

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.

## 53 / WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE [II]

Freya kissed him, one time, two and a half years ago, on New Year's Eve. He thinks about that, sometimes; he's thinking about it now, as he stands in the shower, water beating on his back. *There must be something there*, he thinks, *an attraction, on at least some level there must be an attraction. She doesn't find me totally repulsive. That's something.*

He's thinking about what they talked about last night, the possibility that the two of them might move in together in the fall. Just trying out the idea. Thinking about what it would be like. And the thing he keeps thinking is *maybe this is my chance. Maybe she'll finally figure out that I'm the one.*

*It's possible*, he thinks, as he lathers his face. It's more possible now than it's been in a long time, anyway, because she's single now, for the first time in four years. And he believes, or he wants to believe, that over those four years, as her relationship with Jakob soured, she must have been doing certain comparisons in her head—that when she asked herself *why Jakob?* she must also have asked herself *why not Fletcher?* He wants to believe that she asked this question, and he wants to believe that she found herself lacking a good answer.

So if they were roommates—it's easy for him to envision something unfolding between the two of them. On the couch some night, watching a movie, drinking wine, her feet up in his lap. He can imagine the exact way he would cradle her heel in his hand. And then suddenly

something would turn: some *why the fuck not* impulse would, at long last, move into her and she'd ask him to take her to bed, where the two of them would kiss (again) and thus move their relationship to some new phase, some phase where he would be able to claim something like victory.

*And then what?* he thinks, as he flushes soap away from his armpits and groin. *Where does that leave you?* To this question, he comes up blank. He knows what he wants their first night in bed together to be like but beyond that—? He sort of imagines that things would be basically the same as they are now, only, well, with sex. He knows, full well, that this is a rather poorly fleshed-out vision of the future, but he has no other one to put in its place.

And the question of *would things be better?* is even harder to answer. There have been times when he's imagined himself to be happier as Freya's friend than he could conceivably be as her lover (although the seams of this rationalization show a bit now that she's single, at least potentially available). And then, of course, there's Cassandra, and his relationship with her is good, it's strong, the two of them have been talking about freaking getting *married*. He thinks about just how hard it would be, to dismantle that relationship, and he knows that tearing himself out of the matrix he's built with her would scar him; he knows that if he had to say goodbye to her and to Leander (who calls him *Daddy*) he would forever worry that he'd made the wrong decision. As satisfying as it would be to have that evening on the couch with Freya, as satisfying as it would be to be able to think *finally you win; you were the Friend for fifteen years and now you finally get your chance*, he knows that it wouldn't be a fair trade.

He shuts the water off and snags his towel off of its chrome bar. *Maybe this is when you become an adult*, he thinks, as he blots water from his face. *When you stop believing that what might come next is better than what you already have.*