

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 agrees to hold the table while Fletcher goes up and orders the first round. She watches him standing there, at the bar, and he must sense it or something because he turns around and makes a goofy face at her, fixing his mouth into a chimplike grin and rolling his eyes. She smiles, and looks down, to free him of the burden of performance, and she thinks about how long she's known Fletcher, and how familiar—how safe—it all feels.

A minute later he's back with two Red Stripes, and they clink the bottles together.

—Sorry to hear about your dad, he says, once he's settled in.

—Oh, Freya says. —Yeah.

She's surprised to remember that this is the first time she's seen Fletcher since her dad died. There used to be a time when she and Fletcher got together every week, hell, back in high school they'd see each other two or three times a week, not *counting* the time they'd see one another in school. Now she only sees him about once a month: on an average night she usually just defaults to hanging with Jakob, hanging out at his apartment, or having him come over to hang out at hers. The scene's all very domestic. Nice enough, although she misses the drunken stumble of the old days. She hardly ever goes out for a night like this anymore—fuck, this may be the first time she's been to a bar at *all* since she went to the Fireside last month. With Joshua. The same night she got the call about her dad. But before that it had been a pretty good night. She didn't feel old. Joshua's twenty-one, and when she's with him all she has to do is squint and pretend and presto, she goes through the

timewarp, she's twenty-one, too, for as long as she's willing to play make-believe. Of course when she actually *was* twenty-one, she wouldn't have been flirting with guys her own age: she would have been looking for guys who were in their thirties. Dirty rocker scumbags pushing into the lower ranks of middle age. Haggard dudes, wasted and full of menace, as pale and weathered as vampires, sniffing around for young flesh as though it were an antidote. Like she herself may now be doing.

But, oh, yeah, right, her dad.

—I don't know, she says. —I mean, you know what my relationship with my dad's been like.

—For as long as I've known you, you guys have barely been in touch, Fletcher says.

—Right?

—Yeah, Freya says. —He'd call me like three our four times a year. And every time I'd be like *dude, I don't want to talk to you* the whole way through. So I can't say that I'm really too *ripped up* about him not being around anymore. I still haven't cried, you know? And I kind of feel guilty, like I should, I don't know, *care more*.

—You did go out to the funeral, Fletcher says. —That's something.

—Yeah, Freya says. —I guess. I don't even know why I went, really. I mean, I didn't ever go out to see the guy when he was alive; I don't know what I thought I was going to get by going out there.

—Closure?

—No, Freya says. —I mean, I don't know, maybe. The only way I really feel like I could get *closure* on the thing with my dad would be to confront him, and, well, by the time the dude's dead there's not really much opportunity for confrontation *left*, is there? That's what I wanted in all those phone conversations. I didn't want to make nicey-nice small talk

about *what I'm up to* and *how's work*. I wanted to say *I remember what you did to me, and it sucked, and you were wrong, and I hate you*.

Something catches in her throat. She shakes her head and the feeling subsides.

—And I never said that. And now I'll never get the chance to say it. And that right there is the worst of it. I went to Texas to confront him, only by then it was too late.

It was hard for her, she remembers, standing there in front of his fresh grave, fists and teeth clenched, feeling angry and voiceless. Wanting to scream up into the sky. She wishes Jakob had been there. She still feels like he failed her by not going. By staying home to read his books instead.

— He must have known that you felt that way, Fletcher says. —I mean, to do what he did. He must have been suffering.

—Not by my hand, says Freya. —I wanted him to suffer by my hand. As I did by his.