

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.

22 / THE FEELING OF BEING WATCHED

Lydia's riding the subway in to work, flipping through the *Entertainment Weekly* on her lap. A two-page spread depicting one of Apple's dancing silhouettes causes her to linger momentarily, to fantasize about splurging on an iPod. Her CDs, these days, are mostly just sitting in her apartment, inconveniently stacked in one corner of the living room—sometimes she finds herself wanting to listen to a certain album but then giving up once she notices how far down in the pile it's buried. (Ever since she moved into her own place she's been meaning to make it over to the Container Store or IKEA or something and buy CD racks, but she'd need to get Paul to take her in the VW or she'd need to rent a car, and once she starts thinking about giving up an entire day to the project she loses interest.) But if she had all her music on an iPod, she could just shove all the discs themselves into the back of the closet or something. Not that she has any room in her closet.

She flips on, poking around in the DVD reviews, mentally noting stuff she might rent, when she feels that weird prickling sense she gets when someone's looking at her. She scowls—she doesn't like it when people check her out on the train, it's almost always some skeezy old man or a homeless guy or something. She looks up, prepared to glare the person down, but she's surprised to see that it's a guy about her age, standing pressed in the center of a crowd of people thronged by the doors. He's pretty tall, cause he can see her over the heads of all the people packed around him, and he's actually kind of cute—he's got these big brown eyes

which give his face a certain openness—a kind of boyish innocence, which she likes. He strikes her as Greek, maybe Italian. Dark hair, close-cropped. The lower half of his face smudgy with stubble. Thick eyebrows, but they're not totally unruly—it looks like someone at some point taught him to groom them, and it looks like the lesson stuck, which means that he's at least not totally hopeless as a candidate.

He raises his eyebrows and grins at her and she smiles back, reflex action. She watches him look around at the heads of the people packed around him and make kind of a sheepish face, as if to apologize for the way that rush hour has thrust him into such undignified circumstances. He's being so friendly that she has to wonder for a second whether she *knows* the guy—he looks kind of familiar, maybe he's actually someone who works at Delphi, maybe at the Starbucks where she and Anita go for lunch? (Probably not Starbucks: he's got a tie on.)

She looks back down at the magazine, not wanting to just keep exchanging glances with this guy across a crowded subway car. She's not concentrating on the reviews anymore, though. Instead she's concentrating on the feeling of being watched, which makes her feel equally flattered and self-conscious: she finds that she keeps reaching up to neaten her hair. There's a flutter of anxiety in it, too: the usual *what if this guy's a psycho* stuff, what if he's planning to follow her when she gets off the train, etcetera. *He doesn't look like a psycho*, she thinks to herself. But maybe psychos don't always look like psychos.

She looks up again and notices that he's not looking at her anymore; instead he's now reading a newspaper, folded into quarters. She feels a small disappointment but also feels

reassured: if he were really dangerous she figures he'd still be gazing at her. She watches him for a second, as the train grinds into the Clark / Lake station, tries haplessly to draw new conclusions from what little she can see.

As the doors open, he looks over one last time and shoots her a little wave. Embarrassed by this attention, she *blushes*, looks down into her lap. When she looks up again he's been swept out the doors by the crowd. She peers out the window and tries to get one more look at him as the train begins to pull away, but no luck.

—*Damn*, she thinks.