

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.

## 36 / BY HERSELF

She opens the kitchen cabinet and looks at the ranked bottles of liquor. —What are you drinking tonight? she calls to Fletcher, who's settling into the couch in the living room.

—You have any more of that scotch I had last time? Fletcher responds.

—You're the only person who ever drinks it, Freya says.

—Well, says Fletcher, —hook me up. He picks up what's on top of the side table—a copy of last week's Book Review—and he ruffles through it until Freya comes back.

—Cheers, Fletcher says, as she puts the glass into his hand.

—Cheers, Freya responds. She stands there and takes a sip from her wine, and Fletcher quietly looks her over. She's never really stopped looking good to him. He thinks about saying as much but then thinks better of it.

—So where is everybody tonight? he asks, instead.

—Well, Tim's closing the store tonight, she says—

—He's moving out soon? says Fletcher. —I seem to remember you saying something about—

—Yeah, Freya says. —March 1st.

—Whoa, Fletcher says. —That is soon.

—Yeah, Freya says. —But it should be an easy move—I mean, he doesn't have all that much shit here—he's got, what, a bedroll and the Playstation and like fifty CDs. I'm taking the day off, though—we're going to rent a van, make a run back home, get some of his stuff from my Mom's.

—How's she doing with the whole thing? Fletcher says. —I remember when he first moved in here she was kind of—

—She thought it was the freaking apocalypse, Freya says. —But, yeah, she's kind of gotten adjusted to the idea since then. I think she's come to realize that I've sort of done her a favor—I mean, think about it, high school dropout, he could stuck around at home living off the sugar tit for another, what, ten years—

—Or longer, Fletcher says.

—So I think there's one level on which she actually feels grateful. On the other hand, I still think it all seemed pretty sudden to her. You know? I don't think she was exactly ready to be by herself. I mean, the best-case scenario in her head probably looked like Tim graduating, then going to go to community college for maybe two years, then maybe finishing up. So—two years—there's an adjustment period there where he's still around but is kind of getting ready to go. I don't think she was expecting to wake up one morning to find out that her kids have made this Plan B, a plan where she doesn't get to have any input—I just don't think she saw that coming. Which is funny, because it's basically the exact same fucking mistake that she made with me. She just thinks she can be this incredibly rigid bitch and that we'll just stick around forever and just take it—

—Too bad she didn't have another kid after Tim, says Fletcher. —They say third time's the charm. He drains the last of his scotch.

—I don't know, Freya says. —My mom's pretty retarded, I'm not sure she'd really get it even then. She eyes his empty glass. —Refill?

—Sure, says Fletcher.

She gets up and goes off down the hall. Fletcher picks up the Book Review again and looks at the illustrations, basically failing to engage with the text.

—So where's Jakob tonight? Fletcher calls, after she's been gone for a minute.

—Out, comes Freya’s voice from the kitchen.

—Out where? Fletcher asks.

—I don’t know, Freya says. —A movie, I think. He’s been doing that a lot lately—going out to a movie after work.

—What, just—by himself?

—I guess, Freya says, coming back and putting a fresh scotch in his hand. —Or—I don’t know—he’s got this crew of people from work that he goes with sometimes.

—Hm, says Fletcher.

—I know that part of why he does it has to do with not wanting to be around here—Freya says. —He hasn’t really enjoyed being around here lately.

—Because of Tim? Fletcher asks.

—Yeah, Freya says, —yeah, in part because of Tim—it feels pretty crowded when the three of us are all here—

—Well, Fletcher says, —with Tim moving out things will maybe ease up a little—

—I don't know, Freya says. —I don't really think so.