

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.

5 / HUSBAND AND KID

—Glennon winds up for the pitch, Fletcher says, and Freya slings the racquetball across the length of the laundromat. It hits the armored front of the detergent vending machine—*pong*—and then ricochets up into the blades of the wobbly ceiling fan, where it batters around for a second, dislodging long festoons of grime, before it fires out again, whamming squarely into the center of the plate-glass window. The glass absorbs the impact and burps the ball back into the room.

—Awesome, Fletcher says. He blocks the path of the ball with his foot, gathers it up, and makes as if he'll toss it back to her. —Go for two?

—I think I'm retiring, Freya says, going back to piling dry clothes on the folding table.

—Fair enough, says Fletcher, and he returns the ball to the plastic chair where he found it, then walks over to join her, inspects the sheer size of the haystack of laundry she's piling up.

—Damn, he says. —I don't think I even *have* that much clothing.

—I don't either, says Freya. —This is laundry for three.

—Ah yes, Fletcher says.

She holds up a pink leopard-print shirt. —Mine, she says. Then she holds up a button-down Oxford. —Jakob's, she says.

Fletcher fishes out an Anti-Flag T-shirt. —So this must be Tim's?

—No, Freya says, —that's mine.

—Oh yeah, Fletcher says, looking at it more closely. —I've seen you in this.

—Yeah, like a hundred times, Freya says. She takes it from him and puts it in her pile. —*This* is Tim's, she says, holding up a grey ribbed tank top.

—Whatever, says Fletcher. —So you're doing the laundry for your boyfriend and your younger brother.

—Yeah, says Freya.

—You're turning into a regular den mother.

Freya smirks. —Not exactly, she says.

Fletcher watches her fold. —It *is* weird, though, he says, after a minute, —it's kind of like you have a husband and a kid.

—*Nothing* like that, Freya says.

—No, no, hear me out, Fletcher says. —I mean, here you are, doing the laundry for the household, it's a kind of *housewifey* sort of scene—

—We'll see how *housewifey* it seems when I punch you in the face, Freya says. —Besides, if *anybody* in this room knows about having a kid, it's not me. Who could it be? Gee, I don't know. Maybe the guy whose girlfriend has a *son*?

At the mention of Cassandra and Leander Fletcher beams a little, then averts his eyes, as if embarrassed by the sweetness that he suddenly finds leaking through his expression. It's the embarrassment that makes Freya understand just how deep his fondness for them runs.

—How are they doing, anyway? Freya asks.

—Good, Fletcher says. —Leander just started kindergarten; he seems to be enjoying it— and Cassandra—she's—she's lonely, I think—Lancaster is pretty provincial—

—You're going out there sometime soon, aren't you? Freya says. —I remember you saying—

—Yeah, next weekend, Fletcher says.

—That's cool, Freya says. —This'll be the first time you've seen her since she moved, right?

—Yeah, Fletcher says.

—Looking forward to it?

—Yeah, Fletcher says. —Yeah, I am.