

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.

79 / CLOSING DOWN AND REOPENING

Friday is the first day that there is no job for Janine to go in to.

Perihelion is deep into the business of making itself disappear. In another two weeks or so the act will be formally concluded, and everyone will be let go. Janine's just lucky enough to go first. *Unemployed*, she thinks. *Again*, she thinks. *Thank you, President Bush*.

She tells herself that she should update her resume, but then she agrees to put it off until Monday, that she should give herself at least one three-day weekend without worrying about the hunt for a new job. She got a modest severance package, so she's covered through September, maybe longer if she files for unemployment. Although she despises the idea. So instead she spends Friday doing apartment things that she'd long put off—she cleans the junk out from under the bed, scours grime out of the tub. She deletes a bunch of e-mails that are no longer relevant. There's one from Clark: an invite to her annual birthday party. It's addressed to the entire Perihelion employee listserv. She doesn't delete that one.

In the evening, Thomas, who doesn't work Fridays, comes over with some California rolls from the Dominick's and a movie. This has become a regular ritual of theirs since July. Since around the time that she stopped sleeping with Clark. She frowns, feels tension spread across her forehead.

She sits crosslegged on the floor in front of the sofa, leans her head back onto Thomas' knees. —Will you do my neck? she asks him. —I'm really tense tonight.

—Sure, Thomas says.

He puts his fingers on her and feels for the tension.

It was weird to say goodbye to Clark. Janine said *well, I guess I'm heading out*, and Clark stopped working on whatever it is she works on in her office and looked at Janine for a moment, as though gathering her resolve, as though somehow weary inside. —Janine, she had said. —I'm sad to see you go. We should get together again sometime.

—I'd like that, Janine said. —You have my number. Feel free to give me a call.

Such amicability. So strange, after everything, to find herself here, being polite, pretending that there is nothing to say, not asking what she most wants to ask: *what happened? Why did you stop wanting to touch me?*

—Oh, Clark said. —I'm having a birthday party September 7. You should think about coming.

—I will, Janine said.

Thomas' hands knead the tight muscles in her neck until something seems to drain from her. Jesus it feels good.

—Hey, Thomas, she says.

—Yeah? Thomas says.

—Do you want to sleep with me?

A beat. His hands pause on her neck. It's been four months, maybe more, since they last slept together. But he does not need to think about his answer. —Yeah.

—Why? Janine asks.

—Why?

—Yeah.

—Um, Thomas says. —Because. Because... you're beautiful.

—Oh yeah? Janine says.

—Yeah, Thomas says. —And because—you're my best friend.

Janine smirks a bit at this. It seems so fourth grade. But it's sweet. And she manages to say as much: —You're sweet.

—I just say what's true, Thomas says.

He's surprised to realize that what he said *is* true; he *does* think of Janine as his best friend. For a long time he thought of his college buddy Derek as his best friend, but he hasn't gotten together with Derek in months, and he gets together with Janine just about every week—

—So you want to? Janine says.

—Sleep together? Thomas says.

—Yeah, Janine says.

—Yeah, Thomas says. His hands lie still on her shoulders.

—Keep rubbing, she says.

—OK, Thomas says.