

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.

28 / THE ROMANCE OF HIS LIFE

He's trying to follow a trampled path through a heap of clotted gray snow when his cell starts to ring. It goes *brring brring*, like a real phone, the kind that had an actual bell made of actual metal inside it, the kind that Fletcher supposes you have to call an *old-fashioned* phone now. One day kids will marvel at them in the same way that they will marvel at TVs with knobs. The phone rings again as he gropes for it beneath his winter coat with comically fat gloved hands. He didn't need to pick the ringing-phone sample, he could have made it sound like a croaking frog or a surf-rock band or God knows what else, but when he was setting the thing up and learning the rules of its operating system he found himself grateful for something that would make the little clamshell device seem familiar somehow.

The display reads GALANIS, C., which makes him grin—the whole reason he got the phone in the first place was so that he and Cassandra could stay in closer touch. It's been hard, having her so far away, he gets out there to Pennsylvania one weekend a month but it's still hard, although it's fair to say that it was harder when he felt like couldn't step out for an hour to buy some groceries without feeling like he needed to hurry back home to see if she'd called. (He's still afraid, secretly, that she's going to lose interest, that she's going to come to her senses out there and decide to leave him. This is part of why he has been contemplating asking her to get married: because it feels like a guarantee that she will not leave him. He knows it is not, not really, but it feels like it would at least be more of a guarantee than he

has now. He wonders if this is why most people get married—to try to secure the affection of people who they secretly feel are too good for them.)

—Hey, baby, Fletcher says. His foot hits a particularly loose and grainy patch of snow and shoots out to the left and he has to flail his right arm out to keep from falling.

—Hey, says Cassandra. —How's it going?

—Not bad, says Fletcher. —I'm on my way to the store.

—Picking up some supplies?

—Yeah, says Fletcher. —This weekend, you know, there was all that *weather*, and I was like *no way am I going out into that*. But, I don't know, at some point a guy needs to *eat*. I opened the cabinet today and I was down to like one can of chick peas.

—You could always order out, Cassandra says.

—Oh, I've *ordered out*, Fletcher says. —Don't get me wrong. But there's only so many times I can eat Pizza Hut before I start to feel—

—Gross? Cassandra supplies.

—I was going to say *inhuman*.

—Hm.

—So what are you up to today? Fletcher says. —How are the quilts?

—The same, Cassandra says. —Boring. I'm supposed to be going into Philly for this textile art conference this weekend—

—Oh, Fletcher says, —right—

—and I was kind of looking forward to that, and I still am, I guess—but the acquisition budget is all fucked up at the moment and so I sort of feel like I'm going out there with one hand tied behind my back—it's almost like a *look but don't touch* kind of thing—

They keep talking about this while Fletcher trudges across a parking lot. Finally he gets to the front doors of the Dominick's, but instead of going in he claps his glove over his free ear so that some of the noise of the lot will be blocked out, and he stands there for a while, out in the cold; he's feeling a little pressure to break off the conversation and get started on shopping but instead he keeps talking, and listening, he keeps trying to help her unravel the tangled nodes of her frustration, and the fact that his desire to do this overrides his desire to *get on with his day* makes him feel like a good man, that was the thing she said to him before they kissed for the very first time, *you're a good man*, and that's one of the things that makes him want to be around her, that makes him want to talk to her: she makes him feel like he is good. He wants to believe that he is good.

Eventually the conversation winds down, so he mentions that he's made it to the store. —

OK, Cassandra says, —I'll let you go.

—OK, Fletcher says. —Call me later?

—Why don't you call me, Cassandra says. — Go home, make your dinner, give me a call after dinner when you're relaxed.

—OK, Fletcher says. —Love you.

—Love you, too, Cassandra says.

He goes into the store and walks around, placing a red pepper into his basket, a block of cheese. He selects a jar of spaghetti sauce with black olives in it, a few of the frozen dinners that he knows he likes. He picks out a bottle of cabernet from a vineyard that he's heard about by hasn't tried. On his way up to the counter he reflects upon the fact that anyone looking at him would immediately be able to tell that he lives alone. This used to feel lightly exciting, back before he was dating Cassandra, back when he was single and actively looking around—he used to believe that maybe he would meet someone at the supermarket, a single woman who would notice the meagre arrangement of things in his basket and realize that he was a single guy, the fantasy went that she'd maybe think *what the hell* and she'd strike up a conversation with him, something would spark between them, they'd end up exchanging numbers and he'd call—it would be the start of the great romance of his life. He used to

look, sort of, he used to scan the women in the supermarket, watching for her, wanting to be ready for her, receptive, if she were to one day ever come along. He doesn't look anymore.

It feels strange, not to be looking anymore. It feels good.