

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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In the end he is not that bad.

Inexperienced, sure, and that has its drawbacks— she has to remind him to slow down at least five times over the course of an hour and a half—but Janine is good at giving instructions, and Thomas, bless his soul, was good at following them. For some guys that's a big issue: you say *do this* or *don't do that* in the context of the bedroom and they get all bent, as though you are interrupting them while they're trying to read or something.

Janine stretches in her half of the bed, sticks her toes out from underneath the purple blanket, waggles them, testing the ambient temperature of the apartment. It's chillier than she'd like, and the bed, having been warmed all night by two bodies, applies a certain seduction, which she duly fights. It's nine, and she knows herself well enough to know that if she stays in bed much past nine she'll fall into depression. Nine is the time that she used to have to be in to work. An image, here, of Lee, her former co-worker, sitting at his computer, his hair all tousled, looking, for all the world, like a sleepy little boy. She looks over at Thomas' head on the pillow. His black cowlicks point at the ceiling.

She heads for the kitchen. Thomas feels her go and stirs. He is in a dream, a dream, actually, of dying. In the dream his body is buried in a grave, only it has been covered with Styrofoam packing peanuts instead of earth. He knows that the peanuts will not hold him in the grave, that after a time he will rise, but he also understands that some part of himself will need to be left behind, will need to stay here, buried.

Janine goes into the kitchen. Agh; the floor is cold on her feet. The *Tribune* with the job listings, nearly a week old now, sits on her desk, radiating criticism. Her conscious mind ignores it, steers her instead to the glass-fronted cabinet, where she pulls out two cobalt tumblers. She fills them with water from the Brita-equipped sink tap.

She thinks of last night, the strange sexiness of Thomas' inexperience. His head between her legs. He hesitated at first, not knowing what, exactly, to do, but she was prepared for that, happy to be the director for an evening. *Higher, higher, ah, there*—it ended up sounding like she was trying get an elusive itch scratched. Which, in a sense, she was. He didn't get her off that way—she ended up relying on her own hand for that. Which was fine. *This is not to say that I'm not enjoying what you're doing*, she'd said, to ease the transition. And then—into the bedside table's single drawer for a condom. *Hold still*, she told him, while she put it on. And she lay back and guided him in. And he shifted from one state of being into another.

In his dream, Thomas is emerging from his grave. His fingers go up to his eye. But there is no eye, only a socket. He reaches into this socket and pulls out a stone, alabaster, white as an egg. It is inlaid with a pattern of tiny jeweled lines, like veins. He returns this to the grave, packs it carefully in the styrofoam peanuts, and rises—

He is awake. A rhombus of light hovers on the sky-blue wall. He does not recognize the wall at first, and there is a second of *where am I?*, during which his memory of the dream goes to tatters. He doesn't fully understand where he is until he sees Janine sits on the edge of the bed in a kimono-like robe.

—I brought you some water, she says.

He has already forgotten much of the dream, but the word in his mind is *ablution*.