

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.

## 41 / HAVING FUN

At the reception, she finds her table, Table Six, and she finds her seat, the one next to the empty one. She reads the words *Lydia Ramirez and Guest* on her place-card and right at that moment she decides that if she wants to get through this evening she'd better start drinking now. On her way back to the bar she finds herself making a quick scan of each cluster of people she passes; she doesn't really want to consciously admit that she's looking for that guy Gary, but that's basically what she's doing.

She doesn't spot him until she's on her way back to her seat with her vodka tonic; he's at the receiving end of a monologue being delivered by a portly silver-haired dude who looks like he's about sixty. Lydia looks over the guy's shoulder and manages to catch Gary's eye. She gives him a smile, and in response Gary lets an expression flit through his slightly glazed polite-interest face, for just long enough that Lydia can read it. It says *get me out of this conversation*. Lydia raises the palm of her free hand and draws it back, in a way that says *I'm not touching this*, and she heads back to Table Six, and is immediately chatted up by a stupendously dull husband-and-wife team who work in the banking industry and want to grill her about the exact particulars of her IRA. Her vodka tonic doesn't last nearly long enough.

She manages, with a little wrangling, to extricate herself from the conversation so that she can go back to the bar, and while she's waiting in line she notices for a second time that the

bartender is kind of hot, and by the time it's her turn to order she's kind of worked up this half-thought-through fantasy where she's making out with him in the coat closet later. She tries, kind of half-heartedly, to chat him up a little, asking something like *so how's it going tonight?*, so that he'll know that she recognizes him as a human being and not just a kind of semi-conscious entity that dispenses drinks, because maybe that's a way for her to get *her foot in the door* here, a way to get one step closer to making the fantasy come true. He answers her—*fine*—and she heads back to Table Six. She doesn't see Gary.

Not that long later the food starts coming around. She's grateful, not just because she's starving, but also because the food gives her something to be attentive to: as long as she's focused on carving up her lasagna and salad she can avoid having to make any more conversation with the bankers.

The evening winds on, its passage marked by the sequence of usual rituals—the champagne, the toast, the cutting of the cake, the first dance. Once the dancing begins Lydia knows that the reception is basically over—all she needs to do is hold out for maybe another hour or so and then she can go back to the hotel, get out of this dress, take a bath, and spend the rest of the evening watching whatever trash they're showing on cable. Then tomorrow she can go back to Chicago and figure out what it is, exactly, that she's going to do about Nate. She brings a third vodka tonic back to her table.

She's in the middle of using her cell phone to flatten a piece of gum-wrapper tinfoil when Gary comes over and slides into the empty seat next to hers. —Hey, he says.

—Hey, she says.

—Having fun? he asks.

—Ah, she says, —sure. Why not. And yourself?

—Yeah, it's OK, he says. —But have you *seen* the dance floor?

Lydia cranes to look. The DJ is playing “Oh What A Night.”

—Fogies, Gary explains. —All old fogies! It's—I don't know what—it's a grotesque *mockery* of a dance floor out there. *A mockery*, I tell you.

—Oh yeah? says Lydia.

—I mean, I don't know about you, but I didn't come here to watch a bunch of—a bunch of Geritol users shuffle around aimlessly—I came here to—to *get retarded*. And I'm going to go out there and show them *how getting retarded is done*. Are you with me?

—Sure, Lydia says.

The next song, starting just as they get to the floor, is Prince's “Kiss,” and Lydia begins to move her hands in safe little circles, she begins to sway a bit from side to side. She's having some difficulty shaking off the full weight of her self-consciousness—it's been a good long

while since she's danced. Gary's really into it, though, moving his lanky body up and down, wiggling his hips weirdly, singing the words in a shockingly passable falsetto. She's laughing—he looks completely absurd—but she also finds that there's something sexy in his exuberance. *I bet he'd be fun*, she thinks.

During the next song he cranes backwards and sort of points his pelvis at her, as though he were doing a sort of bad Limbo. He goes down onto his knees in front of her and she pushes him away with her foot; he responds with a look of mock-ecstasy. It's then that she's sure that she could take him back to the hotel with her if she wanted. In the final assessment there's really nothing to stop her. Almost as soon as she's had this realization she makes her decision.