

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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—I'm still angry with you, Johnny says, through the phone. —I want you to know that.

—I'd probably be angry too, says Denise, —if our positions were reversed. She watches the water go muddy as she swirls her painbrush around in it.

—The thing that bothers me is that you went *behind my back* to do it. I just—I just wish you'd *talked to me* about it.

—That wasn't really an option, says Denise. —I don't know if you noticed, but we hadn't really been talking about *anything* for the past year.

—That's exactly what I'm—

—And you know what? she says. —That's not *my fault*. That was *your fault*. That was because every time we were at home together you were either *already* drunk, or on your way *towards* drunk. So—like—I get that you're angry—? I get that you feel like when I called your parents I went behind your back—? But if you want me to say *I'm sorry* then you're shit out of luck cause I'm not going to say that.

Johnny blurts out a half-syllable and then retreats into a consterned silence. Denise takes her brush out of the jam jar, blots it on a folded paper towel, and sets it in a row with the others, waiting for him to speak again.

—I don't want you to say that you're sorry, he says.

—Good, Denise says. —Cause I'm not going to.

—Yeah, I *heard* you, Johnny says, and then he sighs. —Look, he says, starting over, —the whole *reason* I called is because *I* wanted to apologize to *you*.

—Kind of a weird way to start it off, Denise says, —with that whole *I'm still angry at you* bit.

—Yeah, I know, Johnny says. —It's just that—it's just—this whole *rehab* thing is really hard for me. It really sucks, you know, to have to basically look at the way you've *fucked things up* and to have to—I don't know—

—Be accountable?

—Yeah, Johnny says. —I guess. To have to look at something that's fucked up and to have to say *I did that. I'm responsible.* I mean—my mom's on like all this anti-anxiety medication and it's like I just get so *mad* at her; I'm like *mom—quit putting all that shit in your system—you're like a fucking pill addict*—but then I have to look at it, and I have to be like, shit, man, why

do you think she's so fucking *anxious* in the first place? And it's like: *it's because of you. It's because you are bad.*

Denise closes her eyes. —It's not that you're *bad*, she says.

A long silence on the other end of the line. Then: —No. It's not because I'm bad. That's what everyone keeps telling me. It's because I have a *disease*. *It's a disease*, that's what everybody says, *it's not you that's bad, it's the disease*. Disease, disease, disease. Those people don't know what the fuck they're talking about. Okay? I'm just here to say that. I didn't drink because I had a fucking *disease*. I drank because I fucking *hate myself*. Do you understand? Can you possibly, for a minute, understand what that feels like?

—Yes, Denise says.

Johnny is silent; and in this his silence she can hear his blown-up anger collapsing, a crumpling paper dragon. She can hear that he believes her.

—So how do you deal with it? he asks, finally. —How do you just—get through?

—I don't know, Denise says. —You just wake up and there's this day. And—just—you just try to make *hating yourself* take up as small a portion of that day as possible. You try to let the bigger portion be *anything else*.

—I'm not sure that I know how to do that, Johnny says.

—Me either, says Denise. —But you have to try.