

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.

## 47 / HI

Lydia's on the train, holding Sarah Vowell's *The Partly Cloudy Patriot* in one hand, holding it open using the bottom of the commuter mug that's in her other hand. She's finishing the piece "The First Thanksgiving" when someone slides into the seat next to her. She flicks her eyes over, doing the usual micro-confirmation, making sure the person isn't leaking anything infectious or giving her a look of glassy psychosis—but when she sees who it is she just has to stop and flat-out stare for a second, fluttering her eyelids as if this will help her to process the information. It's Subway Guy.

She hasn't seen *him* in a couple of months. The last time was right after Christmas, after which she put up her Missed Connections ad on Craigslist. That led to the whole *Nate* debacle, and by the time *that* was over she'd pretty much forgotten that Subway Guy was the person who'd initiated the whole thing in the first place.

He looks over at her, their eyes meet briefly, and he gives her a little smile and nod—the sort of general polite gesture that any normal human being might give to any other normal human being stuck in their general area—and then he looks away. A complicated disappointment begins to roil inside Lydia—she gets about as far as *maybe he doesn't remember me or*—and he turns and looks at her again, mild puzzlement writ across his face.

—This has happened before, he says.

—What has? Lydia says.

—I mean—he has a pen out in his hands, a pen that isn't a crappy disposable ballpoint but is made of metal and looks like something that might have actually cost money, which worries Lydia somehow, it highlights a certain set of incongruities between the two of them in a way that she hadn't noticed from a distance. He taps this pen against his lips, two beats. —I mean, he says, —I've seen you before—here, I think—I think you even saw me *wave* at you once. He presses the pen against his lips and looks troubled. —I'm starting to realize that I sound like a crazy person, he says, finally.

Lydia breaks into a smile. —No, she says, —I remember seeing you.

—But we've never been introduced, he says. —I mean, I would hate to find out that like, we went to high school together and that I'm just blanking on that right now and sticking my foot in my mouth by being like *nice to meet you*.

—No, says Lydia. —We've never been introduced.

—Okay, whew, says Subway Guy. —Well, um, hi.

—Hi, says Lydia.

—My name’s Nicholas, he says, and he sticks out his hand.

—I’m Lydia, she says, taking it.

—Nice to meet you, Lydia, he says. —So what is it you do?

—I’m—, she says, and she breaks off—she doesn’t want to say she’s an *administrative assistant* because of that metal pen, she’s worried that it’s going to sound pretty lowly to this guy, so instead she just says —I work for Delphi Management Resources.

—Oh, cool, he says, although she’s not sure exactly how *cool* it is. —What do you do for them? he asks next, and this puts her back in the exact same position of not wanting to answer. So she says —I keep the place running, and he smirks inscrutably and says —I hear you, a response which strikes her as agreeable but essentially noncommittal.

—So what about you, she says. —What is it that you do?

She recognizes this as courtship talk—it’s the same exact sort of conversation she went through with Gary last month at the wedding. And so, as Nicholas starts to describe the work he does in systems analysis, there’s a part of her that’s asking herself *why now?* Why now, when things with Gary are going so well, right at the *promising beginning* part of the relationship? Why couldn’t Subway Guy have come along and flirted with her right at the *dismal end* of something?

There's another part of her that doesn't care.