

SCOTT STEIN

**MEAN
MARTIN
MANNING**



ENC Press



EXCERPT

“Every normal man must be tempted at times to spit upon his hands, hoist the black flag, and begin slitting throats.”

— H. L. Mencken

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“MARTIN MANNING was an asshole.”

Sarnauer banged the gavel. “Ms. Washington, this is a court of law. Please use appropriate language.”

She corrected herself. “I’m sorry. I mean to say that Martin Manning was an a-hole. He was a problem from the moment I met him.”

“And when was that?” Alice Pitney asked.

Latisha Washington swept her long, dark hair behind her ear. She thought for a moment. “About forty years ago. It was my first job out of college. I answered phones mostly, filed paperwork—I was a sales assistant at the time.”

It was clear from her first day on the job that I didn’t like her. I didn’t offer any encouragement or praise, not a smile or even the dignity of a look in the eyes, the entire four months she’d worked for me. It was clear that a

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black woman had no chance of advancing in my company, so she quit. I was more than just an a-hole. I was a misogynist and a racist.

Pitney thanked her—such testimony was painful, she knew—and apologized on my behalf. Our society had come so far, but not far enough, it seemed. Ms. Washington was assured that methods perfected in recent years could change attitudes like mine.

I wanted to ask her some questions of my own, but Pitney objected. This witness had been through enough—she didn't need further degradation at my hands forty years after the fact.

What kind of circus was the judge running here? Justice demanded an opportunity to cross-examine hostile witnesses.

Watch myself, he told me.

“Your Honor,” Pitney said, “these witnesses have been thoroughly traumatized by Mr. Manning’s past behavior. They only agreed to testify here today on the condition that they not be harassed. If he is allowed to verbally assault them, we will have victimized them all over again.”

Judge Sarnauer was not about to victimize these poor people a second time, no matter how much I protested about little things like basic fairness and due process. He compromised—I would be permitted to speak for the record in response to the witness testimony, but could not ask them questions and had to wait until they were all finished. If I hadn't been paying attention all morning, I might have said that it was shocking and atrocious. But it had all been shocking and atrocious, less and less shocking with every passing minute.

Josh Goldfarb was next, at sixty-eight still recovering from having known me. I'd destroyed his self-esteem through my fervent anti-Semitism. I'd insisted on keeping the office open on Saturdays, and even though he wasn't an especially observant Jew, he just knew that had he been one, I would have made him work on the

Sabbath anyway. I also looked at him strange, like he was an outsider, and never once wished him a happy Hanukkah despite working with him for three years. I had no appreciation for people different from me.

Caroline Carlson was still fatter than two horses all these years later, and her having never lost any weight was directly attributable to my treating her like a second-class citizen. I'd refused numerous requests for appropriate office furniture to accommodate her size. I didn't force other employees to crush themselves into their chairs, but clearly I blamed her for her disability, regardless of what medical experts and the courts said about the addictive nature of fast foods.

Pitney understood them all. The blind date with the lazy eye who never heard from me again despite promises that I'd call her. The kindergarten substitute teacher, now deceased many years, whose son—an old man himself—testified that his mother never pursued her dream career in education because when she'd insisted to the class that cavemen and dinosaurs lived at the same time, I beaned her in the head with a wooden alphabet block. The former waiter at Vegan Heaven, now a sociology professor, who was sure that all those years ago I stopped in and tried to order veal once a week just to make him cry.

The parade from my past finally ended. Apparently, Pitney had been unable to track down some transsexual paraplegic lesbian dwarf virgin of Eskimo descent and Aztec heritage, whose future had been shattered by my lack of sensitivity to her special needs.

"That was quite a display," I said, once the witnesses had departed. "What do we have, according to Case-worker Pitney? Apparently, I'm bigoted toward black people, women, Jews, fat people, lazy eyes, teachers unfamiliar with prehistorical timelines, and vegans. It's a hell of a case she's built here."

Sarnauer cleared his throat. "Are you mocking the witness testimony?"

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“How is that even possible? Seriously, how could I mock it if I wanted to?”

“Mr. Manning, you asked for a chance to rebut the testimony we have heard, and I granted it. If you have nothing to say, you may be seated.”

I almost gave up. How could I win a trial like this? Maybe I couldn't. But I would stick it out—without question, it was a farce of ridiculous proportions, and if the best I could hope for was to make that plain, so be it. Part of me still believed I could win somehow. An optimistic inclination toward justice, I guess.

“What have these witnesses established? That I'm a bigot? Pitney thinks so. It isn't any business of hers if I am, but she's hardly shown it to be the case. Ms. Washington quit on her own because I didn't encourage her enough. But I didn't encourage anyone. Mr. Goldfarb took our Saturday hours as an assault on his heritage. But everyone worked on Saturdays and he never complained. Ms. Carlson never once answered in the negative when asked if she wanted fries with that, and demanded a chair that practically required a mortgage.

“Pitney seems to be arguing through these witnesses that I'm bigoted toward everyone. If that's the case, then I'm an equal-opportunity bigot—it's nonsense. What's her point? That I don't like people? What a scandal that the man who spent thirty years locked in his apartment doesn't like people. We needed witnesses to establish this? I could have told you myself.

“What's her point? That I'm mean? Is this what this charade is coming down to? My being mean? Let me tell you something—I am mean.” I looked at Sarnauer for a moment, then at Pitney. “I'm mean. Meaner than you yet know. Have no doubt about it.”

GONE WAS the familiar circle of chairs. Instead, we sat around a very long rectangle, actually three six-foot tables lined up end-to-end the length of the community room and covered with heavy tan paper for protection. Bertha was across from me, Jimmy at the other end of the rectangle, everyone lit up with the anticipation of a new chance to improve themselves.

From a small crate, Pitney removed assorted art supplies, placing them here and there along the table.



There were egg cartons ripped in half, each depression filled with a different color paint. In easy reach wherever you sat were plastic tubs containing glue, construction paper, blunt scissors, markers, thin paintbrushes, and glitter. Like the rest of them, I had before me a small sheet of white paper.

“Inside each of you are barriers you don’t even know exist. Emotional and psychological roadblocks to the new and improved you. Art is one of the best ways to dig up what’s buried in here.” Pitney tapped her forehead. “And here.” She placed her hand over her heart and held it there.

“What should we paint?” Jimmy asked.

“That’s up to you,” Pitney said.

Bertha announced that paintbrushes scared her. Someone could be hiding in the bristles.

Pitney told her to use her fingers.

The group busied itself, cutting, gluing, glittering. Pitney assured us that it wasn't important what the finished product looked like, as long as we followed our instincts and didn't try to think too much. Just express ourselves. Bertha dipped her fingers in colors and tapped on her paper with both hands.

I didn't do a thing.

"Mr. Manning, come on now. We had a good start this morning. What do you want to paint?"

She'd done it on purpose. Today's little exercise was for my benefit. There was no way I was touching that paper, and Pitney knew it.

"Mr. Manning?"

Bertha glanced at the paintbrush bristles every few seconds from across the table while she slapped brown and green on her paper.

"Mr. Manning," Pitney repeated.

"You know I won't be participating," I said.

Olive Stench piped in, "What's the matter, Martin? You don't know how to paint?"

Margaret tried to be helpful. "I'm not much good at it either, but Caseworker Pitney said it isn't important what it looks like. The thing is to express yourself."

Bertha, paint all over her hands, added that she hadn't seen anyone sneaking around the bristles yet, so I shouldn't worry. Though she still recommended using my fingers instead, because you could never be too sure.

"Martin," Jimmy asked, "what's the problem? You scared?"

My paper remained untouched.

"Actually," Pitney said, "Mr. Manning here paints quite well. Isn't that so, Mr. Manning?"

I didn't answer.

"Oh," Olive Stench said, "that's a different story. Martin, do you think you could paint me a horse?"

"I want a horse!" Bertha shouted. "Paint me a horse first."

"I'm not painting any horses for anyone," I said.

Bertha wailed, "No one ever paints me any horses. It isn't fair."

Pitney told her to focus on her own painting, mentioning as well how lovely the tree was coming along. Bertha told her it wasn't a tree but a fish. Pitney stood corrected. It was a lovely fish.

"So, Martin," Jimmy said, "why don't you paint anymore?"

I didn't answer.

"Yes, Mr. Manning, do tell us," Pitney said. "Why don't you paint anymore?"

"Was he really good?" Margaret asked.

Pitney handed Bertha a towel to wipe the paint from her nose. "I'm told that he was better than good, for a while, anyway."

The group just had to know what happened.

"You'd have to ask Mr. Manning for the whole story. I only know that when he was a young man his work appeared in all the best galleries. But then he stopped."

"Just like that?" Jimmy asked.

"I'm sitting right here," I said. "You're talking about me right in front of me."

"Martin," Margaret said, "tell us why you stopped."

"It's none of your business," I said.

"You see," Pitney said to the group, "Mr. Manning here had a rare talent. He was doing important work, I'm told. But he gave it all up for greed."

"No," Olive Stench said, saddened.

"I'm afraid it's true," Pitney said. "Mr. Manning gave it all up for money. He stopped painting works of art and started painting billboards. He devoted his talent to designing advertisements for sneakers and dog food. You see, all Mr. Manning cared about was money. Greed got the best of him. He sold himself to the highest bidder, spent decades selling people things they didn't need, so he could buy things he didn't need. All that talent squandered. So much promise, and what did he have to show

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for it? Televisions, frogs, clocks—things, things, things. Thirty years alone and not a paintbrush lifted. Such a waste. It's easy to see why he latched on to possessions with such ferocity. He'd given up on his dreams to make money. When you do something that drastic for money and things, you have to convince yourself that the money and the things are what you wanted all along."

"That's horrible," Olive Stench said.

"No wonder he's so mean," Jimmy said.

I laughed a genuine laugh. "You all must think you're pretty clever, trying to reduce me to a trite cause and effect, make me into some sad case. Let me tell you something—I was mean from the very beginning. Don't fool yourselves. My attitude has nothing to do with a life of regret. You know that before there was anything to regret I was as mean as I am today. Let me tell you something else—I was happy designing posters for sneakers and painting advertisements for dog food. I put away enough money so I could be left alone for the rest of my life. I was happy with my things. I was happy with my frogs, clocks, televisions. I liked things. Still do. They make me happy."

Olive Stench looked at Pitney with understanding and sympathy. "We have a lot of work to do, don't we?"