

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.

30 / FOUR DECISIONS

It is a Wednesday midmorning. Austin sits in an overstuffed chair, drinking a mug of aryuvedic tea, looking out the window at the falling snow. Gray flecks whirling silently against gray sky.

The morning is quiet, as his mornings often are. His roommate is at work. His friends, too. But Austin doesn't have to be at work until two-thirty. He teaches kids how to use audiovisual equipment in a neighborhood program that meets after school, and this has allowed him to use the mornings as a private time, during which he can gather his thoughts, recenter. He hardly ever even puts on any music. He just does not feel ready for the presence of another mind. Generally.

Today, however, he is thinking about Lydia. Preparing to call her. They've gotten together twice now, each time out somewhere in public, and he's decided that he's definitely interested. His roommate's out of town this weekend, so he'll have the apartment to himself. He wants to take advantage of that privacy, invite Lydia over for an evening. But it's already Wednesday, and the weekend is fast approaching. He fishes her business card out of his wallet, downs the last mouthful of tea, and punches buttons on the phone.

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Friday night. Austin is on his couch. Lydia is sitting on the floor, indian-style, reading liner notes. She is leaning her back against his legs. They've spent the evening listening to music. Lydia had browsed the hundreds of jewel cases on the shelves and pulled out anything she'd heard *of* but hadn't actually heard. They listened to everything from Wire's *Pink Flag* to a set of discs of John Cale's 1960's sound experiments.

She looks up at him. —What time is it? she asks, groggily.

—It's, uh, one.

—Fuck, Lydia says. —I don't feel like trekking all the way back down to Hyde Park. I don't even know if the buses *run* this late. (She pauses, giving Austin a chance to interject. He offers nothing more than a noncommittal *hmm*, so she continues.) —I guess I could take a cab.

—Look, Austin says. —If you wanted? You could crash here tonight.

—Really? Lydia says. —I wouldn't want to inconvenience you...

—It's no thing, says Austin.

—Then I could just take the bus back tomorrow, Lydia says, as though she is figuring this out as she goes.

—Sure, Austin says. —Don't waste all that money on a cab.

—That *would* be more convenient, Lydia says. —Are you sure I wouldn't be imposing?

—Yeah, it's fine.

—OK, Lydia says. —Thanks.

Austin shows her to his bedroom. Lydia looks around and she sees his guitar, a small bookshelf crammed full, a bureau on which his hat sits. Austin had anticipated that she might see this room tonight, so he's hidden all the dirty laundry, cleaned up the apple cores and empty glasses, washed the sheets.

—You can crash here, he says. —I can go, uh, crash on the couch.

Lydia notices that he is still pretending that they're really talking about convenience. But she can see his interest. She can tell by the way he hesitates: he is giving her an opportunity to change his mind. She can recognize this because she has done the same thing in the past.

—It's OK, she says. —You can sleep in here with me.

—You sure? Austin says, his voice all concern.

—Sure, she says. —I'd hate to think of you out there tossing and turning all night.

Besides, you seem like a perfect gentleman.

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It is 2:13, and so far he has, in fact, been a perfect gentleman. They lie in the dark, next to one another, not touching. Both of them are fiercely awake.

—Austin? she says.

—Yeah? he says.

—Are you awake?

—Yeah, he says.

—Come here, she says.

She slides her leg over his. This decision has immediate ramifications. It is as though an electricity runs through them both. He rolls towards her.