

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.

25 / THAT AGE

When Jakob gets home from work he can hear the sounds of sex coming from behind the door to the office. He sighs, and pinches the bridge of his nose, and tells himself *ignore it*. This is the same thing he told himself the last time he heard Tim and that girl—Eliza—fucking in there. But he hates having to ignore it. *I have to live here*, he thinks. *I don't need to be bearing that*. Walking past the door on his way to the kitchen he coughs, just to let them know that someone else is home, just to let them know as gently as possible while still allowing him to express annoyance.

He sits at the table in the kitchen, opens up a beer, starts working on the bills in the wicker basket. He's about halfway through when Tim walks in, pulling on a shirt over his undershirt.

—Hey, J., Tim says.

—Hey, Jakob says, punching numbers into a calculator.

—How was work?

—You know, Jakob says. —It was work.

—I hear you, says Tim, going to the fridge and getting out a bottle of water. Behind him Eliza stands in the doorway, looking tousled and flushed. Involuntarily, Jakob thinks exactly what he doesn't want to think, which is *God, she's hot*. He hates thinking this because, number one, she's what, like eighteen? And, number two, he doesn't want to be stuck *envying* his girlfriend's younger brother, because there's no way that *that's* going to do anything good for the apartment dynamic. And here he is, envying. He gives Eliza a tentative smile but her eyes flick away.

—Listen, J., says Tim, —we're going to make a run over to Sean's. I'll be back later on, probably late.

—OK, says Jakob. —There's some leftover stir-fry in the fridge, do you guys want me to heat some up for you—?

—Nah, Tim says, handing the water bottle off to Eliza.. —We'll probably just grab something on the way.

—OK, says Jakob. —Well—catch you later then.

—Cool, says Tim.

—Good to see you again, Jakob says to Eliza. She smiles thinly, looks down at the floor and murmurs something that might be *yeah*. Jakob turns back to the pile of bills and listens to them leave.

Later, when Freya's home, the two of them sit at the table and eat the reheated stir-fry, and Jakob decides to chance a remark about it: —When I got home today the two of them were closed in his room, he says, —and I could hear them fucking through the door.

Freya, her attention concentrated on corralling some peas against the edge of her plate, gives a little shrug. —What do you want? she says. —Teenagers fuck.

—Teenagers fuck, and that's fine, Jakob says, —but what I *want* is to not have to *bear them fucking* when I get home from work.

—So why were you listening? Freya asks.

—I wasn't *listening*, Jakob says. —They were *loud*.

Freya shrugs. —Whatever, she says. —I mean, you remember what it was like to be that age—it's hard for a kid to find a place to fuck—

—When I was *that age* I was in college and I could fuck in my dorm room like you're supposed to, Jakob says. Freya gives him an acid look, and he has to admit that he courted

it: he knows that making any reference to Tim's dropout status puts risks evoking Freya's wrath. But something about her glibness tonight makes him want to push her buttons.

—I'm just ready to have our place back, Jakob says. —If I knew, when we were originally talking about this, that he was going to be here for *six months*—

—Look, Freya says, —he's *on it*. He's been saving up money—he's got a plan—you remember this—when that guy Sean's lease is up—

—I know, I know, Jakob says. —March 1st, Tim's gone. I'm just saying that I feel *ready* for that. I'd like to think that you agree.

—He's my brother, Freya says. (*Half-brother*, Jakob corrects, silently, even though it makes him feel petty.) —I mean, yeah, it'll be good to have some of our space back, but having him around doesn't *bother* me in the way that it seems to be *bothering* you.

—OK, Jakob says. He sighs. —Forget I said anything.

He clears the table.