

This is an excerpt from *Imaginary Year*, a work of serial fiction by Jeremy P. Bushnell. Visit the *Imaginary Year* website (<http://www.imaginaryyear.com>) on Mondays and Fridays for new updates.

## 13 / OUT

Depeche Mode is on the jukebox. *Never again is what you swore the time before.* Even back when Clark was in high school she didn't like Depeche Mode or any of those other types of bands. She knew girls who did, though—they were the same girls who would hint semi-publicly that they were interested in sadomasochism. Clark gave them a wide berth. Fuck your gloom disco sexuality. At the time, she was all about punk sexuality, which mainly involved drinking too much Old Style and then going at it on a mattress in the corner. The only other furniture a stack of milkcrates. A carpet of records and zines.

She and Elliot haven't had sex in two months now. They've only been involved for like six months, so that means, what, an entire *third* of their relationship has been sexless? She wonders if she should be worried about that. It's complicated by the fact that Elliot isn't exactly the kind of guy who she normally dates. For one thing, he's a grad student, and she mostly didn't date grad students even when she herself was in grad school. More notably, he's a grad student in *economics*, and Clark spent much of her adolescence loudly advocating the destruction of all economic systems. But strangely, one evening, there she was, sitting in a kitchen nook at one of those placid grad school parties, listening to this rather beige fellow talk about economics, and she realized two things: one, that she really didn't know much about how economics worked and, two, that she wanted to. If only to focus her critique.

She got together with him a few times for dinner or drinks, and once she began to tease out his particular take—neoinstitutional economics, a branch that treats economies as

ecologies, all dynamic systems and nonlinear combinatorics—she rediscovered something that she learned a long time ago: if you let a guy talk about what he feels passionate about, before too long he'll want to sleep with you. At the restaurant he tapped the point of his knife decisively against the surface of his napkin and he said *I'm finding myself strangely attracted to you*. And she thought about what it might be like to sleep with him and she concluded *why not? It'll at least be different*.

But the thing is, it hasn't been different. She's having the same trouble with him in bed as she's had with each of her other lovers. She could characterize them best by saying that they're *relentless*. She wants a lovemaking that contains detours, digressions, a sexuality that drifts, not this singleminded zeroing in on her cunt that she's grown, sadly, to expect. Sometimes she finds herself thinking about the footage of the "smart" bombs dropped in the Gulf War, drawn to their target as if on invisible wire. This image doesn't do much for her enthusiasm. She hasn't brought this up with Elliot—she knows she should, but, argh, she really doesn't want to take on the role of being someone's sexual instructor: there's a whole-*nother* set of problems that comes with *that*.

*You'll see your problems multiplied / If you continually decide / To faithfully pursue / The policy of truth.*

She's out after work, with Paul; he is doing a little play about Perihelion using tableware; she is drinking vodka tonics, and eventually she decides that she wants to explain her situation to him. She thinks that as a gay man he may have an interesting perspective on it. She wonders if these problems are peculiar to heterosexual sex, *breeder sex* as they call it, whether it's different in sex between men, or sex between women. Problem, though: she hasn't ever officially confirmed that Paul is gay. She personally feels pretty sure—his motions are marked by a certain delicacy, he is surrounded by an aura of grace that doesn't

normally adhere to heavy men—but he has never spoken overtly of a boyfriend or anything like that. She has considered various tactful ways of getting at the matter, but she still considers tact to be something of a bourgeois relic, and, consequently, she believes that the straightforward approach is often the best.

Thus: —Paul. You're gay, right?

Paul sucks in sharply and draws two fingers up to cover his nostrils, as though he's afraid that he may eject his last mouthful of scotch out through his sinuses.

Fact is, Clark is not wrong, but Paul is not accustomed to talking about his homosexuality, unless it is through the character of Adi-Kaya. (Clark knows that Paul "games," but she doesn't know about Adi-Kaya; you could say that she and Adi-Kaya have not yet been formally introduced.) Paul has never even come out to Marvin or Lydia. He assumes that they know, but they don't ask him about it, and now he's been friends with them for so long (Marvin for six years, Lydia for three) that he believes bringing it up could only have two possible effects. Either they already know, and have known for long enough that a confession would strike them as absurdly unnecessary (maybe they would laugh at him), or they don't know, and they would be hurt by his confession, they would wonder why he hadn't trusted them enough to mention it earlier (maybe they wouldn't like him anymore).

Coming out to his parents? Oh, God, the very idea makes him ill. Heavy-duty Catholics. (Paul is the youngest of four.) Paul's dad was mainly interested in hockey, woodcrafting, and repairing electronics, and Paul remembers his dad trying to interest him in these things, taking him out down to the basement on Sunday afternoons and showing him how to plane a board. But during the week, Paul's attention belonged completely to his sisters. They would spend entire afternoons showing Paul their jewelry and makeup and clothes, getting him to help them dress their dolls. (Eventually Paul's dad told him he

couldn't play with the dolls anymore, so Paul switched over to action figures, which were regarded only marginally less cautiously by his dad.) When Paul became an adolescent, his weight became the major point of contention in the house. His dad regularly suggested athletics as the solution, a suggestion Paul resolutely ignored, and as the idea waned and finally disappeared, so did the overall ability of Paul to communicate meaningfully with his dad. Coming out is out of the question.

Even Paul's small, cherished set of sexual encounters with other boys have mostly been wordless. So when Clark asks her question, in this completely offhand fashion, she may be the first person to ever call upon him to verbally acknowledge his identity as a gay man, and he is brought up short: for a moment he literally does not know how to respond.

—Um, yeah, he says. —I guess.

*You guess?* Clark thinks, and an inkling of what she's done glimmers for a moment. A surging feeling of guilt is coupled with her memory of an old *Onion* headline: *Area Homosexual Thinks He's Still In The Closet*. And her mind seizes inappropriately on that, and she can't think of anything else to say. Elliot, the whole matter of male sexuality—these are now gone from her mind.

—That's cool, she says, and she tears her napkin into shreds.