

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.

65 / INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Jakob's at Chili's, having lunch with Marvin, one of the guys who works in the Data Management department.

—I just keep getting this feeling that it's not *ethical*, Jakob says, —to hire an applicant who sort of flirted with you.

—Oh, Marvin says, —don't get me wrong. I'm not saying it's *ethical*. I'm just saying that it's not *so* unethical that you're going to lose your job over it, so—

—Yeah, but— Jakob says. —I don't know if I should let *that* be like my moral compass. *I probably won't get fired over this, so it's OK?*

—That's the way I do it, says Marvin. He bites into his cheeseburger. —I mean, he says, while chewing, —have you looked around at the *other people* at this place? You think anybody in this whole institution is like a— he swallows, with the help of a swig of his Coke —is like a *paragon of ethics?*

—I guess not, Jakob says. He pokes a soggy fry into a pool of ketchup. —But at the end of the day I want to be able to get into bed and be able to think *I'm not a scumbag*.

—If that’s the way you want to play it, Marvin says. —But just know three things: you’ll have to work harder than everybody else, you won’t get rich, and you won’t get laid.

Jakob frowns. —I don’t know about that, he begins—

—Man, Marvin says, —relax. I’m just busting your balls. Do you really think it’s *that* unethical? So unethical you’re going to go to sleep thinking you’re a scumbag? I mean, you told me yourself that you felt like she was reasonably qualified for an entry level position—

—She’s as qualified as any of the other applicants I looked at, Jakob says. —I think.

—Then why the fuck *wouldn’t* you hire her? Because she flirted with you in the interview? The whole reason we *have* an interview in the *first place* is so you can get a sense of somebody’s, what do you call them, *interpersonal skills*. A girl’d be stupid *not* to flirt in an interview. So in a way—in a way, the fact that you’re thinking about *not* hiring her because she flirted with you is sort of like penalizing *her* for being a good candidate. Because you got too into her. Which is really *your problem*, not *hers*. So the *ethical* thing to do— he sips from his Coke.

—The ethical thing to do is to hire her? Jakob says.

Marvin nods, still all hunched over his Coke with his mouth on the straw.

—I don't know, Jakob says. —That seems like a justification on like—on like an *epic scale*.

—Look, says Marvin. —Do you want to fuck her or not?

That's the question that Jakob asks himself that night, as he's lying in bed, clutching his pillow, trying to fall asleep. The check-list for *yes* goes mainly like this: 1) *she's cute*, 2) *she said some interesting things*, and 3) *it kind of seemed like she was flirting with me*. He'd think that that'd be enough for him to go on, but the more he thinks about it the more confused he gets.

There's a check-list for *no* in his head as well, and it's harder to articulate, he keeps thinking things like *it's unethical* or *I don't want to get involved with a co-worker* but neither of these feel true, they're paste-ups meant to take the place of the real reason. The real reason has something to do with the fact that he's thirty-two and she's twenty-two, and when he realizes this he begins throws up even more canned hypotheses about why he's having mixed feelings, he tells himself that he's *robbing the cradle* or *taking advantage of her*—but these don't seem quite right either; she seems to have her head on totally straight, he can't imagine that she would be incapable of holding her own against him. It isn't until he's half asleep that he realizes that she reminds him of a younger version of Freya, and he realizes that on some level he's not seeing this girl as who she is but rather as a replacement, and he gets a sudden clear picture of his own sadness, the depth of it, and he gets sudden bleak vision of his own future as a kind of repetition of this cycle, he sees, with the vividness of a dream, that he will date Anna and that things will degrade in the exact same way as they degraded with Freya, because he has learned nothing, and he knows five years from now he will once again be in his bed, alone, more damaged, less appealing, thirty-seven instead of thirty-two, the pool of people who he could be happy with having long ago thinned out.

