

HIGBY'S DRY CLEANING STORE

Dexter Jeffries

As much as I loved my father and knew he was a hero to all of my friends, he still wasn't enough. Because he was perfect, that automatically meant that we could never talk about or discuss the important things in life like sex, women, and having sex. That world was *verboden* for us. Drugs had to be addressed because of my brother's addiction, but that again was from a practical and sociological point of view. My brother was a textbook case of something, and therefore he played no part in my life. Since my father couldn't talk about those issues with me and since there was another man in my life that could and wanted to, well, that was the ideal situation.

Mr. Higby, who owned Higby's Dry Cleaning store, was going to be the most important man in my life. I know you're thinking I already told you who was the most important man in my life, and it's not that I'm deceitful; it's that we don't have enough words in the English language for these circumstances when you have competing people, men and women in your life whom you really do love more than anyone else. You truly imagine that you will never imagine loving anyone better, but then you meet this other human being and you end up saying, well, he or she was almost the most important person in my life, and you catch yourself because you just said the same thing a few weeks, months, or years ago, and you're not lying. You're just... You're just trying to tell a complicated truth. I know that there still were other *most important* people in my life. It's the language, not me. If we had a word like, *gooleypitushwahghjlov*, this would solve the problem. Because if we had that word, that long, strange sound would capture the idea of a person whom you love body and soul, and you are one hundred percent certain that you will never, ever love or praise

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anyone else, but this isn't true. If we had that word, then you would know what I'm talking about. But we don't have *gooleypitushwahghjlov*. I'll just have to make do with what's in Webster.

Higby was going to make me a man, and because his wife could not have children and he always wanted a son, it was perfect. My father had his topics and areas of specialty: racetrack, cars and carpentry, communism, history, and jazz. Higby had his: work, sex, business, drinking, and exposing me to another world. I was fortunate. If I hadn't had this bad Virgil in my life, I would not have known that other world existed.

He drafted me the same way a scout goes looking for a big league ballplayer. He invested time and energy, about a year's worth, and offered me a contract that I couldn't refuse. I went straight from the farm team to the major leagues, and I paid Higby's Dry Cleaning store back tenfold. He had been searching for a replacement; George Lewis, counterman and presser had worked there for years. He was friendly, adored my sister and always said hello to Vivian and me. The world had other plans for him. His draft notice came, and the next thing I knew he was saying good-bye to Springfield Gardens and us forever. He wasn't killed but never came back. The war needed an ever-increasing army, and in 1968 the army needed him. Mr. Higby, looking for a replacement, drafted me. The last time I saw George he was sporting a khaki uniform with a few yellow stripes on the side of his sleeve and seemed content with his new position. I had his job. I was content too. It was a fair trade.

For the past year I had done something rather innocently that had attracted Theartis Higby's attention on a daily basis. I didn't know that future employers wish to examine your past work record, and they have many ways of getting your résumé whether you know it or not. I was fifteen and wasn't even aware that there was a record that could be scrutinized. I suppose even this unconscious selection process was what made Higby loom larger than life from that first day onward. He had his own sayings, his own little aphorisms, his philosophy built on life, Harlem, getting the combat infantry badge in Korea, being black, and being a black businessman. His perspective on life and things exuded a different brand of confidence that my father did not employ or rely upon. My father had books and articles. Higby had life, and it was raw and crude, but on occasion he refined it enough to make it palatable and appealing to a fifteen-year-old lad from the neighborhood.

I had gone to the dry cleaning store to pick up an order. My mother or father had left some items there, and I was doing the Saturday chore of getting their clothes before he closed at seven o'clock. I walked in unconscious to his machinations and plans. He had been planning this for some time. With his olive brown skin, balding head, he leaned across the counter and said, "Mr. Diaz, Paul or Dexter, right?" He paused and I spoke up, "Yeah, Dexter, Paul's my older brother" came out in my interrogated voice. "Let me see your ticket" and he turned away walking up a long aisle of clothes, disappearing into the back. He returned with the plastic encased clothing. Putting the clothes on that ubiquitous hook, I gave him the money, and he started to make change. "How would you like to work here?" Those words, *work here*, struck me like lightning. The paper route was held in high esteem but to work in a store! To work in a store with a cash register for holding the receipts instead of my right-hand pocket where I stored all of my nickels and dimes, this was a tremendous change.

"Are you serious, Mr. Higby?" I said rather incredulously. "You want me to be George's helper?" He started to shake his head. "No, George is going, got his greetings from Uncle Sam. Going to get a new set of clothing courtesy of the taxpayers, three hots and a cot and . . ." and from that point on I had to learn that this was how a black man talked. He just didn't say *yes* or *no*. He said things that sounded like a song, a poem, a story, a fable. There were no simple yeses or noes. Everything had a rhythm to it, and the rhythm was so appealing that he changed my speech pattern. This was how I started to speak like a black person. I would never be the same again. I would be the same inside, but my way of talking, my sense of the potential that language had for making music was born the summer of 1968. When people heard me talk from that summer on, they knew that there was something definitely black about me. I didn't even know how it was happening, but it did. I would not carry any parental linguistic pattern over from my mother and father. I was going to be black and black and black. He made me black. It happened. I wasn't black before 1968. People noticed it and asked me what happened as if I had attempted some new weight-lifting program or had decided to start exercising. I hadn't done anything. It was osmosis.

"So, what do you think? You should probably talk to your parents. If you want, I'll speak to them the next time or call them," he said with a genuine parental concern. My blasting retort hit him

quickly, "Yeah, I'm one hundred percent sure it's alright. I'll still talk to them, sure but I'm fifteen and can do things." I grabbed the clothes from the hook, totally exhilarated that this incredible thing was happening right before my eyes. Visions of work, importance, and money came tumbling into my head. The *Long Island Press* was a good job; having customers remember-me and tip me extra at Christmastime was fine, but Higby's Dry Cleaning store, with a neon sign and an awning in the summertime with his name on it; this was a dream come true.

I was out the door and walked about half a block. I turned around and walked back to the store. There was something that I wanted to ask him. There was something swirling in my head that just had to be answered right then and there. Why me, what was so special about me that I should be picked from all the young boys in the neighborhood. "I checked out your work record," he said, and this again was an example of his saying something in that special way. I had no work record so what was he saying? But he was serious. How can an adult say something that is not true and yet be serious and truthful? "But Mr. Higby, I don't have a work record. A work record is a paper that shows all of the jobs that you've had. I don't have one," I said.

"The hell you don't! You got one of the best work records of any young man in the neighborhood. Don't tell me you don't have a work record. How else do you think a person can get hired if they don't have a track record? You know what a track record is? Your dad plays the horses. What's a track record?"

I was stunned for everything made sense, but I wasn't prepared for quick questions and answers like this. Everything in my house had a different place. When you talked about Marx, the Second Front, and the mistrial of the Rosenbergs, you were quiet and methodical. I looked at him and said, "Sure, I know what a track record is!"

"Good, I know you do. You better. Now tell me what a track record is." I smiled inside because I was going to talk about something that I knew and was confident.

A track record is a recapitulation of all the past performances of a thoroughbred race horse. It is a complete history of all races whether mud, turf or the flat. It will have races national and even international. It will have all the horse's times for different distances. For instance, at Aqueduct Racetrack, two horses hold the record time for a six-furlong race; Near Man

did it carrying 112 pounds on July 17, 1963; Beautiful did it on December 6, 1964, carrying 121 pounds. That record-setting time was 1:08:2.5. That's one minute, eight and two-fifths seconds.

Mr. Higby looked at me, and the smile that had been growing for the last few seconds just got bigger and bigger. He was shaking his head. The smile didn't stop, nor the head shaking. "Ya see, boy, that's one of the reasons I'm hiring you. All that information in your head. Just like a little encyclopedia. But let me tell you something else. Besides that, I have been checking you out. You just didn't know it. You were too busy doing your paper route job. That's good. You were so busy that you didn't even look up to see Ol' Higby looking at you." That was another thing that he did which was startling and new and exciting. He talked about himself when he was talking to you. He would casually say, "Ol' Higby knows; that's for sure." Or, "Don't fuck with Higby; whatever you do, don't fuck with Higby. Ain't nothin' in a drugstore will kill you quicker than Ol' Higby once you start fuckin' with him." If you asked him a question, he would proudly say, "Higby knows; just gimme a second and Higby will tell ya right off." The music was there and rolled out of his mouth like a player piano. I listened.

I listened some more. I had heard it somewhere before. Somewhere I had heard this type of talking, making yourself into a character because you weren't satisfied with what society had done with you. Louis, sure, Louis Armstrong did this. He would conduct conversations with himself during those early recording sessions when he was really feeling his oats, back in 1931 and 1933. Louis would be in the studio for Columbia or Okeh and would just start conducting his own monologues. He had nicknames too, and he talked in that special way that made you want to laugh and laugh and laugh.

"Now, good evening ladies and gentlemen; tonight, looks like we have a little argument between the saxophones and the trumpets, 'cause these cats just said that they're gonna get away, and the little trumpeter just said the same. Ain't that right little trumpeter? That's right, oh, you little devil . . ."

The stream from the press in the back hissed. "Now, little did you know, goddamn your soul, I've been looking at you for almost a year.

That's right. One year. And that's how I know you're a good man. Every day, now listen, talk to me now, look at me, look at Higby. Every day I know exactly what time it is when you ride by with that bike. Every damn day. Every day you come with that newspaper bike and go across those metal cellar doors. Crash, bam. First I didn't like it. Crash, bam. Every damn day at 3:15, crash, bam. Then I got to liking it. Because it was you and it was the exact goddamn time every time. Do you know that? Yes sir, every day at 3:15 you and that damn bicycle hit those metal doors, boom-boom, and I look up and say, that's the newspaper boy, right on time. Like *The Crusader* express train coming out of Jersey City. No, more like that train they call the . . . damn, way out west, fast goddamn train, what the hell is its name, the, *The Zephyr*, like the goddamn *Zephyr* heading from Omaha, Nebraska, to Denver, Colorado. Never 3:10, never 3:20. Day after day. Paper route, hell you got to be dependable for that. Paper comes out every day, right? Saturday, even Sunday. I don't see ya on Sunday but right again on Monday, crash, bam, 3:15. So Ol' Higby figured, that's the man for the job. I need someone who is very dependable and reliable. Need someone who is going to be at work on time. Need someone that I can trust. Trust with money too. If you were cheating the customers or the paper, you wouldn't have lasted more than a week. That's the kind of business that is. Yes sir, I got an honest and hardworking man right in front of me, and I know you're the man for the job."

The stream hissed again, and someone hit the right pedal of the press to hold it down on the pleat of some skirt or the crease in a pair of trousers. I looked at him. He was so real. So brown, so penetrating. The music had stopped, but my breathing hadn't. It had all flowed out like one big mighty river of love and affection. "Well, I guess all I have to do is ask my parents, like I said before."

"That's right. Go ask 'em, Zephyr. Go ask 'em."