

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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Fletcher is sitting out on Clark's back steps, in his precise places, learned from dozens of sessions like this one. Behind him, in Clark's red cooler, a dozen cans of Miller Lite bob in icy water. Clark fishes two out and hands him one, and he presses it up against his wrists, and then to either side of his throat, attempting to offset the thick heat of the evening.

Noting this behavior, Clark remarks —You can't just drink it? You have to like have *foreplay* with it?

—That's why they call me The Master, Fletcher says, still holding the sweating can against his neck.

—Gross, Clark says. She sits down next to him, and each of them pop open their beers and have a drink.

—Ugh, says Clark. She looks at her can like she's accusing it of some horrible betrayal. — You know, she says, —this is the first beer I've had in four months.

—How are you liking it? Fletcher says.

—It's *horrible*, Clark says.

—That's sort of the appeal, Fletcher says, and he tilts his back and starts to chug the rest of his, something he hasn't tried to do in probably ten years. He gets about halfway through before he botches the job by starting to laugh. Beer foams up out of his mouth and pours down his chin; he only barely manages to keep any from shooting out of his nose.

Clark stifles a grin, adopts a look of mock-sternness. —Cassandra must be very proud, Clark remarks, as he wipes his face with the back of his hand. —I can see that you're providing an excellent role model to her young son.

—Number One Dad, says Fletcher, and he sits up straight, and belches.

They sit there, in silence, for a bit. Clark slices her cigarette-pack wrapper open by pulling its tiny tab; Fletcher takes a more dignified sip of his beer.

—So, Clark says, once she's positioned her cigarette in the corner of her mouth. She gives her lighter two flicks before it ignites on the third. Fletcher watches her draw contemplatively on the cigarette, and waits for what she's going to say.

She exhales; a loop of smoke hangs in the torpid air for a long time before dispersing. —So you're really serious, she says, —about this Pennsylvania plan.

—I am, Fletcher says.

—I can't believe you're going to leave me, Clark says, and although she says it playfully there must be something in it that's true; there's a barb in it that sticks him somewhere deep.

They've always had the ability to see through one another's jokes.

—I'm not *leaving you*, he says, a little more sharply than he'd intended. —I mean, it is true that I'm leaving (Clark here holds up a finger, like she's scored a point) but it's not like we're *breaking up* or anything.

—That's true, Clark says. —It's just going to be weird—not having you around. You're like my only friend.

Fletcher frowns. —That's not true, he says. —I mean, you've got this thing going with Oliver—

—Yeah, Clark admits, with a sort of half-shrug. —I've got this thing with Oliver, and that's great and all—but it's not the *same* as what you and I have. I mean, you and I go back way longer; there's a lot more history there.

—You make it sound like I'm dying, Fletcher says. —I'm not dying. And it's not like *phones don't work* in Pennsylvania—

—It's just going to be different, Clark says, a bit angrily.

—It will be different, Fletcher acknowledges, and he sits and looks out into the yard and drinks the last of his beer.

—And I'll miss you, Clark says. She takes a hard drag on her cigarette. —I'll miss you, and that's kind of hard for me to say, so what I want to hear you say is *I'll miss you too*, not *you won't miss me because Pennsylvania fucking has phones*.

Fletcher thinks that one over for a minute. —I'm sorry, he says, in the end.

Clark shrugs.

—It's just—I don't really know what I'm doing, exactly, he says. —I mean, it's going to be a big change for me, doing this—I don't know if it's the right choice or the wrong choice or what. Sometimes it feels like it's the best decision I ever made and sometimes it feels like the stupidest. There's just so many *factors*—all these elements of uncertainty—and so for me to do it at *all* I have to cling to certain things that I *do* feel certain about. And one of those things is you. Like—at the end of the day I might not know what I'm doing for a *job* or anything like that but I can at least believe *whatever I do, Clark will be OK with it*. I can believe that you'll be OK when I go. That I don't have to worry about you missing me too much. I can believe that you—that you don't need me. That you could be happy if I wasn't around.

—You may be giving me too much credit, Clark says. She turns around and rummages in the cooler, then puts another beer in his hand. Fletcher taps on the top of it but does not immediately open it. Instead he thinks.

—You worry too much, Clark says, finally, clapping her hand down on his knee. —I’m just trying to say that I’m going to miss you. It doesn’t need to kick off an existential crisis.

—I know, Fletcher says, —it’s just that—

—No, Clark says. —Stop. Try this. Say: *Clark, I’ll miss you.*

—Clark, I’ll miss you, Fletcher says.

—OK, Clark says. —Now—next time you say it, make sure it sounds sincere. OK?

—OK, Fletcher says.

—OK, Clark says. —Now shut up and drink your beer.