

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.

49 / WHAT HE STANDS TO LOSE

Jakob sets the cooling KFC box on the table, slaps the mail down next to it, and goes to find a clean plate. As he enters the kitchen he notices that the light on the phone is blinking.

Probably telemarketers, he thinks, but he dials in to the voicemail anyway, holding the phone between his ear and his shoulder so he can sift through a sink full of dishes.

Message number one, unsurprisingly, is an automated message from someone named Don with some outfit called Sattelite Communications—Jakob would instantly delete this except that his hands are submerged in hot suds, so he's forced to actually listen to the thing. — We're going to be in your area next week, Don recites with android cheerfulness, blah, blah.

Message number two, of two, is Melissa. He perks up, turns his attention back on. —Sorry I haven't called you back earlier, she says, —there's been a lot going on out here—things have been sort of crazy. Look, it's—six-fifteen my time; I'm going to be around this evening if you want to give me a call when you get off work.

He does. But first: eating. He gives his plate a cursory once-over with the towel and sits down with his box of chicken. While he eats, he flips through a magazine with his greasy

fingers, but he's not reading; he's thinking about Melissa. Thinking about what his life would be like if he moved to Columbus.

It's not the first time he's had this fantasy. He's run the whole assessment of pros and cons in his head a bunch of times over the past four months, ever since Christmas, almost every day contains some idle moment he can use to try out the idea. In the break room, on the bus, over dinner: these are the times when he works the figures on what he stands to gain, and what he stands to lose.

It would be sad to leave Chicago—he likes living someplace that sprawls and bustles, a place that can legitimately be called a *big city*—when he last went to Columbus he felt experienced it as small, and weirdly empty (despite the traffic, which was worse than he had remembered). He tells himself that he'd miss Chicago's *cultural events* but he has to admit that he doesn't really *do* much in the way of that sort of thing—although he'd like to imagine himself as someone who does a lot of theatre or goes to gallery openings, he has to admit that what he has really done the most of, in terms of *cultural events*, is going out to see science-fiction or horror movies with his Fieldhammer co-workers, and he doesn't need to be in Chicago to do that.

His job is OK but he wouldn't miss it, and he's had some good times with his current set work friends, but really, there are geeks in every office building in America, and he doesn't imagine that this batch is so great that their replacements would suffer unduly by comparison. He tries to think of a single one of them who he'd really want to stay in touch with if he left and he comes up blank.

Which leaves Freya. He finishes the last bite of his biscuit and thinks about what it would be like to really leave the city where she lives, the city where he and she lived together, for a time. He's still not really sure that it's all over between them—they're still talking on the phone pretty regularly, although less so, and he still partly believes that one day they'll decide to give it another spin, he still *holds that as an option*, and going to Columbus means that he'd finally need to give up that idea, to acknowledge it as a fantasy.

And so what does he gain? He gains Melissa, or at least the ability to pursue Melissa, which feels, in some ways, like a step backwards—he last kissed her over a decade ago—but he can also look at it a different way, tell himself that she's really the one he's always wanted, that everything in the intervening years has been nothing more than misguided attempts to find substitutes and stand-ins. Sometimes this argument feels convincing and other times it doesn't. Right now it does. He drops his drumstick bone into the box, wipes his hands on his napkin, picks up the phone, and dials.