

Work Sample #1

The First Encounter

How he met that angel of a woman was pure fate come to save his life from heading south, meaning it was tanking, falling apart – nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Felipe was beyond loser, beyond a totally useless piece of shit idiot, beyond all redemption for that matter. He was on the skids to oblivion, the midnight express to nowhere. In the vernacular of Detroit speak: he was through, done for. True, on one level he understood that about himself. But on another he almost always projected bravado, handsome hope, a winning gold-laced smile. Wow, meeting Dhal flipped Felipe 180 degrees from looking down to looking skyward with the hope that he might begin to mean something to someone and the possibility that he could finally unite the Felipe that traversed Detroit streets with whatever of him was still geographically south south south, floating somewhere in the Caribbean. It was a crazy time for Felipe and for Dhal, too, a real turn of events that propelled their lives in totally different directions as they moved into the new century. Well for Felipe maybe not a turn of events, more like a kick to the flywheel of his failed life, helping him to restart his engine, reorganize his plans and move on down the road. Here's what happened.

The EZ Dollar Store was especially crowded on the morning of August 26, 1998, a Wednesday in the last week before Labor Day and the beginning of the school year. Mothers were in full swing shopping for back-to-school supplies for their kindergarten and elementary children. So this rush of high energy shoppers on a Detroit hump day, when the city tended to wind down in preparation for the weekend, didn't portend well for the feet and patience of the store clerks, but suggested many dollars for the store owner. Kids in tow, mothers picked over the athletic socks and packs of assorted panties for girls and underwear for boys on the racks to the left of the store as you entered the door. Of all of the dollar stores on the northwest side of Detroit, EZ contained the widest variety of treasures and was the best stocked with basic garments, artistic supplies, tools, soaps, bleaches, wine glasses and dishes of any store for miles around.

But it was small, intimate and not air conditioned so the front door, propped open that morning to vent the heat, only allowed in more plus bugs. And the day was truly hot and steamy, even by Detroit standards where air, no matter the temperature, got trapped between buildings high and low and mixed with auto fumes, garbage odors and the smell of its people moving from one place to the other. Even in the neighborhoods that had reverted to farmland on the east side, the air covered the terrain like a heavy blanket of despair. Now that was in the heart of the city. In

the suburbs, things may have been a bit cooler, the grass greener, the parade of people thinner, buildings cleaner and so on. But everywhere in the real Detroit, a peculiar funk covered everything, even the river.

In this case, funk didn't mean stink; it meant odiferous with all the above mentioned nostril-tickling gases plus bar-b-cue, barbacoa, and shish kabob. But you get the picture, the same way of saying the same thing and eating it, too. For this story also we must add roti and curry. No mind, it's humanity upon humanity wondering how in the hell they all landed in a city hailed for its industrial innovations and car factories, producing vehicles for earthly travel, and its churches, fabricating ways to reach the great beyond in high style, having secured earthly riches from an accumulation of hot and cold blest days.

Almost anyone - meaning the factory workers (unionized and non-unionized), the bread makers, the hot dog venders, the sanitation workers, the household workers, the landscapers, construction workers (unionized and non), veterinarians and staff, and dollar store clerks - almost anyone of that ilk who survives Detroit deserves heaven. We won't worry just now about the eternal homes of some of those whose names line the city's streets. Let's just say that the chances of them living in gorgeous mansions in the beyond are slim to none. But commoners who benefited in however meager ways from the crumbs that spilled from the back doors of the earthly mansions of the Detroit rich, well, they've got to be heaven bound.

And there was a ship load of them in EZ just then, all on the righteous path to our lord in the sky just because we are all poor. What bullshit, thought Dhal as she scurried from one end of the store to the other finding crayons, then socks, then nail polish (the mothers need something for themselves), and because not only mothers shopped, a bag full of kitchen utensils for a couple, stacking up on household supplies such as waste baskets, sponges, cleaning fluids and so on.

She: Hey Sweetheart, look at these cloth napkin and tablecloth sets. Wouldn't they look beautiful in our new living room?

He: Oh, Baby, you know you're the decorating genius. Get what you want.

Oh brother, thinks Dhal, how long will this lovey dovey stuff last? Absolutely, Sweetheart and Baby, the sky is the limit. Get what you want. After all, you are in a dollar store.

Being a dollar store devotee herself, Dhal well appreciated the savings and occasional quality if you picked over the items carefully enough. Since beginning employment at EZ in March, she had been able to decorate her bedroom in her Aunt Tantan's house in fine style down to the last pink frilly detail thanks to EZ and had helped tidy

her aunt's general living quarters, especially the sewing room and kitchen, with an assortment of EZ plastic containers and interlocking shelving. There was no hope for the aunt's bedroom as she kept it cluttered with Vincie artifacts, a few articles of his clothing, including a suit rack with his brown suit – she buried him in the black one – some mementos she had kept from various restaurant excursions, a fan from Stanley's Chinese and so on.

It was the kind of day when Dhal didn't know whether to cry or laugh, praise the Detroit lawd or curse the assortment of Hindu gods and customs she left back in Tesoro. This kind of oppressive heat without the surrounding sea confused her, making her feel more trapped than the cold winter she had just experienced for the first time. Then again, she was working, making a few Yankee bucks, free from the even more oppressive constrictions of life with her Tesoro family. This jumble of thoughts swished and swooshed back and forth in her cranial cavity as she rock and rolled her way through EZ's aisles secretly hoping that the store's door would miraculously slam shut to any additional customers until the current crew cleared out. But a relatively short muscular (and good looking) man slipped in.

It was Felipe. He stood just by the door trying to get the lay of the store when he spotted Dhal running from one customer to the other. She didn't notice him at all, but for him all further movement stopped. He couldn't believe his eyes. She passed in front of him once or twice again, just enough for him to load up his lungs with her powdery fragrance. They expanded with the sweetness and he became lightheaded, his eyes clouding over as he was forgetting to breathe out. He knew right off the bat that on a scale of one to ten, she was over the top. Soon he was near drooling, his tongue beginning to dangle lecherously past his lips, and sensations beginning to heat up in the southern regions of his body. In short, he went *bazodee* quickly becoming weak and helpless and *chupid* for so. Plus, he had the silliest grin on his face when Farouq at the counter asked if he could be of some help.

Just looking around man; thank you. That short exchange with Farouq brought him somewhat back to his senses. Felipe made a move the next time Dhal swept past him. Her beauty had brought out the rogue in him.

Miss, I need a birthday balloon. The kind you blow up with helium.

She stopped dead in her tracks as her ears tuned in to his accent. Then the big bling medallion hanging around his neck on a thick gold chain caught her eye. Well, sir, we have a large variety right there in front. The gentleman behind the counter would be glad to help you.

Thank you.

And he meandered off toward the back of the store to regroup, leaving her to stare at him from the front of aisle one until a woman approached her with a question about trouser socks. He found himself in the section of workmen's gloves and bags of clean-up rags, the real reason he had spontaneously stopped into the store in the first place. It was his first time at that store even though he, too, shopped regularly at dollar stores as he encountered them throughout the city. He had become a meanderer in life, wandering from one city to the next, one city block to the next and from one corner to the next in the various apartments and rooming houses he had inhabited. His feet and hands were ever restless in response to mental signals firing at non-stop dazzling speeds.

Dhal passed him nearly half an hour later fiddling with electrical doodads on the rack just over from an assortment of pliers and screwdrivers. What is he looking for now? He turned around and flashed a wide toothy smile revealing small even teeth, the four in front thinly framed with gold. Not bad she thought. The mouth is clean, but the gold is old. The medallion is way too much. I wonder where he is from.

Then she became deeply engaged with a young mother and her five year old who were studying some little hard plastic purses with double handles that flipped up and down and snapped in the middle for closure. For only a dollar, the purses came loaded with pink and blue hard flat sour candy with little messages of encouragement written in red: *you go girl* or *play to win*.

Now see, Dhal encouraged the mother, these little candies give messages that are important for little girls to learn very early on.

That's true.

Does she read yet?

She knows her alphabet.

Well, you can use these candies to help her along with her reading. Every time she wants one, make her read the inscription before giving it to her. And Dhal smiled broadly at the child. *You go girl!*

The little girl said out loud so nearly the entire store could hear, *Mama, that lady talks funny.*

The mother began apologizing profusely, but Dhal was well used to people's reactions to her accent and she herself often had to talk her way through her inability to understand the combination of Midwest and South that dominated the tongues on her side of town. Not to worry, Mum, Dhal assured the lady.

Then the girl, dressed in denim short pants and a red midriff and oblivious to her social faux pas, sang Go go and began to do a little dance in her flopping white sandals in front of the toy rack where the pink purses hung opposite shelves of plastic food wraps and garbage bags.

The sale was a done deal.

Next Dhal encountered a woman, maybe in her fifties, reviewing the plastic containers on a shelf in aisle three. Dhal was working like a whirling dervish that day because Laila, the other lady on the floor, was off taking care of some immigration business – she was at the next step of becoming a permanent resident - and only Dhal, Farouq at the counter and Benny on stock would hold down the fort until Laila's return tomorrow. May I help you, Mum?

I'm looking for something to store my corn meal in.

Do you keep a lot or a little on hand?

Oh I keep a lot because I does use it to make coo-coo.

Where yuh from, nuh, Mum?

I'm from de islands.

Which one? I'm from over that way, too, from Tesoro.

Oh? I'm from Saint Catherine's. How nice to meet a Tesoran here. Not many of you have reached quite this far.

Oh there are a few of us. Do you know my Aunty?

And so the conversation went, with promises to stay in touch and a sale of several plastic containers for everything from corn meal to socks.

You're very good, said the smiling muscular man with the gold-rimmed teeth. He sidled up to Dhal after the woman from Saint Catherine moved on to the front counter to pay. Maybe you can sell me something.

You look like you're doing fine locating everything. Is there something else you need?

Well, I mentioned before I need a birthday balloon.

And I didn't see you up front looking for any.

Oh I know exactly which one I want. The blue and silver one over there with the red squiggles on the border and the message: Happy Birthday Baby.

That balloon was not among the assortment of balloons that dangled over Farouq's head, most of which were also of the happy birthday variety and with enough crazy messages to please anyone. But the muscular man wanted the one balloon that was not with the gaggle hanging already inflated or within easy reach of Farouq's long arm.

No, he wanted the one balloon that hung flattened two balloons in above the rack against the wall in aisle six on the left side of the store. Dhal would have had to climb the ladder to retrieve the Happy Birthday Baby, uninflated greeting in blue and silver with red squiggles on the border. So she did what came naturally to her.

Mr...

Call me Felipe

Mr. Felipe, depending on who you are buying this for...

It's for a very nice and beautiful young lady.

Well, the yellow balloon over there is very popular this time of year, especially for young ladies. Yellow for sun, you know. Plus yellow represents happiness and a loving and caring nature.

No, I have my heart set on the blue and silver one over there with the red squiggles on the border.

That's so masculine.

She's a very strong woman.

All righty then. And with that Dhal proceeded to do what she also knows how to do well – stall. She went in search of a ladder to reach the top because the long mechanical fingers could possibly tear the balloon from where it was taped to the wall.

Just a minute, Mr. Sir, I'll be right back.

Of course, on the way to find the ladder, she ran across three or four customers she practically threw herself at with offers of assistance. Mum, let me help you find this or that. Sir, we have a fine selection of screw drivers over here. Oh Miss, kitchen strainers are on the shelf in aisle three. Come let me show you; we have metal and plastic. Personally, I prefer the plastic because it's quieter, and we have a fabulous selection of colors. Look, these red just came in, and we have bowls to match.

In this way she killed at least half an hour in aisles one through four, hoping that the man in aisle six would go away or settle for a more easily accessible balloon. No luck for Dhal that day. By the time she escorted a woman looking for fabric softener to the counter, Mr. Felipe met her there with a big grin on his face.

I still want that balloon.

So Dhal found the ladder and began her ascent with Felipe watching every movement of her butt cheeks - left up and right up, left up and right up - and checking out the firmness of her calves as she mounted each step. Not bad, he thought. I wonder where she is from?

Dhal passed by the athletic socks and the trouser pants socks and the little thin thin nylon ankle socks with loud colors and abstract designs (very fashionable with the young crowd) when a balloon Farouq had been inflating - this one saying just plain congratulations with some multicolored representations of balloons on the front of the main balloon, which was black - well Farouq's balloon escaped and shot past Dhal like a bullet, completely surprising her and throwing her off balance.

She lost control of the ladder, which began flipping backwards away from the wall. Farouq saw what was happening and began running past the boxes hemming him in at the counter (there had just been a new shipment of dish towels he was trying to inventory from his work station since Laila wasn't there that day). Oh my Dolly. Oh Dolly. And he tripped face forward into a pile of the towels, while knocking over a few of the also newly-arrived bamboo good luck money plants. Fortunately, they didn't have water in them yet.

Customers gathered in the area to see if they could help. They began gasping almost in unison. Benny came running to the front with a box cutter still in his hand and pushed his way to the scene. The store clients looked on in horror. The young couple held each others' hands for dear life. The little girl began crying while her mother, trapped in the crowd, could only bury her daughter's face in her leg.

More than her life flashed in front of Dhal; the store's ceiling passed before her with an uncanny unfamiliarity. She never had realized it was actually a drop ceiling and that things were stored up there. White T-shirts? Tablecloths?

Then time stood still for her even as the ladder rushed to meet the shelves of trash bags. Remember, although the store's ceiling was high, the floor space was really limited. How it managed to house six aisles was a miracle. Dhal's back would have hit the shelf and who knows what would have happened to her, except that her body slackened as she fainted and she lost her grip on the ladder. This was a good thing because Felipe stood below at just that moment and caught her in his arms. Like in the movies, he caught her full, her upper torso nestled in his right arm, her body draped across his chest and her legs dangled safely over his left arm.

The entire store erupted in hoots of glee. Everyone began slapping each other on the backs and hugging and crying. Then all fell silent as Dhal opened her eyes suddenly in shock now to be in the arms of a man, any man but this one smelled pretty good.

Hello, Dolly. When's your birthday?

She knew immediately it had been a mistake to not follow through with her original plans and use her given name at the job. Farouq had taken to calling her Dolly and variations on the name abounded among customers and the store staff. But coming from this man's gold teeth while she was in his arms, Dolly sounded dangerous.

My name is not Dolly. Put me down please.

No thank you for saving your life? His lip edges now curled down faking a scowl.

At this Dhal sighed in exasperation, wanting to give him a real piece of her mind.

By this time, Farouq had extricated himself from the towels and the good luck bamboo plants. He grimaced at Felipe, climbed the ladder, retrieved the balloon, and inflated it back at the counter. Felipe, returning Farouq's stare, pulled a wad out of his right front jeans pocket and was just about to pay for all of his items when he asked Farouq to throw in one of the bamboo plants already on display.

Business concluded he walked out of the store with the balloon bobbing behind him and her eyes on his back. Then with unexpected and inexplicable joy in his heart he reached his hand up and released the blue and silver happy birthday balloon to the Detroit August sky and watched until its red squiggles danced toward the sun and disappeared.