

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.

49 / SHIT AND GARBAGE

—Shit, Lydia says. It's Friday night and she's running late and everything is shit.

It had been such a simple plan: get out of work at five, head straight to Austin's place, meet him there at 5:30. He was going to make dinner, and then they were going to spend the evening relaxing, watching a movie, maybe snuggling? But this morning when she went off to work she forgot her dad's birthday gift—left it sitting right there on the table by the door, wrapped in brown kraft paper and stamped and addressed and utterly fucking unmailed. She remembered the package's existence at lunchtime, in the middle of a crowd riding the elevator to street level; she thinks she actually audibly uttered the word *fuck*.

OK, she told herself, think. The package is already late—she'd have needed to have mailed it on Wednesday in order for it to have arrived on time. The important thing is for it not to get any later. So: new plan. Call Austin, let him know she'll be late, get out of work at five, head home, pick up the package, then head to Austin's. She should be able to be there by seven and then she can mail it from the post office in his neighborhood on Saturday.

But then the bus was unnaturally late and crowded, and she got stuck next to someone who stank of wine, and by the time she made it home she felt grimy and dirty and decided that as long as she was home anyway she should put on a change of clothes, so now it's 6:20, and she's in her own kitchen, miles away from where she wants to be, and she's not even going to make it there by seven.

But OK. She's got tomorrow's change of clothes in a backpack, along with the fucking birthday gift (an enormous can of macadamia nuts). She's got her keys in her hand. She's ready to go.

Her nostrils twitch. It's the kitchen's garbage can. She's not sure what might be rotting away in its depths—she has a dim memory of Marvin eating hot wings over the can a week ago—but whatever it is, she can *smell* it. Fucking disgusting. It was crammed to full capacity two days ago, and since then *someone* has managed to find some unexploited crevasse and wedge still more garbage into it, including a Lucky Charms box which has been *folded into thirds* in order to fit.

Midweek, she swore up and down that she was *not* going to be the one to take the garbage out this time. She's *always* the one who takes the garbage out, and she's probably the one who produces the *least* garbage. And so she decided *fuck it, I can live in sloth just as long as they can*. But that is beginning to look less true. Yesterday she almost cracked, but she managed to hold firm. She looks at the can, smells its funky composting odor, and imagines coming back to it tomorrow, and her resolve begins to cave. She pauses on her way towards the door.

Marvin and Paul are out tonight; they went to catch that *Frailty* movie. She begins to compose a note for them in her head (it goes *TAKE THIS OUT!!*) but then it seems like just taking it out herself would involve about the same expenditure of effort, and at least she wouldn't have to listen to Marvin bellyache later on about how snippy her note was.

So: fine. She finds the drawstrings and pulls them, heaves the stinking column of trash out of the can.

While juggling her key in the lock, which sticks, she comes to be holding the garbage bag by only one of the two plastic loops. So when she's halfway down the stairs and that

loop suddenly snaps in her hand, she has only enough time to shout *no* and make a grab for the bag with her other hand before gravity yanks it free. It hits the step with a beer-bottle *clank* and then continues downwards, end over end, opening wider and wider, issuing forth coffee grounds, tissue, and all its other contents.

—No, no! Lydia shouts. And eventually the bag does come to rest, although its gotten far enough down the stairs that she can't even pretend that her insistence meant anything.

—Fuck, she says. —Fuck, fuck. This is going to be a drag-out-the-vacuum, get-on-your-hands-and-knees kind of cleanup job. For one hysterical moment she just considers leaving the mess there on the steps. Let Marvin and Paul clean the shit up. But no, they would think she had finally lost it. She sits on the step and presses her face into her hands.

Eventually she fishes out her cell and calls Austin.

—Where are you? he asks.

—I'm still at home, Lydia says. She feels a lump rise in her throat. (Stupid, she thinks, stupid!) —Listen, she says. —There's been a—things are all fucked up over here. It's going to be a while yet before I can get out the door.

—Everything OK? Austin asks.

—Yeah, Lydia says. —No. Everything is shit. I mean, it's nothing, but—

—Listen, Austin says. —Do you just want me to come down there? I could pick up some Thai food; stop by Pot Pan or something?

He still has never been inside her place. She has kept him away somewhat deliberately, embarrassed about her roommates. But tonight—tonight she is too weary to resist this suggestion.

—How soon can you be here? she says.