

HANIYAH

INSTEAD I FIND SOMETHING MUCH DIFFERENT. I arrive in San Diego without ever having visited the area. With no money and a recent college degree in communications that is leading only to employment as an overqualified telemarketer, I decide to enroll in graduate school and pursue a master's degree in communications—which will probably lead to employment as a highly educated, even more overqualified telemarketer, or maybe director of mobile phone rip-offs at some cookie-cutter mall. Thankfully I am able to earn a meager income teaching a freshman course in public speaking while I study and delay a real career. And as a twenty-two-year-old college instructor I am somewhat of a novelty, which makes meeting women much easier.

In between teaching and attending my own classes, I spend most of my time flâneuring around campus meeting various women. I'm not your typical hard-up man who stares at a woman as if he wants to eat her; I simply ask how her day is going and take it from there. No self-help books or game needed. Just spark a conversation, ask a few questions and shut the hell up. If you're genuinely interested, show it; if not, cut the conversation short. Unless, of course, you're interested only in hearing her say "Harder, daddy"—in that case, put on your interested look anyway (head tilted to the side, mouth agape, repeat "Whaaaaaat" in an incredulous manner every thirty to forty-five seconds) and be patient until you complete the mandatory three-dates-before sex requirement.

This particular morning I have time to waste between class-

es. I stand on the open-air balcony of a two-story classroom building. Feeling uncomfortably overdressed among the casual students, I place my hands into the pockets of my double-creased pants. I steal a few glances at the women walking past in their tank tops and short skirts, knowing full well that relationships among instructors and students, while not forbidden, are discouraged. Down below I spot a tiny Beyoncé-brown woman with shoulder-length curls and glasses that belie her otherwise youthful appearance. I can tell from her neat and quasi-conservative knee-length skirt that she is probably not from Southern California.

As I spy on her, she looks up and smiles at my obvious attempt to pretend as if I'm looking elsewhere. In a word she looks pure. Her skin is clear and behind her glasses rest wide, eager eyes and threaded brows. Her nose is pronounced, with a slight indent on the tip—the effect is more elegant than unflattering. I can see that her legs are short and I assume she stands not a hair over five feet. Although she holds a little weight in her midsection, she is nowhere near a muffin top. She reminds me of Lisa Turtle from *Saved by the Bell* or dare I say Stacy Dash from *Clueless*. I hurry down the stairs to introduce myself before doubt overtakes my confidence.

“Hi. I'm Dewan,” I say with a smile as I stare at her.

“I'm Haniyah. What does your name mean?” she asks, as if black people always have a reason to name their kids LaShaunta, Durrell Wayne, or, in my case, Dewan. I wish it did mean something regal such as “the one with great longevity,” but I'm sure my young, post-civil-rights parents just thought it sounded nice or, for that matter, cool.

“Huh ... oh, my parents just made it up,” I reply.

She laughs and I ask her the same. “It means ‘happiness.’”

Only days later we're on our first lunch date, at Denny's. While there's not much romance to be had in a shabby restaurant, surrounded by seniors eating the Grand Slam special, it is at least a step up from fast food. As we eat and talk I become enamored with her slight British accent. I learn that she is from Kenya and has come to live in San Diego with her older brother.

After we run through basic warm-up questions, the conversation lapses. Then we stumble upon love, or rather a discussion of love. Whether it is her youthful ignorance of what a first-date conversation consists of or my usual disregard for relational norms, we begin conversing about the existence of true love. You'd think a young and inexperienced woman would have visions of falling in love with her Prince Charming, but Haniyah holds no such hopes. Maybe I don't either.

After a few days of exploratory phone conversations we have our first "real" date, a trip to the movies. Before going she admits that she is actually from Bahrain and has been advised not to tell anyone. We're only a couple weeks post-9/11 and along with the loss of due process, many Arabs in America are experiencing "retaliatory" hate crimes. But I don't really care where she is from. What is on my mind is asking her to hide a Pepsi and a pack of Skittles in her purse before the movie and having the opportunity to get to know her better afterwards.

But, unfortunately, we are not alone. Haniyah's brother Amir and a few of his friends have come along to watch the movie and ensure that I keep my slick hands to myself. While cordial, they seem surprised that I am different from the stereotypical African American males they see on television, who wear doo-rags and prefer to make credit card transactions through the ass crack of a thick woman with multicolored extensions. Even Haniyah asks, "Why don't you dress sporty?,"

which apparently means hip-hop.

“Not really my thing,” I reply. “My legs look like stilts in baggy jeans.” (Since I’m six feet tall and weigh 150 pounds, they pretty much look like stilts in any jeans).

What starts with steak and eggs at Denny’s grows into an exclusive relationship. Outside of the ordinary DVD dates and trips to inexpensive restaurants, we spend time learning about each other’s upbringing. She grew up in luxurious conditions by American standards, while I teetered between middle class and “Dad, when we gonna get the phone back on?” She had a pet lion cub; I had a mixed terrier that pissed himself inside and held his bladder outside. Her family had a personal driver to take them around; I had the back of a bus or, once I turned seventeen, a five-hundred-dollar Plymouth Horizon. She had her own room and bathroom; I shared a queen bed with a snoring brother who farted and then blamed the smell on some mystery person burning hotdogs. She was raised Muslim; I was just raised.

Haniyah and I continue to spend more time together, but I am still unsure where the relationship is going. I have been in San Diego only a couple months and, besides meeting a part-time stripper/full-time biology student who first claimed to work at Starbucks, I have yet to date anyone significant. The barista stripper is significant only because she is just that, a barista stripper. So I go back and forth between trying to fulfill my California player fantasy or going on lockdown, uncertain if I am ready for the kind of relationship where you answer, “We’re staying in tonight,” when the boys invite you to a nightclub, knowing damn well you want to see what’s being flaunted and to secretly touch what probably wouldn’t come back to haunt you. I choose the relationship.