

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.

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Grey clouds mass high above Chicago. The sunlight which reaches earth seems thin and petty: it hits the cold surface of a rain-flecked window and dies there. A chilly, pale shape hanging in a room.

Paul gets out of bed, sees bare, wet branches through the glass. He scratches and grimaces. He finds a pair of sweatpants and pulls them on, then looks around until he finds a clean sweatshirt too. (It is always this way. He dresses fully before leaving his bedroom. He doesn't want his roommates to see the fat that hangs at his waist, or the soft deposits in his breasts.)

Paul passes Lydia's room. Inside, she's asleep, tangled in blankets. Austin is next to her; through the wall he hears Paul's footsteps, and although the sound does not register consciously, it rouses him, and he wakes up in this room—her room—for the first time ever. His eyes focus on the ceiling. A tiny stuffed monkey dangles towards him, hanging from a ribbon. *Any day that begins with a monkey can't be all bad*, he thinks. He shifts in the bed and notices the heaviness of his bladder. Remembers all that green tea he drank last night.

He kind of thinks he should wait for Lydia to wake up before he gets out of bed, but he has a thing about holding wastes in the body. He doesn't think you should ignore the body's signals about a thing like that; it seems like a good way to poison yourself.

—Lydia? he whispers. He touches her shoulder.

She mutters a syllable, but during the night she pressed her face deep into her pillow, so all he can hear is *nh*.

—Hey, he says, a little louder. —I'm going to go use your bathroom, OK?

Nh again.

He takes this as a *yes*, gets up, pulls on his jeans. Skips underwear, and shirt. He wonders if her roommates are around this morning. He didn't hear anyone come in last night, although he and Lydia went to bed pretty early, exhausted from the stresses of the day. He cracks open her bedroom door, peeks through into the hallway. No sign of anyone. He slips out.

Down the hallway, into the living room. What time is it, anyway? His body clock and the light suggest that it's around 9 am.

He takes a quick detour into the kitchen to check the clock. 9:10. Not bad. He is about to head for the bathroom when he notices a pile of books on the counter. The one on top is a Dungeons and Dragons book, the *Player's Handbook*.

Meanwhile, in the bathroom, Paul flushes, stares into the mirror, rubs at the baggy violet flesh hanging under his eyes. He shouldn't have let Marvin talk him into going out to the bar after the movie. Neither of them are really what Paul would consider *bar people*. He remembers Marvin flirting clumsily with the barmaid, and he groans. He sticks out his tongue; it looks furry and gray. He needs water. He heads for the kitchen.

When he gets there, he is startled by a blonde guy, who is standing there reading the *Player's Handbook* with no shirt on.

—Uh, hi, Paul says.

—Oh, Austin says. He slams the book down on the counter. —Uh, hi. I'm Austin. Lydia's friend?

—Oh, Paul says. That makes sense. For a moment, he thought he must actually still be asleep and dreaming. —Yes. I've, uh, heard a lot about you. I'm Paul; one of the roommates.

Paul extends his hand, and there is something dainty about the way he does it, which fills Austin with a weird urge to lift the hand up and kiss it. But his wits prevail and he instead shakes it in the traditional manner. —Hi, he says.

Paul hangs on to the handshake for maybe an instant too long, gazes for just a moment at Austin's skinny chest and tiny nipples. It has been a while since Paul has been around a semi-naked man. *Damn*, he thinks.

—So, Austin says. —This, uh, *Player's Handbook*, is this yours?

—Oh, uh, no, that's Marvin's. Mine's, uh,—he checks to gauge Austin's response—mine's in my room.

—That's cool, says Austin. —I heard they had a new edition out.

—Yeah, Paul says, —Third Edition. That's the, uh, Third Edition *Handbook*.

—Fancy, says Austin. —Man, I used to be *crazy* about this game.

—Oh yeah? Paul says. He brightens a bit, pours himself that glass of water.

—Yeah, Austin says. —I ended up giving my books away to my cousin. I kind of regret it, you know? Those old books were pretty cool.

—Yeah, Paul says.

—Still have my dice, though. I actually use them in some of the music that I work on. As like, a, compositional tool?

—Oh, Paul says. —That's interesting. (It is, although he doesn't really know what more to say about it.) —So what kind of character did you play?

Austin smirks. —I always wanted to play a Thief, he says.

—They're called Rogues now, Paul says.

—Really? Austin says.

Lydia walks into the room. She looks from Paul to Austin to Paul again. It is strange to see the two of them together. It seems as though some odd superimposition is at work: two separate worlds collapsing into one.

—What are you two talking about? she asks.