

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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—Listen, man, Jakob says, do you have somewhere to go tonight? Cause you could come out with us if you wanted to. Freya says it's no problem. Fletcher listens to the phone line humming between them, pauses a moment before answering, considering not so much the offer but rather the way that the offer serves as evidence, evidence that Jakob, in a word, cares. Fletcher frowns, as if puzzled, double-checks his interpretation of the gesture. Then, finally, he smiles. Sometimes he thinks that he alienated all the people who cared about him long ago, and evidence to the contrary is always welcome. —No, no, thanks, Fletcher says. —I'm cool. Esmat is having people over.

Esmat is a grad student, like Jakob and Fletcher, and she has been away from her family for a decade (they're in Iran). So, every year, she holds Thanksgiving dinner at her house, taking in other lost grad students. It's a potluck: everyone brings food drawn from their own tradition. Reportedly Esmat's Iranian dishes are delicious. Fletcher feels a little bit weird, actually, only preparing to bring mashed potatoes and gravy, but his tradition is that of suburban WASP America: even the most inventive genealogy would not permit him to pretend otherwise. Normally, in fact, he would be driving out to Evanston to spend Thanksgiving with his parents, a quiet dinner, just the three of them (only child) and the occasional aunt and uncle in town for a visit. But this year, his parents, newly retired, decided they were going to go spend a week in Spain, apparently a place they'd both always

wanted to visit, so, at age 29, Fletcher, somewhat surprisingly, found himself on his own, needing, at last, to fall back on Esmat's perennial invitation.

—You're going to see my hometown tonight, Fletcher says. —That's so weird.

—Yeah, it is kind of weird, Jakob says. He doesn't know Chicago's surrounding landscape with the same intimacy with which he knows suburban Ohio. In the part of Ohio where he grew up, every high school has at least one name and face attached to it; every lousy 24-hour diner has a story; even the McDonald's have memories linked to them. That world helped to make him, in ways that he cannot begin to fully draw out. And tonight he will see the world that helped make Freya, for the first time. He will see her hometown. He will meet her mom, her stepdad, her brother.

It's 2 pm; Fletcher is supposed to be over at Esmat's by 4, and he hasn't yet started cooking the potatoes. —Look, he says, you have a good time. I gotta get moving.

—Yeah, OK, says Jakob. —Take care.

—I will, says Fletcher. And he knows that Jakob means it. And he thinks of the day and he says: —Thanks.