

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.

30 / NOT SAYING MUCH

They exchanged photos via e-mail, so she basically recognizes him when he comes in through the door of the place, at least once he pulls down the hood of his polar-explorer-type coat. He looks about the same as his picture: wiry, with a choppy auburn beard, although he's shorter than she'd guessed (*damn*, she thinks, remembering Julius, *what is it with your ability to attract short guys?*). He looks around and when he spots her he fixes her with a look that's part recognition and part inquiry: she lets him know that she got the right person by smiling, although the smile feels somewhat awkward on her face, tepid and hesitant.

Oh yeah, she remembers, *dates aren't fun*. That's the thing that people always neglect to mention. On a date she's so busy trying get wreathed with the right superlatives, trying to be *funny* and *interesting* and *courteous* and *sexy*, that she doesn't actually get to *relax* around the other person, which is the thing that she actually wants to do *the most*, the thing she actually wants to be in a relationship *for*. She just wants to be able to relax. And being on a date is basically a big *reminder* that there's basically going to be no real relaxation for the next hour, at the very least. She gets out of her seat to meet him as he approaches. She shakes his hand and the gesture feels *clumsy* somehow, as though she has the motor skills of someone who's mildly retarded. But his face opens up into the broad grin that she recognizes from the photo he sent, and she can tell that he's happy to see her. She likes the way his face looks when he grins, there are lines in it that show that he smiles a lot, and she likes that, she gives

him her own smile again which feels, this time, a bit more confident, although there's still something inflecting it, a little bit of something that feels almost like pity.

—I'm going to go grab myself a—he crooks his thumb over his shoulder to indicate the front counter—I don't know, a coffee or something. He looks at her latte and picked-at carrot cake. —Do you—can I get you anything—?

—No, Lydia says. —I'm covered, I think.

—OK, Nate says. —OK, cool. Well, he says, —um, I'll be right back.

—OK, says Lydia.

—Let me just— Nate says, and he dumps off his coat and messenger bag in the empty chair. He grins again and is off to the counter. She watches him stand there, rocking back and forth on his feet in front of a glass case full of cheesecakes, and she thinks *he's young*. *Twenty-two*, she guesses, not that this is super-young, she's only twenty-five, but when she was twenty-two she was dating Austin, who was thirty. She's just used to going out with guys who are older. *But none of those relationships worked out*, she reminds herself. *Maybe things would work out better with someone younger*. Like maybe younger guys will be easier to impress or something. This entire line of thought makes her feel old.

He comes back to the table with a slice of chocolate cake and a coffee.

—So, he says. —How are you doing?

—Fine, she says, and then she thinks better of this, decides to try to open up the conversation a little bit. —Actually, she says, —you know what I just did? I just did that thing where somebody asks you how you're doing and you just say *fine*, just sort of automatically, you know? As though the other person hasn't really asked you a question at all but you're just kind of going through the motions of a conversation? Sometimes I just want to say, I don't know, *work's been kind of trying lately* or something more *honest*, you know?

—Yeah, sure, he says. —So how are you doing, *really*?

She smirks, thinks it over. —I'm not sure, she says, finally. —I mean, I'm doing all right, I guess, I'm not *dying of starvation* or *homeless on the streets* or anything—

—That's not saying much, Nate says.

—No, Lydia says, —I guess it isn't. (What she would say, if she were to answer honestly, is *I've been struggling with depression pretty hard over the past year, I feel lethargic and fat and unattractive and dull, I worry that I've lost the traits that once made me interesting.* But she knows how *that* would sound, and she doesn't want to come across as *hopelessly* fucked-up.) —I don't know.

Things are all right. She frowns a little. —Maybe this is why people just say *I'm fine*, she says.

Nate smiles. —You mentioned something about *work*— he says.

—Yeah, Lydia says, —no, my job’s OK. I just got moved into kind of a better position, actually, so—that’s nice—but it’s just, well, my job—it’s not exactly the kind of job that you’d think *now here’s something I want to do for the rest of my life.*

—Well, what do you do? he asks, and this leads her back onto safer ground, it feels like she’s explained her job hundreds of times by now; she can do it by rote. So she explains, and he asks some questions that show that he’s paying attention, and she answers them, and when she feels like maybe she’s talked enough about herself she asks: —So what do *you* do?

—I work at a Borders, he says. He makes a face of disgust. —Also not exactly what I thought I would end up doing.

You still have some time, she thinks.

—So, he says, —I don’t know—in a perfect world, what is it that you’d be doing?

She runs through a list of possible answers, thinks about things she’d wanted for herself years ago. These are mostly things that feel too painful to talk about. But she needs an answer.

—Relaxing, she says.