

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.

## 53 / FEELING SOMETHING

Lydia changes out of her work clothes in Austin's bedroom. She keeps some casual clothes at his place now: a pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, a few T-shirts. They sit in a tidy pile against the baseboard.

She feels a small sense of satisfaction when she sees them. The pile gives her a certain sense of permanence, the impression that Austin expects her to return, and return again. That's useful, given that she and Austin have not yet really talked about the long-term potential for their relationship. Sometimes she wants to ask, but she resists: she knows all too well what happens when women bring that kind of stuff up too early with men. She can't say she never worries that he might only be in it for the short term, just tiding himself over with some springtime fucking. But her clothes are here, right where she left them. He has allowed her to consistently leave her things in one square foot of his floorspace. It's not much, but, hey, one square foot of commitment is one square foot of commitment. She'll take it.

She pulls on her jeans. From the kitchen she can hear the sizzle of something striking hot oil in a pan. She can smell ginger in the air. She wants to be out there, watching Austin cook, but she's only half-dressed, and she's worried that his roommate might be around.

She opens the door a crack and calls out. —Hey, she says.

Austin's voice from the kitchen: —Yeah?

—Is Craig around?

—No, says Austin. —He's over at Debra's tonight.

Cool. She walks out and leans up against the kitchen's doorframe, wearing only her jeans. Austin looks away from what he's doing at the stove and raises his eyebrows.

—Hey, Lydia says.

—Hey, Austin says.

Then he goes back to stirring stuff around in the wok. Lydia feels a momentary jab of disappointment: she had kind of been working up a making-out-against-the-kitchen-wall fantasy. The two of them, swept up in a sudden warm gust of passion, knocking utensils off the countertop, while the dinner, forgotten, burns behind them. But no dice, apparently. She unfolds the shirt that she has in her hand—an olive tee with an image of a panda bear on the front—and she pulls it on.

—So I didn't tell you about Craig and Debra, did I?

She comes up behind him, wraps her arms around his waist, and kisses him lightly on the ear. —No, she says.

He kind of breaks out of her squeeze, twists around so that he can face her.

—They're getting married.

—Really? Lydia says. —That's great.

—Yeah, Austin says. —I'm happy for them; I think they'll make a good couple.

Lydia has never met Debra, but she's met Craig a handful of times. Mainly she just thinks of him as *Austin's roommate*, but he seems nice enough. She's not really sure what he's into or anything. —When are they getting married? she asks.

—Well, they're not really sure yet. Probably not until next spring. The lease on this place runs out in February and I think they're going to move in together then, but they don't want to get married in the middle of winter. They're thinking about something outdoors...

—Oh, Lydia says. —So that kind of leaves you... I mean—well—what are you planning to do when he moves out?

—I don't know, Austin says. He prods at frying vegetables. —I can't afford this place by myself, so I guess I'll either need to move into a smaller place or find another roommate. I'll figure something out. It's not a big deal. I mean, I can't exactly say, *hey, man, you can't get married; I need you to split the rent!*

—No, Lydia says, I suppose you can't. She is turning over an idea in her mind. February seems a long way off, but she wonders—

—Hey, Austin says. —Speaking of roommates; I really enjoyed meeting yours last weekend.

Lydia snaps out of the future that she is imagining, returns to the present. —What? Oh. Yeah?

—Yeah, he says. —They're cool.

—What? Lydia says. —I'm sorry. For a minute there I thought you said my roommates were cool.

—They are cool, Austin says.

—I'm sorry, Lydia says. —But, like, Dungeons and Dragons and movies about, like, I don't know what, giant *robots*, are *not* cool.

—Why? Austin says. —What do *you* think is cool?

Lydia presses the balls of her hands up against her eyes and rubs. She had a long day at work and doesn't really feel like having this discussion right now.

—I don't know, she says. —Music. Fuckin'... rock and roll.

Austin makes a skeptical face.

—What? she says. —You play the guitar. Tell me you don't feel cool when you, like, *rock out*.

—Yeah, I guess I do, he says. —But nowadays, there's this whole *culture* built up around cool, that I just can't stand. It's like, people think *cool* is all about wearing the right kinds of clothes—you know, like those thrift store sweaters—those kinds of clothes that are just enough outside of the mainstream to make you seem like a confident iconoclast? It's all part of this greater system of conformity that we call *cool*, which is all about liking the right sorts of clothes and the right sorts of records and having the right sorts of emotional responses. That's why people who *set out* to be cool are always so ironic about everything, so detached—it's all defense. Because God forbid they actually *feel* an actual human feeling and put it on display before checking out how other people are going to respond to it. And we've come to think of that irony and detachment as what cool is, but that's really a kind of, I don't know, *pseudo-cool*. And the real cool is, yeah, *rocking out*, just having this genuine feeling inside and not being afraid to just let it go *blargh!* out into the world.

—So what does this have to do with my roommates? Lydia asks.

—Well, that kind of stuff that you're talking about, Austin says. —The D&D and the giant robot movies? That kind of stuff is so *deeply uncool*—it doesn't even have, like, camp value—that if someone is into it, they must really be into it because they really love it. And a genuine expression of *love* is always cool.

—So let me get this straight, Lydia says. —It's cool to like something uncool, if that uncool thing reveals some kind of deeper *sincerity*?

—Yeah, says Austin. He turns the heat off on the stove.

—But wouldn't that make, like, people who buy Hallmark cards, and who like really really *mean* it, who like read them and find them seriously, sincerely *heartwarming*--wouldn't that make them the coolest people of all?

Austin stops for a minute.

—I hadn't thought about that, he says.