

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.

15 / CONFIDENCE

The last shot in this episode of *Buffy* is of Buffy and Spike, standing in a dark corner of a club, making out. Lydia shifts irritably on the couch: she feels slightly turned on. She grumbles.

Paul mutes the TV, which has switched to commercials. —What? he says.

—Nothing, Lydia says. She pokes around in her pipe with the nail of her pinkie finger to see if there's anything left in there besides cinders.

—All right, says Paul, willing to let it drop. He tilts the bowl of leftover Halloween candy towards him, sifts through the layers until he finds a Hershey's Special Dark bar.

Lydia takes one last hit just to confirm that the pipe really is cashed. —I don't know, she says.

Paul, chewing, puts his hand over his mouth and says —What?

Lydia draws her knees up to her chest and hugs them there, sitting on the couch now in a compact ball. —I'm starting to think that I should write off my love life as just being basically, you know, over, she says.

Even half-stoned, she knows that this is an exaggeration. It's only been three months since she and Thomas split up. *But Thomas barely even counts*, she tells herself. And three months feels like a long time, when you're looking.

She feels a little bit weird talking about this to Paul: she's known him for three *years* and never seen *him* involved with anybody. He could pull rank on her, trump her loneliness with his own; she knows this. But she also knows that it's not in Paul's nature to be petty.

—Darlin', says Paul, in a mock-Southern accent, all you need is a shot of confidence.

Lydia claps her hands to her forehead. —Make it a double, she says.

Confidence. Where the fuck did it go? Age fifteen: there had been this guy she'd wanted, Alestier Jones, and so she'd sent her friend, Amanda Drexel, off to do recon, to assess the viability of this desire. Alestier told Amanda, that he didn't want to have anything to do with *some ugly Rican girl*, and Amanda chose to report this precise phrase back to Lydia, which left Lydia protesting *I'm only **half** Puerto Rican*, over and over again, in her own head. (Left her steamed at her dad, too, for a good long while.) That was a blow. But: age sixteen, one year later, she's standing in front of her mirror, done up in a rubberized yellow raincoat. Glitter on her cheeks and thick rings of eyeliner. Pink hair (she'd had to bleach the fuck out of it before the pink would take). Hot. She remembers herself looking hot and she remembers that she *knew it*, she felt completely confident, as if this thing with Alestier Jones had never happened. So why can't she find her way back to that now?

—What do you think when you look at yourself in the mirror? Paul asks. Do you think I! Am! Lydia! Ramirez! And look out Chicago, 'cause I came here to take you by storm!?

—No, says Lydia.

—Couldn't hurt, Paul says.

What she thinks is closer to *who **is** this mousy thing?*

—What about you? Lydia asks. —When you look in the mirror, do you think, I! Am! Paul! Sutherland!?

—No, Paul says.

What he thinks is closer to *look at the disgusting fat gayboy*.

—Well, she says. —We're quite a pair.