

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.

70 / SOMEBODY

They go to the Fireside, where it's dingy and crowded and hot. They don't spend much time watching the bands: they spend most of the show in the bar. She cools her neck by pressing a Red Stripe bottle up against it. They talk above muffled rock thumping through the walls.

He doesn't ask her if she has a boyfriend, and she doesn't tell him that she does.

She gets his story, what of it there is: he's 21, fresh out of Northwestern. He studied philosophy. He plays the bass in a band. (She asks *what band?* and he waves off the question and just says *we suck.*)

—I used to play the drums, Freya offers.

—Oh yeah?

—This was like, ten years ago.

—You still have them? Joshua asks.

—I think they're in my mom's basement.

—You should drag them out and we'll play sometime. Some friends and I have a practice space; it would be cool.

She takes a slug of Red Stripe from her bottle and regards him bemusedly. She can't quite believe she's having this conversation. She can't believe that he's flirting so *blatantly* with someone who is basically *his boss*. He's direct, earnest: almost arrogantly so. Very 21.

She's 28. Someone like Melissa would say she was *robbing the cradle*. *Ab*, she tells herself, *it'd be good for you. You could probably use somebody who you could slap around a bit.*

Except. Except no. There won't be any *slapping around* of anybody. This entire conversation is just *play*, just something she's doing because it feels good to be the target of a good-looking young man's attention. She is *in a relationship* with Jakob.

Although, she asks herself, where exactly is that relationship going? They've been dating for, what?, a year and a half now? They haven't ever talked about moving in together or getting married. (*Don't think about this now*, says the rational voice in her brain, *now is not the time to be thinking about this.*) Jakob doesn't really show much interest in music, which is the main thing that she's interested in. He hasn't encouraged her to break out the drums again. And the two of them *never* go out to see bands—this is the first show she's been to in maybe six months; she had almost forgotten how much she enjoys it. What do they do instead? She goes over to Jakob's place, or he comes over to hers, and they watch a movie, or they sit around and read, then they go to bed, cuddle a bit, maybe fuck, and then the next day they do it all over again. Its main merit is that it's *comfortable*.

And Joshua makes her uncomfortable.

She catches him staring at her. She looks back at him. They look in one another's eyes for maybe three whole seconds. She feels faintly like she may be falling.

She slaps her hand down on the table. —It's getting late, she says. —I'm going to go.

—We could— Joshua begins.

—No, Freya says. She stands. —I, really, I should go. You working Monday? (She knows he is; she made up his schedule.)

—Yeah, he says.

—I'll see you then, she says.

She's a bit drunk by this point, so she catches a cab home. She staggers up two flights of stairs and fumbles her keys into the lock. On her way into the bathroom she picks up the cordless phone and gets the stutter tone that indicates *voicemail*. She sits on the toilet and dials her mailbox number.

Two new messages.

The first is Jakob:

Hey, Freya, it's me. It's about... eight o'clock. Just wondering where you are. Maybe you're working? I thought you were only on until six. Whatever, give me a call. She scowls.

The second one is from her mom. *Oh, great*, Freya thinks, *some crisis*.

Hey, Freya. It's Mom. Listen, there's something I need to talk to you about.

Her mom's voice sounds more stilted than usual, and Freya's first thought is: *somebody died*.

Maybe you should call here when you get in, but, uh, it's about your father. I got a call from your Uncle Bill today, in Dallas?, and he told me that there had been, well, an accident, the police found him, they found him in his car, and there had been, um, a wound, a, um, from a gun?, they think it might have been self-inflicted, nobody's really sure of anything. And, um, Bill wants you to call him, they're trying to make the arrangements, if you don't have his number it's _____. And, um, call me, too, when you get this message, sweetie, I — really need to talk to you—

These last words are pinched, as though a column of sorrow were filling her, so that words could only squeak out around its edges. A recorded voice speaks: *to play the message again, press one*.

She hangs up the phone. The apartment is quiet. *Fuck*, she thinks. Blank. The apartment is quiet. *Fuck*, she thinks. Sink. Bathmat. Shower curtain. Soaps in a wire

basket. Nail polish. A lipstick kiss on the wall's plaster. Towels hanging on the towel bar. Turquoise razor in its caddy. Everything in its place. And yet she feels the growing pressure of teeming darkness, all around her, ready, at any moment, to burst inward on this world. To drown her in black noise and madness.