

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.

40 / FALLING

Thomas examines the heavy glass in his hand. He moves it in a circle, watches the ice cubes slide along the tumbler's endless circumference. It makes him think of falling. He stops, lets the system come to rest, sips, tastes the sweetness of the RC. and the wiry bite of the whiskey.

He is with Janine, in her kitchen. He watches her prod and chop the contents of a frying pan (tofu, vegetables) with the end of a slotted turner, watches her pinch some yellow spice out of a cellophane bag and flick it into the mix. To him, these gestures seem infused with grace, as though they have been practiced over and over again, refined to the point where no superfluous bit of movement remains.

He has also noticed this elegance when they are in bed. Her hand, her tongue: either can bring him straight to the edge of trembling awe with a single deft motion. He imagines that many other women and men may share her ability, but he does not count himself among them. He feels weak and clumsy in bed, a hopeless jumble of uncoordinated parts.

He worries that Janine will sleep with this woman Clark and find something in her that he is unable to offer. He has felt the warning tremors every time Janine has mentioned Clark's name, every time the two of them have gone out drinking. He has wanted, again and again, to talk to Janine about what he fears she will do, to seek comfort by asking her not to do it, begging her not to do it.

He knows that this is exactly what he should not do. He knows that Janine's relationships are not monogamous, and he knows that she has no plans to change that. He knows that his relationship with her is based, in part, around his implicit acceptance of those facts, and he knows that withdrawing that acceptance is like going back on a deal. He knows that there may be ramifications. But he stands with her here, in the kitchen, the smell of spices and greens rising around them, and he contemplates sharing moments like this, and he feels unsteady and troubled.

He stares down into his glass: races the ice cubes around the edge again. Focusing his attention there keeps him from having to look at her while he speaks.

—Janine? he says.

—Yeah, she says.

—Can I ask you something?

—Sure.

—Are you planning to sleep with Clark?

—Uh, she says immediately, and then she pauses for what seems like a long time.

He changes the pattern of his wrist rotation: makes the ice cubes go the other way.

—I don't know, says Janine. —I haven't really thought about it. But I might. Yeah, I'd have to say that I might.

Thomas nods. —I wish that you wouldn't, he says.

He is still not looking at her, but he can feel her stiffen. It is as though the air has gone brittle between them. The pan sizzles.

—*I wish that you hadn't just said that*, she says.

—I know, Thomas says.

—You can't tell me what to do, she says. —I mean, I like you; I care about you a whole bunch, and when you *say* something like that, sure, it makes me not want to do it. But it's so *manipulative*. The whole reason I have nonmonogamous relationships is to *avoid* that kind of manipulation. And so that makes me want to just say *fuck you*, and just *do* it. But now, now, either way, whether I do it or *not*, it's less about *me* and what *I* want, and it's more about *you*, you see? Now I have to think about my desires in relation to *yours*. Do you see that?

He can feel her looking at him, so he nods.

—Yeah. Well, that sucks, Thomas. Can I just tell you that? That really sucks.

He nods again. He feels slightly sick to his stomach. He feared it might go this way: he knew that as soon as he opened his mouth he might be in trouble, and now he is. A lot hinges on how he responds over the next few minutes. And he has never really known how to handle interpersonal tension gracefully: he is ready to write himself off as doomed right now. And this leaves him sad and afraid, but at the same time he notices that he feels somewhat abstracted from the entire conversation, one degree removed. He finds one part of his brain comparing it to other points of reference, other tense dinnertime conversations, ones he had with Rachel, his first serious girlfriend, when their relationship was splintering under the strain of their failures.

How long ago was that now? Six years? Seven? That was the first time that he felt the bottom drop out like this, and—he has to admit it—it was worse then. He had been all naive; he had believed that his relationship with Rachel was something that would not break, and then it broke, and he felt confused and terrified, as though he were living through the end of the world. He learned lessons then about what language could not do, about how two people who loved each other could fail, ultimately, to make one another happy. Hard

lessons. They have apparently tempered him. He cares for Janine, but not in the same way that he cared for Rachel; he would be sad if this relationship ended, but he knows—a part of him knows—that it would not cause him to lie in his room for weeks, blinking and stunned, sifting through shards in his mind trying to figure out why they will not fit back together.

He wonders if this is part of getting older.

Janine is quiet. She is waiting for him to speak.

