

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.

20 / CONFIDENCE [II]

Lydia is at the Empty Bottle, drinking a Newcastle Brown Ale, trying to blink smoke out of her eyes.

Tonight's show, "Taking Liberties," features a bill of five separate improvisers. She's here by herself, which makes her feel a little bit like a loser. She wishes she was here with the group of music-geek friends that she left behind when she left Bloomington. (She thinks of Thomas, a guy who she went to shows with here in Chicago for a while, and she momentarily—very momentarily—regrets dumping him.)

Earlier she'd gotten Paul to agree to come along—he's not really into improvisational music, not so much, but he's politically progressive, and she knew that proceeds from the door are going to the American Civil Liberties Union, so she played up the benefit angle and he eventually agreed. But tonight he was all *I have to get caught up on work stuff*. He showed her an accordion file full of memos. She almost gave up on the show right then—she felt a strong instinct to just stay home, pop a movie into the VCR, curl up with a blanket and a thing of ice cream. But then, perversely stubborn: *fuck it. I'm going to go out and have a good time*. As though to prove something.

And so here she is. The first act was pretty weak: a guy on a laptop, making some kind of structure out of clicks and static, not unlike some of her own audio experiments. The piece maybe would have sounded OK through headphones, but it was a poor choice for

barspace: its subtleties, whatever they may have been, ended up shredded by side conversation and ambient clatter.

This second guy she sorta dug, though. First of all, he looked kind of absurd. He had on a fedora, and he wore a long-stemmed rose jammed through the buttonhole of a tweed jacket. It bobbed around ridiculously. She read the gesture as a spirited declaration of beauty's preeminence. His set went like this: he had his guitar lying down on a tabletop, and he tapped the strings with what appeared to be a set of chopsticks, creating a kind of weirdly detuned, trance-inducing percussive rhythm. He would play a rhythm for like five minutes and then pause to roll a handful of dice—it was hard to tell, but some of them looked like Dungeons and Dragons dice—and then he'd start tapping on the guitar strings again, playing the same rhythm. Or *was* it the same rhythm? Something seemed different about it each time, as though the dice had shifted it in some direction that she can't quite describe.

Now she's watching the third guy, who's playing a trumpet and putting weird effects on it. After a while, the combination of hammering blare and accumulating cigarette smoke really begins to get to her, so she wanders out to the Bottle's front room, where it's a little quieter and the air is a little more fresh. There is a cat lying on the billiard table; she scratches it behind the ears for a while. She checks out the photo booth, considers getting a strip of photos taken. That's fun. But it's more fun if there's two people.

The fedora-and-rose guy wanders into the room, talking to some other guy. Lydia takes note.

—You need help with your stuff? says Friend to Rose Guy.

—Nah, says Rose Guy, I already brought it out to the van.

—OK, man, says Friend. —Take care.

—Take care, says Rose Guy, and he makes for the door.

He's going to walk right by her. Lydia is all prepared to let him go, but then she remembers that for the past month she's been berating herself: be more confident! That part of her brain kicks her into action, and so she reaches out and taps him on the shoulder.

—Hey, she says.

He turns around to look at her.

—I like your rose, she says.

This is the first time she's gotten a chance to see his face. He's not half-bad looking. He has big calm eyes and a long face, like an elf. And yet the slight elegance of his appearance is belied by a nose that holds the hint of a long-ago break; the hair that sticks out from beneath the brim of his hat looks unkempt. He looks at her, almost puzzled, then looks down at the rose, as though he has forgotten about it.

—Oh, yeah, he says. —You like it?

—Yeah.

He shrugs, and fiddles it out of his buttonhole. —You can have it, he says, and he proffers it to her. He smiles. She watches the lines in his face: she can tell from their shape that he smiles a lot, and she likes that.

—No, no, she says, mock-modest. —I couldn't possibly.

—You sure? he says. His smile grows wider. He lowers the rose towards her.

—Well, she says, and she takes it. She puts her nose up to it, and inhales, and its rich flavor makes her feel slightly flushed. —At least let me give you something in return.

She puts her hand in her pocket and pulls out her wallet. She needs both hands to manipulate the wallet, and she's got the rose in one hand, so she fumbles and juggles for a moment (*fuck, fuck*, she thinks, *real smooth*), but eventually she gets what she's looking for: her card. Lydia Ramirez, Administrative Assistant, Delphi Management Resources. She shows

it to him, long enough so that she's certain he knows what it is, then she tucks it into his fedora's hatband.

—I thought your set was good, she says.

—Thanks, he says.

—I'd, uh, I'd be interested to talk to you about it; you should give me a call. Maybe we could have a cup of coffee or something.

He looks at her for a moment. —Yeah, he says. —Yeah, that sounds good. My name's Austin.

—Lydia, she says.

—Yeah, I, he says. He points at the card in his hatband. —I, uh, got that. He grins, and takes one step back towards the door. —Well, maybe I'll see you around.

She shrugs, shows her palms. —Anything's possible, she says.

—Yeah, he says. —I suppose it is. He pauses, still looking at her. —Well, he says. —Bye.

They seem to be prolonging the conversation past the point where it should have stopped. The stalling is strangely exhilarating.

—OK, she says. —Bye.

—Yeah, um, he says. —Yeah. Nice to have met you.

—Same here.

—See ya, he says, and then he's out the door, with one last backwards look.

Lydia stares down at the rose in her hand, and, as though it had been someone else acting through her the whole time, she suddenly realizes the actuality of what has just happened: she just gave her number to a guy—a stranger—and he *seemed interested*. Cool. Cool. Fucking cool.

She decides to quit while she's ahead. She zips up her jacket, walks out to the street, gets in the Beetle, and drives home.