

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.

7 / CONCENTRATION

Fletcher watches the yellowing sapling in Cassandra's hands; he watches the way she twists it gently from side to side to inspect the different ways that light can fall through it. He likes to see her process information: it gives him a glimpse of the way her mind works, a sense of its animal brightness. He watches her press her hand against a broad stone, testing for dampness, watches her sit and gather herself, arranging her field book, pens and satchel. A little bit further down the path, Leander thrashes a bush with a stick, exclaiming something, a battle cry that imitates one from some cartoon.

Cassandra draws a sort of line between Fletcher and Leander with her head. —Will you—? she says.

—Sure, Fletcher answers. —You going to be a minute here?

—Yeah—I'm going to try to get these leaves down—you see this in here, the way they're sort of crumbling? That kind of—lacy quality? That's what I want to try to get—

—Cool, Fletcher says. —I'll go mind the lad.

Without further discussion, Cassandra turns back to the leaves, begins to sketch out a preliminary shape in the field book. Fletcher walks backwards so that he can keep his eyes on her for just one minute more, then he heads deeper into the gorgeous arcades of the Pennsylvania woods.

It's so good to be here, he thinks, so good to see them doing well. He takes a deep breath of crisp autumnal air which midway through converts into a yawn. He and Cassandra stayed up late last night: after they'd put Leander to bed they curled up under her afghan and watched episodes of *The Office* off of a DVD she got through NetFlix. *That's one thing about Lancaster, she'd said, the video stores; they're terrible. I got so spoiled by Facets.*

—So that's the worst part? Fletcher had said, nuzzling into her. —The relative dearth of good video stores?

—Oh, the *worst* part? she said. —Oh no. The *worst* part is probably the fucking *conservativism*—

—And here I thought you were going to say the worst part was that *I'm* not here, he said, biting her.

—Hmm, she said, pushing him away. —That *is* a drawback, I'll admit. But, you know, there are good things, too. I mean it's just nice to be in a place where my kid can have a *yard*, you know? I mean I know that maybe sounds so horrible and suburban but I grew up in a place

where I could go and play *outside* and I just think—I think that’s really important for a kid: I mean, it was really important for *me*—

—No, Fletcher said, —I mean, I think you’re probably right—it’s just—it’s just hard, being in Chicago without you around—it’s weird—

—You’re sweet, Cassandra said. She presses on his nose with her index finger and he grimaces. —I know it’s hard, being apart—we’ll figure out something, though— She yawned—

On the path, in the woods, Fletcher catches up to Leander, who is busily using a twig to scrape a wet green patch off of a rock. —Hey buddy, Fletcher says. —What you working on there?

Leander looks up blankly, as if he hasn’t quite recognized that he’s been asked a question.

—Good scraping today? Fletcher asks. The blank look turns into a grin, which Fletcher accepts as an answer.

—You want a ride? he asks, crouching down and letting Leander scuttle up onto his shoulders and back. —Up you go, he says, rising. Leander giggles in his ear. —You’re getting big, Fletcher says, as the two of them through the woods. —Soon you’re going to be a big boy. Are you ready to be a big boy?

—No, says Leander.

—No? Fletcher says, pretending shock. —It's so much *fun* to be a grown-up, though. You get to drink coffee—and, uh, pay *bills*—

—No, no, no, sings Leander.

—Well, OK, Fletcher says. He turns around, begins heading back up the path to rejoin Cassandra, to see how she's doing on the drawing. —I guess you can just stay little forever. Is *that* what you want?

—No, says Leander. —You're silly.

—Well, what *do* you want, then?

—I want to be little *now* and big *later*, Leander explains.

—Little now and big later, eh? Fletcher says. —Well—we'll see if we can't work that out for you, OK?

He comes around the bend and Cassandra is there, crouched over her pad, concentrating on the plant and the drawing. He stops at a respectful distance so as not to interrupt. And it's then that something happens: it suddenly seems like he's standing outside of his familiar array of reasons, the one that he long ago labeled *reasons why I will never get married* and closed

himself inside. Now, as he looks at her, as he sees the way her chestnut hair gleams copper in the slant sunlight of autumn, as he holds the weight of her growing child on his back, now he's outside of that array, he can look at her and think *this is the woman I want to marry* and from this new perspective, outside of the locked shape of his old self, all the reasons he would once have used to convince himself that this was not true seem shockingly flimsy and small. It is as though he is now seeing everything in his life at a different scale. His mouth hangs open and his eyes flutter while he tries to make sense of this. It is all he can do not to just blurt out a proposal right then and there.

Last night, in bed, under the afghan, Fletcher had whispered into her ear: —I want to find a way that we can be together.

—We will, Cassandra had whispered back. —We will.