

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.

18 / PRETTY FUCKED UP

—So let me get this straight, Fletcher says. He puts his hands in a kind of squaring position, palms facing one another, with about a foot of distance between. —He and this girl stop seeing one another—

Clark, angled over her lighter, nods.

—And he comes *crawling back*—

Clark leans back, takes her first drag, looks thoughtful, like she's weighing the phrase. Fletcher pours himself another beer from their pitcher, waiting until she completes the exhale.

—Well, she says finally, —I wouldn't exactly say *crawling back*. But, yeah, he calls, he sounds sheepish, he says he misses me—

—So, semantics aside—he comes *crawling back* and you just say, what, you just say *OK?*

—Yeah basically, Clark says.

—I have to admit, Fletcher says, —I’m a little surprised. I mean, I talked to you after that whole thing went down and you seemed pretty—I don’t know, I mean, I’ve seen you *pretty unhappy* about a lot of things over the years—

—And here I’ve always prided myself on being a barrel of laughs, Clark says.

—Well, yeah, sure, that too—but a month ago it seemed like you’d been fucked up pretty bad over this Oliver thing. Fucked up to a degree that I don’t usually associate with you. So, I don’t know, maybe it’s none of my business, but I sort of want to like *caution* you about getting back into it—

—Well, yeah, Clark says, —OK—I was feeling pretty fucked up about a month ago, that’s totally true. She drags again on the cigarette, buying time to compose her justification. — But two things. One—that wasn’t just because of Oliver: I mean, don’t forget what *else* happened about a month ago—

—I take it you’re referring to Bush’s mandate?

—Don’t use that word, Clark cautions. —Because I *will* punch you.

—You’re all talk, Fletcher says.

—Try me, Clark says.

Fletcher gives her an assessing look. —I don't think I will, actually.

—Wise choice. So anyway—*two*—it's not *really* like I just said OK.

—That's good, Fletcher says. —Cause if you let someone just like *ditch you* and then pick you up later, when it's like *convenient* for them to do so—it seems like you're setting some kind of bad precedent there.

—Yeah, Clark says, —yeah, I guess, but you know what? I'm thirty-three years old. And one thing that I've noticed is that as you get older it gets like harder and harder to make friends.

—You get pickier, Fletcher acknowledges.

—You *do* get pickier. And it *takes longer* to get to the point where you feel like someone's even *starting* to understand you. And so by the time I *get to that point* with someone, they have like this incredibly long leash with me—it's like I don't want to just *trash it all* cause I can barely stand the thought of having to start *from scratch* with somebody else—so it gets to the point where when a person fucks up, or makes a mistake, or hurts me, I'm pretty predisposed to just *forgive them*.

—But you said that you didn't just forgive him, Fletcher says.

—No, Clark says, —I didn't. I mean, our relationship, when you get right down to it, is kind of fucked up—

—Well, Fletcher says, —*I* wasn't going to be the one who said it—

—Yeah, Clark says, —thanks. But no, seriously, so much of our relationship was based around *drinking*—

Fletcher looks around at their surroundings until Clark smirks.

—I'm just going to *ignore that*, she says. —So we had like this *breach* in the relationship and I thought, well, maybe as we're repairing this breach we actually have an opportunity to try to repair some of the other fucked-up aspects of the relationship—so I've been saying that when we get together we basically have to *try not to drink*.

—How's that been working out? Fletcher asks.

—Um, Clark says, —*awkwardly* I think is putting it fairly.