

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.

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The subway rattles and squeals through darkness. Denise finds the spot where she left off in her book (Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*); with her fingernail she traces a line beneath the sentence *I desired always to stretch the night and fill it fuller and fuller with dreams*. She moves her eyes over words for a bit but a page later she realizes that she's not actually taking anything in, she's not actually *reading*, per se. She sighs, drops the book into her lap, lifts up her sunglasses so she can rub the bridge of her nose. She's distracted. It was a long night at work. The drawers didn't total out right, to the tune of about forty bucks; she had to go through the whole hassle of counting it out a second time, then a third just to make sure, then filling out the discrepancy report, and now she has to worry about whether new cashier Cheryl is stealing or is just the victim of some legitimate oversight, when what she really wants to do is say *whatever, it's just forty bucks, if she needs it that bad she should have it*. But she knows Mark, the owner, won't see it that way. *Whatever*, Denise thinks. She closes her eyes and tries to relax, lets the subway jolt her body this way and that.

After a minute she opens her eyes again and looks at the other people on the train. It's the usual-looking late evening mix: two guys in suits, animatedly discussing something in a binder that they're passing back and forth between them; an art-school-looking girl with green hair, holding a big mailing tube between her knees; an older Hispanic woman keeping watch over two pudgy little kids who are involved in peering at everyone. Denise gives them

a little wave which they only respond to by maintaining their fascinated stare. She smiles thinly and looks away.

Across the aisle from her there's a guy whose head is kind of thrown back, like he's been stricken somehow. His red face is fixed in an expression of immeasurable grief; his eyes are screwed shut and his mouth gapes open, although silently; it's as though he's gotten trapped in that moment where a sob clenches up and turns into a gag. Denise notes the filthiness of his army jacket, the patchiness of his beard, the dead sheen of his hair, the grubby memo pad he polishes smooth with his thumb, and she wonders how long it's been since he last received a gesture of compassion. She feels like it would be so easy to unlock him; that all she needs to do is intuit the place where he clutches his woundedness most tightly, to find that place and touch it, gently, get it to release. She feels like she could do it: help this person in this way.

That's naïve, she tells herself. *It's not as easy as that, pain. Look at Johnny.* She's been living with Johnny for over a year now, watching him stumble around, broken and sick, and in that time she has found no *single touch* that will start him healing. *It doesn't work like that, like magic*, she scolds herself. If she has to imagine what *healing* looks like she imagines it looks like the Al-Anon meetings she was going to in the summer: getting up there, fucking week after week, trying to *articulate* your shit out to people, and fucking breaking down and crying every single time. Maybe after years of that you'd finally be cried out, or something. She hasn't been to a meeting since August—she knows she should go back but she's just been busy. She's been trying to start drawing again, and so when she has a free evening she has to make a choice

between going over to the church basement or trying to relearn how to make meaningful marks on paper. Right now the process of making the marks is winning.

It's been going OK: she's been doing these complicated glyphs lately, fields full of slashes angled against one another. Sometimes she feels like page is a gate and that the quick marks she makes are attempts to activate that gate somehow, to tap into some energy *behind* the page, or *within* the page, to open up some vent through which holy fire could come, burning her clean, healing her by scouring her down to the bone.