

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.

## 12 / THE WAY IT HAPPENED

—So how are you holding up? Fletcher says, bringing two beers to the table.

—I'm— Clark says. She wraps her hands around the glass and shakes her head. —I think it's safe to say I'm *depressed*.

—Yeah, Fletcher says. He feels like he doesn't need to ask *what about*: everyone he knows feels depressed, this week, about the same thing. —Yeah, me too. I really thought it was going to go differently.

—I did too, Clark says, —even though I fucking *knew* it wouldn't. I kept *telling* myself *don't get your hopes up; don't get your hopes up*. And then it *happened* the way it *happened* and I realized that I *had* gotten my hopes up— she smacks the heel of her hand against her forehead.

—Yeah, Fletcher says. —That's about the long and the short of it.

They both look down at the table, sifting around through their bruised feelings for something to say, then they both drink.

—So, Fletcher says, —have I told you about my plan to personally punch 150,000 Ohioans in the face?

Clark snorts.

—It might take a while, Fletcher says, —but I figure—you know—I have the summer *off*—

—Can I come with you? Clark asks.

—Sure, Fletcher says. —That way we each only need to punch 75,000 each.

—No, says Clark, —No, I think I really *need* to punch the full 150,000.

—Fine by me, says Fletcher.

—So would they be Republicans, Clark says, —or Democrats who didn't vote?

—Oh, it doesn't matter, says Fletcher. —It's really just about the punching. Any sort of political point is strictly a side benefit.

—Well, OK, then, Clark says.

—But I didn't drag you out here because I wanted to talk about my need for catharsis, Fletcher says.

—No, Clark says. —You said you had gossip.

—Yeah—says Fletcher. —It’s not so much gossip as it is *news*, I guess—

—Whatever, Clark says. —Spill it.

He pauses her by holding up his finger while he drinks.

After swallowing: —I think—this feels so weird to say, but—he braces for it—I think I’m going to ask Cassandra to marry me.

Clark blinks, somewhat stunned. —That’s great, she says, a second later.

Fletcher looks suspiciously at her. —You think it’s great? he says.

—Yeah, Clark says. —Yeah, *of course* I think it’s great. What did you think I would think?

—I don’t know, Fletcher says. He sips his beer, thinking about it. —I thought you’d maybe ask me something *pointed*—something along the lines of *are you sure this is what you really want?*

—OK then, she says, grinning, —Are you sure this is what you really want?

—I think so, Fletcher says. —I really do.

—Then I think it’s great, she says.

She says this, although secretly she feels a faint sense of disappointment, a sense of some avenue of possibility twisting shut. There's a future, somewhere in the flickering book of futures, where she and Fletcher end up together—she knows that both of them have glimpsed it at times, have desired it at times, alluded to it obliquely. But it seems, now, that that future grows out of a different past, one where things didn't work out between Fletcher and Cassandra, one where she didn't waste so much time with Oliver. *You put your money on the wrong horse*, she thinks, bitterly, which reminds her of the election all over again. She picks up her glass.

—A toast, she says.