

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.

48 / ARTSY GUYS

—So then? Anita asks, while Lydia completes her order.

—I don't know, says Lydia, dropping a single in the tip box, —by that point we were about to come in to his stop—he gets off at Clark and Lake—and he said *I've enjoyed this conversation* and I said *me too* and he said that we could continue it over coffee sometime if I wanted and he gave me his card.

—Grande latte, skim, Anita says to the smocked barista, offering out a five between her index and middle fingers. —He gave you his card? she asks, waving away her change.

—Yup, Lydia confirms, and she can't suppress a giddy grin. She wants to stomp her feet. The trees outside on the street are in blossom.

—Let me see, Anita says.

—Okay, sure, Lydia says. She snaps open her purse and starts rummaging around among the life-detritus in there: loose tampons, little tins of mints, compacts. —Watch, I probably already lost it, she says. She's still in mid-dig when the barista calls her order.

—Hang on a sec, she says to Anita, and she hurries to the end of the counter to pick up her Americano, her purse gaping open and threatening to spill.

In another minute they're seated, and Lydia hands off the card. —Nicholas *Tarski*, Anita reads. She flips over the card to look at the blank back. —Russian?

—Maybe? Lydia answers. —I always thought he looked more Mediterranean. Greek, Italian, something like that.

Anita nods. —Did you tell him you took out a Missed Connections ad?

—*God*, no, Lydia says, giving Anita a look of scouring contempt: surely you don't think I'm *that* stupid? Anita responds by looking bored and raising her eyebrows: a sort of *whatever* face. She hands the card back.

—Systems analyst, Lydia reads. —I think I might be in over my head with this guy. I don't know what a *systems analyst* is. I don't even know what *systems* are.

—No time like the present to find out, Anita says.

—I don't know, Lydia says. —This guy just seems—I mean, he's obviously a business type—my tastes seem to tend more towards artsy guys—

—You only *think* your tastes tend towards artsy guys, Anita says. —But that’s why you’re always so miserable in your relationships.

—I’m not sure I follow, Lydia says.

—I mean, artsy guys—correct me if I’m wrong here, but in my experience they’re flaky, they’re unreliable, they’re self-absorbed—they’re basically *unemployable*—you get involved with them cause you think they’re going to be *sensitive* or whatever but mostly *sensitivity* is kind of a nice way of saying *self-pity*.

—So what makes you the expert on artsy guys, Lydia asks.

—I used to be married to one.

—Hm. Okay.

—So what do you think? Are you going to call him? Anita asks.

—I don’t know, Lydia says. —My plate is feeling a little *full* right now.

—Cause things are still going well with—

—Gary, yeah, Lydia says.

—You mentioned he was coming to town to visit—?

—Next weekend. It'll be the first time we've seen one another since the wedding. But we've been talking on the phone like every night, every other night—

—What does he do again? Anita asks.

—He works in a custom framing shop, Lydia says, and she cringes inwardly at these words, at the way they sound compared against the words *systems analyst*, and she hates the skeptical face that Anita makes, and she hates herself for cringing, for feeling ashamed of Gary, who has been nothing but kind and charming and attentive in their phone conversations, who has been so eager to make a plan to come to Chicago for a weekend to see her, who sent her a letter, the first actual *letter* she's gotten in years, in which he wrote words like *I feel really fortunate to have met you*. She put the letter on the table next to her bed so that she can have it near her while she sleeps.

—I know what *I'd* do, says Anita.

—What's that, says Lydia flatly.

—It never hurts to keep your options open, Anita says. —Just a little rule of thumb.