

This is an excerpt from *Imaginary Year*, a work of serial fiction by Jeremy P. Bushnell. Visit the *Imaginary Year* website (<http://www.imaginairyyear.com>) on Mondays and Fridays for new updates.

11 / STOPPED

Fletcher and Clark meet up at the Old Town Ale House, same as every week. He makes some joke; she laughs. He watches her. He can see her teeth and this makes him think *sexy*. He doesn't know how he can possibly find a woman's *teeth* sexy, but here he is, with the evidence before him.

He has jerked off thinking about her before: she doesn't know that, of course, and he imagines that, if she did, her reaction would be one of horror.

—So, she says. —Did you have a good Halloween?

Fletcher tilts his bottle of Leinenkugel's from side to side, as if weighing his answer.
—I guess.

—Did you dress up? she asks.

—Yeah, he says, smirking. —I went as someone who still cares about life.

Her face goes serious. —Stop, she says.

He stops. *Only kidding*, he wants to say. *Just joking around*. Fletcher has a reputation as a joker; nobody takes anything he says entirely seriously. Paradoxically, this means he can often say exactly what he thinks. If you can fit an uncomfortable truth into the rhythm of a joke, you can say it, and people will laugh. They only see the confection, and miss the biting edge buried in the center. Fletcher has noticed that people—most people—don't actually pay any attention at all to what other people say. They just laugh at the cues and nod in the right places.

When Fletcher thinks about this, despair rushes into him like a cold tide, because he writes poems; he designs tiny, fragile vehicles meant to carry ideas subtly into the world, and yet, when he watches people, what he sees mostly is that they don't notice the subtle, no, in fact, mostly, they don't notice anything. This is what makes him want to die. This is what makes him feel like he understands what drives people to shoot up their workplaces, their

schools. Sticking a gun in someone's face speaks loud and clear; it cannot be misinterpreted.
Hear me.

But that's the thing about Clark. She hears him. He can't say *only kidding*. She can hear the truth in there. He has said something about the way he feels these days, alone, dead, and she has heard him.

And yet, she stopped him. She locked him in place with a word.

He raises his eyebrows and looks at her. She looks back at him, her serious face still on. She appears to be making some assessment of him, working towards some inscrutable conclusion.

Later tonight he will envision the slope of her neck, imagine tracing its contour with his mouth, following the break line of her collar. He will imagine his fingers on the tiny pearlescent buttons of her black shirt, undoing them; he will imagine his hands, lifting the shirt over her shoulders. He will imagine flesh as pale and as luminous as the moon. In that nightworld, all his, an invention, she will not say *stop*.

She breaks the eye contact, looks down, digs a cigarette packet out of her tote bag.—Fuck, she says. —I'm out. She flings the crumpled, empty thing onto the table, between them.