

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.

## 39 / PRAYING

Denise sits at the edge of the bed and looks down at her feet, gives her toes a flex. A votive candle sits on a brass plate nearby. She watches its fat flame wobble lazily; she inhales the perfumed incense smoke. She bites down on her lower lip.

What she wants to do, in this moment, is pray. *Praying* is a thing she's been thinking about doing all winter long but hasn't yet done. She's not sure she really even knows how, actually. Her parents weren't religious, and she went to public school—they had this moment of silence thing after the Pledge of Allegiance, but she never used it to pray. (She remembers feeling profoundly awkward during those moments, feeling like she was expected to think *a certain type of thoughts* but not really being exactly sure as to what those thoughts might be, which left her with a vague sensation of failure every time.) So the Al-Anon meetings she went to over the summer, each of which opened with a group prayer, were basically her first attempts, and even then she can't really say that she herself actually *prayed*, mostly she sat there and listened, again feeling kind of discomfited and on the spot (as she feels now, sitting there on the edge of the bed, biting her lip) not knowing what exactly she should be doing.

She didn't really feel anything during those group prayers, nothing really *happened* to her during them—but she remembers standing around after the meetings with a Styrofoam cup of surprisingly good coffee in one hand and a danish in the other, she remembers that she'd

ask people what they would do when it got hard, she wanted to know how they did it, what their *strategies* were for getting through another day, and almost universally everybody told her some variation on the same thing. They *prayed*. They *talked to God*. They *gave their worries to Jesus*. And at the time Denise kept wondering—*what could that possibly be like?* She almost couldn't imagine it.

At this point she pretty much has to admit that she's stopped going to Al-Anon—she hasn't been to a meeting since summer—and she keeps wondering whether she got anything out of it. It was good to talk to people, for once she felt able to talk about Johnny to people who would understand, it made her feel good, for a little while—but if that's, you know, *it*, then she really has to reconsider whether going to the meetings was time well spent. And so she keeps coming back to the praying thing. That was what people told her to do again and again. That was what they told her would work. And that's what she wants—to come away with something that works.

Getting started feels embarrassing to her (she had to wait for an evening when Johnny wouldn't be around, for fear that he'd walk in and catch her in the act, ask what she was doing). Even more dauntingly, it feels scary. She's worried about what might happen if she does it and likes it. She doesn't know whether she can believe in God without becoming some kind of conformist—the idea of *conformity* scares her as much as it ever did, possibly even more so now, now that the entire nation seems to be in the grip of some kind of psychotic sickness. She doesn't want to end up as some right-wing Christian asshole and she doesn't really understand what other options might be available to her. But she thinks of Jesus; she thinks of the martyrs she's read about in her book, and they seem so distant from

the average American Protestant that she knows that there's a way to believe without becoming an intolerant, pleasure-hating asshole. She just hopes she can find her way to it.

—Dear God, she begins, and even though she's speaking at a level that's barely more than a mutter, she cringes immediately upon hearing the sound of her voice in the otherwise quiet room. She breaks off. *You can just pray in your head*, she tells herself, as she has told herself before, but that seems, somehow, like a cheat: she feels like you really need to do it out loud in order for it to count.

—Dear God, she starts again, hating the words, hating that her prayer, her first prayer, is starting off sounding like a business letter. She revises it, in her head, to something more “religious-sounding”—*O Most Merciful God*—something more like what God maybe would expect, and she considers starting over a third time, but then denies herself this indulgence.

—I'm sorry, she says, —that I don't really know how to do this—it feels like I'm fucking up— (*Oh my God*, she thinks, *you just cursed, you can't curse in a prayer*). —I'm sorry, she says again, —I didn't mean to—I don't know if that kind of language offends you—it's—it's what I've got.

She breathes. Her eyes are clenched shut.

—Anyway, she says, —I just wanted to try—to try talking to you—to see—to see what happened. To see if anything would happen. I don't want that to sound like I'm testing you

or challenging you or anything but I just—I'm not very good at this. I don't know how to do this. Maybe you're OK with that.

She waits, as if possibly expecting a thunderclap. She breathes.

—I just wanted to ask you if maybe you could try to look out for Johnny, she says. — Things are—things are kind of rough for him—they've always been hard for him, and I don't really know why that is, and I don't really know if praying for him would help, but I thought—I thought I'd try, because I want to see him get better.

It hits her then, an answer: that what Johnny needs to get better is to go back home, to be with his parents again, that they can take care of him better than she can. She opens her mouth to say something else but she doesn't say anything; she's struck by the answer, she has to turn it around in her mind to see if it holds up, whether it's a good idea or a bad one. It's something to think about. And it occurs to her that the prayer is over.

She opens her eyes. She wonders what is different.