

Paul M. Mann

Burlington Northern

Sam was running late as he rushed into Starbucks, the one across the street from the Stone Avenue train station. The early morning sun barely made a dent in the cool spring air, and the brownish grass took on a silver sheen from the frozen dew. These were the last remnants of a stubborn midwestern winter, but Sam liked how the brisk air felt on his skin, the way it nipped at his face and made him feel alive, especially after tying one on. He'd been out late in the city with a couple of the other attorneys at Cohen, Reeves, and Pappas, or C.R.A.P as the associates liked to joke, but not in front of the partners.

Only a couple years out of Stanford Law, Sam had already turned heads at Cohen Reeves with superior research skills and a take-no-prisoners approach to litigation. The enormous workload naturally dictated a certain degree of social and alcoholic abstinence, and he normally didn't go out, much less indulge in libations, but his best and really only friend at the firm, Ed Wilson, had just scored the Atkinson account as second chair to old man Reeves, a huge accomplishment that deserved a little tie-loosening. Though unwritten, all the associates knew that when you second chaired with one of the name partners on a big account, you were next in line for a partnership.

To celebrate, Sam and Ed had gone with a couple of the other associates to happy hour at Bobby's on West Division, a real Chicago sports bar, a maelstrom of students, businessmen and grizzled locals, a mad combo of white and blue collar unique to the Windy City. Sam had too many boilermakers and too few hours of sleep thanks to Ed, the persuasive little devil perched on his shoulder throughout the evening. "Just one more" was Ed's mantra into the wee hours.

In the morning Sam had to exert a monumental effort just to drag himself out of bed. When he hit the shower, the steamy water was rejuvenating. Breathing the moisture-laden air was empowering, the way it coated his parched throat and greased his insides, washing away the previous night's debauchery. He cupped a soapy washcloth in his hands and lay it over his face like a shroud, the overwhelming scent of Irish Spring hitting him like smelling salts as he held his breath, the warm suds melting into his pores and rolling like thick lava over his stubbly neck down to his shoulders and beyond. He held the washcloth in place until the last molecule of oxygen was absorbed through his aching lungs, then peeled it back and allowed the hot water to rush over his weary visage and wash away the foamy patina.

This particular morning was an anomaly for Sam. Disciplined to a fault, he normally treated his body like a temple, beginning each day at five a.m., and not just to see the sun rise. At five-thirty he was lifting weights at the local Y; at seven-fifteen he was ordering coffee from his dream girl at Starbucks; at seven-thirty he was reading briefs on the train into the city, and at eight-fifteen his secretary was handing him the day's appointments. But today, thanks to Ed, he was running late and looking

like Kate Moss after an all-nighter in London's West End.

The shower was just a temporary fix, an external cleansing more for show. At Starbucks, Sam worked on his aching head by ordering a grande black that he planned to down with a three-aspirin chaser, his surefire college remedy to cure a bitch of a hangover. Despite the extended sojourn in the glassed confines of his shower, he still looked the part of a lazy drunk. His normally well-coifed blond hair jutted off at odd angles, dried out and with a mind of its own despite the energetic scrubbing only an hour earlier. In the early morning light of the suburban coffee shop, his chest visibly strained with every breath as his tongue traced languid circuits around parched lips, and his green eyes, framed by shadowy circles below and droopy lids above, bore the distinctive reddish glaze of overindulgence. How he yearned for a second go-around in the steam palace.

Despite his body's rage against itself, Sam, as always, managed a smile for the barista, Shannon, as she handed him his coffee. Easy for him, as he'd worshipped her from afar for quite some time. She was younger than him, but not by much. He thought she was cute—beautiful actually—sorority good looks, clean and bright but with a little edge. Her long, silky, auburn hair was deliberately piled haphazardly on top of her head, with long twirly strands falling in wisps around her face like a soft bouncy frame, while the green collar of her uniform set off her luscious hazel eyes, shimmery and inviting.

He couldn't begin to count the number of times he would open his mouth to say something cute and oh-so-clever to her, but the words were never there. As an attorney Sam was as assertive and aggressive as they come, but with women he was like a wall-hugging teen at his first dance. But Shannon was different, unique in a good way, possessing something that went far beyond her fabulous looks, and though Sam couldn't explain what it was, it was there, sparking a long dormant pilot light deep within his psyche. Besides, he was tired of being the shy, quiet type, tired of his empty house, tired of long hours spent at the office, and really just tired of being alone. So, perhaps due to the odd confluence of events on this ragged morning, he decided to throw caution to the wind. His psyche thus illuminated, he reached back and remembered seeing her reading a college textbook on an earlier visit and decided to strike up a conversation.

"What are you studying?" he inquired. He tried not to sound like he was asking her what her sign was as his toe nervously tapped the grayish tile underfoot.

"Huh?" She was half listening as she pulled bills out of the change drawer.

Great, he thought, she's enthralled. "Ah, I saw you reading a textbook before, ahm... last time I was here."

"Oh, sorry," she apologized as she looked up. "Hi! Ah, nothing yet, really." She smiled and bit slightly at her lower lip. Sam's insides melted at the sight of that smile. "I'm over at City College for now. Night school."

"That's great," Sam said, wishing he'd stopped there. "Gotta start somewhere." Wow, he thought. That sounded really idiotic. And desperate. Not to mention trite and cliché.

But Shannon again flashed that broad smile, a good sign. "Yeah, I guess. It's just tough working and going to—"

"Ahem," the woman behind Sam hinted somewhat loudly.

Sam moved off to the side. "Oh, sorry, go ahead," he shyly offered. Then he turned back to Shannon and started toward the door. "See ya later."

"I'm Shannon," she exclaimed too enthusiastically but without a hint of self-consciousness. He thought it very Annie Hall-like.

Sam turned and smiled. "I know. I'm Sam. See ya."

She smiled the way people do when the future holds possibilities, then bit her lower lip again, crooked an arm and waved, her long fingers softly tapping against the palm of her hand. "Bye, Sam."

Sam walked across Burlington Avenue to the train station with a buzz, his gut hollow like a boy after his first kiss. Thoughts bounced around his mind like a cue ball in perpetual motion. Just a simple hello and some pleasantries, but to him it was like conquering Everest, and it helped him forget about the hangover, about not getting the Atkinson account, and even though he would hardly admit to any jealousy over Ed's good fortune, it stung a little. Still, he was happy for his friend.

He arrived at the station and pulled open a thick oak door, entered, walked through to the other side and pushed open another oak door that led out to the platform and the tracks. A faint hint of creosote hung in the air, the timbers and the steel rails an industrial necessity for the suburban worker bees. He walked to the edge of the tracks, three across, cocked his head in both directions, and checked his watch. On the other side of the rail lines well-dressed businessmen lingered about, preoccupied with newspapers and cell phones.

Sam walked back into the station and sat down on one of the long, thick oak benches that had graced the interior of the station since the turn of the twentieth century. Writings carved into the benches served as anthropological markers: Kilroy was here; Billy USMC Recon '68 Hoo-Rah; Tommy Loves Linda. He leaned back and set his brushed metal briefcase upon his lap, rolled both locks with his thumbs until each read 666, flicked the latches, opened it and removed a Chicago Tribune.

He carefully dissected the sports section to check on his beloved yet hapless Cubs. He snapped the paper open to an interior section and folded it in half, focusing on the box scores as the hexagonal white and green floor tiles and high ceiling loudly echoed the rustle of the paper and caused the clerk in the ticket cage to glance up. Sam's cell phone rang and the resonance was amplified, which made him flinch slightly before he fished the credit card-sized phone from his pants' pocket, flipped it open, and raised it to his ear.

"Dude, I'm so fucking hung over." Ed's voice was longshoreman gruff and slow as Vermont maple syrup. "Fucking old man Reeves called and woke me up at five-thirty. Five-thirty! He was already in the office."

"Jeezus."

“Seriously. No bullshit. Old man’s a machine.” Ed sounded as if his mouth were packed with cotton. “He acted like he had some questions about Atkinson’s offshore accounts, but the message was clear.”

“Which was?”

“If I wanted to make partner, get my ass in the office and increase my billables.”

“Shit, you’re already way over two thousand-some hours.”

“He wants at least seventy-five more. And new clients. At least three.”

“Come on, you can do that—you’re a people person.”

“Cute. I’ll believe it when I sign on the dotted line. Not before.”

“You are such a fucking cynic.”

The door to the station opened up behind Sam.

“Hey Mr. Country Club, if you grew up where I—”

“Nuh uh, don’t pull that working class shit with me. I know you too well.”

“Oh, blow me!”

Out of the corner of his eye Sam saw someone walk in the street side entrance. He turned and saw Shannon. She was out of breath.

“Hey, did you know—” Ed continued.

“Gotta go, see you at the office,” Sam interrupted.

“What’s going—” Click.

Sam flipped his phone shut, stood up, and walked over to Shannon. Standing close to her, and without a counter between them, she seemed taller, different in some way. A good way. He imagined running his fingers in her auburn mane, around and through, then softly outlining her ear and easily sliding his hand around her neck, caressing, drawing her close as he breathed in her sweet flowery scent, all lilac and cinnamon, and let it envelop him. A tingly sensation washed over his entire aching body and brought him into the now. It felt sexual but was more powerful than that, deeper. Naughty yet innocent. He felt like a lovestruck teen.

Shannon stared at Sam as he hung up.

“Hi,” Sam said. “Did I forget something, or...”

“Yes, actually. You forgot your change. Eighteen dollars and thirty-five cents.” She put out her hand filled with cash and coin. He held out an upturned palm and she started to count it out.

“You don’t have to count it. I trust you.” He winked and was once again privy to that smile.

She gently laid the money in his hand, and as she did, their fingers brushed ever so slightly. They stared at one another in silence for a moment, and instead of feeling awkward, as he was wont to do in these situations, Sam was incredibly at ease, and once again his fertile imagination took root. In that instant he considered asking her out, and it required all of his good sense not take her by the shoulders and pull her in tight, to plant gentle kisses about her long, lithe neck and become intoxicated on the sweet lilac and cinnamon. He could picture her gently resisting, hands flat on his chest, her token struggle futile as she finally succumbed, vulnerable to his

advances, head thrown back, her neck and more offered up in carnal invitation. A romance novel come to life in a suburban train station.

"Thanks, thanks a lot," was all the poetry he could muster.

"No problem," she offered as she looked around the empty station.

Sam wanted—no, needed, like he needed to breathe—to know more about her. Hell with it, he thought, his empty house mocking him in his mind's eye. It's now or never.

"Ahm... would you like to ah, well, ahm... get, you know, dinner sometime?" You are some kind of smooth, he thought to himself.

She hesitated. "I don't know," she said. "I really don't know you that well."

He tried to read her like an attorney reads a witness. Her voice was almost defensive, conveying resolve, but her body language, with her head tilted slightly forward, eyes looking up at him, biting her lip, and with her hands clasped behind her back as her torso did a slow, gentle rendition of the twist, was more revealing. It suggested openness and was less resolute. He figured she wanted him to work, just a little bit.

"Are you kidding?" he smiled. "We've probably seen each other like a hundred times in the past year alone." He surprised himself with his playful banter.

"Yeah, but I don't really know you." She's repeating her argument, the attorney in him thought. Her perimeter was vulnerable, but he had to step gently.

"Do we ever really know someone?" he teased with a sly grin. "Fine. What do you want to know?" He extended his arms out to his sides. "I'm an open book."

She placed a hand over her mouth to suppress a giggle. "I've got to get back," she said as she started toward the door. He slumped noticeably, but good-naturedly. She pulled open the thick oak door and turned back to Sam. "But yeah, you can tell me your life story over dinner. 352-8045. Bye, Sam."

It took Sam a moment to process. He fumbled a bit before he located a pen in his shirt pocket and furiously scribbled her number on his Tribune, right next to Zambrano's earned run average. He looked up as she was leaving. "Yeah, I will. Definitely. Bye, Shannon."

The huge oak door shut with a muffled thud, and she was gone.

Outside, the Burlington Northern lumbered into the station. Sam grabbed his briefcase and newspaper and rushed out the door to the tracks. He boarded the train and took a seat next to the window. The conductor's voice could be heard in the distance as the air brakes released their hold with an abrupt hiss, and the train groaned to life and lurched forward.

Sam peered through the window of the moving train and watched Shannon as she crossed Burlington Avenue. He was fairly certain she was skipping. He smiled broadly, leaned back in his seat, grabbed the Trib and found the box scores. Then he flipped open the phone, inserted a smiley face next to Shannon's name, and entered her digits in his contacts, his aches and pains and longing forgotten for now, left behind on a deserted platform at the Stone Avenue train station.