

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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—But what I'm *saying*, Clark says, is that when you're talking about *warfare*, when you're talking about warfare between *global systems*, it complicates the whole issue of innocence. I don't think there's any such *thing* as an innocent in today's world.

She wants a cigarette. But Elliot gets fussy about people smoking while he's eating, and this whole night out is supposed to be celebrating the completion of his semester and the successful passing of his exams, so she agreed to sit in Nonsmoking. She sticks her hand in her coat pocket just to feel her pack of cigarettes.

—So, what? Elliot says. His fork, with a red triangle of steak impaled on it, hangs in the air halfway to his mouth. —A baby? Not an innocent?

—*No* it's not innocent, Clark says. —Not in the sense that it's born into a system with built-in, long-running discrepancies in equality. That *baby* begins to reap the benefits of its privilege *before* it's even born. We talk about *innocents* like there can—

Elliot points the fork in her direction. —But in a market system—

Clark, interrupted, in turn interrupts, starting again, louder this time. —We talk about *innocents* like there can be people who can exist *outside* of our system and not reap its benefits. Cheap gasoline! We put the lie to our innocence every time we gas up our car. Clark notes, with some satisfaction, that the wedge of steak has finally made it into Elliot's mouth. —I don't put myself outside of this. I enjoy the advantages of this system as much as anybody.

But there's a drawback, and that drawback is that I'm not *innocent* of enjoying those privileges, and those privileges are fucking *predicated* on the suffering of others.

—Don't curse at me, Elliot says. —You know that I don't like that.

Clark swallows down the impulse to pitch her water glass at his head. Then she swallows down the urge to say *Why the fuck should I give a fuck what you like?* Then she looks for something else to say. She won't say *sorry*. This is just the fucking way she talks. Dear God she wants a cigarette. She stabs into her salad.

—I don't see why you have to get so *upset* every time we have a political discussion, Elliot says.

—I'm not *upset*, Clark says.

—I'm just trying to *say*, says Elliot, that a market system isn't hierarchical. It's a system of agents, each acting independently in their own self-interest. The primary characteristic of a market is that it lacks a central controller. So, within that system, each individual retains an identity as, well, as an individual. So when you argue that our individual innocence, by which I mean our individual absence of antagonism towards others, is rendered *invalid* by our presence in a totalizing system, I simply disagree. It just relegates the very idea of a personal, individual ethics to a position of absurdity; it says that everyone deserves equally to die.

—Listen, Clark says. —I get the feeling that you're trying to back me into some corner here; I want you to be clear on what I'm saying. And what I'm *not* saying that those people *deserved to die*.

—Could you keep it down? Elliot says, looking around surreptitiously at the other diners, as though they all might be undercover Homeland Security agents.

—Jesus *Christ*, Clark says, even louder. —You just can't *get over* the idea that everybody is focused on *you*, can you? Look *around* at these other people! She waves her hand. —They're not listening to us. They couldn't care *less* about us!

Elliot looks down at his plate, places eight fingertips calmly on the table's edge. —Clark, he says. —Stop it. You're embarrassing me.

—You think this is embarrassing? Clark says. —You haven't *seen* me act embarrassing. You want to see *embarrassing*? And she stands up.

She's not sure what she's going to do: probably just scream. She doesn't give a fuck what these yuppies think about her. When she was nineteen she used to walk around with Doris until they'd found some yuppie restaurant to target: then they'd run up to the window, pull their shirts up, and press their breasts against the glass. Clark had tiny ones and Doris had enormous ones plus a big belly to match: they'd squash it all up against the window for just long enough to see the diners recoil, and then they'd peel free, leaving oily breast-prints behind, and tear off down the street, practically peeing their pants from laughter. That was only ten years ago. Ten years is a long time, but not long enough to fully forget that you once did shit like that.

—Clark? Elliot says. —What on earth are you doing?

She looks down at him, practically sneering with contempt, and she sees the fear on his face, and has second thoughts for just a moment, long enough to completely snuff out the impulse. It just suddenly seems pointless.

—I just need a cigarette, she says. —I'm going to go over by the bar for a minute.

—You need one that bad? he asks.

She turns and goes.