

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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Jakob looks in the bathroom mirror and bares his teeth. He just ate a bagel at his desk and he wants to take a look to make sure that there aren't poppyseeds trapped down in his gumline. And in fact he spots one. *Sesame bagel next time*, he reminds himself. He tries to hook the errant bit with a fingernail which he's bitten down to the point of uselessness, but no luck there; finally he has to resort to prying it out with the corner of his laminated work ID. In the middle of this process one of his coworkers comes in through the door and gives him kind of a look.

Caught, Jakob takes the card out of his mouth immediately, but he knows he's already been spotted acting weird, so he says —Poppyseed, by way of lame obligatory explanation.

—Uh huh, says the guy, standing at the urinal with his back to Jakob, sounding decidedly unconvinced.

—They can be kind of, uh, tenacious, Jakob says.

—I'm sure, says the dude at the urinal.

Fine, whatever, thinks Jakob, and he returns to working on the seed, finally getting the damn thing out, and he hurries out of the bathroom before he's subjected to any more of that particular embarrassing interaction.

To get from the bathroom to his office he has to walk through the Human Resources cube farm, which means he has the option of dropping by and saying something to Anne, a fact he's aware of basically any time he goes from Point A to Point B, probably a hundred times a day. He tries to exercise this option more or less sparingly: he knows if he goes over and talks to her more than once or twice a day she's going to know something's up. Actually he figures that she probably already knows. Subtlety's never really been his strong point.

As he heads over there he starts to think about it this way: she's worked at Fieldhammer for a little over a month now, if he's gone by to talk to her two times a day let's figure he's talked to her a total of sixty times. And yet during the same time period she's come by his office to talk to him only five or six times, maybe ten max, and he has trouble remembering any times when she's talked to him about anything other than straight-up work-related stuff. So a conclusion is beginning to belatedly form in his head, a conclusion he still does not quite want to fully acknowledge as real, not while he can still retain some shred of an alternative possibility.

And so. The usual gang of his co-workers is going out tonight for post-work beers: the plan is to ask her along. She came with them once before, two weeks ago—the most promising sign, to date, that she might actually somehow be interested in him. Followed by last week, when he asked her again, and she declined.

So that brings us to today, Jakob thinks, and he sticks his head into her cube only to see that she's on the phone, which immediately makes him want to abort, but she spots him, and even as he's trying to signal *I can come back later* through a set of awkward gesticulations, she says into her headset —Yeah. Yeah. Hang on a second, and she covers up the mouthpiece with the heel of her hand and gives him a look which means *what* but which also seems to contain an implied *make this quick*.

—Um, Jakob says. —I can come back later if you're—

She cuts him off with a beckoning gesture which more-or-less says *come on—out with it*.

—Um—I was just going to say that some of us are getting together and going out again for beers tonight—we're going to be going to MacLannan's, the pub? So if you wanted to join us—

—I don't think I'm going to be able to make it, she says. —Sorry.

He drops into silence, waiting for any of the things that she might say if she were interested: *maybe next week* or, even better, *tell you what—maybe you and I could grab a coffee sometime* or something like that, but she doesn't say any of those things, instead she gives him a look like *this conversation is now terminated*, and he responds with another weird uninterpretable series of jerks of the hand which sort of tries to say *OK I'm going I'll be in my office if you need me* and he thinks *fuck—I just don't seem able to manage in the world today*—and off he goes.

Fuck, he thinks again, on his way back to his office. *Fuck*, he thinks, as he formally acknowledges the conclusion he wasn't quite willing to formally acknowledge before. He crosses her name off of the top of a very short list.

It's been five months now since he and Freya broke up, five months of sniffing down dead ends (Melissa, Billie, Anna), five months of sleeping alone without having so much as a single date. He thinks about the night Freya called him, back in June, asking him if he wanted to come over for the night; he thinks about the way he fumbled that conversation, and he feels regret settle on him like ash.

You could call her, he thinks, as he sits back down at his desk. *Just to say hi. It's been a while.*

He thinks this over as a possibility, then rejects it, then begins to think it over again.