

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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—I was wondering if I could ask you guys advice on something, Paul says.

Janine grins. —Well, I don't know, she says. —We're normally pretty stingy about giving advice.

Clark swallows her mouthful of beer. —Yeah, she says. —Tight-lipped.

—Oh, yeah, Paul says. —I've really noticed that about you two. Especially after you've had a few beers? To illustrate, he rolls his eyes, and lets his tongue protrude slightly, running his face through a parody of drunkenness. And he holds up his hand and claps his fingers against his thumb, to indicate a loose, flapping mouth.

—Oh ho ho! says Janine. —Keep up *that* act, mister, and see what kind of advice you end up with.

—OK, Paul says. —But, no. Seriously.

—OK, Clark says. —Serious now. She adopts a grim, determined expression, which sets them all to laughing again.

—So anyway, Paul says, when they've all calmed a bit. —I live with these two other people. A guy and a girl.

—Uh oh, Clark says.

—Yeah. They're people who I knew from Bloomington, when we were in college together. And we all kind of came up here together, and I guess we kind of had this

expectation that we'd all be hanging out together all the time, and stuff. But it hasn't really worked out that way.

—Uh huh, Janine says.

—I don't even know why we had that expectation, Paul says. —I mean, Marvin—that's the guy—he and I go way back, but Lydia—she's the girl—she hung out with us in college, but she had like other circles of friends and stuff, and we should have *expected* that the same would be true when we got here. I mean, I guess I kind of *did* expect it, but, so, yeah, that's the problem, we've been here for two years now, and Lydia has this new boyfriend, and she's been spending a lot of time with him, and Marvin just seems kind of *bent out of shape* about the whole thing.

—Number one question, Janine says.

—Yeah, Paul says.

—Do you think Marvin is interested in Lydia?

Paul's immediate gut feeling is *no*. Marvin was reluctant to invite Lydia into the Dungeons and Dragons campaign; he never asks her if she wants to go a few rounds on the Playstation; mostly, he seems to treat her as though she doesn't exist. But right as Paul opens his mouth to say *no*, he second-guesses himself, and sits there instead with his mouth open, thinking. Perhaps Marvin's chilliness towards Lydia is a result of having a romantic interest in her and no good way to express it. He points at Janine with his fork and concludes: —I don't know.

—Find out, Janine says. —It's the key to understanding the whole situation.

—I'll try, Paul says. —Marvin's not always, uh, *forthcoming* on those sorts of details.

(*Like you're one to talk*, Paul chides himself—he still has not come out to his roommates, even though he's been intending to for weeks now.) —But, so, I don't know, I guess the question

I'm wondering about is do you guys think it's *wrong* for a person to kind of give her old friends the slip a little bit when she gets involved in a new relationship?

—Well, Clark says, —*wrong*, you know, that's kind of—I just don't really feel that most human behaviors can be grouped into *right* or *wrong*; I kind of think that they depend on the context?

—To a certain degree what you're talking about is kind of inevitable, Janine says. —I mean, new relationships, they're *exciting*, right? So it's kind of *normal* for a person to want to be spending more time with the new relationship. How long have they been involved?

Paul shrugs. —She met him just before Christmas, I guess? But they didn't get involved until I think February sometime?

—Oh, so, two months? Janine says. —Yeah, they're still in that *exciting new* stage. Things will probably settle. On the other hand—well, have you met the guy?

—No, Paul says. —Lydia hasn't brought him over yet; I'm not really sure why.

—Well, OK, Janine says. —Here's something you should be on the lookout for. Sometimes monogamous relationships can be sort of funny. Like, OK, the relationship gets started, right? And, I don't know, people in those sorts of relationships really focus on *fidelity*. Fidelity is like the big symbol of those sorts of relationships. You know: Commitment! And sometimes, sometimes you get a guy or a girl who really takes this commitment thing to the max, who starts feeling threatened any time the person they're with shows *any* kind of engagement with *anybody* else. I'm not just talking sexual engagement; I mean *emotional* engagement, too. And they start to *pressure* the person not to hang out with their old friends, and sometimes the person will give in to that, you know?

Janine half-turns to Clark, and delivers the next part of the explanation to her: — That's why I'm in the kind of relationship that I'm in, Janine says. —In a nonmonogamous

relationship, that emphasis on *fidelity* is instead replaced by an emphasis on *trust*, and you don't get these weird kinds of fallout effects, where a person tries to control the ins and outs of the other person's relationships.

Paul notices that Janine seems to be explaining this last bit to Clark. He considers making a bid for attention—*hello? Over here?*—but then he realizes that there's something going on. He's not sure what it is, but he feels like he should not interfere with it. Instead he sips his beer.

Clark notices as well, and she puts a name to it: *Janine is making a move on me.*