

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.

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—So, Nicholas says, lowering his menu, —what are you thinking about having?

—Um, Lydia says. —I’m thinking about the bass—? With the fennel, and the lemon—?

That sounds really good.

Nicholas nods. —I’ve had that here before; it’s very good.

—I’ve never actually had bass before, Lydia says.

—Really? Nicholas says, and as she nods he gives her a somewhat quizzical look, as if trying to assess exactly what species she’s from. —Well, he says, —it’s quite good here; I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.

Lydia smiles anxiously, then takes her napkin and puts it in her lap. After she’s done this she notices that he hasn’t done the same with his napkin, and she begins to worry that she should have waited—maybe at a place this nice there’s some rule about when she’s supposed to move the napkin, like maybe after the waiter takes their order, or maybe she’s supposed to wait until the food comes. She should just put it back on the table so that she can start over, she thinks, she could follow his cues this time, do it smarter, better. But instead she leaves it in her lap and wrings it into a rope.

—Have you looked at the wine list? he asks.

—Um, she says. She fumbles around the table, which suddenly seems to have far too much shit on it; before she can pick up the wine list she has to put down the big leatherbound menu, which for some reason she can't seem to do without repositioning the water glass and the candle to make space. Finally she gets the right thing into her hands and she looks over the information, trying to dredge up some semblance of opinion or insight. *At a place like this everything is going to be good*, she thinks to herself, *you could point at anything on the list and say **I hear these are just exceptional** and you wouldn't be making a fool of yourself.*

She's trying to convince herself of that when Nicholas says —With the bass you're probably going to want a white; maybe a nice Chardonnay.

—I was just thinking that, she says. She finds the Chardonnays on the list and points at them, asking —What have you heard about these?

Nicholas begins to discuss the relative merits of the wines, and while he's doing that Lydia thinks *this is a mistake. I'm way out of my league. What the fuck am I even doing here?*

There is an answer; she can't help but think it. It's this: it's *exciting*. To talk to someone you had a crush on from afar, to have them show an interest in you, to call them up and have them ask to take you to dinner at a nice restaurant—all of these things are flattering. They're exciting.

*Exciting, maybe, but not necessarily pleasant, she thinks. Gary comes to mind, unbidden, and she frowns at the wine list and makes an attempt to dispel his image by thinking *it's exciting to have two guys interested in you at once. I'm sorry, but it is. It means that you must be doing something right. And I deserve to feel like I'm doing things right. I do.**

Fair enough, except mostly she doesn't feel like she's doing things right. Mostly she feels like she's fucking things up. She feels like she's fucking things up here, at this restaurant, tonight, and—more importantly—she feels like she's fucking things up with Gary. He was out visiting her this past weekend—it was the first time they saw one another since the wedding—and all she could think about was the fact that she'd agreed to go to dinner with Nicholas. She carried the secret inside her all weekend like a tumor, and as it sprawled inside her, hidden, she felt more and more distressed, and then she found herself needing to conceal the distress in addition to the original secret. This involved no small effort. By Saturday night she was having difficulty sustaining the illusion of cheer.

—Something's different, Gary had said to her that night, in bed, breaking off a kiss. —Are you OK?

—I'm fine, Lydia had said.

—Are you sure?

—Yeah, Lydia had said. —I'm sure.

—You can talk to me, Gary whispered. —If there's something—

—I told you, Lydia said. —Everything's fine.

—OK, Gary said, although he sounded hurt, as though he knew she was lying. And when he hugged her goodbye Sunday morning things still felt awkward—as though he knew that she was hiding something, but was himself hiding this knowledge, so that they could both maintain the illusion that nothing was wrong.

Nicholas asks her something, about a particular wine he's thinking about, and although she's barely listening to the question she smiles, and nods, and says —Yes. That sounds great.