

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.

## 37 / DURATION

Sitting at the dining room table, Jakob can look over Freya's shoulder into the office. He can call it *the office* again, because Tim's out of there now—finally in his own place, splitting a dingy four-room warren with this guy Sean. Jakob and Freya each took the day off so that they could help them get set up, which involved doing shit like maneuvering a bed up three flights of stairs. Jakob has a bruise the size of a playing card on his left shoulder, having, at one point, trying to get around a particularly tight turn in the stairwell, gotten pinned between the heavy wooden bedframe and the wall. Whatever. A small price to pay. So he sits here, nursing his beer, in the quiet, and he looks into the office and in his mind he tries out the words—*our office, my office*—and he waits for some sense of satisfaction to kick in, but it doesn't come. And it's then that he knows for sure what he's suspected for a long time—that *Tim moving out* isn't the magic solution that's going to fix everything that's wrong here. If anything their problems only seem more pronounced now that they don't have a third person to play off of.

—We need to talk, says Jakob.

—Yeah, Freya says. She takes a slug from her beer. —I was thinking the same thing.

He looks at her—their eyes meet—and each of them performs an assessment on what they glimpse in the eyes of the other, trying to figure out if they really are thinking the same thing.

—I guess I'll start, says Jakob. —I can't help but notice that we don't really have much in the way of a relationship anymore.

Freya lets him say it; she lets it settle in her, she absorbs its meaning, she waits to see whether it might strike discordantly with any statement that she personally holds to be true. She waits for a long moment. Nothing happens.

—Yeah, she says, —I guess you're right about that.

—And I'm just— Jakob says, (and he's surprised to find his voice catching, a little bit, in his throat) —I'm just *tired*, all the time. I'm tired of squabbling with you, I'm tired of always walking around afraid that I'm going to do something that's going to *irritate* you—

—I'm not the only irritable one sitting at this table— Freya begins, and then they both break off into brittle silence. The heater turns on.

—No, Jakob says, after a minute. —I suppose you're not. And anyway—I don't want to get caught up in a thing where each of us try to *blame* the other for what's—for what's gotten fucked up. I just don't think that's going to be—useful here.

Freya thinks this over and, in the end, she nods.

—I keep trying to think about how we can fix it, Jakob says. —I just—for a long time I kept thinking that—there has to be some way for us to fix it; some way to make it easier. I want things to be easier. (He thinks here of Melissa Flaum, as his point of reference, he remembers the afternoon spent at Christmastime, drinking tea together in her living room.) —But, he continues, —I’m beginning to think that things between us—that they just don’t—that they’re just not ever going to be easy. No matter what we do.

—So—Freya says. Her face feels stretched and tense. —So what does that mean?

—I don’t know, Jakob says, although he does know. He knows but he cannot say. —I think, he begins, ponderously, selecting each individual word with caution, —that we may need to consider the possibility that our relationship has gone beyond its natural duration.

At this pained wording she has to grin: it seems so *vintage*.

—What? Jakob says. He involuntarily finds himself grinning back. —What’s funny?

—Forget it, Freya says, still grinning, looking at him with no small degree of affection. She can still look at him and see the parts of him that she likes—the sweet, almost charming awkwardness which undercuts his fussiness, his seriousness. She knows him well enough, though, to now know that that awkwardness is something he hates about himself, the exact thing he’d most like to stamp out; he can’t stand the way it makes him into a comic figure, even though that Jakob—the one that’s boyish and hapless and a little scared—is really the

Jakob that she loves, not one that tries so hard to be serious and competent. And so for this reason she thinks he's right, about the duration thing. Even though the prospect of having to *date* again, at age thirty-one, is repulsive to her, she still thinks he's right. And she says as much.

They both sit there and drink from their bottles.

—So, Jakob says, finally. —Now that that's on the table, I guess the question is—now what?