

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.

38 / PICKING UP THE GUITAR

It is Sunday night, around eleven, and Austin is brushing his teeth. Tom's of Maine Natural Toothpaste; Gingermint. The sound of bristles on teeth fills his skull. He listens to it, finds that it sounds like records scratched by a turntablist. He alters the pattern of his brushing to amplify this effect. *Shukka shukka shuk! sha-shuk sha-shukka shuk shuk.*

This makes him think of an animated commercial that's been on TV lately, where a grocery store checkout girl scans something (a pack of gum?) and the bar code makes a turntable flare as it passes over the scanner. She notices, and so she scribbles the commodity back and forth, back and forth, and the supermarket turns into a dance party. Hipsters. Lasers. Austin thinks the commercial could have been more cool if it had built its rhythms from the actual synthetic tones of a bar code scanner. He remembers that sneaker commercial from a while back (Nike?) which constructed an impressively complex soundtrack exclusively from the sounds of basketball. Soles squeaking on a waxed floor; textured rubber thumping against flesh. It was compelling, almost compelling enough to make him forget what scumbags the sneaker companies actually are.

He spits.

He heads back into the bedroom. Outside of the window he can see tree branches, arced from the weight of ice-limned snow. Gorgeous actually. Wind rattles the pane. For a while it looked like this winter would never get cold, but it finally has: tonight the wind chill makes it like fifteen below zero.

Lydia sits on the edge of his bed. She is staying over at his place tonight, and she'll be going straight in to work tomorrow from here. When he called her up in the afternoon and said *why don't you come over?* they kind of treated it as a given that she'd stay the night. They've been involved for a month or so now, and she's staying over about two times a week, on average. She's taken to bringing a set of work clothes with her in a garment bag. He wonders if he should just encourage her to keep a spare set here.

He has yet to even see her place. He asks every once in a while and she usually blows it off, saying something about *two roommates* and *privacy*, and he lets it drop.

Also in the bed is one of his guitars, an acoustic. Lydia is looking at the guitar, tracing the contour of its rib with her fingertips. When she looks up and notices him she moves her hand away, puts it in her lap.

He nods at the guitar. —Do you want to play it? he asks.

—Oh, she says. —No. I couldn't. I mean, I can't.

—Sure you can, Austin says. —I don't mind.

—I wouldn't want to screw up your tuning, she says.

He smiles, sits on the bed next to her. —It's an instrument, he says. —It doesn't fly out of tune the second you begin to play it.

He grabs the guitar by the neck and places the body in her lap.

—Go ahead, he says.

—*No*, she says. She almost seems frantic. —I mean, I don't—I've never *played* a guitar; I don't know *how* to play a guitar. I just... I just don't know what I'd *do*.

He nods. —Yeah, he says. —That kept me from trying it out for a long time. I didn't start playing until after I got out of college, actually. And it was just kind of like, I don't know, it seemed when I was younger I would just try *anything*, you know? People

would say *hey, we're going to get together and do*, I don't know, *oil painting*, and I'd be like *OK, let me try*. But as I got older that kind of got harder; I seemed to get more concerned that I'd be *bad* at the thing, whatever it was, and I was real self-conscious about that, I became real *embarrassed* about trying stuff in front of other people, like I'd try it and they'd *laugh* at me. And, I mean, I *wanted* to play the guitar, badly, but I knew all these people who were *good* at it, but they really intimidated me, and I couldn't ask them for help because I just thought they'd be *totally impatient* with me, that I'd try to play a note and this *horrible sound* would come out and everybody would just look at me and go *ugh*.

Lydia smirks. She knows what he means. She actually feels afraid to even touch the thing in her lap. —Yeah, she says. —So what did you finally do to get past that?

—Oh, well, I'd been reading a lot of stuff about John Cage, and, well, you know, he's got this whole philosophy about the inclusion of all possible sounds into music, that there is no such thing as a horrible sound. (Lydia nods.) That really freed me up. And around that time I was going to be housesitting for a friend and he had a guitar and I asked him if I could play it while he was gone and he said sure, so the first day I was there I looked at the guitar and kind of said *OK, guitar, it's just you and me now*, and I spent like a month locked in this guy's house, watering his plants, feeding the cat, and playing guitar like all day.

—Hm, says Lydia. —That sounds nice.

—It was pretty great, Austin says. —I still couldn't play like a master at the end of the month, of course, but that was OK. I'd been reading this book called *Zen Guitar* which was all about like *being in the present* with your playing, to use the guitar as a tool of self-expression rather than imitation, trying to be aware of your level of ability, to play *within that*, rather than overreaching. And that was helpful to me, because I was kind of at this point where I couldn't even *think* about being able to play like Jimmy Page or Hendrix or whoever,

because I was still trying to figure out just the very *basics* of getting sound out of the thing. I kind of had to give up thinking of the guitar as a guitar: you think *guitar* and all of a sudden you're saddled with all the *baggage* that comes from having lived in a century with a thousand superstar guitarists. You kind of have to think of it as a six-stringed object.

—Heh, says Lydia.

—But the beautiful thing about the guitar as an object, Austin says, —is that, it's an exceptionally beautiful object. If it's in tune you really have to try *hard* to get it to *make* an ugly sound. I could just sit there all day strumming E and just be like *oh pretty*.

—E? Lydia asks.

—This one, he says. He puts her thumb on the string.

She strums, and warm sound moves the air.

It is pretty, she thinks.

