

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.

## 64/ RULES

Janine sits in damp heat. She has the windowbox air conditioner set to full blast, but it barely stirs the oppressive atmosphere that hangs around her. Chicago weather has been in the lower nineties for the past several days. And humid. The humidity makes her hair get curly at the ends; which she hates.

She pulls out her cell phone, flips it open, runs her thumb over the buttons. It's 9 pm on a Friday and she's by herself. Earlier today, at work, Janine invited Clark to come over and spend the night, but Clark said that she'd be working late again, trying to finish some writing to hand off to programmers. *How about you come over after you get off?* Janine had said, intending the entendre, leaning down to nibble on Clark's ear. Clark brushed her away. *I'll have to see*, she said. *This week has really burned me out.*

OK. So fine. So Janine's here by herself, hot, bored, sitting on the sofa, trying to ignore the moisture gathering in her armpits. (If she had her way, she'd never have to think about her armpits ever again.) She flings the cell phone down onto the coffee table and picks up the remote, flipping through the channels, but the array of available stuff looks pretty dire: *20/20*, *Fox News*, what appears to be a *Murder, She Wrote* re-run. She watches five minutes or so of this last one before she feels enough contempt to switch the TV off.

She feels boring as well as bored. Unappealing, unattractive. She wishes Thomas were over; he always makes her feel like she's funny and sexy. Almost always. She's actually still kind of pissed at him. She ended their last conversation by cutting him off, telling him

to take some time, call her when he'd gotten his shit together. She's surprised that he hasn't called her yet. It's been two weeks. She can't remember the last time they went two weeks without getting together, much less without talking.

She regards the phone where it rests, up against her oblong lime-green ashtray. She's annoyed about having to call him; she doesn't want it to look like she's crawling back. She's not going to apologize to him. She thinks Thomas was wrong to pull his whole *how could you do this to me* schtick. She was within her rights to sleep with Clark. Thomas knew that she was nonmonogamous when they first got involved; he doesn't get to *change the rules on her* when he feels like they don't suit him. That's not the deal.

And yet she misses having him around. She's pissed at him, yeah, but it was supposed to be let's-take-twenty-four-hours-to-cool-off pissed, not this-friendship-is-over pissed. She figures that he hasn't called her because he's scared, tangled up in a combination of feeling hurt and wanting to apologize. Sometimes he has trouble expressing himself, and the thornier the sentiment, the greater his difficulty. Traditionally, in their relationship, she has helped him find his way to the right words.

She sighs. It's hard to always have to be the brave one. But that's another one of the rules of their relationship, and she doesn't get to change them either, she supposes. She picks up the phone and autodials his number. Across the city his phone rings.