

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.

35 / WHEN THEY KISS

After the Niblock show she went back to Nate's place, where she met Philo, the roommate, a skinny, bespectacled guy dressed entirely in olive clothes that look like they came from Army / Navy surplus. For a while the three of them sat on the couch with a bottle of wine, watching old *Twilight Zone* episodes from a DVD. At that point she and Nate still hadn't kissed. After the third episode—the classic where the last man on earth breaks his glasses—Philo made a conspicuous show of sleepily scratching the stubble beneath his chin, then standing up, taking an enormous stretch, and saying goodnight, leaving the two of them alone. By this point Lydia, slightly tipsy, had come to rest her head in Nate's lap, and he had begun to trace the edge of her ear with his finger. *I wonder what it will be like when we kiss*, she thought—she'd never kissed a man with a full beard before.

And so they went into his room, and she sat on the edge of his bed and smiled, and he pulled off his sweater and stood there for a minute in his undershirt and jeans, and a fretful look crossed his face, as though he were worried that he was somehow going through the procedure incorrectly, afterwards it's that face that Lydia remembers, but she thought at the time that she could put him at ease by saying his name and instructing him: *Nate. Nate. Just come here.*

And so he comes over to her, and he presses his face up against her neck, and he wraps his arms around her and shudders, like something is terrifying him, like he's trying to prevent her from slipping away, and she doesn't really understand because she doesn't *want* to slip away, she's right here, wanting to kiss him, it couldn't be any more simple than that, but she still has to kind of take his chin in her hand and *direct him* to her mouth. Once there, he kissed her fiercely, and she tried to enjoy it but something felt *off* about it, there's a weird *intensity* to it, something almost violent; plus—she noticed as she pulled away for a second—his eyes were shut, clenched shut, so tightly that she had to wonder whether he was actually kissing *her* at all. He put his hands around the back of her head and pulled her in again.

It went on like that for a minute, with her becoming less and less willing to kiss him back in this fashion, her responses slowing, inertially, until he finally noticed and drew back.

—What's going on? she asked, and he looked at her with a pained, shamed expression stamped onto his face, and then, abruptly, his eyes grew wet with tears and he turned away.

Uh oh, Lydia thought. (When she gets to this part of the story, as she's retelling it the next week after work, *uh oh* is exactly what Anita says as well.)

—Tell me, she asked him, and he told her the story of his last relationship, five years with a woman named Marla, ending, finally, just before Christmas. —I'm not really over her, Nate said, sitting there slumped on the edge of the bed next to her. —I really want to give something new a try—and I want you to be that for me—you seem like a really great person—but, I don't know, kissing somebody is just really hard for me right now—

—It’s okay, Lydia says, holding him, —it’s okay, although inside, disappointed, she can’t help but think *Jesus, what a fucking mess.*

So she sleeps at his place, sleeps with her arms around him, although they don’t kiss and she doesn’t take off her clothes, and when they wake up in the morning and he asks about her plans for the day she invents a fictional haircut appointment so that she can get back home as quickly as possible.

—So now? Anita asks, proceeding to then drain the last of her martini.

—I don’t know, Lydia says. —We’ve been talking a lot on the phone lately but he says he doesn’t feel ready to see me again just yet.

—Abort, Anita says.

—I don’t know, Lydia says. —He seems like such a nice guy and he seems to really be into me—I think it could be cool if he just managed to get his shit together—

—Right, Anita says. —So how long are you prepared to wait around for *that* to happen? This guy’s setting off all my red flags—he sounds like he needs serious therapy. You get sucked into playing the waiting game and I *guarantee* you it’ll make you miserable for as long as you keep playing it.

—I guess— Lydia says.

—Guess nothing, Anita says.

—Yeah—no—you're right, Lydia says. —I know you're right. But—I mean—I figure I should stick this out—it's not like I have anything *else* going on at the moment.

—That's faulty logic, says Anita.

—Maybe, Lydia says. She pushes a tiny plastic sword into a puckering olive. —Maybe.