

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.

41 / WOMEN (OLDER / YOUNGER)

Fletcher heads down to the departmental lounge, hoping for coffee. (It's less because he needs the caffeine and more because he enjoys the simple cycle of it—lift the mug, sip, taste, place the mug down again. He enjoys having warmth, right there at hand, enjoys the way the heat settles slowly back to cold, marking time.) But today there is no coffee. The grimy plastic coffeemaker sits there in its usual corner, amidst packets of Equal and a cylinder of Coffeemate; the burner is even on, but it heats nothing more than an empty decanter, a layer of blackening resin coating the bottom.

Audrey Lemmon is also in the lounge, feet propped on the low table, reading *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

—Now who would do this? Fletcher asks. He gestures at the coffeemaker as Audrey looks up. —I mean, I can understand taking the last of the coffee and not making more. I don't condone it, mind you, but I can see it happening. But this, this taking the last cup and then putting the empty thing back on the burner, that I just don't get. There's a sick mind at work here.

—I think it's still on from yesterday, Audrey says. —You know, maybe there was a cup left yesterday and it just kind of baked away overnight?

—Ugh, Fletcher says. —We've got to run a tighter ship around here. He turns off the burner and thrusts the hot decanter into the sink.

Fletcher's glad to have run into Audrey: there's something about her that he finds kind of hot. He's noticed this before about her, but it kind of surprises him each time. She's older. Fletcher's twenty-nine; he would guess that Audrey is maybe fifty, or more.

He glances over at her as he scours away at the burnt coffee. She has nice legs and knee-high boots. Her hair is in a short, stylish cut, and it looks good; its auburn is all shot through with a silver that he finds distinctive, and, yeah, he has to admit it—sexy.

When Fletcher first entered graduate school and became a TA, some of his friends teased him by suggesting that he'd sleep with his students. Not that far-fetched, maybe—Lynn was really the last woman his own age that he'd dated, and after they broke up, Fletcher had gone on to date a whole chain of undergraduates, throughout his senior year and on into the few years he spent out of school. Two years after graduation he still found himself hanging around the college, smoking cigarettes with eighteen-year-old girls and impressing them with his poems. It was easy to get involved with them, but sustaining his interest was harder: he found himself frequently restless, bored with the deep conversations of eighteen-year-olds, bored with people discovering anarchism or Beat poetry or magical realism for the first time, bored with the whole exciting collegiate process that he himself had been excited to go through just a few years earlier. This was a big part of why he went to graduate school: to catch up on conversations of his peers.

And so perhaps this is why he doesn't find himself attracted to his students, and instead finds himself attracted to Audrey's silver hair and faintly lined face: these things signify a woman who has her shit together, who has moved on to the next level.

He has looked for a wedding ring before and not seen one. He wonders about what she would be like in bed. Shy? Wild?

He adds her to the list of interest crushes and turns off the water.

—I'm going to make another pot, he says. —Do you want some?

