

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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Jakob stands in front of the door to the apartment, trying to fish his ring of keys out of his pocket without dropping his briefcase or the mail, which he holds clenched up in his armpit. He manages this trick and the jiggle-puzzle of the lock, gets in the door, slides his case into the slot that waits for it between the umbrellas and the boots. The lights are off—he flips them on. Maybe nobody’s home. A little weird—normally on Fridays, Freya beats him home by a comfortable half-hour.

—Hello? he calls, sifting loosely through the mail, absently intrigued by the sight of his name appended to various advertisements and offers. After he completes one circuit through today’s sheaf he throws it onto the growing pile at the end of the couch, making a mental note to spend some time sorting it later on tonight.

Nobody’s answered his call, so he goes into the kitchen, flips the light on in there, sticks his head into the bedroom, into the office (aka Tim’s room), just to confirm that he actually has the place to himself for once. Frankly the feeling is nice. He goes into the bathroom and pulls off his tie, washes his face, tries to think about what he’s going to do. It’s only a little after six—he could turn on *NewsHour With Jim Lebrer* if he wanted to, give it his undivided attention for once.

This idea meets with preliminary approval, so he goes to get a beer out of the fridge but as he puts his hand on the handle something stirs in his mind and he just stands there for a minute, thinking.

He's thinking about Melissa Flaum, a girl he used to fool around with back in high school and college although who he never actually quite *dated*. They've stayed in touch—she's been living in Columbus for the past couple of years, working for a mental health clinic. The last communication that flickered between them was an e-mail she sent him a while back, maybe two months ago, something brief—*been thinking about you lately and wanted to see how you were doing*. He didn't respond, not because of a lack of interest, it was something he meant to do, but that was around the time when things got crazy with Tim moving in and all that. Maybe he owes her a call. He can't remember the last time the two of them talked on the phone. They're an hour ahead in Ohio; she's probably home by now—

It takes him fifteen minutes to find his address book, but once he does he takes the phone into the bedroom, closes the door, and dials. —Hey, Melissa, it's me, Jakob, he says, in response to her *hello*.

—Oh, God, *hi*, she says. —Wow.

—Yeah, Jakob says, grinning. —Hi.

—I, she says, —sorry, I—I thought you'd be a telemarketer or something.

—Nope, Jakob says, stupidly. —Just me.

—Yeah, wow. So—

—Yeah—

—Yeah. So how's it *going*?

He gives her the briefest possible set of basics about working in Human Resources at Fieldhammer—he's been working there for close to two years now and he still hasn't found a way to talk about it in a way that sounds interesting to people. She asks *do you like it* and he says *yeah, sure, I mean, it's a job*. He asks how she's doing at the clinic.

—OK, she says. —I got a promotion—I'm now the assistant to the Head of Counseling.

—That's cool, says Jakob.

—It is what it is, says Melissa.

A brief silence ensues. —So, Melissa begins, —are you still dating that woman—Freya?

—Yeah, Jakob admits.

—You guys moved in together, didn't you?

—Yeah, Jakob says. —A little over a year ago.

—You must be really happy.

—Um, Jakob says, —yeah? I guess?

—You guess?

And so Jakob takes the time to outline the situation with Tim, to describe the most overt difficulty within the relationship, the one easiest to convey in broad strokes. He admits something he has not admitted out loud to anyone before: —There are times, after work, where I just walk around downtown or like stop off at a *bar* because I just want to have some time to *myself*. And it's like—I can't believe, sometimes, that I'm in a relationship where those kind of measures feel *necessary*.

—That sounds—that sounds really hard, says Melissa.

—Yeah, Jakob says. —Yeah, it can be pretty hard. But—I don't know—what about you? (He remembers that Melissa was engaged to this guy, Neil, for a while, but he remembers, also, the disintegration of that engagement. He's heard no news since.) —Are you seeing anybody?

—Yeah, says Melissa, and Jakob feels something that is unmistakably a pang of disappointment. —I've been—*dating*, I guess that's how you'd put it. Trying to get sort of *back out there* after Neil, I guess.

—Anybody particularly special in the picture?

—Not really, Melissa says. —I mean, there's this one guy, who's kind of—whatever—I mean, he's a nice guy and all that, but I don't really see much of a future for him and me.

—Is that tough? Jakob says.

—Not really, Melissa says. —I mean—this relationship's not *ideal*, but, you know, it passes the time—and that's basically what I'm in the market for right now anyway—I don't want to set myself up to get burned again—

—Yeah, Jakob says, —That makes sense.

—So when are you coming out to Ohio again? Melissa says. —It's been a while.

—I don't know, Jakob says. —Probably Christmas? To see my folks?

—You should give me a call, Melissa says. —Maybe we could get together for a drink or something.

—I'd like that, says Jakob.