

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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Fletcher lies on the couch, in the dark, his head propped on a pillow, a blanket pulled up to his chin. It's about nine, and he has Cassandra on the phone, about three times a week they talk in the late evening like this, after Leander's been put to bed, in Pennsylvania. That's how it's evolved between them. Three times a week seems, to Fletcher, to be frequent enough for their updates to contain some detail and nuance, but he wishes they spoke more often, he feels, sometimes, like he's losing his sense of the precise grain of her days, and other times he feels that this sense, this true sense of what exactly a day is really *like* for her, is something that he has never had, and he tells himself that he's a fool if he believes otherwise. Even when she lived here, in the same city as him, she always felt further away than he really wanted; it never really felt natural for him to just call her up in the middle of the day to say *I just wanted to see how you were doing*.

He lifts his glass from his belly and tries to guide vodka into his mouth without lifting his head from the pillow. He listens to her speak and tries to think about how to ask what he wants to ask.

—Listen, he says finally. —Can I talk to you about something?

—Sure, she says, something of a shrug in her voice.

—I was wondering, he says, —what you would think about me coming out there to stay with you for a while.

There's a short silence, and then she says —When you say *a while*—

—I mean, like, a term of indefinite duration.

—A term of indefinite duration, Cassandra says. —Aren't you the romantic.

Fletcher sighs. —Let me start over, he says.

—I'm listening.

—Hang on, Fletcher says, sitting up. —I think I need to drink more.

After another slug of vodka he tries again. —Okay, he says, —I've just—I've been thinking—it's just—well—I really like you.

In the silence he can somehow hear her smirk in response to the inadequacy of this opening.

—And—I don't know—it just seems—it just doesn't make *sense*, you know, for you to be out there in Pennsylvania and lonely—and for me to be here in *Chicago* and lonely—and for both of us to be like *missing* one another so hard—

—Yes, Cassandra says, the sense of teasing fun beginning to drain from her voice. He can hear, through the phone, an ice cube clink against the rim of her glass. —It is hard.

—And I mean—I’m at a place where I don’t really know what I’m doing, Fletcher says. —I have this degree but no *job*—and I have this manuscript but no *publisher*—and it just seems like if there was ever a good time for me to just pack up and *go somewhere* it seems like that time would basically be now.

—Right, Cassandra says, —but it’s just—things out here feel so *impermanent*. I mean, I don’t know if I’m going to stay out here in Pennsylvania or what. You know? In another year I might—I don’t know what.

—Well, sure, Fletcher says. —And at this time next year, who knows, I might have a teaching job somewhere. I mean, I’m really hoping to start sending the book out this summer, maybe if I get a publisher interested then I’ll have something when I go to MLA— but if we’re both having a year where we’re trying to figure out what we’re trying to do next then it doesn’t really make sense to spend that year *apart*, when instead we could spend the year *together* and, you know, try to figure it out that way.

—I don’t know, Cassandra says. —I mean, I’ve thought about it, a lot, and it would be great to have you—and I know Leander would love it if you were around more often—but, I don’t know, I feel like you’ve got this whole network of friends in Chicago, I would hate to feel like I was trying to tear you away from that—

—It’s mostly Clark and Freya who I’d miss, Fletcher says. —And, yeah, it’d be hard, leaving them—I mean, I love them, but I love you and Leander in—in a different way. And, I don’t know, Clark definitely has her own thing going on with this guy Oliver, I feel like we hardly ever see one another any more. And Freya—

He thinks about Freya for a second, alone in her apartment now that Jakob’s gone, and he thinks, once again, about what it would be like if he stayed here in town and moved in as her roommate. He even wonders, for a fleeting second, about whether she’ll *be okay* if he were to move to Pennsylvania, although he doesn’t dwell for long on what it would mean for her to not *be okay*.

—I just think it would be fine, Fletcher says. —I’m ready.