

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.

55 / WORTH SOMETHING

Lydia opens her eyes, and when she opens her eyes she realizes that she's in Nicholas' bed, a fact which immediately activates all her memories of last night, memories which include him going down on her and her returning the favor. She winces—it had seemed OK to do those things last night, after her third glass of wine it wasn't that hard to go with *oh well, as long as I'm here*, but now, with thoughts of Gary rising through the throbbing fog of hangover, it's beginning to look like the primary feeling of the morning is going to be *remorse*. *Fuck*, she thinks.

She manages, after a few minutes of hiding her face in the pillow, to sit up on the edge of the bed. She needs to pee and to get a glass of water, but the unfamiliar apartment and the post-wine headache pounding bluntly in her skull combine in order to make it feel frankly impossible to figure out how to meet these needs. *The bathroom's down the hall*, she remembers, trying to will herself to get out of bed and go.

In bed behind her, Nicholas stirs. He shifts towards her, manages to get one arm around her waist. She removes it.

—Don't, she says.

—What? Nicholas says, groggily, the kind of *what* that means *why are you acting like this?*

—Just don't, Lydia says. —I need to— she says, and then she breaks off, not knowing exactly what it is she needs to do. —I just need to get myself together, she finally mutters, at a volume that's nearly inaudible. Nicholas is silent: either he didn't hear her, or he's sulking, or he's fallen back asleep; Lydia's not quite sure and she can't quite manage to care.

She gets up, picks her clothes up off the floor, and hugs them in a wadded ball against her chest. She sticks her head out into the hallway cautiously, as though there might be somebody out there, although she knows that Nicholas lives alone.

In the bathroom, she splashes some water on her face and gets a drink from a little paper cup that comes out of a plastic wall-mounted dispenser. She wishes she could brush her teeth but she doesn't have a toothbrush with her; she thought about packing one in her purse before the date but at the time the idea struck her as vaguely *skanky*. She thinks about just using one of Nicholas'—there are three in the stand by the sink—but she's not sure that she's really prepared to do something this morning that's so weirdly intimate. Instead she fills the paper cup again and takes second drink. Then a third. Then she gets her clothes on and goes into the living room. She lies down on the charcoal sofa and tries not to think about anything.

After a while she hears Nicholas come down the hall. When he gets about to the threshold of the living room he stops; she can feel him looking at her. She can tell that he's running through some set of thoughts but she's not sure that she really wants to know what they are.

Finally he says —Hey.

—Hey, she says, without opening her eyes.

—I'm going to make some coffee, he says. —Do you want some?

—Yes, please, she says.

He goes off, and she listens to noises of coffee-preparation and tries to wrestle her headache into submission. He turns on a kitchen radio which begins nattering stuff about United Airlines, and she marvels at the very existence of someone who would want to be hearing about that kind of stuff this soon after having gotten out of bed.

—I have some bagels in the freezer, he calls to her. —Do you want me to toast one for you?

—Just the coffee for now, she says.

—You take milk and sugar?

—Both, please, she says.

After a minute he brings her a cup; she opens her eyes finally and sits up to take it. He sits across from her on the couch, in a rumpled undershirt and pajama pants, and he smiles at her eagerly, and she can suddenly see, so clearly, just how badly he wants her to like him.

The nakedness of the desire startles her; it's maybe the first thing he's ever done around her that she recognizes as genuinely human. It's the first time that she feels like she can see what lies behind all the impressive façade, and what she sees is a little boy, desperate to be told that he's good, that he's worth something after all. And for a moment she wants to draw that little boy to her and make some attempt to comfort him, but then she thinks of Gary again and the words *I can't do this* come into her brain.

They must show on her face, as well, because a look of faint concern replaces his smile, and he asks —Are you OK?

You have to do this, she thinks. *You have to do this now.*

—We need to talk, she says.

—Uh oh, he says.

—I'm sorry, she says.