

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 that’s it, Oliver says, as the third Presidential debate comes to a close. He aims the remote at the TV, then pauses. —You want to watch the post-debate spin? he asks Clark.

—No thanks, Clark says. —By this point in the campaign cycle I already know what they’re going to say.

Oliver clicks the TV off.

—I thought Kerry did pretty well, Oliver says.

—Yeah, says Clark, —but I just don’t think it matters.

—I’m not sure how you can say that, says Oliver. —Kerry’s rating went up after the first debate, it went up after the second debate. The race is now pretty much in a dead tie. If the trend continues—

—I don’t know, Clark says. —I just assume they’ve got something up their sleeve. Rove’s got some October Surprise; I can just *feel* it.

—Like what kind of October Surprise?

—I bet they've got Osama bin Laden in a cage somewhere. That's the ace in the hole. I bet they caught him years ago and just said *hmm, well now wait a second, let's hang on to this*. They pop him out like a week before the election: Bush's approval rating surges. Kerry's response? Helpless fumbling. End of story.

—I never really took you for much of a conspiracy theorist, says Oliver.

—Hey—I don't put anything past these people, says Clark. —You wait. Two weeks from now I'm going to be all *I told you so*.

—I'll take that bet, Oliver says.

—Even *without* the October Surprise, Clark says, —Bush's numbers are still ahead in the polls—

—Yeah, Oliver says, —but only by like a *razor-thin margin*. And besides, the polls are skewed because of this whole *cell phone* thing—have you heard this? The polls are being conducted over land lines so there's this whole demographic of people who aren't getting polled, people who don't have landlines, and they're, you know, mostly young, and so more likely to skew to the left—?

—Yeah, Clark says, —I heard that. But I'm just not going to get my hopes up. If I start thinking that Kerry's actually going to *win* I'm only setting myself up to have my hopes dashed. I really can't take that right now.

—Hm, says Oliver, heading into the kitchen for more beer. On his way back, he says: —*Speaking* of cell phones. That reminds me. You know that new girl at Chicago Solidarity?

—Who, what's-her-name? Clark says, popping the top on her can. —April?

—Yeah. What do you think of her?

Clark sips, and tries to bring to mind an accurate mental picture of the woman: petite, ashy blond hair, an animated, rubbery face. Vaguely chimplike. Quick to smile, quick to laugh—which Clark admires, but only up to a point—after that, it begins to *grate* somehow. April strikes Clark as the kind of woman who will laugh good—naturedly at her own dottiness, even when doing so is precisely the thing that will drive everybody up the fucking wall.

She summarizes: —I don't know, she's alright, I guess. I've only met her like two times.

Why?

—Oh, I don't know, Oliver says. —She called me a couple of days ago and we got to talking.

Clark looks down, keeps her eyes fixed on the sprawl of books and newspapers piled up on Oliver's floor. —Uh huh? she says, neutrally.

—Yeah, Oliver says.

—So, uh, what did you guys talk about?

—Nothing really. We were just—yeah—nothing.

—OK, Clark says.

Oliver nods, and lets the nod trail off into a blank look.

—Anything more you want to say about it? Clark says.

—What? says Oliver, looking mildly startled, as though he's already forgotten what they were talking about. —Oh—no. He shakes his head with his face fixed in what strikes Clark as a very bad impression of sincerity.

—Great, says Clark. —Then—let's talk about something else.

—OK, says Oliver. And both of them look around, at the curtains, the Latin American history books arranged on the bookshelf, the empty Pabst cans arrayed on the table in front of them, as if casting around for something, anything, to say.