

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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When she's waiting in the hospital she lifts her ass off of the hard plastic seat so that she can get a piece of paper out of her back pocket. She unwads it, reads the ten digits she wrote there, and considers what it would mean, to have to do this a second time.

She looks up at the clock, mounted behind its metal grille. It's almost one in the morning. If she calls, she'll be waking them. She doesn't like it, having to disturb people. *You could wait until morning*, she thinks, wearily. She takes a sip of the brackish, bitter coffee in her foam cup, and she winces.

No, she thinks. *You need to call them tonight. You need to be done with this. He needs to go home, to be with people who can take care of him. Who can take care of him better than you can.* This line of thought begins, gradually, to become convincing to her—she sets her coffee down on the little table and fishes her cell phone out of her purse—but then instead of dialing she just stares at the keys.

Are they really going to be able to do any better than you? is what she is thinking. *Think about what kind of people these people are. They haven't even **talked** to their son in two years; they might not even know where he is—and yet they haven't cared enough to find him—?*

Another sip of awful coffee.

Their son is in the hospital, getting his stomach pumped, she thinks. They need to know. Let them decide what to do next. You don't have to make a decision.

(I'm tired, she thinks. I need to be done with this, she thinks.)

She makes a decision; she dials. She listens to the phone ring and imagines a darkened house in Ohio, imagines the tangled shape made by parents, in bed.

A woman's answers after five rings. —Hello?

—Ms. Blake, Denise says. —I'm sorry to wake you. This is Denise Ross. I'm not sure if you remember me—it's been some years since we last spoke—but I'm—

—I know who you are, says Ms. Blake flatly. Denise takes a second to try to read what she hears in this woman's voice—anger? Contempt?

She can't quite get it, so she continues on. —OK, she says. —What you might not know is that Johnny has been living with me here in Chicago since May of 2003.

Silence on the other end of the line.

—I think, Denise offers, —I think that he may need to go home.

Another long silence, then, finally: —Is he using drugs?

—No, says Denise. —Not exactly. He's drinking.

She listens to his mother sigh.

—I'd like to see him get help, Denise says. —More help than I can maybe give him.

Silence again.

—I think he should be at home, Ms. Blake, Denise says.

—I don't know if he's welcome here anymore, comes the tentative response. —After what he's put us through—

—He's in the hospital tonight, Denise says. —He's getting his stomach pumped. He was throwing up blood.

—Jesus, says Ms. Blake, and Denise can hear her begin to cry.

—If he keeps drinking like this he will die, Denise says.

The sound of crying, through the phone.

—I can't take care of him, Denise says. —I've tried but I can't do it. I'm not the parent.

You're the parent.

Silence, so she continues.

—You need to do your job.