

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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—Oh my God, says Fletcher, scraping the last few bits of shepherd’s pie out of his bowl. —

That was so good.

—If you want some more— Cassandra says, waving her hand lazily towards the kitchen.

—Ugh, Fletcher says. —I don’t think I could do *more*. I’m totally stuffed. So good though.

—It’s nice, Cassandra says, —to have something *hearty* in the winter—

Fletcher takes a sip of hot cider from his mug and nods. Outside the window, snow whistles through the yellow light of the parking lot, and a lone guy, bundled up, hurries back to his car, carrying a huge red pizza insulator.

Fletcher places his empty bowl on the ottoman so that she can lay her head in his lap. —It’s good to have you here, she says, as he begins to work her snarls out.

—It’s good to be here, he says.

—Oof, Cassandra says. —I guess I should get up and do the dishes.

—Yuck, says Fletcher.

—I know, Cassandra says. —It seems kind of unfair, right? I spent like an hour making that dinner and we ate it in—what—like ten minutes? And now it's going to take me another half an hour to clean up the kitchen?

—You want me to take care of the dishes? Fletcher says.

—Hmmm, says Cassandra.

—I'll wash, Fletcher says. —You know this about me. I'm happy to wash.

—True, says Cassandra.

—Just say the word, Fletcher says.

—OK, Cassandra says. —Consider it said.

—OK, Fletcher says. —You have to dry, though.

—I accept these terms, Cassandra says.

And so they go into the kitchen, and they stand there while the sink fills, talking in hushed voices so as not to wake Leander, who went to bed more-or-less on time after Fletcher read to him. (*No foot-dragging*, Cassandra noted. *He must be trying to be on good behavior for you.*)

—OK, Fletcher says. —Hand me that pot. She does, and he submerges it into the suds and starts giving it a vigorous scrubbing.

She holds the towel in her hands and watches him. —What a good man, she says, half-teasing. —If I'd married somebody like you in the first place things might have turned out totally different.

—But if you'd married somebody like me in the first place, Fletcher says, rinsing the pot, —then you and I would never have met.

—True enough, Cassandra says. —But I'm sure you'd be making some other woman happy, so it would all work out.

She dries the pot and rummages it into the cupboard, and he ponders what she's said for a bit, while he washes the plates. Finally he says —Do you ever— and then breaks off, going back to the pondering.

—Do I ever what? she asks, after an interval.

—I don't know, he says, although he does know. —Do you ever think about what it would be like? If you and I were married?

—Do I ever think about what it would be like, she says. —Yeah, she says, after a minute.

—I guess. Yeah, I'd have to say that I do.

—And? Fletcher asks. —I mean—how does it seem to you?

—What do you mean? she says, stacking up the dried plates.

—I mean does it seem *cool* or *lame* or—

—No, Cassandra says. —Definitely not *lame*—it's just—it's a hard question to answer because in a way I don't really see that it would be all that different from how things are *now*, you know? I don't think there'd be this big *change* the second we became husband and wife. You know—we'd spend time together, and it would be nice, and I would love you, and you'd love me back, and that—that would be it really.

—That's interesting, Fletcher says.

—You were picturing something different? Cassandra says.

—I was thinking something a little more Bonnie and Clyde, Fletcher says. —Robbing banks, staying one step ahead of the law, perishing in a hail of gunfire—that sort of thing.

—They weren't married, Cassandra says.