

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.

## **2 / HER WHOLE THING**

On Wednesday nights she and Oliver meet up at the office of the Chicago Solidarity Network, to do phone banking and mailings for a couple of hours. After they get done, at nine, they ride together on the subway, where they gossip about the other volunteers, roll their eyes over the chronic inefficiency of the board, share their respective takes on the newest scenes of megalomaniacal theatre that have emerged from the culture of Chicago activism, and otherwise get themselves laughing over the black comedy of it all. But they do not talk about where they are going or what they are going to do. Neither of them even mention it when they pass her stop.

When they get off the subway, together, at his stop, the first place they go is to the liquor store, where they will pick up a case of twenty-four beers, which will make it easier to do what they are going to do next.

What they are going to do next is go back to his place, drink most of the case, and start to fight. They will engage in literal physical struggle. She will push her open palm into his face. He will pull her hair, yanking her head back against the wall. She will allow him, for a second, to kiss her exposed neck, but then she will wrench herself free, push him down onto his back, force her thumb into his mouth. He will bite her and she will slap him across the

face. Soon both of them will be undressed; soon each of them will have made the other come, and then, sweaty and sprawled across one another, they will sleep.

In the morning the alarm will utter its pattern of insistent noise-bursts, and she will awaken, feeling like God is using a piece of abrasive metal to etch a series of short dashes into her skull. The sunlight eking in through the slats in the blinds will hurt; any motion of her head will hurt. When Oliver gets up to go rattle around in the filthy nest of his kitchen, somehow coercing it to produce two cups of coffee, she will untangle herself from the bedclothes and get dressed, not wanting to be seen naked. Not wanting evidence of what they've done. She will look at the twenty-four beer cans on the floor and think *we drank those* and she will want to retch. She will sit on the edge of the bed and take the coffee that Oliver offers and hold its soothing warmth up against her cheeks or forehead. He will set next to her but they will not make eye contact. Eventually she will down the coffee, call a cab, and get to work between fifteen and twenty minutes late, wearing the same clothes she had on yesterday. She's sure her co-workers have some opinion about that, but fuck it, fuck them, fuck everything. She'll sit there for twenty minutes, poking listlessly at things on the Web, nibbling the edges off of a grim muffin she purchased in the lobby, drinking another cup of coffee when she knows she should be drinking water, and eventually she'll get to work, trying, as much as possible, to ignore that voice in the back of her head that says *you need to figure out just what the fuck you are doing*.

So that's what she's thinking about when Fletcher says that he misses *confusion*, out there on her back porch, in the gathering fall, and that's why she responds by saying that she doesn't. Because she's got her whole thing going on, which leaves her feeling confused and muddled

all week, except for on Wednesdays, when it seems like she knows exactly what it is that she's doing.

—So how are things going with that, anyway? Fletcher asks.

—Badly, says Clark.

—And yet it goes on, Fletcher says.

Clark sips from her beer, rolls it around in her mouth, nodding. She swallows. —Yep, she says.

—Well, Fletcher says, —Cheers.

They clink their bottles.