

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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And so as June comes to a close Jakob sits at work and holds a page from his page-a-day calendar in his hand, and notes that he's about to complete Month Three of being single. He remembers the words he said to Melissa the last time they talked on the phone, all those sturdy little platitudes about how *it might be good to be alone for a while*, and he tries to make them feel true again, but the more he tries this the more he comes to feel that they weren't even true the first time he said them, that they were just words, the telephonic equivalent of a brave face, something that would make him seem confident, secure in himself—desirable.

He folds the page from the calendar in half, and then in half again, and he holds the resulting square of paper between his pointer fingers.

He thinks again about Melissa and he realizes that they haven't talked since that conversation, the conversation where she told him that she was dating someone new—what was the guy's name? he can't even remember—and he tells himself that he should call her, that to not call her is caddish, that his silence makes his ignoble intentions all too obvious. If he calls her he can pretend that those intentions didn't ever exist, that he wasn't really sniffing around in her ruined life looking for sex, all he wanted was just to be a good friend, all he was up to was just *checking in, seeing how she was doing*. Then he realizes that the whole reason he wants to create this illusion, to put forth this false, disinterested self, is because on

some dim level he still wants to keep his options open with her, that even now he's thinking that she might be someone he could potentially date in the future, and to keep silent feels too much like he's burning his bridges. He should call. He should be the good friend, muster up the necessary cheer, bide his time until everything (someday) falls into the correct position and unlocks for them. In the meantime he would at least have someone to talk to. In the meantime he would at least be able to tell a joke, to a woman, and know that she would laugh.

The little clock that lives in the lower-right-hand corner of his computer screen reads 5:45: only fifteen minutes left before he can leave. It's Wednesday night, which means that he'll be going out with his work friends to catch dinner and see a movie; this week it'll be *Land of the Dead*, which he's actually excited about. He likes hanging out with that group—they even have a girl with them now, Billie. He flirts with her sometimes, and it feels good, but he knows that she has a long-distance boyfriend, getting his MFA in Toronto, and the few times he's asked her about him she always gives indications that she's totally committed to waiting for him to finish out his two-year program and move back to Chicago. So he knows that their flirtation is essentially empty, a trifling that passes the time, and he's OK with that. It feels good to be getting at least some positive attention. He wishes, though, that there were more women in the group, or more women at work in general that he was interested in, leads he could follow, anything to keep him from having to set up an Internet dating profile, or from just going out to the bars, to try it that way.

There's always Freya, he thinks, as he sorts the papers on his desk into piles, so that he'll be able to get started more easily tomorrow. *You could call her up, see how things are going with her. It's been a while. Maybe she's feeling lonely too.*

That's not a good idea, he tells himself, and he runs (once again) through the reasons why he hasn't called her. *She was mean to you; she cheated on you; she didn't respect you.* It's a kind of check to see if the reasons remain convincing, and he finds that they do.

He checks his e-mail, making sure that none of his co-workers require anything of him at this late point in the day, and he waits for it to be six PM, so that he can go out, into the city, to eat cheeseburgers with his friends and wait for things to change.