

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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—So let me ask it this way, Fletcher says, pinching up some lentils. —Do you find it maybe *worrisome* that Jakob’s planning to see his ex this Christmas?

Freya peels herself a strip of spongy bread. —Worrisome, she repeats.

—There *are* people who would find it worrisome, Fletcher says. He pops the packet of lentils into his mouth.

—I guess I don’t find it *worrisome*, Freya says, getting her bread around a piece of chicken.

—I mean—I’m not one of those women who wants a guy to make a complete *break from the past* or whatever.

—OK, says Fletcher.

Freya holds up a finger, pausing the conversation so she can chew. She swallows, then continues: —I mean—I think it’s *possible* that a person can have a good relationship—a *friendship*—with an ex without there being all *unresolved feelings* or whatever in the picture.

—You have any relationships like that? Fletcher says.

—No, Freya says. —Do you?

—No, Fletcher says.

—But I don't rule out that it might be *possible*, Freya says.

—Human beings, Fletcher says. —Infinite variety.

—But you know what? Even if there *are* unresolved feelings I don't know if it would bother me. I can see how you might take some comfort from seeing someone who you have feelings toward. Life is hard, you know—and it's *reassuring* to spend time with a person you care about, even if that person makes you feel mixed up inside. Don't you think?

—Yeah, Fletcher says, —I'll agree to that.

—And it's not like that's *dangerous*.

—It's getting *on* towards dangerous.

—But it's not *that* dangerous. I mean, there's a *big gap* between *having* unresolved feelings and *acting* on them.

—True.

—And you know what? Even if he *acted* on them—? I don't really know that I would care that much.

Fletcher raises his eyebrows suspiciously.

—Well— Freya says, —OK, hypothetically speaking—let's say he goes back home to Ohio and fucks her.

—OK.

—So how much damage is that *actually* going to do me? I mean *really*.

—You tell me, Fletcher says.

—Not that much. Not *any*, if you really want to get down to it. Hell, it might even *help things*. I think having a fling can serve as kind of a *safety valve* in a relationship. It can sort of—put things in context, I guess? So if he goes out there and he feels like that's something he needs to do—I guess I'd say *fine*.

—Very generous, Fletcher says.

Freya shrugs, and tears more chicken from the bone.

—I don't know that he'd be that generous if your positions were reversed, Fletcher continues.

—No, Freya says, —probably not. But that just means I get to claim the moral high ground for once.

—How does that feel? Fletcher says.

—It's great, Freya says. —I think I can see my house from here.

Fletcher smirks, takes a sip of his beer.

—So what about you? asks Freya. —You've got your own adventures in monogamy going on. You pop the question to Cassandra yet?

—No, Fletcher says.

—What's your timetable on that?

—I don't know, Fletcher says. —I'm chicken.

Freya points at him accusingly with the bone.

—Hey, Fletcher says. —It’s tough. I mean—three years ago I was telling myself I was never going to get married, never going to have kids—that it was just going to be *me* working on poems, by myself, until I eventually got old and died. That was really the way I thought it was going to go. That was the person I thought of myself as. And now I’m suddenly thinking of myself as someone else, because I’ve met this *woman*, and I feel like a *different person* when I’m around her—

—Do you like the person you are when you’re with her? Freya asks.

Fletcher thinks about it for a second. —Yes, he answers finally. —But I don’t know if I’m prepared to *be that person* for the rest of my life.

—What’s stopping you?

—I don’t know, Fletcher says.

—That’s probably worth figuring out, Freya says.

—Amen, Fletcher says.