

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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Janine comes over for a few hours.

Thomas makes a stir-fry (snow peas, tofu, water chestnuts, red pepper) and they eat it on the couch, watching TV. Janine takes control of the remote, and she scrolls through Thomas' handful of non-cable channels all evening.

She's done this before—it is probably her primary way of watching TV—but it never ceases to surprise Thomas. He mainly uses his TV as a key piece of the VCR, as a window onto big contiguous narratives that he can immerse himself in for a few hours straight. He forgets that people can use it as a box which produces random sounds and images. Janine shuffles through the layers, making snarky comments as she rises and falls. There is no show. She is the show.

—Oh my God, Janine says. Some actress or pop star—Thomas doesn't know which—is on the screen. —Look at that. *Look* at that. Oh honey. Your star is in decline.

—That's fortune, Thomas says. —Ever rising, ever falling.

—Yeah, hers is definitely falling, Janine says. —For God's *sake*, who let her out with that *hair*? These people *pay* people to make sure they don't go out with hair that looks like that. Someone was asleep at the switch on that one.

Thomas smirks, but inside he is thinking about rising fortune, falling fortune.

—So, he says. —Do you think you're going to stay over here tonight?

Janine presses her lips together and screws them up to one side, thinking it over. Then she stretches her arms out and rolls both her hands (an alarming crunching sound comes out of her wrist).

—I don't know, she says. —I probably shouldn't. My apartment's a dump. I should probably clean it up this weekend; next week's going to be crazy with this work thing. Those *Artforum* ads have to go out...

—Uh huh, Thomas says.

It's been two solid weeks since they last spent the night together, even longer since they last had sex. Something is different between them—something has been different ever since that discussion back in March. He feels as though he is on probation.

He remembers the last time he spent the night over at her place, the first real warm day of the spring. They'd gone out to dinner: afterwards they walked through the streets, happy, a bit dizzy from the wine she'd splurged on. The trees on her street bursting into green.

Back at her place, he helped to unzip her dress. She stepped out of it and then sat on the edge of her bed, and he just looked at her for a minute and marveled. He marveled at the shape of her breasts and her legs; he marveled at the contrast the glossy darkness of her bra and panties made against the near-luminescence of her skin. He was seized, in that instant, by a flood of visual pleasure: you couldn't have asked him to imagine a sight more perfect.

He desired her then, as he desires her now, but he still has not learned how to translate desire into action. He wanted to reach out to touch her—wanted it more badly than anything—and he found, once again, that he could not. He waited, once again, for her to touch him, to invite him to touch her back.

She looked at him then, and their eyes met, and some series of calculations flickered in the space between them. A flurry of significant math. At the time, he felt like he understood: a series of meanings and ramifications were transmitted perfectly from her to him, even though he cannot, even now, articulate what those meanings might be.

She stretched and said *I'm feeling pretty beat.*

A description of a temporary state. And yet since then the moment has seemed to accrue a certain peculiar finality. And so: the image from that evening—her there on the edge of the bed? He holds it precious in his mind. He fears that he will not see her in her unguarded body again. And so he cherishes the image of it, as one would cherish the last of any thing.