

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.

59 / A QUESTION WITH TWO ANSWERS

It's getting on towards being late, but Jakob is awake, standing in front of his science-fiction shelf, looking over novels. He's wearing nothing more than a pair of slightly ratty plaid boxers. It's hot here, in the living room; it's hot everywhere in his apartment except the bedroom, where his little windowbox air-conditioner trustily chugs. He spent most of the evening tonight lying in there, working on his laptop, trying to fix his portion of this fucked-up Powerpoint presentation they have to give on Monday, but now that's done, or at least as done as it's going to get tonight, and all he wants to do in the time that remains of his Friday is find a familiar book, and lie, reading it, in wafting cool air, until he konks out. Which based on the way he's feeling now will probably be in about fifteen minutes. He ends up picking *Valis*, brings it into the bedroom and flops down, resting it on his stomach, and wadding a pillow under his head. He starts reading the familiar words about Horselover Fat's nervous breakdown, and he smiles, able to think, for at least a moment, *it's not such a bad life, after all, it really isn't*.

Fifteen minutes later, right on schedule, the soft whirr of the air conditioner begins to lull him, and he closes his eyes in what maybe crosses the line between being a prolonged blink and being a microinterval of sleep. He sets the book down on the windowsill and fumbles clumsily with the lamp until he finally manages to turn the tiny knob in the correct direction and plunge himself into darkness.

The phone begins to ring just as he's seriously beginning to drift off; the familiar ringtone cuts through the fabric of his forming dreams, appearing as an element that he can only make congruent with his waking life. He opens his eyes; the clock reads 12:08. *Who the fuck would be calling me at this hour?* he asks, as he gropes for the phone, his hand led to it by pulsing bursts of green light.

It's Freya.

—Hello? Jakob says, blearily.

—Hi, says Freya. Jakob closes his eyes and rests his head back on the pillow. —I sorry I'm calling so late, Freya says, —I hope I'm not waking you.

—No, no Jakob murmurs. —I was—I wasn't asleep.

—So, um, what are you up to right now?

—Nothing, Jakob says. —Just—I was just reading a book. What—uh—what about you? What are you up to?

—Not much, Freya says. —I was just—well, frankly, I was having a few drinks.

—Drink drink, Jakob says.

—Yeah, says Freya. —And I just got to wondering, you know.

—Know what?

—I just got to wondering whether you wanted to come over, Freya says. —To stay.

Jakob, suddenly realizing that he needs to be a little more awake, opens his eyes, and blinks them shut again, hard, in an attempt to shake off some of the sleep. —To stay? he says.

—Just for the night, she says.

—Wait, Jakob says. He struggles to push himself into an upright position. —Wait—I'm not sure I understand what you're asking—

—Okaay, Freya says, warily.

—I just— Jakob says. —It just seems like something we should think about—

—Actually, no, Freya says. —I'm sick as fuck of *thinking* everything to death all the time. It's basically a question with two answers; either you want to or you don't. So which is it?

—I don't know, Jakob says. Freya doesn't say anything. —It's just—if we're going to do it, I want to talk about it—

—If we have to talk about it, Freya says, —then I don't want to do it.

Jakob, miserable, frowns. —OK, he says. —Then I guess you answered your own question.

—I guess I did, Freya says.

For a minute neither of them say anything.

—You should know, Freya says, —that we're not going to have this conversation again.

—OK, Jakob says.

—OK, Freya says. —I'll talk to you later.

—Yeah, Jakob says, although he suddenly feels horribly certain that she will not, actually, and this certainty fills him with a powerful longing to cry. And then Freya hangs up and he's left holding onto the inert phone and nothing happens, and nothing happens, and the next thing he knows, it's morning.