

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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Weeks ago, Janine went out to the Baker's Lake Nature Preserve for the day and shot two rolls of film. She scanned the images into her work computer and for days she tinkered with them in Photoshop, eventually choosing to blur out every detail of nature except the hues, which, in combination, still unmistakably evoke savannah and sky. These diffuse colorsapes became the backdrop for three ads designed to run in three subsequent issues of *Artforum*. Last week, the mockups passed review, and today, before lunch, she e-mailed the finished ads to the *Artforum* production editors, and after lunch she filled a FedEx envelope with hard copies of the ads, as well as a Zip disk containing the files, source images, and fonts.

She places a check in the appropriate box. Standard overnight service by 3pm next business day. And then she seals the envelope, takes it up to the front, and drops it in the outgoing FedEx bin.

And then that's it. She's done. This calls for a celebration.

A cigarette. (*Isn't it about time you thought about quitting smoking?*, says that voice. *Fuck it*, she retorts.)

She steps outside and finds Clark out there, finishing up a cigarette of her own.

They greet one another; Clark gives Janine a light; they chat.

—I'm glad that those ads are done, Janine says. —For a while I felt a lot of pressure about them. I mean, I kept thinking, *this is going to appear in fucking Artforum*, you know? It's

not like at my old job where I was just designing ads that were going to appear in the back of some in-flight magazine. But now it's *done*, and I just get to be like *hey! My ad is going to appear in fucking Artforum!*

—Pretty cool, Clark says. —You should do something to celebrate.

—Well, I was thinking that, Janine says. And, for a moment, she thinks. The wind kicks up and Clark's hair snaps around her head like dark fire.

—What are you doing tonight? Janine asks.

Clark shrugs. —Nothing, really. I thought I'd go home and read or something.

—Well, Janine says. —I wouldn't want to disrupt your reading, but, do you want to come home with me?

Clark raises her eyebrows. For the merest instant she isn't sure whether Janine is propositioning her or not. She is about to ask for some sort of clarification—*you mean come home with you come home with you?*—when she realizes that there's really no need. Janine's expression is equal parts disclosure and desire: Clark just has to look at it for confirmation. And she doesn't need much in the way of confirmation anyhow: something has been developing between them for weeks, maybe months. Just because it has never before been spoken does not mean that she has not been aware of it, thought about it, tried it out in her mind at night...

But Janine is waiting for an answer. And Clark has not yet made a decision. She's not used to being asked directly like this. Normally she just stays up late with someone, drinks too much, and falls into bed with the other person when the tension grows unbearable. Talking about it usually only comes later, if it comes at all. That's what she's accustomed to, but she'd be hard-pressed to say that she prefers it, or finds it a particularly advisable strategy.

But Janine is waiting for an answer.

But Clark has not yet made a decision.

—I don't know, Clark says.

Disappointment flickers across Janine's face for a second. —Oh, she says.

—I mean, I want to, Clark says. —But, um, can we talk about it some more?

—Sure, says Janine.

—Let's, um, let's talk about it over a drink. It's what, four now?

—Four, yeah, around there.

—Meet me in my office at five, Clark says.

—OK, Janine says.

—I should really, uh, Clark says. A pained, apologetic expression crosses her face.

—I should get back in there.

Janine still looks somewhat disappointed. Clark is filled with a sudden impulse to grab her and kiss her, to reassure her, to say *yes, the answer is yes*. But she does not want to decide on impulse here, not with this decision, no. —Look, Clark says, —we'll talk, OK?

A weak smile crosses Janine's face. —Sure, sure, she says. —It's fine. You should go.

Clark reaches out, squeezes Janine's shoulder, and heads inside.

Janine takes the final drag off of her cigarette and flicks the butt out into the street.

Dammit, she thinks.