

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 over at Freya's apartment. They've both just finished dinner. (Pasta salad: it's hot outside.) Freya begins to gather up her plate.

—Here, says Jakob. —Let me.

He takes his plate and hers into the kitchen. But when he gets to the sink he sees that it's already jammed full of dirty dishes. They form a kind of archaeology of the week: deep in there he can see bowls coated with spaghetti residue, from a dinner Freya had made five days ago. He considers being a good boyfriend and washing the whole batch, but the sink is so full that there's not enough space left to get even a single saucer under the faucet. He takes a few of the dirty plates and tries to pull them free from the heap, a preliminary effort towards reorganizing the mess, but the motion disturbs a few tiny flies feeding in the depths, and as they swirl up at him, his stomach turns.

He can't understand how Freya can let her dishes get this bad. His sink is always pretty clean.

—Jeez, he says. —You plan on getting to these dishes anytime soon?

Freya's in no mood. She worked from nine to six today at the record store, and during today's shift she argued with Don, the manager, about exactly what the store buyers should be buying (a recurring argument, this). She also had to fight with one of the new clerks; he'd requested off July 4th through July 7th, a holiday *and* a weekend; other people wanted those same days off, too, and when she's making up the schedule she has to give

preference to people with seniority, so, sorry, but this new clerk had complained about it, had the fucking *indignity* to complain right to her face, to *bitch her out as though she wasn't his boss*. So she'd already been pretty annoyed when she got home to Jakob reading a book on her couch and running her air conditioner. So what she says is —Fuck you.

Jakob, in the kitchen, freezes.

—I'll get to them when I feel like it, Freya says. —Cause, let me tell you something, I work for a living? I know it's been a while since you've done that, but maybe you should try to remember what it's like.

Jakob grew up in the Ohio suburbs, the child of white-collar parents. His father is an optician, and his mother works as an advocate for the local heritage preservation foundation. They hardly ever raised their voices in anger: not at the television, not at other drivers on the road, not at one another, and certainly not at him. So usually when Freya does it, he's surprised, startled even, and he tends to quail, to go conciliatory immediately. But he's been less surprised lately: he's not sure if it's because Freya feels stalled, or because she has these misapprehensions that he's enjoying a summer of leisure, or what, but she's been getting angry more often, and this has begun to concern him, and this time he is not just going to cower—

—You know, he says, —Maybe you should see a counselor or something about all this anger you seem to have stored up. You just seem perfectly willing to *lash out* at me like it's nothing—

He goes on for a bit, but Freya barely hears him, past when he said that she *lashes out*. That almost seems funny to her. She's used to guys who hit. An image: her ex-boyfriend Mike, drunk, straddling her on the bathroom floor, pulling his fist back and aiming it

carefully at her face while she squirmed and thrashed. *That's lashing out, Jakob*, she thinks. *Not a few angry words.*

An image: Freya's dad has her mom up against the door, his hand around her throat. Freya runs into the room crying, gets pushed, falls to the floor with the sidetable and the lamp and the phone directory. Dad kicks her in the tailbone, once, hard enough that her head bangs into the wall. That was the first time she realized adults were fallible. When she saw that *anger*.

She's never told Jakob about her ex-boyfriends. She's never told Jakob about her dad. She doesn't see the point of telling him. He'll only respond with pity, and she doesn't want that, she hasn't come this far and gotten her shit together this much just to have someone treat her with pity.

Jakob's monologue trails off and he waits cautiously for her response. She drinks her beer. Neither of them speak. Finally he sighs and says —Alright. Alright. Listen. I have a lot of work to do tonight; I'm not going to waste my time with this bullshit. Call me later if you want to talk.

—I will, Freya says.

When he's at the door he pauses for a moment, and then he turns to look over his shoulder and he says —I love you.

—I love you too, she says.

He shrugs and he heads out, hoping, all the way until he turns the corner, that she will come out chasing after him, eager to make up, bearing apologies. But she doesn't.

When he gets to his apartment he sees that the light is blinking on his answering machine. He's certain that it's her, calling because she was unable to stand the disharmony for any longer, because she wanted to sort things out before even one more minute passed.

But the message isn't from her. It's from Thomas.