

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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Freya unlocks the store, disables the alarm, flips on the lights. It's the first time she's been back to work since the funeral.

She never got a chance to see her father's body—the casket had been closed. She wishes they had opened it. Let people see the messy real of death. Get their faces right up against it. People should see what a penetrated skull looks like. Maybe then they'd think twice before doing some *fucking stupid* thing like what her dad did. They'd be conscious, at least, of how they'd look when they were through.

She heads into the back room. The familiar things are there: the wall of lockers, layered over with a thousand promo stickers. The Darth Maul PEZ dispenser hanging from the florescent light's pull-chain. Everything looks strange, although everything is the same. Maybe it looks strange *because* it is the same. She has been to Texas; she has seen her father's gravestone. It seems as though the world should be more torn.

Jakob brought her big cartons of Chinese takeout last night. *They say you're supposed to feed people who have suffered a loss, he said. I know it's not much, but—*. She had spent a lot of her time in Texas angry at him for not coming with her, but something about the helplessness of this gesture made her want to forgive him. She took him into her arms and he shuddered, as though he were releasing some weight he'd carried in his body the entire time she'd been gone. *Ssh*, she'd said, as though he was the one who needed comfort.

Perhaps he was. She cannot say that she felt much grief. She felt disturbed, as though her history had been disrupted. This particular ending forces her to read the earlier chapters of her father's story differently, to see signs and pointers where she had not seen them before.

She also found herself forced to place herself in new categories. A person who knows someone who has committed suicide. A person who has lost a father. These shifts were not necessarily easy to make—and she is not certain that she's fully made them yet—but they were not accompanied by great sorrow. She has not cried.

This makes her feel guilty. The whole thing makes her feel guilty. *If only I'd been a better daughter*, she thinks. *Called him every once in a while. Just to check in. Just to make sure he was doing alright.*

In Texas, her Uncle Bill showed her a few recent photos of her father, the few he had. Her memories of his appearance had been twenty years out of date. *So this is him*, she thought, this shirtless stranger, bare chest covered in a thick mat of gray hair. He's frowning into the camera, as though he wants to punch out whoever's taking the picture.

Thinking of those images now reminds her that her father was a bad person. He hit her mom and he hit her and in the last twenty years he's probably hit other women, too. He threw things and he occasionally broke her toys on purpose and he once put a hole in the wall of her bedroom. Fuck him. Fuck guilt. She's glad that he's dead. She should have spit on his grave.

She imagines his picture going up in flames, reducing him to ash. And she imagines the fire passing over her, too. Her old skin will burn, come off like paper. But she will rise up new.