

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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They erased their world today. Perihelion, liquidating the last of its assets, sold off its computers to an animation house, and so Clark spent her day following one of the guys from Tech through the proving room, watching him reformat all the hard drives.

Once the computers were blank, she went down to the basement, where the original packaging had been stored. She and the other remaining staff members filled up the boxes, sealed them, and piled them by the door, where they were left to wait for the UPS man who would take them to their new life in a Southern California render farm.

After they were through, Clark crossed the conference room, stepping over the scraps of paper and loose lengths of phone cord that littered the floor. She walked down to David's office and found him organizing Perihelion's few remaining pieces of office furniture into a sparse herd: whatever couldn't be sold, now available for any former employee to take home, if they wanted a little bonus to their severance package.

—Clark, David had said. He opened his arms to hug her. —I'm sorry it didn't work out.

She hugged him back, although quickly, and stiffly. —It's OK, she said.

—I just had really hoped to give you something—a job that could—

—It's OK, Clark insisted.

Three years worth of work. She saved a copy for herself, five CD-Rs, rubberbanded together. A world that no one will ever visit, encoded behind plastic. She has no plans of

what she might do with it. Her home computer doesn't even have the processing power necessary to run it. That doesn't even matter. She doesn't want to play it herself. What she really wants is for someone else to play it, for someone to try solving the puzzles that she put in there. The Vanishing Angel. The Inverted Monument. The Tender Crypt. No one will. No one will ever enjoy discovering the Pleasure Garden that she hid in the plainest corner of Eggshell.

This, she thinks, is the fate of everyone. People live, and as they live they grow, and as they grow they develop secret areas inside themselves, pockets of ornate beauty that would amaze anyone who came along and discovered them. But no one does. There is not enough time. And there's no money in it.

Tomorrow is her birthday. She'll be thirty-one. She feels the same as she did when she turned thirty. But she knows that she's one year further along in the story of her own life. In that year she has accumulated all sorts of experiences that no one else will experience quite as she has, and so she is one year more complicated, one more year away from a time when she could have been fully understood.