

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.

23 / WHAT HAPPENED IN OHIO

Jakob's in the break room at Fieldhammer, waiting for his styrofoam pod of tomato soup to finish heating in the microwave. Bored with the process of watching it revolve, he instead turns to the window, and gazes blankly at the people moving and working in the building across the street. He looks at people sitting in their cubicles and tries to make conclusions about them, tries to figure out who he'd want to chat with if he were working in that building instead of in this one.

The microwave emits an electronic purr to indicate that his food's ready.

He frowns, thinking again about Melissa, in Ohio. He saw her the day after Christmas and ever since then he's been thinking about her. He doesn't quite know how to feel about the time they spent together—he's not even certain that he knows, exactly, what happened. Some of the events are still in interpretive flux. He'd love to talk them out with someone; retelling them would make them maybe seem more real, and then he could begin to figure out how he feels about them. But he doesn't know who he can have that conversation with. He has friends here at the office, and he considers them as he peels back the lid of his soup—there's Max, one of the other HR guys, and there's Marvin, who works in Data Management—these are people who he occasionally gets together with for a couple of drinks; sometimes they go out after work on a Friday and catch whatever science-fictiony

thing is looking good that month. But their conversations don't tend towards intimacy. He knows the names of their girlfriends and they know the name of his, but none of them ever discuss any *relationship issues* that they might be having: although Max and Marvin are probably up-to-date enough on his life to remember, maybe with prompting, that Tim is Freya's half-brother and that he's living with them, they don't particularly know how Jakob *feels* about that, and they don't give any indication of being particularly interested; they're more interested in talking about the progress of the *Firefly* movie.

Freya, of course, is supposed to be the person he talks to, which is all fine and good except when he needs advice *about* her, or about some issue that *involves* her, and Melissa Flaum definitely qualifies. He spoons lukewarm soup into his mouth and thinks that maybe he'd enjoy going to see a therapist, just flat-out *paying* someone to listen to him. He thinks about whether the Fieldhammer insurance would cover such a thing. He thinks about calling up Fletcher and maybe trying to mend that bridge. Each of these thoughts is essentially idle: it happens then immediately dies, and he's back to replaying what happened in Ohio.

Mostly it was pretty innocuous: he met up with her in the afternoon and they hung out in her living room getting caught up in greater detail than their phone calls had afforded them. The atmosphere was pleasant; they had tea, and pale sunlight slanted through the ferns she'd hung in the window, and her cat stretched out on his lap and purred easily at his touch.

The guy she's seeing is named Steve, he learned, and she talked for a while about him, his pros, his cons. *I still don't see him as particularly viable for a long-term thing*, she said, and when Jakob asked *why not* she said *he's not as smart as I am; I mean that sounds like a horrible thing to say*

but it's just true. I want a guy who's smart; they don't have to be a genius or anything but they at least have to read a book every once in a while; you'd think that'd be easy to find but, God, I don't know any more.

Jakob, in response, thought: *I'm smart.*

She fixed him up with a beer and Jakob sat on a stool in her kitchen and watched her assembling a big salad while the water for the pasta boiled, and he thought *this feels so comfortable*, and he wondered what his life would be like if he left Chicago and moved to Columbus and began dating Melissa, dating her for real, not just resuming the half-assed sequence of occasional hookups that comprises their history together. He thought to himself that it wouldn't be bad.

They ate, and then they sat on the couch and watched *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* on DVD, which felt like a bit of a weird choice given what was going on, even though neither of them were really admitting what was going on or even really knew, but she rested her feet in his lap and he curled his fingers around her ankle and realized that this was the first time he'd touched her in some way other than a quick hug in close to ten years.

—I should get going, he said when the movie was over, although on some level he was hoping that she would ask him to stay. He knows that much.

—Yeah, she said, —I guess it's late.

She walked him to the door and they hugged, and then when they let go of one another they both kind of lingered there, and then they hugged again. When they were done she held his

chin in her hand and kissed him quickly on the mouth, which startled him, and maybe she noticed that he was startled—he's not sure—but right afterwards, before he'd even begun trying to make sense of the kiss, she said *drive safely* and he said *OK* and the next thing he knew he was walking across a snowy parking lot towards the SUV he'd borrowed from his parents so he could come out here in the first place.

Since then they haven't spoken, although he sent her an e-mail, which said basically *it was good to see you* but didn't overtly discuss the kiss; she responded, saying *it was good to see you, too*, but he's not sure what that *means* in this context. He knows what *he* means, which is something akin to *it was interesting to have kissed you and I'm wondering about following up on that*. But he can't tell if she means the same thing. He's not even sure if she'll *remember* the kiss, maybe it was just a friendly gesture that he's making too much of. Maybe when adults say goodbye to one another these days they kiss each other on the mouth? But that's crazy. People don't do that. Or do they?

This is where it would be useful, he thinks, *to have another perspective on the matter*.