

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.

## 82 / BIRTHDAY

Ok, in her worst moments she feels unattended, misunderstood, alone. And it's true that she's newly unemployed, faced with the prospect of finding a new job, *starting over fresh*, meeting new co-workers, smiling, making nice with the exact people who will eventually drive her to exasperation. And, yes, it looks more and more likely that the United States will go invade Iraq any day now, in a gesture of perfect insanity.

But none of those things mean that she can't have a good time tonight. It's her birthday, and she's having a party, and, goddamnit, she is going to have a good time even if she has to drink this entire bottle of apricot brandy.

This is the fifth year that she's thrown this party, and over those five years it has developed something of a reputation, so now it draws quite a crowd. Half the people here she barely knows. Lots of friends of friends—like, there, at the door, it's Fletcher's friend, Freya, and her boyfriend, that guy whose name Clark can never remember. She shoots a wave over that way.

She moves from there into the kitchen, checks in with the cluster of her co-workers from Perihelion—her ex-co-workers, she supposes. They're standing around in a knot, drinking beers and talking about what they're going to do next. She's surprised to see that David's not in his suit: instead he's got on one of his old punk T-shirts. The Exploited.

Paul's here, too, dressed very sharply, down to a very dapper-looking bow tie. He smiles, and waves his fingers over the top of his beer bottle at her. She grins back.

No sign of Janine. Clark's disappointed; she would like to have the chance to talk to her again, maybe make plans to get together sometime. Pick up where they left off. It's early yet. Maybe she'll still make it by.

Clark takes another swig of brandy from the bottle. Fuck, it's hot in here. Since everyone seems to be having a good time, and no immediate crisis seems to need her attention, she decides that she can shirk her hosting duties for the moment, head outside, grab a quick breath of air.

Fletcher's sitting on the back steps, staring out into her yard, looking into the trees at the edge of the property. She sits next to him, puts her arm around his shoulders.

—Hey, he says. —Having a good time?

—Sure, she says. —And you?

—Not bad, he says.

—You sure? she asks. —You're not sitting out here by yourself as part of your whole *hating life* thing, are you?

He smirks. —No, he says. —I suppose I'm not.

—Good, she says. She pulls his head down onto her shoulder, kisses him on the temple.

—Have you started looking for a new job yet? he asks, after a while.

—Huh? she says. —Oh, God no.

—Do you have an idea of what kind of job you might be looking for? Fletcher asks.

—Not really, she says. —But, hey, it's my birthday. Can't we talk about something else?

—I live to serve, he says. —I can talk about whatever you want. Do you want to hear about how I'm losing my hair? Because I think I am. Check this out. He places his fingers up by his hairline.

—No, she says. —Tell me about your work, your new poem.

—*Everything?* he says.

—Yeah, she says. —How is it going?

Before beginning work on *Everything*, Fletcher wrote this in his notebook: *The work of the poet is to connect disparate things. Since we move constantly through a shifting sphere of interconnections, then any moment can be poetic, every moment is poetic.*

He thinks about this moment, now, as he has thought about many others, since he began. He is here. Clark is here. His head is on her shoulder. A cool breeze passes through the yard, undercutting the thick heat of summer. There is the scent of apricots. All of these things are connected to one another: taken together they form an intricacy. The cat's cradle of energy and being and attention that we call a moment.

—It's going well, Fletcher says. —It's really going well.