

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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When Denise gets home, she finds Johnny on the bathroom floor, drunk. He's on his knees, bent over, his forehead resting on the tile. There's puke all around the base of the toilet, flecks of it in his hair. He still has a bottle of gin grasped in one hand.

—Oh, Denise says. —Oh, my God, honey.

It's been a hard summer. This is the third time she's found him this drunk in the last month alone. She doesn't want to admit it, but she has to: *things aren't getting better*. There was a while there where she hoped they were: back in the winter it actually seemed like his drinking was beginning to taper off, but now things are as bad as they've ever been, worse, maybe.

—Sit up, she says. —Come on, baby, sit up. She kneels next to him, tries to get her hands square on his shoulders; he tries to twist away from her. He's only wearing a pair of boxers, and his upper body is blotchy and sweat-slick, and he succeeds in getting out of her grasp and crashing down to the floor. His eyes are clenched shut. He opens his mouth and retches wrenchingly.

—Baby, she says. —Baby, you have to sit up. Come on. She tries again, and this time, he cooperates and she manages to get him propped up against the wall.

—Give me the bottle, she says, and he grunts at her, a flat grunt of negation, his eyes still closed. She sets to work prying it out of his hand and he grunts again, louder, and tries to yank it away.

You need to get him home, she thinks. Back to his parents. She's thought this before; it was the answer that came to her when she prayed for one back in the spring. She even got online one night and found their phone number through the Internet; she wrote it down, intending to use it, but instead she tucked it someplace secret, telling herself *just wait. Wait and see if things get worse. You can use it if things get really bad.*

Are they really bad yet?

She gets the bottle out of his hand and upturns it over the sink. —No, Johnny says. —No, no.

I'm sorry, she thinks, but she doesn't say it.

He gets back onto his hands and knees, and begins coming towards her in what maybe is intended as a lurch. She leaves the draining bottle in the basin and gets down on the floor again, guides his head into her lap. His face is contorted and wet with frustration and pain. He begins to sob.

—Ssh, she says, stroking his head, picking bits of vomit out of his hair and depositing them in the toilet. —Ssh.

She remembers a passage from Simone Weil that she copied into a notebook this spring:

Those who are unhappy have no need for anything in this world but people capable of giving them their attention. But she also remembers the other half: *The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it.*

—Johnny, she says. —Johnny, listen to me. I think—I think you need to go home. Home to your parents.

He looks up at her, his eyes swollen, incomprehending, accusing her of some impossible betrayal.

—They can—they can see that you get help, Denise says. —I think that's important for you right now.

—No, Johnny says. —No, no. Not important. I already got “help.” Fucking—six months in the halfway house—not going back—no.

His head, in her lap, begins to thrash, and then he goes still and suddenly clammy. —Sick, he says. —Need to be sick—

—Come on, she says, and she helps him over to the toilet. He retches twice, nothing comes out other than a long strand of drool, and then the third time he opens his mouth and a torrent of red vomit comes out.

That's blood, Denise notes, an icy shard of panic surfacing within her. *Blood is new*.

She doesn't know what to do here, whether she should call the hospital or what. Johnny expels one more stream of puke and then gasps for breath. His back beaded with new sweat.

—Johnny, she says.

He pants.

—Are you OK? she asks.