

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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After work, Freya hops a bus over to Jakob's apartment. He buzzes her in and meets her at the door. —I'm still working on this thing, he says. —I'll be done in a minute.

He sits back down at the computer, and she leaves him there, staring at what look like pictures of gutted factories. She sheds her coat and hat, and gets the new issue of *The Wire* out of her shoulderbag (she borrowed it from the store because it has a cover article on Richard Hell, and she's been listening to a lot of Voidoids and Television lately). *I belong to the blank generation and I can take it or leave it each time.*

She sits on Jakob's sofa, flip through the magazine idly for a while. After a few minutes Jakob shouts —I'm just about done in here. —Great, Freya says.

She looks in at him through the doorway. He leans his head back, stares at the ceiling, and says —Ugh. Then he hunches over again, looking back at the computer.

Freya flips another page in *The Wire*. She is no longer reading.

—You know, she says. —I've been thinking.

—Yeah? Jakob says.

—I've been thinking about going back to school.

Jakob pauses for a second, and then swivels in his chair to face her through the doorway. —Really? he asks.

—Yeah, really, she says. —I just, I don't know, I just feel kind of *stalled out* these days. She sort of gestures vaguely around her.

It's true, she does. She's been at the record store for three years now; and aside from the manager and the owner, she's outlasted everyone else who was there when she was hired. She's the assistant manager now, and there's nowhere else to go from there. (That is, unless Don, the manager, quits, but Freya doesn't think Don will ever quit. He's got a good thing going: he assigns all the major work of running the store to her and then spends his days examining the incoming used vinyl. He prices the rarities cheap so that he can buy them himself, either to put in his own collection, or to sell on Ebay, to finance a rumored drug habit.)

Being the assistant manager is fine, she guesses—it pays the bills—but she feels strangely *guilty* about having dropped out of college. She dropped out in her second year to play drums in a band. The band only lasted for about eight months, but once she'd skipped the groove of the school thing it was all too easy to find stuff around Chicago to keep her busy and entertained. But now everything seems to have a certain *sameness* to it, and maybe school would be the trick. It would be good, she thinks, for her mind to be in an environment where it could brush up against other minds.

Not that the people around her aren't smart. Jakob's getting his Master's degree and, fuck, Fletcher's getting his *doctorate*. But she feels like it's difficult for her to talk to them about their intellectual work. Maybe what she needs is to be around people who are working closer to her own level.

—Hey, Jakob says. —If that's what you want to do, that's cool; I'm totally supportive of that. But, I mean, I don't know. I see a lot of entry-level college kids, and I just try to, like, picture you in that classroom. I think you'd feel pretty thwarted. You're a lot smarter than those kids: I just see you eating them *alive*.

Yeah yeah yeah, she's smart. Sure. But Jakob and Fletcher are thinking about ideas that they've been working with for like ten *years*, they were reading the kind of shit that they read while Freya was out every other night drinking Old Style and playing pool and fucking lowlifes. She's tried to get them to explain, to fill out the details of where they are in their own heads, and every time they sort of heave a sigh and begin explaining things to her like she's four and she immediately wants to say *forget it*.

—Yeah, Freya says, —but I'm just kind of *tired* of not being at the same *level* as everybody else around me. I mean, you've got this *project* that you're working on, Fletcher and Clark have their poems, but what do I have like that? Nothing.

—I don't know, Jakob says. —Academia's not all that great. Most of the people there are pretty boring. That's part of why I like you, you know: you're kind of *outside* of that whole scene. And that's, that's *refreshing*.

Freya interprets this as basically meaning *I like the novelty of having someone around who's dumb*. She knows that this is uncharitable, but she's feeling in a pretty uncharitable mood tonight. So fuck it.

—Like, Jakob continues, —you're interested in stuff *besides* your research?

*But that's the whole problem*, Freya thinks. *I don't **have** any research.*