

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.

67 / HOLDOUTS

After she's watched Fletcher have a couple of beers, she decides she should turn in, she has to be at work early tomorrow, new issue of the magazine needs to be put to bed. *I'll see you again before you go, right?* she says. *Absolutely*, he says, and she nods and heads down the stairs and out the door, into the muggy arclit night.

She passes a Walgreens, pasted with translucent banners depicting happy people, and she thinks (again) *so Fletcher's going to get married*. She hasn't quite been able to wrap her mind around this properly—one of the things that helped bond her and Fletcher together when was sitting off on the sidelines while other graduates of their MFA program paired up and got engaged to one another. *Marrying themselves off*, was how Clark used to think of it, and she got to sit, with Fletcher, sort of defiantly apart, thinking of themselves as *principled holdouts*, almost sneering, thinking *it's career suicide, to be too happy, too early*.

Career suicide. She smirks bitterly when she thinks these words. The fact that she once was able to imagine that she would have a career—a writing career—that would matter enough to be considered *alive* seems almost impossibly naïve to her now; the fact that she made profound decisions to safeguard the life of this career seems bizarre. *We all thought we were going to be great writers*, she thinks, *now we're lucky if we manage to keep up a blog*. (A few of her

former classmates have them; she checks in every once in a while, reads up on how their kids are doing.)

Maybe Fletcher will still make it, she thinks. She's read his manuscript in its current form, and it's good, and this deal where he's out in Pennsylvania with his days free sounds like it might give him the kind of time one needs to do the dreary dance necessary to actually publish something. It's that dance, ultimately, that Clark can't stand—she likes writing but she knows that, in the end, writing something will always lead to having to try to take it out there and interest somebody else in it, an act that increasingly feels, to her, like an act of prostitution.

Someone drives by and honks at her; she flips her middle finger reflexively.

So maybe Fletcher will get his book out, and then he'll probably get married, and then—what?—then it'll just be her. The last holdout.

What's this all about, really? she asks herself, as she turns onto a grassy boulevard. *Is this envy? Are you wanting Fletcher's life? The whole marriage thing starting to look better to you now?*

That's not exactly it. It's not that she *wants* to get married any more than she ever did—it's more that she's *afraid* of what will happen if she doesn't. She supposes that this is what people mean when they say they enjoy the quote-unquote *security* of marriage—they must mean that it alleviates some sort of *fear*. The fear of being alone in, say, your fifties, when you finally no longer find yourself fascinating.

She thinks about Oliver, tries to imagine being married to him. It's a thought that doesn't come particularly easily. It's not that she's unhappy with him, exactly—ever since they got their weird shit mostly worked out things have been going pretty well. It's just that she has no idea what that relationship holds in the long term. Mostly, their relationship goes like this: once or twice a week he calls her, and asks if she wants to get together, and she looks inside herself and finds that, yes, she does, and she goes over to his place or he comes to hers and they hang out and eat food and fuck, and it's good, she feels the happiness of being connected to another person, and then in the morning they go their separate ways and she doesn't really think about him that much until the next time they get together. She figures that if, at some point, he asks if she wants to get together and she doesn't, things will have to change, but until then she's pretty content with the arrangement.

But can it last? she wonders. Can people have that kind of relationship for thirty years? What happens, she wonders, if he wakes up one day and decides that he doesn't want to be in a relationship with her anymore—she doesn't want to have to *start over* at age whatever. She doesn't want to have to *start over*, period. She wants things to stay exactly the way they are now, forever.

Getting married doesn't guarantee anything, she thinks to herself, as she descends the stairs into the subway station. *It won't protect you from having to start over. Half of all marriages end in divorce. And if you get married out of fear—if you get married just because you feel like it's time to get married—that's pretty fucked up—*

She inserts her transit card and lets the turnstile return it to her. And then she goes down another set of stairs, and stands on the grimy platform, and waits for the train which will take her home, to her empty apartment.