

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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Paul and Lydia sit around a card table in the living room, waiting for Marvin, who sits at the kitchen counter, scribbling unknown things into his notebook. It is a Saturday morning and as soon as Marvin finishes his notes, the three of them will begin a new Dungeons and Dragons campaign.

Paul makes some minor adjustments to his character sheet, erases a few stray marks, flicks the eraser curlings away with the edge of his hand. He will be playing his old favorite Adi-Kaya. Marvin, the Dungeon Master, will be controlling a non-player character in their party, Galbraith, a cleric. Lydia hasn't played in a few years, and she lost the sheet for her old character, who she wasn't really that interested in revisiting anyway. She instead rolled up a new character for the campaign: Malgorra, a bard. *The Player's Handbook* describes bards as characters who use music to perform magical feats. Malgorra has a lute thrown in with the rest of her gear.

For flavor, Lydia has imagined that Malgorra occasionally inserts small objects between the strings of the lute, or attaches items to them, in order to produce a wider range of sounds. (She is also hoping that Marvin will be taken with the creativity of this idea and will reward her with extra experience points, or perhaps additional spells.) The idea basically comes from John Cage and his prepared piano experiments. She's been thinking about that a lot, ever since she saw that guy Austin last week, performing with his prepared guitar. This reminds her: she has news.

—Hey, she says to Paul. —Remember that guy I was telling you about?

—Austin? Paul says.

—Yeah, Lydia says. (This is part of why she likes to confide in Paul: when she tells him what is going on in her life, he remembers it, down to the details, and this makes her confident that she can pick up where she left off.) —Well, remember, I gave him my card? (Paul nods.) —Well, he called me.

Paul opens his eyes wide in pleased surprise. —When? he asks.

—Just yesterday, Lydia says. She laughs nervously. —He wants to get together for lunch. He's leaving town in a week or so, just going home for the holidays, and, uh, he said he'd like to try to get together before then.

—Lydia, Paul says. —That's *great*.

—Yeah, Lydia says. She picks up her pencil, swivels it into her mouth, and bites down on it for a second. —I'm kind of nervous, she says.

Paul listens.

—I mean, this guy's like, a *musician*. I don't really, uh, I mean, I don't know what I'm going to have to *say* to him, really. I need a strategy. She puts the pencil between her teeth again.

Paul taps his index finger to his lips for a second. —I can give you your strategy in just two words, he says.

—Oh yeah?

—Yeah, he says. —Be cool.

—Be cool?

—Yeah, says Paul. —You know, cool. Be relaxed. Try not to be too focused on how you're coming off. That's what makes people freeze up.

—But you can't *try* to be relaxed, Lydia says. —That'll only make you *less* relaxed.

—Well, Paul says, —I suppose that's true. But you can go into it not trying too hard to do *anything*. Remember: ultimately, this lunch is not the thing that determines whether you're a likable person. What this *guy* ends up thinking about you is not the thing that determines whether you're a likable person. I've known you for a long time now, Lydia, and I can tell you without a doubt: you *are* a likable person. A *lovable* person. If this guy has any sense at all, he'll see that. And if he doesn't see that—then he's probably not the kind of guy who's worth spending your time with, and at least you'll know that. So try not to worry: no matter which way the lunch goes, ultimately, it'll be a positive experience.

Maybe, Lydia thinks. She already feels like she likes Austin. The rose he gave her leans in a vase by her bed. She likes Austin, and she wants him to like her. If he *doesn't* like her, she doesn't know that she'll feel convinced that the fault ultimately lies in him and not her. But it gives her something to think about, in any case. And she's reminded of just how often Paul listens to her and gives advice, and she's reminded, once again, that she's never had the opportunity to reciprocate, because Paul has been single for as long as she's known him.

—Thanks, she says. —Listen, Paul... if you ever need, like, advice from me on— (and here she wants to say *on finding a girlfriend*, but she pauses and revises, because she's never quite been certain whether Paul is gay or not, and she doesn't want to explore that particular matter right now, but she also doesn't want to make the wrong assumption) —on *relationship matters*, you know that you could ask me, right? I feel like, like maybe I could help you in finding someone, if that was what you wanted.

Paul thinks about this. Paul feels like he's good at helping Lydia because she's a woman. He grew up with three sisters and feels like he understands women; he feels like he

has strategies for negotiating their particular needs and soothing their particular insecurities; and inasmuch as he shares those needs and insecurities, he, too, feels feminine. But he desires men. And he can't say that he understands them: he can't even say that he understands the ones who he's had sexual experiences with.

(An example: Noah Gardner, a college classmate of Paul's: they had taken a handful of Communications seminars together, and had become study partners. Noah looked like David Bowie: tall, thin, blond, a slightly alien aloofness about him. Noah and his five housemates had a party at the end of that semester, and during that party he maintained eye contact with Paul almost the entire time, eventually drawing Paul upstairs, wandering backwards down a hallway, keeping his gaze on Paul, groping drunkenly for the doorknob of his dark bedroom, which the party hadn't reached. He sat on the bed, got out his dick, held it loosely in his fist. *I want your mouth on this*, he'd said. And Paul had been happy to oblige. Afterwards, Noah took Paul's face in his hands and kissed him deeply, and then went back to the party. They never talked about it again. Paul would chalk it up to just being used, except for that kiss—prior to it he had looked in Noah's eyes and had seen immense tenderness there, the presence of so much adoration that it came through as a kind of sadness. Paul is convinced that those feelings were not faked, were not just drunken sentiment, and he cannot comprehend why Noah never came back to them, why *anyone* would decide not to explore those feelings further.)

Paul needs a strategy for understanding men better, and he suspects that Lydia is just as confused about men as he is, and thus cannot help him. Still, he is moved by her gesture.

—Thanks, he says.