

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.

43 / IF I'M TO BE COMPLETELY HONEST

It's getting close to the end of the month, and Jakob's been busy going through the process of preparing to move out, which also means separating his stuff from Freya's. He's already gone through the books and tonight he's doing the CDs, poring over the wall of shelving in their living room, trying to sort the maybe sixty discs that are his out of the hundreds nominally alphabetized there. He shakes his head with something that's a little bit like awe: Freya's got basically the whole history of twentieth-century popular music jumbled up in there and a pretty good start on the twenty-first. He's in the S section, looking at the spine of a CD by the Slits, a band he doesn't know, one of many bands he doesn't know in this collection, and this gives him a sense, not for the first time, of how he failed her: he knew from the beginning how important music was to her, and in the entire time they dated he made only the most marginal effort to learn anything at all about it. He supposes he shouldn't feel surprised that he ended up feeling like he had nothing to say to her.

He finds a Scanner disc in the section; that one's his. He bought it from her store, at her recommendation, maybe four years ago, and he remembers how much listening to it excited him; he remembers the way it made her seem so fascinating, so *tuned in* to a whole world that he knew nothing about, a world that she could walk him through. He wonders when, exactly, he lost interest in that. He hasn't listened to that disc in years. He takes it off the shelf and stacks it in the box with the rest.

He's taping the box shut when Freya comes into the room. She sits on the couch, and watches him for a minute. Things have been better between them, actually, since they decided to split up, all their interactions have seemed strangely casual, easy; the exact kind of easiness that he felt like their relationship so often lacked. It feels like he can say things to her that he wouldn't previously have been able to say; he needs to worry less about the prospects of endangering their long-term harmony.

—I just checked the voicemail, Freya says. —There's a message on there from Melissa; she called yesterday?

—OK, Jakob says. —Cool, thanks. He uses his Sharpie marker to write *CDs* on the box, and then he looks up, and sees the peculiar look on her face. This is the kind of thing he normally would have tried, in the past, to ignore.

—What? he says.

She gives him a slightly suspicious look, as if assessing whether he really wants to know the answer.

—Can I ask you a question? she says, finally.

—Sure, Jakob says. He sits on the floor, next to the box, facing her, fully receptive.

—That woman Melissa, Freya says. —When you went to see her in Ohio.

Jakob puts his finger on his lips, waiting for the question, although at this point he knows what it's going to be.

—Did you— Freya begins, and then she lapses into silence and screws up her face for a second. When she begins again she's facing him squarely. —I guess what I want to know is did you fuck her? (Jakob lets out a tiny burst of air, the driest possible little laugh, when he hears the way she has chosen to phrase this question.)

He pauses before answering; it's only after some perverse figment inside him has enjoyed the moment of suspense that he answers: —No. I didn't *fuck her*. We didn't even, you know, *make out*. I thought about it, if I'm to be completely honest I'd have to admit that I thought about doing it, or trying to do it—I don't really know what would have happened if I tried—maybe she would have done it, I'm not sure. But I didn't try. It didn't really—it didn't really feel right to try. I don't know if that's because I wanted to be *loyal to you* or if it had just been too much water under the bridge or what. It just felt kind of *off*.

Freya nods. —I just wanted to know, she says.

—Yeah, says Jakob, —I get that. He waits a second, inspects a rising feeling, weighs the virtue of articulating it, and, in the end, proceeds: —It kind of hurt me, actually, that you didn't ask earlier. It made me feel like—like you didn't care what I did.

—I didn't really, Freya said. —I'm mean—I'm sorry to say it, but at that point I was—I was just feeling pretty *done* with caring about what you were up to.

—Yeah, Jakob says. —That was part of the way that I finally *knew* that things were done. Upon uttering these words, an unexpected spire of misery swells within him, rising to crack through the neutral expression on his face.

—Oh, J., Freya says, —come here. He crawls over to her, rests his head in her lap. —I wish things had turned out better for us, she says.

—Yeah, Jakob says, in a half-whimper, —me too.

She runs her fingers slowly through his hair until he can manage to swallow the sadness back down.

—OK, he says, —so how about you?

—How about me what? she says.

—Did you ever cheat on me? he asks.

Her mind goes blank for a second. It's not a question she expected him to ask. —Uh, she says, flailing while she tries to compose a diplomatic answer, and then she realizes that by not answering she's already really answered.

—One time, she says.

Jakob clenches his eyes shut.

—I'm sorry, she says.

—Who was it? Jakob says.

—It was—it was that guy, Joshua, that used to work—

Jakob makes a noise like *angh* and pulls away from her. —That guy? he says, staring at her with a sudden loathing. —*That* fucking guy—?

—Yeah, Freya says. A dull anger begins to sputter alive within her. —Yeah, listen, I'm *sorry*, all right, so—

—It's just that—that guy was such a fucking *sleaz*e—

—You met him like what? Twice? Freya says.

—I don't need to be his fucking—his fucking *best friend* to know that he's a fucking *sleaz*e, Jakob says.

—Look—whatever— Freya says. —We fucked one time—it was a long time ago—I don't know what you and I are going to gain by having this *stupid* argument about whether he *is* or *isn't* a *sleaze*—

—When was it? Jakob asks.

—*Years* ago, Freya says.

—Yeah but when? Jakob asks.

—I don't—I don't even fucking *know*. It's not like I exactly put it in my diary, you know? Even at the time I felt like shit about it, so I don't exactly want to go back and *relive* the whole thing—

—But I deserve to know what happened— Jakob says.

—Yeah, well I'm answering your fucking questions, Freya says. —So—

—Did you suck his cock? Jakob asks, quietly.

—OK, Freya says, —that's out of line.

—I don't know that *you* get to decide what's *out of line* in this situation.

—Explain to me, Freya says, —how exactly learning that I sucked some guy’s cock back in fucking 2003 its going to help *this situation*.

—I just want to know, Jakob says. —I think you owe me that much.

—Well now you know, Freya says. —Does it make you feel any better?

It doesn’t.