

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.

54 / GOOD REASONS

—Well, Nicholas says, —this is the place. He turns a dial and four track lights brighten. In the center of the room is a charcoal-colored modular sofa, pointed at a media wall dominated by a big high-definition television. She can only really imagine this kind of setup being used to watch high-gloss porn.

—Why don't you have a seat? Nicholas says, after a pause that borders on the uncomfortable. —I can get you a drink if you want—I've got a nice Napa Zinfandel in the kitchen—

—Sounds great, Lydia says.

—Or I could get you some water or a club soda—

—No, Lydia says, —the Zin sounds great.

—Okay, Nicholas says. He starts heading into the kitchen and then he turns back, waves a hand down the hallway. —The bathroom's down there, he says, —if you need to—if you need it.

—Great, thanks, Lydia says, and she sits. In front of her is a glass-topped table with some magazines spread out on it: she picks up an issue of *Crain's Chicago Business* but puts it back after failing to find much of interest on the front page. Instead, she opens her purse and gets out a compact so that she can check her makeup while Nicholas is whistling busily in the kitchen.

She scowls at the face she sees reflected: her makeup job looks funny in a way that she's not really going to be able to fix without washing it all off and starting over. She wishes she hadn't tried so hard to look *dressed up* tonight. Which makes her ask, once again, the question: *what the fuck are you even doing?*

It's not hard, really, to answer the question. She answered it last week when she was out to dinner with Nicholas and she answers it again right now—*I'm on a date. It's OK to dress up when you're on a date. It's OK to want to look good. No big deal.* But the answer doesn't keep things from feeling *off*; and she knows that in another five minutes she'll be asking the question again. Maybe there's another question she should be asking.

At that moment, she thinks the words *my heart's not in this*.

Don't be stupid, she immediately counters. *This is what you wanted.* Way back in January when she placed the ad on Craigslist she would have been thrilled to know that she'd eventually be where she is right now. *Nicholas seems like a great guy.* She starts mentally ticking off her reasons—*he's good-looking; he's got a stable job and a condo in a great location; he's clearly interested in you.* Her recitation of these reasons is familiar, and the reasons are good, she has to admit

that they are, but when she hears them in her head she hears them in Anita's voice, not in her own, and she feels like that's a sign that she should to maybe take pause and figure out—figure out exactly what the fuck she's doing.

She doesn't really get the opportunity, because Nicholas comes back into the room, with two glasses of wine. She takes the one offered to her.

—You want to go out on the balcony? he asks. —There's a nice view of the river out there.

—Sure, Lydia says.

He draws back the louvers and through the glass of the door she can see the North Branch and the peach-colored dusk sky above it. *Impressive*, she thinks, and it is—the reminder that Chicago has an artery of fundamental wildness running through its center always comes powerfully. She smiles and says *wow*. But there's a part of her that just wants to get past all this, a part of her that just wants to fast-forward to next weekend, when Gary will be down visiting again (the two of them have plans to go see *Revenge of the Sith*). And it's a big part.

Whatever, she thinks, as she steps outside and stands at the railing, holding her wineglass out into space and contemplating the satisfaction she'd derive from letting it drop. *You can't just back out on this now*.

Nicholas' hand comes to rest on the back of her neck and she resists the urge to reach up and move it away.

