

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.

60 / CLEANING HOUSE

Thomas is working his way across the surface of his desk. Picking up things, inspecting them, dropping them into an open trash bag that he holds at his side. Part of his spring cleaning project. This bag is his third: two others sit by the door, already packed with detritus. It kind of appalled him to learn that his apartment held so much junk. Magazines from 1996, bought during a layover in some airport? A feather pillow, stained with old drool and left in the back of his closet? Some shirts he wore in college during a brief dalliance with psychedelic fashion? These items are not a part of the minimal, stripped-down life that he desires for himself.

He felt a profound sense of satisfaction after filling the first bag, and it made him curious: just how much stuff *can* he manage to rid himself of? The second bag increased his sense of determination. And so now he is running a dispassionate search-and-destroy mission across the desk, throwing away not only the truly useless items (outdated offers that he received in the mail) but also things that might still possess some conceivable value or utility (the instruction booklet for the SONY MiniDisc Recorder that he bought on Ebay a few months back).

He gets to a particular piece of paper, a pink Post-It Note folded in half; opens it. Written on it is the phone number of this guy Jakob, a guy Thomas got together with, once, last September. Thomas thinks about it for a second, and then drops it into the garbage bag.

It's not that he didn't like the guy. He did. They'd planned to get together again, in fact, but then the attacks threw everybody off, and then things with Lydia went sour, and it wasn't too long after that that Thomas got involved with Janine, and he just got caught up in that—

Not that that is anywhere now, now that Thomas has had a chance to fuck it up. After he last weekend, he finally caught up with Janine on the phone, and he began to play his cards wrong right from the very first words he said to her: *so where were **you** all weekend?*

She told him.

At first he put on the angry face—*how could you do this to me?*—but it is not a face that he knows how to wear well. It rotted off of him, all his fury and righteousness sloughing into self-deprecation—*I can't take this, Janine, I'm not strong enough to take this. Don't do this to me.* She'd made a few comforting gestures, but he responded to each one by just begging more plangently, until finally she'd said *I think you'd better take some time to think things over before this conversation goes any further.*

He's had time since then. Plenty of time. Nothing but. He's been so lonely that he's even taken to going out with the other waiters from the hotel, heading to some Loop bar with them at the end of his shift, and sitting there sullenly drinking one whiskey and soda after another, listening to the speculation about which absent coworker has the worst cocaine habit. He doesn't enjoy these nights (and he always feels like death the next day, he stays inside with the curtains drawn so that the sunlight will not pound into his head through his eyes) but they are better than the nights without conversation, the nights of sitting around listening to records by himself.

He just wants someone to talk to.

He reaches into the garbage bag and sifts until he finds the pink note. He unfolds it and looks at the digits there. And he considers reconsidering.