

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 comes home, whistling. He's made up his mind to do something, something he's put off doing for a long time.

He was afraid. He was afraid that his roommates would be repulsed by what he had to tell them, or hurt by the fact that he hadn't let them know earlier: in short, he feared that his news might *complicate* things. Paul has never enjoyed complicating things. In fact he prides himself on his ability to *simplify* things, to make daily life *easier* for the people around him. And he still fears telling them, but at least by the end of the day he will know whether his news will complicate things or not, either way at least the question will be settled, and this knowledge has already provided him a substantial amount of relief, and it is this relief that accounts for his jaunty walk, the happy tune that he whistles as he sets his briefcase on the counter and heads down towards Lydia's room.

He peeks his head around her doorjamb. She's sitting on the bed, still wearing her work outfit, all except the shoes, which she's removed so that she can rub her feet.

—Hey, she says.

—Hey, he says. —Can I talk to you for a minute?

—Sure, she says.

Clark and Janine put him up to making the decision. It was easy to be out around them, and the more fun he had being out around them the more he wanted to be out to his

roommates, so he could just be out all the time, rather than having to switch into his heterosexual disguise every time he walked in the front door of home.

But it's more than that. He's taken a special pleasure, these last few weeks, noticing the little moments of affection that open up between Clark and Janine at work. In the Perihelion kitchen, Janine presses her face up against Clark's neck. One tender second and Paul feels like cheering. He feels happy for them. Hell, he feels *proud* of them. And, by association, he is able to feel proud about his own sexuality, and it is this pride that has allowed him to begin to blast away at ten years' worth of shame that has accumulated up inside him like shit on a statue.

—I need to tell you something, Paul says. And Lydia gets an expectant look, so he forges on: —I'm gay.

A pause for reaction time. Probably not even a second but long enough for Paul to think *oh damnit I shouldn't have said it—*

—Yay! Lydia shrieks, and she jumps up and throws her arms around him and kisses him on the cheek. —I knew it, I knew it, she says, close to his ear.

—I'm sorry I didn't tell you earlier, he says, quietly.

—It doesn't matter, she says. She stands back, with her hands on his shoulders, looks him straight in the face, and begins to jump up and down. —Yay, yay! she says. —This is so great. Paul scratches the back of his neck, a little confused.

—How long have you known? Lydia asks. —Have you, like, had a *boyfriend* that you've been keeping from us? Oh, *man*, she says, pressing her hands up against her face. —There's just *so much* that I want to know.

—I'd better sit down, Paul says.

When he's settled on her bed, she sits at his feet, leaning her head back against his knees. She looks up at him, and he looks down at her. —I want to hear *all about it*, she says.

—Will you tell me?

—Sure, Paul says.

She looks up at him and smiles sweetly, as if knowing that she's about to get away with something. —Will you brush my hair?

—Sure, Paul says. He finds the brush on the bed and begins to work it into her hair.

—So, I don't know exactly where to start—

They hear the front door open and close; it must be Marvin. Lydia looks up at Paul, a little frantically.

—Does Marvin know? she asks, as they hear him approach.

—Not yet, Paul says. —But I think he suspects; I've been playing a gay Dungeons and Dragons character for like five years now.

Marvin looks in and surveys the scene. Paul is sitting there, brush in hand, with Lydia's hand affectionately on his knee. They both look up at Marvin, and they look at one another, conspiracy written all over their faces.

—What are you two up to in here? Marvin asks.

—Do you want the long answer or the short one? Paul asks.

—I don't know, Marvin says warily.

—I think, says Paul, —I'd better give you the long one.