened, though. After a few weeks of working there she stopped seeing CDs as having any relationship to the people who bought them. Instead she began to see them simply as indistinguishable blocks of product. Units. Stock.)

What she wanted more than anything else—although she never asked for it—was to be transferred to the night shift; to spend long hours guiding the massive machines through their tasks, running the big jobs for people who would come and pick them up while she slept through the day. She found maintaining the boundaries of her own identity in the face of daytime's proliferating connections to be difficult, fatiguing really; she began to suspect that she had no identity beyond the massed flicker of these temporary relations. This was not long after Johnny had been taken away. She liked having her personality all mixed up with his, and his all mixed with hers. They had been connected to one another at every crucial point, and during that time they could have told everyone else in the world to fuck off. And that's what she wants again, really: connection with one person and one person only. That's how you create intensity in a life. Not from this piecemeal divvying out of self that comes with work. A square of grimy bubblewrap blows up against her leg; she shakes it free. She suspects that she might make a good slave. She would rather

do that than work, anyway. One of the books she had rescued from Johnny's apartment was *The Story of O*; she read it during her time at Kinko's and it made sense to her. But she would need a wealthy man, and she doesn't feel like she could love the wealthy men she sees in Chicago, not enough, anyway, to give herself over in the way she wants.

She reaches the coffeehouse and slips in. The counters are burnished steel with a black enamel trim: they look clean even when flecked with cream and foam and loose crystals of turbinado sugar. Fresh-sounding synthpop bubbles through the PA, some breathy male singer dryly professing some observation. The entire place generates a mood which is peppy and edgeless; efficient; a mood Denise despises. CaffeNation reserves the right to enforce a thirty minute time limit on tables. The place's primary merit is that it's close to the record store, closer even than the White Hen Pantry on the corner.

—Could I get a house blend to go? Denise asks. She hates even saying the words “house blend;” they make her feel as though she is somehow playing along.

Thirty seconds later she's out of the place. They've got benches out front and it's a nice day so she sits. She takes a minute to get oriented, to get centered in her surroundings, and then her eye catches on a leather coat. It's that guy who came into Tympanum last week and who seemed freaked out, disoriented. He's sitting on the bench next to hers, looking off down the street; squinting into the glare of sunlight on windshields. A sudden charge of feeling jolts her. She opens her mouth as though she might say something, but then she feels uncertain as to whether she actually should: she doesn't want to make it seem like she deliberately chose to intrude upon him—

She is in the middle of these thoughts when he turns. His face is still tensed in a half-squint but when he sees her it opens up into a look of partial recognition. As though he knows her but doesn't quite know how. Your sunglasses, the *sunglasses!* She quickly reaches up and takes them off. The sunlight dazes her for a second; everything on the street momentarily seems incandescent.

—Oh, he says. Hi.

—Hi.

—You work up at, uh, up at the CD store, don't you?

—Tympanum, she says. —Yeah.

—You were really, uh, he says. —The other night. I don't know if you remember, but, uh, you were really nice to me. And sometimes, well, I don't know, just. He

closes his eyes, concentrating. —There are certain times, for me, where I'm dependent on having someone just be nice to me, and sometimes it's hard to find someone who will do that. So—he opens his eyes again—I don't know, I just wanted to let you know that it meant a lot to me, and I wanted to make sure that I said thanks.

Denise looks down at her hands. Sunglasses, paper coffee cup. Steam. —It's no big deal, she says. —I mean, you know, I was happy to help out. She's curious as to what was wrong with him that night, whether he was just fucked up on drugs or whether it's something else, a mental illness or something. But she doesn't know how to ask these questions.

—My name's Gabriel, he says. He extends a hand towards her.

—Oh, she says. She shakes his hand. —I'm Denise. It's nice to meet you.

—Nice to meet you, too.

There's a silence between them, only momentary, but it begins to extend into awkwardness. —Hey, she says, —I can't really, I mean, I'm working right now. I should probably get back. This isn't entirely true: she's only used up maybe ten minutes of her lunch break. But she wants to buy some time to think of what to say to him next. —But, listen, are you around in this neighborhood very often?

—Oh, yeah, he says. —I live right over that way. He gestures eastwards.

—You should come into the store sometime, she says. —Maybe we could talk some more then.

—OK, he says. —I'd, um, I'd like that.

—Great, she says.

She stands up. She has witnessed only a few points of his personality. Promontories emerging from mist. But the blank space that separates those points seem like a promising field. She hopes to fill it in. Like erasing a map in reverse. —OK, she says. —So I'll maybe catch you later?

—Yeah, he says. —Yeah.

—OK, she says. —Well, uh, till then.

She turns and heads up the street towards Tympanum. There is a tension to her leaving. She looks back once. It is as though her map and his have already begun to grow tangled.

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](http://www.invisible-city.com)).

He can be reached by e-mail at [jeremy@invisible-city.com](mailto:jeremy@invisible-city.com).