

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.

46/ GOOD GIRLS, BAD GIRLS

On the other end of the line, Fletcher's mom says: —So, have you met any nice girls?

—No, Fletcher says.

Which, OK, isn't quite true, because the English Department at the school where Fletcher is enrolled is full of nice girls (*nice women*, he corrects himself). Some of them are even interesting, although his tastes run more towards the handful of bad girls, like Clark. But he knows that what his mom means is *have you met anyone who you could settle down with?* And the answer to that is definitively *no*.

His mom clucks her tongue.

She asks this question, or some variant on it, just about every time they're on the phone together, and Fletcher's answer (at least since around 1991 when he met Lynn) is always the same. Sometimes he'll dress it up a little bit, or dodge the question, but this afternoon he's actually in the middle of three things—talking to his mom, periodically stirring a pot of chili on the stove, and organizing a series of slips of paper on his coffee table—and this leads him towards bluntness.

He is working on a poem about truth. That's what the pieces of paper are for. He spent an afternoon writing down maybe fifty simple assertive statements about himself, trying only to record ones which he could say were unambiguously true. I AM A WHITE AMERICAN MALE. I VOTED FOR AL GORE. I OWN TWO TELEVISIONS.

—Oh, Fletcher, his mom says. —Maybe you need to try getting out more. I always said it wasn't good for you to spend all that time *cooped up*.

—No, mom, he says. —It's OK.

This is also true. Slip of paper: I DO NOT PLAN ON GETTING MARRIED.
(Another: I DO NOT PLAN ON HAVING CHILDREN.) Way back in high school, Fletcher had already begun to seriously consider the notion that his creative work was going to be a lifelong project, and he knew that solitude, lots of solitude, *the kind of solitude that would preclude a family*, was integral to that project. He has never really reversed course. This is part of why his success with “nice girls” over the past decade has been so limited. At age 19 it was hard for Fletcher to find nice girls who didn't have one eye pointed towards wedding and family; at age 29 it is hard for Fletcher to find nice girls who aren't already married. So it looks like it's bad girls from here on out.

(Fletcher is always a little bit surprised when a bad girl accepts him, even though it's been happening more-or-less reliably ever since he was sixteen and he made friends with Freya. He doesn't think of himself as being *edgy* or *hip* or *dark* or *dangerous* or any of the things that he thinks would appeal to them. He is just an overintellectual suburban smartass. There is a puzzle here that he cannot quite figure.)

He has not yet told his mom that he does not plan on getting married. Much less the thing about not having kids. He picks up the two slips of paper with those truths written on them and places them in a separate pile. He mentally designates this pile as the pile of *truths I cannot tell my mom*.

—I don't see how it could be OK, his mom says. —Don't you get lonely?

Fletcher gets up, goes into the kitchen. —No, mom, really, he says. He sticks a wooden spoon into the bubbling chili and stirs. —It's fine. I mean, I'm really busy with school and stuff.

It's fine. This is half-true. He hasn't gotten laid in two years now, and this concerns him. There don't seem to be as many bad girls around now as there were when he was 21. When he tries to think the phrase *bad women*, instead of *bad girls*, it doesn't quite sound right. Where are they all? Did they burn out? Did they settle down? Do they just inhabit a world that he has no access to? Or are they just all around him, in disguise? (He sometimes thinks that Audrey Lemmon might be one, but he can't be sure.)

So, yes, he is sometimes lonely, despite what he's told some of his friends in the past. And he wonders whether his solitary path will lead him into emotional dangers that he cannot yet discern. He recently looked at a Depression Self-Assessment Test, on Prozac's website. Clark pointed him over there: she thought he might be able to use some of the language from it. (She stole some phrases from their site for a poem of her own, "Feeling Better is Not Enough. ") Some slips of paper he generated from the experience: I FEEL DOWNHEARTED, BLUE AND SAD. I DO NOT FEEL USEFUL AND NEEDED.

He moves these slips to a separate pile. He mentally designates this pile as the pile of *truths I cannot tell anyone.*