

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.

14 / PEOPLE MOVING AROUND

Jakob wakes up in bed, with Freya, with his foot touching hers. He slides over, presses his face up against her exposed shoulder, gives her a tiny kiss there. She murmurs a dim assent and nuzzles deeper into the pillow that she holds twisted in her arms. This is about the most they ever touch anymore.

Jakob sits up, rubs flecks of night-crap out of his eyes. The clock says 9:30. If he gets up now he'll probably have an hour or two of solitude; he can sit in the living room and read for a bit before other people start moving around, which strikes him as a pretty pleasing way to start off his Saturday.

He gets up, plods into the bathroom, takes a long morning piss. In the mirror he investigates the grey hairs in his eyebrow, making sure they're still there. For some reason they're only ever in the left one. He runs a palm over the stubbled knob of his chin, trying to figure out how he might appear to someone else, a stranger.

Eventually the thought of coffee overrides the dubious pleasures of this morning inspection, and he starts heading for the kitchen. As he goes past Tim's room—the room he still can't really believe he now has to think of as *Tim's room*—he notices that the door is open. The door is open, exactly the same way it was open last night, around eleven, when Jakob went

to bed. *Did he even come home last night?* Jakob thinks, a note of worry sounding lightly within him. Tim's army sleeping bag looks tangled and unslept-in, which is kind of the way it always looks.

As he's washing out the coffee pot Jakob decides that it's *pretty unlikely* that Tim came in late last night—late enough for Jakob to have slept right through it—only to have then gotten up early this morning and gone out again. Which means that he went out last night and is still out. Or else that something happened. Something bad. Jakob tests out a *run over by a truck* scenario and classifies it as within the realm of possibility. He begins to wonder if this is a situation worth waking Freya over.

Eventually he decides against this. *They probably worked this all out between themselves earlier*, he tells himself. Tim could have called in last night, after Jakob went to bed, to give Freya a heads-up about his activities—*look, sis, I'm at this party, it's going to run kind of late, I'll probably just crash here, if that's cool*. Not that hard to imagine. Plus Freya's hard to rouse in the morning and it's often when she's at her grouchiest—he can't say he's looking all that much forward to going through the trouble of waking her only to find out that she already knew all about what was going on.

So he toasts a bagel in the toaster, he readies his cup of coffee, he carries it all to the couch and lays there, reading Mike Davis' *Dead Cities*. It's about an hour later that he hears some motion in the kitchen, signs of Freya.

—There's coffee, Jakob calls.

No answer, but he can hear her open the cupboard, he can hear the light clatter of ceramic. A minute later she comes down the hallway, towards him, rubbing her face, with a mug in her hand. When she gets to the door of the office she stops, looks in there for a moment, before looking back at Jakob.

—Where's Tim? she says.

—I don't know, Jakob says.

—Was he here when you got up? Freya asks.

—No, Jakob says. —Did you see him come in last night?

—No, Freya says.

—What time did you come to bed? Jakob asks.

—I don't know, Freya says. —Not that long after you. Maybe midnight or so? I figured Tim probably went out after work—but—shit—

She comes into the living room and sits down on the armchair. She blows on the top of her coffee, then turns to look fretfully back at Tim's room without taking a sip. Jakob watches this for a minute without speaking.

—I'm sure he's fine, he finally says.

—Don't say that, Freya responds. —We don't know if he's fine or not.

—All I'm saying is that he's a smart kid—and if something happened—I'm just saying *if—if* something happened, some kind of trouble, he seems like the kind of kid who would be good at getting *out* of it—

—Look, Freya says, —I know you're trying to seem *reassuring*, but you're just making it worse.

The anger snaps on in Jakob's head, and he thinks *OK, I'll just shut up then*. But after a minute the anger crumbles away and the silence begins to seem oppressive so he tries again. —He's probably just over at a friend's place or something—

—Look, would you *stop?* says Freya. —We don't know where he *is*, we don't know if he's in trouble or *not*—

—Well, if you're that *worried* about it, why don't you just *call him?* He probably has his phone on him.

—I—Freya says. —I don't know, I mean, you're right, he's probably fine, I'm probably just worrying over nothing—and I hate to like *call up to check after him*—I mean, I'm not his *mom*, you know? I mean, I hate feeling like I'm being his *mom*.

—But you worry about him, Jakob says, softening a little.

—Yeah, Freya says. She looks down at the cup of coffee in her hands. —Yeah, she says, —I do. But when I *see that* and I just see that *I'm turning into my mom* and it just makes me feel like I'm going to be *sick*. You know what I mean?

—I don't know, Jakob says. He cracks a grin. —I like your mom.

—Yeah, Freya says. She sighs. —I know. You're fucked up like that.