

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.

## 43 / OBLIGATIONS

It's a chilly Saturday afternoon and Lydia lets herself in, bearing an awkward armload of groceries and mail. Jesus *Christ* it's cold out there. She sucks in the apartment's warmth, shallowly the first time, then again, deeper. She dumps everything on the counter, unwinds her scarf, removes her hat, wriggles out of her coat.

She slides a bottle of Woodbridge Cabernet out of one of her grocery bags, and inspects its label. She'll be bringing it over to Austin's tonight; he's making some kind of pasta dinner for her. She hopes the wine is OK. She's 22, and mainly used to just buying whatever would get her and a handful of buddies shitface drunk cheaply. She figures she's safe, because she picked a bottle that was kind of expensive and had a favorable-sounding clipping from a wine guide or something taped up next to it. It's probably not swill.

She puts her hands on her cheeks; they're still cold. She's not looking forward to the trip up to Austin's tonight: she and Paul and Marvin live all the way down here in Hyde Park, way south of Chicago's center, so the trip up to Logan Square is a long one on public transportation, with some standing-on-the-freezing-corner-waiting-for-the-bus involved in it. She wishes, sometimes, that they'd decided on a more central location: it was just that the college-town environment surrounding the University of Chicago had felt like a more urban version of Bloomington, a place they'd grown accustomed to, and so it had quickly felt comfortable and familiar. But tonight she'll be paying for it.

She supposes that she could claim that it's her turn to use the car—they try to split ownership among the three of them, and she hasn't called it in much lately. But if she uses it tonight she'll feel pressure bring it back promptly tomorrow, and what she's really hoping for is a long Sunday morning in bed. They've had some really nice Sunday mornings over the past month. Vegan scones, the *New York Times*, Austin's cat curled up with them—lovely, but the I-need-to-get-home feeling doesn't really fit with that picture.

She knows that Austin would offer to drive her—he finally got the fuel pump on the van fixed, and he's pretty gentlemanly about things like that—but she is cautious here: she worries that if she accepts rides too often, Austin will eventually feel some sort of obligation to give her a ride, and she's learned (the hard way) that *obligations* are high up on that list of things that make guys Get Weird. Even if the obligations only exist in the guy's own head. She doesn't get the feeling that Austin is going to get weird on her, but it's early in the relationship, and she is not going to take any chances. Not with this guy.

She supposes she could have Austin come down here and stay with her. He's never spent the night at her house. He seems eager enough to, but she can't figure out how it would work. She and Austin wouldn't have any privacy: she imagines the two of them, closed claustrophobically into her bedroom, trying to block out the sounds of Paul and Marvin clomping around. Or, worse, the sounds of Paul and Marvin playing *Baldur's Gate* on the Playstation: Marvin screaming *fuck, yeah! Die! Die, you fucking fuck!*

Austin has a roommate, too, this guy Craig, but Craig has a girlfriend, and so he's often away when Lydia's over. And even when he's around, he just seems kind of quiet, basically friendly, but not too interested in her. He's neatly dressed; he has a tidy beard. He's kind of cool. She has a hard time thinking that Austin would find Paul and Marvin very cool. She comes home sometimes and sees the two of them sitting on the couch, immobile,

like two huge sacks of flour, and they'll be watching some anime movie or something, and she tries to imagine bringing Austin into the place, and she feels *embarrassed*, as though they'd reflect badly on her. Christ, on Saturday the two of them play *Dungeons and Dragons* (and, Christ, for a while she was playing *with* them). If Austin came over on a Friday and stayed with her, and then walked out into a middle of a Dungeons and Dragons game—? Little lead figurines all over the table? Marvin getting pumped up on Pepsi and doing shrill goblin voices? She just thinks he would be like *what have I gotten myself into with this girl?*

It's Saturday today, actually. Mid-afternoon. She should be hearing gaming. She pulls a Pria bar out of the cupboard and unwraps it as she walks towards the living room.

Marvin is in there, lying on the couch, reading the new issue of *Dark Knight II*.

—Hey, Lydia says.

Marvin tilts the comic so he can see her over its upper edge. —Hey, he says.

—Where's Paul? she asks.

—Do I have a sign on me that says *Paul's Keeper?* Marvin says.

—No, Lydia says. —But, is it not Saturday? It is. Do you guys not normally play on Saturday? You do. So...

—Where have you been? Marvin says. —We haven't played for the past two weeks.

—Oh, Lydia says. She bites into the Pria bar, chews. —How come? she asks, around a mouthful.

—It's just not as fun with only one player, he says.

—Oh, Lydia says. She swallows. —I see. (She does. This is an attempt to make her feel guilty for dropping out of the campaign. She decides she's just not going to engage it.) —Well, if you see him, tell him—

—He's probably in his room, Marvin says, tilting the comic book back in front of his face. —Why don't you go in there and check?

*Fuck you*, Lydia thinks. —OK, she says. —I will.

—Good, Marvin says.

