

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.

10 / COMING OUT AND TELLING HER

It's a Wednesday night, and Clark stands in an alley behind the building that contains the Chicago Solidarity office, smoking a cigarette. She's waiting for Oliver to join her so they can take off. She watches a truck at the other end of the alley line itself up carefully with a loading dock. She smokes, exhales into the chilly wind, watches men haul big rolls of carpet out of the back of the truck, waits.

After a certain point she thinks *well, just how long is he planning to take?* She flicks her cigarette away into nothingness and heads inside again, to climb back up the two flights of dingy stairs that lead to the offices.

She finally comes across Oliver in the back, with a few files spread out before him on the table, recording a long column of notes. He looks up at her and a vaguely *crestfallen* expression crosses his face. This is not usually the look he gives her, and she's not sure what to make of it. Come to think of it, he's seemed kind of *off* all night. She has a dim sense of what the motive force might be, but she's not yet prepared to fully think it.

—So—she says, —are you coming or what?

—Ah, Oliver says. —Actually— He looks away from her, shuffles around a few of the papers, creating an unconvincing impression of busyness. —I think I’m going to hang out here for a while, get some of these phone records up to date. There’s a lot of people doing get-out-the-vote calls this weekend—

—Yeah, I know, Clark says. —But—

She pauses. She’s still not really sure what’s going on, but she knows a cover story when she hears one. She also knows what they’re *for*—she knows that he’s trying to tell her that he doesn’t want her to come home with him, trying to tell her in this way that lets him get away without actually coming out and telling her. She should just take the hint and say *OK see ya* and walk out the door. She doesn’t want to be that person who hangs around, *not getting it*, dense, embarrassing. But she wants to know what’s going on. And so she flounders on:

—I mean, if you want me to hang out, I could—she crooks a thumb back over her shoulder to indicate the other room, somewhere where she’d be out of his hair—like—how long do you think you’re going to be?

—Actually, Oliver says, —after this I’m supposed to be going over to April’s for a bit. We’ve been—and here his voice loses a notch of volume—we’ve been kind of seeing each other lately, I guess?

—Oh, Clark says. This doesn’t really surprise her—this exact suspicion has been nursing at her in secret for about two weeks now—but hearing it, out loud, just out there as fact, makes

something in her unexpectedly wrench. Almost immediately her eyes are full of tears. She hates crying; she hates the weakness it reveals in her; she hates the craven pity it evokes in others. She bites down on her lip and turns to stare at the frame of the doorway so that he won't see. So that she won't have to see his reaction. A long silence passes, during which she can feel him looking at her; she wants him not to be looking at her; she stands there and stands there and tries not to cry.

—Say something, Oliver says finally.

—What the fuck do you want me to say, Clark says flatly, trying to make her voice stay steady. —Congratulations?

—No, Oliver says, —no, you don't have to say *congratulations*. But I do—I mean, I know this is awkward, because of—because of what's been going on between us—or because of what *went* on between us—but, I mean, I *do* wish that there was a way that you could be happy for me— (Clark turns to look at him, flabbergasted, flat-out fucking flabbergasted.) —I mean, he continues, —this is what I want, really, I want to be, you know, *dating* someone—a relationship that's like—just—*normal*—

You're a fucking liar, Clark thinks. She doesn't believe for a second that he wants a relationship that's *normal*. The fucking *bald-facedness falsehood* of the claim just floors her. It seems precisely like the kind of lie someone would tell themselves if they'd been frightened by having glimpsed a thing they really want. *Fucking humans*, Clark thinks, *fucking humans with their fucking endless capacity for self-delusion*.

—So, I mean, I know it might seem, Oliver says, and Clark cuts him off, saying: —What a load of conservative horseshit. Oliver jolts as though she’s thrown a cold gin and tonic into his face. —You’re telling me, Clark continues, —that what you *really want*, what you’ve *really wanted* for the past six months, is someone you can be fucking playing *house* with—?

—I guess, Oliver says. —I wouldn’t put it quite that way, but—

—And that the person you’ve *chosen* to play house with is fucking *April Bell*?

—I— Oliver says.

—Just answer the question, Clark says.

—Yes, Oliver says.

—That’s bullshit, Clark says.

—It isn’t.

—It is.

—Look, Oliver says, —I’m standing here, and I’m telling you, it *isn’t*. These are *my* feelings we’re talking about. *I’m* the one who gets to determine what feels true to *me*. And I’m telling you that *this is really what I want*.

—Then congratulations, Clark says.