

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.

71 / GETTING EASIER

—We were able to reschedule, says Lydia, —he’s supposed to be coming in next weekend instead, so, I don’t know, I guess it worked out—but something about the whole episode just kind of left a bad taste in my mouth.

—Why do you think that is? asks Paul, cutting thin slices off of a cucumber.

—I don’t know, she says. —I mean—it’s just *frustrating*. I’ve been living in Chicago for five years now, and, you know, dating pretty regularly during that time, and it’s like I *finally* find someone who I really *like* and who I *get along with*—and they live five hours away. It just seems *perverse*. I’d almost rather be single.

—Is that true? Paul says.

—No, Lydia says, almost sulkily.

She flicks her wine glass for punctuation. Paul lifts the cucumber slices in his cradled hands and dumps them in with the spinach in the wooden bowl. He adds a quick hit of oil, and then begins to sift the salad lightly with tongs, waiting for her to speak again.

—It's just—I just feel like I have all this *attention* to give, and I just want someone who's going to *be around* so that I can give it to them. You know?

—You guys talk on the phone pretty regularly, Paul says. And then, sensing the inadequacy of what he's said, he adds: —That's not the same thing, I guess.

—No, Lydia says, —it isn't. Not really.

—Is the problem really that you're not able to *give* enough of your attention? Paul asks. — Or is the problem that you're not *getting* enough back?

Lydia considers this. —They're related, she says.

—Fair enough, Paul says.

—I mean, Lydia says, and then she pauses, trying to figure out what it is, really, that she means. She takes a sip of wine. —Let me just start here by saying I feel like I've been conditioned against saying that I'm not getting enough attention. Like—I feel like that's just something that I'm forbidden from saying. Every relationship I've ever been in where I've said that has come to an end like *immediately* after. So—yeah—*maybe* when I say I'm not getting to *give* enough what I mean is that I'm not really getting enough. But—she pauses to think—it's also true that if I were getting more I'd be able to give more, and I want that, I really do. Gary's a great guy and I feel like he's never really been, you know, *fawned over*, and I kind of want to be in a position where I can do that. Don't you get that feeling, a little bit,

with Scott? Like you just want to scoop him up and say *you're adorable* and just like let him soak it up a little?

—Yes, Paul says, smiling, —I think I know what you mean.

—And I don't *think* that I want to do that just so I'll, like, *get more attention* in response. I think I want to do that because—because I love him, and it just *feels good* to just like *love someone* and let them *absorb it*.

—Are you worried that he doesn't want that? Paul asks.

Lydia thinks about it. —No, she says finally. —I think he *does* want that. It just—it just takes *time* to get to the place where I can feel that starting to happen. And it's like by the time we finally *get* to that place it's time for one or the other of us to turn around and go home. I just want it to get *easier*.

—It does, Paul says.

—I just want it to be easier *now*, Lydia says.

—Well, Paul says, and he grins, and she has to grin back, because inside she suspects that Paul is right, that things with Gary will get easier. Three hundred miles between you and the person you love is a problem, a big tangled mass of difficulty right where everything should be clear and easy, but there are routes around it, and so far they've managed to find them, it

hasn't been easy but they've managed, together. That's the important thing, that they've done it together. That means that he wants things to work just as much as she does. That's really all she needs to know. She contemplates this for a minute while she sits on the stool in Paul's kitchen and sips at her wine.

—I guess in part I'm *jealous* of you and Scott, Lydia says, finally. — It's like—all I have to do is look at you two and I can see that you really love one another. You guys just make it look so *easy*.

—Well, Paul says, —I won't deny that things are going well. And I have to admit that that feels really nice. But it hasn't *always* been easy between the two of us. We've had our share of rough spots.

—So what you're saying is that there's hope for us all, says Lydia.

—Something like that, says Paul.

—That's good to know, says Lydia. —It really is.