

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 is sitting at his kitchen table in his bathrobe, gathering papers together and placing them in file folders. Student drafts, quizzes, surplus handouts. When he's done he'll place them all in an accordion file to bring to school.

But he is thinking about something else. He doesn't really feel like he needs to use much of his brain to do this kind of thing, sorting paper. (This is probably why he is always leaving behind some important document.) He is thinking about Freya, and specifically he is thinking about her dad.

He really only thinks about her dad on unfocused mornings like this, when he can follow a thought to its neighbor without something in the world interrupting. He began by thinking idly about whether he and Freya will ever get married, by trying to envision what their life as a married couple would be like. This led him to wonder whether Freya's dad would show up at the wedding, which reminded him that it's weird, that he knows so little about her dad.

(Or is it? He's not really sure how much people in their thirties actually talk to one another about their parents.)

He's met her mom and her stepdad and her half-brother; he went out to their place for Thanksgiving and introduced himself around. He liked those people OK. Her stepdad was friendly and gruff: he offered his right hand to Jakob to shake and used his left to get a

grip on Jakob's shoulder. (Jakob had never before felt so literally *sized up*.) Her mom spent the whole afternoon feeding Jakob tiny hors d'ouvres. He didn't protest—hey, they were tasty—although he could tell that the doting embarrassed Freya: —*Mom*, she said at one point, —*could you just leave him **alone**? He'll eat when he's hungry.*

So he's met that side. But he's never met her dad. And she doesn't ever really talk about him. He knows that her parents split up when she was pretty young, and that her dad moved out to Dallas, to live with his brother for a while (Freya's uncle?) He knows that her dad is still out there in Texas and that she gets a call from him every now and then. Jakob can remember two incidents, maybe three. Each time she seemed troubled, disturbed.

Jakob: *What's wrong?* Freya: *Oh*—and a complicated expression on her face, as though she were trying to recall the details of a bad dream—*my dad called.*

Jakob knows that she thinks of her dad as a *creep*, a *scumbag*. These are the words she uses. He remembers that she once said that the first time she realized adults were fallible had to do with something with her dad, when she was young. He knows the dark turns that a relationship between a father and a daughter can take, and he wonders exactly what she has lived through.

He wants to know: he thinks it is odd that he is in love with this woman, and yet there are these *shapes* in her background, shapes of terrible meaning, that he cannot fully discern. But he does not want to pry. He will not pry. It is not his place. But he realizes, as he puts his papers in their proper folders, that parts of her are a mystery to him, and this frightens him somehow, here, in the morning.