

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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At around 7 pm Thomas calls Janine's cell phone. Her voicemail answers. He always feels awkward talking on the phone, and he especially detests talking to answering technology; his awkwardness becomes even more pronounced when he realizes that it's being documented for later. But he manages to stammer something out:

—Hey, Janine, it's me, uh, Thomas. I just wanted to touch base with you and see what you were up to this weekend; see if you wanted to get together. Uh, I'm working Saturday and Sunday nights at the hotel but I'm free, uh, tonight—I know that's short notice, sorry, it's not a big deal if you can't do it tonight, but, uh, also I'm free, uh, Saturday and Sunday during the day, if you wanted to do something then, like brunch or something? If you wanted. Um, call me. My number is: well, you have it. Sorry. Uh, I'll be around tonight, so call me if you can. Bye.

By the time he hangs up he feels like he's about to break into a sweat.

He wonders where she is. He guesses she's gone out with those people from work; she's taken to doing that most Fridays. But he can't be sure. She could even be at home. If you call someone on an old-fashioned land line and there's no answer you at least have a pretty good idea of where they're *not*. With a cell you just can't be sure. He doesn't even know what it *means* when voicemail answers at a cell phone number. Out of range? Phone turned off? Batteries dead? Line busy? Any or all of the above? He doesn't have a cell phone himself, so they still seem completely mysterious to him.

By midnight she still hasn't called.

Usually when she goes out drinking with her work friends she's back at home by nine or ten at the latest, and she generally calls, just to check in, *especially* if he's called and left her a message.

Around ten he began to worry that she may be dead, grabbed off the street by some guys in a van. This is Chicago, after all, a big city, stuff like that happens, every once in a while, he guesses.

But before he had finished thinking through the ramifications of that melodramatic theory, he began to consider another possibility: that tonight is the night that Janine finally decided to sleep with that woman from work, Clark. As soon as he thinks it he is certain that this is what has happened. The idea has the gutpunch of truth about it.

It's plausible: he's been sensing its approach for months, and the last time he talked to Janine about it she got him to agree that she should do what she wanted, and that they'd work through the aftereffects as they arose. But the past few weeks lulled him into a sense of security—these *Artforum* ads that Janine had been designing left her stressed out, without much time or emotional energy to spare, certainly not enough to take on a new lover. But he remembers she was planning to finish the ads and mail them out this week—

Were an observer to look in on him between the hours of ten and midnight he would appear to be sitting placidly in his living room, listening to some new CDs, and taking notes on them. In reality he is not taking notes; he is absently tracing out a rough diamond shape onto the pad, drawing each edge and corner over and over again, until the tip of the pen begins to gouge the paper. And in reality he is not listening to anything but the sequence of interlocked internal monologues that he is trapped within.

For instance The Angry Monologue: I can't believe she would do this. She knew that this would hurt me and she chose to do it anyway.

The Angry Monologue leads directly into the Self-Pitying Monologue: She's probably doing this because you can't satisfy her. She's so experienced and you—you were a *virgin* when you got together with her. How did you think you were going to pull this off? Stupid. Stupid.

When that one overheats, he allows himself to descend into the coolant bath of the Rational Monologue: you don't *know* that she's done *anything*. You don't have any information. She could just be [what?].

But the Rational Monologue leads into the Convincing Monologue: where else could she *be*? She got off of work at five—it's now, what, eleven-thirty? She's not going to sit at the bar for *six and a half hours*. And she would *call* you if she'd gotten home.

Repeat.