

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.

31 / AFTERNOONS AFTER

Lydia and Paul sit on the sofa, with a big bowl of popcorn between them. They are watching the Super Bowl, mainly so that they can see the ads. When actual football is on the screen, like now, they mute the TV and make gossip.

—I want to call him, Lydia says.

She means Austin. Friday night they made out lazily for hours, drifting in and out of semi-sleep, and finally, shortly after dawn, she pushed down on his chest with her hands and straddled his cock and rode him until they both cried out with release. Afterwards, she slid herself off of him and lay on her back, breathing hard, and he knotted up the condom, only to let it slide from his grasp and become lost somewhere in the tangle of bedclothes. He looked for it for only a moment before returning to her, kissing the tips of her breasts gently, then nuzzling his scratchy face into her neck and resting there.

The next afternoon was pleasant enough: they went out for lunch, and they thankfully did not talk about what would happen next or where this would go. (Instead they discussed their pet peeves, which Lydia took as a sign of future interest: a gift of a knowledgekit of behaviors to avoid. She was grateful, too, that none of his pet peeves seemed like things she would be prone to do.) But now she's trying to figure out if she's misplayed her cards.

She's surprised that she went all the way with him so early. Normally she doesn't do that: she feels like it causes a relationship to develop at the wrong rate, like a flower that

blooms so brightly and so quickly that it snaps its own stem. But on Friday she felt herself just wanting so badly to abandon herself to *fucking*—maybe it was something she needed, after dating Thomas for an entire summer and never even getting to take all of her clothes off.

—You *should* call him, Paul says.

—I can't, Lydia says.

She called him on Saturday night, just a few hours after she'd left, using the pretense of just calling to see if she'd left her scarf at his place (she had). Once that was settled, she'd asked *so what are you up to right now?* and he'd said *I'm just working on something on the guitar* and she'd exclaimed *oh!* and, not wanting to be the type of girl who is seen as an interference, she'd said *well, I'd better let you get back to it.*

He'd said *no, it's OK*, but Lydia did not want to take any chances, so she lied and said *Actually, I'm just on my way out the door, I just wanted to check about the scarf*, and she gave him time to hurry out a goodbye and she hung up the phone.

Now it is Sunday, and he has not called, and the day has slid into evening.

—It's not that I *can't*, Lydia says. —It's more that I don't want to be one of those girls who, like, *crowds* a guy. She digs into the popcorn bowl.

—I don't know if I'd worry about that, Paul says. —It's obvious that he likes you.

—You're thinking that way because *you* like me, she says. She selects a piece of popcorn out of the handful and tosses it into her mouth, chewing it while shaking her head *no*. —Just because a guy sleeps with you doesn't mean that he likes you. I mean, he *seems* to like me, but he could just be, you know, some guy who wanted to get his rocks off.

—I think you're a better judge of character than that, Paul says.

—Yeah, Lydia says. —I think so, too. But I just want to be *sure*. But if I call him up and start asking all these questions about *do you like me?* or whatever, I'm just going to seem weird and he's going to freak out. And I keep saying *oh, just call him up, and be real casual*, but I *know* that if I call him I'm going to start asking those questions; I won't be able to help myself. What I *really* want is for him to call *me*, because then I'll have at least *some* piece of evidence that he's still interested, and maybe I'll be able to actually get through a conversation acting like a normal human being.

—I see, Paul says.

Lydia sighs, picks another piece of popcorn out of her cupped hand, and fits it into her mouth. —I hate all this game-playing shit. Can I just tell you that? I hate trying to *pretend* that I'm all casual and that what he thinks doesn't *matter* to me. I wish I could just *be honest* and tell him that, you know, sometimes, at the beginning of a relationship, *especially* after the first time I have *sex* with a guy, I need a little reassurance. But the second I *say* that, this guy's going to be like *whoa, I didn't sign up for this!*

—Maybe you could tell him that you're worried about crowding him, Paul says. —Try being honest by telling him that you're concerned about *his* needs. Because you certainly are. Maybe he'd find that less threatening.

—Maybe, Lydia says. —I don't know. I think he'd find that weird. If I say *I don't want to crowd you* what he's going to hear is *I want to crowd you but I'm trying to hold back*.

—Hm, Paul says.

—This sucks. I almost wish that I hadn't even fooled around with the guy.

—Really? Paul asks.

—No, Lydia says. She grins, then points at the TV. —Ads, she says.