

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.

## 1 / THE END OF THE TRADITION

Fletcher and Clark are sitting out on her back steps, with beers, squinting out into the yard as the day begins to descend into its darkening. —So, Fletcher says. —No birthday party this year?

Clark, fiddling with her watchband: —Huh? Then: —Oh. No.

—How come?

—I just— she purses her lips and looks off into some quadrant where she has the answer stored —I just got sick of it, I guess? It's like—OK, every year I'm putting together this big party for like fifty people, and paying for all the food and the booze and all that gets expensive—I don't really care about the expense so much as it is the fact that *of* those fifty people, there's maybe like five who actually bother to *call* me sometime during the year. The rest of them—you know, I sometime see them *around* and all—but I wouldn't really say they were my *friends*. And I just got tired of laying out all that money to throw a party for people who weren't really my friends.

Fletcher swallows, grimaces. —I get that, he says. —Still, he says. —It's the end of a tradition.

—It is that, Clark acknowledges.

—I mean, how many years had you been having that party?

—I had the first one when I turned twenty-one, Clark says. —And now I'm thirty-two. So this year would have been the twelfth. She shakes her head. —God damn.

—A lot of good memories came out of those parties.

—Yeah, Clark says. —I guess.

—I remember you setting Warren Rzentkowski on fire.

Clark sighs. —He was *barely* on fire.

—I don't know—I saw him—he was pretty *on fire*, Fletcher says.

—If he hadn't been wearing that shirt with those stupid *flappy cuffs*—

—Save it for the judge, Fletcher says.

—I remember *you* going around, taking up a collection so you could pay Amy Quince to kiss you, Clark says, peeling a wet strip of label from her bottle and working it into a small pellet.

—Oh yeah, Fletcher says. He smirks. —I remember that. I think I got *twenty-seven dollars*. I remember the kiss, too, he says.

—Was it worth twenty-seven bucks? Clark says. She flicks the wadded paper out into the yard.

—It was a pretty good kiss, Fletcher says. —God, *Amy Quince*. She was a piece of work.

—She really was.

—Whatever *happened* to her, anyway?

Clark shrugs. —I haven't talked to her in like four years.

—She married that guy, didn't she?

—She married him, and they moved to Lansing.

—Jesus, *Lansing*?

—Yeah—and I heard they have a kid now.

—Christ, Fletcher says. —We're old.

—Yep, Clark says.

After a minute she comes back with two more beers, and they crack them open and stare into the yard some more.

—That thing with Amy Quince was like the end of that stuff for me, Fletcher says.

—The end of paying women to kiss you?

—Not that *exactly*—but shit *like that*. All that like free-for-all stuff. I mean—do you remember those games you played in like high school or junior high—like Spin the Bottle and shit like that?

—Seven Minutes In Heaven? Clark offers.

—Yeah—all that crazy stuff. Like fucking—*Truth or Dare*.

Clark groans.

—It's like there was this whole *period* where we were like testing our limits, trying to figure out what we could get away with, what we were willing to do and what we weren't? And now it seems like that period is officially *over*—like now everybody sort of *knows* what they're willing to do and where their boundaries are and there's a certain kind of *wildness* that's just

*gone*—the whole, I don't know, *ethos* of *experimentation*. And its attendant confusion. Sexual confusion. I miss that.

—I don't, Clark says.

Fletcher frowns, thinks it over. —Well, he says. —I guess I can see that. After all—you've got your whole *thing* going on—

—Yep, says Clark. —That I do