

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.

## 55 / THE MIDDLE OF SOMETHING

Paul finishes typing up the Friday meeting minutes and he e-mails them to the company's nine employees, and he leans back in his chair and informally commences his weekend.

He looks at the clock; it's 4:45. Puzzling: normally by this time on a Friday one of the girls has come by to let him know where they'll be going to drink.

He supposes he could just go down to one of their offices and ask, but he's feeling sedentary: instead he re-checks his e-mail (nothing), then surfs over to Free Will Astrology to check his horoscope. This week, Rob Brezny starts off by quoting a Sufi poet—"I know the way you can get / When you have not had a drink of Love"—before encouraging Paul (and Geminis everywhere) to get started on hunting down such a drink. Paul mentally complains *I've been trying **that** for months now* before he gets to the last line: *If you're fixated on thinking that it has to come from a romantic or sexual encounter, it will elude you.*

Hmm. He's going to have to think on that one.

Now it's almost five and still no word. Time to figure out what's going on. He shuts the computer down, shovels his junk into his tote bag, throws his overcoat across the crook of his arm, and heads down the hallway to Clark's office. When he gets there, he raps on the door and calls —Yoo hoo, darling, it's me.

A second later Clark opens up. Over her shoulder he can see Janine, sitting on the desk. This is not particularly curious; all of them hang out in one another's offices a fair deal, but he still picks up some weird vibe.

—Hi, Paul says.

—Hi, both of them say. They are both wearing the exact same expression, one that is a little bit baffled and a little bit frantic. They look as though they are mentally shifting gears. Paul misses a beat as he tries to figure out what's going on.

—I was, he says. —I just wanted to see if. (He points behind him with his thumb, trying to indicate his unarticulated idea with his body.) —If, uh, you guys were planning to go out for drinks tonight.

—Oh, Clark says. She looks to Janine for confirmation.

—Uh, says Janine.

A lightbulb begins to slowly sputter on over Paul's head. This isn't the first time that he's had a suspicion that something is going on between them. —You guys, he says. —Uh. He pauses, starts again. —I'm coming in right in the middle of something, aren't I?

Both of them open their mouths as though to say *no* and then both of them hedge, as though trying to think of a way to say *yes* without making it look like they're telling him to get lost. Paul breaks into a smile. The lightbulb is on.

—I think, he says, —that this is my cue to just head on home.

—No, begins Clark. She looks genuinely horrified. —I mean, you don't have to—

—It's cool, says Paul. —But remember, I'm living vicariously through you two, so if there's any juicy details, I expect a full report on Monday.

Clark and Janine exchange a look.

—Well, Janine says, —we don't know *just* yet if there will be any *details*, but we'll try to accommodate you.

Paul fixes her with a mock-stern look.

—How many times do I have to tell you people? he says. —There is no try. Only do.