

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.

## 16 / JUST TO TALK

Clark's sitting up in bed, smoking a cigarette and reading the latest issue of *The Nation* when her phone, on the shelf, begins to ring. She picks it up, checks the screen, and sees that it's Oliver.

She can't say she's entirely surprised: his name's popped up on the list of missed calls a couple of times this week. She's wanted, each time, to call him back—she's ashamed to admit that she felt it as a kind of *yearning*—but each time she's refused. In part it's because he's never left a message. She's not entirely certain what he wants by calling her, and if she's going to voluntarily initiate a conversation she damn well wants to have some advance sense of what the *emotional tenor* of that conversation is going to be. But now here he is. The phone is ringing. She exhales—a certain resignation can be heard in it—and she stamps out her cigarette in the bedside ashtray.

—Hello? she says.

—Hi, he says, sounding more than a little beaten.

—Hi, she says, probably sounding the same way herself.

—I just wanted to call, he says, —to, you know, check in, see how you were doing.

—OK, Clark says.

—So, uh—he pauses—how are you doing?

—I'm fine, Clark says, —I guess. I'm still feeling kind of depressed about the election results—

—Yeah, Oliver says. —Yeah, me too.

—And, I mean, I keep looking around online at like the evidence that something was fishy with the election, you know, the whole business with the provisional ballots, and these quote-unquote *irregularities*—there's these weird precinct results that don't make any *sense*, and I just can't help feeling like the whole thing's just been *stolen* again. And I watch them, you know, I watch Bush at this news conference just sitting there *gloating* and I just think *they're going to get away with it; we're going to let them get away with it.*

—Everyone around Chicago Solidarity is feeling pretty low, too, Oliver says.

—I can imagine, says Clark.

—We haven't seen you around there in a while, Oliver says.

—No—Clark says, —I can't go in there right now. Right now I just need to try to *get myself together*. My apartment's a fucking mess and there I'm behind on the bills—I just need to focus a little bit. Spend less time online—eat better—

—Yeah, says Oliver.

Clark frowns, listens to the noise on the line.

—How's April? she finally asks.

—Oh—Oliver says. —We haven't really—he pauses, calculating some sequence of words—  
I guess you could say that we *broke up*.

—Oh, Clark says. —When was this?

—I don't know, says Oliver. —I guess it's less that we broke up and more that we just sort of stopped calling one another. Not that long after the election.

—Oh, says Clark. She wants to say *I'm sorry to hear that* but she knows it would sound insincere. So she doesn't say anything.

—I want to see you, says Oliver.

Clark thinks for a minute about saying *no*. *No, sorry, you had your chance*. Instead she says: —  
Why?

—Because I miss you, says Oliver.

*Too bad*, she wants to say. Instead she says: —I miss you, too, and she frowns miserably.

—So maybe we could meet sometime? he says. —Just to talk?

—OK, she says. —But not at the bar. And not at your place, either. You have to come  
here.

—OK, he says.