

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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It is late Sunday night and Jakob comes over. He doesn't teach or have classes on Mondays this semester, and Freya works through the busy weekend but then has Monday and Tuesday off, so a habit has begun to emerge: they have begun to think of Monday as a day to spend together, starting Sunday night. Freya is sitting on the sofa, wearing her glasses, reading Michael Chabon's *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. She looks up when Jakob comes in. He has his own key now.

—How was Fletcher's? she asks.

—Fine, Jakob says. —He keeps asking about you. I think he wants to see you.

Freya puts her hands over her face. —I know, she says through them. —Sunday nights are no good for me, though: I finish up with these weekend shifts and I just want an evening to *myself*, you know? And then the rest of the weekend goes by so *fast* and I just never seem to have *time* during the week.

—I know, Jakob says.

She lets her hand drop. —I'll give him a call, she says. —Maybe I can meet with him for a beer or something some evening.

—I think he'd like that, says Jakob.

Secretly he worries: he knows Fletcher spends a lot of time alone, and he thinks that spending a lot of time alone has long-term effects, and he feels he can see hints of them in Fletcher. A certain superiority marks his tone sometimes, a certain glibness infects his

manner, as though he's already figured everything out and grown exasperated with those who haven't. Jakob thinks that this is what happens when people spend too much time in their own heads: they reduce the world to a model based on a few key premises, an easy bauble, and they ultimately grow smug and detached, bored. Jakob thinks that spending time with other people—bumping up against their inscrutability, their mysteries—cures these symptoms, and so he makes a point of spending extra time with Fletcher. He wishes that other people would too.

—So how were the shows? Freya asks.

—Eh, Jakob says. —*Futurama* and *King of the Hill* were bumped because of football: since we're so close to the Super Bowl the post-game show has gotten pretty long. *The Simpsons* was funny, but, you know, that's basically a given. *The X-Files* was, eh, OK—it was a loop episode: people get killed, and then they're reincarnated, and then they're killed again. The killer commits suicide each time he offs his victims, and then he, too, reincarnates, so that he can kill the reincarnated victims again. It's kind of a (he churns the air with his hand while he gropes for the words) vengeance pact story.

Freya shrugs. —I feel like I've seen that one already.

—Well, Jakob says (and here he comes over to kiss her on the head) —it got me to thinking. There *do* seem to have been a lot of these types of episodes on TV, not just on *The X-Files* but on some other shows, too. These shows where like the characters are stuck in a loop and they have to break it, or figure something out in order to escape it.

—*Groundhog Day*, Freya says.

—Well, yeah, Jakob says. —Hey, that's coming up, isn't it?

—Yep, Freya says. —I have to remember to call my friend Sharon; it's her birthday.

—But anyway, Jakob says, —this loop motif keeps appearing, again and again—

—Almost like—a *loop!* Freya says, in a faux-dramatic voice.

Jakob smirks. —Ha ha. But I just got to thinking, where does it come from? Who used it first? Have there been more of these recently than there were before? What does it reflect about our culture that we find these kinds of stories compelling? The sheer repetitive nature of life in postindustrial society? Something to do with computers? It seems to connect so up to so many things: why, the loop could be a *twentieth-century motif!*

Freya raises her eyebrows.

—Hey, Jakob says. —These are the sorts of ideas that can make an academic's career.

—I can see it now, Freya says. —"Loop studies."

—Exactly, Jakob says.

—No, seriously, though, Freya says. —You might be on to something here. I mean, the loop is a big component of twentieth-century music: tape loops, digital loops. (She snaps her fingers.) Do you know OOIOO's song "Be Sure To Loop?"

—I don't know, Jakob says. —I only know what you play for me.

She smiles. She spends most of her week, every week, with people who base their self-worth on the number of obscure bands they have crossreferenced in their skull. It is refreshing to spend time with someone who doesn't know anything and doesn't feel ashamed to say so.

—OK, she says. —Listen to this. This is like an anthem for loopers.

She pulls a CD out of the racks, stacked high within an armoire. He catches a glimpse of the cover, which seems to be covered in rainbows and spangles. She puts the disc in and hits Play.

—Listen, she says.

Sounds flutter and assemble. There are birdcalls, and drums, and a woman's voice saying "be sure to loop" over and over again, periodically breaking into a chant that goes like this: Loop loop loop loop loop loop loop loop loop loop!

—Wow, Jakob says.