

The Rise and Fall of Dave

by Mahalia Solages

There was a vendor on the four-way intersection where I bought my Sunday paper that intrigued me because he looked like someone I knew from years ago. Albeit faded, his pressed navy t-shirt clung to his pear shaped torso as he proudly paced military style anticipating the next honk. His life beaten, hardened face and dull gray eyes reflected recovery, still, he always winked when he said thank you. A trademark I remembered.

I saw him strolling down the sidewalk one day in the same faded shirt appearing not to have a list of appointments to tick off by noon, unlike myself.

“Great looking dog.” He said approaching me.

“Thanks.” I replied noticing his wide genuine smile and if he was who I thought, was perhaps a decade older than I was.

“I had a dog like this named Pepper.” The man said squatting briefly in front of my dog.

“That’s a neat name. This is Miss Eleanor.” I said smiling softly as the statement confirmed my suspicions.

“You buy the paper from me every Sunday.” He said as if in disbelief, pushing a sun kissed curl behind his ear.

“I do.” I made a note of another of his idiosyncrasies.

“I’m Dave.” His hand came out of his pocket seemingly out of reflex, but he pulled it back slowly.

“Dave, I have to go now, but can I bring you a coffee on Sunday? You appear to have story I would like to hear.”

“Sure.”

I left quickly, ashamed of what I knew.

I brought two mugs from home and a thermos in a picnic basket just after sunrise to the intersection a few blocks from my gated community to find Dave already set up, sitting on an upside down crate, awaiting his first customer. I watched him prepare our coffee, handing it over with grace.

“I came here twenty three years ago from Sebeka, Minnesota.” Dave said after he took a sip, not looking at me. “I used to sift soil, compost and harvest asparagus on a farm. I had a girlfriend named Shelley. She was nice, but sitting by the murky lake together holding our soil caked hands, worn as leather, was not the lifestyle I saw in my dreams.” Dave moved quickly to

a car at the light and came back.

“After graduating high school taking my gift money for gas and rent, double shift pizzeria income for bartender school and my graduation present, I drove here. I lived by the boardwalk on Hollywood Beach in an artist studio with my dog Pepper. My front yard was a sandlot with panoramic views of water waving relentlessly. I used to watch the sunset as I studied my index cards, formulating drinks.” Dave smiled reminiscing.

“I absorbed the life. I worked at a café until I finished bartender school and immediately got a job at Ricky’s dive bar on the beach. I was quite the lure back then with the body I had.” Dave winked in my direction before he strutted to another car. I refilled his mug swallowing the lump in my throat.

“I was popular with the drinks I invented. I had ‘amore please’ and one called ‘panty dropper.’ I then got a job at a nightclub. With the type of money I was making, I treated my parents to a Bahamian weekend. My VIP lifestyle also brought a lot of attractive girlfriends.” Dave shook his head. “Why would you want to hear this story?” He finally asked me.

“You looked like there was more to you than a homeless man who got a newspaper job as a part of a recovery process.”

“Wow! It’s almost inspiring to know that there is still some glimmer.” Dave took a sip. “By the time my dad passed, I had been in the ‘biz’ for fifteen years diligently pushing all nighters, drinking and partying in all forms when I met Vivian.”

“Oh my.” I kept watching Dave’s sun cured profile, anxiously curious as to how his road ended here especially when I too remembered Vivian.

“Vivian fine tuned me. Vivian showed me class. Vivian helped me change directions from being the cool bartender to manager of the year, three years in a row at the Caves steakhouse. Do you know it?” Dave asked.

“I do. It’s still around. It’s still the fanciest one on the beach.” How could I not, I remembered silently.

Dave cleared the workspace with his forearm, dumping tickets, used creamers, trays, and employee cups all over the rubber mat.

“Please leave this prep station clean and clear, just like the hostess stand. If that is the only thing you do right tonight, let it be that. You know that is my pet peeve. Thanks everyone.” Dave said as he walked along the coffee station to glance in the bathroom.

“Dave, relax man!” Calvin said in a nervous laughter picking up a creamer. “So, you trying to get me kicked out of my apartment with that station you gave me? What’s up with

that?"

"Calvin, the last time you requested a larger station, I fixed three tickets and comped two meals." Dave rolled up his sleeves to his forearm bending to review the tickets in the kitchen.

"Those people were idiots!"

"Customers Calvin, that pays your rent. You get too weeded and I need my customers happy the first time, not after I've fixed the issue."

"I can handle it!" Calvin raised his chin, hands on his hips.

"I'm leaving it as it is. Melissa you need fresh blue cheese on your filet. It sat here too long!" Dave called over Calvin's head; walking off, addressing an issue the hostess had.

Calvin clenched and seethed with every shift. "Dave was probably a has-been surfer whose uncle got him a real job and now we all have to suffer from his delusion of grandeur." Calvin rallied by the dumpsters smoking cigarettes with the bus boys and the hostess, Jennifer. "I think someone should just kick his ass for thinking he's charming." Calvin fumed.

"That would be funny." The bus boy giggled.

"I can't stand him. Doesn't he ever make passes at you when you close with him?"

Calvin prodded Jennifer. "He could be your dad, that's gross."

"We joke around, nothing creepy. No big deal anyway, I start school soon."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"My parents don't want me to work when the semester starts." Jennifer said.

"Especially if you have to close with Dave and he makes passes at you right? He could get fired." Calvin prodded.

"It's more the hours. Dave's really nice to me." Jennifer said.

"Really." Calvin flicked the butt into the dumpster; igniting an idea.

"I plated my wit, presenting it with a side of humor to charm the silver haired early birds. The kids, well servers, liked me I think. I ran that place like it was my own. I loved being a manager. It improved my quality of life. I was dedicated. I felt empowered." Dave was staring at me.

"So, I don't get it." I shrugged facing the traffic.

"I don't know. One day I walked into work, forced to walk out. My boss received a letter from a law firm in regards to a harassment investigation of a female employee. Charges pending based on my resignation. My life ended there."

"Was it true?"

"No. I was over ten years older than most of them!" Dave said with disgust. "But it didn't

matter to the jobs around town I couldn't get anymore, or the friends that didn't want to get involved. I hired a lawyer, but nothing ever came of the investigation. My finances dried the more I drowned myself. Despair, depression made everything disappear."

"Why haven't you gone home?" I asked.

"Once I can afford it, I'm there."

"Thank you Dave." I said as I gathered my things.

"No, thank you Miss?" Dave patted my picnic basket.

"Jennifer." I shook his hand, bought a paper leaving before he could see me crying. I got home remembering the one time I visited the restaurant after I left.

"Did you hear about Dave? He had it coming." Calvin said sardonically.

"What did you do?"

"He'll never find out from whom. He was so freakin' charming anybody could have sent in a letter, right?" He confessed.

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