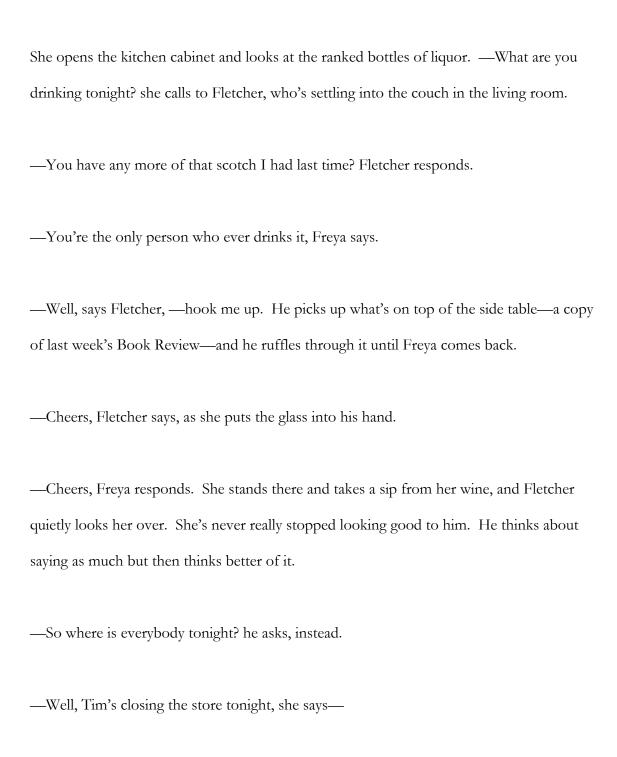
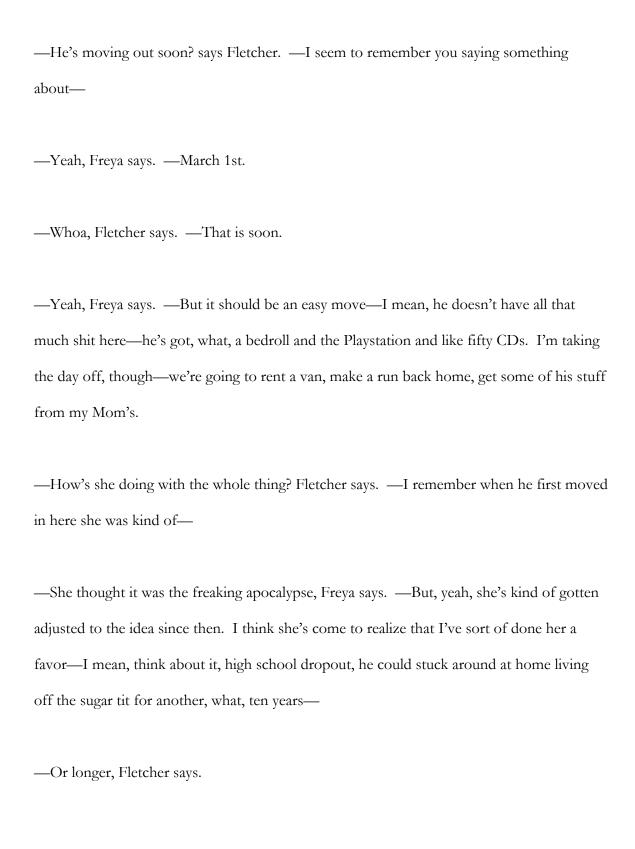
This is an excerpt from *Imaginary Year*, a work of serial fiction by Jeremy P. Bushnell. Visit the *Imaginary Year* website (http://www.ImaginaryYear.com) on Mondays and Fridays for new updates.

36 / BY HERSELF





—So I think there's one level on which she actually feels grateful. On the other hand, I still think it all seemed pretty sudden to her. You know? I don't think she was exactly ready to be by herself. I mean, the best-case scenario in her head probably looked like Tim graduating, then going to go to community college for maybe two years, then maybe finishing up. So—two years—there's an adjustment period there where he's still around but is kind of getting ready to go. I don't think she was expecting to wake up one morning to find out that her kids have made this Plan B, a plan where she doesn't get to have any input—I just don't think she saw that coming. Which is funny, because it's basically the exact same fucking mistake that she made with me. She just thinks she can be this incredibly rigid bitch and that we'll just stick around forever and just take it—

—Too bad she didn't have another kid after Tim, says Fletcher. —They say third time's the charm. He drains the last of his scotch.

—I don't know, Freya says. —My mom's pretty retarded, I'm not sure she'd really get it even then. She eyes his empty glass. —Refill?

—Sure, says Fletcher.

She gets up and goes off down the hall. Fletcher picks up the Book Review again and looks at the illustrations, basically failing to engage with the text.

—So where's Jakob tonight? Fletcher calls, after she's been gone for a minute.

—Out, comes Freya's voice from the kitchen.
—Out where? Fletcher asks.
—I don't know, Freya says. —A movie, I think. He's been doing that a lot lately—going out to a movie after work.
—What, just—by himself?
—I guess, Freya says, coming back and putting a fresh scotch in his hand. —Or—I don't know—he's got this crew of people from work that he goes with sometimes.
—Hm, says Fletcher.
—I know that part of why he does it has to do with not wanting to be around here—Freya says. —He hasn't really enjoyed being around here lately.
—Because of Tim? Fletcher asks.
—Yeah, Freya says, —yeah, in part because of Tim—it feels pretty crowded when the three of us are all here—
—Well, Fletcher says, —with Tim moving out things will maybe ease up a little—

—I don't know, Freya says. —I don't really think so.