

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.

75 / THE END OF THE WORLD

Paul locks up the Volkswagen, and starts walking up the street, towards work. It's Monday, his first day back from Milwaukee. He spent the last four days at Gen Con, the annual games fair, surrounded by thousands of people who are at least as dorky as he is, from the kids in their Luke Skywalker outfits to the old guys dollying around huge cases filled with wargame miniatures. He's rarely felt so much at home. When they first made it to the convention center Marvin kept punching him in the arm and whispering *Oh my God. Oh my God. We're in heaven.*

Marvin spent half of his time in heaven chatting up girls wearing cute little cat ears. *You better find somewhere else to sleep*, he informed Paul over donuts one morning, *cause tonight is my night to score.*

Paul didn't flirt too much—he never found that openly queer gamer that he was supposed to be on the lookout for—but he did have a small taste of pleasure when he participated in a live-action role-playing game, in which everyone pretended to be a character in a soap opera. He played a wicked industrialist, engaged to a society matron, and in true soap-opera style he performed a dramatic reversal mere hours before the wedding, declaring himself gay, and confessing that he truly loved his arms dealer. The arms dealer conveniently felt the same way, and the two of them showily embraced and pretended to kiss passionately, much to the delight of the other gathered players. It felt good to be in the arms

of another man, even if only for a brief moment, and even if the romance was only imaginary. That's more than Marvin got from the cat girls, anyway.

Clark will be proud, Paul thinks. He can't wait to tell her.

He sees Janine, standing outside the Perihelion office, smoking a cigarette. He waves.

—Hey there, he says.

—Hey, she says.

—How's it going?

—OK, I guess, she says. She flicks her cigarette. —Considering.

—Considering?

She stares at him for a second, as though trying to assess whether he's made a joke.

Then she closes her eyes. —You've been gone, she says. —You don't know.

—Don't know? Paul asks. Something inside him yawns open. —Don't know what?

—David got a call from Jean-Pierre on Friday, she says. —He's pulling funding.

Paul blinks. Then he blinks again. —That doesn't make sense, he says. —We're not self-sufficient yet. If he pulls funding then there's no game.

Janine looks at him bitterly.

—Oh, Paul says. —Oh.

—Everything's in a chaos, Janine says. —Nobody really knows what's happening, not yet. David's supposed to be letting people know at the meeting today.

—Oh my God, Paul says.

—Yeah, Janine says. —It's bad. She throws her cigarette down to the ground and stamps it out with the toe of her boot. —I've already done a job search *once* this year; I'm not really feeling in the mood to do *another*, you know?

Paul leans up against the bricks and stares across the street, into a fenced-in lot full of salvaged radiators, and he feels as though he may be leaving his body.

At Gen Con he saw elaborate games, simulations so complex that they spread out to cover the entire surface of conference tables. He watched people who feel happiness most strongly when they come together to arrange tiny figures on vast maps. When they have worlds to imagine.

The worlds exist exactly as long as the players believe in them. And then they disappear.