

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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Freya came over to Jakob's tonight. He was working on the computer and when she arrived he gave her a quick kiss and said *hang on one minute*. That was maybe half an hour ago. But she doesn't mind. She can entertain herself no problem. (She's sitting on the couch right now, reading Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*.) Eventually she'll want a little attention, but she knows this routine well enough to know that eventually she'll get it. Besides, it's actually kind of *nice* to be ignored: she spent all day in the record store, and every goggle-eyed moron in the entire city came in and stared at her breasts (a sign that spring, officially, is here). She had walked out of there feeling kind of scattered, almost as though a little bit of her had been taken by every guy who had looked at her all day. A thousand pilfered Freyas, dispersed all across the city. So it feels good, to sit here on the couch, regathering herself.

Jakob's voice, from the other room: —I think I'm done.

She knows he's been working on a big paper since January—the qualifying paper that he needs to turn in to get his Master's degree. —Done? she says.

Jakob walks into the living room, rubbing his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. —I think so, he says. —I mean, it's a draft, a pretty rough one, I need to, uh, tighten up the arguments in a few spots, but I think...yeah, I'm basically at the end of it.

—Well, Freya says. —This calls for a celebration.

—Um, Jakob says. —I think I want a beer.

He doesn't have any beer in the fridge (in fact there's little in there besides condiments, a dented pizza box, and a bunch of celery that's seen better days) so they go walk up to the corner store and Freya lays out for a six-pack of Negro Modelo. They also stop off at the fruteria and grab some limes. The evening is gorgeous: balmy. They *remember* balmy, but it's been a long time since they last felt it.

And so, winter finally over, they end up sitting out on Jakob's little back deck, next to the rock salt and the snowshovel. The clouds are pink and the night sky is purple, lit by the Chicago beneath it. Planes pass through periodically, reminding Jakob dimly that, somewhere out there, America is in the midst of dismantling and reassembling the governments of other countries. They sit with their backs against the house and they drink their beers quietly.

—So this is it, Jakob says.

—What do you mean? Freya says.

—This is our lives, Jakob says.

—Yeah, she says. —I guess it is.

Her life. She still doesn't know what she's going to do with it, whether she's just going to stay at the record store, assistant-managing forever, or whether she's going to go back to school, or what. (She won't be going back this fall; the time when she would have needed to make that decision has already passed.) But she sips her beer, and it tastes good, and for now that seems like enough.

—So strange, Jakob says. He squints out into the neighborhood. He sees young people walking on the street with cigarettes. He sees someone walking a dog. He hears hysterical laughter from somewhere. He wonders what will happen next.