

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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Tim's skating around on the concrete walkways that surround the sprawling Lane Tech building, returning again and again to jump down the broad, shallow set of stone stairs beneath the clock tower.

He jumps the steps. He jumps the steps. Pretty boring, when you get right down to it. They aren't challenging enough to really hold his attention; he's not learning anything from them or even using them to hone what he can already do. He's just jumping to jump. And to pass the time: his buddy Sean, a guy who works at the skate shop, is supposed to be showing up sometime soon. Was supposed to be showing up at ten. Tim looks up at the clock, which shows the time as a quarter after. He feels a sort of unpleasant twinge—even though he knows that he can now stay out past ten without needing to worry about the wrath of the folks, doing it still makes him feel a little bit flinchy. Whatever.

Eventually Tim gets tired of jumping the steps and he sits down. He sets his deck across his knees, and uses it as a little cigarette-rolling workstation. Freya taught him how to roll a while ago; he's only now getting good enough at it that he can usually count on it to look cool, but since he still muffs it occasionally he figures he might as well take the opportunity to practice.

He's licking the seam of the cigarette closed when his cell starts ringing. The screen identifies the caller as Sean. He sticks the cigarette in the corner of his mouth so he can speak around it.

—Where the fuck are you, motherfucker? is how he answers. —You supposed to be here like half an *hour* ago.

—What are you, my mom? responds Sean. —I'm down at the river with Lauren and Eliza. We got some joints—

—Fuck, man, says Tim. —You down there with them and some fucking *joints* and you just *leaving* me here to skate around by *myself* like a dickweed—?

—Fuck you, motherfucker, we just got here like five minutes ago, and right away I said ladies, you'll have to pardon me momentarily—I gotta call the man—I gotta call my *brother*—the fabulous Mister Timothy Pollard—so, you see, I got your best interests at heart, so I don't want to hear you *crying* like a little *baby*—

—Alright, Tim says. —You down at the normal spot?

—Yeah, says Sean. —So we'll see you down here in—what—five, ten minutes?

—Yeah, I'm on my way, says Tim.

He heads out to Western and starts heading south. There's a couple of ways to get to the river through the quiet industrial pocket near Western and Belmont; but in particular there's this one way that will take you this fat concrete column that looks out over the water. That's the spot where he spent a lot of evenings over the summer with Sean, sitting, drinking beers, smoking joints, talking about girls.

Girls—he's excited to hear that Lauren and Eliza are there tonight. Sean's been hooking up with Lauren for a while and through this conduit Tim's heard that he basically has an invitation to hook up with Eliza if he wants to. And he wants to. Eliza's Greek or something; she's got dark skin and dark eyes, she's damn hot. And plus he hasn't fooled around with anybody since things got fucked up with Megan, five months, five fucking shitty months.

When he climbs over the guardrail at the end of the street he can see the three of them silhouetted on top of the pillar; Sean shoots him a wave. —Mister Pollard, he calls. —So glad you could be here with us tonight.

—The pleasure is truly all mine, says Tim, scrambling up to join them on the blanket. Sean's sitting next to Lauren, so Tim sits next to Eliza, who immediately puts her hand on his knee. Tim and Sean exchange quick glances in the darkness. Tim's basically *so this is on?* and Sean's basically *I told you so*.

—So, Mister Pollard, says Sean. —Can I interest you in a sample of our fine wares this evening?

—Absolutely you may, Tim says, doffing an imaginary hat before accepting a lighter and the end of a greasy-looking joint. He takes a pull. —Exquisite, he says, after exhaling, —truly exquisite.

The discussion in progress is about injuries—clips of injuries that they’ve seen through the Internet, people getting clipped at train crossings or falling off roofs. Tim tunes into this pretty quickly, vividly describes some sick skating accidents he’s seen compiled on video, dudes plowing their faces into concrete or nailing their nuts on some railing. Sean, mimicking the victim, lets loose a stream of profanities in a high-pitched castratory tone.

They fall silent for a bit after that, looking out at the lights shimmering on the black water. The joint is starting to kick in now: time begins to yawn. Tim presses up against Eliza’s neck, drinks in her scent. It’s weird and heady—sort of a mix of smoke and musky body-smell and some kind of oil that makes him think of that Middle Eastern restaurant that he went to with Freya and Jakob a while ago. It makes him instantly hard.

—So, he can hear Eliza say. Her voice seems to be broadcasting from some spectacular distance.

—So, Tim says, right before he puts his mouth on her neck, wanting to like *lick* her smell. She wraps a hand around the back of his head, pushes him further down towards the front of her shirt. He murmurs some word incoherently into her flesh. And they continue.