

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.

## 27 / INTEREST

—So what's Freya been up to? Fletcher asks. —I haven't seen her around much lately. He licks the joint closed, tastes the thin flavor of rolling paper glue on his tongue.

—Yeah, Jakob says, she's been kind of busy. They made her assistant manager at the record shop.

Fletcher lights his lighter and uses it to toast the joint's moist seam dry. —Oh yeah? he says.

—Yeah, Jakob says. —She's been there longer than anybody.

—That's cool. Fletcher offers the joint and lighter over to Jakob, who accepts them. —Things still going well between you two?

There is a pause while Jakob inhales. He holds the smoke in his lungs for five seconds or so, then exhales. —Yeah, yeah, things are going fine, he says. (A few remembered conflicts flicker dimly in his mind, but in the end he decides that his statement is essentially true. He does not want to bore Fletcher by expounding upon each minor aberration from that basic truth.)

Now it is Fletcher's turn to take a hit, and Jakob takes the opportunity to ask: —And you? How are things going with *your* love life?

Fletcher makes a flat plane of his hand, and tilts it back and forth. Exhales. —Eh, he says.

—How about the crush with Isabelle? Jakob asks. —How did that work out?

—Well, says Fletcher, passing the joint, —my crushes don't exactly *work out*. I don't know that they're even *meant* to work out, really.

—How do you mean? Jakob asks.

—You hear people sometimes talk about *interest bets*? Fletcher says. —A bet that you make on something—anything, really. It could be, I don't know, *I bet I'll make it across the street before the light changes*, or *I'll bet you that so-and-so is wearing that same green hat today*, or whatever. These kinds of bets, you don't make them because you particularly *care* about the outcome or because you feel *certain* about something; you make them because it makes your day a little more interesting. You feel that little extra margin of *investment* in the way that things turn out?

—Sure, Jakob says. —I guess.

—That's kind of the way that I am with crushes, Fletcher says. —I don't necessarily expect them to *work out*: I don't even know that I really *want* them to work out. I certainly don't put in much serious effort towards that end. But having a crush gives me that extra *investment* that I was talking about. You know, a normal day, me walking around the English Department: I get to think: Will I see her? If I wander by her office, will she be there? Maybe I'll stick my head in—will I be able to think of something to say? Will I score a point or will I lose a point? It just makes my day a little bit more interesting. It's basically a game. Speaking of which.

He turns on the TV. It is 6:05 in Chicago, and if it were not football season, they would be five minutes into *Futurama*, the first of the Sunday night shows that Fletcher and Jakob sometimes get together to watch. (The lineup: *Futurama*, *King of the Hill*, *The Simpsons*, *Malcolm In the Middle*, and *The X-Files*.) But the game has pushed into *Futurama*'s slot, as it has done almost every Sunday night this fall. Fletcher leaves the TV on and just turns the sound

down. He turns and sees that Jakob is looking at him with a somewhat worried expression on his face.

—What? Fletcher says.

—I don't know, man, Jakob says. —I mean, interest crushes, sure, but—don't you ever get lonely?

Fletcher shrugs. —I don't know, he says. —I've pretty much resigned myself to the fact that I'll be dying alone.

—Shut up, Jakob says.

—No, man, Fletcher says. —I mean, you know, I was an only child; I'm kind of used to it. This is just, you know, the way things kind of *are* for me. It doesn't seem *lonely* or *not lonely*; it just seems like, you know—

He falls into watching the silent TV. Jakob watches the green of football field gleam in his glasses.

Fletcher thinks of the strong women who he has known, Freya, Clark, thinks of the romantic interest that he developed for them, an interest that, in each case, felt so different from a crush. He thinks of the way that he corralled this interest off, created a place where nothing could touch it, a sealed chamber in which it was safe and from where it could not be heard.

The joint, held in his fingers, smolders. Curls of smoke unspool in the air.