

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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This new guy, Joshua, got hired at the record store around two weeks ago.

He looks different from the other boys Freya works with, the non-threatening indie types. For one thing, he's muscular: not like bodybuilder muscular, but, you know, rocker muscular, she can see him out in a garage, punching holes in an amp like Link Wray or something. He's always wearing these tight white T-shirts; showing off his chest, his arms. He wears his hair in a kind of shaggy cut that she likes. It's glossy; it gives off a hint that it might be slightly greasy. She finds herself wanting to take up a great handful of it. He's got these intense eyes, too, dark, a brown that's nearly black. Sometimes she catches him looking at her, and when she makes eye contact with him he doesn't always immediately look away.

Since he started working, there have been a couple of times where she's gone out for a smoke break and he's come out for a smoke break too, shortly thereafter. Too often for it to just be a coincidence. He doesn't say much when they're out there: mainly he just says *hey*, lights up, and squints off into the distance.

They were out there together one time last week and he looked at her and said *some of my friends and me are meeting up at the Bottle later on tonight; you want to come?* She politely declined. A few days later he asked her out to a different show and again she refused. But the thing is: she said that she was worn out. She didn't say that she has a boyfriend. Kind of a conspicuous omission, now that she looks back on it.

Not that things have exactly been going great between her and Jakob. They had that fight a couple of weeks ago—they made up, but things between them are still kind of tense. Last night, bored and hot, they decided to play Monopoly, and after the first hour it was apparent that Jakob was going to win—he already had Boardwalk and Park Place and that batch of green properties, and she only had those low-rent pale blue ones—but when she quit Jakob begged *no, don't quit!* and so she soldiered on. Every time she thought about asserting herself and just firmly saying *no, I don't want to play any more*, she remembered the fight, remembers that Jakob gets upset when she's angry. She's not sure that she knows where *firm* ends for him, and *angry* begins. She wanted to be good, so she just stayed quiet, and kept playing; it was another hour and a half before Jakob finally won. She thinks about that now and it fills her with rage. *Fuck* keeping *quiet*.

She's mad at Jakob. Joshua has been flirting with her. Two facts. In her mind they're connected by a thread that she does not want to identify. But she can identify it well enough to think *be careful. One of these things is not a solution to the other.*

Tonight: Joshua's headed out. She'll follow before long; she's just now handing off her register key to the evening shift supervisor. Joshua turns around, still walking towards the door, backwards, and he looks at her as he's feeling for the door handle and he says — Hey, Freya, some people are getting together at the Fireside in an hour or so, Sweep The Leg Johnny is playing. It's probably their last show, so...I'm just probably going to grab a bite to eat and head over there; you want to come with?

—Sure, she says.