

Missed Connections

She was already on the train when I boarded at Chicago and State. Red Line El to **Howard**. The seat next to the doors was empty and I immediately took it. Normally I would have to stand. Today I was lucky.

She was sitting directly across the aisle, facing me. It was ten minutes to noon and the train was less crowded than usual for that time of day. Small groups of noisy excited pre-teen boys wearing baseball caps were dangerously slashing Cubs pennants through the air. On route with their daddies, uncles, mother's boyfriends, or whatever to the afternoon game at Wrigley. Their mothers were all working, it would seem. Skipping school or work to go to a baseball game was a guy thing.

I glanced at her cautiously, so she wouldn't notice. She had a slender but shapely figure, straight shoulder-length chestnut hair, smooth coffee-and-cream skin, gold hoop earrings, and a dainty rectangular watch on her wrist, most likely an expensive one. She was wearing a conservative beige suit, a good match to her hair and skin, but cut in a way to showcase her bust and hips. I couldn't see her eyes, but I imagined they were a deep chocolate brown.

She was looking down at a paperback book. I could read the title—*Sin tetas no hay paraíso*. Chick lit with a dark side. Chicago Public Library stamped in black ink along the top edge. She made a motion to lift her head, possibly sensing my inquisitive eyes on her, and I looked quickly away.

By the time we pulled into the station at **North/Clybourn**, I had already learned, or surmised, a great deal about her. Classy. Well-dressed. Beautiful and sexy. Self-confident. She probably has a good job in the Loop with a steady income. Executive secretary, perhaps. Or maybe she's an ambitious up-and-coming lady executive trying to break through the glass ceiling at a large bank or

Missed Connections - 2

insurance company. Well off, but frugal. Gets her books on loan from the library. Spanish-speaking, obviously. Reading a book about a Colombian teenager who ends up working for drug dealers as a prostitute. A realist unafraid to confront the nitty-gritty of life. Could possibly be Colombian herself, but probably not Mexican or Puerto Rican. Too tall. Sorry, *chicas*. No offense intended.

#

I was reading my book when he got on at **Chicago** Avenue. He sat down right across from me. I knew he was looking at me, though he tried to pretend he wasn't. That happens to me a lot, especially on public transportation. Men can't keep their eyes off of me. I take care of myself and watch my weight, and it pays off.

More than I could say for *him*, however. That sloppy Bears T-shirt, with a hole in the fabric just below the neckline, couldn't hide his little round beer belly and the spare tire around his waist. He might call it a *love handle*, but I call it blubber. Fat. Just like so many people here. In Buenos Aires you hardly ever see fat people, but in the States, everywhere! What's with these Americans? Don't they have any pride in themselves? They should learn the tango and get some exercise. He probably spends most of his time playing computer games in his basement.

While he was looking away, I noticed he was carrying a flimsy plastic bag from Walgreen's. Looked like it contained several 20-ounce bottles of soda and a big bag of Jays potato chips. Typical.

He seemed fairly young, like early twenties, a bit younger than me. Shorter than me too. Maybe a college student. *Community* college, I mean, not university. In addition to the bag from the drugstore, he was carrying two textbooks. One of them was *Spanish for the Food Service Industry*. Oh God. Loser!

Missed Connections - 3

Even so, he had a cute, chubby boyish face and I gathered from the way he looked at me and then averted his eyes that he must be somewhat shy and perhaps lacking in self-confidence with women. Well, no wonder, given his overall appearance. The beard he was trying to grow had a reddish tinge to it. Maybe he was of Irish descent. Even before I left Argentina, I had heard about the many Irish-Americans living in Chicago. They dump green dye into the Chicago River on St. Patrick's Day.

I quit my job at a brokerage on LaSalle Street after my boss became a bit too aggressive behind closed doors in his fancy corner office. I should have sued him. Instead I was hitting the temp agencies downtown, trying desperately to land another position. The suit from Macy's had been way too pricey for my budget, but you have to dress for success.

A crush of passengers got on at **Fullerton** and for a few moments I was unable to see him. I was glad when they moved away so I could further examine this none too impressive specimen of American manhood. I have to admit that there was something mildly interesting about him. A kind of youthful innocence. Maybe he was still a virgin. I hoped he didn't realize I was watching him with my hypercritical eye.

#

Every now and then I caught her glancing in my direction. Cool. Maybe she likes me. After all, I'm kind of a good-looking dude, even if I have put on a few pounds lately. It's an occupational hazard. I'm enrolled at the College of Culinary Arts on the Near North Side. I had wanted to go to DePaul and major in languages, but without a scholarship I couldn't swing the tuition. I always liked to cook, so I decided on the culinary program instead. Some people said it was a come down, but I thought I could become a famous chef and travel the world on a cruise ship. Meet rich, beautiful women like her.

Missed Connections - 4

We passed **Diversey** and **Wellington** on the adjoining track, had a slight delay at **Belmont**, and then at **Addison** the baseball fans got off, the kids shoving and pushing each other, all trying to get through the doors at once. I was going as far as **Bryn Mawr**, so I still had a couple of stops to go. I kept looking at her, but each time she was either reading her book or glancing off to the side. If only I could make eye contact. But what then? I could say hi, ask her what she was reading (even though I knew already), or try out a few words in Spanish. Tell her I was reading *Don Quixote*—in the original, no less. Would she be impressed? It was difficult reading such a huge book in a foreign language, but I was already more than a third of the way through.

#

Well, maybe. But it would be good if he were a bit thinner. And taller. And better dressed. He might be a nice guy, though, and it would be a refreshing change from those predatory sharks that I usually go out with. But food service? Please. He probably flips burgers and is hoping to work his way up to crew chief or assistant manager so he can use his few words of bad Spanish to boss around the high school students.

#

She's just so incredibly beautiful! But who am I kidding? I wouldn't have a chance with her. Still, nothing ventured, nothing gained. The place next to her had become vacant and I moved forward slowly towards the edge of my seat. Ready to pounce, so to speak. I could simply get up, walk across the aisle, and sit down. Not *right* next to her, that would be too weird, she might think I was some kind of perv, but in the next seat facing forward. That would be close, but not too close. Close enough to tell her—what?

#

Missed Connections - 5

So get off your high horse, Marisol. You'll never find a decent guy by acting like a snob. Maybe you just need to lower your impossibly high standards. What's so bad about blue collar? After all, back home Dad was a dock worker and Mom cleaned rich people's apartments.

#

Crap! Another passenger grabbed the seat I had my eye on. Slowing down before entering the station at **Wilson**.

#

Go ahead—stop reading that damn book and look at him. Give him a nice smile! What harm is there in that?

#

She smiled at me! I swear I didn't imagine it. She really did look at me and smile. Beautiful white teeth framed by full rosy red lips. Holy cow, Bill. This is too good to be true. Stopping for a minute at **Lawrence**.

#

Okay boy, it's your move now. Do you think *I'm* going to ask you for your number? Better act fast—I'm getting off soon.

#

I looked into her eyes, though just for a moment, and then I smiled too. In my signature shy guy way. **Argyle**. Not much time left before my stop. I pointed at her book. "Uh, miss, ma'am, that novel you're reading . . ." The words got stuck in my throat. Total panic.

Missed Connections - 6

#

Impossible! He seems incapable of normal speech. **Berwyn.** My stop. I closed my book and stood up. I gave him one more smile, a big one, provocative and sexy. Plus a little swish of my hips, just for fun. The stainless steel doors opened and I stepped out.

#

She smiled at me one last time and then she was gone. I watched her as she walked away from the platform towards the exit. The world of happy possibilities I had imagined for us for the rest of our lives vanished in the time it took for the train to stop, open and close its doors, and then rush off aimlessly to the next station. I knew I would never see her again. *Good-bye, my almost love. I will remember you until my dying day.*