

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.

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Lydia and Austin had plans to get together before Christmastime, but they fell through. He'd called her up (at work again: she has learned the hard way not to give out her home phone number too early) and apologized. *Things are just getting a little crazy around here, but maybe when I get back? Sure*, she'd said. *Want to grab a coffee after work some day?*

They had previously only talked about possibly meeting for lunch. She made the shift to *after work* deliberately; she wants the open-endedness of an evening at her disposal, just to see what might happen. Things can't get too interesting during an hour-long lunch, safely bracketed at both ends by administrative assisting.

He'd agreed. It took a few attempts to coordinate a suitable Friday night, but now they are sitting here, eating coffeeshop bruschetta and sipping beverages.

The evening got off to a weird start: Lydia had ordered a coffee; Austin had asked for a ginger ale, and then, by way of explanation, had said *I don't drink caffeine anymore. I started to worry that it was doing something to my heart*. Lydia had found that to be an odd thing to say, and she hadn't known how to respond, and, furthermore, she suddenly felt guilty about having suggested that they go out for coffee in the first place. She was struck with an urge to apologize but then thought that an apology might seem weird, as though she was trying too hard. *Be cool*, Paul had told her, and she wants badly to take this advice. So there was a minute—probably only a few seconds, but excruciating ones—where neither of them said anything.

But now they've loosened up a bit, and the conversation has turned to music. To some degree, she felt nervous about broaching the subject: this guy is a performing musician, and, although a thoughtful listener, Lydia doesn't have much experience with actually playing music: she's done some amateur experiments with sound software, but that's about it. All the same, ever since she saw Austin play that show last month, using dice and a modified guitar, she's been wanting to talk to him about it, and she'll be damned if she spends the whole evening small-talking around the subject. So she brings it up.

—Yeah, Austin says. —It's kind of an indeterminacy thing? For that piece I have eight different, uh, melodic cycles that I can play on the guitar? I call them "modules." And I roll a die and that determines which of the modules I'm going to play; and then I roll another die and *that* determines how many times I'll repeat the module before re-rolling. So the piece is, you know, a little bit different every time?

—Yeah, Lydia says. —I get that. It's kind of like generative music. You know what I mean? Where you set up like a series of rules to guide the music and the music kind of, creates *itself* from those rules? [She pauses here, thinks about what she just said, second-guesses herself.] —Not to say that you're not the one creating the music, I mean, you're the one up there with the guitar—

—No, no, Austin says. —You had the right idea. I mean, I'm playing the modules, and I wrote them, I guess, but the performance is guided by other forces, forces that are really not under my control, you know? I've written the rules—what I like to think of as the *programming* of the piece—but I can't always really predict what kind of *effect* those rules will create. It's like, I don't know, a game of chess in that way. Like there's this basic set of rules, but like an *infinite* number of games that those rules can, yeah, generate, like you said.

—It's funny that you should use that word *programming*, says Lydia. —There's this program that I use sometimes, it's called AudioMulch? It kind of works that same way: where you set up this system of effects and the sound kind of cascades through them and is modified in ways that are really unpredictable and kind of neat.

—Yeah, Austin says. —I know some people who play around with that kind of stuff, but I haven't used any of it myself.

It is here that Lydia begins to realize that perhaps she is not as much of an amateur as she thought. She may not have performed as much, but she has been thinking about music for close to a decade now, and she suddenly becomes aware that her structures for thinking about it are sophisticated, that they are areas of expertise.

Austin, for his part, is thinking *this is a girl that I could really see myself liking*.