

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.

29 / KEEPING THE DISCUSSION ALIVE

When Lydia replied to Nate's e-mail, she wanted to keep the discussion alive, so she asked him if he'd ever placed a Missed Connections ad, and if not, whether he'd ever thought about it. Later that day he wrote her back: *I've never placed one, no*, he said, *I feel too shy for that.* (*Shy?* Lydia had thought, intrigued. He'd contacted her out of the blue, in response to an ad that hadn't even been intended for him—she can't say that he struck her as being particularly shy.) *But I've thought about it, sure, I think about it all the time. I'm a chronic people-watcher, and, you know, sometimes you just fall in love with a person on the spot. It's terrible, really. The last time it happened I was at Stanley's—do you know Stanley's? It's that fruit place up on Elston. Going there is a must if you're a vegetarian. Anyway, there was this kind of beautiful hippie-looking girl there buying a bag of pomegranates. It was a hot day and I'd been riding my bike and all I could think about was how nice it would be to go to the park with this earth-mother kind of woman, lie down in the grass and feed one another pomegranate seeds.*

Hmm, she'd thought, surprised to find herself feeling slightly charmed. The romanticism of his answer strikes her as pretty self-conscious, almost forced, she's aware that it's not really a straight answer, that it's more a kind of flirting, a way for him to put his best side forward, but this flatters her more than anything else—it's been a while since a guy has bothered to put his best side forward for her. And she has to admit that his best side looks pretty good. OK, the *earth-mother* bit made her cringe a little—she did her share of acid back in the day,

sure, but she can't say that she *particularly* wants to end up flirting with some latter-day hippie, if that's what this guy is. But she gets the sense that he isn't. And so she thinks *fuck it* and when she's writing her reply she types in her number and writes *give me a call if you want to get together sometime. Maybe we can go out and grab a cup of coffee.*

She hesitates before clicking *send*, remembering Anita's warning: *I don't really trust how people seem over the Internet.* Plus she's always wary about giving out her number to somebody she doesn't know, just as a general rule she feels it's worth avoiding. But she's in a position right now where she feels like she needs to be a little more open when people come along. *I don't trust how people seem over the Internet, either,* she thinks. *That's why I want to talk to him on the phone.* You can tell a lot, from hearing a person's voice, from seeing whether they're able to hold up their side of an actual spoken dialogue. And so she sends.

After work she gets together with Anita for a cocktail but doesn't tell her that she gave Nate her number; she's not in the mood to hear Anita's response; she suspects it will be accompanied by the judgmental tone she's begun to think of as being *inevitable*.

The next day—Saturday—she's lying on the couch reading a copy of the Design Awards issue of *Wallpaper** when her phone starts to ring; she looks at the display and sees that it's him. She gets a little jolt of excitement and answers.

—Hello? she says.

—Um, hi, is— he pauses, as if mentally checking that he has her name right —is Lydia there?

—Speaking, she says, a grin starting to form on her face. She's a little bit happy to see hear a note of nervous awkwardness in his voice—there's something about that that lets her know that he's excited, and this feels flattering to her.

—Hey, um, it's Nate.

—Hi, she says.

—Hi, he says.

Silence for a moment, where both of them seem to be kind of mentally acknowledging the situation. Here they are, talking on the phone—neither of them have exactly *acknowledged* their interest in the other but its presence can be felt, palpably, this very second.

—Um, he says, —I wanted to call you because—well—you asked about coffee and I was hoping maybe we could, uh, work out a plan? And maybe talk for a minute? If now's a good time?

—It is, Lydia says. She's in full grin now. His voice sounds normal. Perfectly normal. She's not exactly sure what she might have been expecting, all she knows is that he sounds normal, and that this makes her feel obscurely glad.

—OK, he says. —Well—um—hi.

—Hi, Lydia says.