

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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—Hey, Melissa says.

—Hey, Jakob says. He doesn't hear an immediate response, just some fumbling on the other end of the line, so he asks —You got a couple of minutes? To talk?

—Yeah, sure, she says. —I'm just throwing together some dinner.

—What are you having?

—I'm making a big salad.

—That sounds nice. You know what I had?

—What?

—KFC, Jakob says.

—Gross.

—Actually it was great. You know—at this new place I take the bus home, and let me tell you, when I'm riding the bus, with my little KFC box, *issuing forth* delicious smells, I can tell that everybody sitting around me is *totally jealous*.

—I'm not jealous, Melissa says. —My salad is going to be delightful. I've got—*olives* in it, and little bits of *ham*—

—That *does* sound pretty good, Jakob admits.

—I'm grating some Parmesan *cheese* on top of it—

—Okay, okay—your salad sounds delicious.

—Thank you, Melissa says.

A pause.

—So, Melissa says, —how's life in Chicago? What's this *you moved* business?

—Yeah, Jakob says. —Uh—Freya and I split up.

—Ah—Melissa says. She takes a minute, seems to be considering what to say. —I'm sorry, she offers.

—It's OK, Jakob says. —It was probably time. I mean, I feel like the relationship had kind of *been over* for a while, you know?

—Yeah, yeah, I get it. I mean—from the way that I've heard you talking about your relationship with her—it's kind of shitty to say *it's probably for the best*, but—

—But it's probably for the best, Jakob says, smirking.

—I don't know. Is that the feeling you have about it?

—It is, Jakob says, —I guess. It's hard, you know, to sort of *adjust* to not being in a relationship after having been in one for so long—but I think it might be good, to be alone for a while—I like thinking that it'll help me to get my shit together somehow.

—So you're not seeing anyone new?

—No, says Jakob. —I feel like I kind of want to take some time, sort some things out in my head—

—See, *that*, Melissa says, —that's something that I've never really been able to do. No matter how lame a relationship is, I can't ever make myself get out of it until I've got the next one lined up. In the last like *ten years* the only time I've really been *single* was right after Neil and I broke off our engagement.

—So, uh, Jakob asks, —how are things with Steve, then?

—Funny you should ask that, Melissa says. —Steve is—Steve is out of the picture.

—Really.

—Yeah—and that’s like a perfect example. I mean, you remember, even back at Christmastime I was like *this guy’s a tool*, I pretty much *knew* that the relationship was—how can I put this?—*inviolate*, I could have told him to *take a hike* at any time. But I let things linger on cause I was waiting, you know—waiting for somebody new to come along.

—And someone has—? Jakob says, although he’s basically figured out the answer already. He can feel the delicate structure of his fantasy begin to collapse inside him.

—Yeah, Melissa says. —This guy Jesse—we’ve only been seeing each other for maybe three or four weeks now, but he’s *really* nice and things seem to be going *really* well.

—Hey, Jakob says, forcing cheer into his voice. —That’s great. So much of his plan, he begins to realize, depended on her staying with Steve, the lame guy, the tool, the guy who wasn’t smart—*the guy he could beat*. He could beat a guy she was unhappy with. He’s not so sure he can beat a guy who’s *really nice*. In his mind, Columbus slowly disintegrates.

—Yeah, says Melissa, —yeah. I’m really happy. After a pause, she says —Listen to me. Here you are, trying to talk about your breakup, and then I come in and start talking about how *great* things are for me right now—that’s kind of fucked up, I’m sorry—

—No, Jakob says, —you’re cool; it’s fine.

—I just—I don’t want it to sound like I’m *rubbing it in* or anything—

—No, Jakob says. —There’s no reason for us *both* to—

Feel miserable, are the words he leaves out.