

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.

25 / SILVER CLOUD

Friday night. After work Paul and Clark hail a cab and head over to the Silver Cloud, on Damen north of North, hoping to drink until their memories of the most recent week's worth of work have blurred. They bring Janine, the new girl, along with them. They both have a feeling that they will like her. Janine's flinty manner seems to harmonize well with the witty, disgruntled aura that they cultivate. They want to bring her on board. They want to teach the right way to suffer.

But they've dropped the workplace gossip for the time being: Clark is talking about how she dumped her now-ex-boyfriend Elliot.

—So, yeah, she explains, —the straw that broke the camel's back?: I was trying to talk about some queer theory, and he was all like *Huh?* And I just basically thought why am I even *with* this person?

The reference to theory makes Janine take note. Ever since she got her Master's she hasn't encountered too many theoryheads, and she certainly didn't expect to encounter any at this job. Especially not a *queer* theoryhead. She takes a second to check Clark out. She liked Clark before, in a she-seems-pleasant-enough kind of way, but this new knowledge causes her to revise her assessment upwards. She wonders, momentarily, whether Clark might be bisexual. She wants to ask Clark about the theory she's read, to see how much overlap the two of them share, but the breakup conversation has already moved on:

—How did he take it? asks Paul, raising a chicken wing to his mouth.

–Very pragmatically, says Clark. –You know, all *well I guess it's for the best*. I don't think his facial expression even changed.

Paul snorts. –Well, he says, –I'm always happy to see another man out there on the market. Maybe you should give me his number.

Paul can barely believe that he is here, in this bar, just *saying* things that identify him as gay. This is new for him. He did not exactly feel comfortable doing that back in Indiana, not even in gay-friendly Bloomington. He's not even really out to his roommates. But Clark asked him, and he told her the truth, and ever since then he has enjoyed these after-work bull sessions even more than he had before, because he gets to try out being an openly gay male. It is like flexing new wings.

–No, no, Clark says. –*Believe* me, you do *not* want to be involved with this guy.

–I have news for you, darling, Paul says. –It's been a long time since I've gotten any action. I am no longer exactly, shall we say, *discriminating* in my affections.

–Paul, says Clark. –*Believe* me. We can find a better guy for you.

Janine recognizes that the *we* is her cue. –Yeah, she says. –There are lots of guys in Chicago who I'll bet are *dying* for a piece of Paul Sutherland.

–I'll take that bet, says Paul.