

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.

65 / DISAPPEARANCE

Austin and Lydia drink from bottles of Rolling Rock. They're at the Hideout, a cottage tucked away among the warehouses and the massive industrial sheds of River North. They're watching a band called the Double Leopards, five people crouching over their tools, filling the room with sound. It is as though a moist curtain of grainy black silt were pouring out of the PA.

Austin cannot imagine being more happy. Sitting here, drinking a beer on a hot summer night, listening to the delicious thick sound the Leopards are generating, three more bands yet to come, an attractive young woman by his side—really, what more could anyone reasonably desire?

Lydia puts her hand over her forehead as though shielding her eyes and she looks down at the table. Austin can hear her say something like *oh my God*.

—What? he says.

She looks up for a moment, then looks down again. —Don't look, she says, —but that guy over there is my ex-boyfriend.

Of course Austin immediately looks. Lydia kicks him under the table, and he returns to looking at her. She rolls her eyes. —I said *don't look*, she says.

—Which guy? Austin asks.

—The... Asian guy, sitting on the floor. But for God's sake, be subtle. I don't want him to see us.

Asian guy? Austin thinks. He begins to make an elaborate show of looking nonchalantly around the room, examining the marlins mounted on the walls, eventually passing his eyes quickly across the Asian guy sitting on the floor. Average-looking guy, kind of skinny, nodding his head in time with some pulse he detects in the music.

Asian, Austin thinks. *Hm*. He didn't realize that Lydia had dated guys from outside her race. Then, of course, he remembers that she's kind of dating outside her race right now, and so is he. Ramirez. Her dad is Puerto Rican. He guesses that he means he didn't realize that she had dated guys that weren't Caucasian.

Hell, he didn't realize that she'd dated other guys at all, not really. She's 22, so logically he *knows* that she must have dated other guys before him; every once in a while she'll even say something like *oh, God, that reminds me of this guy I once dated* or something like that, but none of those guys seemed quite *real*; they seemed *hypothetical*, as though they had once existed but had since vanished from the face of the earth.

—I don't want to have to talk to him, Lydia says. —It didn't exactly end well between us.

—It's cool, Austin says. He looks over at the guy again. —He's not looking over here.

She looks, to check. Austin's right; Thomas seems pretty focused on the band. The Hideout is a small place, though; if he took a survey of the room he would probably spot her. She doesn't know what she'd say if he came over. Lydia puts her hand up, between them, so that her face will be hidden.

Austin watches her for a moment, then looks back at the band. He drifts into their gritty pattern, and he begins to wonder about what it would be like if he ran into one of his own ex-girlfriends. There are some that he hasn't seen in a long time. He still assumes that

they're around Chicago. He thinks of Rose. He wonders what she's up to these days, where she's disappeared to.