Almost There

A Work of Fiction By

Dixie Wells

ALMOST THERE
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All scripture quotations are taken from the *King James Version* of the Bible.

The main characters and events in this book are fictional with the exception of Nick's parents and uncle, who are actual member of the author's family.

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To my loving wife Ginger
Who has Always been there for me
No matter how dark or difficult
The Times —
Thank you, Sweetie

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S:

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Finally, I must thank my family for their indulgence over the last couple of years during the writing of this book:

Brett, my Son, I confiscated your computer. Thank you for taking it so graciously. And thank you for taking my place doing yard work and household chores. You will be the better man for it, trust me.

My Dearest Ginger, there is nothing I can say or do to thank you enough, except to quit writing, I suppose. Thank you, Dear, especially, for your moral compass.

W A R N I N G:

This book contains adult situations and mature themes. It is not recommended for young readers.

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And behold,

A great strong wind

Passed by,

And a great and strong wind tore

Into the mountains

And broke the rocks in pieces before the Lord,

But the Lord was not in the wind;

And after the wind

An earthquake,

But the Lord was not in the earthquake;

And after the earthquake

A fire,

But the Lord was not in the fire;

And after the fire

A still small voice ...

1 Kings 19:11b-12

~ Chapter 1: Hope ~

White gossamer curtains danced flirtatiously with one another inside the open sash window of the Ryan's beach resort home. The sheer, light pieces of cloth fluttered, billowed and bumped to the tinkling tune of the wind chimes, hanging between them, and to the uneven rhythms of the Atlantic Ocean's salty, soft June breezes. The bright afternoon sunlight streamed through the open, lower sash, contrasting starkly with the dark, but spaciously airy interior of the beach house. Against the south-side wall, an old black and white television set aired a commercial. Several feet to the right of the TV, Ryzanna Sheeboom stepped forward towards the sunlight to permit the hems of the flowing curtains to brush against her chest, chin and milk-fed cheeks, and to tickle her nose. She giggled. Breathing deeply, inhaling the salty scent of the moist sea air, the girl took hold gently of one of the curtains in her right hand. The camouflaging cloth was so soft, so fragile between her fingers like she used to be, but so different from the inner toughness she had been forced to develop over the last couple years. Due to her missing husband's, enforced three-year absence, Ryz'n had learned to salve her internal wounds, both emotional and mental in her own way. She camouflaged her most personal scars, even as she hid now, entwining herself in the soft, window-length curtains. A child again, she played without worry.

At first glance, due to her slight stature and the beach home's dark interior, the girl could have been mistaken for a large child. But Ryz'n had put away childish things five years ago, when she began dating Nicky Sheeboom. A closer inspection of the gossamer-enshrouded personage revealed a striking, young woman with a surprising equally wide breadth of shoulders and hips. Chiefly, it was her scarcely longer than average but unusually narrow waist, which emphasized her female form. Unlike some long-waisted women who seemed predestined to inherit short, stubby legs, Ryz'n's graceful, well toned limbs lent a subtle sense of gentle flowing to her being. Shod in sandals, she dressed plainly in a mint-green denim, wraparound, A-line skirt and a simple, light, white cotton top. The blouse was sleeveless, collarless and front-buttoned. However, her plain dress could not conceal her adult, feminine features. No, there was no mistaking her for a child, not even a large one.

Although her maiden name was Ryan, her features as well as her skin tone bespoke a Mediterranean, even an eastern, heritage. Even now, her unstable, olive complexion faded and darkened according to the available sunlight streaming just inside the window. Her thick, shoulder-length hair, the color of hot chocolate surrounding a marshmallow, was a smoky grey-brown and grew densely upon her head. Unfashionably worn in a flip and parted high up on the right side, her wavy hair held its body well. The girl's forelocks fell continually into the left side of her face, despite her ever present, yellow-gold hair ribbon. A keen observer might conclude erroneously that Ryz'n dyed her hair, because the first half inch of her roots

were black as coal and matched the hue of her wispy-haired forearms and her expressive eyebrows. However, she did not dye her hair, nor did she wear make-up, aside from an occasional bit of pink lip gloss and matching paint on her finger and toe nails. Her natural hirsutism and the density of her thick, mop-like head of hair originated from her Indian-Pakistani grandparents. Nevertheless, somehow, her Irish-Scandinavian ancestors had sufficient input to lighten the hue of the outgrown strands, despite their severely dark roots.

Like her kid sister, Ryz'n's face had some makings of a classical beauty, though she would not agree with that assessment. She possessed clear lines, in a high-chiseled cheekbones, a firm angular jaw, smooth roman nose and a full pair of pink-red lips. However, unlike her sister and more like her mother, Ryz'n had never lost the baby fat from her face, as she had elsewhere from her svelte shape. A double layering of cheek flesh gathered into a false double chin, producing the delightful, multiple dimples, which were her trademark. The girl's face reminded one of a high-school cheerleader's, giving her a youthful appearance that belied her age, which was a day and two weeks shy of twenty-two. Her large, hazel-green irises could flash emerald green in an instant, when passion burned within her, and reminded one of her Irish genealogy. Yet, shaped like large almonds, even her eyes were not wholly Irish. Her Spanish and Greek ancestry revealed itself in her eyes as well. Protected by unusually long, black lashes and highlighted with pitch black, broadly arched brows that swept well past the corners of her eyes, Ryz'n's cat-like viewing orbs presented an appealing contrast in both beauty and heredity. Her mixed heritage rendered her features into a stark but alluring natural difference, one her husband could never resist.

They were waiting. They were waiting downstairs. Very well. Let them wait. I have a right to enjoy a rare moment of happiness, even if it is for just a moment.

She snapped the fingers of her left hand in a rhythm and blues (R&B) beat. "Disco Fever" may have begun to sweep the nation, but five years ago Ryz'n had fallen under the spell of what had become a long smoldering, obsessive fever that she could never quite shake, nor did she want to. The young woman began to dance with the curtain, slowly, vibrantly—the Queens Style, as her husband had taught her. Her feet, clad in sandals, slid easily over the wooden parquet floor, which she noted was a great surface for dancing. Up and back, Ryz'n swayed in time to the sultry tune. She began to croon in her smoky voice with that inimitable catch which had sold millions of records ...

(Snap … snap … snap … snap!)
Nevah know how much I love ya.
Nevah know how much I care.
When you put your arms around me,
I get a feeling that's so hard to bear.

Ya give me Fee-vah, when you kiss me,
Feevah when you hold me ti—ight.
Fee-vaaahh in the moh-nin'
And fevah all through the night.

(Snap … snap … snap … snap!)
Listen to me, Baby. Hear every word I say.
No one can love ya the way I do,
'Cause they don't know how to love you my-ee way.

Ya give me Fee-vah, when you kiss me,
Feevah when you hold me ti—ight.
Fee-vaaahh in the moh-nin'
And fevah all through the night.

(Snap … snap … snap … snap!)
Bless my soul, I love ya.
Take this heart away.
Take these arms I'll never use.
And just believe in what my lips have to say.

Ya give me Fee-vah, when you kiss me,
Feevah when you hold me ti—ight.
Fee-vaaahh in the moh-nin'
And fevah all through the night.

(Snap … snap … snap … snap!)
Sun lights up the daytime.
Moon lights up the night.
My eyes light up when you call my name,
'Cause I know you're gonna treat me right.

Ya give me Fee-vah, when you kiss me,
Feevah when you hold me ti—ight.
Fee-vaaahh in the moh-nin'
And fevah all through the night.

(Snap … snap … snap … snap!)
Hmmmmmmmm.
Hmmmmmmmm.
Hmmmmmmmm.
Hmmmmmmmm!

Ryz'n became silent as she snapped the fingers of her free, left hand in time with the beat, dancing always dancing to the melody that played on inside her head. Then, she began to speak aloud as if she were not alone.

"You remember, Baby, the first time—the first time you taught me this dance? That was in the sea breeze, too, The Sea Breeze Café up in Rehobeth. You were so excited to have picked out Little Willie John's version of "Fever" off the juke box. You said, I remember, you said:" She paused to re-enact the memory quoting her husband verbatim, attempting to imitate his croaky baritone.

"'That's a miracle, Ry. I can't believe it—Little Willie John! Who has a copy of Little Willie on a juke box these days? Hunh? Must be for us, Ry, just for us. Come on Baby, let's dance, I'll teach ya. …Sure, sure right here. These people won't mind. Just take my hand here, move like I do and look into my eyes. Don't look anywhere but into my eyes and it will all work out fine.'

"And ooh Baby, how right you were. I did and I've never been the same."

She began to move rhythmically again, keeping time with the "Fever" in both her head and her heart. She danced with him again, with her boy groom. She danced with the curtain, as if she were dancing with him, careful not to bump into the round, darkly stained, oaken, captain's table behind her.

"You know Sweetie, we're kinda like those chimes and these curtains, you and I. Life has blown us some tough, horrific gales Baby, but we keep singin' and dancin'. And just as the curtains are tethered to that rod up there, we are anchored in our faith and in our hope and we abide … And I'm hopin', I'm hopin' Sweetie that you'll turn up soon, real soon." She sighed, "'cause I'm so, so lonely, Nicky. I started off pretty strong and perky. But lately, I believe it's beginning to get me to me, Baby. I don't believe I can take much more of this emptiness, no—it's beginnin' to get to me—"

The Wide World of Sports promotional jingle signaled the end of the commercial, airing on the TV set that perched against the wall between the two open sash windows to her left. "… Spanning the globe to bring you the thrill of victory … and … the agony of defeat!" The girl let go of the curtain and stopped dancing. She stepped back a few feet to where she could view the TV screen easily, but still catch the soft, moist ocean breezes through the open window. Ryz'n repeated "'The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat'"! She inhaled and exhaled deeply, speaking aloud in an empty room.

"We know all about that, don't we Baby?"

The network returned to the ball game she had been watching.

They were waiting. They were waiting downstairs. Very well, let them wait.

The University of Texas was just killing some little school from California in the semi-finals of the 1975 College World Series (CWS). Nicky loved baseball, but he would not have liked this. He always rooted for the underdog. Texas was already up six in the eighth and Longhorns were circling the bases like they were in a stampede. The girl assumed "The

Stance" as her husband had called it. With her left foot forward a foot or so and her left knee bent, she had shifted her weight to the right throwing her right hip out. Her right forearm crossed under her chest, beneath her solid bosom, while her right hand slipped into the crook inside her left elbow, which was bent so that her left thumbed supported her chin. She gnawed gently on the side of her left index finger, which rested between her lips.

They should take him out before this thing becomes impossible.

A former softball most valuable player (MVP) as both a pitcher and catcher for Pocomoke High back in her senior year, Ry knew what she was talking about. "Maybe they don't have anyone else?" The ex-ballplayer reasoned, whispering under her breath. "Never thought of that, did ya? They've already used three guys, at least. Probably, they don't have any arms left with this being a double elimination tournament." She groaned as another base hit drove one more Longhorn across the plate safely.

Loudly now, she complained, removing her finger from her mouth. "Oh! Put a fork in him, for mercy's sake!"

Suddenly, her kid sister appeared in the screened, front porch doorway of the three and a half story, weather-beaten, wood frame, resort home.

"Come on, Ryz'n! You're holdin' up the whole show!"

Ryz'n diverted her attention from the TV screen for a few split seconds to glance at her sister Sheena. The salty scent of the June afternoon's sea air wafted through the front screened porch as well as the open sash windows, permeating all within the Outer Banks beach home. Sheena was a classically beautiful young, woman. Ryz'n believed Sheena to be the true beauty of the family, though opinions varied. The only opinion on that subject which really mattered to Ryz'n was that of her husband. And it pleased her greatly that he disagreed with her. Despite their closeness in age and their competitive natures, Ryz'n loved her sister dearly. She had helped raise her kid sister ever since their mom had gone to work down at Warner-Robins to help their dad pay the bills some twelve years ago. Only fifteen months apart, the sisters knew well how to pull and push each other's buttons. Ryz'n understood she was pushing one of Sheena's now, by watching the television, instead of hurrying down to the family station wagon, as requested. Yet, Ryz'n also knew what Sheena did not realize. The family would not be going anywhere until Sheena's newlywed husband exited the bathroom.

The dark haired beauty held the screen porch door open to the home's second story porch with her foot. The summer sea breeze, passing through the porch's floor-to-ceiling screen windows, rocked the porch ceiling swing gently but unevenly. Sheena tapped her foot impatiently.

"Come on, dammit! Everybody's waiting down at the car!"

The muffled sound of a toilet flushing increased in volume as the door to the bathroom at the back of the home opened. A large handsome, athletic looking young man with nearly shoulder length curly brown locks and close, deep-set dark, brown eyes emerged from the hallway.

Ryz'n took her eyes off the TV set again, this time to question her kid sister who still stood in the doorway.

"Everybody's waitin' down at the car, hunh, Sheena?"

"Well, I thought they were." Exasperated, Sheena scolded her husband of almost six months. "Bryce, I thought you were downstairs taking care of Scruffy. What are ya doin' up here, Baby?"

Bryson replied by quickly raising and lowering his eyebrows repeatedly like the old comedian Groucho Marx, as he scurried down the hall and across the large open dining/game room, barking "Had to go! Had to go!" He stopped halfway to the door to speak to his sister-in-law, his senior by a year.

"Hey Ry, thought you were comin' with us?" Sheena interrupted him.

"What about Scruffy Junior, Bryson?"

"Ry took care of her, didn't ya Ry?"

"Don't I always?"

"Sure, sure ya do. Thanks, Ry. OK now, Sheena?" Bryson looked skeptically at his bride and then turned his attention back to his sister-in-law. "Hey now Ry, whaddaya got there on the tube? Aren't ya goin' parasailin'?"

"I am, I am. I just wanted to see this for a minute."

"What? What is it?"

"It's baseball. College baseball. The World Series. Never saw it on TV before. *Wide World of Sports* is using this semi-final game for it's whole show today."

"Hey, no kiddin'. College Baseball on TV, hunh?"

"Yeah, it's kind of like the Rose Bowl, Orange Bowl and Sugar Bowl all rolled up in one deal. It's a double elimination tournament with the top eight teams in the country playin'—"

"For Pete's sake, Ryzanna! Now you're gettin' him interested in it," admonished the long-haired brunette from the front porch doorway. "Come on, we're gonna be late for our lesson. Thought you wanted to learn to parasail, Ryz'n? It was your idea to start with."

"She's right Ry, we better get goin.' We're gonna miss our turn."

The girls' mother ascended the outdoor front deck steps, wearing a wide, floppy brimmed, red fluffy, fringed, straw hat tied to her chin by a scarf. Her handbag dangled before her. Reaching the porch deck, she called through the outside screen window. The woman looked more like a sister than a mother to the two girls.

"Come on girls, your father is starting to get mad. Let's go! Girls, Bryce?"

"I've been tellin' 'em Mom, but they won't listen" pleaded Sheena. "They're watchin' a stupid BASEBALL GAME!" The youthful matron peered in through the front window screens, searching for her older daughter inside the dark, stained wood interior. Ryz'n's mom pressed her nose against the screen.

"Ry? Is that right? Come on now, Honey. Don't you want to learn to parasail? We all thought that's what you wanted to do." She peered inside to see Ryz'n.

"Oh sure, Mom. It's, it's just that, well, this is the College World Series and Nicky, well, Nicky always wanted to see it, if he couldn't actually play in it, you know?"

"Sure, Baby. I understand. You can stay and watch if you want, but I think we're going to go now. I'm looking forward to it. You'll have to fix dinner yourself, if you stay. We're going to grab a bite out and stop by the dunes to catch the sunset later. Know how you love that sunset up on the ridge, My Baby. But you do what you want. However, turn off the TV, please, if you *are* coming." The mother lifted her chin from the screen, righted her fringed wide-brimmed straw hat upon her head, turned and disappeared down the outside porch stairs.

"I'm comin'. I'm comin'," responded Ryz'n belatedly.

Ryz'n wanted to go, too. She just had not seen the need of sitting all cooped up in the family car for fifteen minutes, waiting for Bryson. Besides, more commercials were on the way now as the manager of the little school had finally decided to take Ryz'n's advice and change pitchers.

"Eight runs down? Too late now, Bub" observed Ryz'n wryly.

Like the others, Ryz'n, wore her bathing suit under her clothes. And, of course for Nicky, she wore a yellow ribbon in her hair. Always, she wore the yellow ribbon. In one swift motion, the athletic girl snatched a beach towel and her FosterGrants off the top of the TV set, as she slapped at the set's on-off button. She yelled to her brother-in-law, outracing him to the front door. "You're holdin' up the whole show, Bryce!" The pair disappeared down the front outside stairs, bumping and giggling like a couple of kids, as they ran close behind Sheena.

* * *

Ryz'n had hit the set's power button, but she had not hit it squarely enough on center to turn off the TV. The picture faded out for a few seconds to a white dot in the center of a dark green screen, but then it bounced back. The tube spread its light slowly outward across the dark screen, crackling as it went. The sound of the Ryan's car engine drifted off down the street. The huge three and a half story Outer Banks resort home was empty, but not quiet as the TV and the game played on to a second floor, of empty couches, rocking chairs, tables and a gently whirring overhead fan.

"Well Leo, looks like we're going to get the opportunity we had been hoping for to see this young man pitch, here with the bases loaded and only one down in the eighth."

"Yes, it looks that way, Chris. He might as well pitch. He's done everything else for his club so far, includin' carryin' the bats to the park!"

"As Strickler makes his way in from center, we'll take a minute to look at his pitching stats. Let's see, uh, here we go. As a pitcher, he's appeared in 22

games, all in relief, winning three and losing two and recorded fifteen saves, with two no decisions. He's pitched 54 and 2/3 innings, giving up 14 earned runs on 19 hits and eleven walks and he's fanned twenty-five batters. Good numbers, Leo, for a guy who's primarily a position player."

"They sure are, Chris. The stat that pops out at me is the 35 doubles plays that he's thrown in those 54 innings. That's incredible! Tells me he's got some kind of a pitch that moves down or drops to induce that many double play balls. They tell me he has a nasty screw ball, Chris. Calls it his 'dippsy-doodle' ball. HA! Ya gotta love that name."

"There you go, Leo! We can get a good close-up look of him as he takes the mound for his warm-up tosses. As we mentioned at the start of the game, the Porpoise roster lists him at six-feet, one hundred seventy-five pounds. Nice lookin' kid, looks kind of like a movie star."

"Well, whaddaya expect, comin' from Malibu? Yeah, he sure's got a head of hair on him. Just like me," joked the infamously bald domed color analyst. "Now that the young man's removed his cap to wipe his brow, it does look like he got a bad haircut though. Nipped off the top of his ear, there."

"Glad you brought that up, Leo. We were unable to work this kid's story into the broadcast earlier with all these runs that have been scored. But Strickler is actually quite a story. Precisely, because he has no story. He came to out of a coma following brain surgery over in the Philippines with no memory whatsoever. Naval hospital records indicate he had been flown to Manila from Saigon to have a bullet removed from the back of his brain by a specialist at the close of the War. Coach Trahorn of the Peppermount Porpoises spotted him playing service ball over in the islands and, eventually, persuaded him to sign with the Fish."

"Well Chris, maybe some of our viewers will recognize him. Officially, he goes by the name of J. D. T. Strickler, although he really has no idea, what his true identity is. Unofficially, he goes by "Dixie," a name his teammates in the Islands hung on him, I understand. Say, can we get a close up of the way he grips that baseball on these warm-up tosses? There! You see it? He's missing the upper two joints on the ring and pinky fingers of his right hand, which, they say, is what allows him to throw with that downward break, away from lefties. He grips the ball with his fore and middle finger together on the left seam while tucking the right seam inside that stump of his ring finger. You know, there was a pitcher I watched as a kid by the name of Mordecai Brown—"

"Sure, Three Finger Brown, they used to call him."

"That's right Chris, and he, too, could throw a mean, quick downer, more of a straight sinker though than a legitimate screw ball."

"Well Leo, looks like the kid's ready to go. He's been handed quite a mess. Bases loaded, one out and down 13 runs to 5 here in the bottom of the eighth. It doesn't look too good for the Fish. Let's see what the kid's got ... He checks the runners and deals. The batter swings. It's a come backer! Strickler

fields it cleanly, throws home to the catcher for one and then onto first for the double play! WOW! And just like that, Leo! The Fish swim out of it."

"The kid did it! Coaxed the batter out in front. It was the screwball, Chris."

* * *

The fireball of a sun appeared to be sinking, slipping quickly into the Albemarle Sound. The hundred-foot high sand dunes on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, known as Jockey Ridge, rode a few curious spectators along their soft, sandy spines. The youthful Bryson and Sheena quit playing tag long enough to hold one another in their arms and watch the awesomely beautiful spectacle of the sunset. Scruffy Junior, the family's taffy-hued, ten-inch high skye terrier settled down at the newlywed's feet. Even little kids, who had been skylarking over the dune, ceased their energetic activities momentarily to watch the sun mysteriously disappear. Thin, wispy, purple, pink-orange and yellow clouds stretched gloriously across an ever darkening cobalt, blue sky.

Ryz'n dug her pink toenails into the soft, cool, grey sand. She sang softly to herself, as she too watched he sun melt into the Sound. With her left hand, she fingered the crucifix hanging from her fine-chained, gold necklace, as well as the miniscule bottle opener that hung next to it. With her right hand, she slid her fingers over the air holes of a USMC harmonica inside the right hand pocket of her self-made, cuffed short, shorts. The harmonica, like her necklace, she carried on her person at all times. The mini-opener and the harmonica had been given to her by her husband three years and five month ago, to keep for him until he returned home from military service for them and for her. She had kept everything for him, just as he had left them, but he had not returned, not yet, anyway.

Ryz'n fingered these keepsakes, as she sang softly, "Ruby, Don't Take Your Love To Town," a song that had been popular five or six years ago. She glanced back at her parents, who also stood barefooted atop the dune, some twenty-five feet upwind of her. As she did so often, Ryz'n stood alone, consciously apart from her family. When she gazed westward, the spectacle took Ryz'n out of herself, filling her with peace and serenity. From where she stood, it looked as if the sunset had a similar effect upon her family.

Behind her, Ryz'n spied her dad placing his right arm around his better half, squeezing her mom tightly from behind in a love embrace, as they too watched the spectacular western horizon. With the Atlantic Ocean behind and below them, the couple gazed westward, diagonally out over the precipitous sands dunes and across the still waters of the Sound towards the green mainland of Eastern North Carolina. Rose Ryan stood with her husband Roy on a beaten down swath of sand atop the huge dune. Ryz'n watched them surreptitiously as her mother rose up on her tiptoes, turning her mouth up to bestow a pert, wifely kiss on her husband's lips.

Smiling, Rosalie Ryan faced westward again, while the sun slipped away quickly now, dissolving right before their eyes into the Sound. Ryz'n's eye

met her mother's. Caught staring at her mom during a private moment between her parents, Ryz'n self-consciously turned back around to watch the sun slip into Albemarle Sound. She resumed her song, wondering why the sun did not hiss and steam as it melted into the blue-green waters. Though Ryz'n sang with her back to her parents now, with her keen sense of hearing, she managed to catch their conversation as the salty, Atlantic sea air gently gusted her way.

"Oh My Baby, My Baby," clucked Rose Ryan, evidently without realizing the breeze carried her voice as far as her daughter. "Oh no, Roy, she's babbling to herself again."

"That damned war! That damned war! You better go to her, Dear."

That damned war!

That was her dad's singular remark for all that he thought concerned her. Her mother would be coming over now to comfort her when she did not need it. Ryz'n needed comfort most in the night, when she lay alone in bed unable to sleep for the aching want of missing her husband. But her mother could not provide Ryz'n with that kind of comfort. Only her absent Marine could offer the intimate consolation she needed, in his own inimitable way.

A sly peek over her left shoulder told Ryz'n what she had expected. Mrs. Ryan had left her husband's embrace to visit her, to console her poor, babbling daughter. Ryz'n could feel her mother's eyes upon her, as she came. This unsolicited sympathy made Ryz'n cringe. Without turning around to acknowledge her mother's presence, the astute girl spoke softly to her mom, as if they had been carrying on a conversation for several minutes.

"He's out there, Mother. I can feel it. I can just feel it. Just as I felt you coming up behind me just now. He's coming home to me. I know it. I do."

From behind Ryz'n, Rose Ryan slipped her lightly tanned, darkly hirsute, olive-skinned forearms around her daughter's long but narrow, twenty-two inch waist. She caressed her elder daughter and whispered, "Of course he is, My Baby. Of course he is. But don't expect too much, Dearest. It's been over two years since he was reported missing. Just keep praying. Keep praying."

"Two years, four months and eleven days, actually. And I am praying, Mother, all the time. I pray so much—I even pray in my sleep. I know I do, 'cause Sheena said I kept her awake sometimes down at school. So then we'd pray together."

The sun had set completely now. The two women stared in wonder at the purple, pink and orange afterglow on the western horizon.

"It's so peaceful, isn't it Mother? So gorgeous. Those long, thin, colorful clouds reach across the sky, like, like the fingers of God, don't they, Mother? Maybe Nicky is seeing this awesome sunset somewhere right now, like us?"

"I hope so. I hope he is. Oh, My Baby, one of the reasons we nicknamed you Ryz'n is because it rhymes with horizon. And look at the horizon now, isn't it gorgeous? Just like you, My Dearest. 'Like the fingers of God ... ' Why yes, that's very well put, Dear." The two held each other tightly with

their faces cheek-to-cheek and stared at the sky, awestruck by nature's glory. "Yes, the horizon is simply gorgeous this evening. Just like its namesake, you, My Baby." Ryz'n felt her face warm, as her mother hugged her, again. "You know the story of how we came by your name?"

"Yes, Mother. You've told me a thousand times. Daddy wanted to name me after you, but you thought a child should have its own name, so you—"

"Compromised. That's right Dearest and your father remembered his grandmother's name, a Gaelic form of 'Rose'—Ryesin. And we compromised, because I preferred Ryzanna, but we opted to call you Ryz'n for short."

"Yes Mother, I know. And Sheena's name is the Irish for God's gracious gift. But that's not what I was thinking about when you came up behind me just now."

"No? Of course not. What *were* you thinking about My Baby?"

"Well, you remember, Mother, when we stood here and Nick played this harmonica?" Ryz'n produced the young man's mouth organ from her pocket. "Remember? He played "Taps" at sunset for all those who had passed in service to our country? He had two cousins killed over there, you know?"

"Yes, My Baby, I know. And I remember, he played the harmonica. He had that cast on his leg and Bryce had to carry him up here. And they both fell back down the dune." She chuckled, as she recalled the incident.

"That's right. And he played "Ruby, Don't Take Your Love to Town," about the paralyzed war vet?" Ryz'n arched her eyebrows hoping for some recognition from her mother, but none was forthcoming. "Well, that's what I was singing when you came over, Mother." Ryz'n broke her mom's grip around her waist by turning into the concerned mother hen.

"I wasn't talking to myself, Mother. I know that's what concerned you. I heard you and Daddy when the wind gusted. I know you think that the war has, has …"

"Well dear, it's just that, well …" The elder woman fumbled for the right words as she stroked the bangs off her firstborn's forehead.

"You don't have to say anything, honest, Mother." Ryz'n could view the sincere look of concern in her mother's eyes.

"I know I don't, but … Dear, you know how I feel about you, how, well, you're just so special to me, Ryzanna Christine. I carried you my entire senior year of high school and I had only been eighteen a week when you were born! And I was never so, so happy in my life! You have been my, my pride and my joy, Ryzanna. But it just tears me up inside to see you so unhappy. If I could bear these painful burdens for you, I would do so gladly, gladly My Dearest, but I can't. And it hurts me that I can't."

"Oh, I'm sorry Mother." In a turnabout, Ryz'n consoled her mother, stroking her hair gently. "Really, I am, but you needn't feel that way. I know you sacrificed your youth to have me. And I feel bad for you, feeling bad for me. Nicky's absence is my burden to bear, not yours. I know what you mean

though. I know you were as depressed as I was when I lost the baby. I know I let you down then and you got so blue. I don't want you to feel so bad for me now. Some things the Lord wishes us to experience for ourselves, Mom."

"Oh! My Baby!" Mrs. Ryan stared at her eldest with sober, steely eyes. "Don't ever think that! You have never let me down. Never! But, as for the Lord … well your faith has always been so strong. It is your rock, for certain." The matron softened. "But your father is right about one thing. 'That dammed war,' indeed!" The mother hen hugged her daughter tightly and the tears flowed.

"Mother?"

"Yes, dear?" Mrs. Ryan sniffled.

"Mother, I confess that I do pray out loud often. I sing to myself, too. And sometimes, I even talk to Nicky out loud. It helps me, you know? It helps me keep him alive in here." The girl tapped her chest with her left fist. "You understand? I'm all right, really I am. Please don't cry."

"All right, all right." She sniffled deeply. "I'm OK now. Ok, My Baby, but I believe you would feel better if you'd see that Dr. Hodgekiss. You haven't seen her for a while and she might help you feel better."

"Help ME feel better? Or help YOU feel better? I tell you what Mother. You set up the appointment and I'll keep it. That is, if it will make YOU feel better."

"Yes My Baby, it will. I'll set it up for you, then." The two attractive brunettes smiled contented with one another.

Ryz'n's dad always said that she and her mother could pose for one of those mother-daughter TV commercials that invites the viewer to guess which one is the mother and which is the daughter. Ryz'n looked so much like her mother, it was uncanny. Her mom was a week away from forty. Yet, she remained still beautifully youthful in appearance, though her frame may have rounded a bit with age and the birth of two children. Ryz'n's father was a couple years older than her mom. Ryz'n knew her parents, neither of whom had so much as attended college, were young to have two married daughters, one of them a recent college honors graduate, and the other only a semester behind her older sister in earning a degree. Ryz'n also understood her folks were justifiably proud of their two handsome, accomplished daughters.

Mr. Ryan had approached the pair and waited for the right moment to speak, "Well, are my lovely girls ready to go? The show's over for this evening and I believe the cards are calling us." He smiled wistfully.

~ Chapter 2: Against All Reason ~

Ryz'n and her family sat round the oak captain's table which they employed now as a card table to play five handed pitch. The table resided beneath the low-hanging, multi-colored, Tiffany style lamp with the psychedelic-colored shade. All the other cards had been played on this trick. Bryson held his last play even with his head in suspense under the brightly shining overhead lamp. Then he dramatically slapped down his jack of clubs to take the last trick and the game.

"That's eleven. I'm out!" He glanced about the table to see if anyone dared object.

"Well played, Bryce," complimented his mother-in-law with her typically pleasant smile. Mr. Ryan shook his black-haired head in mild disgust. Bryce's classically beautiful bride Sheena was not impressed. Then it began, the nightly ritual of tease and dare between the newlyweds.

"Well, big deal!" Sheena bellowed. "You won a lousy game of pitch! You act like you just won the Super Bowl for Pete's sake. Whaddaya expect you're gonna get for winnin' a lousy game of cards, anyway?"

Sheena was teasing her groom, whom she had dated since their junior year of high school. Bryson grinned from ear to ear. Ryz'n grinned also, flexing her dimples, as she watched their nightly ritual. She understood well how much her sister loved to flirt, her brother-in-law as well. Six months of marriage had not diluted either's enthusiasm for the chase.

"YOU, BABY!" claimed Bryson. "Gonna collect my winnings right now, too."

They jumped out of their chairs, with Sheena letting out a yell, while Bryson chased his young bride around the table, catching her easily, far too easily in Ryz'n's opinion. They smooched. Then the muscular, six-foot three-inch, football player picked up his five-foot, four-inch, one hundred and fifteen pound bride and toted her on his hip with one hand as though she were a child. "Goodnight all." He excused himself and headed downstairs with his trophy, laughing and kicking on his hip. For privacy, the young couple had been sharing the lone downstairs bedroom for the last three weeks. Mrs. Ryan and Ryz'n bid them a cheery goodnight, but the choleric Mr. Ryan followed the pair to the top of the stairs. He leaned upon the white wrought iron railing that shielded the open stairwell from the kitchen and called down after them in a hoarse whisper.

"Hey, try and keep a lid on it down there, will ya? Cripes sake! These walls are paper thin, ya know!"

"OK, Pops," replied the son-in-law. "Mum's the word. Got that, Baby?"

"Shut up, Bryson! Just shut up!" However, the young bride's laugh rose devilishly from behind her chastisement, loud enough for all to hear.

Mr. Ryan returned to the round, darkly stained oak table, again shaking his head in mild disgust. "'Pops!'" he muttered. "'Pops!'" He asked his wife and older daughter if they wanted to play three-handed pitch, but neither his spouse nor Ryz'n cared to play cards any longer. He shrugged, resumed his seat and began to play solitaire on the round, oaken table at the back of living room.

"Think I'll crochet a while," offered Ryz'n's mom, indifferently. She left the card table to walk around the bulky, lumpy, grey upholstered couch. The couch separated the dining area from the front parlor. She sat down in her wooden rocker with the pale blue seat cushion, her back to the screened porch, to take up her knitting needles. Scruffy Junior, the family's pet skye terrier, followed her mistress to lay down by her feet next to the knitting basket. The propeller-like ceiling fan whirred lowly and wobbled unevenly above the long, rectangular, mahogany coffee table in the center of the second story parlor. The south by southeast breezes, typical of the Outer Banks in the afternoon, which had blown the gossamer curtains earlier, had just as typically evaporated by night.

Even so, Ryz'n noticed the air was unusually still, yet close. The house had become stuffy. The slow, rhythmic whirring of the overhead fans helped a little. Ryz'n also got up from the card table to stroll barefoot across the throw rugs which covered most of the open dining and living rooms. She shuffled lazily, even whimsically out onto the screened-in front porch. Ryz'n knelt on the porch's bench swing which hung from the porch ceiling, as she looked out towards the ocean, whose not too distant waves she could hear plainly.

"Looks like quite a storm is brewing up out of the southeast, Mother. I can smell rain coming."

"Well, it's too muggy and warm to close up just yet, My Baby. We'll wait 'til the storm hits for that, Dear. It's not hurricane season yet, thank the Lord. At least, I hope not."

"OK, Mom."

Ryz'n wandered around the spacious plank-floored, screen-enclosed porch, before she returned inside to sit on the lumpy, grey couch. She pulled one of the huge, soft green and brown corduroy couch pillows to her midsection, wrapping both of her arms tightly around the pillow. The girl rested her chin over the pillow top and stared into the empty TV screen.

Ha! That old Admiral!

That old television set was like the style of most of the furniture here—early marriage. Most of what her parents had borrowed or received as handouts when they had started out, they had used to stock this beach house. Ryz'n had offered to buy new furniture for them several times, but they preferred the early marriage set. They claimed the old things held too many good memories for them, like that old Admiral. The TV was made of hard, black plastic with an old-gold control panel, embossed with the black letters "A D M I R A L." Ryz'n recalled watching early morning cartoons on that Admiral as a kid with Sheena. Her folks had carted that relic of a black and white television everywhere: to Ramstein Air

Force Base AFB, back to Warner-Robins, then up to Landrews AFB and finally down here to Kill Devil Hills, NC. And it still worked, kind of. In as much as this isolated, sandy peninsula was the home of the Wright brothers first flights, somehow Ryz'n thought it only appropriate, after living at all those air force bases, that her family and this old Admiral should wind up together at the birthplace of flight.

This was the family's last night on the Banks. Tomorrow, they were supposed to return home from vacation to Crest Hill Heights, Maryland. Her parents had to get back to work. The family had spent three weeks here after Ryz'n's graduation from M&L University. It was supposed to have been three weeks of relaxing family time, but the rest of their Rock band members had come down from Maryland to practice. Ryz'n did not have the heart to turn them out, especially since they all needed the practice badly to break in J.J., their new lead guitar player. After almost two weeks, her dad had had enough and asked the band to leave. Ever since then, Ryz'n had felt a certain tension hung in the air between her and her parents. She could not identify what it was, but there was something. She figured they would let her know soon enough. Meanwhile, Ryz'n turned her thoughts to the ball game she had been watching earlier on the Admiral. That college game had reminded her of her husband.

Reminded me? As if I need reminding.

Everything reminded her of him. Still, she recalled how much he loved to play ball. Being with her and playing baseball, playing baseball and being with her—they were his two favorite things to do, he used to say. His music was a distant third. Wasn't that ironic? Because it was his music that had made them all rich beyond her imagination, that had helped her pay off her parent's mortgages, both of them, and would have replaced this furniture, too, had her mom and dad let her. Ryz'n had been glad to do it for them. *Yep, glad.*

But she had been thinking of Nicky, of romancing with him. Yes, and Nicky would romance her anywhere. Well, anywhere they could be alone together. Like she, he was not an exhibitionist. He would never have pulled that stunt in front of her parents that Bryson had just pulled with Sheena. But then, like Sheena, Bryson got along better with her dad than Nicky did, better than Ryz'n did, too, for that matter.

Ryz'n giggled to herself. Nicky was wild and unpredictable. He could make loving fun. There was no one like him. She had never known anyone else. She didn't want to know anyone else.

As Ryz'n stared into the empty, dark, green TV screen, dreaming of her boy-groom, Nicky appeared, as he had on their first date. That was when she had taught him, or had tried to teach him, what he had termed the "twisty flips" at the Base pool. Ryz'n recalled that today was June 7th, 1975, the four year anniversary of her and Nick's high school graduation. She remembered how they had received their diplomas together out on the floor of the University of Maryland's Cole Field House, right under the Terps home basket, or where the basket would

have been had it not been stored away for the ceremonies. She wasn't certain, but Ryz'n thought she and Nicky had been the first married couple from the then five-year old Pocomoke Senor High School to graduate on the same stage at the same time. Ryz'n knew for certain they were the first married couple to graduate in the top ten per cent of their class and to win athletic awards for softball and baseball, respectively.

While Ryz'n dreamed, Mrs. Ryan, sat, crocheting opposite her daughter, on the other side of the long, wooden coffee table. She cleared her throat loudly. Ryz'n was so absorbed in the blank television screen, she hardly noticed. Mrs. Ryan cleared her throat again, louder this time. Scruffy Junior perked up her ears though she failed to rise. Ryz'n heard but failed to heed her mother's warning signal. She knew her mom used throat clearing in much the same manner as Captain Horatio Hornblower had, to gain or divert attention, but Ryz'n was too busy enjoying herself to acknowledge her mom. Neither did Ryz'n's dad respond. He was focused on his game of solitaire. Mrs. Ryan cleared her throat a third time, louder still. Finally, her husband of twenty-two years picked up on his wife's guttural flare, turning his head toward her. Annoyed, Ryz'n again ignored her mom. Her mother simply nodded toward Ryz'n, who sat between her two parents,, staring at the blank TV screen, with her profile to each of them.

"Hey Baby," called her father. "How 'bout a little gin rummy?"

No response.

"Ryz'n? Wouldn't you like to play a little gin rummy with your old Dad?"

No response. Ryz'n was ignoring them, for she was no longer there. She was in another world with Nick. They were dating. They were marrying. They were honeymooning. They were—

"Ryzanna, Baby, your Father is speaking to you." Mrs. Ryan had leaned forward to speak across the coffee table directly to her daughter. The skye terrier at Mrs. Ryan's feet barked once as if to answer and cocked her head to listen.

"What? What Mother?"

"Daddy would like you to play gin rummy with him."

"Oh gee, Mom. I don't feel much like it."

"Well, how about some cribbage? You always loved that game, Ry."

Mr. Ryan chimed. "Sure that'd be swell, if I can just find that cribbage board. We haven't played cribbage in a while." He turned to the hutch for the board.

"Maybe some other time, Daddy. I don't feel much like playing games right now." The parents exchanged exasperated looks of concern over Ryz'n's head.

"Well ... all right then. We can watch TV. Let's see what's on." Mr. Ryan rose from the captain's table to turn on the TV set. Her dad was about five-foot nine inches tall and 180 pounds, a little bit roly-poly, but a handsome man with bright green eyes, dark straight hair, a ruddy complexion and a neatly trimmed black moustache, ala Zorro. Ryz'n stopped him from turning on the TV set.

"No Daddy, I *was* watching TV!" Mr. Ryan looked at his daughter suspiciously, then at his wife and back again to Ryz'n.

Mrs. Ryan asked. “But, My Baby, the TV isn’t even turned on. How could you watch it, Honey?”

“Oh, but it was on, Mother. And it’s playin’ my favorite show, “Nicky!”, written, directed and produced by Ryz’n, starring Nicky and Ryz’n. Yes, it’s definitely my favorite show, Mom. And it always has a happy ending, with Nicky coming home to me, to my arms.” Ryz’n squeezed the large, green pillow to her chest as though it were her missing husband and stared at the set dreamily. Ryz’n’s dad came around the couch to rest his hands on his knees as he bowed before his elder daughter, between her and the TV.

“Look Baby, we all want Nicky to come home to your arms. Believe me, we do. We pray for that every night, your Mother and I. But, but, well it’s been two and a half years, Baby. You, you just have to be realistic. You have to, well, you have to look to the future now, Ry.” His voice softened. “Nick may not ever come home, Honey.” He glanced toward his wife and back to Ryz’n. “We just have to face it, Baby.” Ryz’n bit her tongue out of respect and slowly simmered.

“I know it’s tough to accept, but you’ve just graduated from college Ryz’n, and with honors no less. We’re so proud of you, your Mother and I. You’re a beautiful, talented young woman, Ryzanna. You can do anything you want. Go into business, if you like. Or maybe, with that new guitar player, the band will take off again this summer? You said he’s the second coming of Jimi Hendrix!” Mr. Ryan shook his head despondently, muttering under his breath. “God help us, he sure sounded like it.” Then, louder, he offered. “Or, if the band doesn’t pan out, you could still return to your music career, if not as a performer, as a composer then. You can do anything, anything you want. With the name you’ve already made for yourself, you could even become an actress on Broadway, maybe?”

Ryz’n shook her head in disbelief. It seemed her father’s eternal idea of the highest calling a female could attain was to become an actress on Broadway.

His daughter’s contradictory peer prompted a change in course. “Well, maybe not. All right then, but the point is Honey, there isn’t anything you can’t do, if you put your mind to it. And your mother and I will support you, no matter what you choose. Won’t we, Rose?” He turned to his wife for encouragement. She had not missed a stitch with her knitting nor a word that had been spoken.

“Sure we will. Of course, we will.” Her mom replied, constantly crocheting.

“But Ry, you gotta look forward now, not back, Honey,” pleaded Mr. Ryan.

“I am looking forward, Daddy. I’m looking forward to the day Nicky comes home to me. That’s where my focus is, where it has always been.” Seeking to avoid an argument on a subject over which she maintained little self control, Ryz’n shifted directions shrewdly. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t have plans or aspirations. I didn’t tell you this before, but I’ve been accepted by three universities into their graduate schools of business. I have to decide by the middle of the month which school to attend.” Ryz’n grinned broadly.

Her mother gushed and temporarily halted her crocheting.

"Well, that's wonderful My Baby, just wonderful. Why didn't you tell us this great news before? Which schools are they? M&L for one, right?" She eyed her daughter, hopefully expectant.

"Yes Mother, M&L is one of them. The other two are Stanford and the University of California at Los Angeles. You know, UCLA."

"Stanford and UCLA?" asked her father skeptically. "They're both excellent schools, but they are clear the hell cross country, Honey. You'd be all alone out there. Sheena and Bryson still have another semester left, maybe another year left at M&L. Perhaps you ought to go back to M&L again? Hey?"

"So my kid sister and her husband can watch over me? So you can see me on weekends and make sure I'm OK? Thought you just said, you'd support me, no matter what I chose."

Mrs. Ryan asked diplomatically, "Well, which one are you choosing, Dearest?"

"I don't know yet, but I'm leaning toward UCLA."

"UCLA? But—"

"Roy, let her finish. Go ahead, My Baby. Why UCLA?"

Ryz'n became excited as she explained her rationale.

"Well, it's an excellent school, for one thing. Vicky Vernier just graduated from there. She's received a grant to pursue a graduate degree in math there, so she'll be a graduate assistant. She thinks we can room together. Plus, UCLA has a top-flight swimming and diving program—Division 1A! That's big time college competition in the PAC Ten, ya know? And I still have a year of eligibility left. I thought, well, I don't know. It's just a crazy idea, I guess ... " Ryz'n cast her eyes down, somewhat embarrassed to reveal one of her wilder aspirations.

"What? What is it, Honey?" asked her mother.

"Well, I've won everywhere I've dived. But the NAIA is no NCAA, not even close. But maybe, if I could stack up well out there, well ... Well, trials for the Games are next year. I don't know. I know it sounds crazy, I guess ... " But Ryz'n's dad didn't think so. Suddenly, he encouraged her enthusiastically.

"No Baby, that's a great idea! Really it is. You never know, 'til you try. And it will give you something to look forward to, something to ... "

"Something to take my mind off of Nicky? Is that what you mean? Well, nothing will ever, EVER do that!" Ryz'n felt herself became florid, but she checked her temper once again in spite of herself, holding her emotions below the boiling point so she could persevere.

"The other reason, I'm thinking about UCLA is because I feel Nicky is out there somewhere. He's somewhere out west there, somewhere where they can play baseball year round. Like Hawaii, or maybe Arizona, maybe Southern Cal, I don't know, but L. A. is in the center of it all. I can maybe find a good private investigator to keep on the back of the one I've already gotten, who keeps his hands in my pockets, with nothing to show for it!" Mr. Ryan became miffed.

"He's got nothing to show for it, because there's nothing to find! Look, Honey. You're hung up on that whole amnesia thing, because of that Dixon lead last winter. But that proved false. You talked with Mrs. Dixon herself. She said she had never seen anyone who fit Nick's description."

"Father, all that means is that Nick, assuming he has taken Dixon's identity because he doesn't know any better, hasn't been able to find Mrs. Dixon yet. She told me she'd notify me if Nicky turned up."

"You said right, 'assuming' and you know what it means to 'assume?' Makes an 'ass' out of 'u' and 'me,'" claimed Ryz'n's dad derisively. That was it for Ryz'n. She turned sarcastically on her father.

"Is that what you're afraid of Daddy, that I'll look like an 'ass', waiting for Nicky to come home or that you will?"

Now, Mr. Ryan was hurt and angry. His eyes became a bright pair of emeralds. An imposing, broad-shouldered figure, behind his finely trimmed, black moustache, he leaned over his daughter now. He shook his finger and delivered the speech Ryz'n knew he had wanted to make all along. Her dad was not much of one to beat around the bush.

"You wanna know where your precious husband is? I'll tell you where he is! He's over in some mass grave in South Viet Nam. Or maybe not. Maybe his bones are lying out in the jungle somewhere, all that's left after the wild animals and vultures have picked his corpse clean! If he comes home at all, it will be in a body bag!" Mrs. Ryan dropped her hands and knitting into her lap, obviously stunned at her husband's anger-inspired, explicit pejorative.

Ryz'n jumped to her feet abruptly, causing her dad to stumble rearwards. He accidentally tripped back over the coffee table, landing with a thud upon his posterior, at his wife's feet. Scruffy yelped and jumped out of the way just before getting squashed. She milled about nervously as if she were trying to understand what was happening among these suddenly insane humans. Nevertheless, that accident, though it startled Ryz'n momentarily, did not preclude her from speaking her mind. In a very few ways, she was like her dad and, under appropriate conditions like these, the flaring of her temper was one of those ways. She felt her eyes flash bright and the vein pop out on her forehead.

"You never liked him, Daddy! I know it, ever since that first cookout when you interrogated him, like you were the, the Spanish Inquisition!" Ryz'n now shook her forefinger at him.

"That's not true, Ryzanna." Once more, he looked to his wife for support, but she remained silent, so he continued in his own defense. "You know, I only wanted what was best for you Honey, then, as well as now."

The shapely but athletic five-foot three-inch, one hundred and five pound mighty mite of a girl stalked around the end of the coffee table, standing over her prone father, glaring at him. Passion burned within her. Again, she shook her forefinger pointedly at her father, who remained seated next to his wife's legs.

"Mark my words: He's coming home. He's coming home alive and he's coming home well! And listen …" She paused to listen to the muffled sounds of distant combat, drifting upstairs from the newlywed's downstairs bedroom. Ryz'n pointed towards the stairwell with one hand and beat her chest with the other, as she addressed her parents, looking them directly in their eyes. "When Nicky gets back here, we're gonna shake this whole place down! Understand?"

The incensed young woman stalked off, heading downstairs. Scruffy liked to follow the action and, right now, Ryz'n was where it's at. The pooch trotted after the angered young woman, who turned back to shout defiantly at her parents, "And if you all don't mind, please excuse me!"

Mrs. Ryan called out to her daughter in a saccharine, condescending manner, "Of course, Dear, but where are you going? You know the storm is coming?"

Her daughter replied angrily, "Well! I feel like FISH!" Ryz'n expectantly watched for her mother's reaction

Apprehension drew a picture upon her mother's furrowed face. "Oh, dear, oh dear!" sighed Mrs. Ryan to herself more than her husband. Ryz'n disappeared down the inside stairs. Her mom raised her voice to reach Ryz'n below.

"Well Baby, make sure you get it OFF THE BOTTOM of the freezer and candle it, PLEASE? Don't forget to CANDLE IT, BEFORE you eat it, Hon?"

Incensed herself now, she berated her husband loudly. "Now Roy, you see what you've done? She's going to eat that raw fish again!" From the foot of the stairs, Ryz'n heard her mother admonish her dad. That didn't happen often. She paused to listen. The sounds of combat had faded from the downstairs bedroom and the airy spaciousness of the resort home enabled Ryz'n to eavesdrop as her parents began to argue. She pivoted on her heel and quietly climbed a couple of stairs, but deftly remained out of her parents' sight. Her dad was speaking now.

"Don't tell me, woman. I did what you wanted. I challenged her. We both know what I said is true. You agree with me. Well, we've all been walking on eggshells around her for the last couple of years. It's high time she faced the facts. Maybe she's upset now. But she'll get over it. UCLA and diving might be the best things for her. She'll meet someone out there, maybe one of them blonde California surfers. Anybody. And she'll forget all about Nick. And we can all forget about him and get on with our lives!" Her dad spat out the last words as though he had had a bad taste in his mouth for sometime and had finally expectorated the cause.

"Forget about him, Roy? That's what you want? To forget about him?" You want to forget about your first son-in-law? The apple of our first born's eye? The father of our only grandchild? How could you be so callous, so disaffected? I'm sorely ashamed of you Roy. I'm, I'm gravely disappointed in you." Her suddenly downcast tone saddened Ryz'n.

"Aw come on Rose. What do you want from me? I liked the boy well enough."

"Oh, really? You know, there's much truth in what Ry said a few minutes ago."

"Well, once I got to know him, Hon, you know I did. I wanna remember him, sure I do, but as a fallen hero, not as a ... returning ghost! You know that, Rose."

Ryz'n felt her dad's tone begged sympathy. She feared her mother might soften. Ryz'n crept up the stairs enough to peep over the parquet floor.

"Sure Honey, I know, I know." Begging a truce, Mrs. Ryan kissed her husband gently, then more passionately. "Suppose we go upstairs now, Dear? But quietly, hmmm?" She smiled a white flag.

Roy relented, briefly returning his wife's grin, as she helped him up off the floor. The pair retired upstairs to their bedroom. On their way up, they called down a good night to Ryz'n, who had hopped quietly down the steps and out of sight, without being noticed.

* * *

Wearing her cuffed forest green and gold, plaid shorts, Ryz'n stood over the concrete, basement utility room sink on the balls of her bare feet, with her legs locked at the knees and spread stiffly apart. Still incensed by the argument with her parents, she cleaned and scaled two, seven to eight-inch herring that she had pulled out of the bottom of their commercial freezer. Her parents amicable reconciliation and early retirement only served to increase her anger. She washed salt off the day-old bloaters, then candled them against the unprotected overhead one hundred-watt light bulb that dangled by a naked wire above the freezer. The fish looked OK. While she waited for them to thaw, she sucked on a bottle of Miller High life that she had withdrawn from the basement refrigerator.

"Body BAG! Humpf!"

She was ticked! Ryz'n took out her frustration by banging on the fish with a wooden mallet normally reserved for cracking open hard shell crab legs. She hoped such whacking would hasten the thawing process. Ryz'n chugged angrily on her beer and paced the smooth finished, cement slab that was the utility room floor. As a Roman Catholic, Ry thought beer was okay, though she preferred wine. She drained her beer and opened a new bottle with Nicky's bottle opener.

They were romancing. She just knew they were romancing all around and above her. Very well, let them romance.

Her new bra was irritating her something fierce, just under the left breast, nearest her sternum, where the wire stem dug into her. The thing had been irritating her all evening. Ryz'n unbuttoned completely her sleeveless, light cotton blouse so she could remove the troublesome bra. She lifted up her breast to inspect the irritated area beneath. The spot was red. There were a couple pimples side by side just coming to heads that were the source of the problem. She fired the bra into the dirty clothes basket near the washing machine. Scruffy Junior's head followed the flight of the flying brazier. The dog's tail wagged innocently. "36!" yelled Ryz'n at no one. *Shoulda got a 38!*

All the swimming, diving, exercising and pull-ups she performed daily had expanded her chest, back and shoulder muscles again. She had known that. "But 38! For cryin' out loud!" She guessed she'd have to bounce back to the larger

size once more. But it always made her feel like a bit of an Amazon since she was barely three inches over five feet. Surely, Sheena would make fun of her when she found out. And her mother would wag her head with concern because "no female on [her] side of the family had been so broad." Ryz'n had thought that buying a larger cup size would accommodate the expanded size of her back and chest muscles, making the 36-inch bra fit fine, but it hadn't worked out that way.

"Pickles!"

But the brazier was new. If she worked it in, hand washed it a couple of times in cold water and stretched it a little, it would be okay. She had gotten some Outer Banks sand up under herself and it had caused the pimples. It wasn't the first time it had ever happened. The wire cup had not helped matters any, either. She promised herself to try one without the wiring. She knew she really did not need to protrude anymore than she did already. While the new bra had bothered her, it really was not the source of her irritability. Her argument with her father resurfaced in her mind now causing Ryz'n to grow impatient.

Tired of waiting, using her left hand, she smashed the fish with the wooden crab mallet so ferociously that Scruffy Junior jumped and yelped as ice and frozen fish bits flew across the room. The dog remained on her paws, pacing nervously around the corner of the utility wash basin. Scruffy knew something was up. Taking a handy, sharp knife, Ryz'n severed the tiny, flimsy spines from the fish heads but left the heads attached to the bodies and then slit the fish backs lengthwise. She removed their spines by reaching into the fish, pinching the bone between her thumb and one edge of a can-opener and yanked the spine out from their necks. Then, she tossed the skeletons into the trash basket. It always amused her to see how many of the ancillary bones she could pull out along with the spine. Those that eluded her, she would eat with the fish. Scruffy went to inspect the wastebasket.

"NO SCRUFFFY! NO!" Ryz'n glared at the dog, which backed away from trash basket, the object of her curiosity. Ryz'n removed the wastebasket to the top of the closed washing machine.

Guzzling her second beer, she drained it more quickly than the first. Still irate, she took another couple bottles of Miller High Life out of the refrigerator. Then, clutching fish in one fist and beer bottles by their necks in the other, she dashed outside into the rain which had begun to fall in earnest. Scruffy followed but halted under the outside, open wooden steps. The storm had begun. *The dog has more sense that I do.* Ryz'n back-tracked to open the basement screen door for the obedient pooch.

"Go on girl, you don't want to get soaked, but I do. Go on, now, go back inside." Ryz'n whistled lowly and Scruffy hustled back inside the basement, as Ryz'n let the screen door slam shut behind the obedient pooch.

With her shirt tail flapping in the breeze, Ryz'n ran up the four flights of outside stairs to the top floor, to the observation deck on top of the house. She sat

on the wooden observation bench in the thunderstorm. The four-story jog did not even faze her. Her wind was undisturbed, though her head was spinning a little from the beer. She was thankful to be in decent shape, as she always was. The last few weeks on the Banks, she had run and swam a few miles each day.

Ryz'n wanted to avoid the world right now and cool down. She had picked an excellent spot to do both. High above all the other sparsely scattered beach resort homes, she could see the world, but, in the total blackness of this storm, there was no one to see her. The old coast road near the ocean was dark, as was the newer highway a hundred yards behind her. And the rain was definitely cooling. Through the occasional gusting winds, she could hear the heavy storm surf crashing against the beach a few hundred yards from her, but the pitch black night prevented her from making out the angry white caps, she knew existed. It was not very bright of her to sit in their crow's nest during a thunderstorm, in what was arguably the highest point around, outside of the dunes the other side of the highway. She knew it, but she didn't care. If God wanted to take her now, so be it! The beer and the four-story sprint had made her boldly light headed. The storm intensified, pelting her with wind and cool, driven wetness.

There were a very few things which could set Ryz'n off like the finale of a Fourth of July fireworks display, similar to display she had demonstrated earlier downstairs. Her father had touched upon the number one item on that list: speaking ill of her husband or, what amounted to the same thing in her loyal mind, speaking disparagingly of his return. Ryz'n protected Nicky fiercely from any sort of gossip, slander or even premature, pessimistic talk of his death. Her parents knew that. Anyone who knew her, knew that. Maybe she had placed her husband up on a pedestal. *But doggone it! Nicky deserves it*. In Ryz'n's mind, her father had crossed the line just now down in the living room. Even her mother, whom Ryz'n loved dearly, could not escape Ryz'n's wrath on that subject. Impervious to the cool black rain which pummeled her, Ryz'n reflected now upon how her mother had raised her more like a sister, than a child, giving her responsibilities as well as allowing her freedoms at a very early age.

Ryz'n had always been her mother's little helper. She had always taken pleasure in serving others. ("A natural helper girl" is what Nicky had dubbed her.) This was especially true after her mom had gone to work to help pay the family's bills. Ryz'n took care of both Sheena and the house, first down at Warner-Robins and then, later up in Crest Hill Heights. That was after her dad had been transferred to Landrews Air Force Base during the summer of '65. Despite the mere fifteen months difference in age between Ryz'n and her kid sister Sheena, their mom always had left Ryz'n in charge and expected her to be the "mother" for Sheena. And she had been. In fact, Ryz'n had served in her role so well that Mrs. Ryan had come to rely more and more heavily upon her elder daughter's assistance as both daughters grew older. This was true not only in her helping care for Sheena, but also in performing all the household chores, as well. Ryz'n's almost unfailing obedience had endeared her to her mother even more,

which further had encouraged Mrs. Ryan to treat Ryz'n, at times, more like a sister than a daughter. The special bond between mother and firstborn had incensed Sheena. Nevertheless, Ryz'n and her look-alike mom had spoiled Sheena, who couldn't cook a meal for herself if her life depended on it. Still, Sheena was her dad's favorite and Ryz'n knew it, just as she was her mother's.

Even though Ryz'n understood she always had been and would be her mother's "Baby," she was still upset with her mom tonight. She knew her dad would never have spoken out like that about Nicky in front of her mom, if he had not had her mother's tacit approval beforehand. Ryz'n realized he had spoken for both of them. And it pained her to know her mother shared her father's sentiments about Nick. The whole scene in the living room was the result of that ominous, brooding tension she had sensed. And it hurt Ryz'n to know her beloved mother was a conspirator in it. The black void around Ryz'n matched the black pitch of her mood. Her thick, wet hair was slowly assuming the feel of a wet mop.

Alone, in front of the observation deck's weathered, wooden bench, the cool, wind-swept rain pelted her angrily. Ryz'n was plenty hot, so the storm felt refreshing. She took no offense to Mother Nature. The rain plastered her thin, flapping, cotton blouse to her right torso, rendering the cloth transparent against her olive skin. However, during her run, her left side had become uncovered by the storm. The pummeling, cool rain had exposed her bare chest now, as the wind blew her shirttail away from her. *Good! Clean out those darned pimples!* Besides there was no one around to notice, absolutely no one.

There were few homes on the Banks at this time and Kill Devil Hills was no different from the other sparsely populated, hardy hamlets on this narrow, oversized sand bar called the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Moreover, in order to preserve their view of the ocean, the Ryans had purchased the immediate, surrounding lots with a very small portion of Ryz'n's record fortune. The couple of scattered homes near them were all dark. Even in broad daylight, the observation deck afforded Ryz'n and her sister enough privacy to conceal their complete sunbathing needs. No, Ryz'n was alone. She was the only one crazy enough to be out in such a storm. She stood up as if to defy the elements for their harshness or her invisible neighbors for their real or imagined curiosity. The enveloping wet blackness was interminable. As she looked out around her, with the sting of the cool liquid pellets upon her skin, Ryz'n felt as though she were floating in a black pitch which was without beginning or end.

Still angry, Ryz'n plopped down on the rain-soaked bench. She felt a cold wetness seep through the bottom of her cotton short-shorts, wetting her whole behind. She liked it. The wet was refreshingly cool. Sitting up here, totally unprotected, in the storm was strange behavior. She knew it was. Such behavior had prompted her mother to make those appointments for her with the psychiatrist. But she felt free and her behavior was no more bizarre than her husband's. *Now that boy could do some weird things.* And he would invite her to behave similarly. Like most of his bizarre suggestions, Ryz'n invariably had

found his advice to be sound—method to his madness. Sooner or later, she would come around unobtrusively to adopt her husband's "tips," as he called them.

Over the ocean, an occasional lightening bolt would penetrate the all encompassing black, stormy night, followed by corresponding thunder. Then Ryz'n would flinch reflexively. Behind the bench was a short, squat cupola, that contained a trap door to the attic. Although painted white with a sharply pitched tin roof in the form of a round topped hexagon, even the cupola appeared dark and grey in the storm. Yet, it stood only about a foot behind the bench.

Ryz'n took the tail of each herring between the thumb and forefinger of each hand. She lay the fish across her inner thighs. She popped the top off one of the beers with her husband's bottle opener hanging from her neck, took a couple of swigs and wedged the other bottle between her legs. Heavy rain knocked the fish down into the sluice that ran between her legs. She had to raise her knees up to keep the darn things from swimming away. Then Ryz'n began the ritual which she had developed into an art form over the last couple of years.

She followed her superstitious game plan methodically for she wanted to insure that she would receive the pot at the end of the rainbow—the pacifying ripples. If all was done as she planned, she hoped to receive the small, silent inward ripples of contentment which she believed were her just reward. As she proceeded, Ryz'n thought about the origins of her bizarre behavior.

It had begun when she had seen the wrong foreign film by accident over the Christmas break during her junior year of high school. She was supposed to have seen the Greek political thriller *"Z",* but when she and her friends arrived at the artsy, uptown Biograph Theatre, they found some English-subtitled, German film playing. The film ended when a newly pregnant working girl saw her lover off to sea. In her gloom and sorrow, the woman went to a restaurant and ate raw fish. At first, the raw fish made her sick, but the young woman persisted until she could stomach the unsavory meal. Soon, the woman grew to like the raw herring and finally, she craved it obsessively, consuming one whole fish after another. Time lapse photography showed her eating many such meals. Her gluttony was ravenous and unrequited.

After Nicky had been in Vietnam a while, Ryz'n recalled the raw fish-eating, working girl from that film. She had decided to give the fish thing a try when her mother's recommended solution to requite Ryz'n's desolate condition had failed. Her mom had related how she had handled such aching loneliness when Ryz'n's dad had shipped out on a tour of duty to Japan for the Air Force. Her mom had just given birth to Sheena, so the family had remained behind, while her dad had gone overseas alone. Some evenings, after her mother had put her two babies down for the night, she said she would take a glass of wine and a good book and sit in a warm bath and read. Her mother had found the exercise to be helpfully relaxing and pleasantly consoling in a mellow sort of way. When she had seen herself in Ryz'n's deep longing for her absent Nick, she suggested Ryz'n try it.

Ryz'n had recognized her condition as a deep, unreachable, yearning that grew outward from the pit of her stomach. She had tried her mom's suggested remedy by sipping some Chablis and digesting a book provided by her former, best friend Allena Larrabee. But Ryz'n could not read that trash. Such filth made her feel dirty inside like she needed to make confession. As weird as this fish deal was, and she knew it was darned strange, she felt no need to confess over it.

Her fish-eating ritual was not something Ryz'n could lay at Nicky's doorstep, either. True, it was because of his absence that she did it. However, it was entirely something she had dreamed up solely by and for herself to help her over the rough spots when he was away. And those rough spots seemed to occur on special downers like the one tonight or about every four to six weeks without such prompting. She was in such a low spot now. Her yearning for Nick was yet unquenched.

Ryz'n paused to throw her head back, squint her eyelids and slurp on her Miller's or, alternately, to extend her tongue simply to drink in the rain, which tumbled in torrents now.

"Ummm, this is better than the bath, Nicky. Invigorating more so than relaxing, but the wet is the same." *I'm weird. I know it.* She shook her head in wonder at her own eccentric behavior. "You never minded me being weird, Nicky. In fact, believe you kinda liked it… But the cool is a pleasant change of pace, don't ya think? Even if it don't relax me quite the way the warm bath does."

Satisfied so far, she proceeded with her superstitious rites. Taking the herring now by the tail, Ryz'n sniffed at the fish. She inhaled deeply and smiled. She was weird. She knew it. Sheena reminded her of that fact several times a day and her mother thought she needed to see a psychiatrist.

"Maybe she's right? Maybe so?" She wondered aloud into the beating rain.

Ryz'n lowered the fish to her lap to ponder the suggestion as if the reality of her odd behavior had struck home for the first time.

"Yeah, right, but hey, Mom and Sheena have their husbands inside. What would they do if the tables were turned? It's been three years and two months, since I last saw Nicky."

"Three years and two months!" she repeated aloud in disbelief and blurted out.

"That's a heckuva long time between drinks, Baby. A darn, long time!"

A gale caught hold of her heavy mop-like hair, laying it out from her like the ears of a Bassett Hound in full gallop. She sighed with exhilaration.

Ryz'n giggled, momentarily breaking the spell of her unique ceremony, because she knew she was strange, out here getting drenched in the middle of a storm, eating raw fish, whole. Sometimes, at times like this, she wondered just what the heck she was doing anyway. Then she remembered the loneliness that drove her and the ripples, the peaceful ripples which waited like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, if she imagined hard enough … if she could just ...

Rain still fell heavily. Ryz'n threw her head back, raised the herring above her face, slowly dropping it into her mouth, biting rapidly, piercing the skin and

drawing out its juices. She repeated the act then devoured the fish whole, as if by rote. Lightening flashed unexpectedly, right before her eyes. Thunder pealed in quick succession.

She saw him! *Oh my Lord! My … sweet Lord …*

Framed in the white light, Nick rose up just before and above her. A second bolt of lightening struck close by. She flinched. *There! There he is again!* It had to be him, for there was no one else for her. The love-starved girl saw her boy-groom just as she had seem him that night, that magical night down at the beaver ponds. Now, he reached out and touched her and his touch was magic! She rocked gently in her wet seat.

Again, lightening flashed abruptly close by, an extended flash with the thunder following quickly behind it. So engrossed in her lover was she that the bride did not jump this time. Instead, she glimpsed Nicky for the spilt seconds of that flash, framed against the briefly but torridly white-lit sky.

"Nicky, Sweetie," she purred.

There he stood, looming larger than life, soaked in rain, but, like she, impervious to the elements. His unique close-set, two-toned eyes melted her from the inside out. Her eyes widened with the slimy, satisfying, slithering sensation of the herring swimming inside of her. She felt her shirttail slap freely but violently about her in the cool gale, while her long, wet, dense locks tugged at her like a soaked flag, snapped by heavily brisk winds. The yellow ribbon she always wore for him amid her thick long curls, although wet and down beaten, held its grasp to her head. The cold rain pelted her unmercifully, running over her face and down her exposed chest and thighs in rushing, cold rivulets. However, these harsh elements were merely background scenery. She barely noticed them. She could hardly believe her good fortune. Seeing him was far, far more than she had expected from this fantastic, late night snack.

It took a couple of minutes but the fish, which had initially felt like a whale within her, ceased to swim down into her stomach, dissolving into her, becoming just a gob with a tail. Like the diminishing fish, the image of her missing husband melted before her eyes also. While she waited for what she hoped would come, Ryz'n closed her eyes once more. Could he resurrect behind her eyelids once again, profiled against a lightening bolt of white for her astonished gaze?

"Ooooh yes!" She resurrected him. But in vain, she reached for him.

At first, like always, Ryz'n had felt like the python that had swallowed a man. However, the gob seemed to disintegrate the farther down it swam, winding its way, until it felt as small as a pebble, passing downward behind her diaphragm. And, as it sometimes did, as she had hoped it would, for reasons beyond her comprehension, she felt her insides become like the flat surface of a pond. This was the beginning for what she hoped. That smooth, tranquil pond surface differed sharply with the intensity of the stinging cold, wet pellets pummeling her slick skin. And that inner peace contrasted favorably with the turmoil of her soul. Yet, somehow the contrast magnified the peaceful calm growing within her.

The pebble sank down, down, striking that mellow surface at a point in the pit of her stomach somewhere deep, deep within the core of her. Her internal pond began to ripple outward in ever widening, concentric circles. She purred long and low, folding in upon herself against the bench. Her sense of him was so real, so severe, she could not even smile. She hung her head back over the bench top, letting her hair dangle behind the bench back and sway with the breeze. In sweet peace, the girl faced the heavens with her eyes closed, letting the rain drown her, permitting it to satiate her in its raw, cool wetness. Ryz'n spread her arms out wide, resting them and her hands upon the top of the bench back. She crossed her ankles and pointed her toes outward. Her rain-soaked bottom slipped forward along the bench's horizontal rain-slicked, wooden slats. Cold, black rain, thick as oil, poured over her face, dripping deliciously off her nose and chin.

Then, the ripples appeared magically, just as she had hoped. They crept outward little by little, spreading out from the pit of her being, radiating soothingly to the farthest points of her body. Yes, she even felt them spread as far as her toes, her fingertips, her wet backside and even to the ends of the kinked, wet mop upon her head. Satisfied, Ryz'n leaned back with a sweet, languid sense of fulfillment, riding the last of the fast fading ripples, as she would the tail end of a wave upon her surfboard. Her upturned face placidly accepted the full brunt of the storm. What a contradiction, she mused—peace within the storm. Then she opened her eyes and mouth widely and burped loud enough and long enough to make any camel jockey proud. She laughed loudly, but stopped abruptly.

They're romancing. I just know they're romancing inside. Very well, let them romance.

Once again she closed her eyes to replicate the lightening, reframing the image of her masculine husband against her eyelids. Again, she reached for him, but again he was not there.

"Ooh! That was for you Nicky! For you, Sweetie!" Ryz'n began to cry softly. "Thank You Lord for permitting me a glimpse, even a glimpse. Oh! He's so different now, older now, no longer a boy but a man, now. I know, I know. He's all shot up, all carved up, God help him. But thank You, thank You Lord just the same, that he's alive and that he's coming home to me, just as You promised. I do believe." She sniffled. "I know You won't let me down. I trust in You for his safe return. You know I do, Almighty Father." She sniffled some more.

Then Ryz'n collected herself. She rose against the storm to stand in the pouring down of rain. Her shirt tail and hair still fluttering wildly, buffeted by the storm. Ryz'n toasted her invisible husband, draining her bottle of beer.

"To you, My Love," she toasted. Ryz'n swapped the empty with the other unopened bottle, still held tightly between her legs. She placed the empty on its side next to her in the crook of the seat back and the bench. The bottle wobbled in the storm, but it did not roll. Then she pried the bottle cap off the unopened beer with the small, flat mini-opener Nicky had given her to keep for him, his opener that hung always around her neck. Her expression stiffened.

The second herring slipped from her lap to the deck, as she stood up, turned shakily into the wind with her legs tightly crossed at the ankles to hold the bottle in place, and lifted both hands outward to the heavens. Her summer, cotton top filled like a sail straining against the ocean storm breeze, lifting completely off her shoulders. Only the crooks of her elbows tethered the blouse. Had she stretched out her hands behind her, she would have lost the sail entirely. Surely, she thought the blouse would have traveled farther than the Wright Brothers first flight, which had occurred not a mile away. There was no need to worry. Ryz'n was alone with her husband, thanks to the combination of fish, beer and storm.

Ryz'n was plenty high now. She staggered against the forceful, heavy winds. At her size and weight, three beers were more than sufficient to make her a little goofy. And she had some difficulty maintaining her balance in the gusting storm breezes. To fortify herself, Ryz'n opened her stance and slugged on the fresh beer, nearly finishing it. She inhaled deeply of the storm that washed her clean.

She looked and felt as though she had just surfaced from the bottom of the ocean. Completely drenched, Ryz'n observed her now-uncurled mop hair and the omnipresent, yellow ribbon, which hung limply over her face and shoulders. She felt as though she were bobbing in the black, stormy sea, with the wind blustering about her in the pitch of night. She let the rain wash over her, drenching her, almost drowning her. It was cool. It was clean. Most importantly, it was wet! Rolling thunder and lightening in the distance did not deter her, as Ryz'n reveled in the cool, rain-drenching wetness. Goose pimples covered her flesh, while the peaceful tingle of the last of the fast-fading ripples vanished into the placid, inner pool from which they had spawned.

Ever since she had known Nicky, but was unable to be with him for any length of time, Ryz'n had craved raw fish. The German film had sown that seed within her psyche, but Nick's absence had made it grow and blossom. Ryz'n enjoyed herring best, but she wasn't particular in a pinch, as long as the fish was raw and about a half foot or a little longer. She sometimes enjoyed consuming the fish in a warm shower or, preferably, a bath, along with a bottle of Chablis.

Ryz'n knew people, that is family and friends, thought she was weird, especially after Sheena had caught Ryz'n in the act once and blabbed all. That had occurred down in their off-campus cottage at M&L. Sheena had never let Ryz'n live down that incident. However, since Nick had been gone so long, Ryz'n could care less about Sheena's teasing or tale-bearing.

Every six weeks or so, when all else had failed, when Ryz'n felt prayer had left her empty, or at times like this tonight when anger so overrode her reason, or when she was so desperately lonely, feeling so low, so bummed out, Ryz'n didn't care what anyone else thought. On such rare occasions, she sought and usually found solace in those quiet, peacefully calming, ripples of contentment, which the whole ritual most times delivered. It seemed the more desperately lonely she was, like tonight, the more likely the ripples were to surface.

Of course, those tiny ripples failed to stand up to the real deal. They were merely tiny, quiet, placid ripplelets, small compensation for her deep longing. And, more importantly, they were nothing she would have to make confession over. Eating raw fish to help surmount her longing for her missing husband most certainly was weird, but Ryz'n could feel no guilt over, none whatsoever. Three years and two months were indeed a long time between drinks for a young woman like herself, who always had enjoyed so very much intimacy with her husband. After all, the Good Lord in all His wisdom, had created man and woman to be together, united in holy matrimony. Ryz'n heartily approved. At the tender age of seventeen, she and Nick had bought in to that plan whole-heartedly.

The stormy June night on the Outer Banks of North Carolina began to prick at Ryz'n's conscience however. Far out of character for her, she had lost control earlier with her dad. Partly placated now, Ryz'n realized she had gone too far, despite her Dad's provocation in a matter that was dearest to her heart She would have to apologize. It was the only right thing to do. Yet, she did not want to think about making humble apologies right now. There was time enough for that tomorrow. Right now, she hoped to see her husband again, while she yet sensed his mysterious presence.

The herring and beer had helped Ryz'n to fill the hole that had yearned, aching deep within the pit of her stomach. Usually, one herring was enough to fill the void. But a real downer like this one tonight was definitely a two herring night. *Absolutely!* She picked up the other fish, which had slid from the sluice in her lap down to the drenched, wood planking beneath her feet. Dripping wet with rain but with gusto, she resumed her wet, love seat upon the wooden observation bench to repeat her unusual ceremony.

In her own inimitable way, Ryz'n had no doubt she was loving Nick. "Very well, let us love again, Sweetie." She whispered softly, sincerely, into the tempest, staring into the black teeth of the storm for him. Ryz'n leaned her neck and head back over the bench so that her long thick locks once more hung loose, swaying behind the bench by rain-driven gusts. She reveled in the persistent storm washing over her and squinted her eyes, peering into the wet blackness.

"Come to me now, Nicky--once more for me, Honey." She saluted the stormy sky with her beer bottle in one hand and her half-foot long herring in the other.

"They're inside together downstairs, all of them. But so are we together, in the wind and the rain, unhidden before Our lord, just the two of us up here on the roof unafraid. We are, aren't we Sweetie?" She leaned back against the bench, rocking gently on her drenched, wooden seat. Ryz'n raised the herring high, pinching its tail between her thumb and forefinger, tilted her head back and closed her eyes and let the fish swim into her. The frame of white lightening appeared against the black insides of her eyelids. *Again!* And there he was, once more, her boy-groom, just as she recalled him. Ryz'n purred.

"Yes, My Love. Come to me. And be with me again, My Baby".

He came.

~ Chapter 3: And A Hint ~

Although hurricane season perhaps had not begun officially, the tempest had raged nonetheless. Something less than a tropical depression, the storm had knocked out power and phone lines in its path. The next day, Ryz'n learned the extent of the damage at her parent's place. There were some missing trash cans, a broken window and some missing shingles. Access to the Oregon Inlet bridge was blocked due to a traffic accident that had occurred in the wake of the storm at the east end of the bridge. Likewise standing water at high tide blocked the bridge to Manteo. Bryson had to drive a hundred miles south out of his way, taking the ferry down the Banks, to reach the kids' summer football camp, which he helped run for M&L's coaching staff near Lexington, Virginia.

The Ryans extended their leaves a few days longer to help clean up their place and make external repairs after the upheaval. The Ryan sisters took advantage of the situation to get in some great surfing in the aftermath of the storm. Ryz'n was well aware there was no better surfing on the East Coast than on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Just before or after a big blow like the last one the Ryan's had just experienced, the ocean waves could sometimes reach above ten feet high.

By Thursday, however, it was past time for the family to return home, back to Crest Hill Heights, Maryland. The Ryan's had promised some friends from Mrs. Ryan's job at the Naval Research Laboratory (NRL), the use of the beach house for a long weekend that Thursday through Tuesday. Then, the kids planned to return for another long weekend of their own, with their parents joining them later to celebrate Ryz'n's twenty-second birthday on Sunday, the twenty-second. Overall, Ryz'n, like her parents and sister, were satisfied with their little family vacation, even though they had had some rocky moments. Apologies had been exchanged and accepted. And so, the storm had quelled within the Family Ryan as it had upon the Banks themselves.

Ryz'n and Sheena drove home together in Ryz'n's open convertible Starfire. They followed their parents who had driven down in the station wagon with Scruffy Junior. The weather was delightful. It was a glorious June day. On the way, the sisters discussed their extended stay at the beach resort, including Ryz'n's tiff with their dad. Their little vacation had begun after the family had witnessed Ryz'n graduate from the private and prestigious Madison & Lee University in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. The girls naturally bantered about the band's chances of catching on with another label, since Halo Platters had dropped their option. With Double J's great baritone vocals and his singularly incredible guitar-playing talent newly in fold, Ryz'n and Sheena believed they had more than a good shot to hook up with another label. Ryz'n only hoped J.J. had not been turned off by her dad's gruff ouster of him and the

other band members from the Ryan's beach home ten days ago. Because with the undiscovered, precocious Double J now playing lead guitar for them, the sisters believed *Good Rockin' Tonight (GRT)* could top the charts again.

Their trip home was uneventful, though they made the customary stop at Farmer Kemp's peanut plantation near Wakefield, Virginia to drop off some chocolates. Ryz'n always tried to stop by his place, either on the way down or back, to provide the kind gentleman with his favorite confectionary. Some five years back, the tall, lean farmer had pulled her and Nicky out of his muddy peanut fields, after Ryz'n's old Monza had suffered a tire blowout on highway 460. Ryz'n had been driving, when she lost control of the vehicle and ran off the road. The car had been stuck up to its axle in the muddy peanut field. The kindly farmer had stopped his chores to pull them out of his muddy field with his tractor and then he had changed their tire for them.

Wearing a cast on his left leg at the time as a result of an accident on the baseball diamond, Nicky had been pretty helpless. However, having come to know Farmer Kemp's kind nature as she did, Ryz'n understood he would have changed her tire, even if Nicky had not been incapacitated. When Ryz'n had apologized for tearing up his field. The kindly farmer won her heart when, rather than being angry, he had told her, they had planned on using that front section for peanut butter, anyway.

That summer of 1970 had been her first with Nicky, back when he was in the leg cast. Ever since then, she had brought the chocolates. Usually, Mr. Kemp would invite them in for a bite to eat, but today he was busy with his crop. He knew Nicky's story and never failed to ask if there wasn't "any news about our boy." When there was none, he'd reply, "Well, no news is good news. Ellen and I will keep praying. You can rely on that. And remember now Miss Ryzanna, the Lord derived more satisfaction from bringing home the one lost lamb than He did the other ninety and nine which were with Him always". The kind farmer always brightened Ryz'n's hope.

* * *

Back home, in Crest Hill Heights, the family had to replenish the refrigerator after their absence. Ryz'n had made a pit stop and dumped Sheena off at home, in her parent's sand-colored brick rambler. She intended to fill her car with gas after the six-hour homeward trip, when her mother asked Ryz'n to stop also at the grocery and liquor stores. After some three weeks, it seemed as though they were out of everything. As Ryz'n drew on her wraparound FosterGrants, which she wore almost everywhere, she told her mother she'd bring home the provisions on her return from the service station. She had tied her hair back in a pony-tail with the yellow-gold ribbon she wore for Nicky, She dressed plainly in a dark brown, cotton skirt and a yellow, sleeveless, back-zipped cotton blouse.

Ryz'n drove a long mile down Stuyvesant Street and Coolbrook Drive, past the twenty year old red brick homes with their tall shade trees, past the faded yellow-bricked shopping center and on to the Gulf Station at the intersection of Veer

Avenue and Fairgrass Street, near the end of Stuyvesant Mall. The balmy day lifted her spirits. She liked to trade at the station, owned by Mr. Hawks and Mr. Gasch, two men who knew Nicky well. They had coached Nicky in boy's club sports for years. Mr. Gasch had also coached Nicky in American Legion Baseball. Ryz'n always received a warm reception from them as well as from their employees. She also favored their station over others, because their mechanic Kenny was a whiz, who specialized in maintaining older model convertibles, like her powder blue '61 Starfire and Nick's '63 Pontiac Bonneville. Although she and Nick could afford any car on the road, they preferred the older, big convertible models. The '61 Starfire convertible was one of only 7,604 production models made. The 1963 midnight blue Pontiac Bonneville, Nick had loaned to Bryce. Each car had less than twenty-five thousand miles. Kenny insured the cars were always in excellent running order.

The Gulf Station was a red brick affair with three garage doors and a low sloping, shingle roof that blended in with the homes in the area. A short cupola with a rooster weathervane on its crest served as its distinguishing characteristic. Behind the station was the seven-year old Stuyvesant Mall. To the east lay Veer Avenue, or Route 5, a four lane highway which swathed from the District of Columbia down into the bowels of Southern Maryland. The intersection of Coolfont and Veer required a traffic signal. The Royal George Motor Inn lay on the other side of Veer. Across Coolfont, stood the six-story Stuyvesant Medical center professional building made of beige brick and surrounded by an asphalt parking lot. To the west, the route Ryz'n had just traversed, stood the brick ramblers and duplex homes of Crest Hill Heights and her in-laws home.

Steve Gasch, Mr. Gasch's elder son, was sitting outside the door to the gas station office. He leaned back against the brick wall on two chair legs. Steve wore dark blue mechanic's pants and light blue shirt with his name embroidered in red inside a white oval, over his heart. When he saw Ryz'n pull in, he smiled broadly, leaned the chair forward, and rose quickly to his feet to serve her.

"Ry! How ya doin', Honey?"

Steve had graduated high school with Ryz'n and Nick, although Steve had not graduated exactly in the top ten per cent of the class. Fact was, Steve had been lucky to graduate at all. He wasn't dumb. He just didn't care for school. Steve was a good looking, phlegmatic kid with sandy brown hair and eyes, who was always "kool." Affable and easy going, in some ways, his phlegmatic manner reminded Ryz'n a lot of Nick. Ryz'n knew that Steve knew that, as well. Steve always acted like her big brother, even though he was only six weeks older than she. Ryz'n legged out of the Starfire to greet him. They hugged each other warmly. A married man with a brand new, little Steve at home, Steve let her hold the hug a few seconds longer than usual. They both knew she was a lonely girl.

"Steve! I'm doin' well. Ya know, OK." She drew off her shades, allowing him to see her more clearly.

"Sure you are. Ya look terrific, Ry, just terrific."

"Thanks Stevie, I try. How are you and your young family getting' along?"

"Great, really great. But I ain't gettin' much sleep, ya know?"

"I can imagine." She chuckled.

She could imagine? She imagined all the time what it would have been like had she not lost Nick's baby through negligence down at the beaver ponds almost four years past. Steve interrupted that depressing memory.

"Well Ry, what can I do for ya today? Fill it up? Check under the hood?"

"Hunh? Oh, sure. That'd be great Steve."

"Premium?"

"You bet, Stevie."

As Steve went about his business, The elder Gasch came out of the station office. Mr. Gasch was the same height as his elder son, about her own dad's size, but more roly-poly. He looked like he could have been a handsome mobster in the movies with his suave good looks. In real life, he was an ex-cop, a recently retired D. C. police detective who, in part, because of his good looks and suave demeanor, had been assigned a highly visible security role during the recent Congressional Watergate hearings. He had always stood in a position behind the witnesses as they testified on the Capitol floor and, as such, had been seen across the country by millions of viewers during that entire real life soap opera.

"Ryzanna! How the hell are you, girl?"

"Just fine Mr. Gasch? How are you? How's business?"

"Both of us are great. In fact, we're thinking about buying another station over off of Auth Road, over in Sunnyside."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it. Is Kenny gonna stay here or go over to the other station?"

"Don't know yet. Hey, got some good news for you, maybe."

"Oh, what is it? Can always use good news."

"Well, Chris said he saw a guy who looked a lot like Nicky on TV the other day." Ryz'n stopped watching Steve give her car the once over and zeroed in on the elder Gasch.

"What? No! Where?"

"Some ball game he was watching on TV. Wait a second I'll get him. He's in the garage with Kenny." Mr. Gasch turned and yelled toward the garage Hey Chris! Chris! Get your butt out here boy." The spitting image of Mr. Gasch, about thirty years younger, meandered out of the garage wiping sweat from his brow and grease smears from his hands.

"Yeah, what's up, Dad?"

"Ryz'n Sheeboom's here. Tell her what you told me the other day."

Chris was sixteen, an athlete and well muscled for his age. His eyes lit up when he saw Ryz'n.

"Ryz'n. Hello!" The youth walked briskly towards her.

"Hello, Chris!" Ryz'n smiled somewhat coquettishly at the teenager to watch him blush. Chris obliged.

"How are you? Your Dad says you saw something on TV the other day."

"Yeah, yeah, I did." The boy was self-conscious, but he proceeded with his tale, as he wiped sweat from his brow with his right forearm because his hands were too grease-smeared. "Well gee, I, I was watching this ball game see, and all of a sudden there's this guy pitchin'. And, gee, he looks like Nicky, only a little different." Steve had finished up with the Starfire.

"Your battery was a little low on water Ry, so I added some."

"Oh thank you, Steve," she smiled appreciatively at him. "Now, what was that Chris? What do you mean, he looked 'like Nicky, only a little different?'" Steve sauntered over to listen to his kid brother's story.

"Well, he looked a little older, ya know. But he threw like Nicky! Same motion, everything. He never smiled, though. I remember Nicky was always smiling when he played ball, grinning actually, like he knew something the other team didn't. Know what I mean?" The boy stopped to look at Ryz'n, who nodded and smiled anxiously.

"Well, go ahead, Boy. Tell her the rest," urged Chris's father, impatiently.

Chris took a deep breath and refocused. "Well, this guy, the one who looked like Nicky? Was kind of messed up a bit. He was scarred up, here." Chris ran his fingers along the right side and back part of his neck. "And he was missing the top half of his ear. You could see it clear when he took his cap off to brush his hair back, out of his face. Ya know?" Chris cut an imaginary line across the top of his ear with his fingers, indicating the exact location of the deformity.

Ryz'n's mouth dropped open, as her eyes also widened. She covered her mouth with her left hand, as she was prone to do when she was astonished. Then she seized Chris's right hand, the hand he had just used to indicate the area covered by scars.

"Which ear Chris, was it the left or the right?"

Chris stopped to think. He had just rubbed the right side of his neck, but that had been wrong.

"It was ... It was his first base ear," he quipped triumphantly.

Formerly a gifted softball pitcher and catcher, Ryz'n knew what the kid meant. "Then, it was his left ear, right Chris?"

"Hunh?"

"Your left ear is towards first when you face the batter, isn't it?"

Chris, a pitcher himself, replied as the light went on. "Yeah, yeah that's right. I meant left."

"Oh, Sweet Jesus!" cried Ryz'n in praise. "It's got to be him!"

Mr. Gasch intervened again. "Tell her about the fingers, Son."

"Oh yeah! The announcers were talkin' about his screwball. They said he could throw such a good screwball because of his fingers. They got a close up of his grip on the ball. And he was missing these parts of his fingers. On his RIGHT hand!" His emphasis on the word "Right" made sure there was no mistake, this time. Chris had indicated the top two joints of the ring and pinky fingers were

missing. Ryz'n clapped her hands together, leaning forward so quickly that the small gold crucifix hanging from the fine gold necklace popped out of her blouse between the two top, unhooked buttons. Ryz'n had dropped all pretense of kool. She was jubilantly ecstatic.

"God in heaven! Thank You Lord, thank You Sweet Jesus!

Chris, what was his name?" she asked impatiently. "What ball club is he playing for?"

"I dunno Ryz'n. I was just flippin' through the channels. They said his name, but I don't remember. It wasn't Sheeboom! That's for sure. I'da remembered that. But it was the College World Series on the Wide World of Sports. That, I remember. Texas was one of the teams ... They won the game. But I don't know who the other team was, some little school, I think. Believe they had a 'P' on their caps. I think. But the guy that looked like Nick was on that team, not Texas. And he came in to pitch from center field in the eighth." Chris nodded with triumph at his recollection.

Ryz'n thought that's when she had been watching the game and left to go parasailing! She mentally flogged herself a couple of lashes, then quit abruptly. This was not the time for self-flagellation.

"GOD BLESS YOU, CHRIS!" The girl hugged the sweaty, greasy kid, kissing him profusely on both cheeks. "Thank you. ALL OF YOU. I gotta run. 'Bye-bye." Chris beamed proudly.

Steve called out somewhat concerned, "Ry, Don't ya wanna pay for the gas?" Mr. Gasch pulled Steve's arm down, shaking his head.

"Oh yes, yes. Here's a twenty. Keep the change, Stevie" cried Ryz'n anxiously. Ryz'n extracted a twenty dollar bill from her purse, tossed it to Steve and pulled out of the station on two wheels, as she made a U-turn, causing traffic to part for her, as angry motorists blew their horns.

Steve looked blankly at the twenty in his hand and then at his dad.

"She's seventy-five cents short."

Mr. Gasch placed an arm around each of his sons' shoulders. The Gasches watched the bantam of a girl, with the Wonder Woman figure and the gold ribbon streaming from her hair, tear down the street in the direction from which she had come.

"Well now, I believe she's good for it, Steven. Besides, that little girl is not short right now. She's on cloud nine." Both boys looked at their father and nodded, before they turned back to watch the tail fins of the Starfire disappear down the street out of sight.

* * *

Ryz'n rushed into her childhood home nearly in a tizzy. Scruffy Junior came scrambling from the back of the house, but Ryz'n had no time to play. She brushed Scruffy aside, as she surveyed the room for the ever present newspapers, which to her sad disappointment were nowhere in sight. She glanced frantically

around the living room. To her right, she ran her eyes over the forest green sofa and the beige hassock next to it. The oblong glass, coffee table top in front of the sofa was bare but for a couple of magazines. The lamp stand and table between her parents' his and her brown leather recliners at the far end of the room held only the TV Guide. Ryz'n cried out:

"Where's the Sunday Sports section? Where are the newspapers?" Scruffy yelped excitedly. "Quiet Scruffy. Shhh!"

"What is it, My Baby? What's wrong?" Mrs. Ryan came out of the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron.

"I gotta have the Sunday Sports section, Mother. Where is it? Do you know?"

"Well, I don't know, Honey. Your father had all the newspapers over there." She pointed to the corner, behind her dad's easy chair, just outside the dining room alcove. Ryz'n rushed across the plush, sculpted forest green carpet to her dad's chair, finding almost three weeks worth of newspapers wedged between the chair and the living room wall and under the side window curtain. The anxious young woman fell to her knees next to the lamp stand, combing through the daily papers, one by one.

"Honey, did you get the groceries already? That was mighty fast ... Ryz'n?"

Ryz'n chose not to reply, as her eyes scanned the newspapers feverishly. She found last Sunday's paper, folded and unopened. Hurriedly, she flipped through it quickly, locating the large sports section. Saturday had been a big sports day with much news to report. Ryz'n found what she was looking for on the inside back page with the race results and other miscellaneous scores. There were two box scores under the heading College World Series. South Carolina against—Nah, that wasn't it. Here it was, Texas against ... Peppermount? *What the heck is a Peppermount?* She had never heard of the school, had never caught the school's name on the tube the other day. She scanned her fingers across the batteries underneath the box score: Madrigal, Jones (4), Kaine (6), Rasmussen (7), Stickler (8) and Danielson. Stickler?" She ran her left forefinger along the names in the box score batting order. Batting third was "Strickler cf." Which was correct "Strickler" or "Stickler?"

"RYZ'N"!

"Hunh?"

"Where are the groceries, My Baby?" asked her mom with an edgy tone.

"Groceries? Uh, I dunno. At the store, I guess. Where's the dictionary?" Ryz'n's tone was close to desperate.

"The dictionary is right over there where it has always been. Over there in the bookcase beside the coat closet." Her mother stood motioning with the kitchen hand towel towards the bookcase, then placed her hands akimbo. "I'm more concerned with the groceries, Ryzanna. We're out of everything. What is wrong with you, My Baby?"

Uncharacteristically ignoring her mother, Ryz'n jumped up, leaving the newspapers where they lay, which, also, was very unlike her. She was a very

neat, some, like her sister, would say overly neat, girl by nature. She hopped across the room to the short, dark cherry wood bookcase that stood between the TV and the front door. "There's plenty of fish in the freezer downstairs," she reminded her mother absently. Then to herself, she whispered under her breath, "Webster's, Webster's, Webster's." She extracted the reference book from the top shelf, flipping to the back of the dictionary to look up colleges and universities. She opened the dictionary and rested it upon the top frame of the three foot-high case. "P's, 'P's. Here we go, Pacific, Pan American, Pennsylvania, Pepper—Peppermount? Malibu, California est. 1935? Be darned!"

Ryz'n ran back across the room past her gawking mother, through the dining room to the olive-hued wall phone next to the open swing door to the kitchen.

"Operator?"

"Yes, this is the Operator. How may I help you?"

"Yes, I'd like to place a long distance call to Malibu, California, please."

"Whom do you wish to call in Malibu, Miss?"

"Umm, that would be the Athletic Department at Peppermount University."

"Very well. Hold please, while I place that call." Scruffy Junior padded into her crib in the kitchen to observe the proceedings from a comfortable vantage point. Her short tail drooped down between her legs.

The phone rang several times. Ryz'n knew Malibu was three hours behind the East Coast. It would be a little after one out there.

"What's this all about?" asked Mrs. Ryan slightly perturbed.

"Well—"

A female voice answered in a sing-song fashion. "Peppermount University, Admissions Office, Nancy speaking. May I help you?"

"Yes, Nancy I'm calling long distance from Maryland and I thought I had been given the Athletic Department."

"In the summer, all calls are routed through the Admissions Office, Ma'am. With whom do you wish to speak in the Athletic Department, Ma'am?"

"The baseball coach, please."

"Oh, I'm afraid he's not in his office today Ma'am, but he should be back tomorrow. I can leave a message, if you like."

"Well, is there anyone there who might be affiliated with the baseball team?"

"Hold on a second, please." Ryz'n heard Nancy's now distant voice—"Janet, have all the baseball players gone home? I thought there were a couple still on campus?" There was a pause then the speaker returned to the phone.

"Yes Ma'am. I understand there are a few local members of the team over in the training room. Would you like me to transfer you?"

"Yes, yes. Please do."

"All right, hold please while I make that transfer." Ryz'n held the line and started to speak with her mother when a squeaky, tenor male voice answered the phone. Ryz'n held up a forefinger and nodded politely to her mother, as Ryz'n picked up the voice on the other end of the line. Mrs. Ryan's opened mouth

closed without speaking. Ryz'n's gold cross pendant dangled against her chest, refracting the late afternoon sunlight, which was streaming in through the uncovered, west dining room windows, against the wall and ceiling.

"Yeah?"

"Hello?"

"Yeah?"

"Excuse me, but I was trying to reach the Athletic Department of Peppermount University?"

"Yeah, you got it. What can I do for ya?" squawked a squeaky male voice.

"Well." Ryz'n cleared her throat. "I was hoping I could speak with the baseball coach, but I understand he's not available. Is that correct?"

"No he ain't here right now. I work with the team. Somethin' I can do for ya?"

"Well, perhaps there is. To whom am I speaking, please?"

"Booger."

"Booger? Is, is that it? Is that what you said?" Ryz'n's mother became more interested in her daughter's conversation, taking a couple steps towards her through the dining area.

"Yeah! Booger Phelps. I'm the part-time trainer and I, ah hem, assist the coaching staff in other areas, too." The pitch of his voice lowered noticeably.

From the background, through the phone line, Ryz'n heard loud guffaws. Someone shouted, "He's the flippin' manager, for cryin' out loud! Coach leaves for a few days and now the runt thinks he's Casey Stengel!" Then, more muffled, Ryz'n heard a squeaky response.

"Shut up you guys. Coach left me in charge, didn't he? I'll handle this."

"Yes Ma'am, what can I—"

There was a loud crash and the bells on the phone rang on the opposite end of the line. Ryz'n jerked the receiver from her ear and thought she had lost the connection until she heard an irate squawk—

"You sons o' bitches! You can hurt a guy like that. Now get outta here!"

Ryz'n spoke up, "Hello, what was that?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Ma'am. I wasn't talkin' to you. It was just these a-hol—I mean, I'm sorry, Ma'am, really. Coach won't be back until tonight or tomorrow. Maybe I can help ya."

"Well, I tell you, Booger, I'm looking to contact an individual who I believe plays baseball there at Peppermount."

"Yeah? What's his name? I know all the ballplayers."

"Well, I'm not sure. It's either Stickler or Strickler?"

"Strickler? Yeah! Dix. He plays for us."

"Well, could you give me a number for him? I really need to talk to him."

Booger's voice was muffled again. "It's another one of them chicks that wants Dixie's number." Ryz'n heard him speak in falsetto, in a vain attempt to mimic her to those who were with him on the other end of the line "She says, she 'really needs to talk to him.'" He laughed and Ryz'n heard the others join him in

laughter. Then the voice reappeared in its natural squawky tone, "Look lady, I suppose you saw Dix on TV last Saturday and you're his long lost sweetheart or sister or something. You know, we've had a zillion calls like that. Now why don't you—"

Ryz'n was angry and she cut him off.

"I'm his wife, darn it! And I want to talk to him now! Please put him on the line, immediately!"

"His wife?!?! Look lady—Hey, what are ya doin'? Hey, Mooney?"

"Gimme that phone!" This was a different voice, a little deeper, but still a tenor, thought Ryz'n as she listened intently. "OK, Honey. Now what did you say your name was?"

"I didn't, but it's Ryzanna Sheeboom!"

"Sure, sure I remember you. My wife, yeah right. Uh, look Honey, suppose we meet at this little motel I know, up the coast a ways, where we can get, you know, get reacquainted? Just like old times Baby, whaddaya say?"

"I don't know who you are but you sure aren't my husband, so put him on the line please."

"How do you know I ain't him?"

Because you got a lousy tenor voice and Nicky's a baritone. When he speaks it sounds like two bullfrogs fighting to get out of his throat at the same time!"

The voice on the other end was muffled again. "Dang, this one knows what Dix sounds like." The voice spoke clearly into the receiver again. "Look lady, I don't now what kind of game you're playin' and I don't care. But Dix left for the summer like the rest of the guys. The only ones of us left here now are rehabbin.' So good-bye!" The receiver slammed down loudly into Ryz'n's ear. She was repulsively astonished.

"Why, that's the most arrogant, rude, insolent individual I've ever had the displeasure to speak with!"

Mrs. Ryan had overheard Ryz'n's side of the conversation. Before she could speak, Sheena entered the dining room, coming from her bedroom at the opposite end of the house.

"What's all that hub-bub about? What's going on? You got the groceries, already?"

"No, *forget* the groceries!" Ryz'n had no patience for talk of mundane items like groceries. She dialed Information. "I'm not goin' for groceries. I'm huntin' for husbands! Yes, Information? Please give me booking for Blue Skies Airlines ... Yes, please do. Yes, I'll hold."

"What is this all about, Ryzanna?" her mother demanded. Ryzanna covered the mouthpiece and held it under her chin.

"They've put me on hold. I think I've found Nicky. Chris Gasch saw him on TV last Saturday. In that very game, you all dragged me away from! I knew I should have stayed to watch it. I had a feeling about it. I—Yes, Blue Skies?

"Yes, I'd like to fly to LAX as soon as possible. Could you tell me what flights you have available? Six fifty-two tonight out of Dulles? Arrives in LAX at nine forty PDT. Unh-hunh? OK, hold on a second, please." Again, Ryz'n covered the phone's mouthpiece with her left hand. "Well, Sheena do you want to come with me for the weekend out to sunny California or do you want to stay here and go grocery shopping?" Ryz'n was beaming from ear to ear. She was ebullient.

Sheena caught her sister's buoyant spirit. "Well, lemme see, grocery shoppin'?" She pretended to hold something in her left hand, palm up, and weigh it, "or sunny California?" She formed the same pretense with her other hand, weighing her imaginary options in the balance. "Guess I'll have to go with sunny California." She grinned as well.

"Yes, make that two seats, first class to Los Angeles ... No, one way. Yes, thank you very much. The name is SHEEBOOM, Mrs. Nicholas Sheeboom. That's right, the very one in the same. Yes. Thank you, goodbye." Ryz'n hung up the phone with a grin that ran from ear to ear.

Mr. Ryan came in through the kitchen from the back porch wearing his red and blue plaid Bermuda shorts, a white tee shirt and his favorite red, white and blue golf hat to ask what was happening. He looked like a walking American flag. Ryz'n explained the whole thing to all of them in great detail. When she had concluded, she waited for a positive, enthusiastic response from her family. However, none was forthcoming. Only Sheena sympathized. She patted the back of her sister's hand and smiled encouragingly.

"Well, y'all think what you want, but I'm going after my MAN! Sheena, you had better hurry if you're coming with me, because we don't have a lot of time. Mother, I'm sorry about the groceries, really but this is just too, too important." After the girls had packed, Ryz'n thought to call Bill Fankell, Nick's uncle, who lived in Buena Park, California, not far from Knott's Berry Farm. Bill, as he always did, offered to open his house to her as well as his 'round the clock, personal chauffeur services.

Mrs. Ryan approached her daughter with a tear in her eye. "Go, go after him, Ry Your faith has always been so strong." Her mother sniffed back her tears, as she hugged her daughter and whispered into her ear. "Your faith has sustained you, just like when you stayed up all night praying for Scruffy Senior to come home that time she ran away. Remember, Dear?"

"Yes, Mother. I remember."

"And darned if Scruffy wasn't whimpering outside the backdoor the next morning, scratching to get in." With both of her arms, Mrs. Ryan squeezed her daughter tightly. "You go Ryzanna. Take Sheena with you. And don't worry about the groceries. You've always been the faithful one." Ryz'n turned her head to kiss her mother's wet cheeks.

"And it's that faith that sustains me, Mother."

"Ahhh, Bull Shine!" The Ryan girls looked to the head of the household with shocked disapproval.

Stubbornly angry, Mr. Ryan refused to drive his daughters to the airport, declining to participate in these shenanigans. He warned Ryz'n against "being disappointed again." If things did not work out as she had planned, as they had not, so often in the past, he would not be responsible. He strongly suggested she let her L. A. based PI run down the long distance lead, but Ryz'n complained that she didn't trust him. She said the only way to insure the matter is handled properly, "is to track it down myself." Thankfully, one thing tempered his resentment, their longtime next-door neighbor Allena Larrabee Yikes.

As the Ryan girls were leaving, the Larrabees came over with their younger daughter Allena, one of Ryz'n's closest and longest friends, and her husband Matt Yikes, toting their three-year old son Mikey. They confirmed to Ryz'n and her family what Chris Gasch had told Ryz'n earlier. They also had seen the Wide World of Sports broadcast last Saturday. Ryz'n drove herself and Sheena to Dulles in the powder blue Starfire. The sisters had to fight through and around the DC rush hour, but they made it. By seven p. m., the ravishing Ryan sisters were taxiing down a Dulles runway, filled with hope for what lay ahead.

~ Chapter 4: Remembrances ~

Soon after the girls were seated in the spacious first class section of the Boeing 727 jet airliner, they could feel the power of the big bird beneath them, lifting them off the ground. The diminutive Ryan sisters had ample room to stretch their legs amid the tall, cushioned blue seats and the hard plastic, beige décor of the airliner's first class cabin. With an empty seat between them, Ryz'n glanced to her left towards her sister. Sheena's attention was directed through the double-paned, pressurized passenger window.

With her left hand, Ryz'n reached up to channel the overhead, cool air blower full blast down towards her lap. Then she gripped the stainless steel arms of the first class aisle seat tightly and settled into it. Attired in her snug, single-breasted, blue silk skirt-suit, she wiggled her fanny into the firm cushion, bracing for takeoff. Ryz'n could both feel and hear the engine's revv stronger and louder, gently rocking the cabin, as the captain turned the plane down the runway.

With her eyes closed, Ryz'n laid her head straight back against the upright seatback. Her spiked, high heeled shoes lay flat against the blue-carpeted floor. Firm cushions supporting her taut body provided a sense of luxury, relaxing her a little. Even so, she sat customarily erect, shoulder blades and butt pressed hard into the seatback. Her hands and forearms rested upon the arm rests while her fingers wrapped around the ends of those rests. The pronounced natural, inward curve of lower back remained free and clear of any seat cushion contact. The jet gathered momentum as it hurtled down the runway, vibrating all within the cabin.

As she bumped along, Ryz'n reveled in the run. Takeoffs had always been her favorite part of a flight. Yes, takeoffs could be simultaneously exhilarating and soothing, if her imagination was running as well as those loudly whirring jet engines. This evening, everything was hitting fully on all cylinders. After lift-off, Ryz'n laid her head back against the head cushion and closed her eyes briefly.

The big jet airliner propelled her forward through the atmosphere above the renown Virginia horse country and Ryz'n relaxed. Melting into her seat, she drifted back to her first flight with Nick on their second honeymoon, when they had flown to the Caribbean. She recalled how the two of them had estimated their budget down to the penny. She remembered how, when they had finished figuring eighteen months outward, they would have had only four hundred dollars left, after deducting expenses from a year and half's worth of anticipated toil and labor. Ryz'n chuckled as she recalled Nick pulling on his wraparound shades, wearing them on the airplane, even as she did now. When she asked him why? He had said, he needed them to protect him from the glare. When she had asked him, "What glare?" He had said it was, "The glare from our future."

Then, minutes later as if on cue, their future had arrived in the person of one bald, rotund, "Honest Abe" Saperstein of little known Sable Records. Mr. Saperstein had stumbled down the aisle of the plane purposefully to introduce himself to them. He had heard Nick singing and playing the harmonica at the request of the other passengers earlier on the festive holiday flight. He said Nick's musical gifts had impressed him That chance meeting turned into a profitable one for all concerned.

Nick had been right on that score, financially, anyway. They had become millionaires practically overnight thanks to the lucrative deal the generous Mr. Saperstein had offered them. The deal had been really more like a partnership. So, when *GRT's* first two albums both almost went double gold within sixteen months of each other, the royalties had just flowed in. Then, unexpectedly, Mr. Saperstein had sold Sable Records to Halo Platters and a third *GRT* album, full of Nick's songs, had gone gold, selling well over half a million copies for Halo, even though Nicky was unavailable to promote the album. Finally, over the last year, Ryz'n and Sheena's album last summer came close to gold, selling over a third of a million copies. All tolled, *GRT* had sold more than three million record albums in a little over four years and that was not counting sales from singles!

Of course, Nick had never enjoyed the fruits of his musical success. She wished he hadn't been so stubborn about joining the Marine Corps. *Oh, that lottery!* That lottery, she believed, had sparked him into it. Nick had felt his number would be low for certain. The lottery for males, born in 1953 ,was the first one that did not permit college student deferments, so Nick wouldn't receive the college exemption that so many had enjoyed before him. Rather than wait for the lottery and be drafted into the Army, Nick had volunteered for the Corps. He thought with his luck his draft lottery number would have been one or seven. Then with such a low number, he would have been drafted for sure. *"Lucky seven!"* He used to say, jokingly, that's what he predicted he would draw. Everyone tried to talk him out of volunteering for the Corps, but he wouldn't listen. He never did. He could be downright stubborn that way!

Privately, Nick had confided to Ryz'n that he had seen a "vision" of himself helping other American soldiers, who were clothed in tattered rags, looking gaunt, helpless, and hopeless. He had had this "vision" after watching the 1971 Thanksgiving Day news broadcasts of our American POWs over in North Viet Nam. Nick felt he could and should help them. Ryz'n had told him that he had merely eaten too heavy of a Thanksgiving dinner, but her husband remained resolute in his opinion. She recalled he could be darned irritating that way.

So, the day after Thanksgiving, before heading downtown to the recording studio, and without consulting her, Nick had risen early and visited the Marine recruiting office located up in Stuyvesant Mall. Rather than wait to be drafted into the Army for two years, Nick had volunteered to "be with the best." She had thought that was a very bad move on his part. *Shoot! Everyone thought Nicky had pulled a real boner.* His father and his best friend Johnny Allein were particularly

vocal in their opposition. Ryz'n, as well, tried her best to dissuade her husband from volunteering, wondering to him aloud if there were something wrong with her that was forcing him away. Happily married men did not volunteer to join the Marines and go off to war. But, he had pooh-poohed her distressful suggestion.

Later they had learned that all Marines, except for those protecting the U. S. Consulate and a few advisors, had been withdrawn already from South Viet Nam eight months earlier. Ryz'n had thought then that maybe the Corps was the best way for him to go, after all. They would knock some sense into him, too! "The Marines were the best there ever was," he'd say and he was "gonna be one of the best." *Shoot!* She knew he was one of the best! He didn't need to be a Marine to prove that, not to her, anyway. She never forgot that cold and dreary New Year's Day when he left for boot camp. "What a way to start the New Year!" he had joked. Ryz'n had laughed with him outwardly, but inwardly, she had wept.

However, when the draft lottery was held a month later on February 2nd, with Nicky nearly halfway through boot camp, Ryz'n learned that Nick's lottery number was 268—*268!* She could have died or, more accurately, she could have killed him for enlisting. *Lucky 7? Humpf! For sure, you were wrong on that one, Baby!* With the de-escalation of the war and the ongoing peace talks, there was no way the Government would draft someone with a number as high as Nick's. To add salt to her wounds, Ryz'n learned the following year that the Government only drafted 646 people total for all those men born in Nick's birth year of 1953. For sure, none of them saw service in Nam. None of them was number 268!

Irony of ironies, Nick had joined the Marines but would wind up fighting with the Army, anyway. Green Berets and Navy Seals had joined a few Marine Recon. Scout Snipers in a clandestine, special inter-service search and rescue operations outfit. The secret unit operated under the authority of the Army Rangers.

Still, after he left for boot camp, Ryz'n had bawled her eyes out over Nick's enlistment. Yet, she never had let him see those tears. She had stuck to him like glue before he left, not wanting to miss a single second with him before his departure. Even so, she could go only so long without becoming incensed with him for having pulled such a stunt, without even so much as consulting her on how she had felt about it. It had taken her a long time to forgive him in her heart for his total disregard of her feelings on the matter. Yet when he had arrived, unannounced on liberty in early April of '72, she had been more than willing to forgive him all.

Surprisingly, Nick had shown up the second week of April at her cottage doorstep down at M&L University. She found him in his Class A greens looking so handsome in his uniform. The Viet Cong had just launched what came to be known as the "Easter Offensive," their last ditch effort to win the War outright against the U.S. before the U.S. withdrew. Nick was supposed to be finishing up with the Marine Infantry Training Regiment (ITR), not standing on her doorstep. Ryz'n had not cared. She had been so glad just to see him.

He had been training near Jacksonville, North Carolina at Camp LeJeune and Camp Geiger for a few weeks after he had completed his basic training at the Corps' Recruit Training Depot at Parris Island, South Carolina. Ryz'n had jumped on him when he walked in the door of their little cottage, down at M&L and stuck to him like white on rice for his entire liberty.

She had not given him much time to think, which was what Ryz'n had thought he had needed. They had driven home from their cottage at M&L to Crest Hill Heights to speak with his family, Father Vizconni and some of Nick's friends, like Johnny Allein. Nick had sought advice. He had a tough decision to make.

It seems that Nick possessed some unique physical abilities, which the Marine Reconnaissance and Scout Snipers found appealing. His hearing was exceptional, as was his vision, 20/15 in his left eye, his dark brown eye, and 20/10 in his right, blue eye. More importantly, at night, he could see better than the average human being. That's not to say his night vision was anywhere close to his normal daylight vision, because it wasn't. His night vision was five to six times worse than his day vision, but even so, at night, he could see two to three times better than most people. Amazingly, his eyes could adjust completely to night time darkness in five to ten minutes.

Nick did have difficulty at night in distinguishing varying hues of red, confusing them with greens. (Ryz'n knew this all too well. With her along for the ride, he had, on more than one occasion run, or nearly run, a red traffic light at night, erroneously believing it to be green. However, Ryz'n figured that distinguishing red from green lights was not a priority in the jungles of Viet Nam.) Further, his training record had been excellent in every respect, tops in his class. He had rated, "Expert" with the M-16 rifle as well as with the Marine Corps service pistol. In short, Nick was exactly what the services were looking for, as they were trying one last time to reinforce a unique, clandestine inter-service, company that operated mostly behind enemy lines. The sole purpose of the unit remained classified—Top Secret.

Much later, however, when Ryz'n learned that Nick had become categorized as an MIA, she had also learned the unit's purpose was to extract as many allied prisoners of war (POWs) as possible from the enemy before the peace talks were concluded. The fewer POW's there were, the fewer bargaining chips for Hanoi at the peace table or thus had gone the Administration's reasoning. Later, it had been explained to her that Nick's unit had persevered, by operating unofficially as "special advisors" on "missions of mercy to those in need," long after August of '72. That date had been the final pull-out deadline for all U. S. combat troops from South Viet Nam. It was only later Ryz'n realized that the "those in need" were not Vietnamese civilians, but American and Vietnamese POWs. However, neither she nor Nick had known the nature of the mission that April and Nick had not been thinking of his decision from the personal and not the political angle. In April of'72, he did not know for sure what his mission would be.

Initially, Nick's Base Commander had refused to order Nick into the dangerous assignment. One obvious reason was that the green Marine had lacked experience, unlike the veteran Army Rangers and the handful of Navy Seals, which comprised the majority of the unit, some of whom possessed sensory faculties similar to Nick. In addition, there was doubt that Nick could successfully pass six months of the most rigorous training the Corps had to offer in as many weeks in order to meet minimal preparation requirements for the mission. Success was anything but assured and training classes would be disrupted to accommodate Nick. Yet, the Corps was desperate for someone with his unique skills.

Then, perhaps more importantly, Nick's age and youthful appearance conspired against him. When the Base Commander had looked upon his youthful countenance, Nick said the Commander had seen in Nick his own sixteen-year old son. That was the same son who so recently had wrapped the family station wagon around a telephone pole after the junior prom. Thus, Nick's commander had given Nick a week of liberty to go home and think carefully about what he wanted to do. The Base Commander had told Nick one thing about the mission that had stuck with him. The commanding marine had advised the detail would not be a typical seek and destroy operation, rather it would be more like a "mission of mercy," though the exact nature of the operation was classified.

Nick had thought about it. He had decided, but he did not tell anyone about the decision until he left to return to base. Ryz'n knew her husband. They had experienced more trials, tribulations and successes in almost two years together, than most people had faced in ten. She knew what he had decided, without him having to tell her. Knowing this, she had tried to make their last night together a memorable one. Before she left him at the front gates of Camp LeJeune, Nick told her she had more than succeeded. He said he was glad that she had been so devoted to him all week. He assured her that she had helped him tremendously. She could not begin to understand how much. His compliments had filled her completely and were the only positives she could take from his departure. Then she recalled how he had said, with a wink typical of Nicky, that he'd expect the same kind of treatment when he returned home to her. Now, over three years later, she was still waiting to repeat her performance. The faint smile her recollections had brought to mind vanished in the face of that fact.

Before he had shipped out, Ryz'n had asked him why he had decided to volunteer, when he had known the assignment was so dangerous. Nick had said he didn't want to volunteer, truly he did not. He didn't want to kill anyone either, even though he was certain he would have to do so. But each night that week in early April, after they had fallen asleep in one another's arms, Nick had experienced the recurring vision of him helping American P. O. W. s. Those poor devils were existing in rags and living in hellish circumstances. Nick had become convinced this mission of mercy was to rescue those prisoners. To his way of thinking, what else could it have been? And, as usual, he had been right.

Nick had reasoned that the Lord had bestowed certain unique, physical qualities upon him that he could employ to help out fellow Americans, who were barely existing, surviving in a torturous Hell. His decision was simple really: he could either use the gifts God had given him to help those individuals less fortunate than he or he could choose not to do so. Thinking of it like that, Nick had said he had realized he might die if he went, but he couldn't live with himself if he stayed. She remembered his reply word for word: "It's like 'doing unto others, as you would have them to do unto you,' so there's really no decision to make, is there, Sweetie?" Faced with such magnanimous logic, Ryz'n had replied dejectedly that she had guessed not. What else could she have said to make him change his mind? Absolutely nothing—If only she could have foreseen the future.

Nick had kissed her good-bye very gently, like a breath of air on her lips, as he had first kissed her so long ago on their first date at the Base Pool. He had picked up his sea bag and walked into camp in the early dawn of a Carolina spring sunrise. He never looked back. Ryz'n had her ubiquitous movie camera with her and recorded his parting on sixteen mm film. It was the last Ryz'n had seen of Nicky. That had been April 17th, 1972, three years and two months ago. *Three years and two months! Yes indeed, that is a long time between drinks!*

* * *

"Good evening, Ms. Sheeboom. Ms. Mather. It's a pleasure to be serving you this evening." The handsome flight attendant smiled brightly at the Ryan sisters before she added. "Tonight, we're serving a late dinner."

The flight attendant was young, blonde, beautiful and all smiles in her beige suite with a red, white and blue scarf, knotted rakishly to the left side of her neck. Nick would love her, thought Ryz'n.

"We offer a choice of chicken marsala or filet of flounder. Which would you ladies prefer?" She smiled as if she really meant it and waited patiently for their reply.

Sheena opted for the chicken, while Ryz'n typically chose the fish. Before they could be served, Ryz'n sat forward to remove her dark blue, silk suit coat with its deep lapels and stylish, wide, pointed collars. The attendant sought to relieve Ryz'n of the coat, but Ryz'n held onto it. She folded it neatly, lengthwise, shoulder to shoulder. Then, after folding the coat in half, Ryz'n shifted forward further in her seat to stuff the folded end of the jacket carefully into the tightly banded magazine pouch on the seatback in front of her.

"Ms. Sheeboom, I'd be more than happy to hang your coat in the closet or place it in the overhead compartment if you prefer." It was obvious the attendant felt uncomfortable with Ryz'n's choice of storage.

"No, thank you. I like having my things close about me and the luggage rack is too high. I've done this before and it works out very nicely, surprisingly, with no wrinkles." Ryz'n crinkled her nose to display a perfect flight attendant smile of her own. The stewardess surrendered and served the sisters, asking what they

would like to drink. Both girls chose the Chablis. Sheena was sitting next to the window, Ryz'n on the aisle, with an empty seat in between them. The stewardess served them their meals and the wine and pushed her cart down the aisle of the mostly empty First Class section to the next, unserved passengers. It had looked to Ryz'n as if the flight was not even half filled. There was no one sitting close to her and Sheena in First Class. The sisters whispered their grace, blessing themselves in conclusion, as was their custom. After a few minutes, as they ate, Sheena spoke softly.

"You've been awfully quiet over there, Sis. You OK?"

Sheena was wearing a pair of scarlet satin and wood, clogs and designer dark blue denim hip-hugger jeans, with leather lacing up the front. The jeans were unusually tight in the knees but flared, progressively wider from the knee to the ground. Her off-white top was made of muslin, similar to a peasant's blouse with puffy shoulders and scooped neck at the top. However, unlike a peasant's blouse, the top had long sleeves and the midriff dissolved into a tapered, elastically thatched, fish net which, below the waist, flared out into muslin again over her hips, in a feathered Tinker Bell design. The sleeves fit snugly but oddly, for the inside of each sleeve was hemmed at the wrist, while the outer sleeve, drooped into a ragged cuff, down to a point below her outstretched fingers. Tied about her waist over the fish net section of her blouse, she wore a red canvas belt. The showy belt bore a half dozen, large oval, silver spangles. Like her older sister, Sheena, too, wore a gold chained crucifix about her neck and a yellow-gold hair ribbon. However, Sheena wore the ribbon like an Indian headband, tying her center-parted, long, raven hair close about her head.

Ryz'n, typically, had dressed more conservatively. Hemmed several inches above her knee, the navy, silk mini-skirt, like all her skirts, was high waisted. Ryz'n wore a cream colored, patent leather belt, so wide that she could barely thread it through the skirt's four string belt loops. The belt matched, in color, her billowy, loose fitting cream satin shirt with the wide pointed collar. Earlier she had worn the blouse collar over the equally wide, pointed collar of her suit jacket. The French cuffs of the blouse had protruded fashionably beneath her suit jacket sleeves. Unlike her sister, Ryz'n's center blouse buttons opened modestly at her collarbone. Her gold necklace crucifix, like her sister, lay plainly in sight against her olive-skinned chest, but the larger linked, silver chain holding Nicky's bottle opener disappeared beneath her blouse.

A pair of antiquated, navy spiked heels shod her feet, while a pair of dark nylons adorned her legs. She wore her coffee-hued hair, parted unfashionably high on the right, but tied back in a ponytail, held together by the ever present yellow-gold ribbon. The only make-up worn by either of the girls was pink lip gloss, which matched the color of their long, painted fingernails. Both sisters, out of habit and a desire for privacy, wore their FosterGrants, even in the semi-seclusion of the first class cabin.

"Sure, I am. I'm great, really. I gotta feeling this time, Sheena. This time we've got something!" For emphasis, Ryz'n raised her fork to poke it into the cabin air between bites.

"I know. I feel the same," enthused her sister. "Actually Ry, this is the first time, THE FIRST TIME that I feel we're on top of the situation. You know? Instead of just shooting in the dark?"

"Yeah, exactly ... Wish Dad felt the same about it."

"Oh Honey, don't let him worry you. It's just that he takes it so personally. He feels that, as our father, he should be able to fix things for us, even if we are full grown. Then, if things fall through, he feels worse than any of us, like he failed at his job, like he had let us down. I think he doesn't want to expose his heart like that again, I mean, like before when that Dixon lady shot us down. You know?"

"Yes, I know. It's OK. Once I get Nicky back, it won't matter. None of it will."

"Mother was right, Ry. It's your faith that makes you strong." Sheena chuckled. "I remember back in high school when Nicky refused to date you and we couldn't figure out why. All year long, you prayed for him to come around, even while your were dating Don. And, and Nicky was going out with everyone else in sight, including me. I'm sorry Baby. I knew how you felt about him. I shouldn'ta done that. But you forgave me, didn't ya?"

"Sheena! Whaddaya talkin'? You know I buried that one along time ago and put a fork in it with a sign attached saying 'No resurrections allowed!'" She laughed and Sheena joined her.

"But I always figured you got even with me, anyway."

"Oh? How do ya figure that?"

"Well, you remember that Fourth of July down at the beach? When Nicky rescued us? And brought us back to Don's place?"

"Do I? I think about that night all the time. All the time!" Ryz'n felt a candle light inside of her with the memory.

"Well, you remember when Nicky kissed you at the top of the bedroom stairs?"

"Oh, you bet I do! He kissed me so softly, like a breath of fresh air, just like he did the first time, at the base pool. I remember it often."

"Yeah? Well, maybe you recall what I was doin' at that time?"

Ryz'n stopped to think a minute. "Well, as I recall … you were sick as a dog and vomiting all over the floor by the bed."

"EXACTLY! I figured it was God's getting' even with me for going out with Nicky behind your back like that."

"Oh Baby, you know God doesn't operate like that. Of course, He does move in mysterious ways, but no, that was your own fault. Most people get sick when they get to dopin' and drinkin' the way you were that night with Bernie. You asked for that, Baby Sister. I'm sorry, but you really did." Ryz'n shot her sister an "I told you so" look. Chagrined, Sheena agreed.

"Yeah, I know. So look, tell me again Sis, what these rude kids said on the phone." Sheena removed her shades, hanging them down inside her blouse and motioned for Ryz'n to do the same. She did.

Ryz'n chuckled. "Well, they sounded like typical baseballers. I dunno. Evidently, they had received a lot of calls for this Strickler kid from a lot of females, claiming to be his girlfriend or sister or something. Guess they had seen him on TV when the announcers had mentioned, like Allena and Matt had said, that the kid had amnesia as a result of wounds from the War, etc. So these girls, well you know how cute Nicky is?"

"Yeah, I know. I know. If I hadn't been such a jerk, maybe it would have been me and Nicky, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. I know." They both laughed. "But then you wouldn't have that hunk of a Bryson, now would you?"

"I'm happy. You know that Sis."

"Yeah, I know. I know." They laughed again. The wine helped.

"Anyway, these girls had been calling a lot, I guess. But when I described Nicky's voice to that last jerk!" Ryz'n's felt her brows narrow at the thought of him. Then she exhaled acquiescently. "Well, he realized I had described this Strickler guy's voice correctly. For some reason, he got mad and hung up. I'll talk to the coach, get it straight."

"Strickler, hunh? That's funny. You know, that he'd be using Todd's name? Wonder if there's a connection?"

"You know Sis, I wondered that, too. And I thought of something. I mean, maybe I'm reaching, but ... "

"But what?" asked Sheena in her naturally lilting, lyrical voice.

Ryz'n took in a couple of mouthfuls of fish, washing the food down with the Chablis. Sheena waited for Ryz'n to finish by nibbling some of her chicken. The cabin lights seem to shine off Ryz'n's smooth, cream-colored satin blouse.

"You know that fish isn't too great, but that Chablis is excellent." Sheena nodded in agreement. "Anyway, you remember the first album we did? You weren't on that album, of course Sheena, but there was a group picture of the band on the back. Nicky was sitting down in a chair. I stood behind him, next to Todd. Actually, Todd was leaning on me with his right elbow. The publicist asked him to do that, because we all looked too much like the folks in that painting of the farmer and his wife with the pitchfork. You know, too dour?" Sheena nodded as she kept eating. "Well, they put our names off to the side and around the bottom and top of the photo. However, they put the names on funny, kind of confusing actually. If you didn't know better, from the positions of the names next to us, you'd think Todd was Nick and that Nick was Todd."

"I get it. So you're thinking that Nick, or this Strickler guy, may have seen that album cover, thinking he was Todd, because that's the name that appeared to go with the picture that looked like him?"

"That's it, exactly."

"Well, if that's the case, why wouldn't he have gone to Halo Platters to identify himself?"

"Because that album was a Sable release! Halo didn't pick up our option until the year after, remember?"

"That's right!" A light of understating flickered on in Sheena's eyes. "But couldn't he have contacted Sable and—"

"No Honey! Sable no longer existed. They sold out lock, stock and barrel to Halo. You know that! Old Mr. Saperstein retired from the business with his wife. They packed up and moved out of the country. They only live here, in Florida now during the winter. There's no way this Strickler could know how to contact him."

"Oh yeah, I knew that. I knew that." Again, they chuckled.

"You see, Sheena, what I think happened is this. And it's what the nurse said."

"The nurse who helped Nicky so much at Subic Bay? The one you interviewed in Manila?"

"No, Honey. The neurosurgeon's at Subic Bay told me she had transferred to Kitsap, near Puget Sound. That's where I spoke to her, at the sub base. She was very helpful, but …" Ryz'n didn't care to think how helpful Lt. Rosario had been to Nick. She resumed her explanation without touching on that sensitive subject.

"Well, after Nick recovered from surgery with amnesia over in Subic Bay, he thought he was this Dixon character, because he was found with Dixon's dog tags on him. They sent him to Pearl or Kaneohe or wherever, where he continued to recuperate and undergo psychotherapy. The doctors and the Navy realize they can't help him, because he's not quite right. On top of being amnesic, I remember they said he had spells where he just zoned out, he'd lose it for a few seconds or minutes once in a while, be in another world, ya know? Well you can not be in the service in that kind of a state, never knowing when you might lose it, so they discharged him on medical grounds. Somehow, someway, he finds out he isn't this Dixon fellow after all. So he changes his name again to Jim Stark."

"Yeah, now why would he do that? Where did he pull that from?"

Ryz'n nodded yes as she finished her Chablis. The flight attendant took their plates, asking if the two girls wanted anything else. Ryz'n asked for a bottle of the Chablis to split with her sister. Ry liked her wine. The high flying waitress pulled a bottle of the fermented beverage from the lower rack of her cart tray. She poured a glassful of the wine for each of the two young women and left the bottle with them, at Sheena's request. Sheena thanked the stewardess sweetly. When the flight attended left, Ryz'n added in her naturally smoky, throaty tone.

"Well Sheena, knowing Nicky, he probably took the name of the character James Dean played in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

"But if he's got no memory, how could he do that, I mean, how could he know that Nicky adored James Dean?"

"Don't know. Maybe he saw the movie since he got hurt and liked it. You know, those bases show old movies and stuff for entertainment all the time."

"Could be, I suppose. So you thought while you were looking for a guy named Dixon, he was using the name Stark and while you were looking for a guy name Stark, he saw the record album cover and began using Todd's name."

"Yeah, exactly. And that's why the PI's in Hawaii and LA were having such a tough time digging up stuff. Or, they'd get so far and then POOF! The trail disappeared on them."

"Because they were on the wrong trail. Yeah, it makes sense, I guess. It's almost like Nicky's been throwing us off the track, on purpose, only without knowing it, if that makes any sense. Only ... "

"Only what?"

"Well with Nicky's distinguishing physical marks, I don't think they'd need a name, just a description or a picture. I mean how many guys are there walkin' around with half an ear, one brown eye, one blue eye and a couple missing fingers. Oh yeah, let's not forget his gold-capped, front teeth!"

"I don't know, Sheena. I don't know. The pictures the detectives are using to ID Nicky are the two of Nicky in uniform, one in black and white where he's wearin' his 'greens', and the other photo, in color, in his dress 'blues.' They're three years old. Maybe they, they ... " Ryz'n choked. "Maybe he looks so different now, so torn up, he's, uh, uh, uh, huh, huh, un ... recog . . nizable!" She smothered her inclination to bawl outright.

"Oh Sis, I'm sorry, I, I didn't mean to upset you like this. Maybe Nicky has grown up and looks older. He was just eighteen when he left, remember? Or maybe, maybe they're just bad detectives or maybe they have too many other cases to solve. Who knows why they haven't turned up anything yet? You can drive yourself crazy thinking about that. Besides Chris Gasch recognized him on T. V. and so did the Larrabees." Ryz'n caught hold of herself enough to mumble.

"Yes, I know. Now, I'm sorry. Only, Nicky was so cute, Sheena. Remember?"

"Oh, you bet I do. I had a big crush on him, 'til we dated. I tried not to like him after that. But he was cute, too cute, with those two-toned peepers, too cute for any guy to have a right to be."

Ryz'n refilled their wine glasses. "Yeah, too cute for his own good, sometimes, too. That's for sure." Ryz'n set her jaw firmly and nodded, agreeing with herself, as she thought about Nick and her ex-best friend Allena Larrabee. Sheena proposed a sanguine toast to Nicky's return.

"Ry? Here's to finding Nicky alive and well!" She beamed.

"I'll drink to that" concurred Ryz'n hopefully. They touched wine glasses over the empty seat between them and drank deeply. After the toast, the young women settled back in their seats to drink in silence for some time, each one thinking her own thoughts. The captain announced over the loudspeaker they were approaching St. Louis, flying at an altitude of 38,000 feet.

After a while, Sheena spoke up. "Hey Ry, Nicky was right."

"'Bout what?"

"Well, you remember that first summer down at the Banks? When you and Nicky had that fight and he tore up his underarms with the crutches? And I accused him of coming on to me when we were alone, down the beach? He didn't defend himself, until the next day when Bryson was about to tear his head off. Remember? He came inside to explain he hadn't done anything out of line with me down the beach. You remember?"

"Yeah, so what about it?"

"Well, I didn't admit it then, but Nicky was right. I was the one out of line, not him. You see, I came on to him." Sheena sighed with embarrassment.

Ryz'n lowered her glass to listen carefully. She wanted to hear this!

"See? I filled my two-piece top with saltwater, cupped the water against me with my arms as best as I could. Then I brought it over to put on his underarms which were all bruised up from his crutches. He was lying there on the sand like a beached whale with his leg in the cast and his crutch beside him. I came up right in his face, pushing myself right in front of him and poured the water over him. Then I kissed him. I really kissed him good, ya know? I, I should never have done that, Sis." Sheena stared into Ryz'n's eyes, seeking forgiveness.

"I know Sheena. I know all about it. Ha! Go ahead, drink up! Ha! Ha! Anyway, he told me later, after I 'bout beat it out of him, too. Ha! But it's good to hear you say it. Confession is good for the soul, so they say. But why did you do that? That's what I'd like to know."

"Because! Because I was so jealous! Nicky was beached. You were playing grab-ass with Bryson in the surf. I thought I'd teach you a lesson. Anyway, Nicky was right. I didn't realize it 'til later and this is true the point of the story--not true confessions. He got me to leave him alone by really ticking me off."

"Yeah, so how did he do that?"

"Well, you know Nicky. It's one of his, uh, special qualities, tickin' people off." Sheena cocked her eyebrows knowingly. Ryz'n said nothing, merely nodding, but she knew all too well, her husband's innocent, inimitable capacity for angering folks. "I asked him how he rated me as a kisser."

"Yeah and what did he say?"

"Well ... He said the one thing that could have caused me to leave him alone. If he had said 'OK' or 'not so hot', I'd have tried harder to show him I was good. If he had said I was good or great, I'd have wanted to kiss him some more, because he is such a great kisser himself!"

"Unh hunh, I know, I know. Here have some more wine, Little Sister."

Ryz'n smirked as she poured each of them another glass. Ryz'n liked her wine. It was a weakness. And she was nearly giddy with hope, a bright hope born of trustworthy, eyewitness accounts of her man, and of a light, pale French Chablis. Their giddiness prompted both sisters to behave a little like schoolgirls again.

"Don't mind if I do." They each drank before Sheena resumed her story. "So anyway, Nicky knows all this already, although I didn't realize it then. He says, 'Pretty damned good, but ... '"

"But what?"

"That's what I said, 'But what?' 'But not as good as your sister,'" he said. "OOOH! That really steamed me." Sheena furrowed her raven brows and pursed her lips at the memory. "I was so jealous of you all the time, since you had lost your weight. And I had helped him with his crutches. I could have killed him. I jumped off him and left him there, knowing he couldn't make it back on those crutches, not with his underarms all messed up like they were. I walked away as fast as I could. He called after me. He said 'Hey Sheena, you gotta great wiggle in your walk, too.' I turned around, walking backwards in the surf to flip him off. He says 'But you know what?' And like a fool, I bit again, do you believe it?" Sheena's eyes widened. "And I said 'What?' He said, 'But it's not as good as your sister's!' Well, I flipped him both birds and ran away as fast as I could."

Ryz'n laughed heartily. "That is s-o-o-o Nicky. I can just see it all right before my eyes." She laughed until tears filled her orbs almost to overflowing. Sheena laughed heartily, too, as she poured a fresh glass of wine for each of them. "Oh Sheena, I miss him. God help me, I miss him so-o-o much. It's sinful."

Sheena raised the arm between the seats, back to its vertical resting position. With her half filled wine glass, she slipped into the seat next to her older sister to take Ryz'n's hand in hers. "I know you do, Baby. I know. Gee, I miss him, too. I know sometimes, when Bryce and I are together at night in the other bedroom down at school ... Well, I, I know you must hear us. It must be very difficult for you. I, I ... " Uncharacteristically, the girl began to weep. The wine was having its effect on her as well.

Now, Ryz'n comforted her baby sister who had moved closer to console Ryz'n. She placed her left arm around Sheena's shoulders after shifting her wineglass into her right hand. "Shhh, My Baby, Shhh. It's OK. Most of the time it didn't bother me, too much. Just makes me think of some of the times me and Nicky had together. Believe me, Baby Sister, you and Bryce are tame, compared to me and Nick." Ryz'n sighed deeply, as Sheena's crocodile tears receded. "It's OK, Baby, it's OK. We're gonna find him this time. You'll see."

Sheena raised the arm dividers that separated her from Ryz'n, to lay her head on Ryz'n's soft, full bosom. Ryz'n shoved the seat tray forward several inches. With her left hand, she stroked Sheena's hair and rubbed her back, as she had done so often when they napped together as kids. She hummed Nicky's composition of "Dear One." The sisters had fallen into their familiar roles with Ryz'n as caregiver, Sheena as recipient of that care.

Sheena kicked off her clogs and pulled her bare feet with the brightly painted pink nails into the window seat. Her legs bent together at the knees so her knees hung out over the seat's front edge. The wine led Sheena into slumber as she slid her head down into Ryz'n's lap. The flight attendant passed by and removed Sheena's empty glass along with the empty wine bottle. She reached over Sheena to restore her tray to the seatback in front of her seat. Ryz'n sipped the last of the Chablis from the glass in her right hand, holding her sleeping sister with her left.

She rested her wineglass on the still opened seatback tray-table in front of her. Ryz'n reached up with her left hand to turn off the overhead lights. She redirected the cool air stream away from Sheena's head and just beneath the hem of her suit skirt. The skirt had slipped back up over her nylons when Sheena had laid her head in Ryz'n's lap. Relaxed thoroughly by the wine, Ryz'n whispered to herself as she hurtled through the sky at six hundred miles per hour.

"Oh, Baby. You must be this ballplayer. You must! And he's got to be that Marine, who was shot in the head, whose trail we stumbled upon last winter. It just has to be! We lost you somewhere between the islands and the mainland. But that Mrs. Dixon didn't know you. Oh! I love you so much, Nicky. And I forgive you everything, for that Filipino Navy Lieutenant who nursed you back to health at Subic Bay, and for that Hawaiian girl, she told me about, too. I forgive you, Honey. You didn't know any better. When I find ya, I gotta make ya remember me somehow, make you forget them. Gotta find a way. Lord, please help me find a way. Help me succeed where all the doctors and psychotherapists failed. Help me, Sweet Jesus, please. Help me find him. Mother of God, please pray the Lord in intercession for me." Fingering her crucifix, she gazed out the window at the blue evening sky, bright with sunlight, high above the clouds. Not immune to the white wine herself, Ryz'n leaned back into the curved corner of the blue-cushioned seat. With her sleeping sister's head in her lap, Ryz'n nodded off.

As she slept through the bumpy flight, Ryz'n dreamt of Nicky. She dreamt of their high school days together, of her efforts to find him, of her brief Rock'N'Roll career, of her college days at M&L. However, all of it was mixed up together in a crazy quilt. Two images kept recurring, juxtaposed one against the other. The first was the beautifully sweet, sorrowful image of Nicky leaving her at the Marine camp gates. The other was the ghastly, grisly, horror of the unearthed mass graves with hundreds of rotten corpses and skeletons, trailing dog tags, that her rescue team had uncovered in Laos. There, hard by the Ho Chi Minh Trail, was Nicky's dog tag among them. In between visions, there were reflections of her times with Nicky and times without him, of the band, the attempted rape upon her by a former band member, of her graduation, her diving and swimming victories. Her mind tossed and turned as turbulence buffeted the plane. Above all, she saw a beatific image of the risen Christ hovering in the sky with His arms outspread wide apart, lovingly quoting the scriptures **"all things work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose."**

The flight attendant woke Sheena and Ryz'n requesting Sheena to retake her seat, and for both of them to fasten their seat belts and return the armrests and seatbacks to their original positions. The attendant must have already retrieved Ryz'n's empty wine glass and restored the seatback tray, because both were gone. The attendant explained the flight was about to undertake a lengthy descent into LAX. It took Ry a few seconds to gather herself, Sheena, as well. As Ryz'n rubbed sleep from her eyes, Sheena lifted her head off Ryz'n's lap to complain.

"Darn, something was sticking me, just under my temple." She felt around her right temple. "Look Ry, what do you think?" Sheena pulled her long, black hair back behind her right ear to reveal the side of her head. Ryz'n detected an impression of some sort. It took a few seconds before she recognized the mark.

"Oh, you know what? I think that's an impression of a garter belt snap. You must have laid on it. Surprised, you could sleep on that thing." Sheena began to restore the seatbacks and arms, as she talked.

"Garter belt? You still wearin' them nylon stockings? I thought you were using panty hose, like everyone else now?"

"Well, I was for a while, but I dunno, Nicky always preferred these and—

"Gee Ry, whaddaya think, he's gonna be waitin' for ya on the tarmac?"

"Well, no, of course not." Ryz'n fumbled about, embarrassed.

"Ha, yeah I remember he liked ya to wear those nylons and be—"

"OK, Sheena!"

"Ha! What a character! What did he used to say? Huh?" 'A wife should be—'"

"SHEENA!"

"Well, you know what he said all right. He told Bryce that same stuff and damned if I wasn't doin' that for a while, too, but I wised up! Now I'm liberated. I just go braless." She smirked. "That Nicky was kind of wild and crazy. He was always kind of kooky." Ryz'n sought to defend her husband as well as herself.

"Well, for your information Sheena, I don't plan on meeting him on the tarmac, but if I did, I sure wouldn't mind it any. That's for certain." Ryz'n nodded affirmatively, but avoided her sister's stare. Sheena finished adjusting the seats and paused to look at Ryz'n, rather oddly.

"What?" asked Ryz'n. What are you looking at?"

Sheena grinned wolfishly. "You wouldn't mind it hunh? Bet you're ready for him, too? Aren't you? Right now?" Ryz'n turned her head away from her sister and changed the subject and wiped the side of her face.

"I drooled some during that nap. Think I'll freshen up in the lavatory."

"No, wait!" Sheena grabbed her sister's left forearm. "You are, aren't you? You're blushing, I know you are." She reached toward her sister's leg.

"Sheena really!" Ryz'n slapped hard on the back of her sister's hand and wrist.

"Ouch! That hurt." Sheena glared at Ryz'n in astonishment.

Ryz'n met her glare in anger. "Good! It was meant to. Now, I'll be back in a minute. For goodness sake, Sheena! You act just like a kid sometimes, I swear."

"Wait! You don't have to go off all mad. I'm sorry." Sheena's suddenly hang-dog look appeared genuine enough.

"Well, all right then. Forget about it." Ryz'n smiled weakly. "I guess I am kind of wild and crazy, too. Nicky always made me that way."

"I've noticed. You're just always so straight-laced until you get hooked up with him and it's the best thing you ever did, Big Sister. Believe me it is, even if you two did have to get married twice to get it right." Sheena grinned approvingly.

"I think so, though Dad doesn't. He never really approved of Nick and me."

"Well, he didn't approve of you getting pregnant and getting married at seventeen, that's for sure. He changed his mind about Nicky after a while though, after Father V. married ya in the Church, despite Nicky being such a kook!"

"I dunno about that. I know sometimes I seem so ridiculous, Honey, like so many of Nicky's wild and crazy ideas. Yet, you know there really is something to them. I mean, right now, despite my formal attire and all, well, I feel free … Attractive. Sharp. I dunno, very much like a woman. It's like, empowering or something." Ryz'n shrugged her shoulders and opened her eyes wide to wipe some matted sleep from them. "Well, I hope you're satisfied now that I've confirmed your suspicions." She picked up her purse from the middle seatback's magazine pouch where she had stored it and rose to leave.

"My sister, the women's libber—who would have thunk it? You've always been sexy, Ry. You just never accepted it. EXCEPT, except where Nicky was concerned or if you got a little too high like at those concerts we did. But if you want to make a statement, why don't you just go braless like the rest of us?"

"Well, Little Sister, I'm not lookin' to make a statement. Besides, Nicky frowned on that, for one thing. He used to say 'a girl could defy gravity for only so long.'" Sheena laughed in spite of herself. "And for another thing, I don't think I should be bouncing up and down in front of other guys, taunting them, maybe causing them to stumble, like we've heard Father V. preach many times?"

Ryz'n lowered her chin and arched her eyebrows hoping Sheena would get the message. "And finally," she rose to stand in the aisle, "I agree with my husband: I don't want to be hanging down to my knees when I'm forty." She smirked and started to leave, but she stopped to lean over her seat and whisper.

"Oh, please, keep an eye on my jacket, will ya Sheena?"

"Sure, but it'll be OK." Sheena whispered back, mocking her sister's earnest tone and nodding confidentially. "There's hardly anybody on the plane and the stewardess is close by." Ryz'n whispered back.

"Well, I know, but Nicky's harmonica is in the pocket. You know?"

"Oh yeah, OK. Of course. By all means." Under her breath, Sheena muttered. "We wouldn't want anything to happen to that harmonica."

"What, what did you say?" asked Ryz'n shrewdly in a raised tone.

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all. Go ahead. I'll keep the harmonica safe for ya." She forced a smile. Ryz'n had heard what her sister had said, but she decided it wasn't worth an argument. Incredibly, they were getting along pretty well so far, aside from that one little spat, and Ryz'n did not want to spoil it. She walked down the aisle towards the back of the plane. Aware of her naturally alluring "swish and her sway", which had inspired one of Nick's hit musical compositions and one of *GRT*'s hit songs, Ryz'n walked as primly as she possibly could through the close quarters of the tourist class. Like first class, tourist was not even half filled with passengers. *How do they stay in business? Hope they stay afloat until we get to LAX.*

Ryz'n found one of the three lavatories unoccupied. She entered to wash her face with cool water. She also removed the bottle opener and its silver chain from around her neck and washed them off as well as her sternum where Nicky's smooth, flat bottle opener hung. She did this a couple times a day to prevent pimples. Ryz'n dried off with a paper towel and smiled as she noticed part of her hirsute, Indian-Pakistani heritage in the form of tiny, sparse, black wisps of hair running almost the length of her sternum. That particular inheritance had been a constant source of embarrassment for her as a young teenager.

"Ah, but you changed that, too, didn't you Nicky?"

She replaced the chain and bottle opener around her neck and talked to her image in the wash room mirror. "I didn't believe ya at first, Baby. Thought you were just tryin' to make me feel better," She spoke naturally as if her husband were right there with her.

From a vial in her purse, she dripped a spot of honey both at the base and tip of her long tongue, as was her custom after a meal. She did this to clear her breath as well as to provide an energy boost. Nick had always said her lips had dripped of honey and he had been right. She carried on with her previous soliloquy.

"But when I saw what a kick it gave ya, I knew you weren't just bein' nice."

Ryz'n also dabbed on some of the Love's Fresh Lemon Cologne that used to drive her husband wild.

"And I thanked the Lord for providing me with a mate who complements me so well. And I still do. Amen!" She nodded crisply for emphasis.

Ryz'n removed her yellow hair ribbon and began to comb out her thick, long, wavy hair, watching her self in the mirror, with the ribbon clenched between her teeth. She considered her recent dream. That had been some dream she thought, one that she had dreamt many times before. She stared at herself in the vanity mirror above the sink. It had been some day, too.

It had begun with her daily dawn swim in the Atlantic off Kill Devil Hills. Funny, now she was arriving on the West Coast, where she could take a midnight swim in the Pacific to close out her long day if she so chose. She finished combing out her heavily dense locks, which she wore down and in her customary flip. She wanted to look her best for 'Uncle' Bill when they landed.

She tied the ribbon around the back of her head in a manner beneath her hair that produced a neat, tight bow over her crown and left temple. The yellow bow seemed to appear out of nowhere for the rest of the ribbon lay concealed beneath her thick, wavy locks. A casual observer would be hard pressed to learn how the bow stayed in place. Tying the ribbon was a piece of cake, just like brushing her hair. Indeed, it had become merely the final act of her daily hair-combing ritual.

The young woman glanced at her diamond studded, gold Rolex, which she had already set to Pacific Coast Daylights Savings Time. Nick had given her the watch as a Christmas present a week before he had left for basic training. It was 9:10 p. m., 12:10 a. m. on the East Coast. What a day, it had been! She had helped clean up the beach house that morning. Then she had driven herself and

Sheena almost three hundred miles home to Crest Hill Heights. Her world had turned upside down after she had spoken with the Gaschs and the Larrabees. She must be somewhere close to California by now.

Again, she stared deep into the mirror, peering right through her reflected image. She did this not because she was concerned with her appearance, which she took for granted, paying it little mind, but because she wanted to peer into her soul. "What if this *is* another wild goose chase? What if Dad is right?" Ryz'n didn't think she could bear another disappointment, like the one with that Dixon woman last winter. *God help me. Help me to stay strong, please Lord.* Anxiously, she studied her face in the reflective glass and decided to apply a bit of pink lip gloss. Satisfied, she pinched her cream-fed cheeks. There was a knock on the door. Ryz'n sighed deeply, checked her blouse and skirt in the mirror. She flattened them by sliding her hands downward over them. She turned sideways one last time to check her look, before she opened the door into the small closet.

Sheena, who had been leaning up against the door, fell into her sister.

Looking up from under her thick eyebrows, Sheena assumed the offensive, asking, "Gotta friend in there with ya, Sis? Someone I don't know about?"

Only slightly embarrassed at being caught talking to herself, Ryz'n replied, "Nope, from the looks of it, just you. And us chickens!"

"Us, hunh? Ri-i-ight. Ya know, Mom and Dad asked me to keep an eye on ya before we left. I thought they were full of it, but you're giving me cause to doubt ya, Big Sister, with that impression of Hamlet you were performing in there."

"Don't let it hassle ya, Little Sister. In that get-up, you've got no worries."

"Now what is that supposed to mean?"

"As a refugee from a Haight-Ashbury time capsule, you should have no problem keepin' the faith, Baby!" Ryz'n smirked, turned to leave, but stopped.

"Say, I thought you were keeping an eye on Nicky's blues harp for me?"

Sheena uncrossed her feet, pulled her right hand from under her left elbow and silently wiggled the harmonica before her sister's face. "Psyyyych!"

"Oh, thanks Sheena. I appreciate it." Ryz'n snatched the blues harp from her.

"Of course, I left our purses up there, but I saved your mouth organ."

"You mean Nicky's or—" Ryz'n stopped herself short.

Sheena burst out laughing. "You're red as a beet, Ry."

"I meant mouth, uh … harmonica! Darn it, Sheena! You know what I meant!!" Sheena could hardly contain her glee. Exasperated by her faux pas, Ryz'n smashed the underside of her fist in to the outer lavatory wall. "Well, anyway that was obviously a prudent decision on your part, Little Sister. You know, you should treat this harmonica with more respect. After all, it's made you very rich." Ryz'n winked, left Sheena to the lavatory and returned to her seat, where she prayed about what she would find upon landing.

~ Chapter 5: Sign of Life ~

Bill was there, waiting for them, as they stepped off Blue Skies flight #74, into the terminal at LAX. He did not have to be there. Ryz'n understood that. She and Sheena could have just as easily met Bill at the passenger pick-up, which would have been so much easier for him. Nevertheless, Bill was there, in his wheel chair, waiting to greet each of them with a solitary long-stem pink rose. Despite his wheel chair, Ryz'n recalled Nick's Uncle Bill exuded a confident, manly air. He was a ruggedly handsome man, well tanned with lank dark brown, parted hair that dipped easily across his forehead. The flattened nature of his large, straight nose together with the scar across the upper bridge bespoke also of his ruggedness. He had the broad shoulders of an athlete. His eyes shone a bright electric blue, striking a sharp contrast with the rest of his dark male persona. Ryz'n always admired that Bill maintained a lean build, unlike many paraplegics who tended toward obesity as they aged. His chair was not motorized, so he pushed himself everywhere. He was dressed in grey slacks, brand new looking black loafers and a navy blue, short sleeved ban-lon shirt. An opened package of Lucky Strikes was wedged between a thigh and the thin, stainless steel wall that was the side of his wheel chair seat.

Ryz'n pointed Bill out to Sheena as the elder sister shook her head in wonder at the paraplegic's efforts. Nicky had been right when he had used Bill as an inspiration. "If Bill can get up everyday and go through all this stuff, then I sure as hell can do it!" That's what her husband had said whenever things had appeared to get a little too tough. He had been right, as usual. Still, when Ryz'n received her one-rose bouquet and greeted Bill warmly, bending over to hug and kiss Nick's uncle, she couldn't help but shed two big crocodile tears of joy. Sheena, who was less familiar with Bill, simply shook his powerful right hand. She received his gift of the long stem rose with a demure, reserved "Thank you."

"Bill! You're looking as handsome as ever! Gee, it really is good to see you again, Willy." Ryz'n accepted her rose and bent over to kiss Nick's uncle on the cheek.

"Well, it's great to see you, too, Ry. It really is. So this is your beautiful sister? Beauty runs in the family, I see. Sheena, isn't it? Believe we met at the wedding," he quipped curtly to Sheena who nodded politely in return.

"Yes, this is Sheena. However, I warn you, Bill. Flattery will get you nowhere with her. She's a married woman, too."

Bill smiled, "Well, that's just as well. I'm more or less spoken for at the moment, anyway." He grinned at the two girls.

"No, you're not! Why! That's great Bill. Can we meet her?"

"Think that can be arranged. Come on. Let's make a move."

The girls had carried their luggage onto the plane, so Bill took one of their bags on his lap and rolled along ahead of them leading them out to the parking lot, bypassing the luggage carousel. Sheena whispered to her older sister that Bill's dark hair and his electric blue eyes reminded her of Nick with his lone blue eye. Ryz'n agreed with her sister. She informed Sheena that she and Nick had found a nineteenth century photograph in an old family photo album in the attic of Nick's grandparent's home in Clear Lake, Iowa. The picture showed one of Nick's ancestor's whose left eye was jet black and the other, because of the Daguerreotype, was very pale.

"Yep. Would have been Uncle Nels," informed Bill. Sheena was astonished.

"I thought Nick got that two-toned stuff from the other side of the family, you know from that famous Uncle Richard, the celebrity?"

Ryz'n, however didn't answer. Instead, she had shifted gears and directed her attention to Bill. She explained the set-up to the paraplegic as they made their way to his car. By the time they got to his '65 black Caddy, Bill was mortified.

"To think that Nicky was right here under my nose and I never knew it. Shoot! That college of his sits on the bluff right above my friend's beach house, in Malibu. Why didn't I go watch one of his ball games! I feel like an ass, Ryz'n!"

"Bill, Bill, don't feel that way. You didn't know. None of us knew. The important thing is that we know now. That's what's important!"

Bill threw their bags inside the big Caddy's large trunk, while Ryz'n, still clutching her rose, slid her fanny across the Caddy's front bench seat to sit next to Bill. As Sheena took shot-gun, she whispered to Ryz'n, asking how could Bill drive a car without the use of his legs? Ryz'n winked and whispered "Just watch."

They both observed as Bill opened the driver side door. "Here Ryz'n." He offered her his pack of nails and a lighter. He nodded and she held her hands out, as he tossed first the lighter then the pack of Lucky Strikes, both of which she caught. "Just set them in the ashtray there, Ry." She did.

The girls watched as Bill set the brakes on his chair, pulled himself out of his wheelchair and into the car butt end first. To do this, he pushed off the car's seat with his right hand while he held onto the bar of the vent window with his left hand. Then he grabbed the top of the front seatback with his powerful right hand and pulled with his equally strong left, lifting himself and twisting his body in one motion. In mid-air, he pushed off the driver's seatback with his right hand to help him twist. Ryz'n and Sheena watched in awe as the paralyzed man landed in the driver's seat, facing the door with his limbs dangling outside, right leg crossed left below the knees.

The sisters alternately leaned towards the dashboard or rearward with their head hovering above the seatback, so they could observe Bill's next move. He uncrossed his legs, by lifting them, one leg at a time with his hands and swinging his lifeless limbs inside and over the front seat. The right leg went into spasms. Bill had directed his attentions to the chair and couldn't see it.

"Bill, your leg is shaking," observed with Ryz'n with some concern.

"Hunh? Oh! Damn thing!" Bill turned to the front and smacked his right calf a couple of time, but his paralytic leg persisted in its dance. Placing both hands under the knee, he lifted the leg about six inches off the car floor and then, propelled by his hands, slammed his foot into the floor twice. His paralyzed leg became silent. He grunted, swung his body to the left and renewed his attentions on the chair. Bill reached back with his left hand and dragged the chair up next to him by tugging on the metal foot pedals, which he flipped up vertically to either side. He pulled the three-inch thick foam rubber seat cushion enclosed in green cloth, which he sat upon to prevent "bed sores," and handed it to Ryz'n for safekeeping. She accepted it a little stunned by his almost casual manner, even though she had witnessed this act before.

Next, he leaned out of the car folded the chair up by leaning over and punching the center of the flexible leather seat upwards thereby drawing the two sides of the chair into each other, together. The metal foot pedals were side by side now. Bill turned the chair so that it faced the car. Simultaneously, he picked up and pulled the chair by the medal pedals, lifting first the pedals, then the small front wheels up over the rocker panel and into the floor of the back seat behind him. Then leaning forward, he pulled the car's seat forward toward him reaching back with his left hand. Still leaning forward, Bill tugged, hoisted, then pushed the big wheels of the chair up into the back floor of the car, stowing the chair behind him. He leaned his seat back and closed the door. The whole process had taken Bill no more than a minute or two.

Piece of cake, thought Ryz'n. *Yeah, right!*

Both girls observed Bill's independence with speechless admiration. As Bill started the vehicle, using the hand controls to accelerate and brake the car, Sheena marveled: "Hey, that's really neat Bill, the way you can do that, drive the car like that, I mean." Ryz'n felt Sheena's icy veneer towards Bill was beginning to thaw.

"Yeah, it works out pretty well," replied Bill lazily. "Well, now girls, I have two free rooms. You can use either one or both. I'm available to drive you anywhere, anytime. I want to find that boy, too, ya know?"

"Oh, thanks, Bill. You don't know how much it means to us to have you here to help. I'm afraid I'd spend half my time driving the wrong way on the freeway," replied Ryz'n.

"Well, that can happen to anyone out here, even the natives, although there aren't that many natives. Most of 'em are transplanted Iowans, like myself. Ya know, I believe there are more native Iowans out here than there are back in Iowa!" He chuckled.

* * *

In Bill's off-white stucco bungalow on San Harco Circle in Buena Park, the girls shared the larger of the two guest bedrooms, which housed twin beds. His place had three bedrooms and two baths, with a small kitchen and dining room

and a shake roof. His was a typical Southern California stucco ranch home. The place was nearly completely flat with one step inside from the front foyer down into the living room. There was one riser from the front sidewalk to the front porch. There was also a low ramp that led from the driveway and one-car garage, along the side of the house up to the side kitchen door. Both front and back yards were level as well. A flat patio lay outside his back sliding glass door that led from the dining room to the patio, which he used almost year round. A cinderblock wall, six-feet high, enclosed his grassy back yard, separating him from his neighbors and the alley that ran behind his lot. Obviously, all those level surfaces and the kitchen door ramp were designed to serve his special needs.

Once the girls had settled into their room, which featured twin wooden frame beds, Bill confirmed the name they thought Nick was using. Then he called his girlfriend who worked as a nurse at the Veteran's Administration (VA) hospital in Long Beach. Bill asked her to check into records of a patient with the last name of Strickler. He described Nick's unique physical attributes. He told her he did not have a first name other than "Dixie", but, hopefully, they could find that out the next day. Then he hung up the phone with a sense of accomplishment in his demeanor.

"Don't think there's anything more we can do tonight, girls. Best we turn in now, get some rest. We can head down to the VA hospital first thing in the morning. Esther should have found his records by then, if he has any there. Then, we'll drive over to Malibu tomorrow morning after the rush hour. See if we can't locate that coach."

"OK, Bill. Sounds like a good plan." Ryz'n surprised Sheena, as she uncharacteristically walked brazenly over to sit down in Uncle Bill's lap. Ryz'n hugged and kissed Bill on the cheek. "Is there anything you need Rip, you know, financially? I'm doing very well, you know?"

"No thanks, I'm doin' all right myself. Mr. Hughes keeps sending me checks every month. Nothing I can do about it." He grinned. "Could use a shampoo, though, like ya did for me in Clear Lake?" He smiled impishly at his nephew's wife. Ryz'n sat up in his lap, straight-backed and pinched Bill's cheek between her thumb and forefinger.

"Well, all ri-i-ight! Let's do it. Sheena? You can help."

The girls shampooed and dried Bill's hair thoroughly out under the lights of the back patio. Then they combed out his straight lank hair. From past experience, Ryz'n knew Uncle Bill liked to have his scalp rubbed as a masseuse might and to have his hair combed out slowly and very gently. She gave him what he liked. Bill was a happy camper, as was Ryz'n. Ryz'n could tell he enjoyed the pampering from two Miss America look-alikes, even if one was a newly dyed-in-the-wool hippie.

Shampooing Bill's hair kept Ryz'n's mind off her troubles, calming her down after the adrenaline flow stirred up by her flight. Initially, Sheena found the whole episode a bit odd. She told Ryz'n so, in a whisper to preclude Bill from

hearing. However, later, alone in their room, Ryz'n explained to her sister about Bill. She told how he had acquired his nickname of 'Rip,' of his heroic war exploits over the skies of Europe in World War II. She also explained his tragic personal history, his many personal and physical hardships and his impressive will to survive. Sheena admitted to Ryz'n then that she, too, was happy to have participated in the unusual shampoo.

The next morning, Ryz'n rose early, before five, to exercise and jog, as well as to fix breakfast for the three of them. Ryz'n found jogging around Bill's place, where the long blocks were flat but the traffic heavy, was just the opposite of jogging at her home or down at M&L where traffic was light, but the terrain was hilly. She had kept pretty much the same exercise routine that Nick had outlined for her five and a half years ago.

In high school, all the kids had thought she was crazy to adopt that weirdo Little Nick's crazy and unprecedented ideas into a daily regimen. Nobody worked out in those days. Running was taboo. That changed after Steve Prefontaine's rise to prominence. Yet, her routine also included, calisthenics, pull ups, sit-ups, push ups, light, very light, weight lifting (which had been unheard of in 1969 when Nick had pushed this routine upon her, unheard of even for many high school football programs, let alone for co-eds). Nevertheless, she performed the exercise routine daily, except for Sundays. Every other day, she either swam two miles or ran three to four. Usually she swam, particularly during the warm weather months and down at M&L during the school year as a member of the swim and dive team. After exercising this morning, she cooked breakfast for the three of them. Cooking breakfast for her family had also been part of her morning routine, even at school, where she had cooked for Sheena and Bryson. Ryz'n enjoyed cooking.

Due to her early morning culinary efforts, the trio were out of the house early, arriving at the nearby Long Beach VA hospital by eight a. m. Bill introduced them to his cute, little Filipino nurse friend. She was a short, attractive, slim-figured woman, probably in her late thirties, with bobbed hair, about ten to fifteen years Bill's junior. Her name was Esther. Esther had a pleasant smile and a kindly manner. Ryz'n could see why and how she would make a good nurse. Not unlike Ryz'n herself, Esther exuded a bright cheeriness about her.

Esther had found what they were seeking among the hospital files. Although there were several "Strickler's" on the hospital's rolls as outpatients, there were only a few listed as "mental" cases. Of those, only one met their criteria for Nick. Ryz'n noted if that out-patient were her Nicky, the VA had identified him incorrectly as twenty-two and with an erroneous date of birth. However, the patient's physical characteristics matched Nick's very closely.

The only differences that Ryz'n could detect were that the medical records had this individual listed almost four inches taller and thirty pounds heavier than Nick had been, when he had entered the service barely eighteen. In addition, the dental records had identified Strickler as missing his two upper front teeth, which were

replaced with an upper plate of two porcelain dentures, where Nick had had only a single upper gold-capped tooth. The color of the eyes and hair matched. That was key, because there were very few individuals that had a dark brown left eye and a bright blue, right eye. The mutilations of the left ear, shrapnel scars on the left side of his neck, the mutilation of his right buttock, the missing right finger joints and left testicle, all matched identically with Nick's wounds as Ryz'n had learned of them during the war. Likewise, this patient's vision rating matched her husband's: 20/15 for the left and 20/10 for the right eye. Ryz'n guessed this Strickler guy just had to be her Nick. She surmised he must have grown a little and gotten a couple teeth knocked out. Knowing Nicky as she did, both of those phenomena were distinct possibilities.

The patient, one James D. T. Strickler, had listed Honolulu, Hawaii, as his hometown. His current address was Atkinson Hall, Peppermount University, Malibu, California. Ryz'n stoically fought back tears when she saw he had listed no one as his next of kin. Peppermount Coach Bill Trahorn was Strickler's emergency contact. Ryz'n recognized the phone number for the Coach as the same one the operator had dialed for her the previous day. Esther directed them to the psychiatric ward where they were able to speak with Dr. Mandl, the caseworker, who counseled this "Strickler."

~ Chapter 6: The V.A. Man ~

"Sure, I remember, him," recalled the bespectacled, middle-aged psychiatrist, smiling beneath his graying, sandy goatee. "He's not the kind of person you forget."

Dr. Mandl ushered Bill and the Ryan sisters into his office which was a cross between a government bureau and a private psychiatrist's office. The small man, leaned to his left with his open palm resting face down on the top of his desk. The upper floor room in the VA complex contained a large desk and a burgundy leather swivel-tilt chair, a burgundy leather recliner parallel to the far wall and two burgundy upholstered armchairs with their wooden legs sawed off about four inches. (From Ryz'n's experiences with psychiatrists, the chair for the patient was often lower than the furniture for the doctor.) Two four-drawer, vertical filing cabinets stood in opposite corners of the room. An impressionist painting hung on one of the cream colored walls behind the doctor's desk and a cubist work on another, above the recliner. To her left, Ryz'n observed what appeared to be a copy of a Pollock work. The overhead light utilized a dimmer switch and was set rather low. Blinds were drawn across the single window in the wall to the right of the desk. A dull, dirty, dark gold carpet, not wall-to-wall, seemed almost an afterthought. Burgundy and gold thought Ryz'n, this guy must be a closet Redskin fan out here in Ram territory. Still, the small office generated a cozy, close aura.

Dressed in the same navy blue silk suit but with a matching scarlet blouse and belt, Ryz'n sat in the armchair nearest the desk. She wore her hair down, combed neatly in a flip with her trademark yellow-gold ribbon tied as a hair band. Sheena sat in the chair nearest the far wall by the curtained window with her long locks pulled tightly behind her into a pony-tail. Wearing a powder blue A-line skirt and a sky blue and white, snug mid-riff top with puffy shouldered, short sleeves, Sheena dressed more conservatively than she had on the flight out. The waist of her skirt just did cover her navel. Bill wheeled himself in between but somewhat behind the two women. He dressed similarly to the previous day. He rested his forearms on the green leather-padded arms of his chair, folding his hands together in his lap. Ryz'n waited patiently for the psychiatrist to resume.

"I first met him last September. In fact," Dr. Mandl tilted his grey bearded chin down onto to his chest and looked up over his black frame glasses rather surprised, "he was just in here a few weeks ago, for his quarterly review." The doctor stepped around behind his desk and sat down in his chair, from where he looked down upon the two women seated in the sawed- off visitor armchairs.

"Yes, he certainly is a difficult individual to forget. Physically, I mean, he stands out from the others. Then, too, he acts a little differently."

Ryz'n asked with concern, "What do you mean by that Doctor?" The doctor leaned forward in a confidential manner.

"You know, I'm not supposed to discuss my patients with anyone. However ... in this case," he stroked his graying goatee between his left thumb and forefinger, "given his amnesia and the evidence you have shown that this individual may, in fact, be your husband, I will, shall we say, bend that rule? Knowing him as I do, I feel he would want me to disclose the particulars of his case to you, especially, since it only stands to benefit him." Ryz'n nodded her concurrence to the doctor. He leaned back in his swivel chair, satisfied apparently that he at least had her approval if not that of the V. A.

Not unusually, the doctor leaned forward and proceeded in a clinical manner. With each point he made, he lightly tapped the varnished desktop with the middle three fingers of his right hand. "Now, to answer your question: Well, he is not—delusional." The gentleman tapped his fingers twice again. "He doesn't talk to himself (the sisters perked up to exchange glances with each other around Bill at that remark) or get overly excited, not manic anyway." Again, he tapped his fingers and proceeded to do so after each statement he made, as much out of habit Ryz'n surmised, as to drive home his points. "I've seen no clear signs of clinical depression either. Of course, he occasionally suffers from severe headaches and sometimes has difficulty falling asleep. But then, so do many people, who have never suffered his injury and two subsequent brain surgeries."

Concerned by the doctor's revelations, Ryz'n sat forward and placed her left hand over her mouth. "Hmmm. But don't be alarmed however, Miss. His headaches are decreasing in frequency, as well as in duration. He has been thoroughly examined many times, so there is no cause for concern on that score. And I have prescribed a mild sedative to help him sleep." He smiled softly at Ryz'n belaying her concern. She sat back a bit in her chair. "Surprisingly, once he does fall asleep he is able to reach REM sleep quickly and requires only three to five hours of rest. That is very rare."

"Well. Doctor I don't know what you mean by REM sleep, but before my husband left for the service, he could get by on two to three hours of sleep a night for a couple weeks straight. He never ceased to amaze me how he did it."

"Excuse me Ms. Sheeboom. REM stands for rapid eye movement sleep. It is the deepest of the various sleep stages, and is the one in which we dream. For some reason, James cycles through the various stages and acquires the REM stage for an inordinately long period very quickly. I don't know why that is.

"James also mentions that, occasionally, he has speech problems and writing is always very difficult for him. He has been visiting a speech therapist here in the hospital, Dr. Schwartz. But I believe she won't be in the hospital again until, umm ... let me see here." He moved some papers to the side of a small desk calendar and ran his right forefinger over the calendar. He stopped. "Yes, next Monday." Ryz'n interrupted his speech momentarily to make a note of the

therapist's name and date of her availability. She wrote down the information, using a ballpoint pen and a three by five-inch spiral flip pad, stored in her purse.

When she had completed her note, Dr. Mandl proceeded with his assessment of the Strickler kid.

"He sometimes blanks out for a few seconds, has trouble concentrating, 'zoning out' is the term he uses, but I've never witnessed him in that state. He's quiet, reserved—not resentful or hostile. He respects authority, as far as I can tell. Actually, I enjoy speaking with him. Ha! Counseling with Dixie is more like taking a coffee break with one of the other psychiatrists."

"Dixie? Why do you call him that, Dr. Mandl?"

"Did I say 'Dixie?'" The doctor chuckled. "I intended to say James, but 'Dixie' that's his nickname, which he prefers to James or Jim."

"Do you know how he received that nickname, Doctor?"

"I believe he said that, previously, he had been identified incorrectly as one James Dixon, another MIA. He assumed that identity until he found that he was, in fact, not James Dixon. His associates had taken to calling him 'Dixie', so he retained the nickname, but he changed his surname legally."

"To Strickler? Or to Stark?"

"Strickler, I assume. That's the name he's using presently, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. So doctor, you think he's perfectly normal and no threat to himself or anyone else?"

"Well Ma'am, he's not perfectly normal. No one, who cannot remember his identity, is normal. However, I definitely would not consider him a threat to anyone, including himself."

The doctor leaned back in his chair comfortably. "He's adjusting as well as could be expected under the circumstances, even better than could be expected."

"So he's OK? He just doesn't remember anything at all about who he really is, is that it?"

"Yes, yes that's most of it. Of course, there are the speech and writing difficulties I mentioned earlier. He was very fortunate to receive first rate care and speech therapy over in Manila, immediately after his surgery."

"Yes," admitted Ryz'n, "I've met with Lieutenant Rosario who was his nurse at that time, but I thought she had said Nick, er James, had overcome those problems ... " Distracted by the thought of Rose Rosario, Ryz'n's voice trailed off when she said, "Yes, I understand she gave him a lot off personal attention, far beyond what was required ... " The doctor apprehended Ryz'n's drifting.

"Well, you may be thankful she did, Ms. Sheeboom. He might never have regained his speech and writing abilities to the extent that he has, had she not taken such an interest in him so soon after the surgery. She also helped him learn how to walk, to take care of himself, his personal hygiene, I mean, as well as how to read and write. Unlike the amnesia victims you find in Hollywood films, Ma'am, true retrograde amnesiacs, particularly those who have experienced severe trauma like James, have to relearn everything they've forgotten if they are

to function in everyday society. Lieutenant Rosario you see, helped James with all that. She did a truly remarkable job. Either that or ... "

"Or?" repeated Ryz'n.

"Or, James has some kind of recall neither of us can recognize."

Ryz'n recovered enough to re-focus on the subject. "So now 'James,' as you call him, is able to function normally, despite his loss of memory?"

"Well mostly. You see, as I mentioned, James has certain communication problems. I don't consider them so severe as to be diagnosed as aphasia or agraphia, or possibly even, dysarthria. However, communication, via the written or spoken word, can prove at times to be quite taxing for James, particularly under conditions of stress. It's somewhat difficult to tell in James' case what the correct diagnosis truly is. Although I'm sure Dr. Schwarz, our speech pathologist, could explain these disorders to you much better than I."

This was news to Ryz'n. She knew from prior investigations that the individual she presumed to be Nick had had a speech impediment. She had learned that much from her interview with Lieutenant Rosario, but she had thought that problem had been cured. Ryz'n voiced her concern now.

"Well, can't you take a stab at it Doctor? I may not be here next Monday."

The graying, fifties psychiatrist with the ruddy complexion and grey-blue eyes, which were magnified by his eyeglasses, went on to explain that the evidence of the aphasia was predictable. It generally occurs when Dixie gets overly emotional, or excited or nervous. "Actually, there is a study ongoing at the Mayo Clinic right now by a brilliant doctor by the name of Darley. He is trying to pinpoint the type or characteristics of dysarthria to the location of the lesion within the brain, which is involved with impairment to the neuro-physiolocial ability to produce speech." Ryz'n blinked, as she arched her back more severely, to sit up even straighter than her normally impeccable posture.

"Whoa! I'm afraid you lost me there, Doctor. Could you slow down a little, please?" Dr. Mandl chuckled self-consciously, rose out of his chair and sidled around in front of his desk. Then the perky little man leaned back, with his butt resting on the front edge of the large desk, crossed his right foot over his left and folded his hands together below his belt in one large fist. He smiled beneficently.

"Excuse me. Let me try again, Ms. Sheeboom." Ryz'n nodded. "Well, the brain, as you know, is a highly complex mechanism and extremely delicate." He paused to see if Ryz'n were tracking with him. She was, so he resumed. "Assessing the extent of the damage is not always an exact science, nor is the extent of the recovery of the mental faculties that were injured. In James's case, his brain was penetrated by a bullet as well as by multiple surgeries to remove that bullet and any fragments of it. He suffered extreme edema, that is to say swelling, on those occasions. Exactly what brain cells were destroyed and how the missing or damaged cells will affect his long term memory and communication capabilities— Well, those are difficult questions to answer."

Again, he paused to study Ryz'n. whose serene countenance provided him the tacit approval he sought to persevere.

"See, we are unable to determine precisely all the cells that were destroyed, although we have a good idea. We also are aware of a hematoma, near the speech centers of his brain, which has been slowly dissolving over two years. It's possible that when that hematoma has dissolved completely, his communication problems may be reduced or eliminated. We're not sure. Probably, it's unlikely."

"Why is that, Doctor?"

"Well, you see when brain cells are deprived of oxygen even over a short period, let alone two years or more, those cells die. There is no replacing them. Whether or not those cells could have transferred their knowledge contents to other healthy cells before they died, we don't know. Given James's development to date that transference may have occurred already or he may not get any better. We just don't know. It depends on whether his brain can find new neural pathways to reach the cells containing the transferences. That is both for his memory recall as well as for his speech and writing capabilities.

"I recommended to James that he may want to visit the Mayo Clinic in Minneapolis. The doctor I mentioned previously, Doctor Darley, is doing some brilliant, ground-breaking research in this area. I believe he can determine at least what we are dealing with in James's case, aphasia or dysarthria. Darley is seeking patients for his research. I mentioned this to Dixie, uh James, also, but he was reluctant to be a 'guinea pig,' as he put it." Dr. Mandl, who was leaning back against the front of his desk, threw his hands in the air, as if to reinforce the idea that he had done all he could do to persuade James to visit the Mayo Clinic.

The psychiatrist repeated his earlier assertion that the evidence of the aphasia was predictable. Thus, there may be hope for Dixie to overcome his communications problems completely. They usually occur when Dixie gets overly emotional, or excited, which, from what he could ascertain, was seldom. And this is why, he asserted, James was purposefully phlegmatic in all things, in order to preclude embarrassing himself publicly.

"Well, he's going to college, Doctor. He must be passing his classes, or he couldn't play baseball. He must be communicating sufficiently for that, anyway."

"Yes, Ms. Sheeboom, you are correct." The psychiatrist laughed. "James is a very special character. He really is quite sharp, once you get past his communications problems. As I said, counseling him is more like having a cup of coffee with some of the other staff members. He has learned all the clinical terminology and talks about his own case in a most clinical manner, as if he were discussing another patient. I mean someone other than himself. He has become comfortable speaking with me, so he speaks without difficulty. Actually, sometimes I have to remind myself we are talking about James." The physician's grey-blue eyes twinkled through the thick lenses of his black frame glasses. In jest, he slapped both hands down against his thighs.

"I see. Doctor, is it possible the hematoma could be removed through surgery to expedite the process?" Dr. Mandl's jaw dropped and his eyes widened. Ryz'n surmised she had surprised the old man by her acerbic question.

"Why yes, yes it could Ms. Sheeboom, but who is to say another hematoma would not be created as a result of that surgery itself? You see Ma'am, James has indicated he wants no more brain surgery. And I can't really blame him for that," confessed the psychiatrist sympathetically. Ryz'n was still confused.

"But I don't understand Doctor. If he functions well enough to play baseball and attend college, how do his disabilities affect him adversely?"

Again, the doctor's eyes brightened. "Very good! That's another very good question, Ma'am." He smiled at Ryz'n, who tolerated his patronage. "I would say, primarily in the social and academic arenas from what I can ascertain. As I mentioned previously, when he gets emotionally stimulated, overtaxed or stressed, he tends to stutter or slur his words or both. Occasionally, he loses the very words he would like to speak. Consequently, he takes great pains to remain unruffled, unflappable, uh, unemotional. He speaks deliberately, even sparingly. Verbally, he does not react quickly to an interrogator, say to a superior, a professor or a drill sergeant, for instance. Neither does he respond well to taking a written exam. He is phlegmatic to a fault, which causes other to lose patience with him. The more he is forced to respond quickly, the more unable he is to respond at all. I believe this impediment was partially responsible for his medical discharge from the Corps for mental reasons—that and his brief but infrequent mental lapses. To preclude embarrassing himself, he remains a social wallflower, if you will."

"What would happen Doctor, if this, this impediment did not occur always? I mean if sometimes, he could respond normally in these kinds of emotional, stressful situations. After all, you say he has no problem speaking with you. Is there hope he could be cured?" Ryz'n' glanced to Sheena for her approval which she gave with a pert nod. Dr. Mandl furrowed his brow in contemplation.

"Possibly. I really don't know, Ma'am. Particularly, if those instances occurred with an increasing rate of frequency. It might indicate those cell transferences had occurred previously and he was learning to find them. Of course, when he visits me, there is no stress on him now. But I was explaining his symptoms ..."

"Oh, I'm sorry Doctor. Please go on."

"Well, that's all right Ms. Sheeboom." He smiled patronizingly at Ryz'n. Ryz'n knew he meant well, but she didn't appreciate his manner. Even so, she said nothing, so he resumed.

"You see his partial agraphia, rather his occasional writer's block, can become acute, especially under the pressure of taking a test. He sometimes resorts to drawing his own set of hieroglyphics to take notes or answer essay questions. He has a much easier time with multiple choice or True/False questions. However, for most college students, James's cumulative grade point average would be a source of embarrassment. For James, however, merely passing and being able to

maintain accreditation so he can play baseball, should be considered a point of pride. Though, to his credit, he does not share that conviction.

"From what he has told me, some professors are more receptive than others to his shortcomings. Funny thing is, he can draw and solve mathematical problems all right. I believe that is a testament to the therapy he received immediately after surgery that he has been able to progress so far, as well as to his own willingness to work, of course. Really, what James has accomplished thus far, in so brief a span, is nothing short of remarkable, truly remarkable." The doctor stared into space. Ryz'n pulled him back to earth.

"Doctor, are these speech and writing problems symptomatic of his amnesia?"

"Oh, only, in their root cause, Ma'am, which is to say both are symptomatic of the injuries to his brain. Neither one caused the other however, if that's what you mean. Nor will the cure of one necessarily invoke the cure of the other, if a cure is even possible. Although it would be interesting in James' case, to see what would happen if his memory were to return to him. When one is dealing with the human brain, one never knows." The doctor smiled down pleasantly at Ryz'n. He had given her reason to hope that Nicky, if this patient were her Nicky, could recover fully.

"So you think he may recover his memory, Doctor? What makes you think that he might?"

"Well, there is one, er, uh, a few things, actually ..." The doctor hesitated, seemingly uncertain whether he should proceed.

"Yes Doctor, what are they?" Ryz'n tried not to appear overly anxious.

"Well ... James has both anterograde and retrograde amnesia. He is unlikely ever to remember the immediate events leading up to the shooting." *Oh, praise God for that!* "Moreover, contrary to what you may have seen in romantic Hollywood films, amnesiacs like James have to relearn most of the basic functions that comprise their daily routine." The psychiatrist smiled smugly, proud to relate this fact, unwittingly, for the second time, noted Ryz'n. "To his tremendous credit, James has been able to do that with amazing alacrity. I believe those functions should have been relearned, not necessarily recalled. For him to be passing college level courses now after only two years of therapy is truly incredible! In fact, I would have said it was downright impossible."

"Yes Doctor, you have made those points already. The psychiatrists in Hawaii told me as much, also, but what about his recall?" Ryz'n was becoming impatient with the doctor's patronizing, bedside manner.

Covering his error, Dr. Mandl replied, "Oh yes, I apologize for repeating myself. I'm afraid that's an annoying tendency of mine." The doctor's chagrin registered plainly on his face and he stared off into space again. Ryz'n began to think this is the guy who needed the psychiatrist for his own 'zone outs'. However, she didn't let on and sought to redirect him.

"Oh, that's quite all right Doctor, I find myself doing the same thing at times." Ryz'n smiled winningly at the psychiatrist. "But you were saying why you thought he might regain his memory ... "

"Yes, yes. Very well then, Ma'am. There is something he remembers or thinks he remembers. Here I've got it in my folder on him, in here among my notes from our first meeting last September."

The psychiatrist walked around his desk briskly, unlocked and pulled out a drawer, evidently stocked with folders. He tilted his head back by raising his chin, enabling him to peer through the lower half of his lenses. He scanned intently through the folders and pulled one out of the drawer. He thumbed through the folder and began to speak without paying attention to his visitors.

"Some, as the Navy doctors did, might consider this phenomenon suggests Dixie is, uh, delusional, but I, I tend to disagree ... it's ah . . an isolated image, unique and ... oh, where are those notes?" He dug into the back of the manila file folder. " ... repeatable, always the same. Yes, let me see ... Ah yes! Here it is. He pulled out a single-sheet of legal pad paper. Now these are his words, so I quote:

> There is one thing, Doc. I just can't shake it and I can't break through anymore than what's there in my head. Often when I'm alone, especially at night after I've fallen asleep, I see this like dark background, and a full moon. Silver-like water shimmer off to the left. And there, silhouetted against the moon above me is the figure of a nude girl with long hair, like in profile. And I'm looking up at her, and she is larger than life. She is standing up, above me, profiled against the moon. Her features are clean and smooth. She's really built, Doc. Her waist is perfectly slim but she's proportioned, like Venus herself. Her body stands out sharp against the moonlight. But the thing is Doc, every time I go to reach for her, the mist envelops her. Then, she evaporates like a mirage into the mist, right before my eyes, just as I'm about to take hold of her. Sometimes afterwards, Doc I, uh, well …

The doctor chuckled to himself and continued to stare, apparently wistfully, at the paper before him when he spoke.

"He stopped there. No doubt many young men have similar dreams with similar results." He chuckled. Then he looked up to Ryz'n. "And those were my exact words to him, also, Ms. Sheeboom." Dr. Mandl looked then at Bill for some male understanding. "I told him the dream was normal and healthy and not to worry about it." Bill blinked his eyes and half-smiled. "However, then," added the psychiatrist, "he said something very curious. He said, let me see, he said, here ... " He returned his attention to his notes.

> But Doc, you don't understand. I don't just dream it, but I actually see her sometimes when I'm awake. That's when I have

those ‘zone out’ spells. It’s not that I blank out so much, as I just see her. I see the silhouette girl. I never know when this might happen. But I always reach for her through the mist, just as she vanishes like a mirage.

Again, the psychiatrist chortled lightly. “Such ‘zone-outs’, as he calls them were the primary reasons for his medical discharge—along with his communications difficulties.”

The doctor’s story was too much for Ryz’n. She broke down, whimpering in a subdued manner, her face in her hands, hiding behind her pink polished nails.

“Miss? I mean Ms. Sheeboom, what’s wrong? What is it?”

Ryz’n collected herself. “Oh, Doctor ... I, I am that ... that ‘silhouette girl.’ You see, that was the first time, the very first time that ... Nick-Nicky and I ... Well, we were down at the beaver ponds by La Placa and ... ” Ryz’n lowered her eyes. “The same beaver ponds where we lost our ... our baby, our unborn baby three months later.” Ryz’n struggled to restrain her emotions, but it was difficult for her. Sheena left her chair to kneel next to Ryz’n and console her sister.

Leaning forward on the arms of his wheelchair, Bill interrupted the awkward silence that followed, permitting Ryz’n time to recover. “Doctor, do you know where we can find him and, when we do find him, will his memory return?”

“Regarding your first question, all I know, sir, is what is in the file there, nothing more. He’s attending Peppermount University on a baseball scholarship. However, school is out for the summer and the season is over. He didn’t mention anything to me about his summer plans. His next appointment with me is scheduled for September 4th at three p. m. I expect him to keep that appointment, as he has all the others. As far as your second question is concerned, I really don’t know. I realize that’s not much help to you, but these amnesia cases are very unpredictable.

“I’ve seen situations where the amnesic recovers completely upon first finding his loved ones. I’ve seen situations where they never recover. I’ve seen cases where they recover their memory fully or in part sometime in the future. Usually, the amnesic recovers when there is something, anything, you never can predict what it might be, which triggers that recall. Often, the earliest memories are recalled first. The “silhouette girl,” if it is in fact a memory, runs contrary to that trend, but then it must be an extremely powerful image for him. Of course, if his memory cells were destroyed by the gunshot wound to the head or by the subsequent life-saving surgeries to remove the bullet fragments and their contents were never transferred, then he will never recall. He won’t recall then, because those cells would have been destroyed forever. Then the silhouette girl would be merely a figment of his imagination.”

Having dabbed her eyes with a Kleenex from her handbag, Ryz’n asked, “But Doctor, if he remembers me silhouetted against the moon, that would indicate he still retains those memory cells, wouldn’t it?”

"Yes, yes it would or some of them anyway. However, young lady, I must caution you, whom he remembers, may not be you. It may not be a memory. It may be something he imagined or someone else he has known, uh, since his brain surgery. It might be someone he knows with whom he is unable to connect with the girl in his vision." Ryz'n became anxious, placing her hands down upon either arm of the chair and half rising from her seat.

"But has he ... has he mentioned anyone else?" Her voice tremored with anxiety. "Surely, if that image in his brain were of someone he knew, he would have told you. He might have even sought her out by now."

"That's very possible, Ma'am, but as of my last session with him, he had not found her. As far as I could ascertain, he has no idea who she might be. If he has, he hasn't told me about her. For your sake, I hope that she is still a mystery for him. I hope you are the "silhouette girl." I hope you find James and that he is your husband. I hope you bear children to make up for the one you lost." He smiled limply. "However, I would be giving you false hope by misrepresenting the facts ... There is, however, one other encouraging factor."

Ryz'n sank back slowly into the chair and looked hopefully at the doctor. Sheena, likewise, returned to her seat. "Yes?" Asked Ryz'n tentatively.

"Since our first meeting last September, James has reported other, well, unusual thoughts for lack of a better description."

"Such as?"

"He has recalled, or seen in his mind's eye, certain colorful patterns."

"Patterns?"

"Yes, that's right. Designs. Let me see here." The doctor returned to the folder and pulled out some more notes. "Yes, here we are. He says that he occasionally sees such things in his mind as short, squat boxes or rectangles, black, red and grey in hue on a dirty white background. Black and white mosaics as well as a blue grill containing dark horizontal lines have appeared to him as well, as has a white box with streaks. He has also envisioned white squares with little round, tan holes evenly spaced throughout those squares. Here, he has drawn them out. Do any of those objects prompt your memory at all?" The doctor pulled some sheets of lined paper from Strickler's folder and offered them to Ryz'n.

She inspected the pen and ink sketches thoroughly without positive results.

"No, no I'm afraid they don't. I wish I could, I ... " She returned the sketches to the psychiatrist. Ryz'n frantically searched round the room for help. "Is there anything else you can tell us Doctor that might give me just a clue as to what those objects and patterns refer?"

"No, I'm sorry. I'm hopeful those patterns have something to do with his early childhood. If I learn of anything more that may help, please leave me your name and phone number, so I may get in touch with you. I will be meeting with James again in three months. I'm certain you will have found him by then. If not, I will direct him to you. Of that, you may be certain ...

"Oh yes, there is one other thing, Ms. Sheeboom. If you locate James and he slurs his words or stutters, or has trouble finding the right words, please be patient with him. Don't talk down to him. Listen patiently. Repeat yourself if necessary and make use of facial, body and hand expressions. Encourage him to do likewise. But don't pity him or patronize him. He's a man, not a little boy. You understand, I'm sure?"

The doctor stood up, smiling, offering her his hand in parting, signaling their conference had ended. Ryz'n agreed, and gave him one of her business cards, adding her parents' home phone number on the back. That was the one constant number she had. Even if she weren't there, her parents could always get in touch with her. Ryz'n shook his hand in parting, as did Sheena and Bill in turn. As they were exiting the office, the doctor checked them at the door with a final thought.

"Mrs. Sheeboom?"

The last to leave, Ryz'n turned around as she reached the office doorway and raised her eyebrows.

"Please take heart. There are two factors in your favor, Ma'am."

"Yes, and what might those factors be, Doctor?"

"First, James speaks like you. By that, I mean his accent is very similar to yours. He does not speak like a Filipino or a Hawaiian or a Californian for that matter, even though he had to teach himself to speak English again in those parts of the world. That's very curious. It not only indicates he probably comes from your neck of the woods, but also that he has some subconscious recall he doesn't even realize himself. Second," the doctor paused to choose his words carefully. He looked away and then back to her. "Ms. Sheeboom, please don't think me forward but … you are the stuff of which young men's dreams are made."

"Pardon me, doctor?" Dr. Mandl smirked wanly.

"I mean, except for your diminutive stature, you fulfill the description of the "silhouette girl" admirably. You could very easily be she." His smirk vanished.

Ryz'n felt her face flush. She knew what the doctor meant. Since she had lost her weight and been on tour with the band, she had received many compliments on her hourglass figure, in polite as well as in crude means. However, she had never expected so overt a compliment from a middle-aged VA psychiatrist.

"Thank you, Doctor. I know that I am she, as well." She smiled demurely and turned again to leave, but the physician arrested her once more.

"Mrs. Sheeboom?"

"Yes?"

"James is an amazing individual. If he possibly can recall you, I am confident he will do so." The psychiatrist smiled reassuringly.

"Yes, I pray he will. Thank you for your time, Doctor, and for bending the rules a bit. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

* * *

The trio picked up Esther from her nurse's station in the paraplegic ward. The cute, trim nurse escorted all of them through the ward, where Bill proudly introduced the Ryan sisters to some of the patients and the hospital staff. He wanted to show off the girls and provide a pleasant diversion for the bed patients. Ryz'n had visited there previously. She had learned how to overlook the tragedies that played out before her eyes, as their visiting party moved from one misfortunate hospital bed to the next. She had learned how to ignore the foul odors that emanated from the ward and to focus on each patient individually. Ryz'n greeted each man with her dimpled smile, offering them her hand as well as a warm greeting, as if each of these poor souls was her long, lost friend.

From the corner of her eye, Ryz'n could tell Sheena was taken aback by the whole, pitiful scene. However, Ryz'n motioned for Sheena to imitate her as best as she could. Later, Sheena told Ryz'n that when she did greet one of the "boys" warmly, she received, in return, the patient's priceless, overwhelming smile and an unusually warm, glowing feeling seeped into her soul. Though it was no stranger to Ryz'n, Sheena said that warm inner glow was foreign yet most welcome to her.

Some of the "boys" had recognized the Ryan sisters from their Rock'N'Roll album covers or their live performances. They had requested a song. The girls complied, singing two of Ryz'n's first compositions: "Pinch Myself" and "Husband Mine." They had sung without accompaniment, but they sang from the heart. Enthusiastic applause from the ward's patients thanked the girls warmly for their efforts. Uncle Bill thanked them also and remarked that he was doubly proud of "his girls."

~ Chapter 7: Peppermount ~

After their visit to the ward, Bill made arrangements over the phone to have lunch with his friend Bunnie. Bunnie owned a beach home up the coast in Malibu, just below Peppermount University. They thanked Esther for her invaluable assistance and Bill drove his guests out to Bunnie's Malibu beach house. Bill told the girls, he thought it would be unlikely the Peppermount coach would be in his office during the lunch hour. He suggested they would be better off seeing the coach just after the noon hour. Ryz'n was uncomfortable with Bill's decision, because the trail was hot and she wanted to press on. From her conversation with that Booger yesterday, she remembered the coach was due back to the campus today. W*e're so close now*. However, Bill had been so kind to them, she did not want to disagree. Bill pointed out the university, atop a palisade, as they arrived in Malibu on Highway 101. Ryz'n saw the school sat upon a plateau or bluff just above Bunnie's beach home, as Bill had described it.

Ryz'n had learned Bunnie's history from Bill on her previous visits to L. A. with *GRT*. A former showgirl, Bunnie had married during the Second World War out of show business to a very successful businessman. Her husband was a millionaire many times over. The beach house was one of three homes that the middle-aged, childless couple owned. Their Beverly Hills home backed up to the famous Wilshire Country Club, of which Bunnie and her spouse were card-carrying members. Their other home was in the desert at Palm Springs. But Bunnie didn't give a hoot for the country club set or any of that fancy social scene, except to the extent it could help her raise money for her "boys," the paralyzed war vets at the Long Beach hospital.

Like Bill, Bunnie was a transplanted Iowan, close to fifty, who easily could have passed for forty. She was a big hearted blonde with an even bigger smile. Her passion in life was to help the "boys," who had been paralyzed in the service to their country. The paraplegic ward at the VA hospital in Long Beach was her number one group of "boys." She had donated the dialysis unit operated by the hospital. Bunnie had obtained the "good Samaritan" bug during the war when she participated in USO shows for the studio. She had helped Bill out many times at Long Beach. Bunnie routinely let the boys take "R&R" in her Malibu beach home, allowing them to fish off the back deck into the Pacific Ocean below. Then she would wine and dine her paralyzed guests by preparing surf and turf, wine dinners. She never sought any personal gain from her philanthropy. Her heart was pure gold. Like Ryz'n, she was the type of individual who merely liked to help. She had even helped Ryz'n to locate a PI to help Ryz'n find Nick. Ryz'n knew people like Bunnie were rare commodities.

Even so, Bunnie's earlier efforts to help Ryz'n find her husband had proven fruitless. Her PI had come up empty. It was difficult to comprehend, given Nick's unique physical appearance, unless, of course, as everyone told her, Nick were dead in Nam, a hypothesis Ryz'n had refused to accept.

Ryz'n, Bill and Sheena arrived at the Malibu beach home to find that Bunnie, not the servants, but Bunnie herself, had prepared a feast. There were hamburgers, hot dogs, chicken, ribs. It was incredible. She had cooked them all on her grill out on her spacious deck, which is where they ate. From the front, the two story adobe home with the red tiled roof was almost obscured by the squat multi-car garage, which was made of the same materials as the home. But inside, the home was spacious. Everything was in white: the walls, the furniture, the carpet and the ceiling. The opaque whiteness of the interior became more than a decorative ploy. The total whiteness produced a sanguine, free and open atmosphere, a way of seeing and feeling, everything as larger than life.

The four of them sat and ate on a redwood deck which lagged over half the width of the home's back side. The foursome overlooked the mesmerizing deep, blue Pacific Ocean. From their vantage point, they could watch the Hollywood celebrity set stroll up and down the beach during the Friday lunch hour, as though it were a grand boulevard. Sheena was favorably impressed, but Ryz'n merely picked at her food quietly. Her lack of appetite was obvious to the others.

"What's the matter, Honey?" asked Bunnie genuinely concerned for her young guest. "Are you not feeling well? Would you like to lie down in the bedroom for a while?" Bunnie's, frosted, sunny blonde hair piled high on her head in a twist. She dressed in white cotton peddle pushers, white opened toed, low-heeled, leather sandals and a light blue, front-buttoned cotton shirt. Her tapered shirt tail hung stylishly over her slacks and her sleeves were rolled quarter way up her arms. She reached out from her seat to place her hand upon Ryz'n's forearm and blinked sincerely, as she awaited a response from her young guest. Embarrassed at having worried her kind hostess, Ryz'n looked down at her plate and spoke without looking at Bunnie.

"No Ma'am. I just want to find Nicky. That's all. We're so close now. I can't think about anything else. I can't eat." She dropped her fork and raised up to meet Bunnie's sympathetic eyes. "I'm sorry you went to such trouble, Ma'am."

Bunnie set her half-eaten hamburger down, with her janglely twin bracelets, filled with precious stones, clattering to the deck table. She got up out of her seat to comfort the young woman, as if Ryz'n had been her own daughter.

"Why it's no trouble at all Sweetie and, of course, you're absolutely right!" Bunnie smiled brightly. "And you're such a cutie, too." The older woman stroked Ryz'n's double layered cheek and hugged Ryz'n's shoulders. She pressed her cheek to Ryz'n's, as her golden diamond necklace caught for an instant on Ryz'n's chin. "Of course, Baby, of course, you're right. Well, I think we should all go up the hill and see this, this coach."

Ryz'n asked perplexed, "You mean, right now?"

"Why, of course, right now, Honey." Bunny shook her head once jiggling her matching set of golden diamond ear rings. "Why, having lunch at a time like this was inconsiderate of me. Please forgive me, Dear. Let's get up there right away, 'toute de suite,' as the French say." She smiled pleasantly. "We'll get to the bottom of this thing right now." The blonde do-gooder may have dressed as simply chic as any of the Malibu crowd, but her kind consideration now showed Ryz'n, she was still a simple Iowa farm girl at heart. Bunnie smacked her right fist into the palm of her open left hand for emphasis, jangling her bracelets again.

"Bill?"

Bill had a mouthful of chicken and ribs. He swallowed as quickly as he could, coughing out a reply. "Gee, Bunnie, I can finish this plate off in five minutes."

"Willie, we've made this poor girl wait long enough! Over three years! But not another minute! Now, let's make a move! Let's rattle and roll." She clapped her hands together for emphasis. "Come on now Willie, let's get a move on!"

Ryz'n quickly dropped some honey from the vial in her purse onto her tongue. With Bunnie scolding and pushing, Bill and Sheena scarfed down their meals as best as they could, before they all piled into Bill's black Caddy. Bunnie and Ryz'n sat in front with Bill while Sheena sat in the back with Bill's chair in it's customary parking spot, folded behind the back of the driver's seat.

Although the small university sat directly above Bunnie's beach house, high on a plateau which cut into the side of a palisade, the searchers had to backtrack down the coast highway to the nearest cross street. There, they climbed almost vertically, to reach the university campus. When they arrived, Ryz'n thought, oh, what a beautiful ocean view that campus enjoyed! The morning fog-smog had burned off, revealing the dark blue Pacific with its white-capped waves below them. Ryz'n even stopped for a minute to admire the view.

"If this is where Nicky is going to school,' she murmured more to herself than the others, "he sure picked a lovely place. I can't imagine getting any class work done in a setting like this."

The foursome made their way amidst the palm trees and fragrant, blooming jasmine and roses to the administration building, where they obtained a campus map. The map also contained directions to the field house and the coaches' offices. They found a note taped to the coach's door.

Gone to lunch. Back at one. See Booger in the trainer's room, if you need help right away.

It was about twenty-five minutes to one. Bill looked at them, knowingly. Ryz'n, feigning innocence, stared at the ground away from his accusatory gaze. She chewed sheepishly on her right thumb and twirled her engagement ring about her finger anxiously with her left. Bill did not say anything. He did not have to.

In a loud voice, Bunnie startled them all, "Oh be quiet Bill. Let's go find this Booger character."

Bill protested, "But I didn't say a word."

"You didn't have to. With that look on your puss, we all heard you loud and clear. Now come on. Where do you suppose these trainer's facilities are, anyway?" Bill relinquished his anger to follow the determined women.

The foursome roamed the field house halls, until they heard the sound of distant, echoing voices coming from behind a closed door of the men's locker room. Ryz'n tiptoed between the maze of lockers and benches to the back of the room. Behind her, the others followed the trail of male voices through the locker aisles to a closed, smaller room on the opposite side of the lockers, near the showers. The sound of male voices grew louder as the foursome approached a closed, white pine door at the rear of the locker room. Ryz'n started to knock on the door. She thought she recognized Booger's high pitched cackle.

She whispered, "That Booger is one of the characters I spoke with on the phone yesterday. Think that's him talking now. Be real curious to see what he looks like." She knocked on the extra wide, varnished pine door, and pulled the large handle, swinging the door open.

Ryz'n led the way, by sticking her head inside the trainer's room.

"Hello?" she called skeptically.

She knocked on the doorframe. There were three individuals within. One, a muscular red haired kid with freckles, stood on the far side of the room. Wearing gym trunks and a grey sweatshirt with the arms torn off at the shoulders, he was hooked up to some apparatus that enabled him to pull on a ring attached to weights behind him. Another shaggy, dark-haired kid sat in a whirlpool bath with his bare left arm resting on the top of either side of the stainless steel tub. His right arm and shoulder dipped into the tub, out of sight. The third kid had frizzy reddish brown hair. He was about five feet six inches short and appeared to weigh about a hundred twenty pounds. The shrimp dressed in a uniform-like silver slacks with a purple stripe down the outside of the pant leg, black coach's sneakers and a grey T-shirt. He was folding and stacking clean towels on some shelves, near a three-foot high tray on wheels upon which rested a black phone.

Dark looks overcame their faces when Ryz'n popped her head though the doorway. Apparently, they were all shocked to see a woman in their private, male domain. However, when they saw how beautiful Ryz'n was, the faces of all but the littlest one brightened considerably. The little one assumed authority by puffing himself up like a toad.

"Who do you think you are, coming in here? This facility is off limits to females. Ya better scram." Ryz'n could tell he had deepened his voice artificially, because she recognized it immediately as that of Booger. Ryz'n pushed the door open, revealing Sheena, Bill and Bunnie who stepped just across the threshold into the crowded room.

"Oh?" Ryz'n feigned surprise. "You don't have any female athletes here who require the use of the trainer's facilities?" She appeared dismayed.

"Well, uh, sure. We have a couple I guess, but they don't come in here. They take care of themselves, uh, somewheres else, I guess." Ryz'n clucked her tongue repeatedly.

"Now that hardly seems fair, does it?"

The kid in the whirlpool grew bold. "Sure Baby, you can come in here anytime you want. Maybe you wanna hop in this tub with me, right now. Fix what ails ya, know what I mean?"

Ryz'n recognized his voice as the rude one on the phone yesterday. The little guy, she recognized as Booger. She noticed ice in a bucket. An idea occurred to her, but she needed to get some information first.

Bunnie rebuked the boy. "Sonny, that's not being very polite. I think you should watch your mouth around we ladies."

The brash kid shot right back at her.

"Why, I don't know how much friendlier I could be, lady. I don't offer to share my tub with just anyone, you know?"

The red haired kid back against the far wall cracked up, while the brash kid chuckled at his own wit. Ryz'n cut through the bull.

"Booger! I spoke with you yesterday on the phone, just about 24 hours ago, as a matter of fact. I was in Maryland then. I'm here now. And I would like some answers to some questions about this Strickler kid who plays ball for you."

"Maryland? Yesterday? Gee, lady, I, I didn't know you was serious about that. I thought you was just one of them chicks wanted to get into Dixie's pants after they seen him on TV."

The other two cracked up. Booger turned towards them, laughing nervously, before he returned his attention to Ryz'n.

"Honest, lady. You gotta believe me."

The whirlpool kid volunteered, "Yeah, me too, I never figure–"

Ryz'n cut him off quickly, "Booger, YOU, I believe. But it's all right. It's okay. Just tell me where Nicky, I mean, this Strickler fellow is or give me a number at which I may reach him. That's all I want."

The whirlpool kid mimicked Ryz'n sarcastically, "Oooh, 'at which I may reach him.' Now that's impressive, ain't it Doc?" The befreckled, red head behind him suddenly displayed a sober expression, apparently realizing now Ryz'n meant business. He kept silent.

Again, Ryz'n ignored the brash kid. She concentrated on Booger.

"Booger, you are in charge when the coach is out, are you not?"

"Well ... yes Ma'am. That's a fact. I am." Puffing up his chest, he jabbed a quick sideways glance towards the kid in the whirlpool. "But I don't know where Dixie is or how to get hold of him. The Coach might know. He just went over to the Porpoise Pen to get a bite to eat. He'll be back by one."

"None of you know where, uh, 'Dixie' is or how I could get hold of him?" The other two merely shook their heads negatively, suspiciously.

"Look here fellas, I'm not trying to hurt him. I'm here to help him. Y'all should want to help him overcome his amnesia, too."

"What amnesia?" asked the brash one.

"His amnesia, you know from his head wounds?"

"We don't know nothin' of the kind. Dix is a regular guy, just like the rest of us. He ain't got no amnesia. His head is fine!"

"Oh really? You know that for a fact, do you? Ever hear him talk about his family or where he grew up?"

"Maybe. So what of it? Dix is from Honolulu. We all know that. Ain't that right, Doc?"

Doc nodded, but Booger said, "Yeah, but that's all we know. Never heard him talk about his home, at all, never! And he is scarred up all over his neck, ear, shoulder. You know he's missing a chunk out of his butt and one of his nuts. And them fingers, too!"

Doc spoke for the first time.

"That's right, Moon. Booger's right. Look lady, we'd like to help you but Dix is kind of quiet. He don't hang with the rest of us much. He don't talk much. I know he likes to go up to Vegas and gamble some, whenever he gets the chance. Last summer, he played ball down in Diego. I guess he's either gone to Vegas for vacation or back to Diego to play ball or maybe, maybe, he went back home to the Islands. That's all I know, all any of us knows. He still has another two years of eligibility, so he'll be back next fall. Other than that, I don't know nothin.'"

"Hey, doesn't Dix have some chick down South?" asked the kid in the whirlpool with a smug look on his face. "Yeah, he was shacked up with her. Sure he was. I remember, she had a couple kids, black kids, too! We saw 'em at the tournament when we played ball down there over spring break, remember?"

Doc shook his head in disgust.

"You know Mooney, you can be a real a-hole sometimes, you know that?" Moon chuckled contentedly.

Bravely, Ryz'n held her seething emotions in check and spoke up.

"Was this woman older? Say, late twenties and blonde, about five-nine or ten and heavily endowed?"

Doc looked to Booger. Ryz'n could tell from the looks on their faces that her description had been accurate.

"Heavily what?" asked Booger.

"Real big in the chest," replied Ryz'n.

Booger's eyes widened and he confessed, "Oh yeah, that sounds like her all right. Sure does, especially that emboweled part. She's even more emboweled than you are!" Booger spoke in all sincerity. Doc nodded to confirm Booger's assessment. Ryz'n turned to Bill.

"Darn it, Bill! She lied to us. That Dixon woman lied to us last winter! There was one minute, just one, when I thought—" Ryz'n caught herself, regained her composure and turned back to the ball players.

"Well, look fellas. You said this, this Dixie, didn't talk much. Did he ever sing, play a harmonica, guitar or anything?" They shook their heads.

"No Ma'am. I never heard him sing, not even in the shower with the other guys, not on the bus, never." Booger turned to the others. "How 'bout you guys, ever hear him sing?" They shook their heads once more.

Doc confirmed. "No, never heard him sing. He don't even laugh much, come to think of it. He's kind of strange, keeps to himself mostly. I roomed with him a couple times on the road. In Vegas, he took me into the casinos. He has a system that works. He always came out with more cash than he had to start. He explained it to me, how it works, something about odds and number of face cards and stuff, but I didn't quite figure it all out."

"Ok, one more thing, guys: Take a look at these pictures and tell me if they look like this Dixie character?"

Ryz'n pulled out three pictures of Nicky from her small purse. There was the one she took of him at the beaver ponds leaning up against the "Bonnie," their old aquamarine '67 Pontiac Bonneville, before they had totaled it. There was a wedding picture of just the two of them, and there was a picture of him as the Pocomoke baseball MVP taken in his high school baseball uniform wearing his cap over his long black locks, in his batting stance, holding a bat. She handed the photos to Booger. He looked the first two pictures over, remarking that they looked like they could be Dix's younger brother, but the third picture froze him.

"Yeah, this is Dix, before he got messed up, I guess, when he was younger. Definitely! He holds the bat like that and everything. Here, look guys!"

The other two looked over the pictures and concurred with Booger. The brash Mooney studied the wedding picture hard. He looked at Ryz'n who was wearing a smug, satisfied grin on her face, then he glanced back to the picture a couple times. He looked at her rings. Then he eyed Ryz'n up and down real hard.

"Well, leave something on me Moon or I might catch cold!" Ryz'n was indignant at his unsolicited, lascivious stare.

"Gee lady, I, I'm sorry, I'm sorry I was such a jerk. I, I had no idea. I-"

Ryz'n cut him off again.

"Oh, that's all right Moon." As she spoke, with one hand she snatched the photos smartly from his fingers and with the other hand Ryz'n scooped a bucket into a deep tray full of ice. Then Ryz'n dumped the ice and the bucket over the young man's head and into his lap.

"I forgive you, really, I do, Moon."

As Moon screamed, Ryz'n placed the photos between her lips and dried off her hands. She mumbled.

"Thanks, fellas. I appreciate all the help." Ryz'n removed the photos from her mouth to speak more clearly. "By the way, if you happen to see me around

campus here next year with my husband, we'll just forget all about this little gathering, shall we?"

The other two nodded. Mooney cursed and picked ice cubes out of his bath. He tried to throw some ice at Ryz'n with his sore wing, but came up short, wincing in pain.

* * *

Ryz'n's crew left the field house to head back to this Porpoise Pen cafe, when they literally bumped into a dark haired, short, wiry man. Ryz'n took a small chance when she saw that he was wearing a purple and silver baseball cap with a silver 'P' on the front.

"Excuse me, are you the Baseball Coach?"

"Yes, I'm Tom Trahorn. Something I can do for you, Miss?" Tom Trahorn was a short, slender man with broad shoulders and narrow hips. His neatly barbered, dark hair was cropped short. He was clean shaven with firm, square jaw and a five o'clock shadow that ran ahead of schedule. His beaked nose appeared to have been broken on more than one occasion. His eyes were small, hard black coals, roofed by short, thin, black brows. Well tanned, the lines in his forehead and around the corners of his eyes placed him in his mid to late forties. That was Ryz'n's guess anyway.

Ryz'n introduced herself, as well as the others. Then she stated her business, showing the Coach the three photographs. He studied them hard, lingering over the third as his boys in the training room had done just moments earlier. Concern spread across his face as he looked directly at Ryz'n.

"Hmm, obviously he's grown up some. Yes! Well, why don't we go into my office where we can talk, Mrs. , uh, it is Mrs. Sheeboom, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right, Coach." Ryz'n smiled the three dimpled version, hoping to dispel his anxiety whatever it might be.

"Any relation to the Rock'N'Roller?"

"Yes, Coach. We're one in the same." Ryz'n smiled courteously.

"I see. I see. Well, good, won't you come with me, please?" He held his hand out, back toward the field house they had just left. The coach led them into his office, which was located on the first floor. The twenty by fifteen-foot square room was plainly furnished and contained a large walk-in closet and a couple of book shelves, filled with textbooks and pictures, mostly team picture. The office enjoyed a lovely view of the campus' grassy quadrangle from a long window six-foot high, which ran nearly the width of the room. The floor was a silver linoleum. It featured a sizable, purple "***P***", centered in the midst of four one foot square blocks that lay between his desk and the visitor chairs. Ryz'n thought the Spartan accommodations well suited a baseball coach.

Circa 1950, the metal furniture made the room appear more like a government office. The chairs had green plastic-like seat cushions built into the metal frames and elbow cushions plastered to the grey, metal arm rails. The airy seat backs were punctuated by three vertical metal bars. The austere furnishings struck

Ryz'n oddly because they were in sharp contrast to Dr. Mandl's comfortable office furnishings. Ryz'n reasoned that, compared to psychiatrists, coaches must spend little time in their offices.

Upon Coach Trahorn's desk was a can of pencils and pens, a legal pad, a plain black desk phone set, a large rolodex holding hundreds of cards and a picture frame. Ryz'n could see only the back of the frame. The Venetian blinds were pulled practically up to the ceiling, affording them a fair view of the campus's grassy quadrangle. The coach had only two visitor chairs, so Sheena had to stand, while Ryz'n and Bunnie sat down. Bill, of course, had his chair with him.

Coach Trahorn sat behind his desk and listened to everything Ryz'n had to say. His demeanor told Ryz'n that she had made her case well. This was no prank and she was not some bimbo looking to bed his star ballplayer. The coach leaned forward, resting his forearms on his desktop. He opened his hands and spread his fingers such that he could bounce his finger and thumb tips from one hand against their counterparts on the other. He stared into his desk for a minute before he stopped and pressed his fingers together. He looked up to Ryz'n.

"Look, Mrs. Sheeboom. I'll help you all I can, but, I'll tell you honestly, right up front, I don't know where Dix went." He hesitated and looked out the window at the quad. "Well, that's not exactly true. He was supposed to play summer ball for this friend of mine down in La Jolla, but Dix said he couldn't do it this year. He left me this note. Said he had 'some personal business to take care of' first." The coach turned back to Ryz'n. "Those were his exact words, Ma'am. Here …" The coach reached inside his top desk drawer to produce an envelope containing a single piece of plain note paper. "Here it is." The coach handed the note over to Ryz'n for inspection. She opened it to read as follows:

Coach, something's come up. Got some personal business to take care of. Don't believe I'll be playing summer ball. Not around here anyways, but maybe back East. If it's possible, I'll play. Have a great summer. See you in September. Dix

Ryz'n was shocked at the neat, legible handwriting. Nicky never wrote like that. He couldn't even read his own handwriting half the time. Nick's philosophy was that writing neatly took too much time and effort for too little result. The fact that he indicated he was headed east, however, she believed to be an encouraging sign. She wondered what it was that had "come up?"

"I emphasized how important it was that he play summer ball to improve for next season," advised the Coach. "You know Miss, we came this close to winning the whole enchilada this year. We were almost there!" The Coach held his right forefinger and thumb so close together they nearly touched. "Dix was a big part of our success. I mean a big part. He was our MVP, far and away, above

the others. I, uh ... I'd sure hate to lose him for next year. Uh, if you know what I mean, Miss?"

The light went on inside Ryz'n's head. The coach was afraid this Dixie character might truly be her Nicky and that she might take his star player back East with her.

"Yes Coach, I think I know exactly what you mean. Actually, you might be interested to know that I have been accepted to three graduate schools, one of which is UCLA's school of business. I happen to be a diver with a year of eligibility left, myself. I've done pretty well in NAIA competition. This, Peppermount, is an NCAA school, isn't it Coach?"

The Coach nodded.

"And you have a co-ed swimming and diving team?"

"Yes, we're a member of the West Coast Conference.".

"Well, as an honors student, I was also accepted into the graduate school of business at Stanford. If Peppermount has a similar school, well maybe, I could apply for the fall term. What do you think, Coach? You sure have a beautiful view of the Pacific here. Do you think, I'd have a chance at being accepted here at Peppermount?" The coach brightened noticeably.

"I think you would have no trouble whatsoever in being accepted here Miss, none whatsoever," he glowed. "Tell you what. I'll personally escort you over to the admission's office right now to insure you get everything you need to apply."

"Well thank you, Coach. That's very considerate of you, very considerate, indeed. Before we do that, however, is there anything else you can tell me that might help me to find my husband, I mean, uh, 'Dixie?'" He raised a forefinger and lowered his head as he reached for the phone.

"Hold on one second. Let me make a phone call."

He picked up the phone to dial long distance.

"You know I've always been afraid something like this might happen with Dix. My fortune in finding him has been just too good to be true." Ryz'n and her crew waited patiently as he dialed the number. The coach spoke into the receiver.

"Hello Clyde? Hey, you old so and so, how ya been?" ... "Yeah, for sure. The kids really surprised me this year. I tell you that Strickler kid, just would not let us lose. He damned near pulled out that last one against Texas, too" ... "Yeah. Look, Clyde, Strickler is the reason I'm calling. He's supposed to play for you this summer, so I was wondering if he had shown up yet." ... "Oh yeah? I see, unh-hunh. Did he say where? ... When? ... Uh-hunh? He will?" ... "All right. Thanks, much Clyde. Best of luck this summer." ... . "OK. Yeah, yeah" ... Will do and say hello to Edith for me." ... "Right. Same to you. Bye." The coach hung up the phone with a wry smile and shook his head.

"Well, that was Clyde Wryde." The coach's face came alive. "He's a colorful character. Ha!"

The coach smiled and cleared his throat, getting back to the business at hand.

"Clyde coaches the La Jolla Hammers amateur baseball team. Dix played for them last summer."

("La Jolla!" It's all fitting together.)

"He's supposed to play with them again this year, but he ain't. Dix told Clyde the same thing he told me. 'Personal Business!' Evidently, Dix informed Clyde that he had been to some record company, where Dix had obtained a lead that would help him find out about his past. It's kinda funny ya know, because I didn't even know Dix was an amnesic, until I questioned him once. That was after I saw that he had listed me as his next of kin as well as his emergency point of contact on our medical forms. Ha! Darned kid!"

The coach smiled faintly, as he shook his head at the memory. "Anyway, Dix has gone 'back East somewhere to find [his] past.' Clyde said those were Dixie's exact words. So that pretty much confirms the note, you're holding." The coach was leaning forward on his forearms with his hands clasped together on his desktop around a yellow pencil. Suddenly, he grew anxious as his brow furrowed and he looked away from them out the window.

"When was that, Coach? When did that Clyde fellow say Nick, er Dix, was going 'back East?'" Ryz'n was anxious now, too, almost frenetic, as she leaned forward in her seat, opposite the coach's desk. The coach still looked away.

"That would have been, umm, yesterday, I think he said."

"MY GOSH! I just missed him!" She slapped down with both hands on the chair's arm rails. Her jaw fell open as she stared at her sister standing near her. "Sheena, if I hadn't gone parasailing last Saturday, he'd be in my arms right now." She turned back to Coach Trahorn. "Coach, did this Clyde fellow say how Nick would be traveling?"

"No, no, he didn't. However, knowing Dixie, as I do, I believe he'll be riding his motorcycle. He and I have had several go-rounds about that modified chopper of his, believe me."

"What about this record company? Did he say which one Ni-Dix had visited?"

"No, he didn't mention that either. I'm sorry, that's all the information I have, Miss, I mean Ma'am." Again, he shifted uncomfortably in his chair and looked out the window, avoiding her gaze. He tapped the eraser end of his yellow-orange pencil on the desk top. The Coach cleared his throat nervously.

"Is it really, Coach?" Surprisingly Ryz'n's tone changed, turning accusatory.

"Well, yes, yes it is," replied the coach defensively, still gazing outside.

"You don't have any other information that might help me, do you?" asked Ryz'n slyly, tilting her head to her right and looking up from under her eyelids at him. "Such as information about a widowed blond by the name of Dixon, who lives in La Jolla with a couple of colored kids?"

Coach Trahorn sighed deeply, slamming down the yellow pencil he had been holding onto the calendar desk blotter. He recoiled back into his huge, overstuffed easy chair. The large, green, executive chair seemed to swallow up the diminutive coach. He rubbed either side of his forehead between the fingers

and thumb of his left hand, slowly massaging as if he were trying to rub a headache out of the sides of his skull.

"I, uh, I didn't know how to approach that subject with you, I uh ... "

"Well, I suggest you approach it honestly, Coach, like you have with everything else." Ryz'n remained on the offensive. "What I want to know, is how long have they been together and how serious is it?"

The coach cleared his throat, again, nervously.

"Honestly, I don't know Ma'am how long it's been ongoing, but they were together last summer. I know that, because Dix listed her as his emergency contact when he played for Clyde's club last summer in La Jolla." The coach sighed. "When we played in this year's spring tournament down there, she took her kids out of school to come watch our games. I even let the boys sit on the bench with us to act us unofficial batboys. They're really cute kids, real effervescent and outgoing, eager to please. You know the type?"

He looked at Ryz'n hopefully, but she merely nodded solemnly. She was in no mood to hear good things about the kids of the adulterous woman who had lied to her about knowing Nicky. The coach spoke with equal solemnity.

"As to the other question, as far as I could tell, well, it's as serious as it gets, Ma'am. Dixie wanted to marry her this summer, now right after our season. He had asked about the school policy for married players. You know, living arrangements, that sort of thing? I told him I discouraged my ballplayers from marrying until after they had graduated, or at least exhausted their athletic eligibility. Of course, we do have a 'married' dorm, and there is off campus housing available for rent during the school year just a block or two away. Nevertheless, I asked him to hold off a while longer. Maybe 'cause I didn't want him distracted for next year. I don't know. I do know something didn't feel right about the whole thing. You know? I mean, I kept thinking her husband was going to show up out of nowhere sooner or later, just like you have now. Who knows? Maybe he will yet? He was listed as an MIA, also, I believe. But, evidently, she has some documentation that corroborates his death, though I don't know if it's anything official."

Now shaken, Ryz'n "zoned out." This was not something she had counted on. Finding Nick had been her overriding concern. She thought that if she could find him, they'd be together. Then, everything else would work itself out. Ryz'n never dreamed he might be interested in another woman, interested enough to marry her, interested enough to assume responsibility as well for raising her two children, two Negro children at that.

The Coach, Sheena, Bill and Bunnie all watched her, waiting for Ryz'n to regain her composure. Then Sheena resumed the interrogation in Ryz'n's behalf..

"Coach, tell me, Nick, uh, I mean Dixie, is someone who would stand out easily in a crowd, with his many physical defects, two-toned eyes, gold capped teeth, etc. Wouldn't you agree?"

The coach nodded as Ryz'n refocused and cut Sheena off, "Yes, so how do you explain that, supposedly, seasoned private investigators, here in L. A. would be unable to pick up his trail and track him down?"

Stumped, the coach shook his head.

"I don't know Ma'am, but there are a hell of a lot of people out here in Southern California. I do know that Dix tried to blend in, to camouflage himself as much as possible. He is very self-conscious about his appearance, his defects as you mentioned."

"What do you mean by camouflage, Coach? 'Splain, Lucy." Ryz'n smiled graciously again. She leaned forward in her chair engagingly, as she burned a hole into the coach's coal black eyes. The Coach chuckled at her humor. She could tell she had won some points with him. He leaned forward over his desk, clasping his hands together as he had earlier.

"Well Ricky, it's like this. Dix has a rubber ear, which he wears over his mutilated one. The ear, constructed especially for him, looks real, honest, it does. The darned thing almost feels real, too. The only time he takes it off in public is to swim or play ball or if he's riding at high speeds on his motorcycle. The gold caps on his dentures are fake. He can pop them on and off, like a pair of sunglasses. He wears them only on special occasions, like our national TV game last Saturday. Otherwise, he wears an upper plate of two white, porcelain dentures, at all other times. As for his fingers, Dix stuffs his right hand in his pockets, as much as possible. He does everything left handed, except throw a baseball. Ya know, Dix can throw left-handed, but he can't control the ball as well as he does throwing from the right side. Then too, night or day, inside or outdoors, he's always wearing his sunglasses. At first, I thought he was some prima donna trying to act cool, but then we all realized he was just shy.

"Dixie also wears his hair extremely long, longer than anyone who has ever played for me. I'm pretty lenient on the hair thing, not like a lot of other coaches, but Dixie stretches my leniency to its maximum limit. I know why he refuses to cut his hair. He wants to hide his ear and his scarred neck. Some of the other ballplayers followed his example, but I let it slide. Humph! After the success we enjoyed this year, I'd say I made a wise decision." He grinned triumphantly.

"You'd almost think that he was trying to conceal his identity," offered Bill.

"Well, some friends of mine who saw him pitch on TV said they could see his deformed ear very clearly," Ryz'n offered. "Evidently, the announcers made a point of it, using it to point out his, uh, unique history or lack of it."

"Yeah, well he doesn't wear his fake ear when he plays ball. He said his ear had been knocked off a couple times during a game and that was kind of embarrassing for him. So he don't wear it any more. And you see, Dix has a habit, when he's on the mound, of putting the baseball in his glove, taking his cap off in his right hand and wiping the sweat off his face and brow with the crook of his right arm and forearm." The coach demonstrated the maneuver for his audience. "Invariably, when he does that, he pulls the hair back away from his

ear and neck. He's usually concentrating so hard on his pitching, he doesn't notice he has exposed his bad ear."

"Yeah, Nicky used to do that. I remember, now. You remember, Sheena?" Sheena nodded uncertainly. Ryz'n sought a little more history on "Dix." "How did you first come across him, Coach?"

"Oh, just a fluke, really." He leaned back in his chair, obviously relishing in the retelling of his greatest find. "Was over in the islands, vacationing with my family just before school started, two years ago. August of '73, it was. My wife wanted to take the girls shopping, so I decided to take my son around, show him some of our military bases over there. We had already toured all the typical sights in Pearl Harbor, so we drove our rental car over to Kaneohe Naval Air station and Marine Corps Base to look around. Little Tommy has always expressed an interest in all things military.

"Well, we happened to find a ball game, wouldn't ya know? Some Marines were playing a team of college kids from Maui College, just kind of informal like. We watched for a while, until little Tommy became bored, asked to leave.

So we're walking away when all of a sudden I hear this fantastic 'CRRRAAACCKKK!" The coach smacked his hands together sharply to imitate the sound. "Just like that slam he hit the other day in Rosenblatt." The coach's eyes flashed with the recollection. "Something, I've only heard in a big league park. I turn around just in time to catch Dixie's follow through. Then he's off like a rabbit. There were no fences, see? Just the parade ground. He had smacked it to dead center, over the fielder's head, the length of the parade ground. I mean that ball was halfway back to the states, by the time Dixie had reached second. And he was still flyin'. From the way he was runnin', you'd have thought the survival of the whole free world rested on his scoring in the next two seconds. Mann! He could fly! Still does." The coach's voice trailed off …

"Anyway, after the game, I introduced myself, gave him my card, asked him to look me up, if he came to the mainland. Dix was playing for the Marines. The other college coach, from Maui, who had been coaching his college freshman against Dix and the Marines, had beaten me to Dixie. He had persuaded Dix to come play for him when Dixie got out of the service, which Dix did for a year. Then he came over here to look me up. Well, I had no scholarships left. Got him to enroll in Cerritos Junior College where a friend of mine coaches—"

Bill interrupted. "That school is right behind my house a couple of blocks. You mean Nicky was there, just two blocks away and I didn't know it?"

"Gee, I guess so, because he studied there last fall. Then a partial scholarship opened up here. A player flunked out after the fall semester. So I got in touch with Dix, got him enrolled here for the spring semester. That's about it, really.

"Ya know, he's the best, danged ballplayer I ever recruited and I would have never found him if my wife hadn't wanted to go shopping and my son hadn't wanted to inspect a military base." Ryz'n congratulated the coach excitedly.

"You got the best Coach, THE Best! Bet you didn't know that Nicky practically won the Maryland State Baseball championship single-handed our junior year of high school?"

"Well, no I didn't." The Coach leaned forward interested in Ryz'n's comment.

Emotional now, Ryz'n relied. "Yep! He did. And he also won the state 400 meters and helped our school win the four by one-hundred state relay championship, and finish as state runners-up in the four by four-hundred relays."

Ryz'n could not restrain herself from proudly recounting all of her husband's high school athletic feats. The Coach encouraged her with his smiling attentions.

"And you know what else?" The coach shook his head, apparently much amused by Ryz'n's enthusiastic retelling of her husband's exploits. "Nicky was county wrestling champ, but he was 'DQed' for weight in the state final.

In her excitement, Ryz'n had risen out of her seat, before she noticed the Coach and everyone else grinning at her. Slowly and sheepishly, she sat back down.

"Ooops! I, I guess I, uh, got a little carried away." A little bit embarrassed, she slid back into her chair, smoothing out her skirt which did not require smoothing.

"No, not at all Ms. Sheeboom. Ya know, I can't say it surprises me. Never seen a kid, who, in his own quiet way, hates to lose as much as Dixie. He darn near brought us back against Texas, with that slammer in the ninth. If he could have gotten up one more time with runners on base, I believe he'd have won that game for us, too, like he has so many others this year. Dix has got the talent and the temperament to go to 'The Show.'"

"What 'Show' is that, Coach?"

"You know, the 'Bigs'! Dix could go all the way, if he keeps at it and ... " the Coach looked sideways at Ryz'n ... "Don't get screwed up with some older dame with two kids!"

"Well, Coach you can bet I intend to do everything I can to prevent that from happening. Believe me, there's only one person I know who hates to lose more than Nicky, I mean Dixie."

"Yes? And who is that?"

"ME!!!"

"HA!" the coach slapped the desktop sharply." Well now, I believe you, Ma'am. And for Dixie's sake, as well as yours, I'm rooting for you, too. Say! Wait just a second, here. I think I've got something you might be interested in."

The coach rose from his desk, stepping back to his corner closet, where he opened the door to point to some boxes inside. "These are some of Dixie's things. I volunteered to store them here for him over the summer. Maybe you'd like to take a look."

"Oh yes, I would, very much. Thank you, Coach."

Ryz'n and Sheena sauntered over to the closet to inspect the three boxes. Two boxes contained textbooks, notebooks and school supplies. The third contained some bedding materials, a yellow metal desk lamp and a Sony clock radio with snooze alarm. Ryz'n noted the subjects of the textbooks: astronomy,

macroeconomics, biology, literature books, like *The Iliad*, *Gilgamesh*, *The Aeneid*, *Dante's Inferno*, *Don Quixote* (and *Cliff Notes* for everyone of them—she smiled), *History of Western Civilization To 1500 A. D. , History of the Church up to the Reformation*, and *Psychology*. In the psychology book, she noted, as she thumbed quickly through it, that all text concerning memory or amnesia was highlighted. She had to chuckle at a Pre-Calculus textbook, because Nicky had passed Calculus with a "B" in his lone semester with her at M&L. Mixed in among the college textbooks, she found some Marine Corps manuals. Those regarding drilling, the manual of arms and technical subjects, she passed over quickly. However, Ryz'n lingered over the third, entitled NAVMC 2643 Manual for Drummers and Buglers.

"Coach? Did Dixie ever bugle? Play the drums?"

"No, no, not to my knowledge." He shook his head.

"That's strange. He has a Marine Corps manual here for drumming and bugling." Ryz'n shrugged her shoulders, before she resumed her treasure hunt. The others looked on with interest, watching Ryz'n rapt in discovery.

Ryz'n came across a Cinema Criticism textbook, which had several chapters concerning films of the Fifties. Nicky had highlighted an entire chapter devoted to James Dean and "The Method." She also found three Spanish books, two grammar books and one book containing short stories. She had taken Spanish while he had taken French all those years in high school. Now he, too, was studying Spanish. Strangely, the most interesting textbook of all proved to be *The Aesthetic Evolution of Opera*.

Ryz'n found several cartoon drawings inside the front and back covers, as well as on the text's front flyleaf. She chuckled at some, which obviously depicted his professor and were quite humorous. However, when Ryz'n spotted the back flyleaf, she stopped cold. There was a beautiful pen and pencil silhouette profile drawing of a gorgeously voluptuous nude, young woman. She appeared to be receding into the mist, wearing the moon for a halo, and the mist for a mask. Like Ryz'n, the girl had a pronounced hourglass form and long dark, thick, wavy hair. In the bottom left hand corner of the page were these words:

If I can find you, I will find me.

Ryz'n clutched the opened book to her chest. Close to tears, she bowed her head in silent prayer that he would find her, as well as himself in the process.

"May I have this book, Coach?," she choked. Her tone was as deadly solemn as a morgue. "If Dixie is not Nick, I'll return it by next semester ... Please?" implored Ryz'n. The unusual request flabbergasted the coach.

"Well, I, I don't know. Are you that sure ... "

"Look Coach, that's me!" Ryz'n showed the sketch to the coach. "I know the exact moment, he is thinking of there. Believe me, I think of it often, myself.

Nicky, I mean Dixie, even wrote a song about it, 'Silver Right.' It was on our third LP. HA! It was a decent hit, even though it was atypically very lyrical."

"Dixie wrote a song? I'll be damned. He don't seem the type. That's funny."

"A song? Why! He's written hundreds."

"You don't say?" Coach Trahorn studied the girl, then he studied the picture. Then, like Mooney earlier, he studied Ryz'n again. "There does appear to be ... " He cleared his throat out of embarrassment and paused to think it over. "Well, I guess it will be OK, but please return it at all costs. Though I can't believe he's going to major in opera." They all laughed.

"Don't worry Coach, I'll return the book and Nicky, uh Dixie, as well."

On her knees now, Ryz'n then moved on to the box of bedding, not expecting to find much. Instead, she found one of the strongest clues she could imagine. When she picked up the pillow to look beneath it, the girl caught a whiff of Nicky's scent: a mixture of Old Spice, sweat, pine needles and sunshine. That scent, she had not smelled so potently in three years, a scent that did not fade away in her memory. It brought him back to her as no other clue had, becoming the very embodiment of her lost lover. She caressed the pillow as if it were her Nick. Nick's scent brought back, oh, those close, most intimate memories. She felt weak. Her juices started to flow. Separated from her husband for over three years, she now buried her nose in the pillow, barely able to hold back her emotions. She desired so much for him to hold her.

Sheena knelt tenderly beside her older sister. Her concern prompted Ryz'n to become conscious of their parents' parting admonitions to Sheena about Ryz'n's alleged mental frailty. Sheena whispered softly into Ryz'n's ear.

"Oh Baby, what's wrong? You don't want the Coach here to feel bad, do you? Come on now, pull yourself together, Honey." Sheena turned to the Coach, almost pleading, "It's been over three years Coach since she's seen him and over two since we even heard from him." The coach nodded. He seemed to understand.

"Come on, Baby. Come on now, Honey." Bill and Bunnie's expressions, reflected their sympathy for Ryz'n, as well.

Ryz'n rose to her feet unsteadily, where she turned to address them all. She wiped away some escaping crocodile tears by bringing her nose into the pillow, before she raised her face from it, thereby hiding the depth of her distress from them. "You see, I can smell him, his scent on this pillow. I always loved his scent, 'Nickysmell', except," she chuckled self-consciously, and looked off into the distant past, "except for about six weeks when I was pregnant. Then I could not stand it—made me sick to my stomach. Nick resented that." She giggled nervously. "He thought I didn't love him anymore. I tell you—" She held the pillow aloft. "There's no doubt in my mind, now, no doubt at all." Sheena sniffed the pillow, but her expression indicated she had detected nothing special. Sheena eyed her sister suspiciously. Ryz'n purposefully ignored her. "Coach, can I—"

"Sure, sure. Go ahead, it's yours. Let me know, how else I can help."

"Well, you've already been a huge, huge help, Coach." The girl rallied with a game smile, as a pair of large tears slid down either cheek. "But, if you could show me around to that admission's office, I'd really appreciate that, COACH!"

"Yes, Ma'am. Yes Ma'am," grinned the coach broadly. "Right this way." They all began to exit the office when Sheena stopped them.

"Ry! Look at this." From the innocuous box of bedding, in between the blanket and the towels, Sheena had unearthed *GRT*'s first two record albums. The group picture of the band on the back of their first album cover had been cut out and the remaining rectangular aperture covered over with masking tape.

"Incredible! This is incredible!"

Bill asked what was so "incredible?" Ryz'n explained that Nick had the band's first two albums. The missing picture from the back album cover means he knows, or suspects strongly that he is one of the people in the band. The trouble is the way the names are juxtaposed on that particular cover to the individual band member is misleading. Our keyboardist, trombonist and semi-manager was a fellow by the name of Todd Strickler. He's dead now but that's whose name Nick is using, thinking that he is Todd."

"Well, he goes by James Dean Strickler here," volunteered the coach.

"Can we look at the point of contact form you were talking about earlier, Coach?"

"Sure."

The coach crossed the room to open a file drawer in a cabinet by the wall behind Bill. He leafed through some folders before he pulled Dix's. "Here it is."

He brought the folder over to show Ryz'n.

"You're right. Guess I had forgotten. He identified himself here as 'James Dean Todd Strickler.' But he never goes by 'Todd.'"

"Look at that date of birth, Coach, April 17, 1952. He was born September 22, 1953."

"Well, if he is who you say he is. I imagine there will be quite a few things, Dix will have to put right."

"Yes, that's for certain. Suppose we go fill out those application forms now, Coach?"

"Great. Right this way."

* * *

After Ryz'n had received and completed the forms Coach Trahorn had obtained for her, the Coach gave them a brief, but first class, tour of the ocean side, palisade campus. It was truly a beautiful, immaculate campus. The liberal arts university was a private, Lutheran affiliated school with an undergraduate enrollment a little over three thousand students. There was also a law school and a graduate school in business, which, between them, served another seventeen hundred graduate students. Total student population, including the graduate schools, was just under five thousand. The low buildings, no more than two or three stories high, were made of white stucco and wore gently sloping red tile

hats. The Spanish style architecture meshed well with the Hispanic heritage of Southern California. As they toured the manicured, green, grass-carpeted school grounds, Ryz'n asked the Coach about Nicky.

Specifically, she wanted to know why the kids in the trainer's room had said that Nick never smiled or laughed, why he never sang and why he kept to himself so much. The Coach explained he did not know for sure, but as long as Dixie was passing in the classroom and excelling on the ball field, the Coach did not feel he should intrude. Coach Trahorn indicated that he felt he was building up a trust with Dix slowly. Eventually, the Coach knew Dixie would come around to open up with him. He reminded Ryz'n that Dixie had been enrolled there only for a semester. The Coach indicated most of his players had followed the same pattern. Dixie was merely shy and taking a little longer than most "to come around." The Coach volunteered that, just a week ago, Dixie had been drafted in the twenty-seventh round of the Major League's fifty round June amateur baseball draft. However, Dix had assured Coach Trahorn that he intended to complete college before he became a professional ballplayer.

Before she left the Peppermount campus, Ryz'n likewise assured the Coach that if, as she felt certain, his Dixie and her Nicky were one in the same, she would return to the lovely little campus by the sea with her husband by her side. Coach Trahorn told Ryz'n that he felt she would be as good as her word. He also said he was relieved to know he would not be losing his star ballplayer. Maybe Peppermount could make another run at the national title next year, because the Fish would have all their key personnel returning. He wished Ryz'n much luck in finding Dixie. She left him her card, just in case Dixie doubled back. She added Bill's number and her parents' to the back of the card.

* * *

Back in Bill's black Caddy, the foursome floated on elation born of hope, hope based in evidentiary fact. "My prayers are being answered Bill. It's just all coming together so beautifully." Ryz'n beamed, momentarily choosing not to think of the Dixon woman.

"It looks good, I must admit. It's looking damned good! What's next, Ry?"

"Halo Platters. That snake in the grass Jerry Stiehlmohr might know something. I'm guessing that's where Nicky went." Ryz'n sniffed her pillow while she looked at Nick's sketch of her.

Bunnie reneged. "Well, kids, I wish you the very best, but Ed's coming off the dialysis machine, you know Bill, so I want to have things ready for him."

"OK, Bunnie. No problem."

Bill took Bunnie home. When he let her out, the sisters resumed their front seating arrangement next to Bill. Bunnie reminded them of their invitation to dinner on Sunday, but Ryz'n didn't want to commit. She really could not promise until she knew more about Nick. Bunnie left the invitation open anyway. They parted company with Bill ferrying the girls to the heart of downtown Hollywood.

Hollywood and Vine was where Halo Platters tall office building towered over all it surveyed. Bill offered to drive around the famed intersection looking for a place to park, while they went inside one of the more recognizable of Hollywood's landmarks. The thirteen-story, glass enclosed, silver and white cylindrical, high-rise office building, known as the "Stack of Platters," housed Halo Platters, one of the top record producers in the world.

Bill declined to go up to the Halo offices with the girls. He said he did not think the girls would come up with much. Besides, he recognized this as kind of a business visit between the girls and their former employer. He did not think it was his place to interfere. Finally he confessed, they did not even know if this was the record company "Dixie" said he would visit.

Ryz'n and Sheena left Bill in the Caddy to girl-watch, while they entered Hollywood's famed symbol of power and prestige. Whenever she entered "The Stack," Ryz'n smelled money. There was no other way to describe it.

They had no trouble with security. *GRT* had been under the Halo label ever since tiny Sable had sold out to the music giant almost two years ago. Ryz'n and Sheena made their way across the spaciously opulent lobby full of chrome, glass and a glossy, linoleum floor to the elevators, which serviced the penthouse executive suites on the top floor. For that was the office home of Jerry Stiehlmohr, Vice President (V.P.) overseeing all recording acts. He was the one they wished to interview. When they reached the his outer office, Shirley, Mr. Stiehlmohr's personal secretary, intercepted them. Ryz'n removed her shades.

"Well, hello Ryzanna, Sheena. It's a pleasure to see you two again, truly it is." All smiles, Shirley, was resplendent in a pale blue princess dress with a matching blue waist belt, low blue pumps and an outdated bouffant hairdo. She came around the front of her large, highly varnished mahogany desk in good cheer to provide the obligatory, false Hollywood greeting. She gave a polite hug and a cheek-to-cheek caress for each of the girls. Shirley was OK. Yet Ryz'n also had learned, from personal experience, not to trust any of these Hollywood types.

"Great to see you again, too, Shirley. You're looking very fit, very fit indeed." Shirley posed briefly for them to show off her trim figure.

"Well, you know, Honey, I took you up on your suggestions. And I've lost eighteen pounds and kept them off, too, for nearly five months!" Shirley winked.

"That's terrific, Shirley! I'm happy for you."

As the smiles subsided, Shirley got down to business. "Well, Honey now what can we do for you, today?"

"Well, I know this is short notice Shirley, but I hoped I could see HIM for just a quick minute. Just needed to ask him one or two very quick questions and we'll be out of here, I promise." Ryz'n beamed her three-dimple smile, acting like Shirley Temple asking for a forbidden cookie. Shirley demurred.

"Well, he is in there alone right now. Let me buzz him for you." She grinned..

"Thank you. We really appreciate it." Shirley returned Ryz'n's smile, as she stepped to the side of her desk, to buzz the executive on the office intercom.

A male voice blared from the speaker. "Yes, Shirley?"

"Sir, I have Ry Sheeboom here. She wants to speak with you a moment—"

"She would, hunh? I'll bet she would. Better not be calling collect! Look, you tell that little witch for me that I'm tied up—busy. See? Tell her to call back next week. Oh, and Shirley? Did you get that tee time for me at the Riviera?"

"Yes sir, you're all set for 7:50 Sunday morning, but—"

"Excellent. You're one in a million, Shirley."

"Why thank you, sir. But I don't think you quite understand about Mrs. Sheeboom. She—" The voice from the speaker cut the earnest secretary off.

"I understand about her all right! Let me tell you about butter-wouldn't-melt-in-her-mouth MRS. SHEEBOOM. That witch spends half the summer tour dopin', drinkin' and makin' out with the lead guitar player. Then she has the gall to cry 'rape' when they get caught together alone after a post gig party. 'Rape?' By the guy, who, I might add, was married himself at the time to the band's saxophonist! Then when the papers get wind of it, Sheeboom becomes Miss Purity herself, pining for her long, lost MIA of a husband.

"Yeah! And I let her peddle that soft rock crap LP last summer, instead of the raw R&B that *GRT* is famous for. And they don't even make half the dough they should have made. Now, she has the temerity to turn me down on a new album that plays up the sex angle a little bit? Why? Because, and I quote 'THAT IS BENEATH [HER] DIGNITY?' Well, BULL CRAP! Now, probably, she's run out of cash and has come to her senses. Let her wait. She needs us. We don't need her. Tell that piece of work to call back next week. Maybe I'll be available."

While Shirley tried once more to explain that Ryz'n and Sheena were right there listening to every word, Ryz'n's rising anger boiled over. She felt her face flush hot as she stormed into the vice president's office. She threw open the six-foot wide double office doors with vigor, crashing them back onto the dark mahogany, inner office walls, with Sheena hot on her elder sister's footsteps. The crash of the swinging doors caused the vice-president to wheel abruptly around in his large over stuffed leather, executive office chair. He wheeled away from the floor-to-ceiling, high window through which he had been staring and which served as a wall halfway around his office. From behind his polished mahogany executive desk, he turned in the direction of the sound that had startled him.

A typical visitor might have been overwhelmed by the floor-to-ceiling glass walls and rich mahogany furniture and plush carpet. Brilliant rays of afternoon sunlight streamed in between partially closed strip curtains. However, the Ryan sisters were not typical visitors.

The sight of Ryz'n before him, arms akimbo, coiled and ready to strike with her legs spread as far apart as her snug, navy blue, silk mini-skirt would allow, startled the record executive. The surprise registered plainly on his countenance. Stumbling to his feet, he abruptly released the "On" switch to the intercom. Straightening his tie with his right hand and buttoning his custom tailored, double vented brown Hong Kong-tailored suit coat with his left, the forty-five year old, sandy haired record executive rose to greet his unexpected guests.

Ryz'n was so hot, she couldn't speak. The mutton-chopped Stiehlmohr took advantage of her momentary verbal lapse to seize the initiative, by trying to make amends. He threw his arms wide out away from his sides to greet her with the traditional, perfunctory Hollywood hug and a wide grin, as Shirley had just done.

"Ry, Baby. How the hell are ya? You're looking just FANTASTIC, as always!" Ryz'n pointed her left forefinger at him, wagging it menacingly.

"Stay away from me you, you snake in the grass! Watch out for this guy, Sheena. He'd just as soon shoot you down as look at you. That is after he steals all he can get from you. But, what he'd really like to do is make you." Ryz'n glanced towards her disbelieving sister for just a second. "Yeah, that's right. He tried it with me and got nothing but a knee to the groin and a surprise dip in his private swimming pool! I haven't had any problem with him since, so I warn you." She turned her wagging finger towards Sheena, who yet wore her shades..

Stiehlmohr dropped all pretenses and his false smile dissolved as quickly as it had appeared. The grey-eyed, heavily mustachioed exec with sandy, mutton chop side-burns narrowed his wide-set eyes shooting a laser gaze into Ryz'n.

"Same little bitch you always were, I see. Well, if you've come to agree to terms on the sex LP, too bad. Got someone else, who can fill the bill better than you." He eyed her up and down arrogantly before proceeding with old bad news. "We dropped your option. *GRT*'s history around here. You've lost your 'Halo,' so to speak. HA! So you can just get out of here, both of ya. I've got work to do."

"Oh really? We heard about your 'tee time', among other things, Mister Steal More! All I want from you is the answer to a couple of very simple questions, so simple even you can answer them without having to quiz your lackey—that, that 'Varmint' guy. And believe me, it sickens my stomach even to have to ask you."

"That's Marmint! Leonard Marmint! And if you feel so sick, why don't you make both of us feel better by leaving, NOW, before I call Security on you"

"I'm leaving. Believe me, I don't want to stay in here any longer than is absolutely necessary. Just tell me one thing: Did you see this guy come around here recently to talk with you? Maybe in the last few days?"

Angrily, Ryz'n shoved a recent baseball photo of Dixie into the record executive's face. Coach Trahorn had just given her the photo about an hour before. Stiehlmohr hesitated, glanced at the picture and returned it with a smirk.

"Still playing the aggrieved wife, are we? Think it'll get you another audience with the President in the Oval Office? I guess, after that flop of an album, you need some positive publicity, hunh?"

Vibrantly indignant, Sheena spoke for the first time. "I wouldn't call an album that has sold almost three hundred and fifty thousand copies, a flop!"

"Yeah? It could have gone triple gold, if you had listened to me and recorded more of Sheeboom's tunes, showed a little more skin and put out a lot more bounce to the ounce on stage. And cried a lot less of that MIA crap!"

"DID YOU SEE HIM OR NOT?" interrupted Ryz'n, but he ignored her.

"You know your style and type of music went out with The Pony Tails and The Shirelles, with Leslie Gore and Brenda Lee. This is the Seventies, Baby. Today Disco is what's hot—and sex.. Well, sex has always sold. A little onstage "Rock'N'Roll Hoochie-coo" sure never hurt business any. Not a bit. That's what sells now, Baby. "I'm Sorry" and "Soldier Boy," sung with longing gazes, just don't cut it anymore." Ryz'n lowered her chin and placed her hands on her hips as she widened her stance a bit the only way she could, by pointing her toes outward at an angle of forty-five degrees.

"And don't go gettin' up on your high horse, Girlie. You two haven't forgotten Baton Rouge and Kansas City? I'm sure. Or Oregon? Yeah! You know, ticket and record sales shot through the roof after those exhibitions! So don't tell me, you can't do it. You can do it all right. Hell, you caused near riots in Louisiana, in K.C. and Oregon, too. So don't play the pious act with me, either of you."

Sheena remained impassive behind her Foster-Grants, but Ryz'n shifted uncomfortably. This executive rat had found the chink in her armor.

"We--I made a few mistakes. We apologized for it each time," replied Ryz'n in staccato fashion. Seeing her on the defensive, Stiehlmohr pursued his advantage.

"Yeah, and what happened each time?" Stiehlmohr raised his hand and made it dive down like a jet fighter. "Sales hit the floor. BAM!" He clapped his hands together for effect. "Why don't you listen to me? You, both of you, got it in you naturally to be the greatest Rock'N'Roll/Burlesque act ever. It's in your curves and it's in your blood. You proved that. Don't fight it. It's your nature, girls. Go with it. Rock with it. Roll with it!"

"Nature is something we were meant to rise above Mr. Stiehlmohr," claimed Ryz'n haughtily.

"Oh, really! So! It takes a little wine to lose your inhibitions. Hey? So what? OK, OK, maybe a little white ice, too? Hunh? Yeah! That's all right. You think I don't hear things?" He sneered at the girls. Sheena remained motionless. Ryz'n fidgeted uncomfortably, twirling her engagement ring.

That slime ball Tommy Tremain! I wish I had never laid eyes on that bastard!

"We didn't come in here for any history lesson, or any econ. lesson either, for that matter, Jerry. All we want to know is—"

"You little pious, self-righteous, psalm-singing hypocrite! You want to let go. You love that high you get onstage! Don't bother to deny it. I know better. But you'd rather play the martyr for a dead kid, who got what he deserved!"

Ryz'n was seething now and she blurted out.

"You sonova--! I SAID: 'DID YOU SEE HIM OR NOT?'"

"NO! NOW SHAKE YOUR FAT ASSES OUT OF MY OFFICE!" Stiehlmohr threw the back of his hand out towards the wide office doorway.

Unfazed and not yet ready to exit, Ryz'n assumed "the stance," as Nick had dubbed it. She stood with her weight shifted over her right hip. Her right leg locked straight beneath her, while her left was also locked at the knee straight out in front of her with her left foot angled towards her adversary. Her arms crossed beneath, and uplifted, her heaving bosom. Her hands clenched tightly around her opposite elbows, as she clutched Nicky's picture, which protruded from between her clenched knuckles. Her chin was thrust defiantly in the air before her. The whole tone of her stance was one of defiant contempt. She fired back.

"You don't realize it, but you're just shooting yourself in both feet with this arrogant, hostile attitude MISTER Stiehlmohr. We're close now, real close to finding him. You know Nicky's a heckuva talent! But believe me, he won't be plying his talents for you, or for Halo either. No way! You just screwed yourself, BIG SHOT. How does it feel?" Stiehlmohr chuckled derisively and replied casually.

"He's dead. You'll never find him. NEVER! And without him, *GRT* is nothin'. NOTHIN'! Nothin' at all. You've proven that." He glared at Ryz'n. "You're a three-piece Rock band without a guitar player. HA! You're nothing at all." He spit the last words out contemptuously.

"What are you saying? Sheena's our bassist and I can strum some in a pinch."

"Precisely my point. No guitar players at all!" The sisters frowned indignantly, but Stiehlmohr persisted unimpeded. "You know I've shopped your anemic act around and nobody's buyin', Honey!" Stiehlmohr sneered grandly at Ryz'n.

"NEVER find him, hunh? Well, this picture here is current, taken within the last three months, HONEY!" The incensed Ryz'n gave him back the sarcasm he had dished out as she held the picture in one hand and tapped the front of it with the other. Her caustic tone was unmistakable. "Nicky's been going to school and playin' baseball right out here under your very nose, over at Peppermount. He's alive and I'm gonna find him."

"How do you know that?"

"I know. I know."

"Well, even so, his butt is under contract to me. I'll just pick up that option. It doesn't matter either way. If he still has what it takes, he'll make records for me."

"No, you don't seem to get it, Jerry! He never signed anything with you. Sheena and Mickey and I signed for one album, one tour and an option for

another one, which you dropped. Nick has signed nothing. His original deal, which you bought from Sable, expired two months ago."

"He's with *GRT* and Halo owns the rights to *GRT*, period!"

"*GRT*? What's that? Nick can form a new group or just go solo or maybe he'll just compose? Who knows? But he won't be doing anything for Halo, not as long as you and your Varmint friend work here. I can guarantee you that!" Stiehlmohr lost his patience and began to shoo them out of his executive suite.

"Well, you just try it Honey. And you'll be in the biggest law suit of your life! Believe me, you don't want to tangle with the Big Halo in court. It'll be your worst nightmare. So, you see Baby, no matter what you do, you're always gonna smell like fish!" Inhaling deeply through his nostrils, Stiehlmohr dismissed her disdainfully, as he might a foul odor and laughed. Ryz'n knew her ritualistic penchant for raw herring was common knowledge at Halo. In fact, it was the butt of some great jokes. Ryz'n seethed, too angry to speak.

"NOW GET OUT! Both of you! And I don't wanna see you wiggling your broad butts around here again, not until you're ready to dance and prance for me! You and the queen of the jungle there. We'll see what happens when the dough runs out. Hell, you'll be in here begging me, just begging me to abuse you. I know, I've seen too many of 'em come and go. You know, you really should be more polite to me. I might just drop the dime on you and that guitar player."

Stiehlmohr flashed daggers from his grey, cold shark eyes, while the pair of short sisters retreated. In their common anger, they stalked out of the plush executive suite, through the ceiling high, still wide open, double doorway. They strode away, in step, as quickly as their snug mini-skirts would allow, unconscious of the impression they were leaving behind. Ryz'n, however, could not resist facing about in the portal to fire a parting shot at her former boss.

"You know, I've never seen a person more aptly named than you: Mr. STEAL––MORE! If you want to really drop something, just DROP DEAD!" The girls passed though the outer offices on their way to the elevators. Shirley trotted after them, catching the irate sisters before they could board the elevator.

"Mrs. Sheeboom, Mrs. Sheeboom. Please wait!" Ryz'n held up. "Mrs. Sheeboom, I'm, I'm, well, I don't know what to say. That was terrible, what he did back there. I, I'm terribly sorry. I heard everything." The shame in Shirley's face told Ryz'n this was no act.

"Well, it's not your fault, Shirley. You have nothing to apologize for."

"But I do. You see ... " Chagrinned, Shirley cast her eyes downward.

"Yes?"

"He was here, yesterday, maybe the day before. I can't remember which."

"Who was here?"

"Your husband!"

"WHAT?" Shirley looked up to meet Ryz'n's disbelieving glare.

"Yes, he was. I didn't say anything at first, because I thought Mr. Stielhmohr might want to tell you, himself."

"You mean he saw Nicky and he just lied to me?"

"Not exactly. You see, Nicky, or this nice lookin' young fella who looked like him, came in the other day, asking questions. He was kind of pathetic, actually. He pulled a cut-out piece of your first album cover from his wallet. It was pretty beat-up and had the band's picture on it. He never saw Mr. Stiehlmohr, although I told Mr. Stiehlmohr there was this guy here who looked like he could be Nick Sheeboom, who'd like to see him. Mr. Stiehlmohr said he didn't want to see him. He told me to send him away. You see, we've had a lot of imposters come around since your *Lest We Forget Tour* last summer. They all proved to be false.

"Anyway, Mr. Stiehlmohr was busy at the time with the company president, et cetera. I tried to explain that this guy not only looked, but also sounded, like the real Nick Sheeboom. Mr. Stiehlmohr wouldn't listen, just like he didn't listen a few minutes ago, when he thought you were on the phone and I tried to tell him you were here in person." She nodded towards Ryz'n.

"However, the other day, I thought, this really could be the guy. So I broke company policy, by giving him your home address, not the phone number, just the address, which I know is unlisted. But I thought if he is the real McCoy, he could write or even visit you. If he isn't, then maybe he wouldn't bother you. He asked if the address were current."

"What did you say?"

"Well, I told him I didn't know for sure, but I explained the Crest Hill address was your parents' home. I said even if your weren't there, they could find you."

"Oh Shirley, you're an angel, an absolute angel!" Ryz'n tightly hugged the surprised but grateful Shirley.

"I can't thank you enough, Shirley. But look! If he comes back soon, here's the number I can be reached at, in Buena Park. After that, I'll go home to my folks. And Shirley, this time I authorize you to give him the phone number, as well, or anything else he wants." Ryz'n took a pen and notepad from her purse to provide the Buena Park number. "And I authorize you to release all my home phone numbers, to this guy, and this guy only, that is, if he comes back, OK?"

"Sure, sure. Look Mrs. Sheeboom? I'm really sorry about that scene with Mr. Stiehlmohr." The pained expression on her face confirmed her sincerity..

"Stiehlmohr? Who's he? Nevah , hoid uv 'em." Ryz'n laughed. "Shirley, I feel so good, so high, right now, not even a genuine S.O.B. like that can bring me down. Thank you so much, Honey. I'll never forget you for this, never! Is there anything, anything at all, I can do for you?"

Ever the quintessential company employee, Shirley replied, "Just don't forget Halo Platters, in the future, Mrs. Sheeboom."

"OK, I won't." Ryz'n beamed her dimpled smile after hugging Shirley. The Ryan sisters turned and walked to the elevator door with Ryz'n muttering to herself, "You can be sure I won't ever forget Halo Platters!"

The elevator came back up to open for the third time since Shirley had stopped the sisters from boarding it, before they started talking. The Ryan girls stepped

onto the elevator. When they reached the street, they searched for Bill. They found him double-parked on the boulevard, girl-watching.

After the sisters hopped into the seat next to him, Sheena, heatedly talked across Ryz'n to Bill, letting fly with all that had occurred, leaving out no detail.

"But Bill you should have seen my big sister going toe-to-toe with that Hollywood record mogul. Why! I would have paid good money to see that. Her face got red and her eyes got green. She looked like a busted traffic light. Ha! I tell you true: 'Ali-Frazier' had nothin' on this bout, either one of them. You were just awesome, Sis! You put that guy right in his place. Did he really try to force himself on you? You never told me that."

"Yeah, well it's not something I care to recall, either time. He was going after you until I told him about Bryson. He backed off then. He didn't cherish the thought of getting mashed into the ground by Bryce."

"No kiddin'? I never knew it. Glad I didn't. And you kept mum about J.J, even when he baited you with that no-guitar, three-piece bull!"

Bill interjected. "Well, that's all very interesting girls, but it's dinner time. Since I never quite finished my lunch, my stomach has been rumbling. How 'bout we get something to eat? There's a classic Fifties style drive-in around the corner. Waitresses on roller skates—everything. Over on La Brea, OK?"

"Sure, Bill whatever you want," replied Ryz'n. Actually, I'm kind of hungry, too, now that I think of it. And Sis, you keep mum about Double J, too. He's GRT's future, right now."

* * *

When the trio had finished filling their bellies at the drive-in, they sat back in the front seat of Bill's Caddy to ponder their next move. Ryz'n observed that they had only one. That was the San Diego connection. She itched to confront that Dixon lady, again. La Jolla was a little over a hundred miles from Bill's house. Presently they were clear up in North Hollywood. It was six o'clock on a Friday evening, which meant it was nine p.m. as far as the girls were concerned. Bill suggested they start out for La Jolla fresh in the morning, especially since the Friday rush hour traffic had yet to clear out. Ryz'n hesitated but finally agreed. After all, Bill had been right earlier about Coach Trahorn being out for lunch.

For Sheena's benefit, she asked Bill to drive them over to nearby Griffith Observatory to view the setting of James Dean's famous *Rebel Without a Cause*. Ryz'n explained the James Dean thing to her sister: how Nicky had gone over the setting with her, quoting lines from the film, imitating the various voices perfectly, as only he could. That was before Sheena had joined *GRT* in the Fall of 1971 *w*hen the band had come out to L.A. for a long weekend to make some personal TV appearances. Ryz'n's recollections helped keep her mind off Nick and the Dixon woman. While she was nearly ecstatic over the good news she had received about Nick today, she stewed over the lying adultery of Donna Dixon.

The next morning, Saturday, Ryz'n repeated her early exercise and cooking routine from the previous day. However, before they left for La Jolla, she called home to see if Nicky had somehow obtained the phone number and called there. Her parents assured her that he had not. The Ryans were concerned Ryz'n might be going over the edge. Ryz'n had yet to meet with the psychiatrist her mother had lined up for her. That appointment was set for the next week. They asked to speak with Sheena, who confirmed everything her sister had told them.

Ryz'n listened in on the extensions as Sheena promised her parents that she would look out for her big sister. After she had hung up the receiver, Sheena had to shake her head. Her long, soft and shiny, dark brown hair, shimmered over and around her broad shoulders. Ryz'n asked what was wrong. Sheena said their mom and dad had told her Ryz'n's mind was not to be trusted. They expected Sheena to maintain a level head, so she could protect Ryz'n from herself, as Ryz'n had done for Sheena all those years they had grown up together. Now, they said, it was Sheena's turn to return the favor. Sheena confessed that their parents just were not getting it. Fantastic as it might be to comprehend, Nicky was alive and well and he was coming home, just like Ryz'n had always said he would. Sheena smiled reassuringly and hugged Ryz'n.

On their way south along the coast, the trio again sat, hiding behind their FosterGrants across the Caddy's wide front seat. Sheena asked Ryz'n just how she had known all along Nicky would come home to her, how she could have always been so sure.

"It was Our Lord," claimed Ryz'n matter of factly, sitting barefooted with her feet resting on the hump which ran down the center of the car floor. "When I prayed, I felt Jesus, I mean his words, inside of me, here, next to my heart, [she tapped her chest above her heart with her fist] speaking to me, saying calmly: '**Most assuredly I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name, He will give you**.' And so I prayed in Jesus' name that Nicky would return to me safely. And then, I felt His word inside of me again: '**Daughter, now you have sorrow, but in a little while he will see you again and your heart will rejoice and your joy no one will take from you**.'"

"Wait a minute. You're saying God talked to you, directly to you?" cried Sheena in disbelief. Ryz'n suspected Sheena thought that maybe their parents knew something Sheena did not know after all, that maybe Ryz'n was a little off upstairs.

"No, that's not what I said. I said 'I felt Jesus, (His Word) inside of me here, in my heart', I *felt* those words. It's like I recalled them from some of the readings

during mass, you know? Nicky had the same thing happen to him a couple of times. You remember, I told you about the Buzzbees and how God's Voice saved Nick and Terri Schieffer and Patty Slattery that fatal night?"

"Yeah, you told me, but I never really bought that. Now you're saying the same thing happened to you? Ryz'n, I think you should keep your appointment with that psychiatrist next week." Sheena turned to Ryz'n. The FosterGrants hid her expression, but the tone of her voice was most serious. Ryz'n looked at her.

"You don't believe me? My own sister! Sheena, Sheena. I forgive you, Honey." Ryz'n looked up at the Caddy's ceiling momentarily. "Oh Lord, please increase her faith." Then to Sheena, she added, "Well, when you see Nicky, in my arms, alive and well, you'll see." Ryz'n nodded knowingly as she turned her face to look forward through the windshield.

"Yeah, well, hey! I'm lookin forward to it, believe me, too" cried Sheena, who returned her gaze to the road ahead, also.

"You and me both," replied Ryz'n, grinning from ear to ear, still staring straight ahead, smug behind her dark glasses.

"Make that three of us" added Bill, who had been listening to the girls quietly, while he drove. "Hey, ya know Ry? We could stop by your property in Laguna if you like. Kind of check it out. We'll be passing right by there on the freeway." Ryz'n turned her head towards Nick's uncle.

"Gee Bill. I don't think so. I know that beach front property is worth close to three-quarters of a million now and it would be the responsible thing to do, but my mind is on Nicky and I can't think of anything else. Besides, it wouldn't be polite of me to drop in on my tenants unannounced. After all he is one of the most famous symphony conductor-composers in the world. Believe I can trust him."

"Yeah, you're right, Ry." Bill patted her on the knee to reassure her. "Ya know, I got some friends in Newport and when I'm in the area, I drive by your place over on Cliff. And it looks like it's still standing up OK." Bill grinned.

"That's good to hear Bill. Ya know since you bring it up, how would you like to go into the real estate business? I'm liable to be buying some more property out here and you could manage them for me, for me and Nicky that is."

"Aw, I wouldn't be any good for ya."

"I'd pay ya top dollar, you know that, Bill."

"Look Ry, most of these places out here got a lot of steps. And my chair can't maneuver on the beach. I don't mind lookin' out for ya once in a while, but, nah, I don't wanna waste my time taking real estate classes." Ryz'n nodded and patted Bill on the knee, forgetting he couldn't feel her hand. She pulled back in despair when, beneath his slacks, she felt how skeletal his leg truly was.

Sheena piped up, leaning forward and turning toward Bill, so she could talk across her sister. "Good for you Bill. Our flippin' accountant Jose has got Ryz'n in over her head with this real estate junk anyway. He thinks he's playin' "Monopoly" with her money. Says his goal is to buy some property for him and

Ryz'n in each of the fifty states and in DC and the territories as well. He's bought a rental home in northwest DC already."

"No kiddin'!"

"Yeah, condominiums is the latest thing and he's into them big time. He got Ryz'n to buy a couple in the District up in some apartment building over by Embassy Row. And you know Ryz'n and Nick bought that penthouse in the oldest high rise resort hotel in Ocean City. And if that wasn't enough, this Jose talks Ryz'n into to goin' halvsies with him and his wife on the penthouse next door to Ry's. Can you believe that?" Sheena talked across her sister to Bill, as if Ryz'n were not even there, let alone sitting right next to her. "And all these properties are for rent, except for some deserted ranch in the middle of nowhere, some mountains in Arizona!"

"New Mexico, Sis. At least, get it right. We only put forty per cent down on all those places. And you forgot about the ski chalet in Aspen, which you and Bryce took full advantage of last winter? Over semester break I might add, while I was in Laos looking for Nicky!" Ryz'n slowly boiled at her sister's comments.

"Well, that place is okay. In fact, if you want to sell it, Bryce and I would be glad to take it off your hands."

"Oh! What a hypo—" Sheena cut in.

"Bill! Yet with all her money, Ry doesn't have a nice place of her own, except that little two bedroom cottage down at M&L! When she's not at school, she lives at home with our parents, for cryin' out loud!"

"Now, wait a minute Sheena. You know why I live at home, if you could call it that. It's because I'm never there, practically never, anyway. And I've told you repeatedly that when Nicky comes back, we'll buy a nice home TOGETHER! You never thought he'd come back until now. So I'm lookin' smarter and smarter, all the time, aren't I?

"And that real estate Jose got me and Nicky are good investments, everyone of them." Ryz'n turned from Sheena to Bill now to put her case. "Jose explained how you put your down payment into these properties and take out a mortgage. Then, instead of paying your cash out to the government in taxes, you pay off the interest on the mortgages which gives you a great tax deduction and the revenue from the rentals pays the mortgage and insurance. As long as the Government keeps subsidizing the interest like that, we'll make a lot of money." Ryz'n turned back to Sheena indignantly. "That way you use your money to buy more valuable properties instead of paying Frank Federal Worker to count icebergs off Greenland!"

Sheena rejoined, "Yeah, with all them mortgages you're liable to go broke if you lose your renters. And then, see what happens. You'll be dancin' that strip tease for Jerry Stiehlmohr yet."

"Oh, please, Sheena!"

"And you know what else, Bill?"

Wisely now, Bill merely shrugged his shoulders and remained silent.

"Well, the real topper is that forsaken pile of dirt and mangroves she bought down in Southwestern Florida near the Everglades. You've heard them jokes about buying swamp land down there? Well, that's my sister!" Sheena nodded knowingly and jerked a thumb at Ryz'n. "Yeah, that one really takes the cake. She bought herself almost two square miles of the most worthless, desolate ground you ever laid your eyes on." Sheena shook her head with her long hair shimmering in the sunlight streaming through the windshield.

Ryz'n exhaled dramatically as she leaned back against the seat with her arms crossed tightly over her chest, holding her piece.

"Yeah, she's making faces now Bill, but she knows I'm right on this one," persisted Sheena unabated. "That place is full of snakes, 'coons, spiders, all kinds of biting insects. I mean some big man-eatin' bugs! The whole place is infested with 'em. They got mosquitoes down there as big as fighter planes and sand fleas, red ants, and horse flies that look B-52's. And alligators, too!"

"Oh come off it, Sheena. We've never seen a gator down there. For cryin' out loud! It's right on the Gulf. I have big plans for that property. And those bugs don't bother me at all. They bother you, because you drink all those soda pops and eat all that sweet stuff that's bad for you. They sense that sugar right through your pores. I've said this before. If you would just eat sensibly like I do—"

"Like you? HA! With all that fish and herring. Yeah, right! …"

Bill drove on quietly for the most part, leaving the sisters to banter with one another. Occasionally, Bill would be called upon to affirm or refute an opinion with the shrug of his shoulders or a shake of his head. Ryz'n didn't realize it then, but she later would learn that Bill had put Sheena up to these debates. He had thought it would help take Ryz'n's mind off of Donna Dixon and Nicky, during what would have otherwise been a long ride, with too much time for Ryz'n to think. In retrospect, Ryz'n would see Bill had been right, but his plan failed. After over half an hour of heated debate, Ryz'n shut up and refused further discussion of any kind. The lying Donna Dixon drew her thoughts like a powerful magnet. Only an occasional glimpse of the eye-pleasing, blue Pacific Ocean from the coastal highway could sidetrack Ryz'n's thoughts of Mrs. Dixon and only then, momentarily.

After another half hour or so of quiet running, the trio found Donna Dixon's street. They located her stucco bungalow at the end of the court, where Ryz'n and Bill had left it almost five months ago. Before Ryz'n could follow Sheena out of the passenger seat side of the car, Bill seized Ryz'n forcefully by her left forearm. Bill's firm grip startled Ryz'n, snapping her head around. He had her full attention. Bill removed his shades so that his bright blue eyes bore through her sunglasses.

"Ryz'n, I know you want to confront this woman, but, remember, she has two children who are old enough to understand some things. If you feel you must lay into her, please do it in private, away from the kids. You can even take her for a ride in the Caddy, if you want, OK? In fact, here, take the keys."

Ryz'n accepted the car keys from him. She had forgotten Bill was an experienced man, who had survived and overcome many trials and tribulations, accidents, surgeries, marriages, divorces, even the suicides of a step-daughter and a close friend. Bill had played the chauffeur, acted like hired help, staying out of things, but now he was giving her good, sound advice.

"You're right, Uncle Bill. I'll try to do that." She smiled. "If I get out of line, well, just slap me a good one, OK?" Bill winked at her.

"Here. Come around here and help me into my chair, will ya?" Ryz'n had been around Bill long enough to know that Bill did not ask people for help with his chair, unless, as in this case, it benefited the helper more than he. In this instance, by allowing Ryz'n to assist him, he was telling her that he trusted her, but he also was helping her to remain calm by focusing on his needs and not her worries. Ryz'n understood all this.

"Sure, be glad to, Bill."

Ryz'n slung her thin, but long, brown strapped, rawhide handbag over her shoulder, as she helped Bill into his chair. She wheeled the paralytic down the Dixon's sidewalk to the front door, following Sheena's lead. As they stood outside the Dixon's door, both Ryz'n and Sheena dressed as they had the day before, only the colors had changed. Ryz'n wore an identically cut silk suit of sliver grey with a forest green, satin blouse, while Sheena also had outfitted herself in a split front, green denim, high waisted midi-skirt that thankfully concealed her navel because her white cotton midriff, sleeveless top did not. Bill, always dapper, always neat, waited with them in pressed, grey cotton dress slacks, a light blue, rather than the dark blue, ban-lon shirt of the prior day and his spotlessly shiny, black, tasseled loafers. As Ryz'n looked around, she thought the place was somehow different from their last visit during the past winter. Then she realized what it was: all these cars stacked in the driveway and around the court. Sheena knocked, prompting a delayed response from a cute little black boy about six who answered from behind the screen door.

"You have to go 'round back. You can't come in here, Ma'am. My mommy says, 'All cut-termers have to go 'round.'" He repeated the phrase in a sing-song monotone as though he was bored with repeating the rule. The whites of his eyes and teeth, of which the front upper two were missing, shone cutely in contrast to his dark features. The child pointed to his right, dipping his right hand and rolling it over, indicating they had to "go 'round". Sheena looked at Ryz'n, who set Bill's left brake on and walked up to the screen door. She pushed her dark glasses back onto the crown of her head over the ever present, gold ribbon and half-kneeled, half-squatted down, in her accustomed, former softball catcher's stance, only with her knees politely together. She gathered her handbag into her lap and spoke with the boy through the door's bottom window screen. This was no easy task as her tight, suit mini-skirt constricted her, but it was nothing the former softball catcher could not overcome.

"Honey, we aren't here as customers. We just need to talk to your mommy for a few minutes. That's all." Ryz'n smiled appealingly. The boy smiled back. *He's a cutie all right.* One day she hoped to have a cutie like that of her own.

From around a corner inside the house, she heard the rumbling of a booming, bass voice, which preceded the appearance of a hulking one-armed black man. The half hulk of a man sported an 'Afro' beyond his receding hairline and propelled himself in a motorized wheel chair.

"What's goin' on, Dre? Lemme see." The man spoke gruffly as he tugged from behind, on the boy's shoulder.

The chair's motor hummed. The small boy stepped aside, climbing over the back of the couch. "Something I can help you people with?" The black man spoke roughly, but when he saw Bill in his wheelchair, his bass softened.

"We just wanted to speak with Mrs. Dixon for a moment, if she's home," replied Ryz'n pertly, hiding her unladylike posture by rising erect before the screen door.

The black man eyed Ryz'n up and down a couple times, glancing once over at Sheena and pretty much ignoring Bill, before he answered.

"She's out back, servin' her customers." He motioned slightly with his head backwards, over his right shoulder. Ryz'n stepped close to the screen to peer impolitely through the house, out the sliding glass doors at the back of the dining room and into the back yard. There, she spied a big woman standing behind another person seated in a tall chair.

"Saturday's her busy day, lady. She don't got much time for gabbin.' You look familiar," observed the man slowly, studiously. "Help me out now, lady. Where have I see ya before?"

As Ryz'n stepped back from the door into the bright June sunlight, she excused herself. The big man propped open the screen door to push his chair halfway out of the house, until he straddled the threshold.

"Well, I've been on TV a few times, performed live all over the country. Perhaps—"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" He shook his lone hand as if to snap his fingers. To Ryz'n, the man's hand looked as if it had been scorched, leaving the gaps between his fingers full of scar tissue, looking like a duck's webbed foot. "What's your name, Miss?"

"I'm Ryzanna Sheeboom. This is Bill Fankell and this is my sister Sheena—"

"SHEEBOOM!?!?!?!?! Ah HA! HA! HA! I'll BE DAMNED! I SWEAR, I WILL!" He slapped the arm of his chair zealously and repeatedly. Then, ceasing suddenly, he whispered, asking more of himself than his visitors: "Who would have ever thought I'da run into Nicky and his wife within a day of each other?" In an excited but more normal voice, he asked, "You are Nick's wife, aren't ya?" Shocked but ecstatic, Ryz'n answered.

"Well, yes, yes I am. You bet I am. When did you see him last and where is he now and WHO ARE YOU?" Ryz'n could barely contain herself.

The big man laughed a deep rumbling, rolling chuckle that seemed to envelop all of them as well as the court around them.

"I'm very sorry Ma'am, very sorry for being so rude. I'm Big Jim, Big Jim Dixon. Come on in, come on inside."

He motored himself backwards to allow them to pass through the front portal and makeshift foyer into the dark interior of the living room. The previously muffled sound of the Saturday morning cartoons suddenly blared from the TV set to their right against the far wall. They entered a bandstand of a room. To their right, stood the backside of half of a couch that faced towards the television, perpendicular to the front of the home. The other half of the couch rested with its back against the front wall, beneath a picture window. The little boy who had answered the door sat on the near section of couch, watching television placidly. A larger, lighter skinned boy lay on his stomach, propped on his elbows, with his feet in the air above his bent knees, on the half of the couch which abutted the stucco's front dry wall.

"Come on in here." Big Jim made a backwards three-point turn with his chair and led them through the bandbox living room into the even smaller dining room. "Please, sit down" he offered amiably and motioned to the four chairs around the dining table. "Can I get you some coffee or somethin'?" The big man did not offer to shake hands and, given the ugliness of his handicap, Ryz'n did not push it. He wheeled to the kitchen counter, which separated the tiny dining room from the even tinier kitchen, where he grabbed the coffee pot and a coffee cup.

Ryz'n pulled a chair from the closest end of the table and set it back in a corner so Bill could pull in. They seated themselves around the coffee colored, black flecked, oval dining room table. Ryz'n could plainly see Donna Dixon now through the sliding glass doors cutting a woman's hair on the back patio, while a couple other ladies sat on lawn furniture talking and thumbing through magazines. The blonde hairdresser had pulled her hair back into a ponytail. She wore a pink beautician's smock with large pockets on either hip, a pair of faded dungarees and what appeared to be some boots. The smock tried but failed to conceal the Amazon's curvaceous form. Bill accepted a cup of black coffee, as he introduced himself to Big Jim.

Sheena and Ryz'n declined a beverage. Jim noticed the sisters staring at the women on the patio. Ryz'n sat erect in the dining chair, with her left leg crossed over her right and leaning forward slightly from the waist. She had turned her head to the left to watch Donna Dixon at work on the patio, scarcely fifteen feet away. The woman clipped and combed with an efficient, brisk professionalism.

Ryz'n remembered her as being handsomely attractive in a large sort of way. Now, through the glass door, she studied her adversary more closely. The beautician had a squarish forehead and jaw with a turned up nose. Her deep, Pacific blue eyes were large, her blonde brows and red lips were thin. Blonde bangs, which fell to her eyebrows, were equally thin but curved downward, sparsely but evenly spaced, across her broad forehead. Her features revealed a

strong yet unexpected feminine visage. Of course, her enormous chest protruded from under her smock, like the torpedoes through the hull of the *African Queen*. "Dammit", Ryz'n muttered under her breath as she viewed her for a second time, in a more neutrally critical light. *I can see where a man, especially Nicky, would find her attractive. But udders like that should be hanging from a cow!*

"Yep, that's my wife Donna out there, givin' the haircut." Turning his head toward the living room, Big Jim called out loudly, "Hey! Little Jim!" The boy lying on the far couch responded.

"Yes, Suh?"

"Bring me that album cover we was lookin' at when Nick, I mean when Dixie, was here the other day." The larger boy, who had been lying down, stirred indolently from his relaxed resting place on the sofa.

The light-skinned black boy looked to Ryz'n to be about eight years of age with green eyes and light brown hair. Under his father's sullen stare, the boy began to move with dispatch and produced the album cover as requested. Then, he disappeared again hurriedly back to his cartoons in the living room. Big Jim held the *Lest We Forget* album, which he opened like a sacred book. Then, turning the opened sleeves around, he held the inner cover up for them to see, pointing out pictures of Ryz'n and Sheena to themselves. Then he fingered the big, grayed out basic training graduation picture of Nick in his dress blues that took up most of the right side of the album cover's inner sleeve. Big Jim tapped that picture hard. "That's him. That's Nicky Sheeboom." He showed them the picture he had identified.

"Well, yes Sir. It sure is Mr. Dixon," agreed Ryz'n, who sat directly across the table from Big Jim. "Now you said you saw him in the flesh? Recently?"

"Yeah, 'in the flesh' all right. Ha! Sure did, if you call last night, recent."

"LAST NIGHT! YOU SAW HIM LAST NIGHT?" Ryz'n jumped out of her seat and fell back upon it.

"Damn straight I did! He was settin' right there in that very chair you're settin' on now, eatin' ice cream."

"I don't believe it!" Incredulous, Ryz'n turned to Bill. If we would have come down here last evening, we would have had him!" Bill rolled his eyes and shook his head. Ryz'n chastised herself. "I should have called here last night! Darn it! What a fool I was! And Mr. Dixon, you're sure about that, that it was Nicky who was here?"

"Damn straight, I'm sure. I can't walk and I only got one good arm, but my mind is workin' jes' fine." His grin dissolved. He looked down and mumbled "Now anyways." Jim looked up at them again and resumed the topic under discussion. "Damn right, he was here. BIG AS LIFE!" Ryz'n was both overjoyed and flabbergasted at this terrific news.

"Well, is he coming back? I mean, I mean where is he now?"

"Well, he said he'd stop back at the end of the summer. But he's taken off for Maryland to find you!"

Ryz'n's jaw dropped a mile. She rested her elbows on the table and her forehead in her hands. She did not know whether she should laugh or cry, but she managed to inhale deeply and compose herself. She couldn't believe the irony of this situation. She had just missed Nicky because he had gone to look for her. *Incredible!*

Bill asked, "You're absolutely sure the guy who was here last night is Nick Sheeboom?"

"Absolutely, positively. We got these 'Semper Fidelis' tattoos together in Saigon on a bet." Big Jim rolled up the short sleeve of his light blue T-shirt over his chocolate colored left arm stump. He turned his left shoulder toward them to reveal the colorful red, gold and blue tattoo of the Marine Corps emblem with *Semper Fidelis* arched over and above the chevron at the top of his shoulder, just above his amputation. He turned sideways to allow all of them a good look at the tattoo. "Nick won the bet," he remarked casually. "If he would have lost, he would have gotten a 'Black is Beautiful' tattoo, like this here." The big man chuckled and pulled down the collar of the V-necked shirt to reveal his chest.

"That S. O. B. never seemed to lose." He looked down, shaking his head and chuckling. "I knew he'd make it back OK. I just knew it." He let loose of the shirt and lifted his head to meet their gazes, lightly tapping the bottom side of his fist on the wooden table top. "If anybody was ever gonna make it back, I knew it would be Nick Sheeboom. He's one lucky Son'bitch." The last, he spoke resolutely without a trace of humor.

Sheena asked, "What was the bet, Mr. Dixon?"

"Aww sheee-ittt! Big Jim! OK?"

"Oh sure, sure 'Big Jim,'" apologized Sheena. They all realized Sheena hadn't meant to upset him.

"That's better, Miss. Well, uh, I think it was over whose cherry the Spider Lady would snag next."

"Spider Lady?"

"Yeah, she was a whore worked out of this place we'd tap in Saigon, if we ever got any leave, which was damned seldom. She was called the Spider Lady because—"

"Please Jim, spare us the details" begged Ryz'n. "I'm sure it was a most descriptive moniker, but tell me—"

"Oh, you don't understand Ma'am. Nicky was never one of the Spider Lady's, uh, clients. You know, he just went along to try to 'witness'—that was the term he used. You know, to witness to 'em? Some things about Nick just never seemed to add up. Yeah, like I could never figure it, a celebrity like him, with a great wife like you and he wasn't even drafted! Hell! I never understood why he did it. I mean, signed up and all. I remember him saying the Lord had led him to help find and save those missin' soldiers. I thought he was kiddin'. But he wasn't. He was damned serious. Yeah! He was a Jesus freak back in the Nam.

Seems toned down about that religious stuff now, like he is about everything else. Guess he don't remember that stuff no more, either."

Ryz'n recalled how her Nick's zeal for Christianity had soared after the two of them narrowly escaped a near fatal automobile accident, the summer before he shipped out. Like Jim said, Nicky had volunteered for the service because he truly had thought God had called him with that vision about rescuing POWs. However, Ryz'n had known that Nick's new-found religion had caused him great inner conflict. He had wrestled to reconcile the demands of the record industry and the call of the typical Rock'N'Roll lifestyle with that which the Lord had called him to lead. In fact, the conflict had tormented him so greatly during that last fall that Ryz'n believed this torment of his soul also had been a major reason for inducing him to sign up with the Corps. Nick had never made that confession to her. However, she believed strongly he had escaped into the Corps in part to avoid the demons within himself, to remove himself from the temptations that had surrounded him.

Ryz'n roused herself from her reverie to display her dimples for Jim. She assured him that she understood what he had meant about the Spider Lady and had taken no offense.

"Yes, Jim, I know. But what I really want to know now is: How and where can I find my husband?"

Jim shrugged. "I dunno, exactly," resumed Big Jim with a sigh. "But he's on the road somewheres, ridin' that modified chopper of his. Figure it will take him at least six days to cross the country on a bike. Should show up at your place next Thursday, maybe Wednesday, if he don't have no problems."

"How do you know for sure that's where he's headed?"

"Cause that's what he told us. He said he got your address from this record comp'ny." Big Jim pointed to the Halo Platters label on the album cover, lying next to him on the dining table.

Ryz'n lowered her voice and peered into the disabled vet's dark brown eyes, asking in a sober but friendly confidence, "Did he, did he recognize you, Jim?"

The big man shook his head sadly.

"Nope. Looked right through me, like I wasn't even there. Mann! It gave me a chill!" The big man shuddered at the recollection. "His eyes are different now. Ya know? They used to always have that spark, that gleam, even during the worst of it. But now, he's different now, not the same old confident, ready-for-anything Nick. Tore me up to see him like that. He moves and speaks slow. Has a bit of a speech problem, ya see? Never figured that would happen to my Nicky boy. He was always so cocky, ya know? Like there was nothing he couldn't handle. Know what I mean?"

Ryz'n nodded again.

"Of course, in one way, he's lucky," confessed the big man.

"How's that, Jim?"

Now Jim's eyes narrowed, becoming cold, hollow.

"He don't remember all that hell we went through. I'll tell you what, that husband of yours saved my sorry hide or what's left of it. If it hadn't been for him, I'd be in some mass grave over there right now. Last night, I told him that, but ... but I also told him, maybe he shoulda left me in that bamboo prison ... maybe, I'd be better off, maybe ... "

Bill interrupted, speaking sharply and with conviction.

"That's PURE BULL, Mann, and you know it! You gotta home here, a wife and two boys that need you. Hell! You got more now than I ever had. I don't want to hear that SHINE!"

Involuntarily, Ryz'n and Sheena backed up in their chairs, fearing a fight might break out between the two paralyzed vets, but Big Jim broke the tension with a soft smile.

"You're right, Mann! Hey! When you're right, you're right!" He reached across the table to give Bill the black man's handshake. "Here ya go, Brotha!"

Ryz'n would liked to have talked more with Big Jim to learn more about Nick, but she was afraid the big man would go south on them as he just had, by recalling unpleasant memories. She wondered if he knew about his wife and Nicky, but diplomatically refrained from posing such a potentially turbulent question. What she really wanted, was to speak with the big man's wife, who had lied to her previously about Nick. Ryz'n wanted to nail that Amazon, in the worst way possible. Ryz'n sighted her target, through the sliding glass door, as she carried on cutting a customer's hair.

"Well, Jim, I'd really like to speak with your wife for a few minutes." Ryz'n pushed her chair back to stand up. "But before I do, I'd kind of like to know how you think Nicky just happened to drop by here, if his memory is so bad?"

The big man grinned.

"Donna said she met Nicky, when they found my dog tags on him, when he was still stationed at Kaneohe. She said they kept in touch, in case either of 'em might learn something that would help the other. It was just dumb luck that he dropped by the other day, I guess, because I've only been home eight days myself." His eyes wavered and his quizzical expression belied his confident tone. His failure to look Ryz'n in the eye led her to assume he was being less than truthful. Ryz'n did not press the matter. She had bigger fish to fry.

"Yes, it's a small, but funny world sometimes, Jim. Look, thanks so much and congratulations on your homecoming!" Ryz'n flashed the three-dimple smile, as she rose, excused herself and stepped out onto the patio. Big Jim seemed both surprised and disappointed that she left so quickly. He would have to content himself with just Sheena and Bill for an audience. As for Ryz'n, she had another more, pressing matter on her mind.

Ryz'n had observed Donna Dixon, who, while plying her trade, had tried to avoid peeking at Ryz'n and her party through the sliding glass patio doors. Mrs. Dixon could not run, so she decided to use the excuse that she was too busy to speak with Ryz'n now, which, of course, she was. However, Ryz'n would not

bite. She gave Mrs. Dixon an ultimatum. She explained that the hairdresser could either take a ten minute break, so they could speak in private, or Ryz'n would just fire away right there in front of her friends and customers. The hairdresser decided to take a break. She apologized to her clients, but she said she would return in ten minutes and suggested the ladies help themselves to the coffee pot or the cooler of soft drinks. Donna's customer's looked at one another suspiciously.

The two young women excused themselves via the back door into the garage. The pair squeezed in between the Dixon's station wagon and the interior garage walls. Ryz'n said nothing but simply stared at her adversary, waiting for an explanation. The place smelled of stale, cut grass and gasoline. Mrs. Dixon turned coldly upon Ryz'n, who noticed something below the hairdresser's eyes.

"Well, what do you want from me, Mrs. Sheeboom? Saturday is my busy day. Those kids inside gotta eat, ya know?" With that callous, brisk opening salvo Donna Dixon had thrown down the gauntlet. Ryz'n picked it up with relish.

"The truth! That's what I want, the whole truth, if you think you know how to give it!" Ryz'n spit the words at her adversary as if they were bitter seeds. She could not hide her contempt for this, this lying adulteress. Indeed, it was all she could do to keep from tearing her eyes out.

The tall, buxom California blonde with the deep suntan, freckles, and perfectly even, white teeth, stared at the ground. She began to pace back and forth slowly at first, along the side of the car. Her sunny blonde hair was tied back in an antiquated pony tail with long bangs sparsely bending over her square forehead to her eyebrows. *Right out of the Fifties, Bee-Bop generation*. The woman was half a foot larger than Ryz'n's five-foot three-inch frame and probably a good forty pounds heavier. If it came down to a physical match between the two of them, Ryz'n knew she would be the underdog. Yet, as a former softball catcher, who never had shrunk from blocking the plate, Ryz'n felt competent to meet any challenge here, just as she had done on the softball diamond. She sincerely hoped it would not come to a physical confrontation, but this lying whore had gotten her blood up. As she stared more closely at the Dixon woman, Ryz'n again noticed the hairdresser's eyes. Large dark circles peeked out from beneath concealing make-up and the woman's eyes looked bloodshot.. The skin below her eyes was puffy, as well. It appeared to Ryz'n as if the woman had been up crying all night long. Ryz'n smelled blood.

Donna Dixon reached shakily into a side pocket of her pale blue smock to fetch a pack of cigarettes. She pulled one out and stuck it in her mouth without lighting it. She paused, as she reached for her matches. Suddenly the larger woman remembered her manners.

"Oh! Would you care for a cigarette?" She proffered Ryz'n the pack.

"No." replied Ryz'n coldly. "I don't smoke."

"Will it bother you, if I smoke?"

"Yes, it will. Tobacco smoke doesn't agree with me," responded Ryz'n acidly. (Tobacco smoke had always bothered Ryz'n since she had experienced frequent childhood asthma attacks. Cigarette smoke was a major reason why Ryz'n always tried to avoid playing the club scene. Although she had outgrown her asthma after puberty, Ryz'n still despised tobacco smoke.)

The hairdresser returned the matches and cigarette package to her pocket, but kept the unlit cigarette in her mouth. The butt bobbed up and down as she spoke.

"Well, you're right, I guess," she mumbled. "It is a bad habit and I shouldn't smoke in here around the car and the lawnmower gas can." She paced some more. Ryz'n held her tongue. Taking the nail from her mouth, the handsome blonde let out a sigh of resignation.

"All right. All right." She kept pacing back and forth, in the cramped space between the car and garage walls, while she avoided Ryz'n's penetrating gaze.

"I first met Dixie ... oh, let's see. It was in late August of '73 over at Kaneohe. The Corps notified me they had found my husband or thought they had anyway. They wanted me to come over to identify him, because he had amnesia. They thought a full face-to-face meeting would be better for him than us just talking over the phone." As the woman spoke, she remained agitated. With the unlit cigarette between her fingers, she paced back and forth nervously in the small garage, removing items from her path with her feet, like toy wagons, rakes, etc. She avoided Ryz'n's direct glare as much as possible. Ryz'n nodded, because what the woman had said made sense, but she never for an instant took her eyes off her rival.

"Anyway, they paid for me to go over. So I went." She toked nervously on the unlit nail, then folded her arms across her body. "His Marine company commander ushered me into a small room in the recreation hall. There was Dix in his khakis, sitting in a chair at the end of a long table." She smiled at the recollection, pointing to an old, broken chair in the corner of the garage as if Dix were sitting there. "I remember the sunlight was streaming across him from some partly opened Venetian blinds. The light forced him to squint a little to see me." Ryz'n frowned, but bit her tongue, allowing the hairdresser to go on enjoying the reliving of her recollection.

"Well shoot! I knew right away he wasn't my husband, who you've met, yes?"

Again, Ryz'n nodded once that she had.

"I never thought to ask the Marines what color he was and they didn't want me to speak to him over the phone, thinking the shock of a fresh, full, face-to-face meeting might be the best way to help spur his recall. You follow me?"

And again, Ryz'n nodded. "Yes, you just said that." Ryz'n was cutting this woman no slack, whatsoever.

"Oh yeah, that's right I did, didn't I?" She removed the unlighted Lucky from her mouth and shook her head in agreement. "Sorry."

"Go ahead," urged Ryz'n. "But if you ask me, it seems the Marines could tell the difference between a white Dixon and a black Dixon." Ryz'n's bitterness was

quite evident in her tone. The Dixon woman fidgeted nervously with her unlit cigarette.

"Yes, that's what I thought, too. It was only when Big Jim came home about a week ago that I learned what happened there. It seems the DOD's famed Worldwide Locator Service failed in this case. Evidently, servicemen in "the Outfit", as Jim refers to it, were not entered into the mainstream automated system with all the other servicemen. Seems Big Jim's file, along with the rest of "the Outfit", probably Dixie's, too, were squirreled away under some super "Top Secret" classification, somewhere inside the bowels of the Pentagon. Due to the ultra-clandestine nature of their outfit's operation, ya understand?" Ryz'n blinked deliberately in reply. "Hell!" exclaimed the hairdresser. "Turns out Big Jim was misfiled with Army records of all places, because he and Dix had been attached to an Army outfit! How do ya like that? Of course, all this came to light, only recently, much after my visit with Dix.

"Poor Dix." Donna shook her head. "The Marines had just made up a file for him based on what he could tell them about hisself, which was absolutely nothin'. Ha! They even gave him a simulated rank of corporal." Donna laughed. "But he got busted to private after a dispute with a DI that also cost him a some times in the Brig." She shook her head and smiled. Then Ryz'n's hard, impatient stare prompted the blonde to return to her original subject.

"Oh Yeah, about Dix and me. Right. That's what you were interested in?" Donna took a deep breath, as Ryz'n's sharp, silent stare bore into Donna's eyes. Mrs. Dixon looked away but persevered, "Well, I was disappointed, more like devastated, ya know? I could tell he, the kid, was disappointed also that he didn't belong to me. The captain led me away, consoled me and took me back to his office." Mrs. Dixon looked back to Ryz'n. "Then I thought, hey! If this kid had Big Jim's dog tags, maybe I could find out something from him that would help me to locate my husband? Of course, the captain and his fellow Marines told me, Dixie was an amnesic, but I figured, I could finesse some information out of him. You know? HA! Yeah, right!" She shook her head and eyed the garage rafters.

"Anyway, they took me back over to the rec. hall, but Dix had split. They walked me over to the barracks and there he was." The Dixon woman stopped pacing, using her foot, to right a rake that had slipped down from against the garage wall. Then she resumed both her walk and her talk.

"He was the only marine in the barrack. We caught him in his briefs, I mean, in his under shorts only. Evidently, he was supposed to have been cleaning the latrine or some damned thing, so he was climbing back into his fatigues. Well, I tell you, the sight of that tan, lean, good-lookin', hard-bodied young man in his skivvies struck me hard ... stuck with me." Donna was staring off into space now, hardly aware of her interrogator. "Gee! My husband had been gone for almost two years. Been listed as a M. I. A. for seven months. The Government, that is the Nixon Administration, had said that all P. O. W.s had been returned. Yeah! Right, again."

She stopped pacing and nervously blew imaginary smoke and looked up towards the garage ceiling briefly, before returning to stare at Ryz'n, plaintively

"Well, now, I hadn't so much as looked at another man in all that time. Ya gotta believe me. It's true. Didn't have time, even if I had wanted to, not with working a full time job, trying to raise two kids and runnin' a household, too. Do you know, me and Jim have been married nine years? But we have been separated for almost seven of 'em? Can you believe that?"

"Yes, I can, because Nicky and I have been married going on five years, but we have only been together for less than fifteen months!" Ryz'n was in no mood to sympathize with this adulteress.

Mrs. Dixon became increasingly agitated. Anxiously, she puffed harder on her unlit cigarette. Unable to draw the nicotine that she craved, she reached for the matches again, then, caught herself. Ryz'n could see she desperately needed a smoke

"It's all right, Mrs. Dixon. Go ahead and light up, if it will help."

"Are you sure?"

Again, Ryz'n nodded curtly in reply. She wanted to hear this, even at the expense of sucking in second hand smoke.

"Well, let's get out of here before I blow us both to smithereens. Ha! Then we wouldn't have any more problems. Ever think of that?" Ryz'n smiled weakly at the dark humor.

Donna Dixon reached down, lifted open the garage car door and led Ryz'n out through the open front door into the bright sunlight, where the driveway had queued up customers' cars. There, the big blonde finally lit up. The besmocked hairdresser took that first deep drag and sagged with obvious relief.

"Let's walk," suggested Ryz'n.

The two attractive, young women with a common interest walked down the driveway around the parked cars, looking like a Mutt and Jeff combo. With Ryz'n to Donna's right, they followed the sidewalk to the right around the court on this sun-drenched, Southern California, June Saturday. Once she had inhaled on her Winston again and exhaled deeply, Donna appeared to relax. Her shoulders visibly sagged with relief as she murmured 'Ummmm'. Ryz'n walked stiffly beside her. The back of Ryz'n's right hand rested together behind her on the top of her sharply outward-curved rump. Her left pressed her handbag into her left upper hip. The unlikely pair strolled stiffly, side by side, on the concrete sidewalk that ringed the small suburban court. Fortified by the nicotine, Donna picked up where she had left off.

"So Dix puts on his fatigues and we walk back over to the rec. hall where I quizzed him about Big Jim. Well, as we talked, or I should say, as I talked, Dix listened. He listened with interest. You know, I mean with compassion? But he could not help me. He wanted to help. That was obvious. He just could not recall anything. And that depressed him, hunh, even as it does to this day." Donna zoned out for a few seconds.

"Well, when we had finished our talk, I asked the captain if I could take Dix off the base. I thought, you know, maybe in a more relaxed setting, Dix'd have a breakthrough or something and he could say what happened to Big Jim. The captain called the psychiatrists who were treating Dix. The next thing I know, they give him a four-day liberty. I couldn't believe it!"

Neither can I.

"Well, we take a cab over to Waikiki. We walk on the beach. Far down the beach. We talk. Dix is pickin' my brain. I mean, he's listenin' to me talk about all my problems, my life without Big Jim, the kids, everything. He was so attentive, so attractive, so, I don't know, so sweet, so helpless. Well, I fell in love with him right there." Donna kicked the heel of her wide cuffed, right boot, scraping it against the sidewalk, as if to emphasize her point or perhaps to show regret. Ryz'n could not be certain which. But Donna carried on..

"I sensed the feeling was mutual, but I wasn't sure. So we go to dinner at a nice quiet, Polynesian restaurant. We walked the beach until well after dark. Dix said he felt like swimmin'. He stripped and went in. Went in naked as a Jaybird, right there in front of me, without even battin' an eye!" Donna stopped to drool over the recollection. "I don't know why he did it, because he's usually so shy about his wounds. Maybe he thought it was so dark I wouldn't notice. Maybe he was desperate ... like me. Well! My Gosh! Adonis could not have looked better than Dix. I mean, of course, his war wounds aside.

"Then, I followed him in, just like that!" She snapped her fingers of her free hand. "Ha! I couldn't believe what I was doing either, out there on a public beach like that, even if it was almost midnight. I mean, I just didn't do things like that, not even growing up on the beach here in San Diego.

Guess, I was a little desperate, too." Donna's tone became maudlin. "But Dix, gee, he made it all seem so natural." She started to stroll again as she became more reflective, more sentimental. "He was easy, so easy to be with, easy to love. And I was so lonely, so lonely. Oh, you don't know what it's like—"

They had been walking side by side quietly with Ryz'n holding her emotions in check. However, now Ryz'n stopped dead in her tracks to pivot left on her heel and shoot Mrs. Dixon a laser beam gaze, a penetratingly chilling look. The blonde sighed, inhaling deeply on her cigarette. "Well ... yeah, maybe you do. I mean, sure you do." She coughed self-consciously. "Of course, you do. I'm, I'm sorry." Ryz'n resumed their walk without uttering a syllable, but seething, still biting her tongue.

"Well, me and Dix spent a long weekend together. When we parted company, we exchanged addresses, etc., so if either of us heard something that might help the other we'd, well you know ... " (Righteous indignation welled up within Ryz'n, but she held it in check, keeping her mouth shut and listened.) "When I left Dix, I left my heart in the islands. Truly, I did." Donna sighed. "But I never expected to hear from him again. I swear it. You gotta believe that Mrs. Sheeboom."

"Unh, hunh, that's why you exchanged addresses. But you DID see him again, now DIDN'T YOU?"

Donna Dixon flicked her cigarette butt into the concrete gutter and followed its flight.

"Yeah, yeah, I saw him again." She paused somewhat ashamed and fetched another nail from the pocket of her smock, which she shakily fired up. The buxom blonde inhaled deeply before she resumed both her talk and her walk. Having reached the corner, the pair turned and crossed the mouth of the short court to walk back down the opposite side as Donna recommenced her tale.

"Yeah, it was a just about a year ago, near the end of May, it was. Dix had come down here to play baseball for the Hammers. You know, he's really a helluva ballplayer?" She shook her ahead and paused in awe to look at Ryz'n.

Ryz'n smiled weakly, indulgently.

"Oh sure, of course, you know, of course." They walked on. "Well, he just showed up at my door late one Saturday night. The Hammers had gotten him a part time job at a fillin' station around the corner. I had run into him filling up my car one day and he needed a place to stay. We just accepted it as fate, so ... " Ryz'n halted and turned to her rival.

"So you shacked up with my husband for the summer? How did you explain that to your sons?" Donna stopped as well. She dropped her syrupy tone and became very serious.

"Look, I didn't know he was your husband then, OK? He didn't know he was your husband, either. And the boys love Dix. To this day, they think he walks on water. Dix makes them laugh again. Why, he'd take us all down to the beach on that modified chopper of his, all four of us, can you believe that? I still don't believe we did that and never got pulled over, either. Ha! Not once. Dix was lucky that way. Yeah, I was almost as happy for the kids as I was for myself, maybe more, that Dix had come back into my life. They needed a man, a father figure in their lives, someone they could laugh with, but respect at the same time, you know? And you couldn't ask for a better father figure than Dix. Chronologically, he may not be very old, but from a maturity standpoint, he's older than I am."

"And how old is that?"

"Twenty-eight."

"How old is Dixie?"

"Nicky is twenty-one, just like I am." (Ryz'n did not feel it appropriate to announce, she'd be twenty-one for only another week.)

"Ouch, I didn't know he was that young." Donna shook her head negatively, while Ryz'n stared blankly at her husband's lover. "OK, OK, you're right. I ... I mean, I ... I suspected as much, but—well, gee. There's not much to tell after that, I guess." She started to walk away but Ryz'n stopped her short.

"Oh, I disagree. I think there's quite a bit to tell, Mrs. Dixon."

"Well, maybe ... Maybe there is, something anyway."

They had reached the Dixon home and resumed their walk around the court for the second time, when another of Donna's hair customers drove up in an El Dorado, asking to know if Donna were open for business. The blonde hairdresser told the prospective customer she was welcome but Donna was running a little behind schedule. Donna told the lady, she could go on around back and pick a pop out of the cooler in the back yard and Donna would be with her shortly. The woman said she'd return in an hour. After the woman drove away, Mrs. Dixon returned her attention to Ryz'n.

Donna murmured to herself. "Hope them other customers don't leave ... Now, where were we?" Ryz'n ignored her remark and quickly redirected her.

"You didn't realize how young Nicky is and that summer—"

"Oh yeah, right." Again, they resumed their stroll. "Well, summer ended. Nicky, uh Dixie, went up to Cerritos Community College, until a grant opened up for him at Peppermount, starting the spring semester. He stayed with us over the Christmas break. Then—"

"Wait a minute," demanded Ryz'n. Once more they halted to face each other. "Are you saying you didn't see him from the end of summer until Christmas?"

"Well, no. I guess not. I mean, you know, he'd come down a couple weekends a month, maybe one or two Tuesday evenings a month."

"Tuesday evenings? Why Tuesdays?"

"Well, Dix didn't have no classes on Wednesday and, at that time, Wednesday was my day off and ... "

"And the kids were in school?"

"Yeah, you got it." She spewed some tobacco smoke out the side of her mouth and hung her head.

"SHHOOO—OOOTTTT!" Ryz'n was incensed.

"Well, you kept askin, lady!'" cried Donna angrily, in self defense.

Ryz'n's sunglasses fell down over her face as she jerked her head in disgust. She pulled the dark glasses off her nose and used them as a miniature foil, jabbing them three times towards her adversary as she made her points.

"Just finish this, but don't leave out anything important, not like three months of makin' out! For cryin' out loud!"

"WHAT! What do you want from me, Mrs. Sheeboom? You want me to tell you how great he is in bed? What we did together? Hunh? Well, let me tell you. Honey, we—"

"No, Damn it!" Driven to utter a rare curse, Ryz'n nearly poked Donna's eye out with her FosterGrants. "I want you to tell me what I don't know, not what I don't wanna know! I can figure that out for myself. THANK YOU!"

Donna stared hard at Dixie's wife, who dropped her head and began to walk again.

"Sure, sure. I guess, I guess that was, that was kinda low of me. I, uh ... " Donna took a deep breath and drew on her nail. "OK, OK, so anyway, Dixie went up to Peppermount. And that's when your detective, and then you, showed

up with your pictures and I, I ... " Ryz'n stopped walking causing Donna to stop with her.

"You lied to me. Say it, you lied, didn't you?" Ryz'n seized Donna lightly by the forearm and squared off to face her larger rival, gazing up to the Dixon woman, who towered above her.

Again, the two women halted to stare at one another. Mrs. Dixon broke down first. She sucked anxiously on her cancer stick, holding it in her left hand.

"Yes, I lied to you. OK, you satisfied now?" She spoke in a prissy sort of tone and looked away from Ryz'n's direct gaze. But Ryz'n was like a terrier nipping at Donna's heel. Jabbing her sunglasses in the air, she would not be deterred.

"Why? Why? Why did you do it? Didn't you think Nick had a right to know who he was? If you had really loved him, you'd want what is best for him, wouldn't you? At least, you could have let him decide for himself what that is! Why? Why did you—"

Suddenly, Donna wheeled back towards Ryz'n with her right fist clenched, jabbing downward beside her hip repeatedly. Then, with her open right palm, she slapped her right buttock with a resounding THWACK!

"BECAUSE! BEE—CAUSE! We were GOOD together—GOOD for each other! You don't know how GOOD we were together in every way, not just in the sack, but in every way. If you could have seen him with those kids, you ... Ahh! Look! I lied. I screwed up!" Donna Dixon threw her hands up in the air, as though she were under arrest with her cigarette ashes falling onto Ryz'n, who quickly wiped them off her chest and shoulder.

"Sorry," said Donna curtly without conviction. "Look! When he came down to play in the tournament over his spring break, we went out to dinner. I was gonna tell him about you then, after dinner. Honest, I was. But he took me to the "Top of the Cove" over on the bluff. It's one of the fanciest, classiest restaurant saround here."

Her countenance softened considerably as she smiled and began to stroll again with the much shorter Ryz'n beside her. "We enjoyed a candlelight dinner together. A candlelight dinner! Just the TWO OF US! Can you imagine that?" She shook her head in wonder. "Oh, it was wonderful. Glorious! We ate outside in a flower-covered Spanish courtyard, looking out over the Pacific Ocean. Filled with the spring scent of fresh desert wildflowers and blooming cactus." Her voice trailed off. "It was perfect ... "

"And where were the kids, Mrs. Dixon, the two boys you're so concerned about?" asked Ryz'n full of sarcasm. Suddenly, Donna dropped her fairy tale demeanor in favor of righteous indignation.

"Look lady! You gotta right to question me about Dix, but when it comes to my kids, you got no right and no idea what the hell you're talkin' about! The kids had been with Dix and me all week. My in-laws babysat them that one night. ONE LOUSY NIGHT! For Pete's sakes!" The two women ceased walking again.

"Your in-laws? Ha! How convenient!" Ryz'n's sarcastic tone was not lost on Donna.

"Looook! That was the first time Dixie and I were alone together without the boys that whole week!"

"Except for when you were sleepin' next to MY husband, right? And don't tell me you didn't know he was MY husband then, or that you weren't committing ADULTERY either, because you were you, you lyin'—" Ryz'n felt her face flush and the vein pop out along her forehead.

Again, Dixie's lover backed down with remorse and hung her head in shame, admitting, "Well, Dix was supposed to be roomin' with the team in some motel down by San Diego State, but the Coach cut him some slack."

Without looking up, she spoke softly, hesitantly. "I, I was gonna tell him ... tell him that very night at the restaurant after dinner ... honest I was. But he said he had something he wanted to say first. He presented me with a seventy-five hundred dollar, diamond engagement ring. He asked me to marry him."

Donna looked off dreamily again down the street.

"I couldn't believe it. The answer to all my prayers was right there in front of me, you know?" She turned back to face Ryz'n. "All I had to do was simply say 'yes', 'Yes' 'YES!' If I said it once, I must have said it ten times. I ignored my conscience, thanking the Lord for answering my prayers by bringing me a terrific husband and a father for my kids." Donna smiled beneficently.

"Well Lady, your prayers have been answered NOW. Haven't they, Honey? BEE-CAUSE! Your husband and the father of your kids has come home to love you all." Ryz'n smirked broadly, relishing this moment.

Mrs. Dixon raised her head to look into Ryz'n's spiteful eyes. Ryz'n could see the wheels turn behind the adulteress's bloodshot orbs.

"'Well, now, then, there,' as Dix might say. "Lady, you're just like the rest of us common folk, ain't ya Miss Supah Staah? If I WAS feelin' a bit guilty, I ain't no more. You, uh, had your own sexual escapades, there Honey! And them's just the ones that was in the newspapers!

"You know, right now, I mean RIGHT NOW! Dixie is looking for you, but he don't know you from Adam. He only knows what Big Jim pointed out to him on those album covers. But Dixie does know ME, BABY. AND HE LOVES ME! And it wouldn't surprise me if Dix comes back TO ME." She jabbed her sternum with the back of her thumb. "Yeah, that's right, because he loves ME and he loves those kids! Because he's never really had nobody else. See?

"I'm like a mother, a sister, a fiancée, a friend as well as a lover to him, all rolled into one. See? Yeah! And I make him feel like nobody else can, too. So, we'll see who he loves, won't we, MRS. Sheeboom?"

"Yes, we most certainly will, MRS. DIXON!" countered Ryz'n, teeming with resentment. "I wouldn't hold your breath waiting for him to choose you over me, wouldn't be healthy for ya. And I hope you enjoy the best of health. MRS.

DIXON! So you had better stop smoking those cancer sticks. You have three men in there counting on you to take care of them.

"Now, I believe this conversation is over, MRS. DIXON! On your way back, please tell my sister and Nick's uncle to meet me at the car, I don't relish the idea of re-entering your den of iniquity." Ryz'n shoved her shades back into place over her nose and ears and crossed her arms over her chest, indicating this conversation was over, yet not backing down an inch.

Donna Dixon exhaled her last draw of second hand cigarette smoke down into Ryz'n's face, as the jilted mother of two strode past Ryz'n back into and through her garage. Indeed, the conversation had ended. Ryz'n leaned up against Bill's parked car fanning Donna's cigarette smoke away from her and coughing, while she waited for Bill and Sheena to come out of the house. Her thoughts raced.

She had acted confidently enough in front of her rival, but, in reality, Ryz'n was anything but confident. What the hairdresser had said made sense. Donna Dixon was an attractive, older, but not too much older, woman. Donna's age may have appealed to Nick, precisely because he had no family, no mother figure so to speak, as the hairdresser had said. Perhaps Ryz'n was stretching her two semesters of psychology past its limits here. Then, there were the kids, who provided him with a built-in, complete family. And why was Nick so easy, so fun loving around this woman and her children, when everyone else Ryz'n had interviewed, had said Nick never laughed, never even smiled, hardly? These opposing character descriptions seemed to be of two entirely different people. They had Ryz'n worried. She had no kids to offer. With Nick's medically documented history of infertility, now combined with the loss of a testicle and her own well documented female problems, as well as the complications arising from the miscarriage ...

And then, there was that front on her rival. Why, Dolly Parton would have been proud of that girl's chest set! Since the summer between her sophomore and junior years of high school, when nature had belatedly kicked in and Ryz'n had molded a new shape for herself, she never had felt shorted in that department. Yet, she probably appeared flat chested next to that Dixon lady—Why, that woman was ridiculous! *Udders like that should be hangin from a cow!*

However, suddenly, for some inexplicable reason, Ryz'n thought of Big Jim and she felt a pang of conscience, of remorse. She had displayed an extremely poor attitude toward Donna Dixon just now. In fact, she had also betrayed her Roman Catholic upbringing with her acerbic behavior towards Stiehlmohr, yesterday, too. Suddenly, she felt acutely ashamed, terribly and overwhelmingly ashamed. After all, the Lord was answering both women's prayers in His own way and time. Ryz'n decided to reconcile with her rival, not because she wanted to, but precisely because she did not want to and because she felt that is what the Lord would want her to do. Her loss and her pain did not guarantee her the right to inflict those feelings onto others. She prayed for humility, for courage and for compassion.

Respectfully, Ryz'n passed back through the bandbox of a house. She noticed the kids, playing in front of the TV. The tiny size of the house impressed her now unfavorably and fueled her guilt. Previously, Ryz'n had not noticed the almost claustrophobic closeness of the small stucco cottage. She observed the one-armed big man in the wheelchair, while his wife worked out on the patio to put food on the table for all of them. Whether she wanted to or not, Ryz'n was overcome with compassion for this family, all of them, including the adulterous Mrs. Dixon.

Ryz'n comprehended instinctively that she and Donna Dixon actually had much in common, as MIA wives and as lovers of the same man. She had sympathized with Mrs. Dixon as a sister MIA widow, when she had visited her last winter. Whether Ryz'n liked it or not, Donna Dixon was bound to her in a way unlike any other woman in the world. Ryz'n announced to the group in the dining room that she had one more thing to do before they would have to leave.

Still gathered around the dining room table, the others halted their talk stare as Ryz'n slipped past them with a quick, polite "Excuse me."

For a second time, Ryz'n slid her glasses back up on the crown of her head. She passed through the glass doors to the patio to seek out Donna Dixon on the patio, among her clients.

Mrs. Dixon assumed a confrontational stance. With scissors in one hand and clippers in another, the larger woman looked to be a formidable opponent. She said nothing, but stared hard down at her former fiancé's wife. Ryz'n whispered under her breath so only she could hear. "Father, please help me for I cannot do this alone. Apart from you, I can do nothing." Then she girded herself and slowly moved forward onto the patio. Ryz'n spoke first as Donna's customers looked on. She spoke humbly, gently, despite the customers' presence.

"I, I behaved rather poorly just now, Mrs. Dixon. You know, we have too much in common, too many trials, too many heartaches, for that kind of behavior. Please ... accept my, my sincere, my ... humble, apology." Haltingly, against her will, Ryz'n extended a hand to her archrival, who, hesitated. Staring first at Ryz'n's hand, then into Ryz'n's eyes, Donna switched the scissors from her right to left hand and slowly reached out to clasp the hand of her lover's wife. As Ryz'n took Donna's hand, a warmth spread from their grasp up Ryz'n's arm to her shoulder. An inexplicable feeling of warm elation, welled up within her chest, into her throat and flowed out of her mouth, forcing a shallow smile which she could not repress, though she tried. Slowly, her smile deepened to produce the dimples, which were her trademark. Mrs. Dixon reciprocated with a smile of her own that pushed her toward Ryz'n, hugging her firmly.

Cheek to cheek, she whispered softly into Ryz'n's left ear, so none of Donna's customers would hear her:

"He's all yours. I was wrong, Honey, dead wrong. I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I, I ... " Donna sniffled.

Ryz'n whispered in her rival's left ear, "Yes. It's all right. It's OK. I understand. God bless you and your boys, all three of your boys!"

Then Ryz'n broke their embrace abruptly. She apologized to the waiting customers for taking up their hairdresser's time. She walked out of there on air as she collected Bill and Sheena from the dining room.

Big Jim asked them to stay. He wanted to tell her about Nick and himself over in Nam. However, Ryz'n took a rain check. She was anxious to return home to prepare for Nick's homecoming, even if it would not be for several days yet. She mentioned to Jim that both she and Nick might return at the end of the summer, before he came back to school. Ryz'n hugged both boys before she left, providing each of them with some "ice cream" money. The boys were overjoyed. Ryz'n passed out ten-dollar bills like so much confetti.

The warm afterglow from her reconciliation with Donna still filled her chest. Her enthusiasm overwhelmed the boys and all those around her. What a change in attitude that apology had wrought in her! Now Ryz'n bore a joyfully sanguine exuberance about her. Hope adorned Ryz'n like a festive robe. However, the hope she felt in her chest was now, more than just the evidence of things unseen. This hope was certain, born of prayer being answered right before her eyes. She could not wait to get back to Crest Hill Heights to consummate those prayers.

Back on the road in their respective seats, eyes shaded, Bill asked how things had gone with Mrs. Dixon. Knowing that Bill was a big football fan, a Rams fan, Ryz'n replied in a vernacular he understood well.

"Well, things got a little dicey in the second half Bill, but we smoothed everything over by the end of overtime." Bill patted her on the knee approvingly.

"Good, good. Glad to hear it, Ry. So, what's next?" Ryz'n took a deep breath.

"Well, I don't think there's anything left to do here." Then speaking more to herself than to Bill or Sheena, who sat on either side of her, Ryz'n began to check off items from her "to do" list.

"Let's see, I applied to the college. Of course, I have to write them an essay, but I can just copy one I already sent to UCLA or Stanford." She looked to Sheena for approval, but Sheena remained placidly superior behind her wraparound shades, so Ryz'n carried on. "There are no more leads to follow out here. We've got our bags packed in the trunk. And Nicholas is heading for home!" She beamed radiantly. "Don't see why we can't go to the closest airport and fly home ahead of him. Is that a problem, Bill?"

"Nope, no problem at all."

"Well, then—"

"Wait Ry. What about that record deal, Sis?"

"What record deal?"

"You know the one Mr. Stiehlmohr offered us? The sex angle?"

"Have you lost your ever lovin' mind? What were you drinking back there anyway? I'm sure Bryson would just love to see you touring all across the country pulling that act! You really surprise me sometimes, Sheena!"

"Well, I thought, we could make Bryce part of the act, you know like those male dancers down at the Hangar Club. That way, we'd attract both genders, make twice as much"

The two sisters stared speechlessly at one another from behind their dark glasses. "Millionaires for life, Ry! That's what your buddy Jerry said."

"MY BUDDY?!!" Ryz'n was about to blow, but finally, Sheena could no longer keep a straight face. "Really had you goin', didn't I?"

"Yeah, Baby Sister, you sure did," said Ryz'n wagging her head in disbelief. Bill opined that he thought the idea had merit, but he too was joking, wasn't he? Ryz'n wondered. With everyone hiding their eyes behind dark glasses, it was difficult to tell their true intentions. The good news about Nick had made them all a bit giddy.

* * *

In the San Diego International Airport, the girls purchased first class tickets on an All-American Airlines flight to Dulles, departing at 1:35 p. m. PDT, arriving at Dulles at 9:55 p. m. EDT. Because they had nearly a couple hours to kill, Bill suggested they lunch in the airport lounge. They agreed and headed for the lounge. The girls lugged their bags and shoved them under a nondescript dining table in the fairly crowded lounge. After they were all seated, they waited, eyes shaded, for their lunch orders to arrive. Sheena began to relate Big Jim's tales of Nicky in Nam, which Ryz'n had missed during her talk with Donna.

"You should have heard him talking about Nicky, Ryz'n. Why, he spoke of Nicky like, like Nicky was some kind of, some kind of legend, didn't he Bill?"

"Yeah, sounded that way to me," agreed Bill matter-of-factly.

"You know, I must have missed out on something. How is it that Big Jim just showed up at home from out of the blue a week ago?" asked a curious Ryz'n.

"Coma," replied Sheena.

"Oh, that explains everything Sheena. Gee Whiz!" countered Ryz'n mildly exasperated.

"Well, that's about all he said, Ry. Big Jim was in a coma as a John Doe for a couple of years. He came out of it over in a VA hospital up in Washington State back in April. He had memory problems, too, at first. He just got squared away a couple weeks ago and they shipped him to Long Beach, where the V. A. helped him locate his family here."

"Gee, that seems kind of hard to believe, don't you think, Bill?"

"You mean harder to believe than finding Nicky out here under our noses?"

"Yeah, I see what you mean, but still ... Stranger than fiction, hunh?"

"I'll say it is, Sis, but then strange things always happened to you and Nicky. Look at that whole Buzzbee thing."

"That wasn't me, Sheena. I've told you that before. That was just Nicky, before me. But that accident we had that almost killed both of us on the Beltway, now that was me and Nick. Now look, I don't need a lecture on ancient history. I need to know about Nicky's more recent past. You were saying ... "

"Sure, sure, I know. After all, you were the one who asked about Big Jim. Well, anyway, before I was interrupted," Sheena slid her dark glasses down her nose and, looking over her shades and cut her dark brown eyes in her sister's direction, "I was relaying Big Jim's stories about Nicky over in Nam." She lowered the glasses to the table. "Big Jim explained that when Nicky first arrived over there, he was green as anything, a real 'cherry' is the term he had used, right Bill?" Bill smiled and Sheena continued. "So they were in the same squad. Big Jim took a liking to him and he took Nicky under his wing, teaching him how to survive. Within two months, Nicky was teaching Jim. He said Nicky 'went Gook.'" Sheena replaced her glasses on her face.

"Went Gook? What does that mean, exactly?"

"He said Nicky was far out, Mann, even though he didn't do any dope, like the rest of 'em. Nicky was farther out than anyone in the outfit. He told how Nicky

ate what the VC ate, some stinking fish dish called 'nuoc mam,' dressed like they dressed, thought like they thought, and most important, fought like they fought, only better. Nicky stopped wearing boots. He wore Ho Chi Minh sandals."

"What on earth are they?"

Ryz'n was familiar with a lot of the slang Sheena was repeating verbatim from big Jim's stories. What Ryz'n had not picked up from Nicky's letters, she had learned when she had performed her own long range reconnaissance patrol (LRRP or lurp).She had traveled in a privately owned, motorized skiff up tributaries of the Xe Khong (or Me Kong) River over her last winter's semester break, searching for her husband.

Ryz'n, Nicky's former company commander, her father-in-law Mr. Sheeboom and a handful of hand picked marines and soldiers, who had served with Nick, had volunteered to go back "in country" for their lost comrade. Despite the fact that the American military had withdrawn from that war torn country two years previously, the civil war still raged among the Vietnamese people.

Sheena noted, "Well, Big Jim said the Ho Chi Minh sandal was a kind of homemade footwear, like flip-flops with tire tread for soles. He said Nicky's feet became like boards. Nicky dressed light: no steel pot, no extra garbage, just his M-16 rifle, which, because of its reliability, he preferred the M-14. He also carried a USMC service .45 caliber pistol, a ruck of grenades and ammo clips, a canteen and some salt tablets and light poncho. He also bore a converted, scoped Winchester hunting rifle for sniping. That's it. The bugs didn't bother Nicky as much as the other guys. Maybe it was his diet, because he ate like the natives or maybe he just ignored the insects better. Big Jim couldn't say, but he did say that in almost eight months over there, they were constantly behind enemy lines."

"Yeah, Sheena I know that. I learned about 'The Outfit' last winter on that search and rescue mission. It was an inter-service, "special ops" unit. They pulled out over 250 Americans. Nick and Jim's platoon alone performed 115 extractions in eight months, including some 28 Vietnamese POWs and 87 Americans. That was a big deal, because, in the South, unlike the North with its 'Hanoi Hilton'. The Viet Cong (VC) didn't keep their prisoners very long, just long enough to torture and kill them. The Dac Cong (DC) were especially cruel."

"Yeah, Jim mentioned that. He said the DC tortured their prisoners brutally and killed 'em pretty quickly. Didn't waste no resources on keeping them alive very long. Those 87 American POWs, most of whom were soldiers, you know, were captured during and after the Easter offensive. They probably wouldn't have been around to be freed like the hundreds of other boys in northern prisons, who were released in February, right after the peace accord was signed. Of course, the NVA had their own prisoners whom they would transport north, sometimes through Cambodia and Laos. Now, Big Jim said when Jim and Nick's unit received reliable intelligence, they'd penetrate the border if necessary to effect their extractions. You know? Their rescue operations. Isn't that where you were last winter, Ry, in Laos?"

Ryz'n's eyes misted over.

"Yes. That's why Nicky went you know, why he volunteered, to bring the boys home. He saw it all in a vision. You know that Sheena. Looks like that's what he did. He didn't want to hurt or kill anybody, just help."

"One out of three ain't bad for a battin' average, I guess." Sheena replied dryly.

"What do you mean by that?" Ryz'n asked indignantly, ready to strike.

"Well, he helped people all right, like the POW's they rescued, for sure. But Big Jim swore Nicky killed, more than two dozen of the enemy, seventeen confirmed kills, just snipin', alone, by Jim's count. He doesn't know how many exactly, not with their firefights, too. And that wasn't counting their escape from that supply dump that served also as a temporary detention center for prisoners. A lot of enemy soldiers got wasted there, maybe a couple platoons' worth and Nicky was the primary zapper!"

"That's hard for me to believe Sheena, even though I've got all his medals at home. It doesn't seem possible that he wasn't over there long enough for all that! Was he, Bill? Was eight months long enough to do all that?"

"I don't know Ryz'n," shrugged Bill. "Because Nicky's was the only special operations outfit over there performing that clandestine rescue mission, sounds like they were constantly out in the field reconnoitering behind the lines. They operated all over the country from the northern most part of Quang Tri down to the Delta, even west into Cambodia and Laos. Our air cavalry ferried them all over. I suppose it's possible, given Nicky's unique skills and mission."

"Unique skills? He's no killer, not my Nicky. I don't believe it."

"What he means, Ry, is that Nicky's great vision, his ability to see well at night, his sense of smell—"

"Sense of smell? What sense of smell? All I remember about his sense of smell was how much he loved that 'Love's Fresh Lemon' cologne I wear. It really used to turn him on." She grinned at her two lunch mates.

"All right, calm down girl. You got six days yet to go." Sheena giggled. "But it's true. Big Jim did say Nick 'could smell out the enemy.' Don't look at me like that, Ry! That's what he said. Big Jim also claimed Nicky had a sixth sense when it came to booby traps. He said if Nick stopped, because he feared a booby trap, they usually found one most times. At first, guys ignored him, 'cause he was a cherry, and went on ahead, only to pay the price. Soon, the others came to listen to whatever Nicky said. They learned to respect, despite his youth. Jim related the VC learned to fear Nicky, even though they didn't know who he was. They just knew there was a sniper out there who had killed a lot of them ... usually by a single bullet through the brain." Out of the corner of her left eye, Ryz'n glanced skeptically at Sheena.

"Sheena, either you're really embellishing this story or Big Jim did."

"No, I'm not!" Though indignant, Sheena backtracked. "Well I dunno. I mean, maybe *he* did. I'm just passin' on what he told us. Right Bill?" Bill nodded.

"So hear this now, Ry." Ryz'n playfully sat at attention, primly obedient, but the sober Sheena would not be deterred by her sister's light comedy. "Big Jim gave us an example of the way Nicky, 'the recon sniper,' operated. He said one time they were out tracking this team of four NVA regulars, who were transporting six American prisoners across the foothills." Sheena's enthusiasm drew Ryz'n in, as Sheena looked over her glasses and her eyes narrowed into small hot black coals. Sheena was in the jungle now with Nicky and Big Jim and she was drawing Ryz'n in right along with them.

" ... So Nicky and his squad had tracked them all day and into the night. Nicky, who was a Corporal at the time, halts the squad and motions everyone to spread out."

Sheena slides her shades back up to the bridge of her nose and pantomimes what she believed Nick was doing as she persisted with her tale.

"He assembles a silencer on his Winchester rifle, then climbs up this tree about two stories in the starry dark of night. Big Jim and the others in the squad see Nicky aim his rifle and heard 'shhoo', 'shhoo', 'shhoo', real quick like." As she lowered her sights and jerked her head, her dark glasses slid down her nose again Sheena's eyes blinked unconsciously with each pull of the trigger. She removed her glasses to avoid further distraction. "Only it was silent, whisper-like, rapid fire. Nicky holds his hand outstretched, then makes a fist with his thumb sticking out, turning it down three times in a row, signaling, three fell." Sheena imitates the motion. "He climbs down before the squad and they fan out to approach the NVA camp cautiously— cautiously, because they couldn't account for the fourth Gook, ya see?

"Big Jim described the American prisoners as lying there, tied up, and scared to death with Gook blood and brains all over them. Well, it turns out there had been four NVA regular soldiers killed after all, not three. Nick, without realizing it, had killed two with one bullet as they had been standing side by side and fell dead one on top of the other. The American prisoners said it was the most incredible thing they had ever witnessed. No noise, no nothing and all of sudden, 'Sploosh! Sploosh!' These Gook heads start exploding all around them. They said Nick had shot all four of them, before the first two even hit the ground. The enemy never knew what hit them." Sheena nodded vigorously her concurrence, as if she herself had been an eyewitness to the amazing rescue. Ryz'n grimaced, covering her opened mouth with her left hand.

"Big Jim related that Nick wouldn't enter the camp to inspect his marksmanship. He said Nicky didn't take any pride in killing, like some guys did. 'One bullet, one kill', was the Marine Corps sniper motto and Nick lived up to it, but he didn't take pride in it. Big Jim implied jokingly that Nick wanted to give the taxpayer maximum bang for his buck, but Jim said Nick never laughed or joked about that. Nick may have enjoyed the stalking part, outwitting the enemy, that part, but he didn't derive any pleasure from actually killing them. Jim said each time Nick knew he had sniped one of the enemy, he thought it had

killed Nick, too, a little, inside, ya know?" Sheena paused to look down at the table sadly. Ryz'n waited, then her sister raised her face.

"You know, Big Jim added that as a super sniper, Nick had the opportunity to make those silent kills, but in a firefight, he didn't. It was every man for himself then. Kill or be killed, with no time to think or remonstrate. Jim said 'Nick did his job well, but he definitely didn't enjoy it.' He said Nick did enjoy very much, the looks of gratitude on the faces of those he helped to rescue, as they all did."

Ryz'n nodded solemnly, but Sheena began to giggle. When Ryz'n asked what was so funny, her sister relayed an imitation of Big Jim's deep, rolling laughter, when he had recalled Nick's peculiar fear. "Evidently, it was not the VC, or DC or the regular North Vietnamese Army (NVA) that Nick feared. No, it was snakes. To be more precise, it was the Burmese Python. Nick had trouble sleeping in the bush for fear that a python would slither out of a tree and coil itself about him while he slept, squeeze the life out of him and then swallow him whole. Evidently, that had happened to one of the prisoners they had rescued.

"Big Jim had chuckled, because with all the other more likely dangers and hazards, pythons were what really had scared Little Nick." Sheena added that Big Jim had said, 'so Nicky used to pacify himself to sleep by unsheathing his bayonet, folding his arms and holding the bayonet along his sternum, with the blade perpendicular to his body.' Nicky's reasoning was 'the tighter, the bastard squeezed, the deeper the snake'd cut himself.'" Sheena eyes opened wide again when she recounted, "Big Jim explained, once Nick became comfortable with that idea he slept like a baby. But the squad would tease him, chiding him that eventually, Nick would roll over in his sleep and stab himself to death!" Bill and Sheena laughed lustily, but Ryz'n did not think it was so darned funny.

Ryz'n again observed that Sheena, in the retelling of Big Jim's stories about Little Nick, may have displayed a common but likeable tendency towards exaggeration. However, neither Bill nor Ryz'n called her on it again, not after Ryz'n's earlier questioning of Sheena's veracity had tended to upset her.

The waitress brought their orders. After gracing their lunches, they ate in silence. Ryz'n contemplated quietly the horrors of war, as well as what Nick must have experienced. She thought of the vision Nick had experienced after they shared their last Thanksgiving together, the vision of him helping to rescue American POW's. Ryz'n thought of how only 646 kids his age had been drafted in Nick's draft year, just before the draft ended, and how none of them had been sent to Viet Nam. Nick had been wrong about drawing "Lucky 7", drawing 268 instead, but he had been right about the vision of rescuing helpless prisoners of war. More often than not, he was uncanny that way, usually, irresistibly so.

Ryz'n choked up. She blamed it upon eating her salad too fast, but it was really the thought of Nicky and all the grief she had given him about enlisting. Had he not enlisted when he did, he never would have matriculated through the Corps' training fast enough to help those boys before America's participation in the War had ended. As it was, the Corps had expedited his training to get him over there

in time. And to think, because of his impatience, Nick personally had helped save one hundred and fifteen human beings. It took Ryz'n's maximum resolve to maintain her composure and calmly eat her salad.

After the trio had finished their meals, Sheena relayed Big Jim's opinion, that maybe Nick was better off as an amnesic, because the less horror and pain he could recall, the better off he would be. Ryz'n agreed in part, but she sure would like him to remember her, how much they had loved one another. Bill suggested that maybe Nick would remember. He thought that maybe Ry would remind him of everything that happened before the war, but nothing that happened during it. Ryz'n asked again if Big Jim had reminded Nick of anything. Sheena said it had not, not even when Big Jim had told Nick about their miraculous escape.

Ryz'n lit up as she asked about the escape—that did interest her. The waitress came by to take desert orders. They each ordered a beer. They still had three-quarters of an hour to kill, before the sisters needed to board their plane home. Sheena looked to Bill, who told her "Go ahead. You're doing fine. You tell her."

"Well, it was just after the peace agreement had been signed in Pairs, within hours, actually. We, the Americans I mean, were supposed to have ceased all offensive maneuvers, some two weeks earlier. However, Nick's search and rescue unit was still operating in secret behind enemy lines, near the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They were trying to effect even just one more 'extraction,' as Jim called it. Nick and Big Jim's squad were scouting to the northwest along a tributary of the Xe Khong River in the Annam mountains across the border in Laos trying to locate an enemy camp. Vietnamese intelligence claimed that camp was detaining American prisoners. After about fifteen minutes, Jim and Nick heard rifle fire coming from their rear, to the southeast. They ran down through the heavy mountain jungle to find their platoon outnumbered and flanked.

"Nick and Big Jim's squad hit the right flank of the North Vietnamese unit that appeared to be at company strength. Surprised, the enemy's flanking arm crumpled momentarily and retired. The Americans then retreated down either side of this jungle path, not worrying about avoiding potential mines and trip wires, because the enemy was right on their tails. The mountain jungle terrain was rough, hilly. The ground was uncertain beneath their feet. Nick and Big Jim formed the rear guard one on either side of the path, to cover the withdrawal. Nick climbed a tree for better firing vantage, using the tree as a shield.

"Together, they held off the North Vietnamese, long enough for their platoon to retreat with their wounded, but an RPG, that is a rocket propelled grenade, exploded near them. Big Jim caught shrapnel in his left arm, while the explosion, knocked Nick out of his perch. Big Jim said Nick should never have gone up there. That was okay for a long range sniping, but not a close quarters firefight. Too dangerous! Nick knew better, he said."

Sheena's expression saddened. "Big Jim said it was the one time not wearing a helmet cost Nick too, because he landed partly on his head, and got knocked out cold. When Nick came to, he and Jim were in enemy hands.

"The enemy forced marched them for a couple days to this base on a tributary of the Xe Khong, on the other, the east side of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, in Laos. The enemy had a fuel and ammo dump there, not too far upriver from that village where the Red Cross found Nicky."

"Dong Pal, yes, I know exactly where it is, on the opposite side of the river and just north of Muang Zai. We were there. Go on, Sheena."

"Well, it was well after dark, when the Gooks threw them into this short holding pen made of bamboo rails, both walls and ceiling. There were almost twenty allies, mostly American advisors: Marines and Army Rangers from their outfit, in a five foot high bamboo pen the size of the Dixon's living room. Jim said you couldn't imagine the stench and unsanitary conditions. Big Jim described the conditions as 'brutally horrible.' His words, not mine."

Sheena glanced at Ryz'n for recognition of her last remark, before she carried on with her tale. Ryz'n understood her sister did not want to be accused falsely of "embellishing" again, so she signaled for Sheena to continue, as Ryz'n sipped expectantly on her brew.

"OK, then. Well, the prisoners didn't remain in the pen for long though. The guards would take them out by one's and two's over to a hooch, where the prisoners were tortured and killed. The VC and NVA had no intention of turning them over to the Americans now that the peace agreement had been signed.

"Nicky was in pretty good condition, except for the lump on his noggin and some welts and bumps where the guards had smacked him around a bit."

"Don't forget about his teeth," added Bill.

"Oh yeah, thanks Bill. I forgot about that. Well, it seems the Gooks had pulled out his upper front two teeth as well, so his mouth was kind of a bloody mess. The Gooks wanted to get that gold cap off his tooth and I guess they did." Ryz'n set her beer down and unconsciously covered her lips with her left. She winced as she felt her husband's pain. Sheena hardly skipped a beat. "Jim said he had warned Nick that would happen if they ever got captured, but Nick had always blown Jim off. But Nick wasn't too bad off compared to most of the prisoners. Thankfully, Nick had some penicillin with him, which he popped like Pez.

"Jim explained how he had used to kid Nicky about his 'stash.' But Jim was not laughing when Nick produced it in that pen and extracted a four-inch shiv."

"What do you mean by 'his stash'?"

"That's what we asked, didn't we Bill?" Bill nodded. "Evidently, Nicky had this narrow six-inch long, smooth, stainless steel tube. Inside it, he kept a short shiv, penicillin, a couple salt tablets, and a cyanide tablet. You see, Nick's outfit had been instructed not to be captured alive. They were operating in direct violation of the peace agreement and the government didn't want any more 'bargaining chips' for Hanoi. Right Bill? Isn't that what Jim said?"

"In direct non-compliance ... "

"Yeah, that's right 'in direct non-compliance.' Thanks." Sheena sat corrected.

"But didn't the VC search him? Wouldn't they have found that stuff then?" asked Ryz'n, bewildered.

"Not where he stashed it."

"Where was that?"

"Up his butt! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Oh Mann!" Sheena's outburst caused some neighboring diners to glance Ryz'n's way. For a minute, Ryz'n thought one of them had recognized her despite the dark glasses she was wearing and did wear routinely in all public places whether outdoors or inside. But the woman merely sneered without comment, as she turned back around to her friends.

Ryz'n whispered, "Oh please, Sheena, not so loud. Everyone will be over here asking for autographs! Besides we just got through eating! To hear something like that, why that's terrible and not funny at all."

"Who's laughing?"

"Well, you for one!"

"I don't care. It's T-R-U! Ain't it Bill?"

"I'm afraid so, Ry. I know it's terrible to consider, but think of it this way. That stash saved Nick's life, Big Jim's too! Not too mention many other prisoners."

Ryz'n shook her head in disgust, muttering more to herself, than Bill and Sheena, "Nicky would never have done anything like that before he joined the Corps, never."

"Anyway Ry, do you wanna hear the rest of this story or not?"

"Sure. You know I do!"

Sheena resumed with relish, "OK then. Well, like Bill just said, Nicky's stash saved their lives. Nicky cut his bonds with the shiv, as well as those of several of the others. Then he worked his way around the other prisoners to get near the door of the cage, where the Gooks would grab him next.

"The leader of the two guards took Nick's dog tags. He placed them around his neck like trophies with a host of other dog tags, which he had confiscated from the poor devils who had gone before Nick. The guards grabbed Nick from the cage to march him across the compound to the torture hooch. The other prisoners in the cage and Jim watched, as Nicky killed those two guards so quickly, so silently, textbook style, from behind, you know? Nick deftly side stepped and slipped behind the rear escort, nailing him first. Then he jumped the leader, the one with the dog tags, before he could turn. Anyway, Nick killed them so quickly and quietly that the prisoners in the pen couldn't believe the guards were dead.

"Well, Jim said Nicky gathered up his victims' weapons, giving one to Jim, whose left arm was worthless and kept one rifle for himself. He also passed onto the other prisoners, the shiv and knife he picked off one of the guards. Then he went over to a rifle stack, gathered up the weapons and handed them out, quietly, quickly. AK-47's, I think is what Jim said the rifles were." Sheena's expression briefly became quizzical. Listening in rapt silence, Ryz'n urged her sister on..

"Anyway, the prisoners cut their bonds as well as the tongs that tied the bamboo pen door shut. It was pretty late, very dark, no moon and there was no

activity in the compound. Nick directed them down to a couple skiffs, one of which was motorized and tied to the end of a short dock. Everything was going along fine. Almost all the guys were in the skiffs, when one of the VC came out of the torture hut, yelling, wanting to know where their next victims were.

"Well, that dude saw what was going on and called for help. Shots broke out. Nick killed that Gook as well as the next three to exit the hooch. But then, Gooks from all over the compound came running out of their hooches. They caught the escaping prisoners in the open, like sitting ducks, half of them in the skiffs and the others on the dock. The prisoners didn't have a chance. It was then Nicky stopped shooting the enemy and started shooting the gas barrels in the supply depot. They caught fire! Then—BOOM! BOOM-BOOM!" And Sheena's voice rose with the sound of each explosion." Ryz'n glanced around furtively fearing they'd be discovered. Softly, she mouthed "Shhh" and motioned with her hands over the table, her palms outward towards Sheena, motioning for her sister to tone it down. But upon reaching the ammo dump, Sheena's explosions grew..

"Remember Bill, when Big Jim told this part?" She glanced to Bill for confirmation and he provided it.

Sheena added, "Mann, Big Jim's eyes got huge. He raised his hand in the air (as did Sheena) making these huge, deep bass BOOM-BOO-BOO-BOOMS!

"Sheena! Take it easy," whispered Ryz'n.

"OK, OK. Sheese, Ryz'n! Don't be such a drag. Mann." Ryz'n's shoulders slumped with exasperation. Sheena resumed her tale.

"So, Big Jim said night turned into day, as the whole place went up in flames and explosions. Gook body parts were flying all over the place. That's when Nick and the other survivors took off, floating down the Me Kong. There wasn't enough room for all of them in the skiffs, so those who were not badly injured, like Nick, swam along side the skiffs, holding on as best they as they could."

"That confirms what we learned when we went back over there last Christmas to search for Nicky. Go on, Sheena. This is dead on, right down to the dog tag thing. What else did Jim say?" Ryz'n could scarcely contain her own excitement.

"Well, Big Jim related how the escaped prisoners hid out along the river bank among the jungle bushes and trees, during the day, while they floated south during the night."

"From what I learned over there last winter, the supply depot was completely demolished. I guess there were no able-bodied enemy soldiers left to chase after the prisoners. Guess that's how they got away."

"Guess so, Ry. Anyway, the second night out, something happened. Jim did not know what, because he had lost consciousness from the shrapnel wound in his arm going untreated. They had run into white water and Nick was having a tough time hanging alongside Jim's skiff. There were a couple of explosions near them that roused Jim. Jim, who was barely conscious, remembers Nicky reaching up over the edge of the skiff to grab Jim by the shirt to encourage Jim, to 'hang on,' if they were to get separated. Nick grabbed Jim's dog tag accidentally at the

same time. Then there was another explosion more violent than the others were, because it was closer. The prisoners were in some rough water, now. Though it was not the rainy season, some recent storms had raised the river higher than normal. The current was swift. The violent explosion rocked the skiff and separated Nick from Jim. Nick fell away from the skiff below the surface of the river, taking Jim's dog tags along with him.

"Next thing Big Jim remembers is regaining consciousness in the V. A. hospital up in Washington State a couple months ago, as I said before. He woke up paralyzed, with only one arm, and a messed up memory. He had been in a coma for two years. It was only recently that he recovered sufficiently to where the V. A. could pull everything together for him, enough to return him home."

"That explains how Nick wound up with Big Jim's dog tags and why Nick didn't have his own tags," mused Ryz'n. "But why couldn't the V. A. have taken Big Jim's fingerprints and found out who he was from the military's files?"

"Yeah, we asked that too, Ry. Evidently, the clandestine nature of their outfit prevented that. See, their records were hidden in some 'Top Secret' file that nobody knew about and didn't want to know about. I mean Watergate was bad enough, but suppose it had come out during the final peace negotiations that Nicky and his guys were fighting behind enemy lines after the U. S. had agreed to withdraw completely. Shoot! All Marines were supposed to have been evacuated from the country over a couple years before."

Bill leaned forward over the table and added, "It was like they were already dead and forgotten about as far as the Government was concerned, Ry. Actually, it was more like they never existed."

Ryz'n recalled what Donna had said about the 'Top Secret' file in the Pentagon and the failure of the DOD's computer system to locate the boys' records. "Yes, Donna said something about that. And now I believe that's why it took the Navy so long to notify me that Nicky was missing ... "

"Gee, Ry, look at the time." Sheena was right.

Bill urged, "Yep. You two better get a move on." Ryz'n echoed Bill's wink and accidentally knocked her half-empty beer onto her chest and down her right arm.

"Oh, PICKLES!" exclaimed Ryz'n. "I can't board the plane smelling like a brewery. I'll just have to change my blouse in the Ladies' Room first."

"Well, you better get a move on Ry, because you don't have a lot of time."

"Yes, Bill I know. Don't wait for me. You two go straight to the boarding area and stall a minute or two if you have to. I'll be right there. Uh wait a sec. Bill, would you mind taking my bag?"

"No, no problem Ry. Here, give it to me." Ryz'n handed him her suitcase which he rested across his lap.

"One more second, Bill. I need to get a replacement top .."

"You haven't got much time, Ry."

Ryz'n bit her lower lip, popped the latches on her suitcase, reached in and grabbed the first thing she saw. Then she slammed the case shut and latched it.

"OK, thanks so much Bill. I'm off." She grinned quickly. The trio split up and headed their separate ways but ultimately to the same destination.

* * *

Ryz'n arrived momentarily carrying the beer-wet blouse, wrapped around her equally beer-wet bra and wearing a fresh, horizontally striped, mint green and white body suit top. (Ryz'n learned later that Bill had escorted Sheena to the All-American Airlines flight boarding area, where he had asked the boarding agent to hold up a couple minutes for Ryzanna Sheeboom. The agent had noted the celebrity's name on the manifest. Grinning with saccharine sweetness, she had offered that would "not be a problem for THE Mrs. Sheeboom.") Bill handed Ryz'n her bag and asked if she knew when Nick's family, were coming home from their trip. Ryz'n replied the fifteenth, which was the next day. Bill said he might fly back to D. C. later in the week. He would like to see Nicky, himself.

The boarding agent hustled the sisters down the runway to enplane. All the other passengers had boarded. Bill wheeled rapidly after them, overtaking Ryz'n before the sisters boarded. For the second time in just a couple hours, Bill took Ryz'n forcefully by the arm. His bright blue eyes bore into hers, as his fingers clenched tightly around her wispy-haired forearm.

"Don't worry Ryzanna. Just love him. When he gets a look at you, he'll just fall out. Hell, I'm fallin' out now, you look so sharp! You two are going to have a great future together. Don't worry about a thing! You're almost there, kid, almost there!" Bill's eyes lit up with sincere, enthusiastic encouragement. Ryz'n had been concerned by Bill's actions at first. Now she understood. He wanted her to be at ease over her upcoming reunion with Nick.

"Thanks, Uncle Bill."

She knew Bill was referring implicitly to the buxom Dixon woman as Ryz'n's source of concern and he was correct, so his compliment on her top warmed her.

"I'm counting on that, Bill. Thanks for all your help Willie, and your patience, and for putting up with all our talk." She kissed Bill on the cheek, motioning for Sheena to do the same, and Sheena complied. The flight attendant stepped through the plane's passenger doorway, acting like a traffic cop to wave them in.

"Come aboard, please." The sisters left Bill to board the flight.

"If you see Ray and Wauneta, tell them I'd like to come back for a visit soon, maybe next week. I wanna see that boy, too!"

"Will do, Bill. Bye and thanks again, for everything."

"Ryzanna?"

"Yes?"

"This time, it's gonna happen!" Bill winked again. As Sheena stepped through the portal ahead of her, Ryz'n beamed the seldom seen multi-dimpled grin and pulled a Nicky. "You know something, Bill? I believe ya." She waved and boarded the plane behind her sister.

~ Chapter 11: Fear and Faith ~

Aside from the touch and go, last minute drama of enplaning, the sisters' return flight home was smooth and quiet. It was less crowded even than the flight out. Their seating arrangement matched those of the outbound trip, with Sheena by the window, Ryz'n on the aisle and an empty seat between the two of them. Ryz'n did not take much notice of the first class cabin. She had flown so often now that all the flights and attendants kind of ran together. And besides, now she had interests other than perusing the flight magazine or studying cloud formations. She had tangible evidence of her Nicky to ponder.

She alternately smelled Nick's pillow or studied his sketches in the opera textbook that Coach Trahorn had permitted her to borrow. As she had on the outbound flight, Ryz'n left Sheena to her own thoughts. Again, Ryz'n found it hard to believe Nick had drawn the pictures. Music and athletics had been his gifts, not art. His unusually legible handwriting was another pleasant surprise. The psychiatrist had said he was very deliberate in his speech and handwriting, which revealed a determination on his part to overcome as well as conceal his deficiencies. Under pressure, particularly time pressure, the doctor had said Nick experienced his greatest difficulties. Again, she considered how different he was now from the Nick she had known. Her Nick had thrived under pressure, particularly time pressure. Of course, she could see where an exciting course like the "Aesthetic Evolution of Opera" easily could induce one to pass lectures by drawing numerous sketches and hieroglyphics.

A compliment from the stewardess on the yellow ribbon each girl wore in their long brown, hair provoked a conversation among the sisters and the glorified server. Later, that talk induced Ryz'n to take a trip down memory lane.

She had first worn the yellow ribbon in her hair for Nick that memorable night they first made love, July 22, 1970—she would never forget it, the night they had celebrated her birthday a month late in such grand style. That was the night she had become the "silhouette girl" for whom Nick was searching. The previous night, she and Nick had been arguing a bit. He had been wearing a day old cast on his leg, the result of a recent, freak accident on the baseball diamond. Nick had required surgery to repair chipped bone and torn ligaments in his left ankle. He was depressed. To cheer him up, she had suggested that they celebrate her birthday together the next night, a month late, because they had not been dating each other a month earlier.

She had wanted to dine out, do something special, get dressed up. Nick told her to dress "sharp." When she had asked what he meant by "sharp," he had said, "You know, cute but sexy. Sweet but sharp!" To the best of her limited knowledge, she dressed 'sharp.' Topping off her outfit, she had worn the yellow

ribbon in her hair, because that's what "Youngblood" had worn in the legendary Coasters hit written by the famous Rock'N'Roll songwriters Lieber and Stoller.

The yellow-gold ribbon had held her hair in place so that it had dipped down coquettishly over the left side of her forehead, as it still did today. Nick loved that Coasters' hit from the late Fifties, as he did all of those Lieber/Stoller tunes. Earlier, he had induced her to wear a gold hair ribbon as a prop when she had portrayed "Youngblood" in a skit spoof performed by *GRT* down at Ocean City, Maryland. The whole affair had been part of a special outdoors Fourth of July celebration on the patio of the Surf's Well resort hotel. Ryz'n, who at that time had not been with the band or with Nicky for that matter, had been merely a member of the audience. As the bandleader, Nicky had thanked her for being a "sport," and obliging him with her "cheerful participation." Afterwards, using lyrics from the song, he had complimented her on how "tough" she looked with the ribbon tied in her hair. Two days later, they had become a couple and had been one ever since.

Well, a few weeks later, as she and Nick had left on their special date to celebrate her belated birthday, she had asked him if she shouldn't remove the ribbon, thinking it was too corny. Nick had said she definitely should not. The ribbon was "perfect" and she was "perfect." Ryz'n remembered with pleasure that he certainly had made her feel "perfect." She wore the ribbon almost always for him after that. Well, except for a few rare occasions, when, hmmmm, she was incensed by him. Nick always had a special knack for getting people upset with him and she was no exception.

Ryz'n wondered how much different he would be now. The VA psychiatrist had described to her a different Nick from the cocky, resourceful, fun-loving boy she had married. Big Jim, also, had said Nicky was different: humble, not so self-assured, very deliberate in manner as well as in speech. She worried whether Nick would still love Donna Dixon. Ryz'n worried that she might not be large enough for him now.

That Dixon woman was at least a half a foot taller than Ryz'n was. Trying to observe the hairdresser from a man's perspective, Ryz'n realized the woman had a formidable figure, especially for a two-time mother. "Dang!" whispered Ryz'n under her breath, then *Double Dang!* Ryz'n could not believe that Donna Dixon could please Nick more than she could. Nick was larger himself now, she mused. Perhaps he did prefer a larger woman now. He was a man, full grown. Ever the late bloomer, Nick had grown three inches and gained thirty pounds since he had enlisted, if the Peppermount baseball roster were credible. The stewardess passed by, once again smiling her approval at the Ryan girls and their corny but cute yellow hair ribbons.

Earlier, when the flight attendant had complimented the girls on the ribbons, Ryz'n explained how she first had started wearing them for Nick. Then she had related how she had come to wear the ribbon when he was away from her, as a reminder of him. Yes, she wore a yellow ribbon in her hair at all times, except for

when she was swimming or diving. When she swam and dived, she'd tie the yellow ribbon around the shoulder strap of her swimsuit, in figure eight stripes, tying it off in a bow, even during meets. When Ryz'n had become involved in the MIA-POW campaign, the yellow ribbon concept mushroomed. Other families with MIA-POWS began to wear the golden ribbons in memory and in support of their absent loved ones. The movement had really exploded when Tony Orlando and Dawn released their number one hit "Tie a Yellow Ribbon ('Round the Old Oak Tree)" in 1973, when the peace treaty was signed. People all over the country had started tying yellow ribbons around their front yard shade trees or their mailboxes. The ribbons showed their support of the POW-MIAs, as well as the other returning vets, as America withdrew from the War.

Ryz'n had become active in the movement, even before Nick was reported missing. She had reasoned to herself then, if all the MIA-POWs were released to come home, the mission of Nick's unit would cease to exist, releasing Nick also to come home to her. Of course, she understood he still had to complete his tour with the Corps, but at least he would have done so in peace, not war. Close to the Nation's Capitol as she was, Ryz'n had participated in all the rallies and functions that had kept the MIA-POW issue before the public eye.

When the Corps finally confirmed Nick's MIA status, the Sheeboom's had joined Ryz'n in the MIA-POW campaign. Ryz'n's celebrity stature, via *GRT*, had provided her increased access to the media, which she had used to promote the "Bring the Boys Home" movement. Initially, Jerry Stiehlmohr and Halo Platters had supported her, although reluctantly, when she had offered up the idea of the *Lest We Forget* tour. By the time the tour had begun in May of'74, the North Vietnamese, supposedly, had returned all U. S. prisoners to America. According to the terms of the peace agreement, there were no longer more than fifty active U. S. soldiers, marines, sailors or airmen stationed in Vietnam, though the civil war still raged among the Vietnamese people. Americans wanted to forget about the War that had become an American disgrace in so many respects.

Nevertheless, Stiehlmohr had allowed Ryz'n, Sheena and Mickey Saxon, their drummer, to reform the band into a down tempo group featuring bubble gum, soft rock and sad, love songs, including even a couple of gospel tunes. It was quite different from Nick's naturally raucous, hard driving sound, which he had described as Dixie Rock'N'Soul. Ryz'n understood the lecherous Halo record V. P. had supported them for three reasons. First, the *GRT* name was still pure gold, so he was sure they could sell records and draw concertgoers for one tour at least, based solely off the *GRT* name alone.

Second, Ryz'n had some real talent, as a songwriter, singer and performer. They both knew that, so he wanted to encourage her. Stiehlmohr had told her that he had hoped she would realize her talents, lifting off like a rocket and flourishing under his tutelage. He further hoped she would want to repay him for his support later by creating more hits, either on her own or in collaboration with

Nick, should he return. After all, she actually had composed most of the *Lest We Forget* best-selling singles.

Third, Stiehlmohr had his own designs on her, which Ryz'n had come to find out only later. With the likelihood of Nick's homecoming more and more of an impossibility, in his own twisted way, Stiehlmohr hoped his indulgence of the *Lest We Forget* tour would ingratiate him to her. Stiehlmohr conveniently overlooked a few facts. He was older than Ryz'n's dad and he was married, too. The middle aged record executive's obvious lust for her had convinced Ryz'n that he wanted to make her in the worst way. He finally had come onto her last Labor Day weekend, during a cookout party for record executives at his place in the North Hollywood Hills. It was after the conclusion of the less than victorious *Lest We Forget* tour (which Stiehlmohr sarcastically had re-dubbed *Let's Please Forget*). Stiehlmohr had told Ryz'n that he had heard about her alleged "drug-induced, lewd shenanigans" with *GRT*'s ousted, former lead guitarist Tommy Tremain. He had assumed mistakenly that Ryz'n was not the dutiful wife she appeared to be for the public. *Thank God, Bryce and Mickey had come running when I called after that New Year's Eve gig, backstage in Miami or that lecher might have been right. I made a huge mistake with Tommy that night, but the boys bailed me out.* Yes, Stiehlmohr had sought to take advantage of her alleged philandering nature, but he had assumed wrongly.

Ryz'n had become aware of Stiehlmohr's motives over the summer. She had tolerated his familiarities up to a point before and during the tour, for Nicky's sake, to promote the album and the cause. Until, finally, she had been compelled to put the lecherous executive in his place. Stiehlmohr had been misled, concerning Ryz'n's alleged promiscuity. That had been a lie put out by former *GRT* guitarist Tommy Tremain and his attorney to save the talented lead guitarist from an attempted rape charge, brought against him by Ryz'n. Eventually, Ryz'n had dropped all charges, which only tended, in much of the public's eye, to support Tommy's contention that he had not tried to rape Ryz'n after all—that he had only done what she had wanted and that it had not been the first time, either. All the band members knew that had been a lie, as well, except for Tommy's wife, Terri, the band's tenor sax. For her own reasons, she wanted proof of her husband's infidelity. However, Stiehlmohr chose to believe the lie. In fact, he was counting on the lie to be true.

When Stiehlmohr learned the allegations against Ryz'n were false and when the *Lest We Forget* tour did not live up to his financial expectations, he chose to take it out on Ryz'n. He said Ryz'n owed him that much, especially with no hope of Nick coming back. After all, he had acquiesced to the whole MIA promotion for the tour, hadn't he? Due to small crowds, the tour schedule had to be rearranged to play the smaller venues, because *GRT* had not been selling out the larger ones as he had hoped. True, the album produced a few top twenty hits, including a cover of a Little Willie John number that broke the R&B Top Ten, as well. (Ryz'n's L.P. title song peaked at thirty-five). However, *Lest We Forget*

had not turned out to be the mega seller album Stiehlmohr had anticipated. The platter had not "busted out" the way the Halo brass had hoped, even with the *GRT* name on the cover. In Stiehlmohr's deviant opinion, he had reckoned Ryz'n should repay him now for the disappointment of the album and the tour in a most personal way.

She did. As she had explained to Sheena and Bill earlier, she repaid Stiehlmohr with a swift knee to the groin and a sharp shove into his swimming pool. Of course, she later had apologized as part of her penance after making confession. But after that, she really had wanted nothing more to do with Jerry Stiehlmohr. After that personal encounter, despite her apology, her boss became vindictive.

He had tried to force the Ryan girls to take on a new, excessively sultry image and live up to it on, as well as off, stage. He procured some raunchy songs with a disco beat that would suit their proposed new image and to which they could bump and grind bawdily. When the girls had balked, Stiehlmohr dropped Halo's option with *GRT*. He had explained to her that *GRT* was nothin' without Nick Sheeboom and Nick was dead, never to return. Their lackluster last tour was proof of his expert judgment, which he claimed was as sound as any in the record business. He'd see if he couldn't shop their act around onto some sucker maybe, because he refused to finance the sharp downhill slide that he just knew awaited Ryz'n and the band. Ryz'n had accepted Stiehlmohr's opinion of himself that he was a genius in the business and that *GRT*, sans Nick, was truly a not-for-profit organization. Yet, she knew he was wrong about Nick not coming home. Once Nick did return, Ryz'n felt the business stuff would work itself out.

Stiehlmohr would not let go. Her kick to his groin that landed him in his pool in front of his Hollywood guests had signaled war as far as he was concerned. He claimed to have incriminating evidence on film of Ryz'n's zealous, voluntary participation in drunken, lewd acts with Tommy Tremain, but Stiehlmohr had added he would use it only as "a last resort." Stiehlmohr had told Ryz'n he'd allow her to view the incriminating film herself, before he released it to ruin her career. Once the evidence was released, he claimed the only work she would find in the entertainment field would be in the newly flourishing porn industry. He promised he wouldn't mind backing her in such an endeavor as a secret partner. He had boasted "with your cheerleader's wholesome good looks, stripper's body, dancer's rhythm and sultry voice, you'd make one helluva porn star! After all, it's a burgeoning business." The mere thought of such an offer made her sick! Ryz'n knew he was bluffing. There was no "evidence." There couldn't be.

Stiehlmohr said he was holding off only because he first wanted to hear this new guitarist, that he learned Ryz'n had found. He knew the kid was rumored to be the next Jimi Hendrix. Stiehlmohr promised to withhold his "evidence" until he saw how things worked out with the band this summer, even though he had dropped the band's option. He claimed the "reserve" clause in Halo's contract with *GRT* would uphold Halo's rights to the band. The clause stipulated that *GRT* must notify Halo of any new record deal and give Halo a thirty day window in

which to match the other company's offer, for up to five years from the date Halo dropped its option. Ryz'n and the other band members knew the entire Halo contract had been so unfair compared to *GRT*'s original deal with Sable Records. She knew Nicky would never have signed the Halo deal. She had been naïve when she had signed on and induced the others to sign, as well. And Stiehlmohr had exploited her naiveté. Now, painfully aware of the "reserve clause," Ryz'n was keeping her talented find of "Double J" under wraps, just for spite. For he had yet to perform publicly with *GRT*.

If Stiehlmohr had thought Ryz'n would betray herself and her faith for the money, or if he thought she could be intimidated, then he had certainly been a poor judge of her character. She recalled, in high school, Nick had composed a couple of bawdy songs with that hard driving, slow grinding R&B sound for which *GRT* was famous. The lyrics had affronted Ryz'n so much that she had prohibited Little Nick from recording or publishing the tunes. Stiehlmohr was certain those tunes, "Was a Girl Like You" and "Hop On," would shoot straight to the top of the charts, if they were released today, carrying an album along with them. With other recent hits, like "Bang a Gong, Get It On," "My Ding-a-Ling," "Go All the Way," and "Rock'N'Roll Hoochie-Coo" making it big recently and, despite the present era of Soft Rock, Stiehlmohr, who knew the pop market tastes well, had been convinced Nick's sassy songs were sure-bet, chart toppers.

The record executive had wanted to feature these songs on a brand new brassy *GRT* album with an "exciting, sexy look for the band." That "look" would feature the exquisitely, "curvaceous pair of Ryan sisters out front and center, shakin' [their] ample booty," according to Stiehlmohr. In his twenty-five years in the business, the V.P. had claimed he had never seen a more beautifully voluptuous, naturally shapely, pair of sisters than the Ryan girls. He thought the sisters should take advantage of what nature had done for them. "After all," he warned, "you won't be young forever." He had argued vainly, in Ryz'n's vernacular, that "God would not have blessed you with so much, if He hadn't intended for you to use what He had given you." The record executive had promised the girls that, if they "would play ball" with him, he'd make them "millionaires for life."

Stiehlmohr was nothing, if not successful. Ryz'n had not doubted his musical judgment, his ability to anticipate the 'Rock-N-Roll market or even his capacity for judging horseflesh or, more appropriately, woman flesh. While Sheena might have been persuaded to adopt his lascivious suggestion, had he waved sufficient green before her nose, Ryz'n never would have gone along with her boss's lustful, greedy demands. And without Ryz'n, Sheena would have declined also, because Ryz'n was the talent.

It was not as if Ryz'n were a pronounced prude on stage. She wasn't. She rocked just fine. Nor did she see herself as a prude, at least not after she had fallen in with Nicky. She dressed "sharp" as Nick would say. Ryz'n felt she and her sister dressed for promotional purposes both on and off the stage, in a manner that tastefully revealed their womanly virtues. Ryz'n understood in the music

business that attractive looking females, those whom the male audience found easy on their eyes, were great business assets. Such women were even expected, as part of the show, to dress and move somewhat provocatively on stage. Ryz'n accepted all that, to a degree.

Moreover, neither girl was above shaking and quaking to the music in public when the beat moved them in that direction. That is, when it was all within the context of having fun. And with Nicky's songs, the beat usually so moved them. Sure, Ryz'n wanted to entertain the audience and she liked to Rock'N'Roll as much as anyone, but she adamantly refused to become the show herself, by being an object of gratuitous, sexist voyeurism. That she would never do—at least, not sober, anyway. At heart, despite her big time entertainment popularity, Ryz'n was a good Catholic girl whose primary interest had been to bring her missing husband home. For her, rocking and rolling, along with all else, was secondary to that singular goal. Stiehlmohr could never seem to grasp that simple fact. More than she cared to admit however, Ryz'n did indeed learn to love the high she received from being center stage. Occasionally, much to her chagrin like most rockers, she had found an illegal substitute for that high, one that had driven her to apology, confession, and repentance. Stiehlmohr had noted as much during their recent confrontation. Yet, there was no high for her greater than the love of her husband. In his absence, any other high was merely a temporary fix.

Ryz'n's in-flight musings were interrupted when the flight attendant brought the young women their meals, which they also ate in silence. Ryz'n graced her meal as she flew some forty thousand feet above ground. Closer to heaven, the young woman's thoughts now drifted away from the sordid to her God, Who was answering her many prayers. Her God was very real to her, lovingly merciful and greatly concerned. She had accepted Him into her heart, even before her first communion. She spoke with Him often, especially with Nick gone so long. Her faith in Him was resolute. Suddenly, Ryz'n recalled a Father 'V' homily on God's willingness "to give good gifts to His children." In a whisper, she quoted the Word of the Lord from the gospel of Matthew: "**Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you**." Years ago, that message had spurred her first to prayer, then to action in support of the Cause and Nicky. And now that prayer was being answered, as she always had believed it would. She thanked her Heavenly Father for his goodness. *Amen*!

Thanks to her celebrity and her father-in-law's connections through his long-term senior civil service position in the federal government, she and the Sheeboom's had arranged a personal meeting with President Ford. The vivacious, personable, young entertainer, with the four-dimple smile, had charmed the Commander-In-Chief. When she and her in-laws had left the Oval Office, they had taken away from that meeting an executive order. That decree effectively gave the U. S. Defense/Intelligence community carte blanche to do whatever they had to do in order to find Nick Sheeboom and bring him home.

Armed with that order, over the period of several months, Ryz'n, with the assistance of The Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Jake Lattimore, had enlisted the aid of some of the men who had served with Nick. There were so many volunteers from Nick's outfit willing to go back over there to find him that the company captain, Captain Williams, who had been promoted to major, had to limit the volunteers, hand-selecting a choice few.

Mr. Sheeboom and Ryz'n joined them. Major Williams strongly advised against either of these civilians coming along, risking not only their lives, but potentially the success of the mission as well. After all, although the U. S. was completely out of the war then, the civil war in Vietnam still fumed.

Nevertheless, Ryz'n and her father-in-law, who were footing the bill for the private search and rescue operation, remained adamant. They left with the rescue team, going over to Laos just after Christmas 1974. It was a hazardous, uncomfortable journey. The Laotian people were engaged in a civil war precipitated by the North Vietnamese desire for a communist Laos. Yet Laos still maintained strained diplomatic relations with the U.S. Ryz'n would note her good fortune a few months later when the Laos People Democratic Republic (LPDR) kicked the U.S. envoy out of the country so hurriedly, the Americans could carry with them only their personal possessions. This occurred just a couple months ago in April, after the fall of Saigon.

However, during the advent of 1974, Ryz'n's troupe had entered Laos via the back door by flying into the Laotian capitol of Vientiane on special diplomatic visas. The U.S. Consul to Laos provided Ryz'n' search party with all the contacts they would need. From there, they hired bush pilots to fly them to Ban Baq, near a tributary of the great Xe Khong River. Some rebel Hmong, friendly to the U.S. helped the Americans procure motorized skiffs to take them up a shallow tributary of the Xe Khong deep into the Amman mountains. Intelligence had indicated that was Nick's last known position.

Major Williams had explained to Ryz'n and her father-in-law where Nick and Big Jim had been lost. It was in the Ammanese Mountains, just inside the Laotian border, near the Ho Chi Minh Trail and near the sixteenth parallel. (Ryz'n and her search party actually glimpsed the infamous Trail from the air. She was shocked to find it was not some collection of jungle dirt paths, but instead was more like a dual lane highway!) Back in January of '73, members of Nick's outfit had returned to the scene of Nick and Jim's capture. They had reconn'ed the area by helicopter shortly after the fateful skirmish had occurred. However, the peace accord, as well as the clandestine nature of their mission, had tied the hands of the searchers. Then, they could do no more than make a superficial aerial search. Their efforts had proven fruitless.

U. S. Intelligence had become aware within a couple days of Nick's disappearance, that an enemy fuel and ammo dump upriver had been destroyed. Vietnamese Intelligence also knew their troops had not destroyed that dump. The Americans had no troops in the area. Perhaps the camp's destruction had been an

accident, but that was unlikely. Then a few American servicemen began stumbling into Laotian villages, like Muang Zai, finding haven in isolated Red Cross shelters protected by the rebel Hmong, allies of the Americans. These scraggly survivors had spoken of a miraculous escape and the destruction of a Gook supply depot up river. That was back in early February of '73. Because that destroyed depot was known to have detained prisoners of war, the Major had decided to lead his search party there first. Politics had precluded him from doing so two years earlier.

Now, all Ryz'n's rescue team had found at the former depot and detention center was rubble and a mass grave. Digging up the grave was a grisly, loathsome business. Ryz'n recalled the brutal humidity. Even though it had been January the height of the dry season, the humid air had combined with the awful stench to overpower and nauseate her. Since she had already developed mild dysentery, she found herself in the worst of ways. But she had refused to back off. She tried to take some little solace in the fact they party had not had to climb high into the mountainous jungle to find what they were seeking.

Among the many corpses, they did find one with several dog tags around its neck, one of which was Nick's. Ryz'n's heart had sunk to its lowest point ever. Having heard Big Jim's story of the escape via Sheena, Ryz'n now surmised that corpse with all the dog tags must have been the lead guard Nick had jumped to initiate their escape. However, neither that corpse nor any of the skeletal remains they found could be identified as Nick's, because none of them had his distinguishing characteristics. None had two missing digits from his combat-maimed right hand or the missing, two upper front tooth and a chipped left ankle, which Nick had injured playing Boys Club baseball.

At least, this had been the slim shred of evidence Ryz'n and her father-in-law had clung to in hopes that her young husband was yet alive. Nevertheless, the fact that Nick's dog tags, along with several others, were discovered around the spine of a skeleton really had bummed Ryz'n and Mr. Sheeboom out at that time. The Major had considered giving up to return home.

Then the searchers stumbled onto some friendly Hmong living nearby, in a small village downstream. The search party stopped there to question the Lao Sung villagers, when Ryz'n happened to notice that one bare bottomed toddler was limping. She had stopped to inspect the boy's foot. Ryz'n had found a small thorn that seemed to have infected his foot. Using supplies from a first aid kit she carried, she removed the thorn. She applied some hydrogen peroxide and Neosporin to the wound and covered the area with a band-aid. The swelling subsided. The child's mother found the boy and, reluctantly, thanked Ryz'n.

Gradually, at Ryz'n's insistence, the two women entered into a brief conversation through an interpreter from the search party. That act of kindness turned Ryz'n's despair into joy. From that chance conversation, she learned what had happened at the compound two years ago. The prisoners had blown the place

to smithereens when they had escaped. The Laotian mother explained how the Americans had jumped into a few skiffs and floated downstream.

With renewed sense of purpose, Ryz'n's team had followed along downstream, stopping at each village along the way, until they found the one at which Nick had washed up. When the translator described Nick's physical characteristics, the villagers became sullen, avoiding the gazes of the members of the search party. The translator advised Ryz'n and Major Williams that the villagers knew something but they weren't talking.

After much effort, the translator made the Laotian villagers understand that all Ryz'n and her party wanted was to find Nick. It turned out the reason for the natives' reticence had been that they feared retribution. The Hmong villagers, who had not maintained communist sympathies per se, merely had been protecting the young boy who had shot Nick in the back of the head with an old .22 revolver. Luckily, for Nick, the shooting had occurred on one of the two days each month when the Red Cross visited the village.

Ryz'n knew when she heard that piece of good fortune that the Lord had been hearing her prayers. Then the interpreter had explained that one of the villagers had stopped Nick's initial bleeding. Almost immediately, the Laotians had turned Nick, who was unconscious, over to the Red Cross, which had arrived miraculously within minutes of the shooting. Again, the uncanny timing of the Red Cross arrival had confirmed to Ryz'n the awesome power of her prayers.

Under the security of the Hmong, Ryz'n's party of six had proceeded to visit the Red Cross Clinic where her husband's life had been saved. From records left in the hospital, Ryz'n and her party had uncovered Nick's trail, which, over the last five months had led her to where she was today. Had the Dixon woman not lied to her last winter ...

The sisters had almost finished eating when Sheena spoke for the first time, voicing what Ryz'n had been thinking.

"It's like a giant jigsaw puzzle, isn't it, Honey? And Nicky is the last piece. We're almost there, Ry."

Ryz'n smiled. "Yes, except while he may be the last piece of this puzzle, he's just the first piece in a new one."

"Oh? How's that?"

"The puzzle of Nick himself! Sheena, Sheena! We've got to find a way to put him back together that will make him whole and strong again, daring, unafraid, happy, like he was before he left. He's got to remember who he is, where he comes from, what we mean to each other."

"Don't worry Ry, he will. It's by God's grace that we've found him, isn't it? Then it will be by His grace that Nick remembers. God wouldn't have allowed this trial to go so far, without bringing it to a successful conclusion. You've taught me that much, Ry. Just speak with Father Vizconni before he leaves for his new assignment. He'll help. He always has." Sheena smiled encouragingly at her big sister.

"You're right, Sheena. I know you are, but I'm a little worried." Ryz'n hesitated with a furrowed brow, wondering if she should reveal her innermost fear. She decided to go for it.

"Sheena, did you know—I say, did you know that Nick had proposed to that Dixon woman and she had accepted his proposal, even though she knew he was mine? They were going to be married, Sheena" Surprise stole over Sheena's face.

"Is that what you were talking about with her?"

"Yes. They love each other, Sheena. She said they were 'good together.' She said the boys loved him, too. She swore that Nick loved them, all three of them. She was adamant that her family was just what Nick needed and that he was exactly what they needed as well." Sheena's brow crinkled in bewilderment.

"But Big Jim's come home. They don't need Nick anymore."

"Yes, you would think that. But she needs Nick, all right. With Big Jim home, she has another mouth to feed, another body to clothe and bathe. What can Big Jim give her in return? Compared to what Nick could give? Did you see how her eyes looked, dark circles, blood-shot, red and puffy"

Sheena shook her head, indicating that she had not.

"Well, my guess is Nicky told her it was over last night. She was up all night, crying over it. She didn't say that, but I'm pretty sure that's what happened. I was really upset with her, that she lied to me last winter, that she accepted a proposal from him after she knew. SHE KNEW!" Now Ryz'n strained deeply against herself. She felt the blood vessel on the left side of her forehead stand out.

She gasped and then, just as quickly as she had fired up, she caught hold of herself. She remembered her act of reconciliation with Donna Dixon. She took a deep breath.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Baby. I'll be OK." She paused to collect her thoughts. "You see after speaking with her, I came back inside that tiny cottage, looked around, saw the kids and Big Jim. And, suddenly, I felt sorry for her. Honestly, I did, Sheena. That woman has a difficult life ahead of her, really difficult. That was when I decided to mend fences with her. Besides, as MIA wives the last couple of years, we have shared a lot of the same heartaches, long nights and frustrations. What I've felt, she has felt, too, but I didn't have to try to raise two boys with a one-armed paralytic for a partner. What a burden that must be! I pray that God will give her the grace to be the strength of that family. Truly, I do, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and the Holy Ghost, I pray for all of them." Ryz'n crossed herself.

"You forgave her for that lie and for trying to steal Nicky?" Sheena's face was filled with doubt.

"Yes, yes I did, Sheena. Honestly, I really did."

"Pshewww! Don't know if I could have done that! At least, not so quickly."

"It wasn't easy, believe me. But I willed myself to do it. And ya know Sheena, once I started, it felt like someone else was inside of me reaching out to her. Then when she accepted my forgiveness, an incredibly warm rush swarmed over and

through me. Sheena, it was just incredibly peaceful, joyful. It really was." Ryz'n's drifted off into another world as she paused for a minute to reflect.

"That's how it was with me in the paraplegic ward at Long Beach," recalled Sheena. Then Ryz'n reached over to tap Sheena's knee reassuringly. "Yes, of course." She sat back in her seat. "Well, it's over. My only concern now is Nicky. I hope the Lord erases her from his memory as well as my own. I hope after he sees me, he won't even think of going back to her." Sheena's mouth popped open.

"RYZANNA CHRISTINE! How can you even think that! SHE? Why she can't compare to you in any way! Why, you're as gorgeous inside, as you are outside. How can you think such a thing? Nicky could have had just about any girl he wanted in high school, but he wanted you, when you didn't look near so PHAT, P-H-A-T, as you do now. You'll see, everything will be fine, just fine, Ry!"

Ryz'n chuckled. "That's because I was just FAT, F-A-T then. I sure hope you're right Baby Sister, but how do you know for sure? He's never seen me before, except in a picture on an album cover. I suppose he's heard me sing, but he doesn't KNOW me at all, not at all. How should I approach him? Did you ever think of that? Should I approach him like his wife of almost five years? Or, should I approach him like I did on our first date? And what if this guy isn't even Nicky, just some look-a-like coincidence? Did you ever think of that?"

"Oh Mann! This is no look-a-like coincidence. No way, Jose! It's gotta be him, just gotta be! But the other questions are tough ones to answer. I don't know, Ry. I'm beginning to put myself in your shoes and Bryson in Nick's. Gee, Baby, I don't know what I'd do. I guess, I'd feel things out as I went along. Actually, it could be fun, ya know? Flirting and dating all over again?" Sheena scrunched up her shoulders and smiled smugly at her sister.

Ryz'n smiled faintly. "Really? Some how I don't think it will be like that. And what about our first night together? He won't know me. To be honest, I won't know him, either. He's not the same boy that left me over three years ago. Ya know, when I first met him, Nicky was so handsome, his body was so hard, so lean, muscular and unblemished, except for an occasional pimple. He was just shy of sixteen, yet his shoulders were broad and his hips narrow. That little butt of his turned up in the back, so cute like a lot of those black ball players."

"Ryz'n! What kind of talk is that?"

"Oh, come off it Sheena, you know what I mean." She quickly reached across the empty seat and slapped playfully at Sheena's thigh and retreated just as quickly. "Of course, he was short! Ha! Ha! But he used to wear those baggy, old fashioned Fifties style clothes covering himself, making himself look smaller than he really was. I remember when, how he surprised me so, when I first realized how ideal his body really was, on our first date at the Base Pool ... "

Again, Ryz'n's eyes trailed off, following that memory, but just as quickly as she had left, she returned to the present wearing a frown.

"Now he's all torn up, mutilated, scarred. How do I handle that? Ignore his scars? Stare? I could ask him to tell me about them, but he can't even do that. Shoot! I can tell him more about his wounds than he can tell me. I've got the official casualty reports, plus the personal notes from his commanding officers, and his own letters to me, as to what happened! Of course, all he'd say in his letters was that he got a little 'Nicked up.' Then he'd write me 'HA! HA! HA!' As if losing a testicle, or an ear or getting' your butt shot off, was no big deal!"

Ryz'n was becoming agitated again. Sheena sought to soothe her by reaching over and gently patting Ryz'n's forearm.

"Calm down, Sis, calm down. Hey, let's share another bottle of Chablis, like we did coming out. That was fun and I know how you like your wine, Baby."

Ryz'n agreed. The two sisters ordered the white wine from a nearby stewardess. Then they consumed that bottle and most of another over the course of their homeward flight. Both women were feeling pretty good when the captain's voice came over the loudspeaker. He announced that presently their flight was over Fort Knox, Kentucky at an altitude of thirty-six thousand, five hundred feet and they were beginning a long, slow descent into Dulles International Airport. The Captain advised the passengers were free to move about the cabin for another twenty minutes, before all passengers would be requested to retake their seats prior to landing.

As was her habit before landing, Ryz'n retreated past the empty rows of seats with her arms folded modestly over her showy top. She entered one of the three unoccupied lavatories to freshen up. She rinsed her face in cool water and dried off with the mint-scented, damp hand towel previously provided to her by the flight attendant. Simmering in Chablis, Ryz'n wavered while she checked her look in the slender mirror hanging on the lavatory wall above the sink. Unlike on her outbound flight, Ryz'n did study her features this time. Because, in her reflection, she realized this is how Nick would see her for the first time. She paused to take stock of herself. She tried to examined her visage, objectively as he might. What would he see? Would he recall her upon first sight? Would he stare straight through her? "What do you see, Ryz'n?"

The girl next door. A cute cheerleader? That's what everybody says. Can a girl next door stand up to that double breasted, blonde Amazon? His fiancé! My gosh! They could have been married already. Thank God that didn't happen!

The mirror showed Ryz'n's face held a youthful, healthy glow beyond what the Chablis had added to it. Yet, despite the vino, Ryz'n was anxious now. Could a schoolgirl cheerleader stack up in Nick's mind against Double 'D' Donna Dixon? She knew Nick, knew what attracted him to a woman. If ole Double 'D' was indicative of his present tastes, he had not changed much.

She recalled Nick was one of the first to see beyond her girl-next-door façade. When they started going together, he had told her that her eyes were "tempting, two-toned in their own right, both devil and angel at the same time." The contrast between her thick, jet black brows and long, dense lashes compared to her green

eyes and softer colored hair "was striking." He had said her lips were "inviting" and "kissably soft." It wasn't just that they were full and pink and well shaped, although he admitted they were, but he really dug the way her full upper lip turned up and flattened out a bit in the center. He had said she "turned [him] on like nobody else." He had told her she "had the toughest walk of any chick he had ever seen." She wondered if he would pay her those same compliments now.

After they had been married a while, she saw how easily he handed out compliments to others. He was very personable, a real smooth talker. Ryz'n had asked him if those early compliments about her had been "come-on lines." He had shocked her when he had admitted they were, but he also had vowed "they were true and sincere come-on lines and he had never come-on to anyone else quite like that." Oh! That boy was something else all right. It wasn't that he knew just what to say and do, but he knew just when and how also. The boy's timing was impeccable. She shook her head, as she chuckled to herself and her dense hair bounced heavily about her. She caught hold of some of her wavy locks.

Nick was big on hair—"Give me a head with hair, shoulder length or longer" —as it said in the old rock song. He grew his hair long, long before long hair was acceptable in athletic circles. He had trouble with both the baseball and football coaches in high school because of it. She recalled the football coach, Coach Greavey, benched him for the first couple games, until, out of desperation, he put him in at the end of the of the third contest. Nick returned a punt to tie the score right before the gun sounded. After that, the coach let Nick and anyone else wear their hair however they wanted, as long as they kept it under their helmets during games. Her own long, thick locks, low forehead and inherited hirsutism, in general, had turned him on and she was glad for it.

Her mom had told her and Sheena that the key to both physical and social beauty was symmetry or graceful balance. The Ryan women all had thanked the Lord for the good genes which produced their symmetrically lined facial features. And Ryz'n had practiced to be gracefully balanced in her social life as well. To achieve those ends, she tried to dress and act as she would like others to do.

Aside from pink lip gloss, she disdained make up. Nick had said she did not need it. She had believed him, so she seldom wore cosmetics, except for rare occasions like live performances. And then, she had applied it only sparingly, mostly at the behest of the Halo road manger. Her chin was neither pointed nor square, but her long jaw was angular and her cheekbones, high. Partly because of her celebrated name, and partly because of those cheekbones, full lips and her lovely legs, she had been in demand by some of the modeling agencies, despite her healthy, cheerleader cheeks and short stature. Ryz'n realized she was not the tall and willowy type coveted by most model agencies.

Yet, one "name" agency had told Ryz'n that she possessed a unique, wholesome appeal, not unlike that of the vivacious Mary Ann Mobley. The short, swarthy Mississippi teen had beaten out a slew of lithe blonds to be crowned Miss America back in the late Fifties and went onto a career in entertainment and

modeling. Although flattered by their overtures, Ryz'n nevertheless had rebuffed all the modeling offers. She had felt the agencies merely were trying to capitalize on the minimal celebrity she had achieved with *GRT*. Besides, modeling did not appeal to her, though Sheena was considering becoming a model after she graduated from M&L. That profession was all right for others, maybe, but not for Ryz'n Somehow the idea of posing for pay before the camera seemed vain. Although, she had enjoyed posing for Little Nick. Now that was different.

Nick had taken some artsy photos of her as an anonymous, fog enshrouded nude down by the beaver ponds. Some of the shots had won a couple of contests from a national photography magazine during their senior year of high school. In fact, Nicky's drawing of her that she had discovered in the coach's office was a dead ringer for the award winning photo that had garnered cash prizes for photo of the month and, later, photo of the year from a national photography magazine. She and Nick had used that money to help finance their honeymoons, both of them. It was that drawing and his scent on the pillow that had convinced her that Dixie Strickler really was her Nick Sheeboom.

Despite the interest from the modeling agencies, Ryz'n could not take her good looks or her "grooming," as she called it, all that seriously. Besides, she reckoned she didn't have time for a modeling career anyway. No, she had to find Nicky, finish school and somehow keep the band together for Nick until he got home.

Staring into the lavatory mirror, Ryz'n realized that her mother had been right. A big obstacle to Ryz'n's classic beauty were those double cheeks and chin, from which maturity had reduced the baby fat but had never eliminated it. Her baby-faced, double cheeks formed the false double chin and the signature dimples that reflected her inimitably upbeat cheerleader persona. Were it not for those healthy, milk-fed cheeks, she would have resembled any another raw-boned fashion model, like Sheena for that matter. Instead, Ryz'n had to admit she looked like the typical, wholesome, girl-next-door. That look had drawn Nicky to her, even when she had been overweight back in high school—that and her walk!

Despite her schoolgirl appeal, Nicky had been the first to notice her walk. Well, at least he had been the first to mention it to her anyway, in spite of her then pudgy schoolgirl appearance. Yet, later, after she had slimmed down, everyone, well, all the guys, had commented upon it. Nicky had said she had "a schoolgirl's charm but oozed a kind of wild hypnotic magnetism, especially in the way [she] walked." She adored his sincere compliments, yet Ryz'n could never see what he had meant by that. She merely placed one foot in front of the other and moved front point "A" to point "B" like anyone else. From looking at Uncle Bill and Big Jim stuck in their wheelchairs, she was grateful to be able to do so. But Nicky had said it was the way her hips and shoulders rolled indolently, "in a loose, erotic kind of perfectly counterbalanced harmony." She realized that Nicky, while earnest, could be prone to exaggeration. However, over the years, others seemed to confirm his high opinion. Nick used to say with a broad smile that "some girls had the look, while others had the walk but there very few like

her who had both. See? You just can't help it, Baby." Whether it had been an exaggeration or not, Ryz'n had been highly gratified nonetheless to know that she could please him without even trying. Over time, she had learned to accept such compliments gracefully, from Nick as well as from others.

Besides, her "grooming," as she preferred to call it, was the Lord's doing, not her own. So she never placed much stock in such attentive flattery. Ryz'n reasoned that if she combed her hair and brushed her teeth, could she honestly claim any reward or accept compliments for that? If she had any beauty, it came from the Lord and she could take no credit for His handiwork. Moreover, secretly, she harbored a deeply hidden fear that she could, through neglect or apathy, return to her prior pudgy, teenage, ugly duckling status. This fear instilled the discipline she needed to maintain her diligent, daily diet and exercise regimen, as outlined to her by Nicky nearly six years ago.

Now, as Ryz'n stared at her mirrored reflection with the Chablis swimming through her brain, she drifted further back into time. She recalled how, in junior and senior high school, that Sheena had always been the one over whom the boys had fawned. Sheena had matured well ahead of Ryz'n, much to Ryz'n's chagrin. Sheena's lighter complexion contrasted sharply with striking dark, even features. Sheena's visage was even more striking that Ryz'n's. Her raven-hued hair, which she had inherited from their mother, matched her jet-black eyes, brows, and lashes. Unlike Ryz'n, Sheena's eyebrows were not only broad, but also flat, upward sloping and tapered abruptly at the outside edge of the brow, giving her the appearance of a vixen.

Likewise, Sheena inherited their father's hereditary long, angular jaw as well, but with no baby fat in her cheeks and no dimples, either. Sheena's complexion was creamy, like their father's, as opposed to Ryz'n's own olive skin. Ryz'n's kid sister was a classically gorgeous young woman, even if she didn't tan nearly as well as she would have liked, as well as Ryz'n did. And Sheena had inherited their mother's shapely form, too. She maintained that perfect 0.7 size ratio of waist to hips. Ryz'n had read somewhere that worldwide, cross-cultural studies confirmed that specific size ratio produced the kind of feminine curves which men deemed most attractive. Yes. When Ryz'n thought of a beautiful girl, she pictured her kid sister, never herself.

Sadly, Ryz'n's own self-image had formed as that of a pudgy, swarthy, hirsute teen with braces, acne and limp hair. Even now, she did not really picture herself as beautiful. Her psychiatrist had informed Ryz'n that most people formed their adult self images by the time they reached high school. Since Ryz'n had such a poor image of herself then, her shrink said Ryz'n would continually have to fight to overcome it. Ryz'n thought she had, but sometime those old negative thoughts came creeping back. Any perceived threat to her relationship with Nicky from anyone, such as Donna Dixon, or anything, might serve as that negative catalyst.

Her unique diet and exercise routine afforded her the security she needed to allay those fears. Indeed, they had become a way of life for her. Any other way

of life would have seemed foreign to her now. Of course, she had put on a few pounds recently, since the conference diving championships. Due to her late night studying for finals and all the traveling she had done lately, she had eaten more fast foods and skipped a workout or two now and then, as well. However, the few extra pounds were almost impossible to notice. When Nicky had left more than three years ago, her weight had dipped just below the century mark and her waist just below twenty-one inches! Her mother had complained that Ryz'n had been too thin then, almost skeletal. In recent years, she had come always to think Ryz'n was too slender. Nevertheless, as Ryz'n turned sideways now to view herself in the small lavatory mirror patting her tummy, she found it flat and firm, just the way she liked it, even if she was couple pounds overweight.

Unlike her facial features, Ryz'n did take a very little pride in her figure, primarily in her long, slender waist which she had worked so hard to forge. Though, again, she did not puff herself up over it. Before Nicky had helped her out in high school, Ryz'n had weighed over twenty pounds more than she did now. In shedding those pounds and a few more besides, Ryz'n reasoned she merely had shaped up the raw material given her by the Lord. In her mind, she had only corrected earlier mistakes in faithful obedience by striving to put her best foot forward..

While both of the Ryan sisters had inherited their mother's natural, shapely form, Sheena, without lifting a finger could eat everything in sight, yet still boast classic 36-24-35½ measurements. Yet now, Ryz'n bested her sister. Looking like some kind of comic book heroine, her waist to hipline ratio was about 0.6! In fact now, if the Ryan sisters happened to pass a construction site side by side, Ryz'n, and not Sheena, was the one to garner most of the unwanted attention,. And that was saying something, because it had not always used to be that way.

Even so, Ryz'n still worried when she considered the enormously endowed Donna Dixon. *With her double 'D' cup size, the woman's initials suited her well. How can I compete with those monsters? Nicky had intended to marry that woman. He had been looking forward to sticking his nose between those bazookas every night for the rest of his life!* Ryz'n turned to profile herself against the mirror once more, this time to check a different part of her anatomy.

After the accidental spilling of beer back in the airport lounge, Ryz'n had changed into her short-sleeved, collarless, decote, summer, knit body top with its alternating broad, horizontal, mint green and narrow, white stripes. A body suit, the top was made of a knit cotton polyester and fit her like her own skin. She had meant to wear it if they had found Nick, but she wore it now for the same reason she had not worn a bra, because of the beer spill. The body suit had been handy while the bra was not and she had had no time to rummage through her bag. Now Ryz'n stood profiled at attention, chest out, to study herself judiciously. Normally, she had no complaints. But now, with Donna Dixon as her new rival, suddenly Ryz'n did not feel so secure.

To imitate her rival Ryz'n pushed up her bosom with both hands and stuck out her tongue rakishly to her mirror image. *Ah! The Chablis!* She laughed and let go, only to watch her breasts bounce firmly just once and that pleased her. The skintight top held her just perfectly. She smiled approvingly, assured Donna Dixon could not match her firmness. Ryz'n profiled herself in the mirror and inhaled deeply again, holding her breath. *I may not have torpedoes as long as that Dixon woman, but I ain't too shabby either. No, I'm really not too bad at all*. Giggling, she turned eyes front and exhaled. All the pushing, tugging and deep breathing had stretched the material, emphasizing her natural bounty. The daring nature of her braless top made Ryz'n blush, a fact that was confirmed by her mirror image. Ryz'n's naturally generous endowment usually made her feel feminine, like a complete woman. However, that had not always been the case.

As a really late bloomer, when she had turned sixteen and Sheena was only fourteen, her younger sister was already a full-bodied, young woman, just as she was today. Meanwhile Ryz'n had been merely full-bodied in a different sense. Beneath her fat, her acne, and her previously bouncy, bright hair, which had turned limp and dull, Ryz'n remembered how ashamed she had felt sitting on the school bus next to her kid sister. To add to Ryz'n's insult during ninth grade, fine but dark wisps of hair had surfaced mysteriously but imperceptibly above her upper lip, behind her upper jawbone and on her forearms. For these reasons, she also had been ashamed to be seen in the girl's locker room. However, even Sheena had not escaped this latter, peculiar inheritance, which permeated their mother's East Indian female ancestral line. Much to Ryz'n's chagrin again, in this department, Sheena's heirloom was not nearly as glorious as her own.

Ryz'n had taken a rough riding from the other girls during Gym Class in junior high school. Her classmates had proven so severe upon her that she had refused to shower. Ryz'n flunked Gym rather than endure the other kids' insults. By high school, her classmates had matured and she was able to shower without fanfare. Although their silent but ever-present, curious stares still haunted her. Feeling ashamed, isolated and worthless was no way to go through life. However, that was how she had felt. In an effort to hide her low self esteem from others, she cheerfully had joined as many school clubs as she could. Naturally athletic, Ryz'n had relished her role as a J.V. cheerleader and smiled unceasingly as an ambassador of that good cheer. She continually hid her tribulations behind that dimpled smile. There were times however when she physically hurt so badly it was all she could do not to cry.

Unpredictability and continual, painfully severe cramping not only had proven to be gallingly embarrassing for her but it also routinely produced nausea. She missed so much school her sophomore year, she nearly failed to matriculate with her class. Her physician had determined Ryz'n suffered from a variety of reproductive related problems, some congenital, some probably induced by a post-operative fever, incurred after an appendectomy when she was eleven. Moreover, Ryz'n suffered from unusually high, wildly fluctuating testosterone

levels in her blood, which had produced her unwanted facial hair. It was not uncommon for Ryz'n to test two to two and a half times above the level of those women, who maintained hormonal levels at the upper end of the norm.

All of these symptoms had devastated Ryz'n emotionally, but none more so than her doctor's studied prognosis that she was infertile. It seemed she had blockage and serious scarring in her reproductive tract. In fact, the doctor had predicted that Ryz'n was highly unlikely ever to bear children. Ryz'n loved children. The prognosis had sapped her joy in living and hung over her head like the sword of Damocles, until Nicky proved the doctor wrong on that prediction. A little more than a year after her physician's prognosis, Ryz'n was astonished to find that she was pregnant with Nick's child. The doctor couldn't believe it. Nobody could believe it, especially Nicky. She chuckled now at the memory.

Well, it was merely another example of Nicky's miracle-working abilities.

Earlier however, before she had dated Little Nick, Ryz'n's sophomore year had been a living hell. The only good thing about it, from a physical standpoint, had been that her bust finally had begun developing by the close of that school year. By mid summer, after other hormonal drug treatments had failed to halt her severe, irregular cramping, Ryz'n finally, reluctantly consented to her physician's repeated recommendation to take "the pill" as an antidote to her problems. Certainly, surgery, she was told, was another option. However, if unsuccessful, surgery could render her impotent. So, backed into a corner, just before she returned to school for her junior year and, after much soul searching, Ryz'n and her mother, out of desperation, opted for "the pill," even though the Church prohibited its members from using such medication. Shortly thereafter, Ryz'n also began implementing Nicky's personal exercise and diet program.

Ryz'n wasn't sure which remedy was more effective, the doctor's or Nicky's. However, suddenly, as if by magic, all her physical ailments began to melt away. Her system became regulated. And she didn't miss any more school, because Ryz'n rarely had gotten sick from any other causes. She was a lot like Nicky in that regard. Her testosterone levels dropped some. More importantly, though still higher than average, her hormone levels had stabilized. That new stability had given Ryz'n her life back!

It was about then that she had begun to view Little Nick in a different light. Ryz'n had always known he was cute though short, but suddenly she had begun to reflect upon him privately. Romantic desires she had hidden deep within herself blossomed. Even though Ryz'n had been going with Don Leipzig at the time, she never had thought of Don in any kind of romantic context. He had been merely her "boyfriend" in the most platonic sense of the word. But Nicky ...

At night or even during the day, if she were bored, Ryz'n would think of Little Nick in a manner which made her blush and which she refused to mention to anyone. Occasionally, she might unburden her conscience in the confessional. She would make her penance and vow to repent, but, sooner or later, her mind would drift. And there would be Nicky in her imagination, waiting for her.

Standing now before the lavatory sink, Ryz'n stirred from her reverie. She had learned that pursuing such thoughts led to problems greater than their cause.

She redirected her thoughts down memory lane, allowing herself the rare luxury to resume pondering her magical teenage metamorphosis. By Fall of her Junior year, Ryz'n remembered how her wispy facial and forearm hair receded and lightened dramatically in hue. Her chest had concluded its previously retarded development. Like Sheena before her, Ryz'n had grown to amply fill out a "C" cup. She smiled to herself now, knowing that about two weeks out of every five, she did so more than amply.

It was then she had begun to sit up straighter, stand up more erect. Suddenly, she was no longer afraid of showing the good posture her mother had nagged her repeatedly to exhibit. Ryz'n's coarse, shaggy mane had begun to bounce again in its natural, inherited, heavily thick, sheen, as well. Her teeth straightened and the orthodontist removed her braces. Her complexion cleared. Ryz'n lost her baby fat, except from her face and, by her Junior Prom, she had blossomed into the vibrant, vivacious young women she had become today.

However, now, wallowing in Chablis, as she considered Donna Dixon's "enbowelment" (as Booger had so aptly misstated) compared to her own, all those old teenage insecurities crept back in upon her. Concerned, Ryz'n turned to face the mirror squarely again. Despite all her success in the classroom, the diving pool, the recording studio or on the stage, all it took was a threat to her relationship with Nicky to resurrect her personal demons. Deep down in her being, real or imagined, Ryz'n always had believed that Nick Sheeboom had been the prime catalyst in her self-transformation. Through and because of her husband, she believed she had formed a new, exemplary figure, overcome her low self esteem and achieved both artistic and financial success. And all by the ripe old age of twenty-one! Yet now, as she peered into the mirror with the aid of the wine and the inescapable knowledge of her rival's abundant endowments, Ryz'n saw once again the chubby, flat-chested, pimple-faced teen with the lifeless hair and a mouthful of metal.

Ryz'n had to shake her head like a sneezing horse to jettison that poor, ancient but enduring self-image. Subconsciously, she began chewing her lower lip and twirling her engagement ring around her finger with her left thumb, as she was prone to do when she was anxious. Ryz'n thought to use some soap and water to cleanse the area along her sternum. She did so three or four times daily, to prevent pimples from growing due to constantly wearing Nicky's flat bottle opener. Carrying the opener, as he had requested, had become a point of pride for her. And the pimples it occasionally produced in her naturally oily skin, had become merely minor obstacles to overcome. No matter how long she wore the smooth, flat opener between her breasts, she never fully got used to it. And that was good too, because it constantly served to remind her of him.

As she spread herself to clean her sternum, Ryz'n caught sight of those hidden, long, sparse but coarse black hairs that had so enthralled her husband. Unlike her

vanished facial wisps, this dark, unrefined hair had never receded. It grew here, sparsely, unchecked upon her, as well as elsewhere covertly, where it blossomed softer but more densely, more like angel's hair. What a liberating relief it had been for her to have heard Little Nick confess how much he enjoyed that peculiar inheritance of hers!

Oh! How you had made over that, Baby! Thank the Lord you did!

Ryz'n's mind began to drift once more at the thought of Nicky's joy in her soft, dark, curly angel hair. Even though they were married, she usually had tried to shield herself from his curious gaze. Except when she was high, her natural modesty was a difficult habit to break, much to Nicky's displeasure. Her lover would shake his head, frowning, before he began to work his magic upon her.

"Ahh! It's that Catholic upbringing," he'd lament. "Something we gotta overcome," as if it were something she had wished to overcome!

Not anymore.

"As sure as the Lord lives in heaven," vowed Ryz'n before the mirror, "I'll do whatever it takes to erase that big-boobed, blonde liar from his memory. I'll make him remember me, to remember our love, to love me again."

Modesty be damned! Whatever it takes!

Ryz'n unclenched both her fists and her teeth. She relaxed and once more resumed her reverie, recalling her lover's unusual style of wooing …

Nick liked to massage her with Johnson's Baby Oil, giving her a really awesome, full body massage. He used the baby oil because Ryz'n found its aroma addictive, also because oddly enough she enjoyed the heavy, greasy feel it left upon her skin. Zoning out, Ryz'n reenacted the scene, as she had so often before. Again, she spoke as if he were present, enacting his part as well as her's.

"Sweetie, you really don't have to do this you know?"

"Yeah, I know," he'd reply cavalierly. "And you know, Ry, that if I thought I had to, I wouldn't. Right?"

Ryz'n would play the martyr, surrendering as if she had no choice in the matter. Yet she would smile coyly just the same. A sly grin would spread from the corner of his mouth as well, while her lover would stare hard into the reflection of her eyes via the door mirror hanging upon the closet door

"But since I don't have to, it gives me great pleasure to do so," he'd say.

Then he'd wink and tap her playfully on the rump. Ryz'n would sigh and grudgingly relent. Secretly, it pleased her greatly to think he would take such pains and this, he had known as well.

As Ryz'n would watch via the reflection in the closet door mirror, Nick would totally absorb himself in his task. She thought he had looked like a gentle kid tenderly teasing a Barbie doll. When he had completed the massage, to end his zaniness, Ryz'n would cry "Enough already, for crying out loud."

"No need to be so modest, Sweetie," he'd pronounce. "Not with that glorious set of tail feathers you got. Why, you should be proud as a peacock!" Then Nick

would grin, smack her sharply on the rump and order her to roll over so he could "baste and paste the other side."

Ryz'n could see it all as if it were happening this minute. The juices flowed within her as she moaned lowly and subconsciously rocked rhythmically back and forth next to the lavatory door.

"Enough all ready! For cryin' out loud, Ry!" Ryz'n blurted out now, just as she had done with him, then. She startled herself. *Yes, enough already*. Ryz'n saw her face blush in the mirror and she smirked. She shook her head negatively in self reproach.

"Ry, don't you dare go down that road now," she admonished herself in the mirror. "Not now. Darn it. Not now, Honey. Get hold of yourself!" *Must be the Chablis going to my head*. "Yes, that and the lingering scent of his pillow and that baby oil!" *What baby oil?* "Well, at least the wine and the pillow are conspiring against me," she concluded. *Father, in Heaven, redirect my thoughts.* Having collected herself, Ryz'n sought to pick up where she left off, before things had gone south. She stuck the bottle opener back in its cozy home.

Yes, Nick had taken all this, this unseemly, embarrassing inheritance of hers, what she had considered to be a negative, a disgrace, and made it into a plus for her. She couldn't have been more pleased. Ryz'n did not believe he actually had enjoyed performing as her singular body hairdresser, but she knew there was a method to his madness. She understood that he had sought to relieve her of any anxiety she felt about herself. He had known of her past, of her problems with low self esteem. His zany, full body massage, though bizarre, had made her feel accepted by him totally and without reservation. And that unconditional acceptance by him had fostered an overwhelming sense of security within her. Nick had known that. She had known that. And each one had known the other had known it, as well. Even so, when it had come to wooing her, Nick always had known just exactly what to do and say. They had had no problems there. It had been in other areas of their marriage that he could infuriate her to the point where she would occasionally forget her gentle Roman Catholic upbringing. However, she did not choose to go down that road at this time, either.

Some turbulence rocked the plane for a few brief seconds, tossing Ryz'n against the inside of the closed lavatory door and bringing her out of her reverie. She steadied herself by placing her hand against the door. With the other hand, Ryz'n threw more water on her face, resolving to think positively. She made another conscious effort to collect herself. She reminded herself that Nicky had left Donna, after all, to find her, his wife. Certainly, the Lord was in charge, as Sheena had indicated over dinner. He was orchestrating this whole thing. Ryz'n recalled the Proverbs from the readings at mass.

"**Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not into your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge Him and He shall direct your paths**."

Ryz'n resolved to rest in Him, as she always had. Besides, Donna may be *udderly* ridiculous, but Ryz'n bet her rival didn't have anything close to a 0.6 size ratio, or a family heirloom as naturally unique as her own! Ryz'n only hoped the new Nicky would be as receptive as the old to her peculiar family heritage.

"Ladies and gentlemen this is your captain speaking. We are beginning our descent into Dulles International Airport. Our estimated time of arrival is 9:52 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time. The temperature in Washington is 78 degrees. The skies are fair and the air is unseasonably dry.

"At this time, I ask that you please return to your seats and restore your seatbacks and table trays to their upright positions. Thank you very much."

Ryz'n obeyed the captain's requests and vowed to trust in her God.

* * *

When their plane landed at Dulles Airport near Chantilly, Virginia, the Ryan girls, thanks to the larger portion of a couple bottles of Chablis, were still flying high, though Ryz'n flew much lower than her sister, who had a lower tolerance for alcohol than Ryz'n. It was nearly ten-thirty that evening when they climbed into the Starfire convertible for the drive home.

Traffic was nearly non-existent, as they cruised down the George Washington (GW) Parkway along the west bank of Potomac River in the opened convertible. Sheena asked if they couldn't cross over the Key Bridge into Georgetown. It was a beautiful warm, semi-dry Saturday night in June, quite different from the brown of the California desert, not nearly as dry. The girls could feel the mid-June evening air cool about them as the Starfire sliced along the densely wooded west bank of the Potomac. The sisters' long, thick locks fluttered about in the soft summer breeze. The breeze smelled of green woods, sweet honey locust blossoms, freshly mowed grass, and the sweet aroma of the last of the late blooming spring honeysuckle as well as the occasional fragrance of wild clover. The soft summer scent lifted Ryz'n out of herself.

Hundreds of fireflies flit over the just cut grass along the roadside, reminding Ryz'n of the song Nicky had composed. "Dance of the Fireflies" had been inspired by an incident during one of their first dates. She noted proudly to Sheena that song had risen to number three on the pop charts! *Yep, Nicky sure knew how to write hit tunes.* Ryz'n wondered if he still could. She refused doubt a portal to her brain. Her faith in God had combined with the Chablis to drown her prior in-flight anxieties. If not completely on top of the world, Ryz'n was almost there and she planned to stay that way. She felt alive, vibrant. Ryz'n was confident now that the Lord, Who had brought her and Nicky thus far, would perfect all that concerned her, as He had promised her in His Psalms. And, *No, the wine hasn't hurt any either*. And she giggled.

"Georgetown? A victory cruise?" Above the blare of the Top Forty on the car radio, Ryz'n responded to Sheena's earnest pleading to have at least a little fun after such a serious trip. "Well, I'm not really dressed for it, ya know?"

"Are you kiddin', with that top? You're dressed perfect—SHARP, as Nick would say. Though your lecture on the way out to L.A. about the disadvantages of going braless holds no credibility with me now."

"Well, it should. Everything I said still holds. This top gives me plenty of support and I only dressed like this, because it's the first thing I laid my hands on in my suitcase and there was no bra handy. I know Nicky would like it. I packed it to wear for him. But I dunno about Georgetown."

"Aw, come on, Ry. We'll stay in the car and just cruise. And I'll make sure all the guys are looking at me anyway. Whaddaya say?"

"Well … Why, sure Baby Sister, why don't we cruise Georgetown for a little while? It's Saturday night and exams are done. School's out for the summer. The old place ought to be really hoppin'." Sheena grinned and they crossed over the Key Bridge into the chic, trendy old town.

Ryz'n had been right. The celebrated, trendy nightclub district of the Nation's Capitol was hopping with activity and the Ryan sisters were dragging the gut right down the center of it all. Traffic was stop-and-go all along the popular cobblestone intersection of Wisconsin Avenue and "M" Street, Northwest.

From their open convertible, the Ryan sisters received a variety of invitations from passers-by flirting with Sheena. Clad in her shades, Sheena sat sidesaddle in the front passenger seat, leaning on the car door with her right arm hanging down over the door, kibitzing with the young men of Georgetown. Ryz'n did not interfere. She understood that her kid sister had always loved to flirt. It was a pastime with Sheena. Based on her responses tonight however, Ryz'n believed her kid sister to be way out of practice. *Good thing Bryce isn't here.*

Wearing her wraparound FosterGrants to conceal her own identity on the brightly lit streets, Ryz'n kept quiet and drove. Self-conscious, she locked both hands atop the steering wheel to cover her daring top. She always felt conspicuous wearing her shades indoor or at night. Sheena could afford herself the luxury of flirting, for she did not enjoy Ryz'n's popularity. Having only joined the band two years ago in Nicky's absence, Sheena, unlike Ryz'n, had missed most of *GRT*'s nationally televised appearances on the band's meteoric rise to fame. Those exposures had aired before Nicky had left the band to join the service. That had been when *GRT* had performed on national programs like *Dance Band, The Late Night Show,* Donna Sands' afternoon program *Sands of Time* and *Soul Track*. *Shoot!* She and Nick had even made cameo appearances on back-to-back episodes of the sitcom *Happy Times* which aired during April of 1972, even though those episodes had been filmed the previous Fall. That was when the sit-com still endeavored to remain true to its original Fifties setting, an era that Nick adored and had influenced him each day in creating his music. Ryz'n reasoned that Nicky would have loved the late wave of Rock'N'Roll revival that had swept over the nation in the last few years. Even many of the new tunes sounded old.

Nicky had always been especially proud of *GRT*'s two *Soul Track* appearances. Few all white groups were invited on the popular Saturday afternoon teen dance program. Of course, *Soul Track* never invited *GRT* back once Nicky had joined the service. His hard driving, long grinding R&B style and his raspy baritone voice that gave *GRT* its "Soul" sound, so much adored by Nick and his fan base.

Ryz'n was not alone in thinking Tony Joe White was the sole (or "Soul") white performer who even approached Nicky's black sounding vocal chords. In high school, Ryz'n recalled Little Nick had hung out with the minority of black kids whenever he could, especially during lunch. He had walked their walk and talked their talk, which had served to enhance his natural raspy style. And he had caught no little flak from the other white students at Pocomoke High for it, especially from his longtime, good friend Johnny Allein and Johnny's old girlfriend R. J.

Georgetown's historic brick row houses had been transformed into nightclubs, exotic restaurants and high fashion apparel shops. They rose like vertical, urban canyon walls on either side of the Starfire. The cobblestone thoroughfare was well lit, enabling Ryz'n to see through her shades and, at the same time, remain anonymous. The heavy Saturday night traffic crept along, as always. The classic car rocked along unevenly over the famed cobblestone streets in fits and starts, as the slow traffic permitted.

"Hey Baby! You're lookin' good tonight, Mama. Wheweee! How 'bout you step out of that heap and I buy ya a drink?" offered a young man with shoulder length blonde hair and a scraggly, golden beard that didn't quite cover his face.

"'Cause you're right," replied Sheena, who was in her element.

"Right, about what?"

"Me lookin' good—too good for you, that's for sure!"

Ooooh that was rank. Pure korn. Pure grade school stuff!

Had he been here, Bryson would have conked Sheena for her outrageous, juvenile flirtations. Ryz'n had thought Sheena would have outgrown such adverse, adolescent actions. For her kid sister, flirting was just a harmless game, which brought out the kid in her again, if only briefly. Sheena really meant nothing by her coquetry. She flirted merely for the fun of it. For her, the means was the end. However, Ryz'n shook her head, concerned more with what Sheena's targets might think. Ryz'n feared others might misconstrue her sister's motive. The light ahead changed and Ryz'n left their admirers behind.

Ryz'n envied her sister's anonymity. Around home, up in the Heights, Ryz'n was OK. Everyone knew her as the girl-next-door. She could go about her daily business, grocery shopping, running errands, etc. without fanfare. The locals usually smiled politely, nodded and said hello. Behind her back, they might quietly whisper to one another who she was and why she was famous, but that was the extent of it. The same thing occurred down on the Banks and at M&L, the prestigious small, private school nestled in the Blue Ridge. Her celebrity was very low key down there as well and she could be just another student. If she were found out here in Georgetown tonight, Ryz'n would not be so fortunate.

In addition to her dozen national TV appearances with *GRT*, Ryz'n had appeared on the national evening news several times as a spokesperson for "The MIA-POW Bring the Boys Home" movement. Once she had appeared on the national news on the lawn of the White House with President Ford. That precipitous meeting with the President had garnered her the precious executive order she needed to instigate the overseas search for Nicky. Moreover, she had been semi-featured in a *One Hour* TV news magazine piece focusing on the need to bring the boys home. Of course, during *GRT*'s *Lest We Forget Tour* of the fifty state capitols last summer, Ryz'n's face had appeared on the local news stations all across the country for press conferences to promote the band's live performances. (Much to her displeasure, Sheena had not been in such demand.) However, more importantly for Ryz'n, she was able to use those interviews as a platform to promote the Cause. And so now, Ryz'n hid beneath her oversized wraparound shades on this gorgeous June night, chauffeuring her flirtatious kid sister beneath the bright street lights of Georgetown.

A pocket of cool air had settled upon them, inducing goose pimples on Ryz'n's arms. She reached to turn on the convertible's heater.

"Hey, pretty Mama! Why don't you give me a ride? We could go far, Baby" yelled a young man in a group of three, all dressed in faded blue dungarees and multi-colored, long sleeved, pointed collar, dress shirts.

"You can't afford a ride in this car, Honey," smirked Sheena. Ryz'n winced.

Oh Sheena, Sheena! Sometimes we act like fools and don't know it, 'til later.

Mrs. Mather persisted in her shameless flirtations, as she now sat atop the back of the front passenger seat, like a debutante in the Rose Bowl Parade. However, the three young men on the street took Sheena's coquetry as a dare. Uninvited by Ryz'n but responding to Sheena's quip and daring posture, they climbed aboard the Starfire, carrying their beers into to the back seat, while the girls were stopped in traffic. From behind her shades, Ryz'n politely asked their uninvited guests to leave. They thanked her very politely, but said they preferred to stay. They complimented her on the Starfire, as well as her good looks. Sans shades now, Sheena did not help matters any by sliding down into her seat and turning to face backwards. She rested her knees upon the seat, her elbows on top of the seatback, she continued to play the coquette.

Each of Ryz'n's new-found, back seat passengers had a beer in hand. That was illegal. The District of Columbia did not permit you to carry opened alcoholic beverages on its streets. After all, D.C. wasn't the Big Easy. The guy behind the driver's seat kept leaning forward asking Ryz'n to remove her dark glasses, when he spilled his beer over her shoulder. That was the second beer spilled on her today and she did not appreciate it one bit. A uniformed cop on foot at the corner approached the Starfire and was about to cite them all. However, Ryz'n talked him out of it when she removed her dark glasses to look deeply into the young peace officer's eyes and flash her dimples. Ryz'n could flirt a little, too, if the situation called for it. Her persuasions swayed the officer, who allowed them to

pass with only a warning. In the officer's presence, Ryz'n did ask the boys to leave the car. They had no choice but to comply. Ryz'n, who smelled of beer now, decided that was enough excitement for one night. She took Sheena home. The sisters arrived at their parents' home after midnight without further fanfare.

* * *

The next day was warm, muggy and overcast, a typical D.C. summer's day. Ryz'n caught Father Vizconni still in his official tunic after the last Sunday mass. She wanted to talk to him about Nick's homecoming.

"Hello Father V? Have you got a minute?"

The young priest stepped aside to allow home-going parishioners to pass, as he paused on his way back to the rectory.

"Sure, Ryzanna. What can I do for you?" Ryz'n crossed to his side of the concrete walk, while people passed by in one's and two's, as the foot traffic slowly dwindled away. Ryz'n grinned.

"Our prayers for Nicky are being answered, Father V. I have good reason to believe he is on his way home to us even as we speak!" Ryz'n scarcely could restrain her exuberance. The priest appeared to be taken aback by the good news but he said all the right things.

"Why, why that's ... That's incredibly terrific news Ryzanna! Thanks be to God the Father and Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!" Despite this approval, Father V. looked to be only half-believing her, but Ryz'n carried on as though he fully understood

"Yes, it is, Father. Truly, it's a miracle. I expect him later this week. He's riding cross-country on a motorbike. Sure could use some prayers for the Lord's travel mercies."

"Of course, Ryzanna, of course my child. Consider it done."

"Thank you, Father." Ryz'n beamed joyfully as she rose bubbly and bobbing up and down off the concrete sidewalk on the balls of her feet. She felt as though she were an iridescent pink light bulb. She fairly glowed from within her plain pink, sleeveless crinoline shift, tied smartly with a pink corded belt. Ryz'n had sewn the dress herself and was particularly proud of the two large pockets, one over each breast. The pockets featured a single, pink button tying down the triangular, envelope-like pocket flaps at the point of the triangle. She bounced and waited, cheerfully expectant for some further congratulatory response from Father V. Ryz'n clasped her small purse in her hands in back of her, resting them on the small shelf top that comprised her upward sloping behind. The handsome, young priest had counseled Ryz'n for the last seven years. He returned her enthusiasm, though a little less fervently than she would have liked.

Father V's neatly combed, dark, wavy hair grew fashionably over his ears and collar. His sad, dark eyes, olive complexion and smooth features gave no doubt that his family was of Italian descent. Father Vizconni was the most popular priest in the parish, because he listened hard and spoke softly. He seemed to possess a special gift for dealing with young people, especially with troubled

adolescents. It was in that capacity that Ryz'n first had come to know him seven years ago. He had counseled her from her awkward teen years up to the present.

The padre had been there for her when she had lost Nicky's unborn baby. He had not condemned her for her sins. Rather, when she had condemned herself and pointed out to him that the miscarriage was just retribution from an angry God, Father V. had rebuked her in his gentle manner. The kind priest had explained that the God they served was loving and compassionate and did not seek vengeance on unborn children. Later, Father V. instructed the young, under aged couple in their Pre Cana classes and offered to marry her and Nicky. But after her miscarriage, Ryz'n's parents would not give their legally required consent to their seventeen year-old daughter. So she and Nick had eloped to be married by a justice of the peace. Afterwards, Father V. had worked on Ryz'n's parents to permit the young couple to marry in the Church, rather than to live in sin. His persuasions were effective. Father V. had performed the sacrament in the grandest wedding ceremony ever witnessed in the Heights.

Since then she had involved the pastor in every major crisis, tragedy or joy, of her life, and there had been many. Standing now squarely before her, the cleric reached down to place his hands upon her shoulders, gently retarding her joyful bouncing. His manner became sober and he spoke tenderly.

"Your faith has been constant for so long, Ryzanna. Perhaps we should have named you Constance." His weak attempt at humor failed, because Ryz'n could see from his face that he was terribly touched. "I must say, I am amazed, but ... " He choked, letting go of her and turned his head slightly. He did not speak. Ryz'n understood that the priest knew Nick well, had known him when he was still called "Little Nick," long before Nicky had become famous. He had married the popular, teenage couple when they had been celebrated only locally, not nationally. Ryz'n stammered. She had not been ready for this. She sought to help the cleric out by shifting the subject and asked him the personal question that preyed upon her mind. Suddenly, she became subdued and somewhat reluctant.

However, because of their longstanding, personal association, Ryz'n felt the popular cleric was more like a close member of her family than merely her parish priest. Father V. was someone of whom she could ask even intimate questions, questions she did not feel that she could ask even her own father, who never had been very understanding, with her, anyway. So now, she asked one.

"Father? Father V.? Well, you know, it has been over three years and much has happened to Nick, and to me as well. How should I, well … you know?" Embarrassed, Ryz'n looked away from the priest's eyes. "How should I, you know, approach him? You see, he has amnesia ... " Her voice trailed off sheepishly. The priest checked his emotions momentarily to address her directly, kindly as he always did.

"Ryzanna, my child, must it be so difficult?" The cleric placed his forefinger under her chin to turn her face back to him. Father V. smiled gently. "Nicholas is your husband, Ryzanna. His return is a miracle from God, a joyous event.

Approach him as such, with love, with hospitality, with warm humility and with sincerity, in much the same manner as Abigail approached David in the scriptures, when she was yet a stranger to him. But above all, with love." An easy smile stole across his lips. He had recovered his emotions and his natural, unassuming manner. *Thank God.* She couldn't handle a teary priest. It was all she could do to keep her own tears from falling. Ryz'n replied hopefully.

"I guess Abigail's approach was successful, hunh Father?"

"Oh yes, decidedly so. David married Abigail and made her a queen."

Ryz'n beamed anew. Then a shadow of doubt lowered over her countenance.

"But Father V. , I thought that David married Bathsheba? I think I remember that. I confess I'm not very knowledgeable of the Old Testament." Ryz'n understood that what little she knew of David and Bathsheba had not come from her knowledge of scriptures, but rather from some vague recollection of an old movie she had seen on her black and white Admiral television as a kid. She recalled for certain that the movie starred her favorite actor Gregory Peck. Because she couldn't remember the particulars, she'd like now to get the straight dope from the horse's mouth, so to speak. Somewhat uncomfortably, Father Vizconni cleared his throat.

"Well, that, my child, is another story." He smiled weakly.

"But Father didn't Bathsheba become queen? I mean, I thought she married David or was I wrong about that?"

"Hmmm, no, no he did. You are correct, Ryzanna. However, Bathsheba's approach, although equally successful, was considerably different from her predecessor's. But yes, she did marry David after he had married Abigail."

"Oh, AFTER Abigail passed away. I see. I know women didn't live too long in those days." The priest placed his hands behind his back as he now began to bounce a bit on the balls of his feet.

"Well no, not exactly. You are correct, a women lived considerably less long in biblical times, I suppose. But, you see, also in those days, you'll recall from your catechisms, hmmmm-hmmm, kings oftentimes had more than one wife."

"Oh, yes, of course, Father," replied Ryz'n sheepishly. She felt a little stupid. She should have known that, though she failed to comprehend the concept of polygamy. *Why would God allow such a practice*? The mere thought of it was totally foreign to her.

"Yes, quite," replied the priest, though his tone underscored his distaste for the practice as well.

"Well, Bathsheba's approach must have been more successful than Abigail's, you know, since David chose to marry Bathsheba AFTER he had married Abigail, or did she follow the same methods as Abigail?"

Again, the priest cleared his throat and backpedaled.

"Well Ryzanna, I never quite thought about that, I uh, well, you have a point I suppose ... Look, perhaps I used the wrong example, perhaps Esther, as she approached her husband the king, who was a stranger and a foreigner to her

would have been a better example? Yes, Esther is definitely a better example." But Ryz'n did not hear his retraction, she was lost in thought about Bathsheba.

"Gee Father, Bathsheba's way must have worked better. I mean since she came AFTER Abigail and all. Does the Bible say what she did so differently?"

As a typical Roman Catholic, Ryz'n rarely consulted the Bible, though she was fairly familiar with the New Testament. However, what she knew of the scriptures, the Old Testament, came from listening to the Readings at Mass. Bible study was something Nicky, a Protestant, had undertaken only after the two of them had escaped miraculously from a near fatal auto accident in the summer of 1971 when he had "got saved."

"Well child, let's just say she used a more, uh, I mean, a less subtle and a more, ah-hem, shall we say, sensual approach?" The priest arched his eyebrows, as if to say: *Now, do you understand?*

"Oh!" The light switched on in Ryz'n's brain.

"Look Ryzanna, I really must run an errand for Father Damien before he tries to do it himself. At his age and in his condition ... Perhaps we can talk some more later." With both his hands, he tapped the outsides of both her arms twice in unison, for assurance. He resumed his walk in his priestly robes back towards the rectory. He called back to her over his shoulder, "But that's great news about Nicholas, Ryzanna, just fabulous! Make sure you bring him by for a visit. I can't wait to see him. OK?"

Ryz'n was a bit stunned as she realized the depth of her ignorance of the Old Testament and the awkward position in which she had placed Father Vizconni just now. She did not respond quickly to the priest's overtures. How could she have been so dense? Then it suddenly occurred to her that she thought she remembered that Abigail had herself been married to some idiot when she had first met David. Ryz'n shook her head. She could never keep all that Bible stuff straight. Of course, Nick had suggested that if she would take the time to stop, pick up the Book and actually read it once in a while, she might learn something.

Again, she shook her head and clucked her tongue thinking of Nicky and his new found "religion." Here, she had been a faithful, patiently practicing, devout Roman Catholic all her life. Then along comes Nick, a Johnny-come-lately so to speak, and gets "saved" in some totally foreign, black Pentecostal church service over in Anacostia. All of sudden, he's a "specially anointed child of God," who is correcting her on matters of doctrine. *Boy! That really ticked me off!* It had made her especially mad, when he'd go to the Bible and spout scripture in defense of his position. She would tune him out and refused to explore the scriptures herself, out of spite. Even if she had, that Nick could always twist and turn things his way. He was a real pip at that. He was a natural, born used car salesman. If her husband had had no musical talent whatsoever, Nick could always have made a fortune, selling plain old rocks for a living, like some others she knew.

The padre waved warmly as he strode off toward the rectory. The whole parish knew he would be leaving in a few weeks for a new assignment. He had served at

Holy Trinity for a record long term of seven years. He would have left already, but for Father Damien's sudden, unexpected illness. Over his shoulder, the priest reminded the girl that he had many fond memories of Nick. She knew Father V. was sincere in his hope that Ryz'n would bring Nick around to see him before the kindly priest departed the country. As an afterthought, Ryz'n called out to warn the young cleric again that Nick had lost his memory and probably would not recognize the padre. Father Vizconni turned to enter the rectory, walking backwards, stating loudly that nevertheless, he wanted to see "Little Nick!"

* * *

Later that afternoon, Ryz'n, along with Sheena, tried to visit Nick's parents. The Sheebooms had just returned from their trip to Australia and Hawaii. But her in-laws were not at home. A helpful neighbor advised the sisters that relatives had picked up the Sheebooms at the airport and taken the couple to Sunday dinner. They were not expected home until late that evening. Ryz'n left the neighbor with a message saying she'd stop by to visit her in-laws the next night.

* * *

The following night, after supper, the Ryan sisters returned to Nick's homestead to find the Sheebooms awaiting them. Mr. Sheeboom was excited. The dapper, distinguished looking little man with the barrel chest, flashing black eyes, long lashes and dark wavy hair had accompanied Ryz'n to Laos and insisted on helping to finance the trip as well. Now he asserted that on his vacation he had stumbled upon the Maui College baseball coach who had recruited Nick over in the Islands. The coach had told Nick's parents that Nick definitely had gone to Southern California to play college baseball, but for whom, the Maui coach could not say. Mr. Sheeboom wanted to turn around and go right back out to California to interview some college coaches, but his office required his presence during the upcoming week. He said that he had tried to reach some coaches by phone, but the few he had reached did not know his son.

Finally, Ryz'n was able to cut into her father-in-law's animated diatribe to relate everything she had learned when she had interviewed the Peppermount Coach, herself. Ryz'n told them about Big Jim and everything, well, almost everything. She did not mention Nick's engagement with Donna Dixon. That detail she left out, because she thought it might upset her in-laws. (Later, Sheena agreed with Ryz'n's decision. Sheena had assured her that the news of Donna Dixon would have only upset Nick's parents. Ryz'n was impressed favorably with her kid sister's sudden display of mature wisdom.) Ryz'n also relayed Bill's message to her in-laws that he would like to come out to visit them at the end of the week. He wanted to see Nick, also. The Sheebooms were ecstatic. Ryz'n ended by saying Nick should be arriving Thursday, possibly even Wednesday at the earliest.

On that estimate, she was mistaken. For how could she have known that, at that very moment, "Nick" was just one night's motorbike ride away? How could she have known that he was almost there?

~ Chapter 12: Flip Side ~

On a bright afternoon, the first Saturday of June, a large red ant crawled over a missed blade of grass on the otherwise freshly cut green carpet, which was the outfield in Omaha's Rosenblatt Stadium.

"Well, we made it this far," whispered the young center fielder hoarsely. He spoke to the ant beneath him in confidence, as if it were a close friend. Totally oblivious of the young ballplayer, the ant crawled on over the grass between the ballplayer's legs, a couple feet directly below the outfielder's nose. Ignoring the insect's cold shoulder, the ballplayer talked on.

"Just one game away from the national championship. Yeah Buddy! We were almost there," he acknowledged smoothly with a soft sense of distant satisfaction. The ant paid him no heed.

Resigned to defeat now, the outfielder felt the need to explain his team's present dire circumstances to the unsympathetic, red insect. He believed the ant might become interested, once it heard the full story, so he spoke on evenly.

"Ya see partner, we beat the Zorros in the regionals and nobody had done that in years. Yeah Buddy, we stopped their six-year consecutive championship reign. And here we are in the semi-finals of the College World Series, on national television no less. That ain't bad for a school of thirty-three hundred kids, not bad at all." The ant carried on industriously with its business, still ignoring the center fielder, who looked up now towards the infield.

The Texas Longhorn, who had just walked inn a run, reached first base. The University of Texas led the Peppermount Porpoises 13 to 5 in the bottom of the eighth inning, with the bases full of Longhorns. There was only one out. Fans who had hoped to see a Cinderella-like upset of the mighty Texans from the little school by the sea were leaving Rosenblatt Stadium in droves.

The young outfielder remained motionless. He was bent over at the waist, knees slightly bent, with his hands resting on his knees. A blade of grass protruded from between his fake, gold-capped, upper front teeth. The center-fielder was in good defensive position. He glanced down and to his left at his shadow. Like him, the shaded silhouette was ready to play ball. The centerfielder slowly raised his head to follow the manicured, emerald green carpet into the diamond. The air was dry and crisp. Stockyard aromas and car exhausts drifted over the outfield fence to mingle oddly with the smells of popcorn, hot dogs and cigar smoke that filled the old ballpark.

The Peppermount Coach Tom Trahorn had asked for "Time" and stepped out of the third base dugout. The coach began his slow, purposeful approach from the dugout to the mound. The cloudless June sky wore a pale blue cover overhead. The sky failed to deepen into a darker blue the higher one's vision took him or

her into the heavens. It was the kind of a sky that ballplayers liked to call a "high sky." The centerfielder knew it was the kind of sky in which he could lose a high, fly ball easily, if he weren't careful, if he lost his concentration.

"Hey, Dix!"

Scotty MacDougal, the right fielder was calling him. Dix slowly turned only his head to the left until Scotty came into view. Like him, Scotty remained bent over at the waist, in a defensively ready stance, even though time was officially out. Crouched slightly, right hand upon his knee, Scotty had turned his head turned to Dix with his glove cupped, around the left side of his face. He used the mitt as a shield, to keep the sound of his voice from drifting into the infield, barking an "outfield whisper."

"Dix, bet he calls for you now. Shoulda done that back in the fourth, when we were still in the flippin' game!" Dix said nothing, but raised his chin to acknowledge his concurrence. Then he swiveled his head back to he front to watch the conference on the mound. Sure enough, just as Scotty had predicted, Coach Trahorn raised his right arm, pointed to center field and motioned for Dix.

Dix rose up, spitting the blade of grass out of his mouth. He slid his glove off his hand, placing it under his left arm. Then the sophomore hitched up his knickers, stepped over the ant and deliberately made his way in to the mound.

Scotty was right. Told Coach in the fourth, when it was still tied, that I was ready. Said he wanted to save me for the finish. Said, if we won, he'd start me tomorrow, too. Trouble is, now, looks like there ain't gonna be no tomorrow.

As Dix made his way in toward the mound, his teammate Rudy Garcia ran towards him to take Dix's place in center. "Go get 'em, Dix" quipped Rudy in passing. Dix nodded soberly in reply. Much of the sellout crowd in Omaha's Rosenblatt Stadium, who had hoped to witness another major upset, had already left for the exits. Only the Longhorn faithful remained to celebrate the inevitable. Had he a choice in the matter, Dix probably would have preferred to have been elsewhere, doing something else, like wedding Donna, as they had planned.

The young athlete approached the mound to accept the baseball from his diminutive coach, who confirmed what Dixie had just thought.

"Well, Dix. Looks like you were right, kid. I was hoping we could stay close a little bit longer. Guess I screwed up—waited too long. Not a damned thing I can do about that now." He looked away, expectorated, and then looked back up to the taller Dixie. "I gambled for the whole shee-bang! Judas Priest! Got a little greedy, I reckon. They snuck up on me, scored too many, too fast." Coach Trahorn shook his head and clucked his tongue.

"Well, it ain't over yet, Dix! Get us outta this mess and, who knows? We came back from this far down against LASU! Maybe, we can do it again. Just give me everything ya got, kid!"

"There's one out, bases full. Don't matter whether you throw from the stretch or not. Whatever you wanna do. This is their clean-up, comin' up. Try to keep it down and away from him. Now is the time! Let's go, kid!" He slammed the

baseball into Dix's mitt and patted Dixie's carved up half-ass, before he trotted back to the dugout. He didn't stick around to watch Dixie's pitching mechanics during warm-ups.

Danny Danielson, the chunky catcher who had waited quietly for the coach to finish, now winked and smacked Dix on the rump also. "Runner on second! So second signal after the second flap. Got it?" Dixie nodded grimly. "Hey, you can do it, Dix. You're the man! Let's go kid!" Then he bopped Dix on the rump once more and half trotted, half waddled back to his position behind the plate.

Dix took his eight warm-ups, four fastballs and four screwballs. With each practice toss, he concentrated on relaxing, not getting ahead of himself, bending his back and following through. He wanted his legs to do the work. He thought he had his 'A' stuff. He could tell by the way his pitches were moving as they broke across the plate. But he could never be sure. The hitters would let him know. They always did. He felt good, relaxed. He should have come in, in the fourth. Dix glanced down at the pitching rubber. There was just enough of a depression in front of the rubber for him to get a good push off.

After completing the eighth and final practice toss permitted to him, Dix walked down the backside of the mound, looking out towards the center field he had just been patrolling. He saw Rudy, his replacement in center, finishing up some quick warm-up tosses of his own with Scotty Mac. Dix checked the breeze. The only breeze that could hurt him was one blowing from left into the first base dugout, which would retard the break on his screw ball. But there was little breeze and what there was of that drifted out from home plate, just right for knocking down his dippsy-doodle ball. He glimpsed the centerfield camera.

"Gotta forget about that," he mumbled self consciously.

Dixie realized he had sweat dripping from his brow. Still back of the mound, the hope of the Peppermount Porpoises turned around to face the plate. With the baseball in the glove on his left hand, Dix used his right hand to remove his purple cap with the silver bill and scripted, silver "***P***". He brushed off his dusty, sweat-stained face and brow with the crook of his right elbow and back of his wrist. He brushed his shaggy, long dense, dark mane back over his left ear with his right wrist and forearm. Thus, he unwittingly exposed to the nationwide *Wide World of Sports* audience the fact that the top half of that ear was missing. Dix was not thinking about any national television audience now. He was trying to calculate out how he could get out of this bases loaded, one-out, Longhorn jam.

He leaned over by his right foot, balancing himself upon it, to pick up the rosin bag off the back of the mound, and balanced the bag, then bounced it, first in his palm, then flipping his hand over, on the back of his right, pitching wrist, allowing the smoky rosin to dry his sweat. Thrusting his wrist downward with a jerk, he let the bag plop down on the back of the dirt mound behind him. The base runner at second needled him, ordering him to "Get goin'".

He's right. So Dix strode up the backside of the mound to assume the rubber with a single-minded purpose. He already knew what he was going to throw the

Longhorn waiting on him at the plate. Like the rest of his teammates, Dixie wore the button-less purple double-knit jersey with "**Peppermount**" scripted in silver across his chest. The lettering ran diagonally from lower left to upper right. His knee socks were purple, but his knickers like the three parallel silver stripes around the bottom of his short sleeves were silver. His spikes, like all the rest of the team were an untraditional white, in imitation of the world champion Oakland A's. Naturally, his sanitaries were white.

The Porpoise relief hurler gripped the baseball with his bare right hand in his glove. With his right index and middle fingers together, straddling the inner, left seam of the baseball, Dixie caressed the right seam with his stump of a ring finger. He straddled the rubber and then assumed it by gingerly placing the side of his right foot just in front of the long, white rubber rectangle. He was throwing from the stretch.

The guys started yelling encouragement to him. There were some isolated shouts from both dugouts. With the ball in his right hand, back of his right hand resting above his backside belt, glove hand resting on his left knee, bent over at the waist, Dixie peered grimly in for the sign. He nodded when he got the signal that he was expecting from Danny. The vocal war, unique to baseball, escalated all about him. His teammates in the field as well in the dugout shouted encouragement. The Texas dugout and runners shouted other, less encouraging verbiage at him as the runners extended their respective leads. Even though the bases were jammed, he had chosen to pitch from the stretch. He took his time.

This was it, that singular, unforgettably true, pristine moment when pitcher and batter face off. Dixie focused on Danny's mitt and ignored the southpaw hitter, who waved his bat menacingly.

"Come on Dix. Come you, come you, come you KEED! Come you now One-One!" From his third sacker, Dix heard:

"You the Man, Dix. Shoot 'em down Baby, shoot 'em down, shoot em' down, shoot 'em down, KEED!" The runner at first answered:

""He gwonna take your heed off Pitch. "Come on LEMMEE! Come on Baby! Right Back up the middle. Rock this dude! Tear this sucker's head off, like someone did his ear."

"Bring it in there Dixie boy. Bring it in there, KEED!" shouted the shortstop.

Dix blotted out all the noise around him, sinking into a quiet, effortless world all his own. He came set and leisurely checked the runners dancing off second and third, coolly as though it were the most natural thing in the world for him to do. He was nervous, but he refused to show it.

Dix was all business. He checked third again and with the ball buried in his glove made sure he had just the grip he wanted. His injured ring finger was the key to his screw ball or "dippsy-doodle" as he liked to call it. He focused on Danny's glove, which was thigh high to the batter, looking like a huge bull's eye in the center of the plate. Dix inhaled deeply, flexed his right knee and rocked

backward as he drew his left foot up next to his right knee. Kicking forward with his left foot, he flung his arm back like a slingshot before the sling is slung.

The back, inner top of his right ring finger joint formed a bicuspid-like surface in which he choked the concave cusped joint into the ball's red, outside seam. Dix came forward with all the coiled power of a mountain lion pouncing from a rocky ledge towards its unsuspecting prey. When Dix let go, that cusped joint was the last piece of his flesh to break contact with the baseball. That release forced the horsehide sphere to spin a little more yet linger a little longer on it's tantalizing dance to the plate.

The pitch headed true, right to the catcher's mitt. Dix could sense the batter salivate as the pitched ball approached him slowly, ever slower. Dix's powerful motion camouflaged the true speed of the pitch. How could a pitch be so slow without stopping and reversing direction back to the hand that had released it?

The white-clad batter in the burnt orange batting helmet with "TEXAS" scrawled in the same hue across his white jersey became impatient. When he could wait no longer, the batter shifted his weight and hands forward prematurely. Dix's dippsy-doodle ball took just a little bit longer to arrive at its destination and then dropped off sharply down and away from the left hander just a little bit more than the average screwball. The ball dived down over the outside corner and seemed to hang there just below the batter's knees.

Overanxious, the Longhorn hitter just could not hold back long enough. He lunged forward too soon and, at the last instant, Dix's ball bit even more sharply down and away. It fell as though it had fallen off a table. The batter tried to hold back, dropping the head of the bat down, but he failed. Too far out in front of the pitch, he swung out, over top of the baseball, sending a weak one-hopper full of top spin back at Dixie.

Dix fielded the ball with ease just in front of the mound. He threw with aplomb to Danny covering the plate for one out. The Porpoise catcher then pivoted and fired onto Charley Browne, covering first base to complete the double play. A long, exaggerated breath escaped Dixie. *YES!* He permitted himself a rare display of emotion by making a brief fist with his right hand, but he did not raise it above his waist, merely leaving it to languish down by his side, belt high.

That double play ended the inning. Dix had escaped the sinister looking jam that he had inherited on just one pitch! As he walked toward the Porpoise bench, relieved, but by no means euphoric, Dixie stepped over the third baseline, careful not to tread upon it. His teammates ran by him on their way into the dugout, patting him on the back. "Way ta go Dix, Way ta go KEED!"

The batter had surprised Dix that he had hit his dippsy-doodle ball at all. Most hitters he faced for the first time didn't. Obviously, Texas had scouted him well. But, as Dix knew and that Longhorn hitter had just found out, there's a big difference between a scouting report and the real thing.

As Dix descended the steps down into the dugout, he heard Coach Trahorn.

"Way ta go Dix! Thataway ta smoke 'em One-One! Way to go, KEED! all right men, this is it!" yelled the banty rooster of a coach. Dix's teammates crowded in about him to echo the coach's hearty congratulations. "Time to rattle them bats boys! I over managed us enough today, so I ain't putting on no automatic take here. But make sure it's something you're looking for, and where you're looking for it, before you go to cutting at it. OK?" The Coach glanced around the semi-circle of young men gathered around him, making eye contact with each player.

"All right," he said, "Let's score some runs. Have some fun, men! This is the College World Series! This is what it's all about. Let's do it, let's do it! Hands in now, team." The team gathered around, engulfing their bantam coach and placed their hands upon his upraised hand. "All right, WIN", he cried. Then in perfect unison, in a deep baritone, the team shouted: "One-Two-Three: WIN!"

Although they were down an impossible eight runs to what was arguably the best team in college baseball, the Peppermount Porpoises were confident. They had achieved the impossible against the heretofore perennial NCAA Champs, the LASU Zorros, so they felt confident they could do it now against the Longhorns. The team broke their impromptu huddle to take the offensive in their last ups.

Coach Trahorn is OK. Not many guys would admit they screwed up like that. Then turn around and give you the freedom to trust your own judgment, down so many runs with the national championship on the line.

The Porpoise batters responded to the Coach's confident, upbeat style by rallying in the top half of the ninth. They scored a run and had filled the bases with two outs when Dixie came up hitting in the three spot. The team rose as one to assume the top step of the dugout to cheer on their main man. Some wore rally hats, others chewed tobacco, others gum, but they all stood up as one in support of their big gun who had carried them on his back all year long.

Although aluminum bats had been approved for CWS use the previous year, Dixie persisted in swinging real lumber. He couldn't bring himself to use the "toy" bat. He didn't like anything about the aluminum bat, not the feel of the rubberized handle, not the sound of the ball coming off the bat, nothing. Besides, the pros used wood and that's where he intended to play someday.

The switch-hitting Dix was batting lefty now against the right-handed Texas hurler. Dix reasoned that with a seven-run lead, the Longhorns wouldn't do anything cute. Dix guessed they'd come after him with heat, probably high heat. He knew that he would, if he were pitching. Those Longhorns sure didn't want to walk him. They'd make him put the pill in play and let them eight other Longhorns grazing in the grass out there help out their stud relief pitcher.

Before he stepped into the box, Dixie looked around to find only boisterous Texas supporters remaining in the stands. The lack of support didn't faze him. Dix knew what it was like to lack support. Besides, his teammates were cheering him plenty, as he stepped in. He steadied himself to focus on the Texas pitcher.

As he figured, the first pitch was a fastball, but inside and at the knees. Ahead in the count 1 and 0, Dixie didn't think he'd see anything but the fast ball. He wanted one, up and out over the plate, where he could extend his heavily muscled arms for maximum leverage. He stepped out of the batter's box, but there was no need to look down to the third base coach for the sign. This was strictly "hit away" time. Dix stepped back in, standing almost erect, rocking his butt, getting comfortable, resting his bat on his left shoulder, holding the lumber parallel to the ground until the pitcher was ready. He zeroed in on the opposing hurler, looking for the ball, trying not to salivate.

"Come on Dix. Come on Dixie! One time, Double Ace, one time, BABEE!" His teammates exhorted him. The runners danced off their bases as the Longhorn hurler went into his full wind up and kicked. "Get hold of one, Dix. Cold cock him Kid!" With his superior vision, Dixie zeroed in on the "box" just above and to the outside of the pitcher's right shoulder to pick up the release of the ball and its spin. The Longhorn hurler fired a high, hard one nearly letter high and headed it for the center third of the plate, just what Dixie wanted. Dix waited until the pitch looked as if it were by him. Then, he quickly pushed off his left, rear foot, shifted his weight forward and, suddenly at the last split second, flicked his wrists, whipping the bat around powerfully, in an ever so slightly downward arc. He caught the rising heat sweetly right on the barrel of his Louisville Slugger.

CCCCRRRAACCKKK! Sounding like a rifle shot, that crack reverberated through the rafters of the near empty stadium. *Ummm, what a sweet feeling. Mann! I got it all.* He wasn't trying to show up the Texas pitcher, but Dix couldn't help but watch the ball's flight for a second. A low liner, at first it appeared the second baseman, might leap up and snag it, but the ball rose the farther it flew. When the pill reached the Longhorn outfielders, it seemed to kick into overdrive as it started to sail.

Dixie had surprised himself that he had gotten all of that one. Of course, he would not admit that to the sports reporters after the game. No self-respecting ballplayer would ever make such an embarrassing public admission. But this baseball sure got awfully small, awfully fast as it headed over the top row of the right center field bleachers in a big hurry. Four Fish, including Dixie, swam across the plate on his blast to narrow the margin to 13 to 10.

The Longhorn pitcher had challenged Dix with high heat. Obviously, that had been an error in judgment on his part. Unfortunately, Brooks Byron, the Porpoise left fielder, scorched the next Texas offering right at the Longhorn third baseman. The third sacker snagged the shot as he threw his mitt up in front of his face in self-defense. The force of Brooksie's smash smacked the Longhorn infielder's glove back into his forehead, knocking his cap off and onto the infield dirt, but the ball stuck in his glove. Brooks rammed his bat into the turf in disgust. The play had occurred so quickly, Brooks had not even had time to drop his stick.

Just like that! Inning over. Game over. Season over! Still, the Fish had reached the semifinals of the NCAA College World Series (CWS). The Porpoises filed

dutifully out of the dugout to congratulate their opponents from the Lone Star State in front of home plate. Dazed, Dixie made his way through the mandatory post game procession trying to realize what had just happened. The suddenness of the abrupt ending as well as the reality of how close they had come stunned him. The opposing face of each Longhorn, whose hand he shook, appeared unreal, even blank, until one of the Texas coach's seized Dixie's maimed right hand and refused to let go. That got Dixie's attention.

"Glad you didn't get another chance at the plate today, Kid." He pumped Dixie's hand warmly, before the Longhorn head coach took Dixie's paw. "Do all of us a favor Kid, take that offer from the Wonders." He winked. Dixie nodded, but he had no intention of turning pro just yet.

The small school by the sea had beaten their local rival, the big, bad, defending six time consecutive, national champion L. A. State Zorros last week in dramatic, come-from-behind fashion. That victory had clinched the regional championship and propelled the Porpoise's into collegiate baseball's crown jewel CWS. So, the Fish had mixed emotions now about their national semifinal loss.

The loss did hurt. Like Dixie, in the back of each Peppermount player's mind, had lurked the thought they might have been a team of destiny, a team that would defy all the odds to go all the way. The Texas Longhorns had just dashed those hopes to pieces. On the other hand, the Peppermount Porpoises were extremely proud of what they had accomplished. A small school from a little regarded conference showed they could compete with, as well as, beat the big boys. Making the CWS semifinals was no shabby feat.

In the post game locker room, Coach Trahorn gave a little speech in which he took the blame for the loss. He credited the boys for giving him the most satisfying season he head ever experienced. He was proud of them. With most of the team returning next year, there was a genuine upbeat feeling amongst the players. When Coach Trahorn awarded Dixie a game ball, despite the fact the Fish had been hooked by the 'Horns, bedlam broke out. Dixie's teammates pummeled him, barraging him with towels, caps, socks and athletic supporters. They all knew Dix was the main reason they had advanced as far as they had. They also knew that Dix, who had just a couple days before been selected in the twenty-seventh round of the major league draft, had promised his teammates that he would forego the draft to play for Peppermount again next year.

Then the Coach asked for a show of hands. Who wanted to remain overnight in Omaha to watch Texas face South Carolina in the championship game the next day? Or who wanted to head home immediately? To a man, the players followed Dix's lead, as they had come to do for most everything. Dix preferred to leave immediately. He had important, personal business, very personal, to take care of back in Southern California. He was a week late for a wedding—his own.

The team enjoyed the chartered plane ride home. Over the course of the lengthy flight, the sting of the loss began to wear off, as the larger accomplishment of the team's successful season began to sink into their

individual psyches. The team was in high spirits upon landing at LAX. They prevailed upon Dix to lead them over to the Porpoise Pub, just a couple blocks from campus. Dix complied, abandoning his typical, antisocial behavior. The garrulous boys ate some midnight sandwiches, washed down with beer or pop.

The guys loved to rag on Clint Battles, their Hawaiian shortstop who always tried to use his Psych. Major skills to "solve their problems." Now, in the comfort of the dark and smoke-filled bar, they were ragging on Clint for one incident in particular. It had involved a juvenile delinquent quarrelling with his pugnacious girlfriend beyond the chain-link, outfield fence, during one rain-spotted, dreary practice early last February. Danny Danielson performed as raconteur. The others listened, as the phlegmatic Dix dragged on his last Lucky.

While the team "joned" on Clint for taking a bra-beating from a five-foot high teenage girl, Clint, the self-appointed team psychologist, yet maintained that he had resolved the crisis in a "professional manner." Dix had heard the story many times and he had been an eyewitness, as well. He could appreciate how the tale (specifically, key parts of the girl's anatomy) grew with each retelling. Dix pushed off his chair away from the makeshift banquet table in the front corner of the pub. Clint stuck to his same, lame defense amid the jeers and guffaws of his teammates. With the collar of his gabardine sport coat turned up against his deeply tanned neck, Dix squelched his cigarette butt. He flicked it at Danny where the spent nail bounced off Danny's chin into his half empty beer mug.

"Dixie! You jive turkey! You're pollutin' my brew, Mann," jibed the catcher.

"Aah, won't hurt ya none Danny. Add it to your chaw. Ain't no filter on it. The fire's out. Jes' don't swallow the butt sideways, might get stuck in your craw. You be all right. Besides, that'll teach ya to tell them stories on Clint," chided Dixie. He staggered back towards the bar a bit unsteadily. Danny picked the floating butt from his mug and fired it wildly at Dixie, missing him widely. "Glad you threw better than that on that double play ball in the eighth—you jive turkey!" Dixie giggled. He grabbed Mildred, the waitress who winked, when he slipped a dollar into her cleavage to replace Danny's contaminated beer.

Cigarette smoke hung thickly in the dimly lit pub. Several local Porpoise supporters had gathered to celebrate with the team. The cumulative achievement of the team's unprecedented, successful season appeared to have overcome completely the sting of the Texas loss and was reflected in their revelry. Dixie excused himself as he accidentally jostled into a pool player about to take his shot. Then he weaved between the air hockey and foosball machines.

The players were enjoying themselves and so was Dix, even to the point of enjoying a few laughs with the guys, a luxury Dixie had seldom permitted himself. He was with his boys. He was with his troops. He was relaxed. He felt good. There were no speech problems now. Nevertheless, Dixie longed to be elsewhere. Shortly after midnight now, he felt it was high time he broke free from his compatriots to make an overdue, long distance call. He could use the phone booth at the back of the tavern, near the rest rooms and cigarette machine.

Dix dressed in grey flared corduroy slacks, a purple and sliver Porpoise baseball inner shirt, a grey gabardine, sport coat with an upturned collar. He sported his pride and joy, new pair of brown leather Dingo boots. The boots featured a decorative ring over the inside ankle that held the intersecting, three fake, ankle straps together. He looked like a typical college kid enjoying himself.

He purchased a pack of his preferred Lucky Strikes from the vending machine. He broke open the pack to extract a cigarette and light it, before he made the long awaited call to the love of his life. Smoking was a bad habit he had acquired in the Marines. He knew he should quit and he planned to, some day. However, right now, he drew deftly on the unfiltered Lucky.

Dix entered one of those old style, wooden and glass phone booths that stood against the wall between the cigarette machine and the rest rooms. Looking out across the smoke-hazed bar at his teammates, Dix lounged against the right wall of the booth. He watched his buddies through the glass, feeling no pain as he sucked on his nail and dialed long distance. The phone rang twice on the other end before a gravelly female voice answered in a tired whisper.

"Hello?"

Dix spoke softly to avoid startling the party with whom he spoke. She sounded as though she had just waked.

"Hey Baby? How ya doin'?"

"Dix? Just a minute."

Dix heard the receiver being set down on a hard surface. Then he heard the sound of scratching, as if the phone receiver were sliding somewhere. Then a couple thuds resounded in his ear. *What's going on?* He knew his fiancé would have had the kids in bed long ago. Once those two boys fell asleep, they slept like dead men. Nothing short of an explosion in their bedroom could have roused them. Dix recalled having to wake them during the night to go to the bathroom, so there were no "accidents." Dix thought, maybe the younger one was scared, so Donna maybe had let him sleep with her. That was possible. It had happened a couple times when Dix had stayed there. He and Donna had let little Dre into bed between them. He listened as Donna picked up the extension in the kitchen.

"Dix? You still there?"

"Sure Honey, I wouldn't leave ya hangin'. You know that." Dixie turned into the phone. What's wrong? Did Andre have a nightmare?"

"No, Baby. That's not it." An unusual edge to her voice alarmed him.

A loud crash far to his left prompted a louder round of shouts from the guys. Dix leaned back, looking to his left. Danny Danielson had just knocked a chair into a table and fallen flat on his back while trying his typical stunt of limboing with a bottle of beer balanced on his forehead. Per usual, he had messed up again. Dixie shook his head and unfolded the accordion wood-framed, glass door behind him, extending it out fully, so that it shut completely. *What a difference!* Now he could hear Donna fine. He returned his attention to the phone.

"Well, what's going on? You're not sleeping with another man, are you?" Dix chortled sarcastically.

"Dixie?" Donna asked hesitantly.

"Yes?" Dixie thought of Donna and reached out to caress the top right corner of the pay phone box as though it were she. With his Lucky Strike between his fingers, lazily trailing smoke upwards, Dix ran his fingertips, slowly, carefully around the upper corner and down the side edge of the phone box, as if he were running them over some of her fine curves.

"Look James, I, I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, Honey." Donna began to sniffle into the phone. "Oh God, Oh God!" she cried. Dix stopped rubbing the phone and cupped his right hand around the bottom, speaker end of the receiver, which he held to his left ear.

"What is it, Donna? What's wrong?" Now Dix was alarmed.

"Dixie, I don't know how to tell you this, but ... "

"BUT WHAT?"

"It's Big Jim, Honey. He's come home! He's alive!"

Silence! Those nine words struck Dixie with tremendous force, just as if he had been hit by a Nolan Ryan fastball. The only difference was the location of the hurt. Dix felt as though his insides had just been kicked out. He felt much the same when he had received a "Dear John" letter from Lieutenant Rose Rosario. She had written him a year ago last Christmas to tell him that she had found the man for her, an officer and a surgeon. Dix reeled.

"Dixie? Dixie, Honey? Are you OK, Baby? Talk to me. JAMES!"

Dix recovered slowly. After several seconds of silence, he slurred his response. "Ah sch-schuss hadma in-in-size kick'doouud."

"Aw Baby, don't go to slurrin' and stutterin' on me now, not now. Ya been doin' so good with that lately, Honey."

"Sssorree Baaa ... beeee!"

"Aw Baby, I'M SO SORRY, SO SORRY! I feel just terrible—for both of us."

"D-Donna. Ayfelsikkk. Byah." Dixie felt the blood drain from his face and his stomach turn over.

"No Dix! Don't hang up, please." The urgency in her voice was unmistakable. "Look, ya gotta come down here, Dix. Come down tomorrow, please. PLEASE?"

"Sssorrreeee, nooo."

"But Dix you don't understand. It's Big Jim. He wants you to come down, too. He knows you, James! He knows who you are!" Those words shot past Dixie's bow like the sound of big guns.

"Whaaaa?"

"Yeah! He served with you in the "The Outfit," on the rescue team. You saved his life. He talks like you are some kind of a god or something. He wants to speak with you."

"D-D-Duzzee knowbouduz?"

"No, I don't think so. I didn't tell him. But the kids, you know, they talk about you all the time. I told them to keep quiet. But, but I think he may be figurin' it out. Big Jim is bad off Dix. He's paralyzed from the waist down and only has his right arm. His left is gone. He's like a stranger to me Dixie. Honest to God, he is, Honey. You come down now. We'll see what happens ... James, are you there?"

"Ye-yeah. Iahtraah t' cummm, bu-bu-buh yu'nmeeerarah dunnn, finsched."

"Oh James, don't' say that!" Donna scolded him. "Don't even think it. I don't know what Big Jim wants. Hell, he don't even know himself what he wants. He just got in the other day. You come down here and see for yourself before you go making any decisions. I still have that beautiful ring you gave me, Honey. I keep thinking about the night you proposed." Her voice lilted dreamily. "The very thought of that proposal keeps me going, Baby, honest it does."

"You wh-wharrin' sa ringggg n-n-nowww?"

"Well, not right now Baby, I mean—"

"Gottagoooo. Byah, D-D-donn.'"

Dix hung up the phone. He wanted to puke. *Act like a man*. He shoved back the phone booth door rudely and exited the booth to order two shooters at the bar. Anxiously, he waited for the drinks and finished his smoke. Then he threw down the pair of shooters in quick succession. He asked for the second beer chaser in a bottle, which he took with him back to campus. Dixie fired up another Lucky, as he meandered his way unsteadily through the beautiful, old, Spanish style architecture of the pristine campus. The black, costal California night sky was clear. Unsteady on his feet, he humped his bottle of Olympia beer across campus.

Dix crossed the spacious, grassy, manicured quad, stepping around the strategically placed palm trees along the concrete sidewalk, which bordered the edge of the grassy common. The jasmine and the roses were in bloom. The sea air mingled quietly with the tropical floral scents. How could the orchids smell so lovely when his world had just turned into crap? He strolled jerkily over the plateau which terminated in a broad bluff at the southwestern end of the quad. The ocean view here was unimpeded. Dixie stopped to sit his carcass down on the crest of the plateau where it overlooked the coastal highway and the Pacific Ocean.

He popped off the bottle cap with his miniature bottle opener that hung from a silver chain beneath his shirt. The long day combined with the alcohol to produce a warm, soothing effect that permeated his entire being, even though his insides still shook from Donna's news. The young man gazed through the darkness out over the dark sea. Ocean breezes ruffled his thick, long mane. His night vision enabled him to see the white caps clearly, despite the dark of the moon. He could hear the waves, as well, roll in hundreds of feet below him, against the beachfront property of movie star homes on the other side of the Pacific Coast Highway, a couple hundred yards directly below his perch. He could also smell the salty humidity. Fog was creeping in. He slurped on his bottle of beer.

James Dean (Dixie) Todd Strickler liked this place, even better than Hawaii. Of course, he didn't like the smog in the mornings. He didn't like the traffic on the freeways, particularly at rush hour. But those complaints aside, he liked the Los Angeles area. He could play baseball year 'round if he wanted. He could hop on his bike to visit San Diego, Mexico, Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon, the mountains, the desert, San Francisco, Big Sur, all the James Dean haunts, all within hours. He wasn't trapped on some damned island. He was free.

He thought about everything that had happened to him in his two plus years of life. Two years was the sum total of his known existence, since he had come out of a coma over at Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippine Islands. Right now, he was willing to think about anything except Donna Dixon and her kids, despite the fact, they had consumed his thoughts for much of the last year.

When he had first come to, after his second brain surgery, he had awakened with a terrible headache and a lonely, cold hole in his soul. Waiting right there for him like a midwife had been that angel of a nurse Lt. Rosalita Rosario. The cute Filipino had weaned him and nursed him back to health. She had, in fact become his good friend far beyond what Navy regulations permitted for a female officer with an enlisted man. They had become lovers in a metaphysical sense and he had felt her melt that frozen vacuum inside of him. She claimed that he had reminded her of her late husband, who had been killed during the war. Rose had told him she thought she could love Dixie. Now, Dixie compared his present pain to the loss he felt when he had received that "Dear James" letter from her about a year and a half ago. The Corps had transferred him to Kaneohe and the Navy had reassigned her to Seattle. She claimed she had found the "appropriate love" for her there in the person of a naval surgeon, an officer.

Later, Lori Lei, the Honolulu undercover cop, had helped him partially fill the empty loneliness within him. The slim, mixed blood, dirty blonde, Polynesian, was so physical, so active. She pushed him into surfing, scuba diving, mountain climbing and, eventually, into bed. She was so forceful and domineering that Dix hardly had a chance to think about, let alone, feel his personal, internal frozen void. From that aspect, she had been good for him. However, she had preyed too strongly upon Dix's vulnerability. So, when a possible, partial baseball scholarship opportunity on the mainland had come along, Dix had seized it, despite the lack of a guarantee. Shortly thereafter, the hungry, cold vacuum within had returned to devour and freeze him once again from the inside out.

Lori had been angry with him for leaving, although she had tried not to show it, telling him to do "whatever floats your boat". That phrase had prompted him to compose a song, which he played on his USMC bugle mouthpiece only in the privacy of his room, when he was alone and really down. He couldn't read music so he just remembered the words and that was always sufficient to bring the melody back to him. He played it now, using the mouthpiece which he carried everywhere. He blew the intro and then feeling sorry for himself, sang:

Out on my own, got no more home.
Yes, I'm all alone.
Go where I choose, got nothin' to loose,
But she's all gone.

She said whatever floats your boat,
Go it alone. If that turns you on.
But forget about me. It's no longer we.
That was her song.

(Chorus)
Whatever floats your boat!
Whatever floats your boat!
Yeah, that's what she said.
Whatever floats your boat,
That's all she wrote!
And then she fled.

So now that I'm free, I'm single you see.
Yeah, I'm all alone.
Do what I please, blow with the breeze—

His throat constricted. He couldn't finish the song. He slid the mouthpiece back into his pants pocket and swilled his beer.

As bad as those times had been, this was worse, far worse. With Donna and her two young boys, he had been so much closer to having a family, a real family. He had been almost there. Dixie had hoped he had filled in that hole three times over with the love of Donna and her two boys. He—

"Sir? Excuse me. Please stand up." It was the campus security night watchman, in his official, grey uniform tie and shirt, replete with a shiny, black billed cap.

Dixie stood while the guard shined a flashlight in Dixie's face, causing him to shield his eyes.

"Oh, Dix! Didn't know it was you, Mann! Didn't know you guys were back already. You really played a helluva game out there today, Boy!" He pumped Dix's hand excitedly and plopped Dixie firmly on the back. "What did you do, knock in seven runs and score two?" Dix nodded. "We're all sorry you lost of course, but everybody around here is super proud of you, Mann, just tickled to death. You put Peppermount on the map today, Dix. And ya did it on the school's Fortieth Anniversary, no less. How 'bout that?" The guard slapped Dixie sharply on the back causing Dixie to step forward a couple inches against his will. The reluctant hero smiled weakly. He had forgotten about the anniversary deal.

"Look Dix, you know you ain't supposed to be out here drinking beer. But what the hell? There's nobody around now with school out and after what you

did today— well, Hell—after what you done this year! Well, just forget about it. You take care, Dix." He began to move away smiling brightly at the hero of Peppermount, then he stopped. "You're comin' back next year, ain't ya, Dix? Not goin' pro are ya?" Dix shook his head negatively.

"Good boy!" He reached back to slap Dixie sharply on the back again. "Well, take it easy Dixie and don't forget to dispose of that bottle properly, OK? Mann, you sure got hold of that last dinger today!"

With his chin on his chest and a faint smile across his lips, Dix nodded shyly again, this time in the affirmative. Then he forced a broad grin for the officer. The cop waved and left Dix alone, as he had found him. Dix wondered if all those stiff slaps qualified as police brutality. No, he reflected, the only brutality he had received had come from his lover and she had served him a low, hard one.

A lonely campus hero, Dix sat back down again, resuming his previous position with his legs dangling over the cliff. He sucked the remaining life out of his brew. The security guard had cheered him up a little. Dixie ignored the voluptuous Donna Dixon for a moment to turn to consider his options.

Maybe he could get back together with Lori Lei? He hadn't heard from her since Christmas. His thoughts turned to her now. Lori Lei, the Hawaiian police detective. They had enjoyed some strong vibes that were even semi-electric at times. She was a real adventuress who had taught him to surf, snorkel, rock climb, and a few other things as well. She had enjoyed particularly physical competition with men. Lori was kind of flat chested but she had a narrow waist, shapely hips and awesome looking legs. Her dirty blonde hair and light brown, Asian eyes were uncharacteristic of a Polynesian, even a mixed blooded one, but she was truly something special. Her clear features, sultry looks and aggressive demeanor had made her a great undercover hooker, undercover lover, as well..

Yes, he had left her when he had gotten the chance to play Division 1A baseball for free. Between the G.I. Bill and a partial scholarship, Dixie didn't pay a nickel for his schooling. But would she welcome him back now? Hell, she was probably already onto someone else by now for sure. Or, maybe, he could catch her between beaus? He wondered if he should head back to the islands and play ball over there for the summer. Then he thought he might go play down in Mexico. He heard there was some wild-ass gambling down there. Then there was Vegas. The waves rolled in beneath him and the night covered him like a blanket.

Yeah, maybe he would head up to Vegas. Coach knew a guy up there who was always looking for a good ballplayer. Dixie reasoned he could clean up in the casinos, whenever he wanted. After all he had before, hadn't he? All he had to do was be careful, not get too greedy. Lose every once in a while, especially the last play of the night. The card counting system Ed "the Rabbi" Rabinowitz had taught Dixie over in Manila had worked like a charm, most of the time anyway. Ed was on his last legs at the time. About to die alone, The Rabbi, as he had come to be called (though Ed had had no sanctioned basis for that title) had wanted to leave a kind of legacy behind, so he had taught Dixie his system. After

brain surgery had left Dix's mind a blank, he had been hungry to learn anything then and his competitive nature drew him to Ed's card-counting tactics. Dixie soaked up Ed's system like a sponge to water. He went on to win enough, along with his monthly VA check, to support himself and Donna, and purchase his new customized Honda cycle, too. Dixie had lost big money only once with Ed's system, because he had gotten a little greedy. He hadn't respected the house.

That was the time those Hawaiian gangster thugs had strong-armed him, kicking the stuffing out of him in a back alley in Honolulu's red light district. After that mishap, Lori Lei had taken him to her martial arts class and suggested he purchase and register his Smith and Wesson. She also suggested an ankle holster for the hand gun. He had heeded her advice in all respects.

The strong, cool westerly breeze off the ocean soothed him. Dixie breathed deeply of the salty sea air. He loved this spot on the cliff, overhanging Route 101. He was just close enough to feel he could touch the waves. He sure as hell could smell their salty humidity and hear them as if he had put a conch shell to his ear. Only an occasional, motorist passing below, shattered the peaceful calm.

Despite staring out at the Pacific and it's awe inspiring white caps, Dixie lost focus of his ocean view, looking inward again to take stock of his present situation. Financially, he was OK. He was not hurting for cash. Discounting that $7,500 he had thrown away on that showy engagement ring for Donna, he had almost $16,000 left, not bad for a twenty-two year old college kid on his own. Between the Defense Department, the VA, and his college "stipends" Dixie had collected over eight grand the last couple years. Then he had quintupled his assets gambling in Manila, Hawaii, Vegas and Tijuana. However, he had given almost half of his cash to Donna and her kids. Dixie reckoned he'd keep ten of the 16 Grand in his bank account and pocket the rest with him for the summer.

He was going to enjoy himself this summer. Sure, he'd play up in Vegas until August. Then he'd decide whether he should cruise on down to Mexico for a little R&R or head back to the Islands for a month before the start of the fall term. Of course, a lot of that would depend on Miss Lori Lei. Hell, maybe he would invite her to Vegas. They could cruise down to the Grand Canyon and onto Mexico, maybe Baja. Hell! He had plenty of options. He had cash, a great, new motorcycle and the summer before him. And he had his freedom. He was beholding to no one. *NO ONE!* He tossed some pebbles over the cliff, as he lazily kicked the back of his dangling heels against the brow of the bluff.

"Sure I'm beholdin' to no one. Of course! That's 'cause I got no one to be beholdin' to! I got nobody. Period! That's for sure. Or cripe's sakes! No family, no parents, no brothers, sisters, grandparents and, most of all, no wife, no fiancé, not any more. Hell, I ain't even got a girlfriend! But, I still got that damned cold hole inside o' me that I woke up with in Manila. And now, that lousy vacuum is growing deeper and wider by the minute. Sheee-ittt!" Dixie spit angrily over the cliff, only to have the spit blow back on his pant leg. "Shoot! I can't even spit right." then he laughed at himself, as he knocked the spit from his pants.

But Dixie also had that surreal vision of the sensual silhouette girl, who had haunted, tempted, and inspired him since Manila also. He had not thought much about her lately. Donna had kind of pushed that shapely silhouetted vixen into the background. Dixie drained his beer. Then he got up to heave the bottle down the hill. But he remembered the cop had told him to dispose of it properly. He looked around on the ground about him and found his spent bottle cap, which he placed in his pocket. He carried the cap and empty bottle back to his dorm room.

Dix prepared for bed, kneeling beside it to pray, as was his custom. School had been out for almost a month. His roommate, who was not a ballplayer, was long gone, so Dixie was alone: situation normal. He struck another Lucky.

Damn! I'm smoking way too much lately.

He pulled out his portable cassette tape recorder, sticking in the one tape recording he owned, containing thirty minutes of *GRT* music on each side.

Dixie turned off the lights as he lay down in bed beside his tape recorder. He pushed "Play" to hear the sax introduction to "The Stalker." Then he heard his voice, Todd Strickler's voice, singing, so Dixie sang along: "She's out on the street, prowlin' all around. That girl's a stalker, searchin' to be found ... " He had just lost the one thing he wanted most: a good woman, a built-in family. Now he listened to himself on the tape player, singing himself to sleep. *How could that be me? I could never do that now, never. Gee! I can't even sing in the locker room.*

Maybe this Big Jim could help him find his past. Dixie squeezed the life out of his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, before tossing the butt into the wastebasket. Maybe he could help Dixie find the silhouette girl! It had been a while since Dixie had "zoned out" on her. His dreams of Donna had precluded such visionary excursions. The silhouette girl had to be a figment of his imagination like the Doc said, because no girl could look so perfect. Even Donna didn't look that good! The cassette tape played on. He moved it to his headboard.

"Mann, I sure cold cocked that slammer today," he whispered. Dixie chuckled at himself, recalling when a sports reporter had asked him that very question after the game. Dixie had sandbagged the journalist with, "Well, got most of it anyways." Now Dixie admitted to himself out loud. "But I got it all, Baby! Whew! Jes' couldn't let him know that. Might give people the wrong impression like I can't hit it no farther. But jes' between us chickens, Dix, you sure did get all of that one, KEED! Yeah, Coach should have pitched me in the fourth, well ... maybe next year ... What about that silhouette girl, anyway? Don't need no sleepin' pill tonight, Doc.""

He grew silent. The jilted athlete drifted off to sleep before the cassette ran out, clicking off on its own. Dix didn't hear it. He was searching in the mist, by the silver waters, on the riverbank for that shapely girl, framed against the full moon. Maybe her warm love would melt the frozen vacuum in his soul.

~ Chapter 13: Lost and Found in La Jolla ~

Morning fog felt its way over the scenic seaside campus as it seemed to have done each morning since Dixie had arrived. Clad in his new pair of Dingo's, navy blue cords, a white T-shirt and his beat up brown leather biking jacket, Dixie sat on the campus chapel's front, white marble step, ready to ride. He gallantly ignored his desire for a smoke. Those Lucky's had sunk their hooks into him. He had been smoking far too many of them lately. The excuse he used now for not lighting up was the fact there were no containers around to hold his butts. He couldn't just mash them on the pristine, white chapel steps. That was what he told himself, but he knew the real reason was he did not want the Coach to catch him smoking when he exited from the nine a. m. service with his family.

Dixie had attended Lutheran services in the chapel behind him, maybe half a dozen times over the course of the spring semester. He had not really understood what was going on during the services, but he had listened intently. The amnesiac wanted to know who he was and hoped God would help him. Dixie had found the music weak at best, but the people were very kind, very friendly. He had not made the services himself this morning, because he would have been late and he had nothing to wear. He had packed all his churchgoing clothes into his garment bag for his forthcoming journey.

Dixie had come to believe in God during an Alcoholic's Anonymous (AA) meeting he had attended with a Marine buddy back in Honolulu. Dixie had no problem with alcohol himself, but his fellow Marine did. At the AA meeting, Dixie had listened soberly to their twelve-step process to recovery, which included belief and trust in a higher power, something outside of and superior to oneself. The message had forced Dixie to stop and think. Dixie had believed. He had trusted. He just did not know Who God is or how to find out. He had studied the theory of evolution in Biology, but he could not buy into it.

The theory sounded okay on paper, but Dixie had seen the vastness of the oceans, the heavens and such a variety of plant, fish and animal life in his journeys. He just couldn't buy that every living thing on earth today had all come about millions of years ago when lightening struck some gas molecules in a puddle somewhere out in the universe. Dixie did not consider himself very bright, but he was not stupid enough to fall for that.

Something or Someone with some intelligence just had to be the Creator. Because all of creation that he had seen seemed to fit together too well, more by design than by chance. Dixie had no problem with a Higher Being, a God, creating everything. However, the thing that had stumped him about the existence of God was, where did the Creator come from? Who or What had created Him? That was a real stumper. The concept of an eternal being eluded

him. He reasoned that if Someone could create all that he surveyed, then, that Someone was smart enough to, to what? Create Himself? Now that was stupid, too. It made no sense. He was stymied.

Nevertheless, he opted to believe in the Creator theory, partly because even if he were wrong, he reasoned it would make no difference. However, if he went along with the random chance theory of evolution and were wrong, and there was a God, a Dispenser of eternal justice, Dixie could wind up, screwed for eternity. Mostly though, Dixie had an innate sense that God existed and God was watching him. Besides, there was the Voice he occasionally felt, not heard but actually felt, well up from within his chest. That was some kind of strange. It was downright weird, not to mention more than a little disconcerting as well.

Dixie contemplated these thoughts as he sat in the fog on the marble, chapel steps until the services concluded. Peppermount's second team All-American and CWS hero rose to allow the congregation members an exit pathway while he waited for the Coach. When the Coach emerged from the chapel with his family, Dixie reminded him that he had agreed to let Dix store some of his belongings in the Coach's office over the summer. The Coach remembered and advised his family to go onto the car without him. He would join them shortly. Dix greeted the Coach's wife and kids, who congratulated him on an outstanding playoff run.

Coach Trahorn and Dixie walked across the dew-covered, fog-shrouded quad over to the athletic field house. Dix had left three boxes of his stuff sitting outside the main door to the building. Tiny Coach Trahorn, dressed in a grey cotton suit and matching tie, toted one box of books, while Dixie humped the other two boxes: one of books, one of bedding, towels, etc.

They stored the boxes in the coach's office closet. Coach Trahorn took this opportunity to verify that Dixie was going to play for Clyde Wryde again down in La Jolla. Dixie said he did not know for sure. He was also considering heading to Las Vegas, instead. He asked the Coach to recommend some coaches up there. The Coach checked the rolodex on his old metal desk and wrote down a couple names, phone numbers and Vegas addresses for his best ballplayer. He reminded Dixie it got pretty hot up in Vegas, even if they did play at night. Dix promised he would play ball somewhere that summer. Coach Trahorn joked that after the display Dix had made the day before on national TV, Dix should not have any trouble making a team, even though most summer leagues had started already.

The dark, trim, peppery coach became serious, asking Dix about any marriage plans in his star ballplayer's future, specifically, those concerning the blonde bombshell in La Jolla. He pointed out that the University tolerated marriages better among seniors, rather than underclassmen. Therefore, Dix might want to consider holding off for another year, at least. Dix muttered that would not be a problem. He turned in his dorm room key as well as his combination lock for the locker room to Coach Trahorn. Then, the coach verified that Dix was planning to come back the following year. Dix said he was, "Absolutely." Coach Trahorn

reminded Dixie how close they had come this year by holding his right thumb and forefinger about a half inch apart.

"We were almost there, Dix. But with you and most of the other guys back next year, believe we can go all the way."

"Ya know somethin', Coach?"

"What's that Dix?"

Dixie deadpanned, "I believe ya."

Dixie grinned broadly, as the coach slapped him on the shoulder and chuckled. They parted, wishing each other a great summer. Dixie found his isolated, loaded down Honda in the nearby empty student parking lot. He double-checked his bike to insure it was ready for the trip. He had all the belongings he needed, packed, ready to go, as was his modified, suped up black Honda CB750K5.

Dixie had bought the bike early, last February, over the semester break, with some of his gambling winnings over New Year's. The previous fall, Donna had let him use Big Jim's'69 Honda 750/4, which he had enjoyed, but Dix had wanted a bike of his own. He bought the'75 Honda CB 750K for almost four grand. Then he had paid nearly that amount again to have the bike customized. The cycle was a touring bike with some "pop." Well, he had most of the "pop" added. He basically took the touring version of the 750 and had it made into a sport racing model, maintaining the best of its touring features. Dixie had actually exceeded 150 mph out in the desert returning from one of several Las Vegas gambling runs. That stunt had inspired him to write down one of the many song melodies that continually popped into his head, but which he almost invariably ignored. That time he had embraced the tune, calling it "Hair On Fire."

Dixie's bike was black with sliver handlebars and fenders and came with a one-down, four-up gear shift. He had bought the 750 from the dealer with a five-gallon gas tank and a 1.1-gallon reserve tank that he could access at the flip of a switch. He also had the bike modified to his tastes, complete with safety bars and crash bar footrests for comfort on long rides. He had front and rear disc brakes and a nine-inch wide luggage rack installed that extended well out over the back wheel and tail light.

Dix had found a shop down in San Pedro which made the modifications he had wanted. They had suped up the engine to seventy horses (more than the 'F' racing model) funneling four overhead carburetors into a single exhaust. They had also replaced the handlebars with a longer, extended pair, near chopper-like (but not so long that he couldn't lean forward in racing mode without a modicum of comfort). The San Pedro biker's shop had installed a custom made steel frame, leather backed, thirty six-inch high sissy bar over the back wheel and front part of the back luggage rack, of which he was particularly proud. Dixie also added a set of soft, brown leather saddlebags, though a lot of so called 'true' bikers looked down on the bags. Dixie felt the saddlebags made him a real, modern cowboy. But, what he did not add, and by journey's end, wished that he had

added, was a windshield. He would never eat so many bugs in his life, as he would on his upcoming travels. "A high protein diet" is what came to call it.

Dix had loaded his bike down pretty well. Except for the three boxes stored in the Coach's closet, all his worldly possessions would ride with him on his bike. He carried most of his cloth belongings in a standard USMC issue sea bag. However, included in that bag also were: three (wooden) baseball bats, an expandable pull up bar and a thirty-inch 5/4" rebar. (He had wrapped the rebar in a rag to prevent the rust from staining his clothes and by sticking the butt end into a piece of Styrofoam. That would prevent the ragged steel end from tearing a hole into surrounding materials). He sat the bag with the handle side containing the bats etc. up against the sissy bar. Dix used the end of the rebar and bat handle protruding from the top of the bag as anchors to help tie the bag to the backstop. Dixie hung an opaque, plastic garment bag from the top of the sissy bar, wedging it between the bar and the duffle bag.

The heavy garment bag contained two suits and his three Marine uniforms, the greens, tans and the dress blues. The uniforms meant something special to him. He did not trust leaving them at school, not even in the Coach's office.

Up front, locked in the faring, Dix stored important papers related to the bike: his registration, owner's manual, service records, including the itemized bill of all the customizations he had ordered. He also kept a cheap pair of sunglasses and a small flashlight for emergencies in the space that was the motorcycle equivalent of an automobile glove compartment.

When he traveled any long distance over desolate areas, as he was about to do now, Dixie tied a round two-gallon gas can atop the nine-inch wide luggage rack, and to the backside of the sissy bar. The can's funnel clamped into place on top of the can. Dixie had slid the handles to an athletic bag down over the top of the sissy bar, so that it rested sideways on top of the gas can. The bag contained the rest of his baseball equipment, including: a couple pairs of spikes, sanitary hose, inner hose baseball pants and inner shirts, jock straps, cups, two batting helmets, and a pair of Converse All Stars. There was also a pair of Nike tennis shoes given to him by the school athletic department, a pair of low top Adidas running shoes, as well as a few baseballs.

Dixie also toted a standard issue USMC sleeping bag, blanket and a two-gallon canteen of water, all of which he tied around and across the chopper style handlebars. The canteen rested partly on top of the sleeping bag, partly on top of the gas tank. When he leaned forward and down, that arrangement also served as a sort of homemade windshield, which proved to be helpful, but not helpful enough to prevent the high protein diet he would experience. After all, he had to be able to see the road. He amazed even himself that he could get all this junk on his bike without any of it falling off. But then he recalled that he had ridden with both Donna and her two kids seated behind him on their outings to the beach.

By 1975, Dixie knew almost all states had adopted some form of motorcycle helmet laws. The Federal Department of Transportation had tied the provision of

federal funding for state safety programs and highway construction to the mandatory wearing of motorcycle helmets. Dixie hated motorcycle helmets. He did whatever he could to avoid them. He did carry three Peppermount baseball batting helmets, two in his athletic bag and one, from which he had removed the bill, he would wear, if he were forced to do so. Otherwise, he stored that helmet in the soft, brown leather saddlebags he carried over the back of the seat.

Because the state of California was big on riders wearing helmets, he usually wore a batting helmet backwards around town in his in-state travels. Out on the highway, he wore the helmet that was a eighth size too small for him from which he had shaved off the bill. That was to make sure the helmet wouldn't fly off at extended, high speeds, though it could cause him headaches. Dixie kept a smaller batting helmet for any female companions he might carry. However, when he rode out of state, Dix did not wear a helmet much. If he were caught without a helmet, Dix would plead ignorance of local law and then pull out his batting helmet. Thus far, Dix had received only one ticket, which he had paid promptly.

Dixie carried other forms of protection as well. He feared and detested side arms, as one might who lived daily with the amnesic effects and nasty wounds from receiving a bullet in the back of the head. Nevertheless, he holstered a short barreled .38 caliber Smith and Wesson, five-shot revolver. He stored the holster inside his left boot, above his left inside ankle, under his flared corduroy pant leg. He typically filled four of the chambers, leaving the one next to the hammer empty. Moreover, sheathed inside his right boot, he strapped a six-inch stiletto just above his right ankle.

Dixie was not looking for trouble. To the contrary, he was a quiet, unassuming young man. However, he would not get the stuffing kicked out of him again, as had occurred in a deserted alley behind an illegal Honolulu gambling house. Also, Dixie was carrying six thousand dollars on his person, which had to last him through the summer. He intended to protect both himself and his property.

A little before noon on this second Sunday in June, Dixie placed his batting helmet backwards on his head, over his long, wavy, black mane and set some cheap sunglasses on his nose. A joy that springs only from total freedom partly filled his heart. Partly, because his newly lost love filled the rest. He climbed on his modified chopper and jumped onto the Pacific Coast Highway (Route 1) before he assumed the interstate at the start of I-10 to head east. Dixie had decided to go to Vegas. He had decided to have nothing to do with Donna Dixon. However, as he passed the turnoff for USC, over the Harbor Freeway, Dix caught a fleeting vision of the silhouette girl. Now, he reasoned, if Donna's husband could help lead him to that vision of loveliness ... The sign for the Santa Ana Freeway appeared, when, without being conscious of what he was doing, Dix took that exit southeast. If this Big Jim could shed some light on who Dix really was, then Dixie reasoned maybe he could find that girl and maybe himself, too.

As he followed I-5 south, the smog burned off. With his long hair, flying in the breeze, trailing behind him, Dix felt as though he owned the road. That's what

came of gliding a suped up CB750 at high speeds down the coastal highway. When he approached Capistrano Beach, where the deep, dark blue of the Pacific Ocean came into view, Camp Pendleton loomed ahead of him.

Semper Fi! O*nce a Marine, always a Marine*!

Even though Dixie could remember nothing about his service experience, except the last few months when the Corps had taught him to bugle, Dix felt like a Marine. He wore that red, gold, and black tattoo, at the apex of his left arm. *Semper Fidelis* was scripted on the two streamers above the red and gold globe and blue anchor, which comprise the emblem of the United States Marine Corps. He knew how to break down his rifle, how to clean it, how to fire it. How to fire it? *Hell, I was rated "Expert."* He knew the close order drill, how to march precisely. He could blow "Taps" or "Reveille" or any other damned bugle call in the manual. He knew field hygiene, how to handle a pugil stick, pack his equipment, fix a bayonet and perform the manual of arms. He knew a rifle from a gun. He knew what was for pleasure and what was for fun. He knew so much. Yet, he could not recall boot camp, ITR, combat or how he came to be injured. The Corps had bequeathed an unwanted Christmas present upon him back in '73. They had kicked him out into the world alone on a "medical." Yet, as a former Lance Corporal, Dix still felt a kinship with the Corps. He didn't know why.

Dixie had passed by Pendleton nearly a dozen times a month during the past fall semester, usually on Big Jim's Honda. He had traveled back and forth to visit Donna and the kids, though not so much recently, because his baseball schedule had prevented it. Each time he passed the Camp, he wondered if he should stop to visit, to ask if anyone knew him. Always, he had thought better of it, figuring maybe the MP's would locate his medical file and call the white coats down on him. Dix had always thought that not stopping was probably a wise decision on his part, so he kept right on past the famous camp now, as he always did.

He rode along next to the deep blue Pacific, free as a bird. The bike rumbled smoothly, powerfully beneath him. He had not yet come close to letting all those horses run. Typically, the hairs on his arm and back of his neck stood up when he rode fast out on the highway. He exited I-5, just south of La Jolla at Highway 52 following it less than half a mile before he turned left into Donna's development on Regents Road. Dixie took this first left onto Pennant Way. As a ballplayer, Dixie had always liked that street name. Next he followed the first right into San Hacienta Court and Donna Dixon's house. He kick shifted into neutral, cutting the engine to appease the neighbors, gliding noiselessly up to Donna's home.

Technically, Donna's development was in something called East Clairrette. Yet, when people asked him where his girlfriend lived, he had always said, if he replied at all, that she lived in La Jolla. La Jolla was just the other side, coast side, of I-5 and the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe railroad tracks. Everyone knew La Jolla, while most had never seemed to have heard of East Clairrette.

When he stopped in front of the small, one-story, two-bedroom white stucco house, Dixie planned to stay only long enough to see if Donna's husband could

help Dix find out who he was. Before he walked up to the front door, the young man removed his batting helmet and cheap sunglasses. Suddenly, conscious of his appearance, he clamped on his false ear and then, quickly, from his pocket, he snapped on his fake, gold caps over his two upper dentures. *What a mess I am.* Actually, he was shocked that Donna or any woman for that matter could love him and his stuttering, amnesic, carved up carcass.

He looked over the tiny, two-bedroom, white, stucco bungalow with the red tiled roof that he had come to think of as home. Well, he sure could not think like that anymore. From the street he spotted the cracked window in the boy's bedroom. He had promised Donna he'd replace it, but she had said she would take care of it. He guessed she had forgotten. Dixie reminded himself that Donna had a lot on her mind, raising her kids and running her own business, as well as her household and all by herself, too.

He spotted Andre's big wheel in the driveway and pulled it into the yard, out of the way of Donna's Chevelle station wagon. Dixie rang the door bell. He was nervous as hell. How many times had he rung this bell in the past with high expectations, expectations for acceptance, love, joy, even pleasure? And had them all, everyone, fulfilled beyond his dreams? But now, he seriously considered making an about face, when the door opened.

Little Andre let him in. Both boys jumped all over Dixie, wrestling and hugging him at the same time, as he entered, grinning from ear to ear.

"Hey Dixie, we saw you on TV yesterday! You were great!! You really creamed that ball," enthused the nine-year old Little Jim.

"Yeah, Dixie, ya really whammed it!" added kid brother Dre. The six-year old smacked his hands together for emphasis, so hard that his head shook. Dixie beamed at the two grinning youths and knelt down to look them in their eyes. "Well, I got a little lucky, ya know? He just happened to throw it where I was lookin'." Andre laughed and took advantage of Dixie's stooped stance to climb up onto his broad shoulders. Dixie laughed.

"Ya 'cold-cocked it,' Dix. Isn't that what you always say?" asked Donna, smiling broadly as she strode toward him between the hutch and the back of the sofa. She greeted him with a warm, long, close hug. Dixie stood up to receive her but he could not return her enthusiasm. His arms hung stiff at his sides. His grin dissolved into a frown as she hugged him. With Andre riding upon his broad shoulders, Dixie stood stiffly with his hands in his pockets, looking past her, cold to her touch. She dressed in dungarees and a plain, front-buttoned, pink cotton blouse. She wore her hair in thin, curving front bangs and a pony-tail. As always, she looked remarkably well. His fiancée whispered negatively upon his coldness toward her, while Big Jim's wheel chair hummed his way in from the bedroom hallway on the other side of the cramped living room.

In Big Jim, Dixie saw half a huge black man in a motorized wheel chair with a left arm that was amputated just below the shoulder. He looked to be in his early thirties with a broad nose, a receding hairline encroaching on his tall "afro" and a

full thick, black beard. Big Jim's greeting made those of his family seem small by comparison.

Initially, he simply stared at Dixie, mouth agape, studying the young man from head to foot with a concentrated stare. All eyes waited to see what the paraplegic would do next.

"Son'bitch! You old son'bitch," he whispered under his breath in disbelief, shaking his head in awe. Then, the excited, disabled vet appeared to jump in his chair and almost screamed, "YOU OL' SON'BITCH! DAMN IT! COME HERE, NICKY BOY!"

Dixie looked at the paraplegic uncertainly. Donna led Dix by his left hand over to her husband with Andre hanging onto Dix's shoulders and Little Jim holding onto Dix's bad right hand. Little Jim let go and Big Jim took hold of Dix's right hand with the only good hand he had. Dix felt Jim's powerful grip, as he pumped and squeezed his old comrade's mangled paw. Big Jim pulled Nick (and by default Andre) down to him, where Jim could hug his old buddy and former comrade-in-arms, as he whispered into Dixie's ear.

"God bless you, Mann. I thought you was dead, I thought ... " His whisper trailed off, as tears moistened his eyes. "It's OK, Mann", he sniffled. "We did it, Nick, we survived, Baby! We SURVIVED! We did it!" Big Jim raised his hand in a fist as though he were pulling on something. "I 'hung on' just like you said, Mann. Yeah, it's OK, now. It's OK." Then he took hold of Dixie's still outstretched hand. Big Jim seemed to be trying to convince himself more than Dixie. He held onto Dix tightly with his lone hand.

Then Big Jim spoke softly into Dixie's ear:

"'Hang on Mann! You hang on in there, Big Jim. That bombshell of a wife and your kids are waitin' for ya. You hang on in there, Big Jim. Ya heah me, boy? You got some livin' to do. YOU HANG ON!'" Big Jim withdrew his head from Dix's ear to look him in the eye. He spoke in a normal tone, but tears brimmed in his eyes. "Remember that, Nicky? Them was the last words you ever spoke to me, before that mortar hit. And I been hearing 'em reverberate in my brain ever since, even in the coma. Remember when you told me that? 'Hang on, Mann?'"

Dixie backed away so he could look the man in the his moistened eyes. Solemnly, he let little Andre slide down off his right shoulder to the blue shag carpeted floor. Both kids backed off instinctively, allowing the grown men a minute between themselves. Dixie looked right through Big Jim. He felt nothing. There was no recognition whatsoever. Dixie shook his head negatively, simply whispering "No." Big Jim peered hard into Dixie's eyes, looking for even the smallest sign of recognition, but Dix gave none. Dixie's face was blank. Obviously, they were both disappointed. Big Jim sniffled.

"Well, it'll come back to ya, Mann. Just give it some time. Hell! It did for me, ya know. I lost my memory for a while, too." He let go of Dixie's hand. Dixie nodded, but, based on his experience, he did not share the big man's optimism. Then Big Jim called to his wife, "Get us a couple beers will ya, Donna?" He

dismissed her like he would a strange waitress. The healthy blonde exited to the kitchen to play waitress. Big Jim asked, "And what else Nick? You hungry? Had lunch?" Again, Dixie shook his head negatively. He wanted to ask why Big Jim called him Nick, but he did not get much of an opportunity to talk. Big Jim yelled into the kitchen, "Hey Donna, fix Nicky something to eat." Then to Dixie, he asked, "What would you like? Think we got some hamburger meat left over from last night. What would—"

"Li-ver-wurst is O-K." Dixie was nervous. He spoke slowly with concentrated effort. He did not want his sorry speech to betray him in front of Big Jim.

"Sure, liverwurst. Hey Donna! Hey!" Mrs. Dixon returned with the requested two bottles of Olympia, which she handed out to her husband and his guest. "Hey Donn, Nicky wants a liverwurst sandwich. You think you could—"

"Sure, I'll get you one Dix, er, Nick."

Big Jim asked, "What do you want on it Nicky Boy?"

In a motherly tone, Donna answered, "I know how he likes it, Jim. I'll take care of it." She left for the kitchen. Big Jim did a double take and furrowed his brow. Dixie heard the refrigerator door open and shut. He sipped on his brew calmly.

"Oh yeah, that's right. She told me how ya'd come down and visit. Take the kids to the zoo and stuff. Damn nice of ya, Nick! Damn nice thing to do, when you didn't even remember me. Well, you was always kind hearted, Nicky.

"'One Gook, one bullet!' Remember that? Hey! You didn't want 'em to suffer. And they didn't! Ha! Ha! You'd nail 'em boy. "Poof! Poof! With that silencer?" The big man's smile waned, as he watched Nick sip on his beer politely without comment, without acknowledgement. The boys sat on the couch against the wall, oddly quiet. "Yeah Mann, well. She told me how she run into ya over at Kaneohe, 'bout how ya was shot in the head and all. You running into her like that. That was a helluva coincidence, a helluva of coincidence!"

"OK, come and get it," called the woman of the house from the tiny dining room where she had set a place for Dixie to eat his liverwurst sandwich.

Big Jim permitted Dixie to push his motorized wheel chair into the dining room with the boys tagging along behind. The place looked exactly as Dixie had remembered it. There was the light brown, oval dinette set and the kitchen counter that separated the kitchen from the dinette area, leaving just enough room between the end of the counter and the refrigerator to swing open the double doors of that appliance. Dixie moved around the counter behind Donna to wash his hands in the kitchen sink, as though he had done it many times before, which he had. He felt Big Jim watching him curiously as Dixie comfortably made his way around the Dixon kitchen. Dixie tried not to notice Donna's beaming face as she followed his every move, but Big Jim noticed.

"Gee, Donna. Don't remember you grinning like that when I come home the other day," remarked Big Jim matter of factly.

"Well, I, I was in shock that's all, Jim," replied Donna finally taking her eyes off their guest to look at her husband.

"I see, but having Nicky in your kitchen don't shock ya none, hunh?" Donna looked away without replying. Likewise, Dixie remained silent as he sat down at the dining room table to eat his sandwich. Then Donna asked if Dixie needed anything else, but he did not.

In silence, Big Jim watched Nick eat and drink. The kids were asking Dixie to play whiffle ball with them when he finished. He was about to agree when Big Jim nixed the idea, saying Nick and him had business to take care of after lunch. Big Jim's tone sounded ominous. Big Jim noticed Dixie's missing finger joints as he ate his sandwich with both hands, although he had said nothing about it when the two had shaken hands.

"Know how you lost them fingers, Nick?" With a mouthful of liverwurst, Dixie shook his head negatively. "Ambush!" Jim became excited and his coal black eyes lit up.

"We was reconning this village, see? Them gooks were supposed to have intelligence regarding the location of some American POW's. The village was supposed to be friendly—SUPPOSED TO BE—what a crock o' crap! You was on point, like you always was, unless you wasn't covering our asses, when these "friendlies" opened up with R. P. G's. You didn't have a chance, Mann. You threw your hand up in front of your face and turned your head instinctively. That's how you got them scars on your neck face, too, and lost an ear ... Although, I'll be damned! Looks like that ear grew back." Jim studied Dix's ear with interest.

Dix swallowed his mouthful of sandwich. Then he set the sandwich down on the plate, to pull his ear off. As he chewed and swallowed, he handed the fake ear to Big Jim, who marveled at how real the fake appeared and felt. The kids marveled, too, as they always did. They wanted to see and handle it again. Big Jim spoke to his wife, "Donna, did you see this? Really something isn't it?"

"Ummm, yes, it is." She smiled weakly. Donna's blasé response seemed to irritate her husband. "Like another beer, Dixie?," she asked pleasantly.

"Ple-e-ease."

"I think I'd like one too, Donna," said Big Jim a bit testily. He returned Dixie's ear, which Dixie reattached as before. When Mrs. Dixon served the beers, she stumbled a bit because she couldn't take her eyes off her fiancé. Big Jim made an announcement.

"Donna, think you oughtta take the kids out to the zoo or somethin'. Nick and I got some serious things to discuss." The kids yelled for joy. There was only one San Diego Zoo. They scampered into the bathroom to take care of business before they left. Big Jim asked, "Have we got enough beer?"

Donna was miffed at her dismissal and her actions reflected her displeasure. She rolled her hands into fists and dug them into the sides of her broad hips. Donna bit her lip, before she admitted there was a case of Olympia in the garage.

"Well great, bring it in and put it in the refrigerator," ordered her husband impenitently. Donna was about to yell at him, when Dixie rose abruptly, still

swallowing his sandwich. He rested his hands on Donna's right shoulder to calm her, as he pivoted toward her and away from her husband.

"I'll g-g-get it." He made eye contact with her and the red in Donna's face faded like mercury dropping in a newly cold thermometer during a sudden storm. Dixie took a swig of beer and went out the side door and down the steps into the garage, but he was unable to find the beer. Donna came out with the car keys. She had left the Olympia in the back of the Chevelle station wagon. When she opened the trunk for Dixie, the lid flipped up blocking their view of the dining room door. Donna took advantage of the brief opportunity to push him toward the driver's side of the tailgate and wrap her arms around her fiancé. She kissed him passionately. The suddenness of her embrace caught Dixie off guard. He responded involuntarily, before he gripped her forearms firmly, removing them from his neck. He whispered harshly.

"'s o-o-o-v-a-h tw-tweenus, D-D-Donn.'S O-O 'sdun!"

"No, Dixie don't say that." She whispered softly but quickly. Her eyes darted furtively to the kitchen door and back. "Don't even think it. We can work something out. I know we can." Her pleading countenance did not dissuade him.

Dixie pulled her arms down in front of him, squeezing her forearms in his strong, athletic hands until he hurt her. As she grimaced, Dixie glared into her eyes to repeat his earlier conclusion. "O-O-O-DUN!"

Big Jim had rolled himself to the dining room-garage door. "You all need a one-armed man to help ya with that beer?"

Dixie picked up the case and shut the wagon door. "I g-g-got it." He pushed past Mrs. Dixon, as he remarked, "Hope you en-en ... uh, lahk sa z-z-zoo."

* * *

Mrs. Dixon and her two boys departed for the afternoon, leaving the two men to talk and drink, and drink and talk. That day, Dixie learned much about his tour in Nam, before Big Jim passed out in his wheelchair in a drunken stupor. Shortly later, Donna returned with a Colonel Sanders Kentucky fried chicken dinner. Dixie knew it was the boys' favorite food. Donna liked it, too. Partly because the traditional, ready-made meal also made things easy for her on Sundays.

Dixie had put Big Jim to bed. Donna asked if Dixie had emptied the big man's urine bag first. When he said he had not, because he did not know that he should have, Donna cursed him. She disappeared into the master bedroom to check the bag's contents. As she feared, with all the beer her husband had consumed, the bag was full, even ready to overflow.

She came back into the dining room to ask Dixie's help, as the boys chowed down without waiting for their mother. It was after seven and they were hungry. With great difficulty, the half-drunken Dixie and the over taxed Donna worked together to place the snoring Big Jim into his chair and wheel him into the bathroom, where Donna emptied the bag into the toilet. The pungent odor of the big man's beer-laced urine nearly overpowered them. She emptied the bag, re-inserted his catheter, which had fallen out, washed her hands and then helped her

semi-drunken lover carry her even drunker, paralyzed husband back to bed. The whole process took some little time and would have been comic, were it not so pathetic. Big Jim still had both his legs and he was a big load. By the time the pair of ex-lovers had cleaned up and returned to the kitchen, the kids had finished eating and were watching Walt Disney on the tube.

Donna threw up her hands at the mess the boys had left on the dining room table. She was about to lay into them, when Dixie intervened, as he had earlier. He knew Donna's temper. He had been on the receiving end of it more than he cared to remember. He offered to clean up the mess. Donna railed at him, claiming he could hardly stand up himself, but he managed to clean off the table nonetheless. Evidently, it amused her to watch him do so with his groggy, overly exaggerated, but patient fastidiousness. When he had finished, she set the table for the two of them. She liked Colonel Sanders, too. She remarked that his slogan about his chicken being "finger lickin' good" was true, in her case anyway. She and Dixie ate together in silence.

Walt Disney concluded. The boys, Andre and Little Jim, asked for Dixie to put them to bed. He told them to get ready, so they did. They always minded Dixie well. Getting a meal in Dixie helped sober him up a little. He took the kids into their bedroom to pray. They knelt beside the lower bunk, one boy on either side of him. The boys' mother stood in the doorway, surreptitiously. She had watched this scene before, enjoying it many times. It warmed her insides to see the virile, handsome, war hero, get down on both knees to pray with her fatherless, formerly fatherless, children. This was just one of the many little things that had so endeared Dixie to her, that caused her to love him in a way, she had never imagined possible. He had given her hope.

The three boys prayed together.

"N-Now I lay me d-down to sleep ... I pr-pray the Lord m-my soul to k-keep ... If I should d-die before I wake, I pr-pray the Lord ... m-my soul to t-take. God b-bless Andre and Little Jim and M-Mommy and Da-Daddy! A ... men."

It was a simple prayer that Dixie had taught the boys. He had no idea where he had learned it, but it had seemed appropriate.

"And God bless Dixie!" piped up Andre whose broad nose, dark skin and facial structure imitated his father perfectly. The six-year old smiled broadly revealing a gap where his upper front two teeth should have been. Dixie removed his gold covered upper dental plate to mimic the boy's smile, causing both boys and their mother to giggle.

Little Jim asked, "Dixie, are you gonna stay with us, like you said you was and marry Momma, like you said?" Dixie looked to Donna, wondering if the boy's mother had put him up to posing that question. Dixie understood that the kids probably remembered him better than they did their own father. Donna read Dixie's mind and met his questioning gaze, by shrugging her shoulders and shaking her head. Dixie sighed, taking a boy in each of his arms. He reinserted his dental plate with the fake gold caps.

"You know Little J-Jim, I su-su-sure would like to d-do j-j-just that. Be-Believe me, I would. Be-Because I love your ma-mother and I la-love you and Andre." Dixie slowed his speech to keep from stuttering. The kids were used to his difficulties, saying nothing about them and waiting patiently for him to finish. "I don't ... know if there ... is anything else that ... could ... ma-make m-me happier than to ... . st-stay with you all ... But ... I, I can't do it. N-Not n-now. N-Not with your D-D-Dad coming home. See, you won't ne-ne-ne-eed me, ne-neither will your mo-mo-mother ... . You have Big Jim n-now. He is your true father ... No man ... c-can take better ... c-care of you all than, than he ca-can."

"But we don't know him like we know you, Dix. And he can't play ball with us like you do," countered Little Jim.

"You will ... . you will ... g-get to know him, Little J-Jim. You're g-going to g-get to know him very well. And you know him n-now ... even though you do-don't realize it. You know ... why?" The boy shook his head. "Be-Because he is inside of you, b-both of you. He helped your ma-ma-mommy to make you. If it weren't fo-for ... Big Jim, neither of you ... . would b-be alive. You'll see. Now, hop-p-p in b-bed." Little Jim climbed into the lower bunk.

Dixie picked up Andre and threw him playfully onto the top bunk. He tucked the boy in as he kissed the youngster on the forehead. Andre threw his arms around Dixie's neck, hugging him tightly. Dixie patted him on the head and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. Then, he treated Andre's older brother in the lower bunk in like manner.

Andre asked, "Dix? Where will you go?"

"Dunno for sure ... Guess I'll head ... . up to Vegas to play b-ball. Think some of them ca-casinos sponsor teams. I'll ca-catch on. And try to f-find my ... f-folks, maybe f-find out who my own da-da-dad ... mom are."

Little Jim replied, "He still can't play ball with us like you can."

"Well, he can't run ... b-but he gets around real well ... in that ch-chair. And he's got a pow-pow-powerful g-grip ... . Nearly made m-me cry today, when we ... sh-shook hands."

"Did he really Dixie?" asked Andre, wide eyed.

"You b-bet he did. You b-boys had be-better jump ... when he says to j-jump. If, if he gets ... hold of you with that pow-powerful right hand ... Wheweee!" Dixie shook his head in an exaggerated fashion. "He can put a hurt, hurtin' on ya in a hu-hurry! N-Now that's enough ta-talkin'! Time ... to get you ... some rest ... . You all st-still have to, to get up for sc-school in the ... m-mornin.'"

Little Jim asked, "Will you take us to school tomorrow Dix, on your cycle?"

"May-be, if y'all g-go right to, to s-sleep ... N-Now, that's it. G-g—goo' n-night, fellas!" Donna called out softly, "G'night boys" and left the room.

Dixie backed out, switching off the overhead light, and closing the door without pulling it all the way shut. He walked into the kitchen to help himself to another beer out of the refrigerator. Then he slid open the glass doors to sit out on the patio. Donna finished cleaning up from dinner, snatched a beer for herself

and followed her fiancé outside. She sat down in the chaise lounge facing her lover. Dixie was sitting on a patio chair, which doubled as a waiting chair for Donna's clients during the day. He was enjoying the sweet summer night air and the soft scent of the lemon tree. The tree grew at the back of the Dixon's small lot, next to their cinderblock back wall that separated their yard from an alley. Beyond the alley was a park filled with trees and beyond that the railroad tracks.

Neither spoke for a while. In the twilight, Dixie observed the heavens trying to discern some of the constellations he had learned about in astronomy class. From experience, Dixie knew this was Donna's favorite time of day, just after she had put the kids to bed and cleaned up the kitchen. She could finally give it a rest, relaxing with a glass of wine or, in this case, a beer out on her patio. She had explained to him how at such times she had felt such a peaceful sense of relief, a release that she felt at no other time, except after Dixie had just made love to her. Many of their more notorious love scenes had started right out here on the patio. That thought made Dixie uncomfortable right now, out here with Mrs. Dixon and with Mr. Dixon asleep inside, just a few feet away.

"That was a helluva a speech, you just made to those kids in there, Dix. Yep, one helluva speech!" Donna spoke without looking at him, as she untied her pony tail, shook out her hair and let down her long blonde locks.

Dixie eyed her studiously for a few seconds, while he sipped on his Oly, disdaining to reply. She wore blue dungarees and a short sleeved, pink shirt that buttoned up the front and sported a round, scalloped, dainty collar. She had tied the shirt-tail at her midriff, baring her abdomen. Now Donna tried to draw him into conversation. She turned toward him, unbuttoning her shirt front down to the knot of the tied tails. She spread out, revealing a lacey, pink half-brazier.

"Are you growing a moustache, Baby, or did you just forget to shave today?" Dixie ignored her, returning his attention to the heavens. Once again, they drank their brews in silence. Finally, Dix got up.

"Where you goin', Honey?" asked Donna urgently.

"Get my s-s-saddle ... b-bags and b-bedroll ... . Sleep under ... la-la-lemon tree ta-ta-tonight."

Donna rose to catch him as he entered the house. She took hold of his forearm from behind him. Dixie stopped without turning around to her. Mrs. Dixon pleaded:

"Look Baby, please, don't stiff me like this. Please don't! Big Jim! Well, I don't know how long he can stay here. I mean I can't nursemaid him twenty-four hours a day. Darn it!" Still holding him by the arm, Donna leaned forward to try to gain his attention by looking him in the eye, "Dammit, Dix! He's worse than a kid to watch and take care of. You saw what happened tonight with his pee bag and that's just the tip of the iceberg. The kids were right. Big Jim can't do for them, what you could—or for me either, Baby, for that matter. He never did." She eyed him coyly, hopefully.

Dix ignored her and broke free of her grip to move into the house. She caught hold of him by the arm again, wheeling him around to face her this time.

"Really Honey! He can't do for me what you can and he never has, even before. You must know that. But then I don't think anyone else could either ... "

She eyed him plaintively for a few seconds before she threw her arms around his neck, kissing him ardently. Dixie tried to hold back, but the cumulated effect of a day's worth of beer on his brain, combined with his terrific love for her, overcame his reason. He gave in to return her passion. Their embrace lengthened as her hands began to roam. Because of the baseball season, they hadn't been together since he had proposed to her during Spring Break three months ago. She placed his hands upon her where she wanted them, but the young man balked.

"No D-Donna, ca-can't,'s wrong."

"How would you know?" she asked indignantly.

"'cause ... it, it feels wrong. I s-sorry, D-Donna. N-not that I don't want ... .'s been a while, bu-bu-but ... "

The earthy blonde's would-be lover slipped out of her grasp to retrieve his things from the Honda, parked out front. Curiously, she let him leave without incident. When Dixie returned to the back yard, she had disappeared. He heard the shower running in the bathroom. Dixie shrugged and spread his sleeping bag over the crabgrass, under the lemon tree, against the corner of the back yard's seven-foot high cinder block wall. Dix waited for the bathroom light to go out, before he took advantage of that facility.

After he had gone inside to prepare himself for bed, Dixie returned to his sleeping bag beneath the lemon tree. As he approached the bag, it came alive. He opened his bedroll to find Donna, smothered in her usual lilac perfume and little else but the ultra sheer, bright blue, full-length negligee he had bought her last Christmas. (That baby had set him back a couple bills, but it had been worth every penny as far as he was concerned.)

She lay, half reclined on her side with her left elbow propping her up. Her right leg lay straight out with her toes pointed at him. Her left leg lay on the ground, bent seductively at the knee, with the flat of her left foot up against the unbent right knee. "Boo! Hello, Sweetie," she teased.

The sheer, blue mesh garment was woven from an exquisite French make with long, flowing sleeves which gathered at the wrist. The nightwear featured little delicate, cuffs that extended beyond the wrist in the form of ephemeral tulip-like petals. The same tulip-like feature applied to the upturned collar. A pair of long deeply cut but narrow lapels stemmed from the collar down to the navel, where a single blue strand of satin ribbon tied the whole delicate affair together. Donna had tied the blue satin ribbon belt neatly in a bow and just tight enough. The ribbon belt was tied neither too tight to cause the material to bunch and overlay itself nor so slack as to loose the definition of what lay beneath it. Blue was her color and she wore it magnificently. *Especially when it's darn near invisible.* Dixie's heart flip-flopped.

Donna's combed, honey-blonde hair, still wet from the shower, set off her angular Scandinavian face. Two long, golden curved hair strands led his gaze naturally downward. She whispered to him in an artificially husky octave.

"Come on, Baby. I know you want to. Maybe more than me, though I doubt that. Come now, like you always do." She smiled playfully and extended her right arm with open palm in a generous invitation, expecting his surrender.

Dixie shrunk to his knees, as if her natural, bright, blonde and blue beauty held a spell over him, drawing him to her like a powerful blonde-blue magnet. He had never known a woman like her. Now Donna's dark blue eyes sparkled like the Pacific Ocean in the sunlight. And her large white teeth rose and fell like the ocean's white caps between her drawn, lipstick-red lips. Those lips, she had enhanced just for this occasion. Freckles were evident beneath her deep tan as they lay across her ever so slightly upturned nose. He reached to embrace her, as she sat up to kiss him. He was about to cave, but as they kissed, a sudden sick feeling overcame him. So potent was the sickening sensation in the pit of his stomach that he gagged. Dixie feared he might vomit.

"What's the matter, Honey? What's wrong?" Donna asked, full of concern.

"I, I feel ... si-si-sick. C-can't do it ... . Donn. Just ... can't. Sor-soreee, Ba-beee."

Exasperated, Dixie's fiancé rose to her knees. She threw back the flanks of the negligee behind her in contempt. Her long hands lay flat against her thick thighs, holding back the flanks of the dressing gown. Indignant and incensed, Donna ignored the potential stare of any nosey neighbors.

"Are you saying, I make you sick to your stomach all of a sudden, James?" Dixie was quiet. He dared not look at her. Donna regained her cool and slouched back down upon her elbow, as before. She tugged lightly on the lone restraining ribbon and threw back the gown, leaving little to his imagination. She tilted her head away from his stare but she eyed him seductively. Dixie tried to avoid staring at her.

"You a ba-beautte, Donn' …a-and you know it, ta-ta-too. I d-dunno ... what the pro-problem is ... Buh's time for ba-ba-bed and you in ma-my spa-'pot-t. So ... p-pease, g-go s-s-seep with your husband and la-la-leave m-me in pa-peace."

Incensed by his rejection, Donna replied flippantly in a voice loud enough for any neighbors to hear.

"Well, I'm s-so D-DAMNED so-so-sorry that I'm in YOUR D-DAMNED SPA-'POT-T!" She mimicked his impediment, articulating each consonant unduly, and drew up on her knees, glaring at him in disgust. Then, suddenly, her tone melted. "Dixie, Sweetie," she pleaded. You're throwing it all away Baby, just throwin' it all away, Honey. We could have it so good together Dix, the kids and us, just like we talked about." Now Dixie became angry.

"D-Damn it, Donna! That was ... wh-when we thought Big Ja-Jim was ... d-d-dead. He ain't. It's, it's O—O ... done! D-Don't you g-get it?"

Strongly perturbed, Donna rose to her feet now, towering over Dixie who slumped on his knees beneath her with his head bowed

"Look at me!" She demanded. "LOOK AT ME"!

As, Dixie slowly turned his head upward, her scent stole over him, seizing his nostrils. Her feet were spread slightly wider than her shoulders. She stood akimbo with her fists smashed into either side of her inward curving waist, pulling the blue mesh garment snugly up against her torso and breaking the fragilely tied ribbon belt. For a split second, she reminded him somewhat humorously of the Jolly Green Giant on all those vegetable cans in grocery stores. However, as his gaze trailed further up her body, he met her angry stare and all sense of humor evaporated. Under the lemon tree, in the dark of her back yard, Donna looked more like the Angry Blue Amazon. Her steely, blue-eyed stare beat down over her pair of heaving titan torpedoes and stabbed him straight in the soul. Her lilac perfume lapped over Dixie like the waves upon the seashore. She appeared larger than life, a true Amazon, like the silhouette girl in his vision.

"Well, I sure ain't gettin' it now," she replied in disgust, "But we'll see how things work out! In the meantime, MISTER JAMES DEAN STRICKLER, YOU CAN JUST KISS MY BIG BEE-HIND

Donna provided him that very opportunity by pivoting sharply upon her heels and swinging her broad backside toward him, while she bend over to pick up her bathrobe. She did not bother to put the robe on or to close the negligee what had fallen open. Instead, she straightened and folded the robe over her left arm. Then she sashayed brazenly across her small backyard into the little stucco house with the bright blue negligee flowing out behind her. She lengthened her stride but neither quickened nor slowed from her normal pace as she crossed the lawn, leaving Dixie to contemplate the full extent of his loss. He watched closely as his fiancée slammed the sliding glass doors shut behind her sizable, shapely self and disappeared into the darkness of the sleeping home.

Thankfully, Dixie's nausea subsided. As he lay himself down to pray and then to sleep, he could not help but think of Donna. She had made certain of that. Between her omnipresent lilac scent that saturated his sleeping bag and the lingering vision of the beautiful display she had just made of herself, which had saturated his mind, Donna had seen to it that Dixie would spend a fitful night. He did. His thoughts wandered, but they always returned to her rough-hewn beauty. However, if he dwelled lustily on his former fiancé, the guilty, sickening sensation in the pit of his stomach returned to silence such lewd thoughts.

For some strange reason, he recalled a bible story from the Old Testament. In his loneliness and his wanderings, Dixie often had found a Gideon's Bible handy. He discovered many of the stories in that old book fascinated him. They intrigued him much more than what happened to be broadcast at the moment on the rec. hall, dorm or motel room television set, where he happened to be lodging. The

tale that occurred to him now, the one that caused his nausea, was the tale where God, through the prophet Nathan in the presence of the royal court, had revealed King David's guilt in committing adultery with Bathsheba. David had compounded that crime by orchestrating the murder of Bathsheba's innocent, faithful husband Uriah the Hittite to cover up for David's adultery.

Suddenly, Dixie saw himself as David, Big Jim as Uriah and the earthy, voluptuous Donna as Bathsheba. Instead of Nathan, the boys, Little Jim and Andre, were denouncing Dixie, as they caught him in the act with their mother under the lemon tree. The boys appeared to him as wraith-like figures inhabiting a single, oversized, hooded robe. Andre stood upon his brother's shoulders. Dixie could make out only the whites of their eyes, peering out from the dark recesses of their shared, single hood that draped over Andre's head. However, both boys pointed at Dixie with extraordinarily long, outstretched accusatory, skeletal fingers, which emerged from under the droopy sleeves of their baggy robe.

Sick again, Dixie rolled over on his side to retch a dry heave. The shakes overcame him, but he regained his poise and his stomach before it was too late. He managed to keep Colonel Sanders down where he belonged. Dixie panted, breaking out in a cold sweat. He asked God for peace and promised he would abstain from relations with Donna. The insomniac sought repose, but it was elusive. He lay awake for hours, both hearing and feeling the nearby passage of the rumbling two a.m. freight. Eventually, sleep came to him, as it usually did, when he gave up seeking it so diligently.

~ Chapter 14: Revelation ~

A cool liquid dripped upon Dixie's forehead. Giggles sounded behind him. The sun was up. Breaths of air tickled Dixie's face. He woke to feel and see bubbles breaking upon his nose. More giggles. A huge bubble, floating from over his head, was about to settle down upon his nose. Gently, he blew the bubble back in the direction from which it had spawned. The boys came around from behind him to face Dixie directly, blowing bubbles as they came. They laughed playfully.

"Mornin', Dix!"

"Mornin', Dixie!"

"Mohnin', fellas!" As the black of night had given way to the light of day for a span, Dixie's speech impediments, like Donna's lusty temptations, had deserted him temporarily. He found his speech problems often melted away when he was with these boys in a relaxed setting.

"You said you'd take us to school on the cycle." It was Little Jim.

"I did? Are you sure?" Dixie cocked his eyebrow quizzically and pretended as though he did not recall, a favorite ploy of his.

Dre spoke out, "Yes, you did Dixie. You shore did!" His round black eyes grew large.

"Gee, two witnesses, hunh? Guess, it must be true, then. Well, how soon you gotta be there?"

"You know what time Dixie, 8:30!"

"What time is it now? Anh, anh, not you, Little Jim. Wanna hear Dre tell me."

Dre looked at his brother's watch. He studied it carefully. It's eight-nine."

"No, Dre that's not right," declared Jim. Dre was perplexed by his older brother's comment. "It's seven-"

"Wait a minute now, Jim." Dixie raised a forefinger to halt Little Jim. "Dre? Why do you think it's eight-nine?"

"Because this little one is almost to the eight and the big one is on the nine."

Little Jim laughed at his brother who puffed up like a toad at his tormentor.

Dixie spoke deliberately, but he felt fine, loose. He loved these kids and felt comfortable alone with them, so he had no trouble speaking with them now.

"Well, now don't laugh, Jim. What he says makes sense, but, of course, we know it doesn't work that way. Now see here, Dre. You see these twelve numbers, one through twelve, right?" The boy shook his head in agreement. "Well, those numbers mean two different things. When the small hand is on them, the numbers tell the hours and when the big hand is on them, the numbers tell the minutes. Each number is five minutes apart from the other, because there are sixty minutes in an hour. So when you see the big hand on the nine,

remember to count the number of minute[1]s from the 12 by fives." Dixie could see he had lost the boy, so he gave up.

"Never mind Dre, you'll learn that in school. Eight-nine, it is! I'll get ready."

When it came time for them to leave, Dixie pulled his remaining gear off the bike to put the boys up on the cycle. He sandwiched himself between the smaller Dre in front of him and Little Jim behind him. Dixie wore his favorite navy blue, flared cords and grey T-shirt with a pocket over his left breast for his Luckys. He made each boy wear one of his batting helmets. Luckily, the boys did not see any police officers en route to school. After Dixie let them off, he returned to the Dixon residence.

He found Big Jim was up at the dining room table, drinking his morning coffee, probably looking as hung over as he felt. In other words, he looked pretty darned bad. Donna came in from the back yard to announce she had to run some errands. Monday had become her day off since Dixie had financed her home hair-dressing business. Monday was her run-around day, in which she had to take care of all her errands, all family business, for the week. Carrying her purse draped over her shoulder and dressed in blue jeans and a red and white checkered, sleeveless blouse that had a dainty, narrow round collar, Donna looked fresh and healthy this morning in her tight ponytail. "All mothers should look so good," murmured Dixie to himself.

"You boys are on your own today. I'll pick the kids up from school, Dixie. We'll be eating dinner promptly at five, because the boys have baseball games this evening, OK?"

Big Jim said nothing.

Dixie said, "Sure, sure. How are they doin' with it?" This was the first year for both of them playing organized ball and they did so largely because Dixie was a ballplayer. He had encouraged them in the athletic endeavor. He believed it would be a fun way to help keep them out of trouble.

Donna studied Big Jim, who seemed disinterested, lost in his thoughts. When he failed to acknowledge her, she frowned and turned toward Dixie.

"They're doin' good Dix, both of 'em. Andre is the more aggressive one, but the coaches tell me they both have some ability. And they're enjoying it, which is the main thing." She looked accusingly at her sullen husband, then back to Dixie, before she added. "Thanks for asking, DIXIE!" She spit out Dixie's name, clearly angry with her husband's lack of interest, and not with her fiancé. The handsome blonde patted Dixie softly on the shoulder as she moved past him to the garage. Evidently, she held nothing against him from the previous night's abstention. She stopped at the door, placing her hand on the doorframe, and turned to ask softly but sweetly.

"Umm, you are gonna be here for dinner tonight, aren't ya Dix?" Dixie hesitated, before he answered.

"Don't know. Sure would like to see the boys play some ball, but ... " He shrugged his shoulders. "Don't know. Can't make no promises." The corners of Donna's mouth turned down a little.

Slowly however, Big Jim looked up from his daydream, to break his sullen silence.

"He'll be here. Go ahead, Donna. Don't worry. He'll be here when you get back." His voice was distant, empty. Donna tapped the doorframe lightly twice with the flat of her open, right hand. She raised her eyebrows and nodded her approval, before she stepped into the garage. Dixie heard the garage door open and then the car door open and shut. Then he heard the car start and roll out of the garage as Donna left on her weekly rounds.

The two men sat silently, opposite one another at the dining table. Big Jim sipped on his coffee, staring straight ahead. No doubt, he was feeling his hangover. The dining room air was pregnant with tension. Dixie could feel it, but he could not place a finger on the reason for it. Had Jim seen Donna return to their bedroom in her altogether last night? Was he putting two and two together? Or had one of the boys said something to him? The quiet from the boys' absence resounded against the walls of the bandbox to heighten the pressurized atmosphere. Dixie rose to enter the kitchen and pour himself some orange juice. One commodity they had in abundance in Southern California was orange juice, which he really enjoyed.

Wearing a dark blue terrycloth bathrobe over a light blue T-shirt and a pair of under shorts, Big Jim's sat in his wheelchair with his back to Dixie while Dixie poured his drink. Staring sullenly straight ahead and down at the oaken, dining room table, Big Jim spoke from out of nowhere in a flat monotone.

"Somebody's been poppin' my wife."

Dixie's ears perked up. He almost dropped his juice glass. Swallowing hard, he came around the kitchen counter into the dining room to retake his seat at the opposite side of the table from Big Jim.

"Wh-Why do you say ... that, J-J-Jim?" The tension in the air and Big Jim's allegation had resurrected Dixie's stuttering.

Jim pulled Donna's checkbook out of his lap. Dixie wondered if Donna could complete her errands without her checkbook. Maybe she took some checks with her or maybe she'd be back for it, soon.

"There's a cash deposit in here back in December for ten thousand dollars, marked as a 'gift.'" He raised the bankbook aloft. "And another one in January for three G's—another GIFT!" He growled. She's had the work done on the garage and patio, the electrical work, the plumbing, the new door. She bought all them fancy patio furnitures and them hair-dressin' accessories so she can work at home. That Chevelle station wagon is new, too, probably a trade-in on the Nova, but still ... No way could she cut enough hair to buy all that herself. I don't blame her, but I'd kinda like to know who it is. If I didn't know better, I'd say it was you Nicky, boy." He stared at Nick. Dixie choked hard on his juice.

"But then, there's no way a kid like you could lay his hands on that kind of green, not given your condition and all. There's no way you could afford this!"

The big man set his coffee cup down to pull something out of his blue tee-shirt pocket, which he tossed onto the table like he might toss a pair of dice in a crap game. The object of his toss was an ostentatious, gold diamond engagement ring.

"Go ahead, pick it up" he urged Dixie. "Take a look for yourself."

Dix did as Big Jim ordered. He inspected the ring. Truly, it was a thing of beauty. Dix ought to know, he had picked it out. He had thought that ring in that setting had been more beautiful than some of the more expensive engagement rings he had considered. And there hadn't been many, more expensive than this.

Big Jim observed, "That's gotta be a five, maybe, probably, a ten thousand dollar ring. What do you think Nicky? How much is it worth?"

Dix returned the ring to Big Jim, stating matter of factly: "Split the di-d-di-diff'rence."

Big Jim nodded. "That sounds about right."

"How d-d-did you ... c- come by it?" The paraplegic motioned his thumb casually backwards over his shoulder. He scooped the ring back up off the table.

"She left it on her side of the bed headboard cupboard." He sighed as he returned the ring to his shirt pocket. "I asked her about it, but she dummied. When I tried to talk to her, she just gave me a dirty look and left." Dixie nodded in an understanding manner, as he sipped his O. J. "You know, Nick. I kinda wished you was the one."

Dixie was surprised. He placed his juice glass on the table top.

"But Wha-Why, J-Jim?"

"Because, if I had to pick one guy to take my place with my wife and my kids, there's nobody who I'd trust more, nobody who would provide for them better than you, kid. I remember how you useta take care of us out on patrol, even though you was the youngest guy in the outfit. You was a natural leader. I see how you are with my boys here, just like that. And I see how much they respect you, how much they admire you, just as we all did in the Nam. They would never admire me like that, not now. But then, Hell! You got your own family, kid."

Dixie had started to raise his glass for another drink when that remark took him completely by surprise. He dropped the glass back to the table, causing what was left of the orange juice to slosh like a tidal wave inside his glass.

"Wh-what ... fam-famly?" Jim's blank expression disclosed that he was again lost, deep in thought. Dixie repeated his question.

Continuing to stare blankly into space, Jim asked seriously, "You haven't been poppin' my wife, have ya kid?"

"Wh-wh-what?" Big Jim seemed to be incoherent, leaping from one thought to another. He broke out of his trance to smile at Dixie.

"Nah, of course not. You've got your own beautiful wife, now don't ya kid? You'll be goin' back to her now that you're done playin' ball and school's out for the summer."

"Wha—hell ... What wife?" Dixie sat up in his chair ramrod straight, his eyes searing through Jim.

"That's right, Mann! That's right. You don't know, do you? I clean forgot. How could I? Ha! The rock star, Nicky, that's your wife." Big Jim winked at Dixie.

Dixie opened his wallet, pulling out a ragged, bent, six-inch by two-inch piece of cardboard. He unfolded it before Big Jim, pointing to the girl in the group picture of band members. "Her?"

Big Jim picked up the picture to inspect it closely.

"Yeah, yeah. She's the one. She's your wife, all right. See, there you are and there's your name and there's her's."

"No, no ... My name, STRICK ... LER. S-See?" Dixie tapped the name Strickler, next to his picture.

"Nah, Mann! That's a screw up. You're this guy. You're Nick Sheeboom." He tapped Nick's image and name simultaneously for emphasis. I'm surprised Donna didn't tell you that, before now." Nick could tell Jim's surprise was as genuine as his own.

"Donna? Why a ... D-Donna?"

He grunted. "Are you kiddin'? Come here." The big man pushed away from the table and pivoted. For some reason, he opted to leave his motor off and laboriously rolled himself with his lone good arm until Dixie pushed him from behind. They went into the far corner of the living room to the record cabinet, housed inside the wooden framed combination television/Hi-Fi set. Big Jim pulled out all four *GRT* records from amongst the cabinet full of albums.

"She had hid 'em in the back. Wrapped 'em in cheesecloth. Ever seen 'em?"

Dixie shook his head. "Na-never went in there. Th-that's her st-t-tuff.

"Hmmpf!" replied Jim disdainfully

Then Jim showed Dixie the fourth one, *Lest We Forget*. On the front cover, Dixie saw all three *GRT* band members in separate photos. The photos were enhanced, elongated pictures. Each band member was playing his or her respective instrument. Dixie recognized the drummer and one of the two girls, the one Jim identified as "Nick's wife," from the picture he carried in his wallet. The second girl, Dixie did not know, but she was a looker, too. Big Jim opened up the album to show the three band members, posing seductively.

Then Big Jim tapped the facing side of the inner sleeve cover. There, in a background picture that covered the whole inside sleeve was a close-up of Dixie in his dress blues. Inserted in the corner was a wedding picture of him with this gorgeous bride, the same girl that was on the cardboard in his wallet. Song lyrics were printed all over the inside cover, superimposed over the big picture of him. Dixie didn't buy records. He didn't own a record player, though he did own a cassette tape recorder. If he listened to music radio at all, it was usually Country and Western. That's what his buddies in the Corps had liked to hear. He did get a charge out of the late night Rock-N-Roll "Oldies" shows hosted by The Wolf

Man. In shock, Dixie slowly removed the album from Big Jim's hand. The young vet sunk slowly down, coming to a rest with his butt on the small but sturdy, rectangular wooden, glass-covered, coffee table behind him. "BRING THE BOYS HOME" was superimposed diagonally over the pictures of the band members on the facing cover. Dixie pointed at the marine in the dress blues.

"Th-that looks la-like m-m-me!" exclaimed Dixie utterly shocked. Jim turned his chair to face Dixie squarely.

"Damn right, it's you! That's what I'm trying to tell you, Mann!"

"But how— Why di-di-didn't you tell me ye-yesterday?"

"Didn't think of it yesterday, Mann. Too much beer, I guess. I knew you used to be a big time rocker, but forgot you didn't know it. Guess we got caught up in talking about the Nam and then I got loaded before I could tell ya. Didn't think of it again 'til a couple of hours ago."

"Ya know, whenever I get loaded like that, I can't sleep, but for a few hours. Guess you don't remember that, either, hunh? Anyway, I got up early, before dawn, started hunting around for something to do. Then, I remembered your old record albums. Figured if I got them out for you, maybe they'd jog your memory. I didn't know about these latest two, but I found them hid with the others. This one ... " Big Jim tapped the third album (*Still More Good Rockin' Tonight*) "is pretty good, like the first two, but not as good, 'cause your voice ain't on some of the tunes.

But this one here (*Lest We Forget*) is different, more slow songs, kind of sad, soft rock, they call it, and a religious song, too. Only half are up-tempo tunes, but they're more kind of like bubble gum melodies, you know. You ain't on but a couple of them tunes. They must have had you prerecorded or somethin'. It ain't a bad album. It's just ain't as up-tempo, as soulful rockin' as the others. Guess that's 'cause a lotta of them songs was writ by your wife about missin' you and not by you, like on them other albums."

"ME? S-songs?"

"YEAH! YOU!" the big man held up the first three albums. You wrote practically all of the songs on these other three albums!"

This was too much information, too fast for Dixie. He took a seat on the couch, trying to take everything in, clutching the *Lest We Forget* album in his hands. Dixie thought about those strange, unfamiliar tunes that popped into his head randomly. He almost always ignored them like he would a bad thought. Occasionally, he would blow them out on his bugle mouthpiece. A couple times, when he had been alone, he even had written down some words and blown out a simple tune on his mouthpiece. But hit songs? No, no way!

Big Jim could see Dixie's wheels spinning. Jim watched him curiously.

"Lemme help ya out kid. You was on the verge of being a Big Time Rock'N'Roller! You didn't know that? I mean BIG TIME, before ya joined the Corps. You and your band *GRT* won awards, been on national TV and everything. Hell! We all knew that over in the Nam, even. We used to kid ya

about it all the time. Kidded ya about your wife, too. I mean about her awesome looking picture, here on this album, here." He pointed to the inside cover of *GRT*'s second album *More Good Rockin' Tonight*, which depicted Ryz'n in profiled in a snug, canary yellow, terrycloth, tube top, black leather mini-skirt, fish net hose and three-inch black, spiked, high heels, topped off with a yellow ribbon in her long, wavy hair. One leg was stiff, while the other was bent seductively at the knee. Her shapely hips were thrown to the side of her stiff leg. Big Jim set the record albums down on the coffee table, so that picture of Nick's wife lay on top.

"'Aw, nobody could have a wife looked like that,' we'd say. Then you'd come over to the unbeliever who had made that remark and introduce ya'se'f as 'Nobody' and wink. Ha! You always got a kick out of that! I'm surprised nobody recognized you by now."

"They d–d-did once. 's how . . got ... p-pic-ture ... showed you, b-but ah though' b-big red-head g-g-guy here," Dixie pointed to an individual standing next to Ryz'n, "was N-Nick ... Shee-b-boom an' I—"

"Well, you thought wrong, Mann. That album cover is kinda screwy, the way they did it. Why didn't you go to the record comp'ny and follow up on it?"

"I tr-tried, only that," Dixie pointed to the first two albums, "Sable rec-comp' outta bi-business, dis-a-p-pear ... "

"Maybe, but that one your holdin' there is made by Halo Platters. I know they ain't gone outta business." Dixie began to inspect the Halo label and read their address at North Hollywood and Vine. *That's not too far from the Mount!*

"Ya know Nicky boy. Ya saved my life again up in sick bay up in Spokane."

"How's that-t-t?"

"Yeah, I was amnesic at the time like you are now and just a little while ago, too. Had been in a coma for coupla years and jes' come out of it. Anyways, I'm layin' there in the hospital bed, feelin' sorry for myself and you come on the radio. I mean your voice was on the air in a pre-recorded interview, ya see? I'll never forget it. It was a Saturday night and the oldies station had this special program called, uh, lemme see ... called ... uh 'The Late Great Eight from Noon to Eight!' Yeah! That was it. They repeated the show the next day, too. You know they said your band set some kind of a mark for a new group. Your first two albums sold more copies faster than the first two albums of any other new artist. Did you know that? Least I think that's what they said." Dixie shook his head in the negative and said nothing.

Was he serious? How could I know that?

"Yeah, well anyway, the station had about an hour devoted to eight, late great Rock'N'Roll personalities and you was the last one. Yeah, they gave you close to an hour and a half, Mann!" Big Jim halted to think.

"Lemme see, the others was, uh, Buddy Holly and them other two dudes that crashed and burned with him. And there was Sam Cooke and Alan Freed—the

guy who coined the term 'Rock and Roll'. Ha! Ya know that's the brother's old slang for gettin' it on. You knew that, right Nick?'

"No I, I, I dunno. I—" Dixie was thinking about Jim's wild tale, but in Jim's enthusiasm, he had cut off Dixie's response.

"Aw Mann! Sure it was. You knew that! Anyway the other cats was Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin and you, of course, Nicky boy. Not bad company, 'cept they're all dead. HA! HA!"

"B-but, J-Jim—"

"Lemme finish Nick! Come on, Mann!"

Jim flashed impatience, so Dixie kept quiet, as he had all yesterday.

"Anyways, them announcers said you and *GRT* was the best pop/soul group since Sly and the Family Stone. 'ME-TE-ORIC' that's how they described your star. 'The ME-TE-ORIC rise and fall of Nick Sheeboom and GRT ... ' That's what they said. Yeah, T-R-U, Mann!

"And they had Gary Bordy on there, on the air, saying you was a musical genius and how he wished he would have had you under his Motor City label. Dan Demetorice of *Soul Track* said you and your band volunteered to stay an hour after the show to perform for the kids, both times he had you on his program. The other guy, runs the white dance show on Saturdays? Uh, Ricky Dark. He said you all revived the art of hand dancin' that had been missin' since before 'The Twist.' And them composers, Lollar and Stieber said they had quit the business, even quit listenin' to the radio, until your sound made 'em turn the radio on and listen again."

"Loller and who?"

"Oh, Mann. You know them—the dudes who wrote all those big Toasters hits in the Fifties? Them fun tunes I used ta listen to as a kid."

"Oh yeah, sure." However, Dixie was anything but sure.

"But the best dude was this Achmed cat. Owns the Ocean record label?" Dixie shrugged.

"Trust me. He does. He said you—now get this—" Jim looked up to the ceiling and recited as if by rote. "He said 'Sheeboom combined honest R&B sounds of the Fifties with the "Soul" and style of the Sixties along with a new southern kind of rock to create a whole different genre for the Seventies.' Yeah! How ya like them apples? And he oughtta know. His label has been pumpin' out big hits since R&B became big back in the late Forties. And they even interviewed Elvis!"

"No way! Elvis? About m-me?" Dixie was flabbergasted.

"Damn straight, they did."

"What d-did Elvis s-say?" croaked Dixie reverently.

"He said you were 'cool,' Mann. 'Damn tragedy, what happened,' he said. 'No tellin' what you might have done, if you had lived.' He said you was 'a true American hero.'"

"Aw, you're pu-pullin' ma-my leg? El-vis?"

"No Mann! It's all true! I got it memorized, 'cause everything just came together for me right then. He said your loss was a 'real tragedy.' Dixie shook his head from side to side and laughed. He couldn't believe this. The whole thing was absurd—ridiculous.

"So hey, Nick? Listen up, Mann! I got sidetracked. I was gonna tell ya how I come out of my amnesia."

"Yeah, g-go ahead, J-Jim. Maybe it'll work for m-me," Dixie joked.

"Anh, I don't think so, cause you already heard your voice and that's what done it for me. Now see, I'm like just layin' there and I hear that scratchy croak of yours on the radio in some pre-recorded interview and presto!" Jim snapped his fingers. "I know that's the same voice I'd been hearin' in my head the last couple years, in my coma—your voice, tellin' me to 'hang on, Big Jim, you just hang on.' And that's when I remembered, who I was. So ya see, ya really saved my butt twice, Nick! Now whaddaya got to say about that, hunh Nicky boy?"

Dixie merely stared at Jim in disbelief. Jim took that as a signal to carry on. "Well, I'll tell you what the radio guys said. They said you was a 'teen'—wait, wait a minute, now. They said you was a 'teen—?' Oh mann!" Big Jim rolled his eyes and then suddenly snapped his web scarred fingers again. "'PRODIGY!' Yeah that's it. That's what they said. They said you was a damned 'teenage prodigy.' That's what they said all right. You went from bein' 'a great teenage prodigy to a late, teenage tragedy.' Yep. They did. And now they'll hail you as the prodigal son returned home. HA! HA!" The big man slapped his hand down on the arm of his chair. So whaddaya got to say about that one now, hunh? 'Teenage prodigy?'"

Big Jim was all smiles, but Dixie was on another track, not *Soul Track* either. He was thinking about his own amnesia and the Rock'N'Roll girl on the album covers, his alleged wife.

"Da-Damn! Ya know. Th-this Halo—" Dixie moved quickly from the couch back onto the coffee table. He tapped firmly on the *Lest We Forget* album cover next to him. "They cl-clo-ose ta P-Pep-pep-, ta 'cool!" Excited, Dixie checked the album for a date. Big Jim's smile melted away as he read Nick's mind.

"May, 1974. That's when the album was published," observed Jim wryly, suddenly looking like he remembered his hangover. Dixie looked up to Jim. Their eyes met. The big man voiced what they both thought. "Yeah, that's right, Mann. She may have had the album a year. She never said anything, did she? Just like she never said anything to me about that damned ring I found this morning while she was sleepin'. Now, why would she keep silent, hunh? That ring ... "

Dixie saw the wheels spinning in the black man's head.

Sadly, Dixie shook his head, looking down to the ground, unable to look the big man in the eye. He slid down, off the coffee table onto the floor on his knees. Big Jim leaned forward in his chair, facing Dixie. His voice dropped almost to a whisper, but he was calmly serious.

"It was you, wasn't it kid?" From his knees on the blue, shag-carpeted living room floor, Dixie looked up to Uriah with a confused, pained expression. "What?"

"You're the one, Donna's been bangin, ain't ya?' She knew who you was all along, but she wouldn't tell ya. She was afraid she'd lose ya. She promised to marry ya. Hell, Mann! my legs may be paralyzed, but my mind ain't! At least not anymore. What a chump—umm! You love her. Hell, I can see that! Wait a minute. It's all coming together now." Jim looked past Dixie and slammed his lone hand down on top of the arm on his chair. SMACK!

"Yeah, she told me how you two met. You all thought I was dead. It makes sense. Hell! Even the kids love ya! She figured she had it made with a new young husband, a WHITE husband too, a father who the kids respected. So she hid this from ya and kept her mouth shut." He held the album cover aloft. "Then I showed up black and back—from the dead, so to speak, but only half alive ... if that." Jim spit out the last two words in anger and in shame. Then, he stopped, evidently to contemplate what he had just admitted to himself.

"Sure. It all figures ... "

Dixie hung his head in shame a second time, remembering David, Bathsheba and Uriah.

"Thing I can't figure out, kid, is the money angle. Where in Hell did you get the cash to start her up in business and buy that expensive diamond ring, if you didn't know who you was?"

"G-Gam-blin'," responded Dixie softly.

"Gamblin'?" Jim couldn't suppress a chuckle. "Shee-ittt! You that good?"

Nick nodded. "Li'l l-luck, too."

"I'd say so. We should go to Vegas," joked the big man sarcastically.

"O-K. Ta-teach ya ma sy-system. La-Least I can d-do. Rent car and ... . ga-go up there ca-couple days ... Then ch-check out ... Hay-Halo Rex-uh, Pl-Platters. See 'bout ... wa-wife of m-m-mine."

"Hope nobody's bangin' her, hey kid?" Big Jim cocked his head to eye Dixie suspiciously.

Utterly defeated, Dixie studied the injured vet. Dixie threw up his hands in surrender as he kneeled before Jim's wheelchair. He placed his hands on the arms of the big man's chair.

"Wha' ca-can, I say, Ja-Jim? Yes, I la-love D-donn.' Ya-Yes, I wan-TED ta ma-maarr' her. Hell, 'posed to been maarr'd week ag-go la-las Sa-Satur ... day, ba-but team ... made it tada Ser-ies. Yes, I ... la-love you ka-kids. But's all o-o-o DAMN!"

Dixie was angry at himself. He slapped his thigh, rose up and paced away from Jim the few feet allowed him by the constricted space of the tiny, dark room. Then he turned around to face the paraplegic. He was going to get this word out, no matter what. Big Jim watched carefully as Dixie tried to compose himself.

"O-O-VER! Damn it! Told her th-that yester ... Ta-told her on phone Sa-Satur ... nigh.' 's ov', 'cause ya-you r'ah her husban' ... , you are fa-fatha her-her ... k-kids."

The big man studied his young houseguest earnestly, looking him directly in the eye. Big Jim measured his words as he leaned forward in his wheelchair to speak solemnly.

"All right, Nicky. I believe ya. You always was a straight-up guy. That's one of the things caused me to take ya under my wing over in the Nam. You was always straight-up, no matter that you was a big celebrity. You didn't have to come to the Nam and risk your butt, but you did. You helped rescue a lotta people and you saved my butt, to boot! More than once! What's left of it, anyway. Hell, I was jes' kiddin' 'bout Vegas, kid. You don't have to take me to Vegas. I was just raggin' on ya 'bout that. You gotta find your own wife now."

The big man stretched out his one, good hand to Dixie, who took it. Big Jim squeezed hard, as hard as he could, but Nick met his grip with equal pressure, drawing the wheelchair toward him. as they shook. Neither man would back off. They stared hard at one another. Finally, Big Jim said through clenched teeth,

"Don't think we're gonna make Vegas like this, Nicky boy."

When Dixie smiled, they both relaxed their grips and let go of each other's hand. A modicum of good will had been re-established between them.

* * *

When Donna Dixon arrived home later that afternoon looking for someone to help her unload the groceries, she found no one, contrary to what her husband had promised her earlier. Instead, on the dining room table, she found her engagement ring on top of a note and the opened *Lest We Forget* record album.

"*Gone to Vegas for a few days.*"

There was no signature, no reason why, but Mrs. Dixon recognized Dixie's immaculate handwriting and she needed no explanation. She bet it had taken him a good ten minutes to write that brief note. She could just picture him now, bending over the table with his tongue hanging out, putting a hundred per cent effort into forming those neat letters. She sat down, buried her head in her forearms on the table and cried. The ice cream melted.

* * *

In Vegas, Dixie taught Big Jim, Dixie's system. Actually, it was Ed Rabinowitz's system, his late comrade from Subic Bay. Dixie made sure that Jim understood that he couldn't take credit for inventing the system, but he sure could play it. They gambled for three nights, winning about eleven and a half thousand dollars. The two vets split the loot evenly between them. Big Jim was impressed favorably with Ed's system. The pair had spread their play out over nine different establishments, careful not to draw attention to themselves as big winners. Dixie simply told Jim that "they got a little lucky."

Naturally, a long-haired, young white man, with gold-capped teeth, who always kept his right hand in his pocket accompanying a one-armed, paralyzed, black man in a wheel chair drew people's attention. However, Dixie made certain neither of them left a casino with more than a thousand dollars apiece. Dixie planned to return to Vegas many times in the future. He didn't want to wear out his welcome teaching an old buddy how to gamble. Dixie felt comfortable with their efforts. Big Jim was ecstatic.

Early Thursday, the two men drove to L. A. in their rented 1974 black Cadillac Seville, where Dixie visited the Halo Platter offices in downtown Hollywood. The Halo executives stiffed him, but one of their secretaries was very helpful. She gave him the home address of Ryzanna Sheeboom, the Rock'N'Roll star, who was purported to be his wife. The secretary had observed that, if Mrs. Sheeboom weren't there, her parents could tell him where she was.

"Mrs. Sheeboom?" he had asked. Was she still "Mrs. Sheeboom?" The secretary had said as far as she knew, Ryzanna was still "Mrs. Sheeboom" and very anxious to meet "Mr. Sheeboom." Then she had grinned widely. Dixie asked the secretary for Mrs. Sheeboom's phone number, but the helpful woman kindly refused to provide it. The administrative assistant explained that she had just broken company policy by giving out that unlisted home address. She wasn't going to compound the problem by adding an unlisted, private residence phone number. The secretary explained Halo Platters, as well as Mrs. Sheeboom, had both dealt with many impostors since Halo had released the *Lest We Forget* album. While the Halo secretary thought Dixie looked and sounded very much like the real Nick Sheeboom, she could not be sure since she had never met him. She had reckoned, if he truly were Nick that he would not mind taking the trouble to write a letter or head east to find out.

Dixie did not mind. In fact, he was looking forward to the adventure. Suddenly, Dixie had something, something to look forward to, something that might be able to thaw and absorb the frozen, vacant hole left in his soul. That hole had been dug even deeper now due to the loss of the desirable Donna Dixon and her loveable kids. Suddenly, Dixie had hope.

He then took Big Jim over to Peppermount to show him around. Big Jim, like everyone else, was extremely impressed with the scenic, immaculate school's oceanside campus grounds and its grand view of the Pacific. Coach Trahorn was not available, so Dixie left him a note under his locked office door, explaining that he was heading east to take care of some personal business, where he hoped to play summer baseball, as well. Big Jim mentioned that he would like to bring the kids up next year to watch some of Dixie's games.

The two war buddies returned to La Jolla in the rented, late model, black Caddy. Strange as it may seem, neither man had mentioned Donna the entire trip. In fact, they had gone out of their way to avoid mentioning her. They both knew that she was the main reason they had left La Jolla in the first place. Upon their return, Dixie was fired up to leave for the East Coast that very night. However,

the boys prevailed upon him to stay one more night to watch their little league and tee ball games on Friday. They reminded Dixie that he had skipped out on them the other night. So, Dixie obliged the youngsters by staying over one more day to watch their Friday night games.

After Dixie had put the boys to bed Thursday night, the three adults retreated to the back yard patio for a painful confrontation. The larger measure of hurtful, ill will fell between the Dixon's, while Dixie mostly just listened in anguish. He did not confront Donna about her withholding evidence of his past from him. What good would it have done? As the troubled, married couple carried their battle royal back inside, into the master bedroom, Dixie retired to his bedroll under the lemon tree. Listening to the pair fight through their open bedroom window, hurt him tremendously, for he knew they were arguing over him. He wished he had never promised the boys that he would stay over.

The overriding factor that brought joy to Dixie's heart this night was the hope of finding himself, of finding HIS wife, HIS family. Since Big Jim had shown him the record album covers, Dixie had studied, even memorized, the album pictures of Ryzanna Sheeboom. She was an absolute knockout. From the record albums, he also found her smoky, sultry voice with the catch in it to be tremendously fetching. One picture, in particular, intrigued him, the one Big Jim had singled out. It was a profile shot of her facing right, standing up as she played the keyboard. She was singing in her tight fitting outfit, with her long coca-smoky brown hair hanging far down her back and a tremendously joyous grin across her face. The picture reminded him very much of mirror image of the silhouette girl. He wondered if this Ryzanna Sheeboom could be his silhouette girl, if she could be the one to fill that void in his soul. He wondered this as he fell asleep under the lemon tree, inhaling the omnipresent lemon scent while the battle of the Dixon's raged on inside the little, stucco house. He slept right through the two a.m. freight.

~ Chapter 15: Donna's Dilemma ~

The next morning, Dixie took the kids to their last day of school. The day was glorious, no fog, no clouds, just dry, warm sunshine and blue skies. Dixie shook his head. *Poor kids! The teachers oughtta do themselves and the kids a big favor and jes' forget the last day. Jes' let 'em go for the summer.*

When Dixie did not return after a couple hours, Donna became anxious. His gear remained at the house, so she knew he hadn't left to head east. And he had promised the boys he'd stay. Friday and Saturday were her two busiest days of the week. She had a couple cancellations around the lunch hour, which prompted an idea.

She postponed her two appointments for the one o'clock hour and for eleven-thirty. Then, without her husband's knowledge, she dug out her, powder blue and white striped bikini from her chest of drawers, grabbed a beach towel, and a few other items, including some snapshots, a cassette tape and a couple pieces of stationary. Concealing these items in a bag, Donna told her husband she had had some cancellations and needed to run some errands. Then, she hopped in her car and headed for the nearby beach. She knew this would be her last chance to reach Dixie, the last chance to change his mind.

Donna Dixon located Dixie just as she guessed she would at "their spot" in Coquille Cove State Park. She saw his bike at the far north end of the back parking lot. Did she know him or what? He was down at a remote section of the beach about a half mile from the public locker facilities, at the same place he used to take her and the kids. The parking lot was practically empty, with only two other cars parked at the opposite, south, end of the lot. School was not out yet and the beach was not well known to tourists. Donna changed into her halter top bikini in the women's shower room, before she jogged heavily over the half mile of sand to her fiancé.

She found Dix, sunning on an old woolen USMC blanket at the extreme north end of the beach where the sand tucked itself snugly under an overhanging cliff. At high tide, the waves came close to lapping against the base of the cliff, but it was not high tide now. This had always been "their spot." Subconsciously, Donna licked her lips as she eyed the handsome young vet lying on his back, beneath dark glasses. He was wearing only the dark blue, boxer swimming trunks with the tan trim, which she had given to him a year ago. His long, wet, jet black hair had exposed his bad ear, because he had removed the fake ear to swim. To Donna, he appeared to be a lean-bodied, broad shouldered, deeply tanned, muscular slab of Adonis. Donna almost salivated as she dropped her towel on his blanket and knelt down beside him in the sand. It had been a while.

"Hello, Baby," she purred.

Startled, Dixie woke to find this overexposed Venus before him. Though she had not needed to, when she had first bought the suit, Donna had shrunk the halter top in order to emphasize her finer points, just for him.

Dixie had been at peace here. He was not about to let her sudden appearance unnerve him and his smooth, distant speech reflected his calm.

"What are you doing here? Thought this was one of your busiest days?" asked Dixie mechanically contemptuous. Donna was happy to see his speech had improved, but she ignored his unfriendly tone. She did not make a big deal of it, smiling pleasantly, instead.

"Usually, it is, but I had a few, umm, last minute cancellations. You don't look very pleased to see me, Honey?" Dixie looked away from her, up the beach, then out towards sea.

"Look, there's plenty of beach and it's a big ocean, so go ahead, knock yourself out."

He turned his head to the other side, away from Donna, ignoring her. However, that was hard to do, because he could smell that lilac perfume which had come to mean something special for him. The beach was sparsely populated and there only on the opposite, south end. School was still in session for another couple of hours, although it was a short day, and this was not a beach frequented by tourists. Donna placed both hands flat onto the sand with the heels of her palms almost abutting one another, her fingers pointed outward. She used her biceps and the insides of her elbows both to support and push her bust out before her. Donna leaned forward in her shrunken top, hovering over Dixie.

"Baby? Hey, Ba-bee?" She purred huskily trying to gain his attention.

Dixie turned to behold her. His mouth dropped open in surprise at her audacity on a public beach. She took his response as a signal to resume her overtures, so she removed his shades, opened her mouth, and placed it over his, kissing him passionately. Like the other night, Dixie gave in, returning her passion. They kissed several times, until, once again, something akin to an alarm rang out in Dixie's mind. When Donna came up for air, Dixie's internal moral compass was gyrating as wildly as the pit of his stomach.

Without a word, the young man jumped up away from her to jog into the sea. Without explanation, he commenced a swimming marathon. Donna Dixon lay down on the blanket facing the sea, smiling, waiting patiently. She had seen this act before, when he had pulled a similar stunt to keep the boys from seeing the two of them together. She knew that he would tire, returning to the blanket, too exhausted to resist her charms. Yes, this scene had played out before. Out of deference to his concern for the boys then, she had backed off. However, today there were no boys and no one else within a mile, for that matter. Dixie had always selected this place for its remoteness. Tucked in beneath the overhanging cliffs, it was almost like a secret hideaway. She was glad of it, for she was a desperate woman, desperate enough to try anything to keep him with her and the kids.

Donna watched her fiancé swim. She had convinced herself that divorcing Big Jim was a real possibility. In fact, after their monstrous argument last night she thought Big Jim might even be in favor of a divorce. Of course, now Dixie knew he had a wife. That did complicate matters a bit. Yet, Dixie did not know his wife, not like he knew *her* anyway. Donna knew Dixie loved her. Of that, she had no doubt whatsoever. Before Dixie left them, the attractive blonde wanted to remind him of that fact one more time. In addition, she wanted desperately to hear Dixie proclaim his love for her one more time as well, for he was the only man who ever had. She was glad the beach was so deserted. However, frankly, it really would not have made any difference, no not now, not considering their desperate circumstances.

Besides, maybe Dixie's wife had given up on finding him by now? It had been almost five months since Ryzanna Sheeboom had come nosing around about Dixie. Maybe that shrimp rocker had become involved with someone else? Like that guitar player! *Fat chance!* Donna had thrown the rock star's phone number away, after Dixie had proposed to her. She was thankful for those noon hour cancellations today. The additional hair appointments she had postponed until that evening meant Donna would have to miss Andre's game and part of Jimmy's, too. She loved watching her boys play ball, but this could not be helped, not today, not with Dixie about to leave, maybe forever.

A slight, steady breeze blew sufficiently strong to keep both the sea and the flies at bay. Dixie swam and swam. He mesmerized her with his athletic grace. He was a terrific athlete. It seemed to her he was swimming longer than usual. Donna watched and waited. Patiently, she traced designs with her fingers on Dixie's wool USMC blanket. She glanced at a watch stuck in his shoe. He had been out there almost twenty-five minutes, swimming constantly with one stroke or another. He slowed to a stop. He was out beyond the breakers, beyond the sand bar. Donna noticed he was struggling. He couldn't get back. That was not like him, especially since the sea was so calm.

Donna's heart rose into her throat. The buxom blonde jumped up and ran into the surf, filled with anxiety for her lover. She ran, barely aware and uncaring that she heaved prodigiously to and fro in the salty sea air. She just couldn't deal with that now.

Donna swam out to her lover, who had trouble keeping his head above water. The water was unusually cold today. Donna was a strong woman, a good-sized woman at around five-foot ten inches, a hundred forty-five pounds. A native to the California beach scene, she knew how to swim and how to rescue. She employed her knowledge now, knifing through the gentle swells as she approached him.

"What is it, Baby? What's wrong?"

Donna called out to him with concern as she dogpaddled over the waves, keeping him in sight with cool seawater dripping down her face. She could see

that he was grimacing. Dixie was clutching at his right leg near the water's surface, as he tried to lay back on top of the sea. He was struggling to stay afloat.

"What is it, Dix"

"Cramp—Right calf!" Dixie spat out the words between clenched, white teeth. He was obviously in pain, as the grimace across his red face plainly signaled.

"It's OK, Baby. I know what to do. The sea is calm. Here, let go of your leg. Lay back and float. Try to relax, Honey." She calmly reassured him.

She took hold of his calf, buoying herself by treading water briskly with her feet. The deep, blue water was cool, even cooler a foot or so below the sun-drenched surface. The two of them rose and fell with the widely spaced ocean swells. Yeah, she could feel it. The calf was all knotted up, like the upper and lower calf muscles were trying to reverse themselves in his leg. She placed her left hand firmly under his ankle and her right underneath the top of his calf. Cupping her right hand around the back of his calf, she massaged the muscles from top to bottom slowly, gently, then back the other way, searching for the right combination. Dixie's blonde lover, turned lifeguard, urged and guided the muscles back into their natural positions with her hands and fingers. Dixie lay back, floating and bobbing on the ocean's surface. She repeated the procedure. She could feel the muscles relaxing. The couple bobbed to the top of a swell, which separated them momentarily. Donna swam back to him.

"It's crampin' up again." Dixie struggled to get the words out before a close-following, secondary swell washed over him. He came up spewing ocean like a baby whale.

"It's all right Baby. I'm right here," Donna cooed. "We'll just do it again, like we always do," she teased and smiled at him reassuringly. Once again, she took hold of his leg and massaged his calf methodically from top to bottom and, once again, coaxing his muscles to relax. As the cramp dissolved, Donna could feel his muscles shift beneath the steady pressure of her hands and fingers. The sensation aroused her.

"Ahh, OK, thanks, Donna. Feels so much better, Baby."

Donna pulled him toward her. "Don't I always make ya feel good, Honey?" He had to admit that she did. She kissed him hard. "Come on Baby, I'll take you in. You just rest and lay back and let ol' Donn do all the heavy work, like you know I can. Take you all the way like I always do." She winked and took hold of him in a lifesaver's hold. "Now, don't kick that leg at all, Dixie. I mean it!" She spoke in a condescending, parental tone. "Don't try to help. Let me do it all. Dix, ya hear me? Don't want you crampin' up again, now. Won't take much. This water is unusually cold for the start of June."

"Yeah, OK, Mom," he grinned and held loosely onto her waist while floating on his back. She smiled back and went into action.

Donna got behind Dixie, placing her right arm under his right armpit and around his chest, while she dog paddled in towards shore with her left hand, scissor-kicking with her legs and feet. For the first time, she felt part of her

considerable bosom swinging free and easy in the cool, salt water. And she felt the goose pimple the cold caused. Donna sighed. She felt so free and so alive with Dix in her arms. The sea was colder beneath the surface, but she found the cool to be refreshing and it drew her taut. There was a bit of an angled undercurrent so she swam across it, angling in, opposite the current, toward shore. It took them a good ten minutes. Finally, a breaker washed them up onto the beach. She rolled him over onto his back to inspect the damage. He coughed up a little of the Pacific beside him. Donna was breathing heavily. She hadn't done anything that strenuous in a long while.

Donna could see Dixie was worn out, but he was OK. *OK? Why he looks positively appetizing!.* His dark, swarthy features and heavy tan had always made her think he was Chicano. The black moustache he was growing so quickly and thickly, matched his long sideburns and only served to enhance that perception. Of course, that inimitable lone blue eye tended to throw that Chicano theory out the window and served as such a powerful, attractive magnet to her. His tightly tanned, muscular chest heaved, as he drew deeply of the salt air.

They lay barely half inside the water's edge. Occasionally, the end run of a wave would gurgle up against them. Donna sat up on her knees with her toes dug into the wet sand behind her, her broad butt resting on her heels and her bounteous bust looming large before her. As Dixie raised one of those sculpted arms of his to flick the saltwater from his face, he reminded her of that drawing someone who—*DaVinci? Michelangelo?*—had made, depicting the anatomy of a perfectly sculpted man. Well, she thought, whoever the artist was, he must have used Dixie for the model.

"Thanks, Donn." Dixie nodded his appreciation.

Dixie dug his heels into the beach trying to push himself up out of the tide's edge. He winced when his leg cramped up again. He sat up and began to massage it himself, but Donna pushed him back down onto the beach. Turning her back to him, she applied the same technique on land that she had used in the water with the same satisfactory results. Resting on his elbows, Dixie curled around Donna's broad backside observing her therapy from the inward curve of her waist, while she concentrated on nursing his calf. Drops of saltwater tickled Dix as they dripped onto his legs from her overhanging long, blonde hair as well as from her looming bosom. She was oblivious to her overexposed status now, so intent was she upon relaxing Dixie's cramp. They both felt his calf muscles flip-flop once again back into place. Dixie sighed with relief.

"You need to warm up, Baby." She rubbed and massaged his calf briskly, trying to warm up the leg. Her titan-sized bust shook like jello.

Dixie observed her closely. He loved this woman, who had done so much for him, who meant so much to him. "OK, Mom," he replied again, pertly, feigning to notice the shaking jello. Donna looked crosswise at him.

"So I'm your mother as well as your lover, hunh?" She cocked her eyebrows suspiciously. "So what does that make you, hmmm?" She grinned.

"I'd say that makes me one mother-lovin', lucky, uh, guy. That's what."

"What do you always say to me, Dix?"

"I dunno. What?"

"I believe ya? Ha!" She grinned.

Donna moved her massaging hands up to his thigh. Both of them were excited. It didn't take much. It had been three months. Donna became smugly conscious of the effect her disclosed womanhood had upon him. Once more, she began romancing her fiancé, slowly. She was making a thorough job of it, too, taking her time, enjoying herself immensely. More importantly, Donna wanted to make sure Dixie enjoyed her. This was her last shot at him, to make sure he would remember her when he was back East with the superstar, if it came to that.

Dixie did not resist, at first. After all, they were on a public beach, in broad daylight. He knew Donna. She would stop soon. However, Dix had neglected to notice the beach was deserted. Donna proceeded as if she did not care if it were. Almost too late, he realized his amorous, former fiancé had no intention of halting. But at this stage, he no longer cared. Dixie let her do the work. Then, just when he had laid his head back on the beach, resolving to let her have her way—

"***What ... about ... your wife?***"

Dixie sat bolt upright, quickly pulling her head up toward his chest, while she sat down upon his lap with the cool tide spilling into and around their feet. He had felt those words in his heart before, but he had usually sloughed them off as part of his mental condition. However, until now, he had been unaware that he had a wife. Now that he believed that he might have one, this small Voice scared him, scared him to death. It frightened him to think there was a silent Voice within him that had known something so real, so personal about him that he did not. He protested to Donna, as the tide ebbed and receded from their legs.

"No, Baby, no. We, we can't do that anymore. You know that!"

"But I just wanted to, to prove my love to you, Dix. Give you something to remember me by, so you'd never forget me. Maybe, maybe ... even come back to me, maybe?" Her voice and manner wavered, revealing her reverence for him.

"Donn, you don't have to prove anything to me. I know you love me. There's nothin' for either one of us to prove. Besides, if we were to make love now, we'd feel like heels afterwards. You know we would."

Donna slid up on him a little further, pushing his torso back down into the muck of the tide's wake. She lay down on top of him. With her elbows pointed out, she bent her arms, placed her hands, palms flat, left over top of one another up on his chest, feeling his rock solid pectoral muscles. Then the Amazon lover rested her chin in the gap between her left fore and middle fingers, as she smiled at Dixie and purred huskily. Dixie bore her weight without complaint.

"You love me, Dixie. You know you do, Hon. What's more, I know you do." Her smile broadened in triumph. Dixie raised up on his elbows again. He was relaxed with her and he spoke accordingly.

"I always said I did, didn't I? Didn't play no games with ya. We were going to be married a week from tomorrow, remember? I don't go around marrying someone I don't love."

"That was a postponement, Baby. We were gonna be married a week ago tomorrow! The last Saturday in May, remember? But you had to go ahead and pull off that upset of LASU, practically all by yourself, and go to the College World Series! Mann, if LASU had won, do you realize we would have been married, already? Do you realize that? And we can still do it, Dix." She stared at him anxiously.

"What are you talking about?" Dixie thought she was losing it. Donna became excited, as she raised her head up.

"I still have Big Jim's death certificate. We can take that down to Tijuana and get married, just like that!" The woman raised her head and snapped her fingers for emphasis.

"Come on Donna, you can't be serious. I couldn't do that and live with myself. Neither could you. I know you couldn't. I don't know if I can live with myself after what we're doing just now. Besides ... I gotta know where I'm from. I gotta know WHO I AM! Damn it!" Disgustedly, he lifted one forearm off the beach and smacked the sand with an open palm, splattering wet sand on both of them.

"Gee thanks, Dix." Donna flicked some muck from just under her right eye. But Dixie ignored her and carried on as if nothing had happened.

"If I hadn't promised those kids, I'd—"

"Yeah, yeah, sure. Dix? You know, you and me have got something special together. We love each other in body, soul and mind. Not many people ever have that. Most never do."

It was as if Dixie had not spoken. Her train of thought remained unaltered. A couple of white and grey, hook-beaked seagulls screamed as they swooped down to the beach several yards from them. They hunted the ebb tide with heads bobbing asynchronously in a herky-jerky stroll.

Dixie's head began to ache. He grabbed his forehead with his right hand, squeezing the temples in between his thumb and fingers, while he rubbed the deformed hand back over his head, squeezing the saltwater from his hair, forcing it to drain down his back.

"You better go Donna. You're missin' all your appointments. Friday's a big day for you. Besides, you're heavy."

"Don't give a damn about them appointments, Dixie! And since when has my weight ever bothered you?" Donna felt mildly insulted. "It never did before. I'll stay here and make love with you 'til you can't take it anymore, just like we useta. OK, Baby?" He avoided her stare.

"Well, I can't take it anymore already, so you can go on home now."

Dixie turned on his side to look towards the sea gulls and the parking lot, forcing his passenger to roll with him. Like a bronco bull rider, she remained astride his waist.

"Dammit, Dixie! You don't even know that little rich bitch back East! She probably only wants to fleece you out of your fortune. Did ya ever think of that?" He could feel her glare penetrating the bullet wounds in the back of his head. He had not given a single thought to a fortune. Then she softened. "But Dix, all I want is you, Baby, just you. I don't care about your Rock'N'Roll money. Honest, Honey, I really don't. You know I don't mind workin' for a livin'. I'll take care of you, Dix, just like I took care of that cramp. And besides, YOU LOVE ME, not her! Well, DONCHA?" Seizing him by the chin, she turned his head back to her, tugging him once more onto his back. Dix replied angrily.

"Didn't I just say so? And how could I possibly love someone I don't even know? Even so, I don't go 'round committin' adultery with women, even one as handsome and sunny as you, Baby. Even when I do love them! SHEEESH!

"Donna, please go, Honey, before I get sick again, like the other night. You know I love ya, but I'm leavin' tonight and I ain't coming back. NEVER! I shoulda left last night, like I had planned, and this would never have happened. Adultery!" He spat angrily. "Damn, I just can't do that!" Undaunted, Donna persisted in pleading her case.

"What about all them other times?"

"They don't count and you know it, 'cause we didn't know."

"Before I got Big Jim's death certificate? Even the first time in Hawaii, when I was still lookin' for Jim?" Her voice raised more than usual as she put the question. Again, he looked away from her.

"Well ... that, that was wrong. I, I shouldn'ta done it then, either." The idea flashed through his brain, that Dixie had felt the Voice in Hawaii, but he had ignored it, afraid he might be psychotic. He remembered his desperation at that time when he had first met Donna and added, "It's just that I was so lonely, so, so lonely, I ... "

Now Donna's voice softened and she placed two fingers over Dixie's lips.

"Shhh. Shhh. I know Baby, I know. So was I Dix and, without you, I still am. Don't ya, can't ya see that, Baby?" Dixie averted her penetrating star blue gaze.

Donna drew herself up so that she sat across his lower abdomen. Dixie laid back, his head on the beach, resting his left forearm across his eyes, straining against the white glare from the noonday sun straight above, beating down upon them. She leaned over him, with her palms flat on the sand to either side of her lover's head, trying to stare him straight in the eye, her bountiful bust gently brushing against his chin, like a pair of torpid torpedoes.

"Look, Dixie. Suppose, suppose you go back East and things don't work out? Maybe she don't want you now, since you've been all shot up? Since ya ain't so pretty as she remembers? Hunh? Or maybe she's got somebody else? There's

been rumors about her, ya know? Maybe she jes' wants to get you back there to divorce ya, take your fortune from ya. Ever think of that? Hunh, Dix? Did ya?"

Dixie pretended to ignore her, but he wondered about the "rumors?"

"Ya know Baby, she's just a Rock'N'Roll brat. You know how they all are, goin' around dopin' and makin' each other all the time. And suppose Big Jim and I don't get along? Suppose we get divorced? Judgin' from last night, I'd say that's a real possibility. Ya think, you might wanna come back then? I'd be waitin' for ya Baby, the boys, too. They were right the other night ya know? He can't play ball with them, not like you. With me, either, for that matter." Donna peered into her lover's eyes, as she removed his forearm shield.

Dixie drew himself up on his elbows in contemplation. The tide swilled up around his legs again. He had not considered those possibilities. "I never thought about it like that Donn, really. I guess it's possible ... That is, if you and the boys still wanted me … I guess. I do love you all, terribly. But why wouldn't you and Big Jim get along? You love each other, don't ya?"

"'Still wanted ya?' Are you kiddin'? You know Dix, one of the things, one of the many things I like about ya, is you're so darned modest. I could jes', why I could jes' eat ya up." She proceeded to try. They romanced for a while with Donna as the aggressor. Again, Dixie felt the Voice from within speak in gentle, evenly spaced words but softer this time. Again, it chilled him to the bone and, again, he stopped her short. They were both frustrated.

Donna was more than a bit miffed. She rolled off of him to sit in the muck by herself. "You sure don't act like you love me anymore James, but you're talkin' a good game." Hurt and ticked off, she tied her bikini top snugly behind her neck, reining in les grands tetons, as she sat in the surf with her heels in the sand, her legs bent slightly at the knees. Dixie looked out to sea, watching the sunlight dance over the lazy, slow rolling waves. They sat silently like that for a couple minutes before Dixie spoke tenderly what was on his mind, without impediment, as he had the entire meeting.

"That's unfair Donna. It really is. You know it is." When she responded only by making a sour face, he changed the subject to avoid a quarrel. Then he directed his gaze back to her.

"You know something, Baby? You'd make a hell of a swimsuit model. You know that?"

Donna brightened and posed for him, sitting with her feet together and flat on the beach, her knees slightly bent and her hands in the sand behind her, her chin up and dripping wet head tilted back. She put her chest forward, feigning one of those "come hither" looks the models use. They both laughed, because she was not a "come hither" kind of a woman. Dixie knew her more as a grab-you-by-the-hair-and-drag-you-into-bed kind of a woman.

"That's one of the reasons why I love you Donna, is 'cause you got such a great sense of humor. You don't mind laughing at yourself once in a while. And

you got guts, too, Baby, raising those kids alone, starting your own business and everything. You got plenty o' guts!"

"Oh, really! That's not what I thought you admired about me." Such frank compliments, which struck so close to home for Donna, embarrassed her. Now, it was her turn to redirect the conversation. The well-built former cheerleader with the sunny smile once again stuck out her dual torpedoes, allowing her womanly virtues to burst forward once more.

"Gee Honey, I thought you loved me, because of my finer points, here." She cast her deep blue eyes downward, batting her eyelashes at him.

Dixie rose to his feet, feigning insult, as he rubbed his hands together to knock the sand off them and then brushed off his elbows. He eluded temptation with a joke. Sticking his nose in the air, he, too, could play. Now he feigned offense and declared, as he walked away from her, "Never even crossed my mind." Then they both burst out laughing, as she jumped up, brushing the sand off her hands and butt, before smothering her strikingly handsome ex-fiancé with hugs and kisses. Donna felt wet sand on his back and butt, so she turned him around to knock it off of him.

After she had finished, she caught her breath when she viewed him from behind. Dixie's smallish rump was naturally tightly upturned. The boxer style trunks hung well on him despite his terrible wounds which hid the fact that he was missing the lower half of his right buttock. His waist was narrow. His athletic frame fanned out from that tight, narrow trunk. His heavily muscled, back, shoulders and arms reminded her of a strong oak's spreading branches. He looked like a ballplayer. Donna jumped him from behind to whisper in his ear.

"I'll never forget you, James, please don't forget me, please? When you're back there with your tiny, rich-bitch Rock'N'Roller?" Dixie turned back into her, encircling her with his left arm, slowly but effortlessly lifting her one hundred forty-five pounds off the beach in a show of machismo that did not escape her attention. (For he only weighed thirty pounds more than she.) Donna wrapped her strong, slightly tanned legs around his waist to help Dixie support her.

"I won't forget you, Donn. Honest Baby, I won't. How could I, after what you been to me? When I came over from the islands, I was just a shell of a person. You took me in and breathed life into me. You gave me a home and hope, a hope that I could be normal—whole. And see how good I'm talkin' now?" Suddenly, he gleamed. "Yeah, that's it, whole, a whole person. You and the kids thawed and filled that cold vacuum, that frozen emptiness I carry around inside of me--three times over."

"Does that mean you forgive me for holdin' out on ya 'bout your wife?"

"You mean about the record albums?" She nodded.

"Sure. Look, Donna Honey, you've been everything to me: a mother, a sister, a lover, a counselor, a friend, a fiancée and almost a wife. Now how could I not forgive you, hunh? How could I not?"

They paused for a minute, without either of them speaking. Dixie brushed her freckled cheek with the backs of his fingers, of his free, heavily calloused right hand, while he supported her back with his left hand. He had not been using the batting gloves she had purchased for him to keep his hands soft for moments such as this, because he had felt they had caused his early season slump. Donna ignored the rough calluses and turned pensive. She knew there was more to her cover-up than what Dixie knew about, more than just hiding the record albums, but she kept her silence. She did not want to risk changing his fine opinion of her, not at this moment, anyway.

"You know Baby, you never answered my question about you and Big Jim," summoned Dixie gently. "Don't you love him anymore?"

"HA! That's a hot one! 'Don't I love HIM anymore?'"

Dixie let Donna slide off his left hip. From her tone and expression, he could tell this might take a while and he was worried he might cramp up again. Besides, she was too big of a woman to hold for any length of time. They strolled lightly back up the beach to Dixie's blanket in the cove. Dix took it easy on his right leg as he walked. Donna stared at her feet, as she spoke of her painful past.

"Jim married me when I was four months pregnant with Little Jim, at the point of my old man's shotgun and under the "unofficial orders" of the base commander over at Pendleton! Jim applied for every overseas assignment he could find, leaving the kids and me behind. I kept thinking he was just a gung-ho Marine, but three tours in Nam? Come on!

"Before he went over the last time, I found out the problem. ME! I was the problem. Do you believe that?" She stopped and looked up at Dixie for his shocked disbelief and got it. "I had tried my damnedest to be a good wife and mother."

Surprised, Dixie shook his head incredulously. They walked some more.

"Yeah, me. I was the dutiful homemaker, the mother, and I WAS THE PROBLEM! You see, it turns out Jim didn't want no white wife. He wanted a black wife. He also didn't want no Oreo kids, especially one with green eyes and light skin who bore his name. Big Jim was BLACK and he was PROUD! Well, he ain't too proud now! No sir. He's got to cling to me now. And it really tees him off!" Dixie stopped and touched her shoulder to halt her. His leg was bothering him a little. He didn't want it to cramp up again.

"Hold on Donn. When you first made love with him, when you conceived Little Jim, you must have felt something for the man?"

"I'm ashamed to say what really happened there. Guess that's why I never spoke of it before. Gee, it seems like a century ago now."

She took a deep breath and started to walk back up the beach to his blanket, again with Dixie limply tagging along by her side. She noticed his limp.

"You gonna be all right, Baby? Wanna stop for a minute?"

"Nah, I be OK. G'ahead with your story. I wanna hear this."

"Well then, you're the only one who wants to hear my sad story. But then you're the only one, period, Dix!" She dropped her chin and looked up at him for confirmation. When Dixie lowered his eyelids and nodded, Donna resumed walking slowly, with him alongside of her.

"Well, anyway, we were in a bar up by the naval air station, you know Miramar? Couple of girlfriends and me used to go up there evenings to dance, maybe meet some nice pilots, or sailors." Donna paused to see if Dixie were tracking with her. He nodded that he was.

"Well, I was tryin' to get over the loss of my high school sweetheart. The bastard! You know he went steady with me all through high school? He pledged me true love. Then he takes off for Oregon on a football scholarship, where he dumps me for some rich co-ed, whose father owns a couple car dealerships up there. Damn straight of him, hunh? Well, that's another story!" She looked at Dixie but didn't wait for his response.

"Anyway, this one Saturday night, I get a little carried away with the booze. I got a fake idea, you know?" Dixie nodded. "Well, hell, I was only eighteen, can you believe that?" Donna shook her head at the memory. "You had to be twenty-one to drink at that time. So, anyway, like an idiot, I got into this drinking contest with these Marines from up at Pendleton and I lost. Jim won. He won ME! I was too schnockered to remember much, except he took me to some cheap motel, where I woke up alone the next morning sick as a dog. A few weeks later, I start missin' periods and eight months after that Little Jim arrives."

"Gee Donna, I, I never knew. I'm sorry, really sorry." They had reached his blanket and stopped. She turned to him.

"Well, I don't want your pity! Damn it! That's why I never told ya. I just want YOU! Just you, James!" She grabbed both his arms.

"Baby, we can be in Tee-Jay in an hour. JAMES! Turn around and listen to me. Honey!" Desperate now, with an almost crazed look in her eyes, she grabbed him by his upper arms and jerked him back to face her. "Aside from the boys, you're the best thing that ever happened to me, Honey. Gee Whiz! Jim and I weren't together two years in nine. Hell, you and me have been together almost half as long ourselves. I love ya, Dixie. God help me. I love you so much."

Donna threw her arms around him once again, pressing her cheek tightly against his and spoke past his ear.

"You're the only man who has ever said he loved me, Dix. Did you know that? I ain't countin' that lyin' schoolboy football player back in high school. And you're the only man whoever proposed to me. You're the only man that has ever taken pleasure in giving me pleasure." She pulled back to look him in the eye. "Did you know that, Baby? Honest, the only one."

Once more, she dropped her chin to her chest and looked up to him pleadingly beneath her golden sponge eyebrows. Dixie stared into her Pacific blue orbs and blinked to indicate he understood.

"And you're the only man to take an interest in my kids. Hell! The other day, YOU were the one to ask about the kid's ballplayin', not their father." She reached up to stroke his face gently. "James, Baby, it's you and only you. Dix, you know that! I don't care about money, like she probably does. Honest, I don't. HONEY, I'd do anything, I mean ANYTHING to keep us together, Sweetie. Really, I would."

Dixie felt her swaying him. Donna's impassioned pleas had aroused him. Donna sensed her advantage and went for the jugular, grabbing him around the face and neck with both of her large hands.

"Please. You name it, Baby. I can make you feel good, Dix, you know I can. So-o-o go-oo-ood. Come on Baby, I know it's been a while, but you haven't forgotten, I'll show ya, right here, right now, show ya just how much I care. And then we can go over to Mexico, get married. And it's anything you want James Dean "Dixie" Todd Strickler. ANYTHING!" She kissed him with all the passion living within her, a desperately bold passion that strained to break out of her. Hers was a high voltage, electric ardor that demanded from him the same voltage in return.

However, once again pressed to the limits of his resistance, Dixie felt the accusatory fingers of the dual specters pointing at him, felt the internal stomach rumblings and so he gently spurned her advances. Then, once more, he felt that small, still Voice within him that he had learned so often to ignore, asking resolutely but impartially:

*"**What ... about ... her husband**?"*

What was happening here? This was a different twist on that sober remonstrance, which he had passed off so often previously as temporary insanity. But again. the Voice was right on. The strange Voice within him, which was becoming precipitously more familiar, had pierced him to the quick for the second time in the last few minutes.

Shaken, he stuttered, "Ba-Ba-Baby, there is s-s-ssomething you can d-do for me." She seized caressing him with her lips to reiterate.

"Anything, James, you just name it, Honey." His stuttering, now, worried her.

"The b-boys?"

"Yeah, what about the boys?"

"K-Keep loving them, all of them and keep da-doin' the great job you have been doing with them, ALL THREE of them. And remember, now my na-name is N-Nick Sh-Sheeboom ... not D-Dixie Strickler, not Ja-J-James." He had spoken with a quiet strength of force that belied his true, mixed feelings.

Dixie felt like a heel. He sure didn't feel like he was Nick Sheeboom. Just saying it, sounded like a gross lie. Totally deflated, Donna slumped away, down to the sand. That had been her last ditch effort. She could try no harder.

Dixie walked around the blanket to his beach towel where he picked up his pack of Lucky Strikes and lit up. He picked up her beach towel and tossed it to her, which she used to dry her face and then folded it beside her. Sitting

sidesaddle on the beach, below his towel but leaning on it with her left hand, her resolve lagged. Staring into the sand, Donna spoke just loud enough for her lover to hear her. Ashamed, Donna refused to look at him, but she was ready to confess all now.

"There's something else, something I didn't tell you," she called after him softly in a whipped, dejected tone so low, he almost could not hear her over the sounds of the surf. Defeated now, she thought she might as well tell him all, before he heard it from HER!

Dixie bent over his blanket to pick up his dark glasses. He put them on. Then he strolled casually back over to the deflated blonde to offer her a cigarette. She accepted it, as he leaned down to light her up and asked casually,

"Oh, what is that?"

"Your wife."

Donna inhaled deeply only to leave a loose fleck of tobacco on her tongue which she picked out of her mouth. She coughed. "These Luckys are strong, Baby. Much stronger than my Slims."

"My alleged wife, you mean. I know all about the record albums."

"No, I mean your true and legal wife. She, she ... she visited me this winter just after you went back to Peppermount." He pulled his shades down his nose.

Donna turned away from his incredulous stare.

"She what? You never mentioned that before!"

"Oh, really?" The jilted lover dripped sarcasm. She stared back at him, dragged on the unfiltered Lucky Strike and coughed. She was not used to its harsh taste.

Dixie walked closer to her, removing his shades. He knelt down on one knee beside his lover, with his left foot flat on the sand. Dix rested himself upon criss-crossed forearms, over his raised knee, as if he were posing for a team photograph. The ocean breeze blew into his face, ruffling his still damp hair. The pair of seagulls that had been hunting together down the beach, suddenly squawked at each other, fighting over a fish head on the sand.

More curious than angry, he questioned her.

"Why Donn, why? Tell me. Does she still want me? Did she say?"

"No, she don't want you so very much. She's just been searchin' all over the globe for ya. That's all. That's how she found me—through her investigations." Donna expectorated the last three words as though they left an unmentionable taste in her mouth. "Her private eye had been around when you were taking exams in December. She came after, late in January. I told both of 'em I didn't know ya." She spit another fleck of tobacco toward the ocean, but added dispassionately. "The PI said that was strange, because he had it on good authority from a Marine company commander over at Kaneohe, name of Pyle, that you and me spent a long weekend together in Honolulu in August of '73. I told him, the investigator, that the officer he had spoken with was mistaken."

"But why, Donna? Why did you lie like that?" She looked at him coldly.

"Because I didn't want to lose you. DAMN IT!" She softened as she tilted her head. "Dix, I was desperate to keep ya, Honey. Then, after I met her, your wife that is, she was so, soooo nice, DAMN IT! Made me sick to my stomach, so syrupy sweet she was!" Donna flicked some ashes away angrily. "Well, I started thinking, how I'd feel if the situation were reversed. So, I called you up to school a couple times to tell ya, but the words stuck in my throat. They just, they just wouldn't come out. Know what I mean? You know how that is, don't ya, Baby?"

Dix thought of all the times he could not speak, for fear of the slurs and stutters. He took pity on her and responded softly.

"Sure Baby, I know, I know how that is. Of course, I do." He became sullen, pensive. She assumed the offensive, sensing rightly that he would be susceptible to her defense.

"You remember the night you proposed to me right down the beach, right over there at the Top of the Cove?" With her cigarette between her fingers, she pointed southeasterly across the cove to the opposite La Jolla shoreline, where the famous restaurant stood on a bluff, looking out over the vast Pacific. Dixie nodded.

"You remember, how, after dinner, we both started to speak at the same time and we finally agreed that you should go first." She paused for his recognition. "Aw, James, I'll never forget it, NEVER! Except for bearing the kids, that proposal was the highlight of my life. It was just beautiful, so romantic ... " Her eyes trailed off dreamily to the horizon for a few seconds. Then she refocused.

"Everything about it was perfect: the setting, the meal, the wine, the orchids, the outdoor table overlooking the bluff and the rolling ocean below."

Again, her gaze trailed off to the ocean breakers for a moment as she recalled one of the most joyous occasions of her life. Dixie looked at her now, also recalling that night. Then Donna resumed her explanation..

"And how, after I accepted your proposal, I told you I had forgotten what I had to say?" Recognition registered across Dixie's brow.

"Yeah, now that you mention it, I believe I do remember that. Why?"

"Well, I lied. Because I was going to tell you about her, about her visit to me. I had her phone numbers for ya in my hand, but after that proposal—well, I threw them away. I know it makes me a heel. I guess, I didn't cover up stuff any better than the President covered up Watergate."

"Oh, well, I don't know about that! I'd say you covered it up pretty DARNED GOOD!" Dixie rose off his knee and turned away, angry now. Standing up with him, Donna flicked her unfinished nail away and bounced after him.

"Don't be angry with me, Dix. I told you I'd do anything to keep ya and that still goes." Dixie hesitated.

"Does she really want me? Does she still want me, Donn, do ya think?"

"Oh not much, I suppose. She's probably got only about a thousand yellow ribbons tied around her, old oak tree." He wheeled into her.

"You're kiddin'!" But Donna's disgusted look told him it must be true. "But what about them rumors, you mentioned?"

"Them's jes' rumors, I guess. No Dix, I wish I were kiddin'. I'm only tellin' ya now, 'cause I'd rather have you find out from me, rather than from her. I don't want you to hate me, Dix. I want you to love me, the way that I love you. Even, if we're apart from each other. You're the only love I've known, James, the only love I've had." Her forlorn tone saddened him. She began to sniffle.

Even though she had wronged him, Dixie took compassion upon the poor woman. She had always treated him like a king, like a king of kings. Nobody else had done for him what she had, nobody. Nobody else had filled that cold void in him with warm love like Donna and her kids. He could not help but love her.

Dixie took her chin in his hand to turn her ruggedly handsome, freckled face towards him. He looked deeply into her Pacific blue eyes.

"Baby, that's something you'll never have to worry about. I will always love you, ALWAYS!"

Donna broached a smile that broke apart as her lip quivered and she began to cry. Donna was a tough woman. Her forced marriage, the years of single parenting, the war, and developing her own business had all combined to make her tough. She was not the kind to cry easily. However, now unashamedly, she did cry softly. Once more, Donna slumped back down dejectedly upon the sandy beach, smoke curling upward from the cigarette between her fingers. Dixie inhaled deeply on his nail and flicked the butt away onto the sand.

He sat down next to her to hold her in his arms, rocking her gently. Dixie parted his legs, sliding his right leg over her lap and his left thigh wrapped around her lower backside, as she faced north up the beach, while he faced into her. Donna finished her cigarette, trying to regain her composure. Dixie embraced her and rocked her, kissing her tear-stained cheeks softly, whispering endearments into her ear, tasting her salty tears. He repeatedly told her the words she longed to hear. His tender, gentle reassurances assuaged her guilt and fear, but she allowed him to go on for several minutes. She wanted to burn this moment into her memory, for she knew it would have to last her a lifetime. She understood what lay ahead for her.

The seagulls squawked, separated and flapped away. One headed down the coast, while the other flew up towards L. A. Finally, and regrettably, Donna interrupted him, because she really did need to get back. She had missed far too many appointments already. Partly to buoy her flagging spirits, partly for real, he complimented her again on her figure. He shook his head and whistled.

"Havin' kids sure agrees with you, Donn. You really could model swimsuits, Honey. In fact, I believe that blonde country singer, what's her name? Dolly Parton? She'd envy what you got, Baby."

Donna laughed sarcastically, thinking of Big Jim and her situation, as she looked out towards the surf. "Oh yeah, she's just pea green with envy, I'm sure." Nevertheless, his flattery had its intended bolstering effect.

"Well, I think you look like that famous sculpture of, uh, uh, you know, David—very athletic and muscular. Remember the one in your art history book?" She nodded once for emphasis.

"David, huh?"

Dixie frowned. He wished she had kept that thought to herself. Her intended compliment recalled to him last night's nausea and the biblical tale that had prompted it. He didn't know if he looked like David, but he sure as hell felt guilty like David.

Dix retrieved his cheap shades and walked her the half mile back to the shower and locker rooms, waiting to kiss her when she came out. Before Donna left, she reminded him that the boys wanted Dixie to take them to the ball field and they had to be there by 5:30 p. m. She suggested the boys might like to get some soft ice cream afterwards. For a few minutes, they reacted remarkably like any husband and wife communicating about the chores of the day and their kids' schedule, almost as if nothing had happened.

Then her tone changed, becoming edged with drama. "James, you're the only man I ever loved or whoever truly loved me. We were like two lost souls wandering in the dark, when we found each other over in the Islands. I'll never forget you, Baby." Dixie removed his dark glasses.

"I know. I know, Donn. I, I feel the same." He kissed her gently good-bye, but Dixie did not watch her leave. He felt bad enough as it was. Instead, he replaced his sunglasses on their usual perch and meandered back to the beach to think.

When he did leave the beach a few hours later, he found some strange gifts on his motorcycle standing in the beach parking lot. Tied across the cycle's handlebars was Donna's drying, light blue and white striped halter bikini. Inside the bikini bottom, Dixie found a ninety-minute tape cassette, labeled in Donna's handwriting with *Lest We Forget* on one side with *Still More GRT* on the other. These were the two *GRT* albums Dixie did not have on tape. Also in the bikini bottom, Dixie found an envelope, containing several photographs of Donna and the kids as well as the diamond engagement ring he had given her. He also discovered the following note.

My Dearest Dixie,

Because I wanted you to remember me, and the boys, in the best possible light, I leave these trinkets for your pleasure. The bikini speaks for itself. I had bought it especially for you and, with your leaving, I no longer have any need of it. Besides, it works rather nicely as a pouch, don't ya think? Ha!

Seriously now, you may recall a couple of these pictures we took are not for public consumption! The photo of me posing in the bikini—well, it would mean a lot to me, if you could keep it handy somewhere. I know it's korny but, really, it would give me some consolation, at least.

The ring is for you, too, Baby, a reminder of just how close we came. In all conscience, I cannot keep it. It is far too expensive and you've already given the kids and me much more than you ever should have. Thank you for everything, James. WE REALLY WERE almost there, Baby—just one lousy ball game kept us apart. God bless you, Dix, and keep you, always.

ALL MY LOVE,
Donn

P. S.

Really like the new moustache, Honey. Makes you look as distinguished as you truly are.

That night after the boys' baseball games, Dixie and the Dixons stopped to pick up some ice cream at the local Arctic Circle on their way home. Donna had finished her late appointments early. She had brought a chocolate sundae back for Jim, who had not gone to the ballpark. He joined the others for ice cream around the tiny, dining room table. They finished their cones and sundaes, guffawing over the boys' play earlier that evening.

Dixie's impending departure hung across the small room like a thick curtain. The boys asked for him to put them to bed, but he declined, saying that was a special privilege reserved for their mom or dad. He suggested Big Jim might want to try it, since he had never put them to bed before. Big Jim hesitated, but he followed Dixie's advice.

Dix picked up each boy, one in his left and one in his right hand, giving each one a big hug and kiss, for he knew he might never see them again. Then he placed a boy on either arm of their father's wheel chair with their legs dangling

over his lap and watched as Big Jim operated his motorized chair, rolling them all into the boys' bedroom.

Dusk had fallen. Dixie left the Dixon house to pack up his bike for the cross-country trek, with Donna tagging along behind, trying to help without crying. As Dixie was tying down his gear on the cycle, Donna, like a loving wife, placed bananas, apples, peanut butter crackers and a couple of candy bars in his saddlebags. She handed him his canteen which she had filled with cold water. Then, she backed off in silence so Dix could finish packing. He was ready to go.

She threw her arms around his neck, holding onto her man tightly. She was an incredibly strong woman. She kissed him passionately, as if her kiss could hold him, disregarding any curious neighbors.

"Remember Dix, remember. In the future, it could be you and me, Baby. Maybe?" She smiled wistfully. Though her eyes were moist, Donna arched her golden eyebrows hopefully.

"Donna, Honey." Dix's tender tone sounded a bit exasperated. "Don't get your hopes up on that one 'cause it's just a pipe dream, Baby. It ain't gonna happen."

"What do you mean, it ain't gonna happen? We talked about it today, on the beach." Indignant and defensive, Donna's tone was clear.

"We said, if Big Jim divorces you and this, this Rock'N'Roll girl don't want me. Well, she may not want me, all right, that I don't know, even though you seem to think she does. If only long enough to, what did you say—fleece me? But Big Jim will never divorce you now, not based on what I've seen the last couple of days. He needs you, Donn. He won't divorce you. You and the boys are all he's got."

"But he don't love me, James. Hell, I don't believe he ever did. In fact, I'm sure of it. I told ya, we got married after I was four months pregnant!" Dixie turned away to mount the Honda. This was old news now that Dixie had absorbed, digested and evacuated. He did not want to digest it again.

Desperate, Donna cried out, "James!" She took hold of his arm, turning him toward her. She stared hard into his eyes.

"Anytime, anything you want, you call me, you hear? I LOVE YOU, DIX!"

"I b'lieve ya, Baby." Dixie whispered, "Honest, I do and I won't forget you, ever!" She reached to embrace him. As they kissed, the two became aware of the hum of Jim's motorized chair approaching the street, tooling up the slight incline of the driveway. Dixie whispered, "I got that picture in my wallet, Baby, where I can't miss it." He winked. Donna smiled through misty eyes.

"Pretty slick move, Kid. Have me put the kids to bed while you pop my wife in the street in front of all the neighbors." Jim's gruffness caught them off-guard.

"Loo- ... Ba-Big Jim I ... did' mean any-"

"Hey, it's OK. That's all over, right? Isn't that what you said?"

"Well, su-sure—"

"Well, su-sure, of c-c-course, it is." Big Jim sarcastically imitated Dixie's stutter briefly. "I tr-trust you K-Kid—like I'd tr-trust a live gr-gr-grenade!"

"Lo ... oo', Bi' Ja-Jim—"

"Stow it! What's done is done." Peeved, Jim's words had assumed a surly tone, hushing all response to the contrary. "What's past is past. Once you're gone down that street, it's over. As much as I like you Nicky boy, as much as I 'preciate what you done for me and the boys and for settin' Donna up in business—after this, no more kissin' and foolin' around with Donna. In fact, just stay away from her altogether, Mann. Or you're liable to wake up one mornin' with no balls, instead of just one." Jim's glare was pure and Dixie knew it.

Dixie leaned over his bike, sticking out his hand to shake with Jim's only one.

"All right, B-Big Jim. That ... seems ... fair ... to me."

They shook, prompting the usual battle of machismo. Finally, a relaxed Dixie said "Ja-Jim, if you d-don't let go of my hand s-soon, I won't b-be able to op-op'rate this cycle-cle. Then I'd have to st-stay here and make goo-goo eyes at your lovely bra-bride." Dixie grinned devilishly, raising his eyebrows spasmodically. Jim released Dixie's hand and laughed derisively. Then he laughed in a more relaxed manner.

"Now you're startin' to sound like the old Nick."

Dixie grinned. He sighed and produced two business envelopes from his back pocket. Each bore the return address of the motel where the two war buddies had lodged in Vegas and each contained twenty-five one-hundred dollar bills a piece. Dixie handed the envelopes over to Big Jim. One was marked "Little Jim" and the other "Andre."

"Whoa! What's this?" asked Big Jim, incredulously.

"It's m-my sh-share of the Va-Vegas trip, less expenses of c-course. It's for the b-boys. You c-can st-start an account, a co-college account, f-for each of them."

"But, I can't take this."

"You c-can and you will, else you m-might wake up one m-mornin' with na-no arms ... inst-st-stead of je-jes' one." Dixie glared at Big Jim mockingly.

Big Jim replied with a hearty laugh. "Well, that ... seems ... fair ... to me, Nick," mimicking Dixie's reply of a minute ago. "Goodbye, Nicky boy. Once you get hold of that luscious, knockout wife of yours back East, you're gonna forget all about Donna and her big tits here." Dixie stared through Jim.

Donna smiled weakly as her lover prepared for takeoff. Ignoring her husband's feelings, Donna ran over to Dix once more to hug him, kiss him on the cheek and whisper once that she loved him. Patiently, in a low whisper that only she could hear, Dixie pressed his cheek to hers and promised he would always remember her. Her eyes shut tightly. He added, jokingly, as long as he didn't lose his memory again, that is.

Then he roared off, but stopped abruptly and turned around at the entrance to the court. He had forgotten something. Dixie reached into his left pants pocket to retrieve the engagement ring, which she had returned to him, and he had wrapped in a receipt. He rode back to her. Big Jim and Donna were waiting and watching.

Whether it was the fact he had left and returned or that he had just made Big Jim laugh or that he was talking directly to Donna, ignoring her husband, Dixie spoke perfectly. Sudden, perfect speech never ceased to amaze and gratify him. "Almost forgot about this, Baby" he declared as he reached out to return the ring to her. "I bought this for you. You can do what you want with it. Cash it in, return it if you want or throw it down the toilet. I don't care. Maybe you can buy one of them fancy hand control vans so Big Jim can drive more than that wheelchair? Or you can pay off the station wagon? Or both. It's up to you, Donn. Can't use it where I'm headed. You know, I'll just scuff it up or lose it. What a waste that would be!

"Here! Here's the receipt for it. Got it at that fancy jewelry store over on Prospect." Donna hesitated. She bit her lip and stopped her hand from accepting the ring back. Dixie encouraged her. "Go ahead, Honey. Look Donn, if you don't want to use the money for yourself, add it to the kid's college accounts. Go ahead now, Baby. Let's not make a big deal of this now. I got plenty to remember you by. You saw to that." He smiled broadly at her, paying no heed to Big Jim. She took the ring from his hand, but she never took her eyes off his.

Dixie revved up his engine again, as the final glows of the early June dusk faded into darkness. He gave his James Dean-Jett Rink wave, starting his right hand as if to salute and then sliding it in a downward plane to his waist and out away from him. Then he roared out of their court once more, for the last time.

His destiny beckoned.

~ Chapter 16: Homeward Bound ~

Dixie weaved his way out of Donna's development, turning right along Highway 52 for a quarter mile until he reached the Pacific Coast Highway. Before he entered onto the freeway heading south, he pulled his custom-made, dark, prescription glasses out of the left pocket of his brown, leather, motorcycle jacket to protect his eyes. Now he was using the wraparound glasses in place of a windshield for night driving, as the sun had all but set. Moreover, these glasses (unlike the cheap shades he had worn on the beach earlier) were made especially for him, at his request. They actually helped him to see better at night. The experimental dark glasses were something he had picked up on while he was in the Corps, something the Government was trying to develop to enhance night vision for military combatants. While the special prescription glasses did not work well for everyone, Dixie found the glasses sure helped him. With his better than average night vision anyway, the specially made, wraparound, dark glasses helped him see well enough to drive the bike at night without a windshield.

He followed I-5 south to I-8 where he headed east. Wearing his purple and sliver Porpoise batting helmet backwards with the "***P***" above the bill, Dixie was careful to stay around sixty mph. Gas prices were still high from the recent "shortage," so Congress had passed the national 55 mph speed limit law which California police were enforcing strictly. Dixie had heard some of the other sparsely populated western states were not nearly so zealous in enforcing that limit. He thought he would leave California, before he tested that theory severely.

Once he passed El Cajon, he opened up the bike a little to 65. The bike ran smoothly and, as it always did at higher speeds, the hair stood up on his arms under his road weary, brown, leather jacket. His dark mane flapped wildly in the breeze behind him and around his ears. Dixie had to slow down for a few miles when the interstate ran out, turning into Highway 80, then he picked up I-8 again.

He planned to drive nights and sleep days, skipping the sun and heat which could really sap his strength and limit his riding time. He also planned to employ a tactic used by one of his heroes, Stonewall Jackson. The Stonewall Brigade in the Army of Northern Virginia was also known as the "foot cavalry" because of the speed at which they marched. Often they had surprised the enemy by showing up where no one thought they could be, given the time and distance to be traveled. Dixie had read that Stonewall's speed marching secret was to march his men at the double quick for fifty minutes out of every hour. Then the famous general would have his troops fall out by the roadside and sleep for ten minutes, before they repeated the process the next hour. Dix planned to ride for fifty-five minutes on the odd hour and rest by stretching for five minutes. Then he would ride for fifty minutes, resting (or buying gas) for ten minutes on the even hour.

With his reserve tank, Dixie had a little over six gallons to burn. On the highway, the bike got around fifty miles to the gallon so he could travel about four hours, if he could average 70 to 75 mph, before he had to stop for gas. At least, that was the plan. He also carried the extra two-gallon, gas can on his back luggage rack, in case of an emergency. He humped a Rand McNally Road Atlas in his saddlebags, along with anything he might need for overnight. In them, he also carried the fruit and candy Donna had provided for him.

As he sped eastward over I-8, Dixie could not help but think of Donna and the still Voice from within. Leaving her and the kids tore him up inside, but what could he do? That man had survived Hell to come home to his family. Dixie was not going to stand in Big Jim's way. He just could not do it. Dixie wondered what would have happened, if Peppermount had lost to LASU, as everyone, including himself, thought would have occurred. He and Donna would have been on their honeymoon in Mexico when Big Jim had arrived home. Mann! That would have been a real mess—the kid's with Big Jim's family and Donna and him loving each other up, down in Acapulco.

Still, Dixie would have been compelled to step aside. The courts surely would have sided with Jim. Of course, Donna could have filed for divorce from Jim, but Dixie could not have allowed it, not on his account anyway. He would have left just like he was doing now. No matter how he sliced it, even if he did not have this alleged wife looming on the eastern horizon, he would have left. No, Dixie could not rationalize taking Big Jim's family from him. Nope, he could not justify taking the man's wife and kids out from under him, not after Jim had already lost two legs and an arm in the War. Had Big Jim returned home whole, not wanting Donna (as Donna had claimed he had not wanted her before he had left for Nam) well, that would have been different. But that wasn't the case.

Dixie had heeded the still Voice he had felt inside, but now that frigid hole in his soul grew larger and colder than ever, like a giant, gaping freezer burn. Thankfully, Jim had pointed him to this Rock'N'Roll chick, giving Dixie hope, something to take his mind off the loss of Donna. Maybe the "rich bitch back east," as Donna had tagged her, would be able to thaw and fill that hole for good.

Expect the worst, but hope for the best. That's my motto.

Thinking of this Rock'N'Roller, prompted Dixie to play the cassette tape of her which Donna had made for him. His cassette tape player had a slide-out, chrome handle, which he used to tie the player to the bike's left handlebar. The tape player rested over top of the sleeping bag he had tied across the handlebars and over the gas tank. Holding the bars steady with his right hand, he pushed the play button with his left, turning up the volume as far as it would go. He strained against the road noise to listen to her voice, singing the title song, "Lest We Forget." He learned the words to the song. He would learn the words to all the songs, just as he had for the first two *GRT* albums.

The road surface was dry and smooth and there was little traffic. The highway stretched out before him like a ribbon of long black train tracks, with him as the

train engineer. His bike melded with the road. It was as if he, the Honda and the road came together as one mysterious entity. Dixie slipped into a zone, which he often did when he traveled long distances under such ideal conditions.

He did not listen to the radio much. Sometimes he would catch the Wolf Man's TV show out of L.A. late at night. He loved the old tunes, which, of course, were all new to him, and the Wolf Man just knocked him out. The Wolf Man's voice was not too unlike Dixie's own croak. Dixie had no trouble impersonating the famed disc jockey. Solely for his own amusement, Dixie loved to imitate the Wolf Man's commercial for Olympia beer, when no one was around to hear him.

"When you're thirsty, I mean when you're two fisted wrapped around the tonsils, squeezing 'em dry kinda thirsty, that's when you go for a NICE ... COLD ... O-LEEEEE!"

Cold? Yeah, well it was cool enough all right. The natural cool of the night desert air intensified at high speeds. Dixie pulled over to the shoulder for his five minute break. He stretched and tossed some imaginary warm-up pitches. He slipped his batting gloves out of his athletic bag and zipped up his leather jacket to fight off the wind-chill. Thus equipped, he hopped back on his bike. Donna had bought him the batting glove because she had complained that the rough calluses on his hands had stunted their lovemaking. However, he had quit using the gloves after he had gone into a brief slump at the start of the season. His hands were as roughly callused now, as ever.

Dixie crossed over the Colorado River, passing through Yuma. He thought he would open her up a little more, testing his speed limit theory. Dixie pushed the speed to 85 mph, although, from some of his Vegas trips, he knew he could push her as high as 150. That's as high as his custom speedometer went. Dixie leaned forward resting his chin in the sleeping bag and placing his feet on the rear footrests. He had not had the handlebars extended so far that he could not perform this biking maneuver comfortably. The hair was standing up on his arms under his jacket big time now and the back of his neck as well. *What a rush!*

Leaning forward also helped cut down on his high protein, bug diet. Dixie was flying. He had stowed his helmet with his gear and now his hair was on fire, just like in the song he had written by that very name. Dix was glad he had taken his fake ear off, so he did not have to worry about losing it. Before long, he felt/heard the engine sucking air, so he flipped the switch to open up the reserve tank. Now Dixie had fifty miles to find an open gas station, unless he used the full, gas can strapped on back. He preferred not to use the can now, if he could help it. Having just passed Dateland, he was presently in the middle of nowhere.

He found a gas station up at the next exit in Sentinel. After Dixie filled up his gas tank, he emptied his bladder tank, which was the usual dual in-out procedure when he stopped for gas. He asked the gas station attendant about speed limit and motorcycle helmet law enforcement in the state, as he headed east. The attendant told him it was pretty much wide open, except on I-10 between Casa Grande and Tucson. The kid suggested Dixie keep it around 65 on that stretch. He also said

he saw motorcyclists without helmets, but he did not know if the police enforced the helmet law. Dixie thanked him for the information and tossed him a Milky Way Bar and chewed on one of his own. He glanced skyward to view the awesome, star-infested, southwestern night sky.

Big Bang! Yeah, right! If the Milky Way Bar had not come about by accident, by random chance, why would a person think the Milky Way had?

Then he recalled the sparse words of the inner Voice: *"**What ... about ... your wife?**"* That question woke him up. He resolved to move forward and not look back. After all he did not want to turn into a pillar of salt like Lot's wife.

He jumped back on the interstate. It was two a. m., but Dixie felt good, strong, even though he had been up all day. Normally, he didn't need much sleep. Since he reached high rapid eye movement (REM) sleep quickly, Dixie could get by on two or three hours of sleep a night, if he had to, but he preferred to sleep five or six. Tonight, in the medium cool, dark, desert air with his adrenaline pumping, his future before him, he felt as if he could ride all night. The candy bar helped.

HOME!

And the thought of that sharp Rock'N'Roller on the album covers combined to form a strange but strong elixir, strong enough to power him through the desert night wind-chill. How he had ached for a home for so long and now—"Well, expect the worst, but hope for the best." Dixie softly repeated his personal motto, which he had adopted after many disappointments. He figured his next gas stop would be Lordsburg, if he could travel at a 45 to 50 miles per gallon rate. He could manage that mileage if he stayed under 65 mph. If he couldn't, then he could always use the extra two gallons he carried on the luggage rack.

Thinking of Lordsburg took his mind off the fatiguing wind by reminding him of *Stagecoach*, the 1939 John Ford film, starring John Wayne and Claire Trevor. He had seen it over at Kaneohe. Since he had run the rec. hall projector as one of his assigned duties, Dixie had seen many old movies over there, including all three James Dean films. He focused on those films now as he flew along the interstate, south of Phoenix where I-8 merged with I-10. He slowed down to 65, following the recommendation of the filling station attendant, only to open it back up to 85 after he had passed through Tucson.

Because of the high rate of speed, Dixie was unable to make it to Lordsburg on that tank of gas. He had to stop en route to refuel from his extra gas can. Dawn had just broken. He swung his six-pound rebar for a few minutes and ate some more of Donna's provisions. He comforted himself with the knowledge that the rising sun would warm him. The eastern horizon was a gorgeous pink, orange and red panorama. He was headed due east, right into the breaking dawn—what an incredibly awesome sight.

Yet, as Dixie rode out again onto the interstate, he thought of Donna some more. He could not help it. Dixie did not blame her at all for holding out on him. Suppose Big Jim had not come home? Suppose Dixie had married Donna? Suppose he had not found out about this Ryzanna Sheeboom, whom he did not

know, for years, or maybe forever? It would have been OK, because he loved Donna. He loved the kids. It would have been all right. He would have been content. You could do a lot worse than Donna Dixon. That was for sure.

He made Lordsburg where he filled up all his gas tanks. Dixie wanted to make the other side of El Paso before he stopped for the day. He was getting tired. He was ready to stop right now, but his goal had been El Paso. As he rode on, the sun rose in the sky, as the temperature rose on the ground. He had to shed his jacket and batting gloves. Dixie had passed through El Paso about 9:30 when he spotted a water tank off to the southwest, just east of Socorro.

He had been in the saddle for over twelve hours and awake for twenty-six. He decided to call it a night. He left the interstate, following an old dirt road down to the tank. The oblong water tank was probably three-quarters of a mile long, about half as wide, and set in a rocky basin. A ten to twenty foot rocky rim protected the northern and eastern edge of the tank, while desert guarded the western bank. But on the southern rim stood a few pinion and juniper trees and maybe a couple cottonwoods. Well, he guessed they were cottonwoods. Dix was not sure. They were shade trees. Weren't all those trees in cowboy movies set in Texas, called cottonwoods? On the north side of the tank, among the rocks, there was a green, metal, trash barrel suspended a foot off the ground by two green, wooden posts.

Some litter lay about the can around what appeared to be an unmarked dirt parking lot, which signaled the unofficial end of the dirt road. Guiding the Honda, Dixie navigated a narrow footpath bordered by outcroppings of rock on his left and the muddy water on his right, as he skirted the east end of the tank. He parked his bike under a few skimpy, shade trees on the south side of the tank. When he dismounted the bike, Dixie felt like he had been on the business end of a jackhammer for a full eight-hour shift. He peed behind one of the trees. Then, he removed his jacket and boots, placing his ankle-holstered Smith & Wesson in his boot near him, for fear of shooting himself in the foot while he slept. After a long swig on his canteen, he bedded down on a patch of dirt in the shade of a juniper. He thanked God for his safe progress and quickly dropped off to sleep.

* * *

About seven hours later, though stiff, sore and sweating, Dixie awakened anxiously to the sound of small arms fire close about him. Face down, he found himself eating dirt. During his daytime sleep he had writhed and wriggled out of his bedroll, as he had followed the shade provided by the juniper above him. Instinctively now, he located the boot with his handgun. He seized the boot as he scrambled across the sun-baked dirt to hide behind the nearest tree.

"Dammit!" Bitten by a burr as he crawled to safety, Dixie tried to pry the burr loose from his hand, while he hid behind the narrow trunk of the tree. He pulled the sticker out of his left hand and tossed it behind him, sucking blood from the wound. Dixie shook like a leaf in the wind as half a dozen shots burrowed into the dirt ground around his bedroll in staccato-like fashion. Dixie was scared. His hands shook. He drew the Smith and Wesson from his booted, ankle holster.

Instinctively, he felt the scars from his war wounds rise up on his scalp at the back of his head. Dixie rested the side of his face against the bark of the juniper, looking to the heavens and releasing a deep sigh of relief that he had not been hit. The smell of the bark seeped into his brain. Dixie closed his eyes and tried to swallow but he had no spit. He had to pee badly and those shots damn near had scared the pee right out of him. He shakily removed the safety on his pistol.

The shots had come from the rock rim atop the north side of the tank maybe a little more than a hundred yards away. The short-barreled pistol wouldn't do him much good at that range. Somehow, he knew the rifle fire was small caliber, probably a .22. That was a good sign. He listened to unexpected laughter and voices carry easily across the open water tank. They were kid voices! Precautious as well as curious, Dix opened his eyes.

"That's enough, Rory. Ya scared the pee out of him!" cackled a boy's voice. A second boy added:

"Yeah, d'ya see him jump? Ha! Ha! He looked like a puppet jerkin' around."

"Yeah and I'm pullin' the strings. HA! HA! HA!" That was a third voice. It must have belonged to the shooter whom they had called "Rory."

Their voices carried clearly over the water in the east end of the tank. He heard them plainly, even though he could not see them. There were three of them, but he had heard only one weapon. However, between a pair of rocks directly across the tank from him, he could see vibrant sunlight glint off what must have been their rifle barrel. *Thank God, they seemed to have only one weapon among them!* One of them shouted, "There he is Rory! Behind the tree!"

Ping! A small branch above Dixie's head fell to the ground about fifteen feet in front and to his right. Dix ducked back behind cover. *Damn! That kid was too close for comfort!* Another voice drifted across the tank, that of a teenage girl.

"There! There, they are Mom. They're shooting at some man over there."

Dixie could not see the girl, but the acoustics afforded by the water tank allowed him to hear her distinctly. The adrenaline rushing through his system heightened his senses sufficiently to overcome his stiffness from last night's long ride. He swore he could hear those kids breathing.

"RORY! What in hell are you doin'?" This was a woman's voice.

"Aw, we was jus' funnin', Ma. We ain't hurt nobody."

"FUNNIN?!? Gimme that damned rifle, Boy!" Dixie stuck his head out from behind the tree cautiously, but in time to see a tow-haired boy reluctantly hand the rifle over to a woman, presumably the boy's mother. The woman angrily snatched the rifle from the kid's hands. She removed the ammunition clip and ejected an unspent cartridge. Then she whacked the boy upside his head smartly with her free hand,, but the kid didn't budge.

"Come with me! All o' ya!" she ordered.

"Where?"

"Around the tank!" She waved the rifle in Dixie's direction. "You're goin' to apologize to this person. All of ya!"

"Aw, Ma."

"Come on, le's go!" She prodded the recalcitrant boy with the rifle like a sheriff taking prisoners to jail in an old western movie. The sheriff herded the three outlaws before her, with the deputy, her teenage daughter, trailing behind. They marched single file around the rocky path that rimmed the tank.

Dixie placed his .38 in his right back pocket, as he emerged cautiously out from behind the safety of his tree. He walked down to his bedroll to take a swig out of his canteen, put his boots on over his naked feet and empty, ankle holster. Dixie watched them come in the stifling heat of the late afternoon sun with nary a breeze to salve the baking June sun's effect upon them. Dixie didn't know how he was going to react. However, he told himself these were just kids, ten to twelve years old, so he should take it easy, which was his normal modus operandi anyway. Drops of sweat rolled down his temple and over his cheeks.

The shooter, who was called "Rory" and his sister who was taller, were both blonde with brown eyes. One of the other kids was heavy with red hair and the other short and slender with brown hair. The girl wore pale blue shorts and a matching top, the boys wore dungarees and white T-shirts. The boys' hair were all long and shaggy, mop head style, while the girl's hair was long and straight. The mother was thin, in her mid thirties, with a hint of a pot belly. She wore a green and yellow scarf on her head, with what appeared to be some kind of doo-dads beneath the scarf to make her hair do what she wanted. Thick glasses obscured her eyes and featured pointy frames that had somehow survived since 1960. The woman looked a lot like the gum-chewing, glasses wearing, scarf sporting, character, Cher invented on her and Sonny's TV show. Without stopping to introduce herself, the mother prodded and pushed the kids up to within three feet of Dixie, whom she hardly acknowledged. She focused on the sharpshooter.

"My boy's got sumpin' to say to you, Mistah." Her voice was kind of twangy. She prodded the boy in the back with the butt of his rifle. "G'head Rory!" The kid did not budge or speak. "Well, GO AHEAD!" She prodded him again harder.

The freckle-faced kid replied cavalierly, "I'm sorry," but he appeared to be anything but sorry. His whole manner, was insolent, almost bored, as he stared past Dixie. Dixie thought the kid acted as if he were only sorry that he had been caught. The mother suggested the other two boys apologize as well. Their apologies were more heartfelt. They pawed the dirt with their feet and looked at the ground, too ashamed to look up at their former target. The mother finally looked to Dixie for an appropriate response.

To the latter two, Dixie accepted their apologies and tousled their heads and suggested they refrain from further, similar acts. Then Dixie directed his attention to the shooter.

"Tell me s-son, why da-d-did you d-do something as d-dangerous-s as-s that?"

The kid shrugged his shoulders.

"What dang'rous? I wasn't tryin' to hit ya. If I had, you'd be fulla lead raight now. "

"Rory! What the hell do you think you're saying, Boy?" The mother started to smack the kid but Dixie interrupted holding his open hand up, palm outward.

"That's OK, Ma'am. Guess your boy must be a pretty fair sh-shot, a real sh-sharpsh-shooter, hey kid?" Dixie bent over to face the kid, placing both hands on slightly bent knees, as if he were playing centerfield.

"Tell me now s-son, why did you d-do it?"

"I ain't your son. My name's RORY! And I did it for the fun of it." The kid crossed his arms over his chest. He was defiant as hell, even arrogant.

"For the fun of it, hunh?" The kid looked Dixie straight in the eye.

"Yeah, wanted to see ya jump, maybe even pee your pants. Yeah, that's it. Wanted to see how it felt to make someone pee their pants." He chuckled, smirking, smugly eyeing his groveling buddies with contempt. Dixie raised up straight.

"I see. Well, you damn near su-succeeded. I had to p-pee p-pretty bad, st-still do." Dixie chuckled to himself. "Wonder what your father will s-say about this?"

"He won't say nothin'!" The kid's defiant glare struck an angry chord deep within Dixie. The mother spoke up.

"The boy's father run off a couple weeks after he's born. We ain't seen or heard from him since." The boy looked up at Dixie defiantly.

"I see, I see. Well, uh, Rory? That's it, isn't it, Rory?" The boy stared at his interrogator, without speaking, full of insolence. Dixie held his anger in and approached the kid in a fatherly manner. He placed his arm gently around the boy's shoulder.

"Well, uh Rory, let's you and me ta-take a little stroll down to the water for a minute, have a little talk." The boy shrugged off Dixie's hand and backed away. "Well, unless of ca-course you're afraid of m-me, that is," offered Dixie.

"I ain't ascareda nobody," the kid assured him.

"Well, all right then," Dixie replaced his arm around the boy's shoulders and nodded towards the mother, before he headed the recalcitrant toward the tank. Wearing flared blue cords and a T-shirt, Dixie observed the boy closely, as the unlikely pair strolled down to the tank. The others held back, watching curiously.

"I can imagine, it must be ta-tough growing up without a fa-father. See, I don't know who my old ma-man is, either." Dixie's revelation made no dent in the kid who remained defiant. The boy shrugged off Dixie's hand but said nothing. When they reached the muddy water's edge, Dixie asked if the water was OK to drink. The kid said it was.

"Well then, let's … drink," suggested Dixie. The sun reflected up off the water at them, causing both man and boy to squint in order to protect their eyes. The water shimmered and breathed like a real, live being. They knelt in the mud. each on one knee, side by side, eying each other carefully. They reached down as

one, skimming off the surface water. The unlikely pair bent down, dipping their hands beneath the surface and cupping some water into their mouths.

Without warning, Dixie, in one swift motion, dropped his cupped hand of water and with his left hand, seized the boy roughly around the nape of his neck, forcing his head down into the muddy tank, face first. At the same time, Dixie drew his pistol from his back pocket with his right hand. He pulled the trigger three times in succession, once for the empty chamber and then twice more, firing two quick shots past the boy's ear down into the tank. With one hand Dixie lifted the kid from the water. The boy jumped and jerked beneath Dixie's iron grip, as though he were a jerking puppet with strings tied around the his neck, feet and waist. The kid soiled himself just before Dixie released the pressure around the boy's neck. Close to tears, the would-be sharpshooter threw his wet mop head back, sputtering and gasping, as he fell back against the dirt bank, covering his right ear with his right palm.

The mother and the other kids were shocked. She came running angrily down to the water's edge in her green, deck shoes to assail Dixie, who calmly holstered his pistol inside his boot. When she noticed Dixie was calm, she relaxed somewhat the intensity of her reaction.

"What the hell do you think you're doin' Mistah?" she asked with a sharp nasal twang. "Tryin' to blow his damned eardrums out?"

With the danger past and in control of the situation, Dixie's speech flowed smoothly without stuttering or pauses.

"N-No Ma'am. I believe his ear drums will be just fine, although now Ma-Master Rory here has got his wish. Now he knows exactly how it feels to be so scared that you wet your p-pants."

Observing her son, she noticed Dixie's statement was true.

"Hopefully, he'll remember that feeling before he sh-shoots at s-someone else again." The other kids ran down the bank and caught up to the woman Totally astonished, they stared at the once proud Rory's pants legs. Completely embarrassed and disgraced, Rory scrambled off around the east end of the tank, from whence he had come.

"Look, Ma'am—"

"Riordan, Arletta Riordan's the name! This is my daughter Rachel and this is Terry and Dizzy, friends of Rory's." She spoke confidently.

Dixie nodded to each one in turn. Then he addressed the mother.

"Mi-Mrs. Riordan—"

"MISS Riordan!"

"P-Pardon me, Miss Riordan. I've been sh-shot before, darn near killed as a matter of fact and, while I detest-t firearms as a rule, uh, well, the boy sh-showed no remorse in his apology. To the contrary, you s-saw him. He was outright defiant. I just wanted to give him a sc-scare that might prevent him from repeating his act, maybe from actually hitting s-someone the next time. Better to pee your pants now than kill s-someone or go ta-to jail later, I figure." Before he

continued, Dixie hesitated to insure she was tracking with him, which she was. "It's ta-tough not having a father, I oughtta know. I don't have any folks at all, not that I know of, anyway." Dixie looked away out of embarrassment, before turning his attention back to the concerned mom.

"It's been tough on the boy, without no father and all," she lamented. "On all o' us, for that mattah."

Dixie studied Miss Riordan as she likewise looked him over carefully. Her angry expression had softened some with his personal confession. Her face had relaxed. He felt she had sensed his sincerity. The young matron made peace, by avoiding the subject further.

"Look, uh, Mistah, Sattidies is pizza night at our place, ya know? Now if ya was of a mind ta, you could follah us home and jine us in some carreh-out?" Her Texas twang amused Dixie. Again, he hesitated. He really did not have time for this. She eyed him hopefully. "Maybeh you and Rory can mend fences a bit?" Dixie considered her offer. That last remark persuaded him.

"All right, but I'm buying the pa-p-pizza, OK?"

"You ain't gotta—"

"Anh, anh! Don't forget. I got the p-pistol." He smiled and waved his .38..

"Maybe, but I gotta rifle." She held out Rory's .22 and she chuckled, but agreed, reluctantly to accept Dixie's offer. Had Dixie known he was close to the site of his idol James Dean's 1955 film set for *Giant,* he might not have accepted.

But Dixie followed them, bought the pizza and gave it to the kids. Then he followed the Riordans home to a wooden frame house, in need of a white wash near the railroad tracks, where Rory changed his pants and Dixie cleaned up. After dinner the other two boys went home. Dixie unloaded his bike to take Rory and his sister for rides on his Honda. He showed Rory how to work the bike and let him drive it around, alongside the railroad tracks, with Dixie riding up behind him, his foot on the rear foot brake.

Dixie broke through to the kid, who apologized for the shooting incident sincerely this time, without any prompting from his former target. Dixie returned the favor. It was after eight when Dixie started to leave. However, Arletta Riordan wanted to know if she couldn't have a ride on the bike, too. Dixie looked at the kids, who shrugged their shoulders and rolled their eyes. Their hapless expressions indicated that she was their mom and Dix should please excuse her.

"Sure Mrs. , I mean, MISS Riordan, be glad to. C-Come on and hop on."

"Love ta." She had removed her curlers and the scarf, leaving her near shoulder length hair in a fashionable shag. Miss Riordan had also removed the outdated glasses revealing large soft brown feminine orbs covered with false, long eyelashes.

She don't look half bad, except she's wearin' a little too much makeup. Kinda trashy, but not bad, not bad at all.

"Anythin' special I have ta do?" asked Miss Riordan.

"Hunh? Oh! Just hold on to me. Lean when I lean. Squeeze me twice to stop."

"Why, that's the best damn offer I had in a coon's age," she joked. Dixie laughed. *She's OK.*

"Might be difficult gettin' on with that sh-shift you're wearin' there. Might wanna change into some s-slacks. Could be embarrassin' for ya Ma'am, er Miss, if you dress fa-fa-flies up."

"Em-bar'ssin'? Sounds like fun to me. Cheap thrills. Hell! They's all so few and far between, I take 'em anehway I cain git 'em." Again, Dixie chuckled.

"OK, hop on board. Any place special you'd like to go, Miss?"

"Wherevah, youah goin' Huh-neh, Ah'm agoin', too." She crawled up behind him. She had a man's strong jaw and a man's directness to match.

Dixie laughed as she put her arms about his waist. He thought she was joking, but one look at her had told him she was serious. He knew the look, a hungry, stalking kind of look. He had seen it before. Women seemed to go for him. He did not know why. He used to listen to some of his teammates complain they could never get a date. Dixie never had that problem. Instead, he often was ashamed to have to turn away members of the fairer sex, because he could never cheat on Lori Lei or Donna. They were the only two he had truly wanted to know in the biblical sense. And he could say honestly that he had loved each of them.

Now Miss Riordan was looking at him with that same light of love, or make that lust, in her eyes. In her mid-thirties, she possessed average looks and a slim but average build. Having removed her thick, dated glasses now, she uncovered a lot of make-up and a bony nose that turned a bit sideways. After she had climbed on up behind Dixie, she pushed her modest self firmly into his back. He had no trouble feeling her through his T-shirt. Dixie rode her down highway 20 to the small town of Clint, where he crossed over to the interstate, and headed back to the Socorro exit. He stopped at a filling station to gas up before he took her back home. At her request, he bought her a Dr. Pepper. She gasped as she accepted the pop and told him that was the best ride, of any kind, she had had in some time. "Hell," she confessed, "it's the only ride I had in quite a spell."

Dixie smirked and sympathized. He told her he appreciated that she had a tough job raising two kids without a father. He told her a little about Donna. However, Dixie also said he believed God exists and He sees things. Dixie felt certain Miss Riordan would be rewarded for her trials. It was just his gut feeling. Arletta claimed Dixie was "too good to be true." She asked him to stay on as long as he liked, but he said he was on a mission to find out who he was. By the time he returned her home, the sun had set completely.

Dixie loaded his bike down, said his good-byes and shook hands amicably with Rory. But before he could ride off, Miss Riordan threw her arms around his neck and kissed him like she was eating a juicy piece of fruit. After she had sucked all the spit out of him, she leaned back, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Just couldn't REE-sist a little DEE-sert, Huh-NEH! Hope y'all don't mind."

Recovering from her ambush, Dixie joked coolly, "Uh, well, the treat's on me, I reckon, Mi-M-Miss Riordan … "

"AR-LETTA!"

"All right then, Mi-Miss Arletta!"

"Peaches!" she replied coyly.

"Excuse me?"

"I've always been partial to peaches for dee-sert."

"Well, ma'am, I mean Miss Arletta. I must say you've got some very sweet peaches there. Adios!"

He waved to the kids. Then Dixie shoved the Honda into gear and wheeled out of there in a cloud of dust. He couldn't help but chuckle to himself as he left. For some reason, women, even those who had been total strangers, became amorously friendly once they had ridden behind him on his Honda. *It's the damnedest thing!* He didn't know if their audacity were due to the mystique of the bike, the thrill of the ride, a sense of mutual trust developed during the ride, or merely the fact that they felt it was warranted because they towered over him when they got off. But for whatever reason, they acted as though they were entitled to seize his head and plant one on him. It never seemed to fail. Of course, they didn't all go snorkeling for peaches on him like Miss Arletta had just done. But, he couldn't complain. After all, she was just a lonely, single mom like Donna, doing the best she could. Still, he chuckled roundly at the phenomenon.

Dixie rode out to I-10, where he headed southeast. He left I-10 at the north end of the Davis Mountains to take I-20 towards Fort Worth. The night passed similarly to the previous one. Dixie questioned whether he was doing the right thing by driving at night. At high speeds, the wind-chill was refreshing. The batting gloves protected his hands all right, but his ears and face below his shades became weather beaten.

He had known there were mountains in Arizona and New Mexico, but he never realized there were mountains in Texas. While the nighttime temperature may have been less intense than during the day, the wind-chill factor on his Honda was quite a bit lower. Both he and his bike were getting a work out. The CB750 was a smooth ride, issuing a mild vroom from its four-in-one cylinder. The gyrations he felt from the engine were tight, continuous and low key. He reflected on the Voice inside and Donna. A new, strange tune kept popping into his head, which he could not ignore. *Damn it!* "Arrrgh!" He just swallowed another bug! He turned his head aside to spit out the contents of his mouth. Then he hunkered down behind his sleeping bag for the rest of the ride, peering out over it, as if he were hiding from the enemy. At eighty mph, those darned things stung, let alone tasted like dung.

He stopped for gas in Odessa and again in Fort Worth. The wind chill temperature had raised a good ten degrees once he had escaped the Davis Mountains. The going proved more comfortable. Dixie followed Stonewall Jackson's lead, exactly as he had planned and the old general's tactics seemed to be working. He began to look forward to the hourly breaks after he'd go full out

for fifty plus minutes, pushing the bike even beyond 85 mph. However, he had to cut back to 65 once he approached Ft. Worth.

The population was becoming too dense. Although the traffic was sparse at night, along with more towns, came more exits and more Smokeys. Dixie would be lucky to avoid a speeding ticket even at 65 from here on out. He left interstate 20 to pick up I-30, the other side of Dallas. As he gazed at the June Texas night sky, he noted the old song was right: "The stars at night ARE big and bright, deep in the heart of Texas." The Texas sky overwhelmed Dixie, making him and his Honda feel small indeed, downright miniscule as they rolled as one over the asphalt ribbon that made this high speed journey possible.

Dixie's goal for the night was Texarkana. He estimated he should be able to cross at least one cotton-pickin' state in an entire night. *Cotton-pickin'!* Now where did he come up with that phrase? Stuff like this was always happening to him, like when he came up with "dippsy-doodle" as the name for his screw ball. That name had just popped into his head out of nowhere. Why was he the only guy on the team to say "y'all?" or "cold-cock" or "cee'ment" or call a broom a "brum", a room, a "rum?" No one he knew spoke like that. No one taught him to speak like that, certainly not Rose Rosario. Maybe that's how they talked back East, back in Maryland. He wondered.

But he'd never find out if he could not cross Texas. However, Dixie did cross the great state of Texas. He did not stop until almost ten o'clock the next morning. This time he chose to bed down in the "40 Winks Motel" in the state border town of Texarkana. He needed to clean up and shave almost as much as he needed to sleep in a soft bed.

Traveling at night had advantages as well as disadvantages. The motel owner was a disagreeable little man of ruddy complexion and graying hair and scraggly beard. He wanted to charge Dixie double, because he had no daily rates, only nightly ones. Dixie argued convincingly that he would be out of his room in time for the owner to rent the same room to another customer that night after Dixie had left. The man reluctantly agreed and Dixie settled in for a good rest.

The only problem was the constant noise around him. The house cleaner walked in on Dixie twice, despite the "Do Not Disturb" sign he had hung on the outside doorknob. Then there were noises from the highway and noises from the numerous guests in the other rooms. He had thought Sunday was supposed to a day of rest. Evidently, forty winks were not all you could get at this motel. Dixie was dog-tired and his body yet vibrated from the long ride.

Incredibly, Dixie had traveled some sixteen hundred miles in a mere two nights. Though he was a young athlete in his prime, the arduous bike trip was beginning to wear on him. While he only had a little over eleven hundred miles left to go, and despite the prospect of sleeping in a real bed, due to the distractions, he needed to pop a couple of Dr. Mandl's sleeping pills. He got his forty winks and then some. It was a good thing he did so, because, for what lay ahead, he would need all the rest he could get.

~ Chapter 17: Smoky Mountain Moons Surprise ~

Dixie remained fatigued when he woke that afternoon. Though he was probably not as tired as he had a right to be. He hoped the adrenaline, pumping through his veins at the prospect of finding out who he really was, would pump him up enough to travel. He left Texarkana and the 40 Winks behind. His goal for the night was the Great Smoky Mountains in Eastern Tennessee.

In Little Rock, I-30 joined I-40. Dixie stopped off the interstate there to take batting practice (BP) in some cages that he had spied from the highway. He had not taken any BP for over a week and was losing his timing. He was grateful for this opportunity to practice his swing. It felt good to jump in the cage and belt out a few. Dixie enjoyed this particular venue because he hit into an open field, enabling him to gauge better how well he had stroked the ball. The place had been about to close on a dead Sunday night when Dixie had arrived. He didn't have to deal with other customers gawking at him and asking questions. Because when he took BP, Dix could put on an awesome display of batting prowess.

He was a little rusty. It had been eight days since he had swung a bat in earnest. It took him a token's worth of balls to catch up to the "very fast" machine. Then he cranked one after another until there were no more balls left. Afterwards, he turned around to the left side of the plate where he put on a similarly impressive display. He swatted several practice balls over the four hundred-foot marker.

The owner of the batting cages, a bald Chicano in his mid-forties with a heavy, black moustache handed Dixie his professional card. The man said he was a scout for the St. Louis Cardinals. When Dixie explained who he was and that he planned on finishing college before giving professional baseball a shot, the scout backed off. He still asked Dix to keep him and the Cardinals in mind.

As he left the scout and the batting cage, Dixie did not know what he might find back East and whether he could catch on with a ball team. Already, too many disappointments in his brief two-year existence had taught him to hope for the best, but to expect the worst. Maybe all this Rock'N'Roll girl wanted was to find him so she could divorce him, as Donna had suggested. If so, maybe she could at least point him to his family, his parents, brothers, sisters, if he had any that is. Maybe, he was not really the guy she was looking for after all? Who knew? Maybe, just maybe, he would discover some little thing that would spur his recall, despite all the experts' opinions to the contrary. However, no matter what happened, Dixie was going to find an adult amateur baseball team and play baseball somewhere. At least, that's what he hoped to do, if he weren't too late.

After BP, the night rider jumped back on I-40, which he followed through Arkansas, across the mighty Mississippi and over the lush Tennessee farmland clear to the foothills of Knoxville. The weather had turned muggy. The bike was

holding up well and, despite the length of his trip, he was getting a big kick out of riding his Honda. He never got over the thrill of the ride, the hair standing up on his forearms and the back of his neck, as he felt the power of the bike beneath him, humming rhythmically and quietly over the smooth concrete at sixty-five mph. Traffic was heavier east of the Mississippi, but it was not overwhelming.

For some reason this early morn, Dixie had a strange, unfounded desire to spend the day among the Great Smokys. So he left the interstate and drove fifty miles out of his way south to enter the famous mountain range at a place called Clift Creek. Early morning smoky fog blanketed the mountains. Visibility had virtually vanished. Dixie rode his bike gingerly through the park, trying to rise above the blue haze with little success. He followed the creek, up the mountain, spurning a campground in search of daylight upon higher terrain. Finally, he wearied of the effort and turned off onto a hiking trail to hunt for a campsite.

He found such a spot, covered with soft moss on the north side of an oak, near a babbling tributary of the creek that began up near the Appalachian Trail, on the north slope of Mt. Guyot, near Clift Knob. Dense evergreen and deciduous trees, shaded mountain rock. The sparkling stream babbled eagerly down the mountainside. The abundance of green, shade trees provided a coziness that had been lacking in his previous, largely barren campsite at the water tank.

Dixie could make out what looked like a couple of five-foot waterfalls within a few hundred feet of each other. Just as he set up camp, the fog began to burn off, forcing him to move to a shadier place up stream. He was exhausted. The heavier traffic east of the Big Muddy had strained him mentally more than he had realized. Strangely, his entire body seemed to have born the burden as well. Again, he slept like a dead man.

When he awoke early in the evening, Dixie was stiff as a board, primarily through his lower back and hips. His forearms and shoulders suffered the strain, as well. In fact, Dix felt as though he were still riding on the back of the Honda. To loosen up, he stretched, as if he were beginning spring training. Then, he practiced his swing with the rebar. Once he had loosened up, he decided to take a dip in the mountain stream. From the angle of the sun in the sky, it must have been after five p. m. There was no trace of fog now, but it was hot and muggy.

The sounds of the rushing waterfalls and gurgling stream beckoned to him, inviting Dixie to refresh himself. This part of the mountain appeared to be isolated. With no one else around, Dixie thought he could safely strip and dip in the mountain creek. He removed his fake ear and took it along in a towel with his canteen down to the stream. He drank the cool stream water, which was incredibly cold. After filling his canteen, he submerged it beneath the stream's surface, wedging it between two rocks to anchor it, as well as keep it cool.

Dixie stripped and laid his clothes on a smooth stone of the rocky bank. The mystical spot was almost equidistant between two short waterfalls linked by the murmuring stream. *Beautiful!* Green hemlocks bordered one side of the brisk, bubbly mountain brook. Craggy grey rocks on the other bank boomeranged

brilliant rays of late afternoon sunlight which sliced majestically between the lush, green trees. The stark, rugged beauty of the rocky gorge and heavy tree cover emboldened him.

He tip-toed out gingerly on some exposed rock tops, until he reached a place where he could easily dip half his right foot in the water without losing his balance. *Mann! That water was some kind of cold!* Dixie couldn't believe water could be that cold without being frozen. *Not like the seven pools in Hawaii.* "Oooooh!" he shuddered. He withdrew his foot and warmed it on the hot rock. *What a big sissy!* Then he hotfooted it over the rocks downstream until he reached a pool at the base of one of a series of small steeping stone waterfalls. He guessed the pool was about fifteen feet square and six to eight feet deep, depending on the size of the submerged rocks. Despite the whirling eddies, Dixie could see rocks at the bottom of the pool as clearly as he could see the rocks upon which he stood. The water was crystaline. It was like looking through glass.

Dixie steeled himself for the icy plunge. He spied a fair sized fish not fifteen feet from his perch. Unsure of the true depth of the pool, he submerged himself feet first up to the neck. *Whoa!* He thought his body had gone into shock. Then he felt as though something from within was kicking him hard in the chest. Thump! Thump! Thump! His heart pounded as the cold water took his breath away. Dixie realized the kicking in his chest was actually the pounding of his heart. The muscle sought to pump the blood in a valiant attempt to keep his body warm against the shock of the ice cold mountain stream. *What a rush!* "Wheeeww!" he shouted loudly to no one. His shout echoed, bouncing downstream from rock to rock. He had never sensed anything quite like it. What was left of his manhood had shriveled down to nothing. He was burning calories fast. Dixie reckoned heavy people could lose pounds here easily, without dieting. He looked up to the treetop-lined blue sky, wondering if all this was real.

Then he looked down through the clear, pristine waters at the lower half of his body to watch his legs bicycling to keep him afloat. He could see them pedaling, but he had trouble feeling them. Could be the first person to ever swim here? *Could be, ya never know*. Could be he was the only one ever stupid enough to brave such wet cold. Dixie swam around the pool vigorously to warm himself.

For kicks, he stuck his head in and out, under the waterfall. When he emerged, much to his chagrin, he spotted some kids, hippie, college kids, from the looks of them. They sure had arrived on the scene unexpectedly. *Hippies! the last of a dying breed!* "Hmmpf!" Dixie liked to think of himself as liberal minded. But he had never cared much for draft card-burning hippies. Of course, due to his loss of memory, hippies were really just a history lesson for him in this present age of disco. Still, after what he had been through and what hippies represented, well ...

There were six of them, three girls and three guys, all wearing cut-off jeans and sporting long hair. The girls wore bikini or bra-like two-piece bathing suit tops and from what Dixie could see with his sharp eyes, they did not believe in

shaving. The boys were shirtless, but bearded. All wore long, long hair. They had come to wade and climb and sun themselves on rocks like the snakes they were.

Now hold on there, Dix. They caught you with your pants down, don't forget.

The teens spotted Dixie. One of the boys called out a warning to him.

"Hey Mann! Aren't you cold? You're lips are turnin' blue. Better not stay in there too long, Mann."

Dixie nodded and offered a weak, "Thanks." If they had not come along, he would be out right now, drying off on a hot rock. But now he could not get out until they left. Terribly self-conscious, he did not want them to see his wounds. He had taken a lot of ragging from his teammates, dorm mates and barracks mates about his lack of anatomy. Funny thing was, the couple of women who had seen him, had not minded at all. In fact, truth be told, his deformities seemed to attract them all the more, as if his wounds challenged their womanhood. Yes, his scars had challenged them to draw the love from him in the most amorous of ways. Nevertheless, that was not the case here, so Dixie swam around the pool heartily, in a vain effort to keep warm while he was freezing his butt off, or what was left of it. One good thing about the cold reasoned Dixie, he no longer felt the stiff soreness of his cross country bike ride. That's because the wet cold had numbed him so, he could feel hardly anything at all.

As he started to lose the feeling in his upper legs and extremities as well as his feet, Dixie knew he would have to crawl out of the cold creek. The kids were still there on the bank laughing and skylarking, not minding him. Half were climbing on the rocks. Half were sitting on the rocks or the creek bank sunning themselves with some late afternoon-early evening rays that filtered between the pines and hemlocks. Dixie thought he could retrace his steps quickly, get his clothes and get his pants on, while shielding his deformities from them. He thought wrongly.

Carefully, climbing out from the water onto the grey rocks with his teeth chattering, Dixie attempted to cover himself with shivering, crossed hands. Because he was wetter than a fish and slipperier too, now, his numb feet failed him when he stepped onto a dry rock. He slipped, falling roughly to one knee, cutting himself slightly. This occurred a couple of times. It was a nightmare. Suddenly, the great natural beauty of his private mountain stream playground, had transformed into a den of horrors filled with public shame. The loss of feeling in his feet sabotaged his sincere efforts, making him appear ludicrous.

Dixie had to sit on a rock, surrounded by the gurgling stream, to rub some life back into his feet and calves. He turned his back to the hippies whom he knew were watching. To get out of the stream and get to his clothes, he had to pick his way slowly and carefully across the rocks. He spread his hands out far from his sides, like a tightrope walker in a circus to keep from falling, but exposed himself fully to the curious onlookers. Even worse, he had to lean forward like a monkey using all four of his limbs to balance himself, showing his bare end and its shortcomings. It was pure torture. Dixie's embarrassments became plainly evident for all to see. To compound his shame, Dix was all shriveled up. He

shivered and shook like a frightened fawn. As he expected, as it always had, the heckling began from the boys. One sat on the near bank, the other on a rock.

"Well, looky there Greg. Believe that fella musta left something BEE-HIND in the creek." They chuckled. Dixie shivered and plodded shakily toward his goal.

"Yeah, froze a chunk right off'n his ass end. Must be colder than we thought. Ha! Hey fella, what's your name?" Again, Dixie ignored them, persevering, trying to maintain his balance. Their ridicule helped him take his mind off the cold a little. He did not look at any of them, though he could feel all six pairs of eyes on him or, more specifically, on the lack of him.

"Hey Buddy, didn't you hear me? Just cause you're missin' an ass and an ear, don't mean you're missin' your hearin', too. Does it?" Controlled laughter arose from the boys. Acting as if he were alone, Dixie crawled out from the shade into the sun, slipping here and there. Oooh, did he wallow in the heat from those rays!

"Hey Ace, I recognize this jive turkey."

"Yeah?"

"Oh yeah, sure. Never forget a face like that." They laughed again.

"Well, what's his name, Greg?"

"Why, don't you know who that is? Why, that's Silly Willy's brother."

"Oh yeah? How can you tell?"

"Well, you heard Silly Willy cut his toilet seat in half?"

"No, I didn't. Why did he do that?"

"'Cause his half-assed brother there was coming to town."

That remark drew some loud chuckles. Dixie had reached his towel by now and was drying off. So far, he had heard nothing new. That sun felt good, as did the heat bouncing up off the rocks. They were partial compensation for his travails.

"No! That's not Silly Willy's brother. His brother might be half-assed, but at least, he's a full man, not like this turkey. Look at 'im! No, he's a Gook spy."

Though not fully dried, Dixie hurried to step into the cords he had left by the stream. Then he dried off his upper body some more, still pretending to ignore the jokes directed at his expense. He refused even to look in the hippies' direction. His cords were hot from lying in the sun. They provided a welcome, warm relief to his lower extremities and a much needed covering for his shame.

"No kiddin' Ace, the hell you say!"

"Yeah, it's true and I know his code name."

"Yeah? Really? Tell us, Ace, what's his code name?"

"This is secret stuff now, so you gotta keep it under your hat, but ... his code name is ... Won ... Hung ... Lo."

Well, they all cracked up over this one with loud, belly busting guffaws all around. Dixie guessed these hippies must have pretty good eyesight. Given the shriveling effect of the cold water upon his person, he wondered that they could see what he had, let alone what he had not. Nevertheless, Dixie chuckled to himself at the originality of their joke, while he pulled his silver and purple

baseball three-quarters sleeve, inner shirt on over his tousled, dripping, wet head. Still, he refused even to acknowledge his new "friends."

Dix re-attached his rubber ear as quickly as possible and that act drew some jibes from his unwanted audience, as well. They jeered, that now, they knew why he hadn't replied to them. He hadn't had his ear—"the better to hear us with." Dixie rubbed his limbs vigorously with his hands in order to warm himself. He stood with his back to his detractors as he began to feel his lower body parts again. Things were looking up, despite his hecklers. As he dried and combed his long, black mane straight back, pure, cold, mountain creek water dripped down his back. A warm, tender, female voice, from very close behind, startled him.

"Hey, now! Don't pay any attention to them jerks! They don't mean nothin' by it. Sometimes, they just act like ASSHOLES!" She had raised her pitch to emphasize the last word for their benefit, but then her natural alto softened once more. "But we all do sometimes, don't we?" Her sympathetic tone moved him.

Dixie turned around to look at the person behind the voice. She was smiling—a real cutie: barefoot, about five-foot five or six inches with an attractive figure. Her hips and shoulders were of equal breadth and her waist was slim. *Damn slim!* Without doubt, the girl had some curves. Raven black hair fell to her waist. She featured bright blue eyes with broad, long, arched dark brows and scarlet red lips. Faded blue, cut-off jeans revealed tanned but hairy, chorus girl legs. A bra-like bathing suit top colored in a red, orange, yellow and pink floral motif warmed Dixie up even more, because of how well she filled it. Her nose and ears were a little on the large side, but her lips were enticing and her eyebrows and eyelashes, long, broad and black. She looked to be between eighteen to twenty. Deeply tanned, the girl's complexion was clear. In some ways, she reminded Dixie of the picture of his Rock'N'Roll girl, or maybe that other girl on the last album cover, the one with the pitch black locks, or maybe even the silhouette girl. Except, curiously enough he found both underarms like the legs of this cutie were unshaven. Rather than deter him, he found her natural body hair intriguing.

Evidently, he interested her as well. She peered intently at first one eye, then the other. His apparently close set, two-toned peepers seemed to intrigue her. In his brief two years of existence, Dixie found this phenomenon to be true with most females. Rose and Donna had both told him that the contrast in his eye color made the dark eye appear to be set lower in his head and closer to his nose than the blue eye. They claimed both eyes appeared to be set too close together, kind of like an optical illusion. Evidently, his eyes attributed to him a perplexed, child-like look, which the two woman had found to be at once both vulnerable and enticing. Both said the contrast had served to mesmerize them. The closer they had looked to discern the illusion, the more engrossed in him they had become. The attraction was not only the sharp contradiction of the electric blue and jet black hue of the irises. But it was also his thick, long black eyelashes and brows, which they had claimed were more like a girl's. Or, so they had said.

"Yeah, I guesso," he replied casually. She smiled pertly in return.

"Look, um, have you eaten dinner yet?" Dixie shook his head. "Well, we've got some hot dogs and hamburger meat, back at our camper." She smiled invitingly and nodded in a backwards direction. "Would you like to eat with us?"

One of the long-hairs behind her over on the rocky bank called out, "Come on Moons, whaddaya doin'? We just can't feed everybody you feel sorry for, like that stray cat you brought back to the dorm." The girl called "Moons" rotated her trunk in the hippie's direction. Dixie bent over to pick up his wet towel.

"Aw shut up, Greg! You've said enough already."

The girls' angry tone melted into sweetness and light as she turned back to Dixie. She apologized for her traveling partner. "Wish I could think of an excuse for such rudeness," she remarked tenderly, "but I can't. Sometimes I, I'm ashamed to say he's my step-brother." She glanced angrily in the step-bother's direction before asking Dixie: "So how 'bout it, are ya hungry?" She smiled and raised her already naturally arched eyebrows to underscore her question.

As if on cue, Dix's stomach growled. Both looked at his stomach and laughed.

"Guess that's a 'Yes'. My name is Molly Malloy, but they call me 'Moons' or 'Two Moons', if you like." Though curious about her nickname, he said nothing.

She held out her hand for him. Dixie shifted the towel to his left hand to shake hands. She couldn't help but notice his missing finger joints. Dixie's hand was cold but he felt a noticeably warm semi-electric tingle in her grasp. Surprise registered across her face, but she said nothing. Was it because of his missing joints or had she felt the tingle as well?

"And what's your name? I'm sure it's not Silly Willy," grinned Moons.

Dixie laughed. "No, no.It's not Won Hung Lo, either." They both chuckled.

"Actually, I'm not sure what my name really is. To be honest . .." He looked off up the hill for a minute. "But I intend to find out, soon. In the meantime," he returned his gaze to her. "I go by Dixie." Dixie couldn't believe how well he was speaking after the embarrassment he had undergone and the ribbing he had just taken. There was something about this strange girl's magically free and easy manner that warmed his heart and put him at ease. Grinning, she winked at him.

"Well, Mr. Dixie, let's go grab some grub." Dixie responded confidently again.

"Uh, I, uh, gotta get my stuff first. Don't wanna leave it out here, ya know?"

"Sure. What stuff?"

Dixie folded his towel lengthwise in half and slung it over his left shoulder. He led her by the hand around a rock and tree where she could see his bike and gear.

"Cool, so you're a biker?" Her eyes widened with approval as she held onto his hand, warming it up. Dixie nodded as he felt it tingle. "What a turn on! That's far out, Mann!" The attractive hippie spoke in the vernacular of a day gone bye. Was she referring to or his bike or the tingle? She didn't say. They walked over to his camp hand-in-hand, where he quickly put on some socks as well as his ankle-holstered pistol on his left leg and his ankle-sheathed stiletto on the right. He didn't look up to notice her expression. Then he pulled on his boots, rolled up his

sleeping bag and tied all his gear on the bike. The girl watched with interest, but, if the weapons frightened her, she did not say so.

"Ah, nuts!" exclaimed Dixie only mildly perturbed.

"What's a mattah?"

"My canteen! Left it back there, in the stream."

Dixie threw his thumb back in the direction from which he had come. He quickly stuffed the towel in his athletic bag. Then he bounded back to the stream with an athletic grace that belied the bumbling awkwardness he had displayed moments earlier, when he had trod, wet-footed and ape-like over the slippery, smooth rocks. As he bent down to pick up his canteen, he dipped his hand in the cold, babbling brook. He slurped the sweet water. Dixie picked the wet canteen out of the stream and swiped it down a couple times to knock the water from its outer USMC cloth cover. Then he bounded back to her like a gazelle, holding the dripping wet canteen at arm's length. She remarked with some surprise.

"You're really quite graceful, aren't you?" Dixie replied by asking gently.

"Would you like a swig of cool sweetness?" He offered her the canteen.

"Is that water OK to drink?" asked Moons suspiciously.

"It should be. We're pretty high up here. The source of that stream can't be too far away. Don't believe, there's been much to pollute it between here and there."

"What about acid rain?" she replied quickly.

"Acid rain? Nevah hoid of it," joked Dixie, laughing. The girl grinned.

"Sure, I'll chance a swig of SWEETNESS."

Dix handed her the opened canteen. She shook out her shiny, long, black hair, throwing it out of the way, in a most naïve but alluring manner. The girl eyed Dixie as she drank with a smile in her bright blue eyes. Dixie felt playful.

Suddenly, his eyes rolled back in his head. He became apoplectic, grabbing his throat. The girl choked on her water. "What's wrong, what's wrong Dixie?"

"Ah-ah-acid r-rain!"

"Oh NO!"

"Ah-ah-ah-CHOO!" Dixie sneezed ceremoniously, dropping his pretense as easily as he had begun it. "Guess, it was just a rough sneeze." He grinned slyly.

The girl's expression turned from white fright to red bewilderment and then to dark anger, but only briefly before she got hold of herself. Then she unceremoniously dumped some of the canteen's contents over his head, laughing heartily. "Oh, you! You are something else, aren't you?" she teased. She brushed his wet hair back upon his head, still chuckling, and touched his cheek.

"Gee, you're still cold, Baby!"

"Well, you get cold when you're like me, so 'far out' … in space, right?"

Dixie was really feeling his oats. The girl shot him a mock, dirty look and then curled a devilish grin. *She's a real vixen.* He grinned back. He didn't know where this thing was headed, but he didn't mind taking the time to find out. As far as he was concerned, he was still a free man out on his own, traveling alone.

"So, where's your camper?" Dixie shivered involuntarily as he shook the water off his head. He took the canteen from her and screwed the top on again.

"What? Oh, 'bout a mile or so down the trail, over in the campground parking lot. Hey, don't you know you aren't allowed to ride your cycle on this hiking trail?" She scolded him, mockingly crossing her arms under her healthy chest and squinted those electric blue peepers at him.

"You caught me red-handed, Moons!" What can I say?"

Dixie put his fists together out in front of him and offered himself up to her for a citizen's arrest. She slapped down sharply at his hands, knocking them apart.

"Let you off with a warning this time," she grinned.

"Well thanks. I guessed as much, but ... Well, here, come on, hop on up behind me. I'll give you a lift."

"Love to, anytime." Now she winked slyly.

Dixie released the kickstand, pulled his dark shades from off their resting place on top of the sleeping bag and put on the glasses.

The girl smiled broadly, climbing on behind him with his help, as it was no easy chore for her to squeeze in between him and his bulky baggage. Evidently, the weapons she had seen him carrying did not bother her at all. Dixie believed he detected a faint scent of honeysuckle upon her. She noticed his license plate.

"Say? You rode all the way from California on this thing?"

"Yep, guilty again."

"Now, that's far out! Really far out, Mann!"

"Yeah, sure feels far." Dixie reached behind him to rub his derriere, which she patted playfully. The biker spoke to her over his shoulder. "OK, hold on tight now and lean with me. These paths are kind of rough. Put your feet on those footrests on each side. If you need to stop, just squeeze me twice."

"My pleasure."

She held him as tight as Miss Riordan had and Dixie did not think that was possible. In fact, Dixie did not think this whole scene was possible, rather kind of deja vu. So much like what happened outside El Paso, it was surreal. *Life on the road!* Of course, this girl would have no choice but to hold on to him tightly, as they would bump over this rough mountain terrain. When he had ridden Miss Riordan, Dixie had removed his duffle and garment bags from the sissy bar, so she, and the kids, before her, could sit on the back seat comfortably.

However, here he was carrying all his belongings, with this cutie wedged in between him and them, forcing Dixie to slide up partially onto the gas tank. He could feel the entire front of the girl's warm, shapely body smushed into his backside, as well as her upper legs, which snugly encircled his rear and thighs. And he did not mind at all, no not one bit. She warmed him all over. He faced forward to start, but Moons squeezed him twice. Dixie turned his head.

"What? We haven't even started yet," remarked Dixie, bewildered.

"Yeah, I know. Just couldn't resist."

He spun his head around to look at her. Grinning, she winked coquettishly.

"OK, Dix. You're the man now. Let's go get some meat!" She ordered in a lower, manly voice and a serio-comic frown.

Smiling, Dixie shook his head, put on his dark glasses, started the engine and they were off up the trail like a pack mule.

"Wheweee! Go for it, Dix!" This Moons behaved as if she were riding a roller coaster, when he was going no faster than a bicycle. *It ain't even out of second gear, for cryin' out loud! If she's so enthusiastic over this kiddy, scooter ride, how will she react to a real ride?* He grinned to himself as he pictured that one. Moons directed him over the bumpy footpath, up the mountain to her camper parking lot. Besides her camper and van, there was only one other camper and a trailer on the other side of the lot. Dixie helped Moons dismount. She shouted.

"That was frigid mann, really cool! Maybe we can go for a ride after dinner?"

"Well, maybe we can," smirked Dixie. *Frigid?* He had never heard that before.

"Hey Dixie! Come on into our humble abode."

She ushered him up the camper's back steps. The camper was actually a brown and white Winnebago Chieftain and looked fairly new. The vehicle bore Michigan license plates. It was the only recreational vehicle (RV) parked on this end of the mostly level but deserted, grey-blue gravel, cinder lot. Next to the camper was a beat up old VolksWagen (VW) van, covered with painted multicolored flowers and rainbows. The van also bore Michigan plates. The mobile home rested near some tall pines and yellow birch in a corner of the lot. The RV backed up next to the rocky, carved out mountainside. Overhanging large, green ferns and leafy trees provided shade. Farther up the mountain, a couple trees grew sideways out of some crevices to offer extended shade over the lot. Cookout grills and dark red picnic benches lay within a hundred feet of the camper. A couple of tall beech shaded the picnic area as well. An orange tent stood in a glade near the parking lot. Chipmunks and squirrels hopped around freely, while birds whistled their evening songs.

Again, Moons winked and waved him toward the RV. Dixie followed her into the back of the camper. She sure was big on winking, mused Dixie, approvingly. Inside, the Winnebago was like a little house, with all the comforts of home, including a bathroom, a little freezer-refrigerator, an oven and a television. The mobile home made Donna's bandbox look like a castle. Though he was just a hair shy of six feet, Dixie felt like he had to bend over inside the camper, though he really did not need to do so. "You all sleep in here?" Dixie asked curiously.

"Well, no but we could. The sofa here slides and opens up and the bed can sleep all us girls easily. But the boys sleep out in the tent. Works out better for everyone that way, see?" She grinned. "Cozy, don't ya think?" Without waiting, she showed him around the place.

More like claustrophobic. Dixie smiled politely but said nothing.

The girl spurned all the camper's amenities by choosing to cook some hamburger meat outside on one of the park grills. He helped her prepare the meal. She gave him the charcoal, lighter fluid and a can of beer and asked him to

heat the coals on one of the grills outside in the picnic area. The attractive hippie hustled around there pretty quickly. The girl seemed to know her way around a kitchen and, after they had moved outside, around a cookout grill, as well.

Dixie sneaked some peaks at her from behind his shades, while they cooked and drank their beers. Her lashes were incredibly long. He wondered if they were for real. Her dentures were white as snow and her eyes as brightly blue as his single blue eye. Her nose was a little long, but straight and nicely shaped. There was a bump that crossed up near the bridge as if her nose had been broken once, maybe at birth thought Dixie, as had happened with Lori Lei. Dixie believed her nose gave Moons true character and may have been her best feature, though some may have deemed it less than beautiful.

The meat was nearly cooked when the rest of her group arrived after the long hike up the winding trail. The girls huffed and puffed. The Greg guy spoke up.

"Hey, it smells good, Baby," He reached for a roll. Moons held a long skewer fork, which she jabbed lightly into his forearm. "Ouch! Dammit Moons!"

"You fix your own. These are for me and Dixie." She brandished the skewer and flashed her eyes, which revealed a boiling meanness that took Dixie aback. Greg hesitated, but he smirked slyly.

"Sure, Honey. No problem. But ya don't gotta be so touchy about it, Baby." He licked his fingertip and shot her a disparaging look. Then he backed off.

"And don't call me that no more, Greg. You got no right, not any more!" She glared towards him still waving the long fork like a weapon. He slinked away wearing a wide, sarcastic grin. Dixie kept quiet.

Greg was supposed to be her step-brother, right? That's what she said, right?

Moons and Dixie ate while the others bustled about preparing their meals. He scarfed down two cheeseburgers, a couple hot dogs, a dish of applesauce and another of potato salad, in record time. He had long since drained the last, golden drops of his beer. Moons didn't eat half that much, yet he finished before she did.

"Ya know", she admitted, "it warms a woman's heart good when she sees a man enjoy her cookin' like that."

"Yeah, well your heart ought to be burnin' up, 'cause that was excellent. Really hit the spot." Dix grinned as he showily smacked his hard, flat belly, producing a long, loud burp. They both laughed and Dixie excused himself.

Moons answered softly, after she had swallowed a mouthful, and eyed him soberly. Her voice lowered an octave, taking on a sultry tone.

"Oh trust me, Baby. My heart surely is burin' up, all right. Believe me, it is." She stared hard into his eyes.

Dix eyed her solemnly for a minute. Then he belched loudly and excused himself again, hoping to defuse the heavy atmosphere. She beamed.

"Yep. Must have been REAL goooood." The cutie returned her attention to her meal, toasting him silently with her beer can. This girl was all right thought Dix, not getting all huffy after a simple, natural burp, as many females he knew would. And she took his cue to drop the heavy stuff and move on, and without

being told twice, either. As she ate, Dix noticed Moons' long fingernails were painted scarlet. This, he also liked. They matched her full, bright red lips.

The girl perked up when a squirrel hopped up onto the table. She rewarded the bold animal with some crumbs from her hotdog roll. The rodent took the bread between its claws and bobbed its head politely twice, as if to say "Thank you, thank you very much." Then it turned tail and hopped away with its treasure, drawing chuckles from both Dixie and Moons.

As she finished off her food, the lively girl introduced Dixie to all of her crew. They had come back out from the camper after retrieving their food to cook on the grill, also. First up was Michael, her full brother, with whom she shared her dark features and blue eyes. Next was the one called Ace with the wild, wiry, sandy brown Afro. Then there was the brash one, the step-brother, the lean, pony-tailed, brown-haired, brown-eyed, swarthy Greg, whom Dixie had already met, sort of. One of the other two girls was nondescript and a cousin of Moons, kind of mousey looking but not wholly unattractive. The other girl, a tall, slender, handsome blonde, had been Moons' college roommate at Michigan State. Like Moons, the girls wore their hair long, down to their butts and were unshaven. Hmm, reflected Dixie, in this age of Disco, this group must be the last of the hippies. But if so, that Moons is the most attractive hippie he had ever met.

During the course of their conversation, Dixie let slip that he was an amnesic, who was searching for his identity. Uncommonly talkative, he mentioned that he might be somebody by the name of Nick Sheeboom. Well, the kids dropped their utensils as well as their jaws, because they knew the name. The hippies hailed from Michigan. A couple of them, including Moons, had seen *GRT* and Nick Sheeboom, live, in a weekend concert in the fall of '71, at the Michigan State field house in East Lansing. They all attended MSU now, but at the time of the *GRT* concert, Moons was still in high school in Lansing. Moons gushed when she proclaimed that was the first and the best rock concert she had ever attended. She said she had had a big crush on Nick Sheeboom ever since.

"Crush? Mann, that was a nuclear meltdown!" laughed Mike. Moons blushed.

"That was until I came along, right Baby?" interposed Greg, grinning from ear to ear. Moons responded by rolling her eyes and screwing up her face as if she just caught a whiff of something putrid. Laura, the blonde roommate, prevented a fight by intervening to ask Dixie to sing a *GRT* tune, to see if he sounded like the famous Rock'N'Roller. The others echoed her request. Now Dixie felt his ears get hot. Embarrassed, he looked toward the ground and shook his head.

"Aw, I could never sing in front of pee-people, pe-people I da-d-didn't know."

Greg suggested triumphantly, "Then you ain't Nick Sheeboom, then. He didn't mind singin' in front of thousands of people." Dixie shrugged, nonplussed..

"Maybe n-not, but I'm g-gonna find out."

So far, they hadn't said anything about his stuttering. He told himself to relax. He told himself he would never see these people again. *So don't sweat it, Mann*. He didn't really feel much like talking with them now anyway. *With Moons,*

yeah, hell yeah! But not with the others. Then the mousey one, ran inside and returned shortly with the *Lest We Forget* album. She asked Dixie to remove his ever present sunglasses, which he did. Then she opened the album cover, exclaiming, "Oh magosh! I don't believe it. He is Nick Sheeboom. Look!"

One by one, they inspected the inside of the album cover, as Laura placed the thin end of a black ballpoint pen over Nick's upper lip in the picture, simulating Dixie's moustache. Moons placed her hand over her open mouth, looking first at the album cover, then back at Dixie, then back to the cover. A respectful hush fell over all of the hippies. Suddenly, instinctively, Dixie sensed these hippies revered him, when they had all, except Moons, derided and suspected him just a short while ago. Dixie noticed the change in their demeanors, but could not figure it, because he could not relate to being a big Rock'N'Roll star. Whether he liked it or not, he was now the sole topic of conversation.

"FAR OUT!" chided Mike. "Like OUTER SPACE, FAR OUT, MANN. Yeah! Dig it! The famous Nick Sheeboom has been missing for two years and we find him up here in the middle of nowhere? Dude! That is some kind of hea-VEEE!"

In a sober tone Ace asked, "You know, I bet you've had a dozen top ten hits?"

"Aw BULL! *GRT* don't have no dozen top ten hits!" interrupted Greg rudely.

"Well, a half dozen at least!" replied Ace assertively.

"No way, Mann!"

"Yeah Greg, they do," added Laura. "I can count at least eight off the top of my head right now.

"And how would you know? What are you? Their accountant or somethin'?"

"Yeah Greg, or something! I've been following GRT for four years. They useta be my favorite group! And why the hell are you so interested, Greg?"

"What could you possibly care?" Moons inquired derisively. "You just said Dix here couldn't possibly be Nick Sheeboom anyway. I've had about enough of your attitude around here. Think it's time for you to pack up your gear and split."

Greg glared at her and simmered, but he didn't open his mouth. What power Moons could hold over the kid, Dixie could only guess. Dixie decided to veer the conversation casually back in the direction from which it had spawned.

"No, really, I, I didn't know that about the hits and stuff," replied Dixie trying hopefully to match Ace's earlier sincerity and redirect the conversation. Dixie was talking like a champ and told himself to keep it up. All the kids had turned their attention back to him now. "However, in the last couple of days, comin' across country, I, uh, I've heard all of 'em on my tape player and some of 'em have pretty catchy tunes, a good beat. You know? Yeah, I gotta admit, they do."

"Some of 'em?" The Ace shook his head, bewildered. "Mann, you gotta be a millionaire, at least!" The others concurred, shaking their heads solemnly, almost in unison, all except Greg who still simmered from Moons' caustic chiding.

"Millionaire, hunh? Ha! Almost my entire estate is sitting right over there," observed Dixie dryly, pointing towards his Honda. "Yassir! Practically everything I own is on that bike."

"Gee, Dix." observed Moons admiringly. "You talk like you like it that way."

"Well, that's 'cause I do. I don't really need much. Guess I got all I need."

"Everything?" Moons' tone was playfully sexy. Dixie backpedaled.

"Well, financially speaking, that is." She grinned at him and he smiled back.

"Cool! Dig it! Baby, can you dig it?" Mike sang the old rock tune, laughing and slapping the top of the picnic table with his open hand. His jovial good nature amused Dixie. Then Moons explained that her brother Mike was feeling the effects of doing a little grass down by the stream along with the other guys. Mike opened his glassy eyes wide and grinned like a devil.

"Who? Me?" He shook his head playfully, obviously, guilty as charged.

Laura asked, dumbfounded. "And you don't remember anything, nothing at all? You can't play the harmonica, nothin'?"

"Well, I learned how to bugle some in the Corps," conceded Dixie now that the climate had changed in his favor. Dixie extracted the bugle mouthpiece that he humped in his pocket. "I can blow reveille, taps, recall, etc., some of them Big Band tunes, like 'Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B,' which was my company, by the way." He smiled proudly. "I was in the Third Marines."

No one else smiled, except Greg, who merely smirked. Apparently, mention of his amnesia distressed them or they could care less about the Third Marines.

Ace remarked, "You mean, you made all them hit songs and all you can do now is blow a couple crummy bugle calls?"

Dixie stared blankly back at him. The others seemed embarrassed for him. They avoided Dixie's innocent gaze. He didn't mention the few songs he had written the last couple of years. He didn't want anyone to know about them. Slightly cowed, Dixie hid by replacing his shades over his nose.

Moons changed the subject.

"Hey, Dixie?" she asked brightly. "How 'bout takin' a walk with me, up the hill there? Walk off this fine meal? Know a place with a great view?" She raised her eyebrows in a beckoning fashion.

Her perky smile was genuine. Dixie considered her offer. He was about 550 miles from his destination. Even if traffic were bad, he could make Maryland probably in ten, maybe eleven, hours at worst. The sun would not set for another hour or two. He had some time to kill. And this girl was something else, a real winner. He returned the raven-haired beauty's smile.

"Sure. Love to," he replied. She beamed broadly his way.

"Just a minute," she said raising a forefinger in the air and jumping down off the picnic table upon which she had been perched.

"Yeah, just a minute is right, Moons," countered Greg.

Greg had toned down his emotions, but he was resolute nonetheless.

"You ain't goin' nowhere with him, not without me, you ain't. And that's for damned sure."

"The hell you say. Just who do you think you are? Mister Pain-in-the-Ass!"

"You know. I'm the guy that's, uh," Greg smiled cynically, "related to you, kinda personal-like related, you might say. I'm the one you like to—"

"No, not no more you ain't! Not after what you did!" Moons glared at him defiantly and started towards the camper. She ignored the others who listened with downcast eyes. She turned to Dixie and smiled, as if nothing had occurred.

"Be right with ya, Dix."

She started to walk away but Greg moved to block her. Moons stepped around him. Again, the angry Greg cut off her path. When she began to step around him a third time, he raised his open palm as if to strike her.

"You bitch—" but before he could act or speak further, Moons' brother Mike stepped swiftly between the two of them. Despite his weed-induced high, Mike's jovial demeanor had been replaced with sober resolve.

"She said, 'no more,' Mann. That means NO MORE, unless she changes her mind, understand?" The two brothers were about Dixie's height. Mike was a bit thicker and he had right on his side, as far as Dixie could see. Standing face to face, they stared hard at each other. There was no brotherly love here.

Moons leaned around Mike to see both his and Greg's face.

"I don't want him to, not no more, not ever!"

There was a Mexican standoff for the space of a minute, with each man eyeing the other distrustfully. Like bulls squaring off, they snorted heavily. Yet neither of the long hairs moved. Moons tugged on Mike's elbow from behind.

"Thanks Mike, but I can take of myself, you know that. Come on now. We don't need no trouble here." Dixie stood up and spoke.

"Look! I gotta be goin' anyway, really. I don' wanna cause no trouble, either. That's for sure. Honest." He was apologetic in tone as well as in manner. Moons turned towards him with all trace of anger replaced with an inviting, sweet smile.

"Oh no. Now you Baby, YOU are an entirely different matter all together. And I definitely wanna take a hike with you, Big Boy. No, you're not going nowhere 'cept up the hill with me, see?" She cooed and smiled brightly. Her bright blue eyes and scarlet lips mesmerized him. He hesitated, then she spoke again.

"Just a sec Baby, I be right back." She gave Dixie a flirtatious wink and jogged excitedly toward the camper steps. Dixie watched her go with interest as her long hair swished from side to side across her shapely butt.

"You always get what you want?" he called after her, amused.

As she mounted the steps, the coquette turned around, peeking from behind her swaying, long, raven hair. "Not always, but ... MOST always." She threw her head back, laughing, then turned and entered the camper, swishing her fetching fanny a little more than Dixie recalled was natural to her walk. And what had been merely natural for her had been more than pleasing to him.

With long, purposeful strides, Greg followed Moons across the picnic grounds into the camper. Dixie and the others heard loud, angry voices coming from inside the RV. They looked around at each other, ashamed, trying to avoid one

another's gaze. Mike strolled over to the camper, just in case he were needed, but he did not enter.

To make conversation, Dixie asked how Molly came by the nickname of "Two Moons." The others looked at one another and giggled. Dixie chuckled involuntarily but he did not know why.

"So what's the big joke?" He asked. The girls and Ace shook their heads.

"It's her boobs, Mann," observed Ace. 'Becca the cousin, chided him.

"You don't gotta say it like that Ace! Sheesh." The mousey girl turned to Dixie. "Molly has a unique, uh, chest set, you know? She, she's got, well, like a pair of perfectly round, perfectly symmetrical full moons, you know?"

"And she always suns herself with her top on," added Laura. So she's very white like the moon. Dixie nodded.

"Oh, yes, I see. Sure, I get the picture."

"No, but if you're lucky tonight, you might," cackled the Ace. The girls shook their heads in disgust.

The RV door slammed open. Moons burst forth and the door slammed shut behind her. Undaunted, Moons descended the camper steps saucily, with her long raven hair swinging to and fro behind her back, wrapping about her slim waist as she came. The soles of her brown sandals slapped smartly against the soles of her heels. The bare-chested Greg leaned against the inner camper door frame, drinking from a can, and staring out through the camper screen door at the girl.

Now, reeking of honeysuckle scent, the black-haired cutie returned with a six-pack of Hamm's beer. A Nikon camera dangled from her wrist. She handed two of the cans to her compatriots and kept the remaining four. Then she used her camera to take a picture of Dixie as he held a can of beer in either hand.

"A two-fisted drinkin' man! That's the kind I like!" she proclaimed. The vivacious girl grinned widely, with all hint of her trouble with Greg, apparently an evaporated memory. She took a picture of "the two-fisted drinkin' man," with his hands outstretched, each wrapped a round a can of Hamm's. Then she motioned with her head and her hand, "Come on. It's this way, Baby."

Greg loomed upon the threshold of the open camper door, still scowling after her. The others watched as Dixie followed his comely, Smoky Mountain guide. They assailed a footpath behind the picnic area, heading west. Dixie was right on her tail, enjoying immensely the alluring swing of hr gait. Soon, the pair picked up a hiking and horse trail headed west towards Clift Knob Ridge. After they crossed the west prong of the creek, Moons led him off the marked trail south and ascended a rocky spur for nearly twenty minutes, before she stopped. They had come upon the Appalachian Trail. Moons popped open a can of beer and drink thirstily. Dixie followed suit. Breathing heavily, she took his picture again.

Moons threw her long hair back, slurped on her beer again and asked philosophically, "Ever notice how those first few gulps of beer taste so good when you're thirsty and, after that, they don't?" Dixie swallowed his beer and

nodded. He set his beer down on the rock and did his Wolf Man Jack imitation, grabbing his throat both hands and croaked.

"You mean, 'When you're two-fisted, wrapped around the tonsils, squeezin' 'em dry, kinda thirsty?'"

She laughed heartily. She had never heard that commercial before. Dixie was having no trouble speaking around her and the other kids, whom he would probably never see again. Maybe that was why. He felt loosey-goosey. He felt fine. The beer probably didn't hurt any either. And this girl's pleasantly flirtatious manner sure helped a lot, as well.

"Yeah, that's EXACTLY what I mean," she giggled.

They sipped some more beer and finished off their respective cans. Moons set her empty down on the waist-high, rock outcropping that intruded upon the path. She suggested he do the same.

"We'll pick 'em up on the way back down, Baby, if we remember. Come on."

The energetic teen jumped away and jogged up the broader, public trail, as their squirrelly guest had done earlier on the picnic table. Dixie was right on her tail. The heavy hiking sent the beer right to his head. *I feel loose. I feel fine*. Up, they hiked, sometimes using their hands to help. Dixie could hear a stream running through a ravine to the east, down to his left.

The dappled evening sunlight, filtered through the treetop canopy of, beech oaks and evergreens. The light diminished as clouds began to cover the forest like a blanket over a bed. The freshly met couple climbed higher and higher up to the spine of a rocky ridge. They turned right off the Trail onto an unofficial path. As they hiked, the path narrowed and undergrowth gave way to rocks and boulders and shade trees gave way more and more to firs and straight evergreens. Fortunately, Moons had remarked that poison ivy was scarce. She stopped, as if to take her bearings. Dixie no longer heard the rushing sound of the brook. His guide turned south to crawl upward along the ridge's spine. The unkempt path beneath their feet was fraught with criss-crossing tree roots, tiny rain-carved gullies, and lichen-covered rocks. Clouds blotted out some of the sun's rays. They wound up the spine of the mountain, careful to ride the crest of the ridge. Dixie could hear the gurgle of the creek's west prong again, down to his left, in a ravine, far below him. Onward and upward, he thought. But one look at the swish of her hair, swinging across her swaying, round caboose, energized him for more.

"This way." She pointed decisively to her left.

His guide turned and climbed higher. Her fragrant honeysuckle perfume was so strong, Dixie could have followed her blindfolded.

Moons pointed to a split in the brush between a couple of trees, where they stepped through some ferns. The pair doubled back to their left and then right, always upward, seemingly forging their own path among the evergreens and ferns. They had lost the official trail some time ago. The sound of the brook faded. Suddenly, they emerged upon the top of a sheer cliff. The sun, setting below the clouds, struck them strongly in the face, forcing them to squint. The

girl scrambled up the face of a craggy, rocky outcropping about fifteen feet high, topped by a lone fir. The shapely little mountain climber laughed loudly with an unopened can of beer in one hand and her camera dangling from the other. She leaped down off the rock, out of Dixie's sight. Her laughter echoed out across the Smokies. Dix was frightened, momentarily. *Did she jump off the face of the cliff?*

Dixie followed Moons anxiously by climbing up over the last rock only to find her lying on a rock flat out on her back, snapping his photo. She was merely a few feet beneath him, giggling like a schoolgirl. Her giggles bounced up the side of the mountain. Moons was sprawled out below him about five feet, on a rock that protruded like a broad, flat, lower lip from the mountain's face. The stony lip protruded at almost a right angle to the mountain wall and was about ten feet by eight feet in size, with the shorter side projecting out away from the mountain. Beaming broadly, she winked at him. She bid him to jump down and follow her. Then she led him close to the edge of the stony lip. Dixie followed cautiously, carrying his beer.

"Holy Mackerel!" exclaimed Dixie, losing his breath when he reached the lip's rocky edge. The treetops were so far beneath him, perhaps thousands of feet. Dixie lifted his arms as if they were wings. His stomach floated away and he felt like flying after it. The open air drew him on like a magnet.

Standing on the edge of the world and about to fall off, Dixie was almost compelled against his will to fly. Instinctively, he stepped back a couple feet from the edge, when he became dizzy. Beside him, Moons grinned again.

"I felt the same way, at first, Dix. But once you get used to it, you can stand closer. Mann, it really gives you a rush. Better than sex—Well, so they say ... " She hesitated with an embarrassed 'just picked off base' look on her face and chuckled nervously. With her tongue tied, she looked down rather sheepishly then up again with a quizzical expression. "Well, that depends on your partner, I guess, doesn't it?" she asked softly. Moons hesitated again looking up from under her downcast eyelids and doe-like lashes. The girl searched Dixie's features to ascertain if he believed her. "Course, I, I wouldn't know, really," she muttered. Moons flailed her arms innocently out and then down to her sides. The camera danced in the air as the girl gesticulated in defense of her innocence. "'S just what I hear, is all." Skeptical, the cute coed looked up at him. Then she blushed sweetly and smiled.

Dix nodded coolly. He wondered about this girl's sanity, considering her seeming lack of concern for the certain death that waited one step behind her.

Moons chuckled nervously. "No, I'm not crazy," she admitted.

How could she have known what he was thinking, wondered Dixie.

They stood at arm's length from one another. She pivoted backwards on the rock half a foot to take a picture of his profile. Dixie started to reach for her but stopped when she did.

"Here." Paying no attention to the drop off into oblivion a foot behind her, the adventuresome girl extended her feminine right hand toward him. He reached out

to accept it. Moons caressed his left hand tenderly, while she pulled him gently towards her and the edge of the cliff, steadily gazing into his eyes. As he slowly stepped forward, Dixie took his eyes off her raven-haired beauty to look at the miniature rocks and treetops so far beneath him. They resembled fake pieces of scenery on a Lionel train set. Both he and Moons faced toward the edge. Again, he felt that rush. The hair stood up on his arms and the back of his neck, as though he were riding fast on his Honda. His fingers and toes tingled. Once more, he felt pulled into nothingness as though he were taking flight.

Holding his hand, Moons must have felt the electrical stimulation passing between their fingertips, too, because she fairly purred. He watched as her lips parted and reddened beneath her lipstick. Her eyes widened and breathing became labored. However, Dixie purposefully tried not to pay her any overt attention, as he alternately studied the awesome scenery beneath him and next to him as well. Even so, the stimulating sensation emanating from her fingertips excited him, even against his will. It was as if she used the setting to will her electric passion into him. It was darned strange, darned strange, indeed!

Dixie attempted to concentrate on the view and on how close he was to the edge. Beneath the clouds on the western horizon, the partly cloudy sky began to assume a kaleidoscope of colors. Little more than a foot from oblivion, he still felt like flying. He and Moons must have been over three thousand feet in elevation. Amazingly, there was no fog this evening in the northwestern Smoky's and they could see for miles. Mountains cupped around them both to their north and south. But to the west, the rocky terrain dropped precipitously perhaps a thousand feet or more, enabling them to see over forest covered hills to the flat land out towards the horizon. They could see green and gold cookie cutter farm tracts in an irregular checkerboard setting. In the distance, rays from the setting sun glinted off metal objects like cars, silos and such.

Dixie felt as if he were king of all he surveyed. As he swallowed his heart back down into his chest, he became increasingly aware of his arousal and the steady current of electricity passing between their fingertips. He turned to the girl beside him who took that as a signal to embrace him. With a can of beer still in one hand, and without warning, she kissed him ardently. One false movement and they would have descended into the abyss. However, Dixie's fear of falling only heightened his sense of arousal in her arms, in the heat of her wet kiss. That kiss lasted long, exciting both of them with neither one willing to break it off. When they did, it was spontaneous and mutual.

She led him back a few feet towards the mountain wall, which formed a headboard with the bed that was the flat lip of the protruding rock upon which they stood. They set their beers down against the wall. Dixie's heart pounded within his chest, now as much from his flirtation with Moons as from their mutual flirtation with oblivion, perhaps more. After his earlier, icy cold dip, he figured now there was more than one way to get a heart pounding rush in the Smokies. The young rock climbers sat down with their backs up against the

mountainside to watch the sunset. They held hands but did not speak. The sun slipped below the cloud cover in the western sky, low enough to bother their vision. Moons used her left hand to shield her eyes from the sun's direct rays. Dixie offered her his special wraparound prescription sunglasses. She declined.

Dixie was trying to figure out why he was getting involved with this girl, when his new wife, his new life, supposedly, was just a few hours bike ride away. Was it really or was it just another illusion, like the silhouette girl? Like Rose Rosario? Like Donna and the boys? Did he really have a wife waiting to love him? Although he had never had any trouble attracting members of the opposite sex, he also did not go out on women he was seeing, whether it was Rose Rosario, Lori Lei or Donna. And he had had plenty of chances to do so. What was he doing here now? Of course, he did not know this alleged wife of his or whether she truly wanted him. And sure, this girl beside him was attractive, warm and outgoing, and really knew how to get his blood up. And sure, he felt so comfortable just being around her, but ... Could she be the silhouette girl?

When the red-orange sun hung just above the horizon, the two new friends rose up to walk back to the edge of the rock's lip. Again, the bold Moons led the way. She was brave enough to sit on the rock and dangle her feet over the brim, kicking them to and fro languidly, over a three thousand foot precipice. Moons placed her hands behind her and leaned back on her open palms. She was downright blasé about her rocky perch high above the Smokies. Dixie admired her. Sans sunglasses, she squinted and alternately used one hand or the other to shield her eyes from the sun's glare, supporting herself against the rock with her free hand. Neither spoke. They let nature speak for them and it was shouting glorious volumes, in full, natural color.

Again Dixie offered his shades to her, but, again, she politely declined them. Stubborn, he thought, but he admired her for it. Dixie sat to the side and a little behind the adventurous girl. Shortly, the sun had sunk low enough just above the horizon that the ozone provided a natural shield for their eyes. Dixie swiveled around on his rear end and then lowered himself down onto his belly. He crawled up to the rocky lip's edge, where he stuck his head out over the rock and into the twilight mountain air. Now, like a turtle, Dixie poked his head carefully out of his shell, hanging it over the precipice. She laughed at him, but, all the same, the Michigan Moll pushed herself back from the edge and swung her legs back around, to lay beside him in like manner. They folded their arms with their forearms flat against the stony surface, elbows at right angles to their chins and one hand over the back of the other, resting their chins between their knuckles. The pair lay like that, side by side, touching elbows, as they watched the sun melt away before them, leaving in its wake a glorious, colorful panorama.

When that naturally awesome display had ended, Dixie scooted back on the flat rock a little. Thus, he could roll over onto his back and rest his head upon the stone, without having his head dangle a few thousand feet up in the air. Moons turned and snapped another candid shot of him with her ever present camera, this

time with the flash on. Dixie admired her as she resumed her appreciative stare out into what was left of the afterglow of the glorious sunset.

"What are you gonna do with them pictures, Moons?"

"Put 'em in a album" she replied pertly, as she turned her head back to him. Call it 'My Summer Adventure – 1975!'" She pretended to block the title out on an imaginary theatre marquee. Dixie grunted, grinned and looked up at the sky.

"Yeah, women are good at that, creating photograph albums, I guess." He was thinking of Donna and the pictures she had given to him. Moons scooted back alongside of the prone Dixie.

"We're really very lucky, no fog right now. Blue fog—that's why they call 'em the Great Smokies, ya know? Sure was a beautiful sight though. Ya know, it's gonna be tough gettin' back now, Dix, without the sunlight, I mean." Her speech slowed, assuming a somber tone as she eyed him suspiciously out of the corners of her bright eyes. "We, uh, we won't be able to see where we're going, now. Guess we'll have to spend the night, uh, right here on this rock," she remarked slyly, arching one eyebrow. Dixie glanced casually over his shoulder at her and shrugged. Then he returned his attention skyward.

"Wouldn't worry about that," replied Dixie cavalierly. "I can see in the dark."

"Bull!" she snorted. "Nobody can see in the dark!" She turned in mock anger into him, resting upon her left forearm and elbow with her long, black hair tumbling down onto the rock beside him.

Dixie remembered what Big Jim had told him, so he thought he would pull the joke on her. He extended his hand to her and said, "Well, in that case, I'm glad to meet ya 'cause my name is Nobody.'"

She looked at him skeptically, but rolled over to him, taking his hand firmly in her own. Dixie felt an electric current tickle within in their grasp. Moons must have felt it as well. Suddenly, she scrambled upon him, removing his sunglasses and, in one continuous, swift motion, kissed him wildly this time. Eventually, the amorous girl enticed him to hug her tightly, just so he could get a break by pulling her head down next to his cheek and catch a breath of air. Their hearts were pounding out of their chests. Her heartbeat hammered as vigorously as his own. Dixie could also feel that he was strongly aroused. This girl kissed passionately, hotly. She did not hold back that was for sure. Dixie thought he should redirect things or he might not be able to control himself. This little co-ed was truly something else!

"Hey, you know what?"

"No, what?" Moons was ready to play.

"I can see those two beers we humped up here settin' back there by the wall. Don't know about you, but I'm kinda thirsty."

"Yeah, that's a good idea, Dix. I'll get 'em. Say wait a minute. I can see them cans, too. If that's what you mean by night vision, we better stay right here."

"HA! No that's not what I mean. Besides, I didn't say my vision was great at night, no, not at all like during the day. It's just better than most people's that's

all. And my eyes get use to the dark faster than most, like in five minutes. Also, these dark glasses I got are special-made. They actually help me see in the dark."

"Oh, Bull spit!" she exclaimed in frank disbelief. "Who do ya think you're talkin' to here? You think I was born yesterday?"

Dixie grinned like a devil. "Well, if you were, you sure been takin' some kinda vitamins!" He shook his head in feigned wonderment, as he whistled at her. She chuckled, accepting his compliment gracefully.

"Same kind of vitamins that are in your glasses there, I'll bet." Grinning, Moons nodded towards his shades.

"Maybe. I dunno what's in these glasses. But they make ya produce something called rhodopsin in your eye, gives ya "vision purple." Ya see better in the dark."

"Rhododendrons? Shoot! My mom's got them growin' in the side yard and we passed some on the way up. Suppose if I sniff 'em enough, I can see at night, too, hunh? See purple, like you. Ya think?"" Her speech dripped with sarcasm.

"Ha! Ha! Yeah, well maybe. I dunno about that. One thing I do know, Moons. Still am hankering after one of them brews over there." Dixie rolled his eyes towards the mountain wall.

She rose off him and quickly retrieved the beers. The cute co-ed handed him one of the beer cans, as he sat up to receive it. He thanked her and she sat down next to his left hip, facing him. Flinging her head to one side, her long, shiny straight, raven hair flipped back over her shoulder out of her face. When she popped the top on her beer can, the contents fizzed up, spilling over her red and orange swimsuit top. The girl raised the can over her head, then tilted back her black tresses. Moons eyed him while she caught the foamy overflow that drained down the side of the can into her open mouth. She half joked, he was welcome to lap up the brew that had spilled onto her chest. He shook his head in jest.

Dixie held his beer off to his right as he opened it away from her, to avoid the overflow, allowing it to splatter on the rock beside him.

"Got plenty right here, but thanks jes' the same. Here's lookin' at you, kid!" Dixie faced the girl and hoisted his can towards her.

"And the same to you, Dixie!" The girl smiled broadly and drank as he did. "Umm. This one's a little warm, but it still tastes pretty dammed good, too. Once you get past the foam to the real stuff. Ain't that always the way?"

"Yeah! Sure does taste good," he agreed smacking his lips.

They drank some more. Moons became serious.

"Dixie, you sure you don't remember anything at all? I mean NOTHIN'?" Cocking her brows and dropping her chin, Moons acted out her astonishment.

Dix took another long swig from the can and lay back down placing his right hand under his head to cushion it from the stony surface. He nestled a little closer to her to avoid laying in the spilt beer to his right. Moons sat sidesaddle upon the rock on her left side, leaning against his left side, facing him and the edge of the rocky lip. The girl leaned across his body propping herself on her left hand, resting her weight upon the flat rock next to the right side of his chest, waiting on

his response. They both held their beer cans on their exposed hips. Moons waited patiently for his response. The cool of the evening was beginning to descend upon them as the dying embers of the colorful sunset faded out. Dixie felt great!

The girl's request was sincere. He probably would never see her again and he liked her. She was genuine, fresh, unaffected. He would respond in like manner.

"Well ... there is one thing, but I don't know if it's a memory or something I made up. Least, that's what the shrinks think." He grew silently pensive.

Gently, she asked, "Well, would you mind telling me?" She peeked plaintively into his eyes.

Dixie looked at her in the dusk of the day. Her perfectly oval face was lined by straight, coarse black hair. Her longish, lovely visage was sculpted ideally with high cheekbones, fleshy, tanned cheeks, and a narrow, oval, cleft chin. Her scarlet lips, which he had already tasted, were lusciously inviting. The symmetrical lines of her eyes and mouth triggered a memory. He was thinking of the silhouette girl of whom Moons reminded him so closely. Dixie did not see any harm in telling her, though he had told no one else besides the doctors, not even Donna. And this girl was easy to talk to. He didn't think that he would ever see her again. He raised his head to sip on his beer, before lowering it back down. He checked her out again. Her question was guileless.

"OK, I guess", but once more he hesitated.

The girl gulped her beer. Then she leaned over him, smiling and nudging her half empty beer can into his arm.

"Well, go ahead, silly. I'm listenin.'" She grinned quiet encouragement towards him. Her gentleness induced him to continue.

"Well, the thing of it is." Sighing deeply, Dixie hesitated before he looked her way, where he observed tender patience fill her face. "OK. OK. Well, there's this picture, see? This image of a silhouette ... of a girl, actually. She's a beautiful, nude girl, profiled darkly against the moonlight. Yeah, silhouetted against the moon, but shrouded in mist, she is." Dixie warmed to his subject. He found a relief in the telling of his secret. He felt himself glow.

"Yeah, her hair is long, dark and thick, like yours, but dripping wet, like she just came out of a pool, ya know?" Dixie paused and received the encouraging nod he expected. "Well, she's beautiful, just awesome, like the first woman Eve must have looked. Or maybe, maybe even like a goddess, with long, straight dark hair. And the mist is settling in all around her, see?" He felt both his eyes and smile widen as he recalled the romantic vision. Moons smiled, too.

Dixie paused to let the recollection soak in. Moons drank her beer as he spoke. Her eyes lit up with his. He could see that she was tracking right with him.

"What color are her eyes? Blue?" Moons asked hopefully.

"No. Well, I dunno. I can't see her eyes 'cause of the mist, ya know? The mist is like a mask over her eyes."

"Oh, so they could be blue?" asserted Moons cheerily.

He admitted sheepishly, “Could be, I suppose. Actually, she does look a lot like you, Moons, a lot like you. But there’s no moon out tonight, is there?”

“Well, there may be,” she admitted. “I don’t know, but if there is, it’s coming up on the other side of the mountain. Won’t know for sure until later, provided there ain’t no fog.”

Dixie nodded, “I guess.”

She grinned. The girl drained her beer. Then she set the can down on the rock, looking directly into his eyes, totally absorbed in him. “Maybe, I am that silhouette girl. Ya think?” Once more, she grinned hopefully in Dixie’s direction.

“Nah, I don’t think so, Moons,” declaimed Dixie with an embarrassed, negative shake of his head. “Like I said, and you agreed, there’s no moon out tonight.”

“Yeah? Suppose I could produce a moon for you, maybe even two of ‘em?”

Dixie became wary. “Well now, then there! Guess it don’t take much beer to get you goin’. Nobody can produce a moon, let alone two.”

She chuckled. “Oh, really? Well, I’m enjoyin’ the beer all right, Honey, but hey! Glad to meet ya, ‘cause my name is ‘Nobody.’” She giggled and extended her hand to shake his, just as he had done earlier to her, but he feigned taking it and chuckled.

“Whaddaya talkin’ about?”

“Well, catch this! Ya know, they don’t call me ‘Two Moons’ for nothin’.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

Dixie sat up a bit to rest upon his elbow. She had his interest.

Moons sat back a little to balance herself while she reached behind her with both hands.

“Whoa! Hold it right there woman!”

“What?” She looked up bewildered.

“I believe ya.”

“You believe what?”

“That you got two moons. I believe ya.”

“How do you know that?”

“They told me, down below.”

“Well, Sugar, you know seeing is believing.” The coquette grinned like a vixen, reached behind her and leaned forward with her long, raven black hair falling down around both him and her. Dixie scooted over and pinned her arms to her sides, spilling some beer, while the straps to her colorful swim top tumbled down her arms and upon him, as well. He set down his beer and took hold of her bra straps and fastened them together again. Then he picked up his beer and scooted back to his spot. Moons sat up, seductively raising herself erect. She brushed her long dark locks behind her shoulders, out of the way of his view.

“That was very gallant of you Dixie, but why did you do it?” Her voice lowered an octave from disappointment. Her countenance had fallen. She folded her arms across her chest beneath her two moons, clutching herself tightly in a defensive posture.

"Well Molly, because I don't know you well enough, for one thing. And because I have faith, Baby, and faith is believing without seeing, see?"

"Hmm. I wouldn't know about that. Do know I was *tryin'* to let you know me."

"Umm, too much too soon. But why'd you say that about faith? Like to hear."

"You would hunh? Well, let's just say I don't know ya well enough." She smirked. "Shouldn't bother ya any, though. Cuz you got belief without hearing, don't ya?" She turned her head slightly and arched her eyebrow.

Dixie let out a deep sigh. She was pissed because he had turned her down.

"Loook, Molly. I think you are great. I mean really GEAT, GREAT! But …"

She lowered her arms down around her knees and leaned forward. "Yes?"

"Well, I don't know exactly, but its not you. It's me. But I feel certain you have the most beautifully round pair of moons in existence, but I, I …"

The bewildered look on her face told Dixie he wasn't reaching her. Then, for some reason he did something he failed to understand himself. He set down his beer and beckoned her to him. She smiled with joy. Suddenly aggressive, the girl seized the moment of his weakness to fall upon him. The pair of lovers romanced a bit with Dixie, feeling temporarily like "the man in the moons."

The girl gasped. Her honeysuckle scent overwhelmed him, just as the rapidly cooling Smoky Mountain night air invigorated both of them, raising goose bumps on each. Dixie's baseball inner shirt was worn thin, as were his favorite pair of cords. Moons took advantage by slowly but vigorously stroking him repeatedly from shoulder to knee cap. She seemed to have more hands than an octopus. And her scarlet lips never stopped sampling his own. Although Dixie did not permit himself to be carried away completely by her moonlit charms, his breathing became labored, as did her's. The Voice from within had not sounded and he did not want to recall it to mind right now. Things got downright steamy.

Dixie abruptly caught hold of himself when, for some unknown reason, he recalled the purpose of his journey. He retarded his lovemaking and his heavy breathing subsided. Moons followed his lead and backed off a bit herself. She peered at him with a look of pleased, starry-eyed astonishment. Eventually, the devilish light in her eye warned him that his prudish behavior would not deter her long.

During this break in the action, Dixie drew out a Lucky Strike from the pack in his pants pocket and lit up. He thought perhaps the smoke break would cool those full moons off a little. *Not likely.*

"You really know how to kiss a girl, Dix, but that don't entitle you to be rude."

"Rude, how was I rude? I thought I was pretty darned polite. After all, I was just followin' your lead." Right when he thought that he had resolved their little difference, she had resorted to scolding him.

"Oh Baby, you done fine with the turtledovin'. Really all riiight!" She smiled beneficently, calming his fears and reached over and down to stroke his cheek gently, as the last afterglow of the sunset dissolved into the dark of night. "Super fine, as a matter of fact, Honey." She grinned flirtatiously at him. "But I'm

talkin' about the cigarette, there. You know, that's not very polite of you at all, Nick, er, Dixie. It's kind of a turn off, really. Aren't you gonna offer me one?" She acted hurt. Dixie caught on to her play and he followed suit.

"No, I'm not. I figure it was most polite of me." Dixie affected an air of mock superiority by turning his nose up away from her. She played along.

"Oh, is that so? Just how do you figure that?"

"Well, these things are bad for ya Moons, especially, these unfiltered Luckies. Seems to me I was doin' ya a big, big favor. Ain't there some kinda connection between smokin' and breast cancer? You wouldn't like for the light of them two lovely, full moons of yours to go dark, now would ya?"

She shook her head in feigned disgust, but he persisted.

"Yeah, I'm just lookin' out for your breast, I mean, uh, your best, interests, kinda like. See?" He giggled at his honest slip of the tongue. The sun's afterglow had disappeared completely now. Cool mountain air again raised goose bumps.

Moons answered by seductively smiling and reaching across him to wrap two slender fingers tenderly around the nail. Then she slowly withdrew the smoking butt from between his fingers, charming him with her bright blue eyes. The girl dragged deeply on the cigarette. She held the powerful Lucky Strike smoke in her lungs until Dixie thought she would pop. Belatedly, the young seductress exhaled through her long nostrils, never once taking her eyes off him. Moons studied him acutely for his response. Something about her actions was darned enticing. He had seen Donna do that with the same effect, but she had smoked those mild, filtered Virginia Slims. Dixie felt like a hypocrite. Embarrassed, he looked down away from the girl, before he spoke.

"Smokin' is a bad habit. I guess. I, I got started on it in the service," he explained without any prompting from her. "The only work breaks the platoon sergeant gave us was 'smoke' breaks. So ... " Dixie nodded, shrugged, and smirked acquiescently. Embarrassed, he turned his face from her. "But I ain't proud of it, now. Not for a minute, I ain't!"

"Hey! That's all right, Su-gar!" Her soft, casual alto was that of a long time lover's and brought his gaze right back around to hers. "You don't need to explain to me, Dix. I'm on your side, Baby." She winked and reached over to stroke his cheek again with her free hand. "But just for your information, the link is to lung cancer Honey, not breast cancer. And men get lung cancer same as women." She lowered her chin to her chest and looked up at him through bright blue, I-told-ya-so eyes that were veiled by her long, black lashes.

"Oh well, yeah, yeah, guess you're right about that," responded Dixie lacking his usual cool. She nodded and he nodded back. "Say though? Kinda looks like you might have done that before, hey?"

"No! Ya think?" She sucked on the nail again, with similar results, proving to him the first was no fluke. "Those first couple drags are kind of like," she paused to blow the smoke out through her nostrils again, "like those first couple sips of

beer, real good. Ya know? I mean, umm, they just hit the spot, just right." Again, her seductive actions had the same enticing effect upon him.

"Yeah, I know ... Look ... Moons, I, I'm sorry. I mean, believe it or not, I was genuinely looking out for your best interests."

She dragged once more, as before, on the cigarette, only this time she blew a large smoke ring at him and grinned. She slid the Lucky back between his parted lips as the smoke ring broke against his cheek. Now Dix dragged deeply, in turn.

"I know, Baby. I was just playin' with ya," answered Moons coyly. Again, she grinned like a vixen. "Kind of turns me on when a man is 'genuinely looking out for [my] breast, I mean [cough, cough] best, interests—both of 'em.'" She smiled playfully at him, reached one hand behind her back and leaned toward him.

"Gee Molly, don't ya think you're awful young for … for all of this, this stuff, hunh?" Dix motioned his hand rolling it over and over in the air away from him.

Then, boom! As if by magic, even before he could exhale fully, her hot mouth was upon his lips.

Damn! That's one persuasive rebuttal.

Molly Two Moons fell across Dixie's body into his right arm. She pushed him down onto his back against the uncomfortably hard rock. Then, sitting astride him, she raised up almost erect, to tower over him with her back slightly arched. The vivacious, blue-eyed teen hovered above him for a few brief seconds. From the lusty look of mastery in her eye, Dixie could tell she seemed to enjoy having him at her apparent mercy. The precocious, teen ogled her prey with manifest pleasure. Her long, dense tresses permitted Dixie only sporadic glimpses of the crescent moons offered by her gaudy top. Placing her weight on her knees and toes, Moons began to roll over him backwards, gently but fluidly. Sliding heavily over his stomach, the girl inched her way down to his lap. There, resting upon her forelegs and the tops of her feet, she hovered, fluttering over him, like a helicopter over a landing zone. Her honeysuckle scent assaulted his senses anew.

The young temptress eyeballed Dixie hard, sucking him right into her will. She stared hungrily at him. She appeared to be a dark-haired Lady Godiva, which made him what? A Peeping Tom? He blinked twice and shuddered at that revelation. Besides, this Moons was no lady. She behaved more like a saucy tavern wench, dancing languorously over his lap. Meanwhile, her hands rested innocently upon her thighs. Dixie responded involuntarily to her fluid motions.

Obviously, Miss Molly Two Moons was performing for his pleasure, proving that she was old enough "for, for all of this stuff," just as she had proven her point with her smoking exhibition. The girl was trying to seduce him and she was succeeding—*Big Time.* Her scarlet lips parted seductively, yet, she never looked anywhere but into his eyes. Dixie tried but failed to hold her stare, as his leering gaze drifted uncontrollably southward.

The girl watched with glee as Dixie's mouth fell open. Her eyes widened with excitement.

"What is it, Baby?" she asked coyly.

"Well, I, I guess, I never quite understood before how the moon causes the tide to rise. But, uh, I think, I've just gained some new perspective on the matter." He chuckled shyly. Moons laughed.

"Yeah, they do seem to have that effect, now don't they? Ha! Now Big Boy, it's time to get down to some serious foolin' around."

No sooner had she spoken than the girl again threw her long raven hair back over her tanned shoulders and dived down into him again. Miss Molly Two Moons located her target with the precision of a dive bomber, kissing her lover's lips even more passionately than before. Dixie had not thought that to be possible. He hugged Moons' behind with his left hand and crushed out his cigarette butt on the rock with his right. He flicked the cigarette away by remote control, while she poured out her passion upon him.

Dixie had wondered earlier if she really could be the silhouette girl. Her name, her looks, her hair, maybe, just maybe ... But no, there was something that was not right. Where was the water in the background? Moreover, he was sure the full moon he saw in his image was truly a moon, not some kind of symbolic reference to her name or her namesakes, as lunar-lovely as they were. However, the way she romanced him, he wasn't so sure. He thought that perhaps he should proceed with his investigation. Dixie gasped for air so that he wouldn't drown in this amorous co-ed's sweet-tasting mouth.

"You sure are easy to be with, Moons," he marveled.

Moons beamed down at him, obviously basking in his approval.

He added. "Like fine brandy, you go down smooth ... real smooth." The girl's beam broadened ever wider.

"So do you, Nick—I mean, uh, Dixie, so do you, Honey. And I really like that black 'stache. It's uh, most becoming, yes, most becoming. A real turn on, too!" She smiled cutely and came to him again.

Nearly a quarter of an hour passed that proved to be pleasantly frustrating for both of them. Then, as Moons shifted her weight out over him, Dixie noticed her electric blue eyes enlarge with illumination. Moons caught her breath. He studied her kissably fine lips. He scanned her becoming, longish nose with the shallow bump across the upper bridge. Dixie found her to be irresistibly attractive. The girl raised her head up slightly and gasped. Their hormones must have matched.

"Gee Honey, guess you can work other magic in the dark besides that night vision stuff."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"Well, HA! You seem to have been taking some kinda vitamins yourself, uh, since you stumbled out of that creek a while ago, I mean. You just turn me out!"

Moons redoubled her amorous efforts with renewed zest, beating down Dixie's resolve. The girl's eager hands fumbled with the button to his beltless cords. She accomplished her objective, before Dixie seized her forearms so that the crooks of his thumbs encircled the outsides of her wrists. He overpowered her, forcing

their arms out and away from them. Their eyes locked. They froze in a moment of truth. Fire crackled through his grips on her.

What the hell! He caved.

But just then, at the most inopportune time, that small but quiet Voice from within calmly posed those evenly spaced words that stopped him cold—AGAIN:

"What ... about ... your wife?"

That singular question rocked him like the recoil from a big gun firing within his heart. Dixie's internal bugle sounded retreat. He obeyed the call. But it sure was going to spoil his fun.

Dammit! But that's right, I do have a wife ... don't I? I clean forgot. Shoot!

Dixie stalled and murmured "My wife!" Moons halted her loving briefly.

"What? What was that Honey?"

"Well, now, then, there Miss Molly Two Moons! Well …You sure can kiss! That's for darned sure. And your namesakes do you proud. Yessirree! They most certainly do." Dixie pushed her off him a bit to gain some space, some air, and some respite from blowing his stack. He fumbled for his pants button and attempted to reseat it. He noticed he had begun to sweat. His face felt beet red hot. "But you know, Sweetie, I've stayed much longer than I had in mind Baby, so I, I'm afraid ... I better be, I better be goin' now." He choked on his own words and looked up to her rather ashamed, while he pushed her hand away to button up his pants.

Astonished, Moons sat back, which afforded him the opportunity to sit up fully. He laid her aside gently, as though she were a helpless, baby doll. The sudden relief he felt on his backside was overwhelming. That rock was a pain!

"You've got to be kiddin'!" Moons sat up completely shocked in perfect posture, with her two round moons heaving seductively before his face, showering their unique brand of moonbeams upon him. "You can't be serious!" Moons was unrelenting. She turned into him, throwing her right leg over his left. Dixie turned away a bit, in a vain attempt to ignore her.

"No Baby, 'fraid I am, but I wish, I wish I weren't, really I do. Ya know this rock ain't getting' any easier on my backside and—" Moons turned him toward her. A look of genuine concern suddenly overcame her lovely, surprised face.

"Oh Babeee, my poor Babeee! Oh, I'm so sorry, Honey. Why didn't you say something before? Here, let me fix it for ya. Here ya go, Honey." Gladly, she rolled away from him to lay with her back to the rock. "Here Baby, let's switch. I like it this way just as much, maybe better." Once more, she grinned impishly with her arms outstretched toward him. Dixie raised both hands in protest.

"No, no, Moons, you don't understand. It's OK, really, it is. But I really do have to get going now."

"Now? But it's dark and foggy. And them rocks are slippery. You can't go. NOT NOW!" She leaned up on her elbows and forearms, half reclined, pleading. "Besides, we haven't ... why, we haven't finished what we started," she cried,

indignantly. She was right on both counts. The night fog had begun to creep in over them and they hadn't finished what they had started.

"How's that?" asked Dixie, playing dumb.

"You know darn well we haven't ... haven't ... well, you know, consummated our love, Honey." She spoke the last words softly, in a plaintive tone. Dixie looked hard at her to verify she wasn't kidding. She wasn't.

Love? Was this love?

"Dammit, Dixie. I feel, I dunno ... sort of ... well, INCOMPLETE!"

She sat up in frustration and smacked her hands down, flat against the rock. Her eyes flared. Her tone was peevish. Clearly baffled and deeply frustrated, she bellowed "CRAP!" in disgust and the mountainside echoed her frustration.

He looked sideways at her, as he was half turned around towards her. Hadn't she guilelessly mentioned something earlier, about being innocent in such matters? Dixie assumed a knowing manner.

"Well, that's OK Honey, because consummation is all in the mind anyway." Dixie's meager attempt to placate the jilted girl failed abjectly.

"The HELL it is!" Her eyes flashed angrily. She sat up abruptly and threw her arms about her knees. Moons grasped each elbow with the opposite hand, inadvertently concealing her two moons in the process. Chagrined, Dixie replied in a mollified tone.

"Well, some of it is anyway, Baby, as much as you let it be, I guess—Say! I thought you said you were a virgin?"

"A what? Ha! Don't think that word ever crossed my lips!"

"Well, maybe not, but you sure implied—" Moons ignored this line of talk, cutting him off.

"You know the problem with you Honey, is: You THINK TOO DAMNED MUCH! You gotta FEEL MORE DIXIE and THINK LESS! And it seemed like you was feelin' real good a minute ago, when you was feelin' me and I, uh, I was feelin' you. And you know, Baby, you know I was feelin' the same as you were. You know I was!" She shot the last words at his eyes, daringly.

"Well, maybe so, maybe so. But all I know is I ... I, I just can't do it now." He lied. "Come on Moons, you're a big girl. You can put two and two together. You know, you saw how I was all shot up down at the creek ... Yeah, just can't make it, I guess. I'm sorry, Baby." Dixie shrugged his shoulders and turned away as if he were embarrassed. "That's all there is to it, I, I guess. Nothin' personal, Baby. Trust me." He lied a lie that had bailed him out in similar, past situations. He was afraid to tell her the real reason. Besides, what was a little lie when he knew he was unlikely ever to see her again?

But the lie brought the astute girl quickly off her butt, up onto her knees, right next to him. She shook her hair behind her shoulders. With her arms akimbo, her two moons appeared to shower sparks brilliantly upon him from, shooting out from all around round her read and yellow bra top. Her frowning facial expression, as well as her defiant body language, revealed that she was both

incensed as well as insulted now. The night chill drew her ample bust taut, giving rise again to goose pimples. Dixie tried not to stare, but that was easier said than done, so he looked past her.

"Oh that's a crock of BULL, Dixie. And you know it!" She clapped her hands together sharply, next to his ear, producing a sharp cracking echo off the mountainside, which demanded that he turn around to look directly at her. She did not pause to appreciate the echo. "Don't ever try to tell me that you CAN'T. I KNOW BETTER! Hell! Right now, you're no different than this damned stone!" She leaned forward on her knees, her pitch black, long hair falling about her, and, with the open palms of both hands, sharply slapped the granite rock surface beneath her. Again, an echo reverberated off the mountain walls. "SHEEESH! S'pose next you'll be tellin' me the damn rock's been takin' the same vitamins as you."

Dixie felt his cheeks flush hotly and he dropped his head in shame. She had him pegged right. This naive girl was not so innocent and not such a girl either.

Looking like a dark Lady Godiva again with her dense, raven locks concealing her lunar orbs and unconscious of her black underarm hair, she raised her arms, stretching her feminine limbs out to him, hoping to lure him back into her web of romance. Dixie turned to her, balancing on one knee. *Damn!* She was some kinda tempting. Taking hold of her smaller, feminine hands in his maimed, calloused paws, he pushed himself off the rock with his right foot and left knee to stand erect, pulling her up with him, in one fluid motion. The girl seemed to recognize she was losing him, so she dropped her defiant front as quickly as she had assumed it. Then, Dixie confessed tenderly and stroked her cheek softly.

"Really Baby, I gotta go."

"Gotta go?" she repeated, incredulous. "Well, DAMMIT DIXIE! I GOTTA GO, TOO!" She stomped her foot and simultaneously slapped the sides of her curvy hips hard, causing her two moons to jiggle in their orbits, beneath their dark cloud covering. "But at least I can hold it for a while longer, FOR CRYIN' OUT LOUD!" She hinted at a smile and Dixie chuckled.

"No, I mean I gotta leave, gotta go find that wife of mine, remember?"

"But Dixie, what she don't know—hey! You know that old song, "Love the One You're With?" Moons rose up on the balls of her feet, with her countenance hopefully expectant.

The anthem of a generation? How could I not know that? But he played dumb for her anyway. "Gee, I can't quite remember it. I got amnesia, ya know? Can ya hum it for me?" Dixie looked suspiciously at her to see if she believed him. Moons realized he was joking and pushed him lightly.

"That ain't funny, Dix."

"No, I suppose not. Well, let me put it this way." Dixie suddenly became serious. "Suppose you were to switch places with her, right now, this minute? Switch places with this so called wife of mine? You know, this Ryzanna

Sheeboom? How would you feel about it, then?" Her mouth dropped open with delightful surprise.

"Are you crazy? You mean, if I could trade places with her? Right now? I'd probably just be the happiest woman on the face of the earth, that's all. And we wouldn't be arguin' like this. We'd be down there bangin' a hole in this rock the size of a tunnel." Dixie saw that she was dead serious.

"And it would be OK by you then, if YOU were in Maryland and if she and I, you know, were here on this rock together, and we—and you wouldn't know of course because what you wouldn't know wouldn't hurt ya? And ... " He peered hard into her lovely electric, blue eyes. It appeared as thought the electricity was fading out slowly somewhere behind them. It was enough.

The girl sighed and looked down, pouting, defeated and embarrassed now. "I, I suppose you're right," she mumbled. She rocked back upon her heels. Her head sagged. Her two firm moons however did not.

Dixie crooked his right forefinger, cupping it under her chin and lifted her face up towards him, but her gaze remained downcast.

"Loooook, Molly." No response. "Mol-leeee?" Dixie pleaded in a high pitch. "Look at me, Baby." Slowly, she raised her pouting, suddenly not so bright blue, eyes to meet his.

"Molly, you know lovely one, if things were different, there's absolutely nothing else in this world I'd rather do more, than to stay right here and romance you 'til the sun comes up, in spite of that darned, hard rock. Absolutely nothing! And you're right. I am capable of it. I lied. But believe me, Honey. There's nothing else I'd rather ... " Dixie eyed her wistfully, but now she wouldn't meet his gaze. "You do believe me, don't ya, Molly?"

An innocently sincere look of begrudging acceptance stole over her face, assuring him that she did. He felt his soft, equally sincere but tender tone had pierced her to the marrow of her being. Yes, he knew she believed him. Dixie thought he detected a joyful sorrow in her eyes as Moons rose up on her toes. She slid her arms under his armpits, wrapping them around his back and shoulders. Clasping her fingers together up, against the base of his neck, Moons buried her head into his chest with her ear next to his heart and her two moons squashed between their two bodies. Dixie's poised external demeanor, could not conceal the frenetic locomotion of his heartbeat. He felt her heart, too, like his, pounding as it had earlier in the cold mountain stream, as though it would have burst through his chest. They stood together like that for a good five minutes without speaking, just rocking back an forth. Dixie embraced her tightly. Her two moons squished into him. Her back bore the night chill and was cold to his touch. He rubbed her back firmly, with both hands in unison in long pogo-jumping-like strokes. Through his thin, baseball inner shirt, he felt her taught nipples relax against his lower ribs. Moons purred and burrowed her face into him as if to burrow herself into his racing heart. The pounding of his heart and the warmth

afforded her from his strong embrace must have assuaged her flagging resolve, because finally, she spoke softly, very softly.

"I, I suppose you're right, Honey."

He had pegged her right. There was more to her than beauty and personality. She had character, true character which was reflected in that unusual nose of hers. She wasn't just some bimbo. The strength of character and charity she had displayed to him down at the creek was confirmed now in the denial of her desire for him, despite the ripe circumstances. He understood she wanted him as much as he wanted her, maybe more. They held each other a while longer in silence. Dixie massaged her back to warm her and Moons purred once more. The fog thickened. The rocks would be dangerously slippery now. She repeated her earlier suggestion to wait until daybreak, for safety's sake, if for nothing else. Dixie assured her, it was neither too dark, nor too dangerous, nor too soon.

On the contrary, he knew he was leaving just in the nick of time. And he reminded her that consummation was all in the mind. All she had to do was follow his lead in all departments and all would be fine. Obviously disappointed, but resigned to his will, Moons followed him. Dixie picked up his special prescription sunglasses, put them on and smashed the empty beer cans to carry them in his pockets They had a responsibility to keep the park clean.

She asked him to take a couple flash pictures of each other up against the rock. Dixie thought it was the least he could do. Dixie joked that her unique brand of moonbeams shooting out of her top were penetrating his special glasses and blinding him. She stopped dead, lowering her head to shoot him a galling, condescending look through her long black lashes.

She replied wearily, "Oh Honey, you're so naïve, but I like it. I do like it a lot." She laughed and provided him extra flash cubes from her jean pockets. Moons pouted and stuck her tongue out at him and Dixie caught it on film. They both laughed.

Moons posed and Dixie snapped the photos. Her favorite pose seemed to be with her back to the camera, a fist on either hip, arms akimbo, butt up, legs locked and feet spread just outside her shoulders. Her long, dark hair streamed down, just free of her back, as her shoulders and head torqued around toward the camera. That stance emphasized her long, up and outward sloping, tan back, round rear, slender, inward-sloping waist as well as the fullness of her namesakes. She topped the shot off with a devilish smile and a sly wink. Turning in the opposite direction, she mirrored the pose. Then Moons faced left and lifted her head up slightly, as though she were searching earnestly for something. Bent down on one knee to take the pictures, she flabbergasted Dixie when the flashes hit her full right profile and bounced back off the rock face behind her. He froze dumbstruck. His heart caught in his throat. There for certain was his silhouette girl, just as he had always pictured her, and she was enticing him once more.

Dixie could not believe how close Moons came to matching the image in his brain. But there were too many other details that did not fit his vision. Though a

mist was fast descending upon them, it was not sufficiently thick to block any part of her from view. There was no water, no moonlight and little fog in the background. Neither were her long locks dripping wet. Moreover, there was no fully nude profile here, though he reckoned he could have one for the asking. Dixie's new found arousal raised up a little guilt within him. *Would a wife want me taking these pictures? B*efore he could answer himself, Moons began to unfasten her cutoffs.

"Hey! What are ya doin' there, Moons?" The girl stopped and sprouted a pleasant, unassuming smile.

"Droppin' my clothes, whaddaya think? Then you can get that full profile shot. See if I really am the one." Dixie thought she must be reading his mind.

"One, what?"

"Why, the one you're lookin for, Silly. The girl in your dream, the one you just told me about."

Damn! She is reading my mind!

Still feeling guilty, Dixie replied "No, no! Don't do that Honey, please. Uh …" YOU match her all right, Moons. Honest! You do. It's the setting that's wrong. There's not enough mist to cover all your, uh, your treasures." Then she zipped up her shorts and patted the button twice with the flat of her hand.

"Voila! OK?" She asked pertly.

Dixie grinned and nodded.

"So, you think I'm the one, hunh, really?" Her face was animated, hopeful.

"Well, I didn't say that Molly, just that you match close enough to be the one."

"Gee, Baby. Jes' how many girls are out there walkin' around that could match her as good as me, hunh?"

"Honestly? I dunno Moons. I just don't know." Perplexed, Dixie shook his head.

"Well shoot! I can strip in a sec and we can tell for sure." She smirked slyly.

"No, no Moons, please don't. I, I—don't do that. I've seen enough— too much. Your moonbeams have blinded me enough for one night."

"You sure? It's no problem ya know? Not for YOU, Baby."

"No-no, I mean. Yes, I'm sure. You're the closest I've ever seen, Molly. Honest!" The girl beamed. *Closest? Hell, she fits my vision to a "T."*

"Ya know Shua-gah? Never thought Nick Sheeboom'd be such a prude. A lotta guys'd give their eye teeth for the show I'm offerin' you right now, Baby.

Dixie chuckled nervously. "But I ain't Nick Sheeboom—YET!" *Eye teeth?* An idea to throw her off track occurred to him. "Besides, maybe these teeth'll do." Dixie reached into his mouth with his thumb and popped out his dental plate, which he offered to her in earnest.

Aghast, the girl stood dumbstruck. He took her left hand and placed his two upper, front teeth into her fist, hoping the dentures might cool off her passions. Moons studied the teeth and then, still stunned, she dropped her mouth wide open when she inspected his smiling, gaping top row of teeth. Then, cracking up, she

bent over backwards holding her sides with her arms, unable to contain her mirth. When Moons finally regained her poise, she came to him, chuckling, stumbling and still clutching his teeth. She shot a picture of him grinning minus his teeth.

Though he grinned like a clown for her, revealing his wide upper tooth gap. Her smile evaporated suddenly, as she became serious. Taking his head between her hands, she kissed him, kissed him sumptuously. She reached through his gap and beyond, sensually exploring unchartered territory. Dixie became aroused, but he let her finish. When she did, she groaned from deep within and murmured, "Baby, you jes' never, ever cease to amaze me! That was simply incredible. SO SMOOTH, so sweet. Um. Um. Um." Dixie grinned and winked.

"And a little lumpy, too," he added.

She laughed.

He had met with similar reactions in past similar situations with all his previous lovers. Moons replaced his plate for him, but he had to realign it. For effect, Dixie chomped down loudly on it twice, like an old codger testing his dentures before dinner.

She watched him and her expression seemed to melt, but she rallied and came to him again, kissing him sumptuously, once more. Then she asked him to pose for a couple pictures for her, using some extra flash cubes she carried in her pockets.

When she had shot her fill, Dixie reminded her that he had urgent business about five hundred miles to the northeast. Dixie put on his specially made wraparound shades. Then he carefully led her out of there, back down, retracing the steps by which they had come. He held her hand and made sure she stepped where he had stepped. He kept the sound of the babbling brook down to his right and didn't stray off the spiny ridge until they intersected the big trail. It took a while, but he thoroughly enjoyed holding her hand in his, as he led her down the mountain. Dixie picked up the first two beer cans they had left on the way up.

"How did you see them?" she asked totally amazed. "I had no idea we were even near that place."

"Hey, I'm 'Nobody,' remember me?" He laughed.

Moons became serious. She raised up on her tippy-toes, reached for him, took his square chin in her hand and kissed him passionately, once more.

"YOU SURE AS HELL ARE SOMEBODY TO ME, BABY. AND DON'T YOU EVER FORGET IT!" The saucy coquette winked at him, again.

Why couldn't I have met her a year ago, when I first came to the mainland?

He was sorely tempted to forget about this alleged wife of his and remain by the light of the Two Moons. But he didn't. Instead, he returned the conversation back to its beginning by pointing out the peculiarly shaped rock outcropping that he had remembered was where they had left the empty cans.

"What rock?" was her response.

Dixie just laughed. His night vision had astonished her. But you weren't even looking in that direction. You were looking off to the side of that rock, down the path. Dixie laughed again.

"I don't see as well right in front of me, but off to the sides kinda, it's clearer." When she remarked admiringly upon his excellent eyesight, he joked that it was easy to see when he had the light of "Two Moons" shining behind him, lighting the pathway home. Again, he induced her to chuckle at his wit.

Then she warned him. "We better get going. Coming up, I was sure we avoided the poison ivy. But now, wouldn't be surprised if we didn't brush some of that nasty stuff somewhere along the line. The sooner we rinse off with some cool water, the better off we'll be. Come on. There's a water pump back at the campground." Dixie sang the old Coasters tune "Poison Ivy" that he had heard on the *Wolf Man Jack Show*, as he led her down the mountainside. She had never heard the song, but she laughed as he adlibbed it when he reached back to tickle her. " ... when poison ivy comes a creepin' all aroun-oun-oun-ound."

Back at the camper, they both washed off at the water pump, based on Moons' suggestion. They took turns. One pumped while the other one rinsed off. The water was cold but they washed wherever skin was exposed. For Moons that meant she practically took a shower. She said she did not know if they had brushed any poison ivy or not, but she was not taking any chances. After they had finished washing, Dixie asked Moons if she would be OK.

"I hope so. Usually, if you wash off with cool water right away, you're OK."

"No, that's not what I meant."

"Well, what did you mean, Baby?"

"Well, that guy, that Greg!" Dixie motioned toward the camper with his head. "He didn't seem too pleased we went rock climbin' together."

"Anh, that's nothin'. Forget it. It's a long story. I can tell ya all about it next time I see ya, if you're still interested." She made it sound, as though she would be seeing him for sure in a short while, as if they were old friends.

Then he thanked her, as well as the others, who, having heard the returning hikers, had gathered round the pump, all except Greg that is. Now, unlike before, some of them were sporting long jackets and full dungarees in the cool of the misty, evening, mountain air. They had come to see Nick Sheeboom off. Dixie thanked them all for their generosity and mounted his cycle to leave.

Moons shivered, as she tried to dry herself with her hands and her hair.

"Wait a minute, Honey. I want to give ya something."

His caring female companion, now in wet cut-offs and swimsuit top, darted into the camper. She returned in a few minutes with her ever present Nikon, a pen, a piece of paper and a small wallet-sized picture of herself—an official high school graduation photograph, no less. Yet, she stubbornly had refused to cover her obviously, chilled, goose-pimpled body or change her wet clothes.

Meanwhile, Dixie had broken out his brown leather jacket for the cool, mountain, night ride ahead. He wore it now as he waited in the saddle for her. Moons came running breathlessly out of the fog. Her buddies ambled after her.

"Can you give me the address and phone number where you'll be at, in Maryland?" She asked, as she reached him, smiling broadly and breathing

heavily. Her two full moons heaved markedly up and down, in unison. "We're gonna be passing through D.C. around the Fourth of July to see the national fireworks display in the Nation's Capitol." Dixie forced himself to concentrate on her question rather than on her natural beauty.

"Well gee, Moons. Ya know I, I don't have a phone number, just an address."

"Well, would you mind giving it to me, Baby?" Dixie hesitated. "Please?" She pleaded. Moons looked a little like a puppy dog begging for a bone. He thought about how he had built her up, only to let her down back on the rock. Against his better judgment, Dixie acquiesced.

"OK, guess it wouldn't hurt, I guess. It's 2221 21st Avenue, Crest Hill Heights, Maryland."

She took down the information he volunteered and handed Dixie her picture.

"I wrote my address and phone numbers on the back, around the edges, so it don't bleed through on the picture. You know, in case you aren't who we think you are, or, in case, in case she don't want ya no more ... 'cause, damn it Baby, I sure as hell do." She smiled cheerfully. Dixie turned the picture over to verify her statement. Then he flipped the photo back over again.

Moons beamed broadly, confidently, as she had back upon the rock when she had revealed her namesakes to him. When Dixie merely smiled weakly in return, shaking his head in disbelief, her confidence seemed to dissolve before his eyes. Once again, she stared into his peepers like a puppy begging for a bone. While he had met many co-eds in the last couple of years, Dixie had never, ever, met a girl like this Molly "Two Moons" Malloy. She seemed to sense what he was feeling and thinking and knew just what to do and say in return. The girl was so direct, so unpretentious and yet so discerning, so sympathetic, in spite of, her natural good looks. Even her longish, broken nose, the feature which many might consider to be unattractive, Dixie found to be damned enticing. That broken nose reflected her true character, while the symmetry of her eyes and mouth blasted her beauty.

Dixie returned her easy, shy smile, as he pulled out his billfold, which contained pictures of Donna and her two boys. He added Moons' picture into one of the empty plastic photo holders. He closed the wallet and planted a kiss on the folded billfold. Then he placed the wallet in the left inside breast pocket of his leather, riding jacket. Dixie placed both hands together up in front of his face, as if he were praying. He leaned over and kissed the near edge of his meshed forefingers and winked at Moons to seal the deal. (He had seen James Dean do that for Natalie Wood in a similar situation in the movie *Rebel Without a Cause.)*

Moons called for her cousin 'Becca to come over. She handed 'Becca the Nikon, and whispered in her ear. Dixie released the kickstands, before he started up the bike. He was about to leave, when Moons leaned over the bike in front of him, her long black hair falling down around him as before. She zipped up his brown, leather jacket completely for him, patting the wallet in the jacket's inside pocket. Her picture was close to his heart. She liked that and told him so. Then,

slowly, she removed his shades and leaned into him, kissing him, slowly, sensually, despite their audience, as if it might be her last kiss ever.

'Becca had stepped around in front of the bike and caught the pair of lovebirds in the act with a candid, camera flash shot. When Moons had finished, she remained nose to nose with him, looking him squarely in the eye and whispered in a sober, sultry manner.

"I really do." She was dead serious.

"Do? Do what?" asked Dixie, stumped.

"Want you." She stared deeply into his eyes, darting from one iris to the other.

She just knocked him out with her direct sincerity. Dixie replied seriously, "You know something, Moons?"

A sultry Moons mewed, "No, I can't imagine. What, Baby?" The handsome girl's upbeat, unpretentious manner both wowed and attracted him. Her free and easy appeal was undeniable. D*amn!* But he had to leave. He had to find out what awaited him in Maryland, so Dixie hid his feelings, as he almost always did, behind his typical, casual cool.

"Ha! I believe ya." Dixie nodded and smiled slightly, winking his dark brown eye at her.

She laughed easily and warned. "You better! And don't forget, Dix. That girl in your vision has black hair, like me. But she don't."

"Who don't?"

"That wife you're so hot to see. She's a smoky brunette." His face blanked.

Then Moons replaced his shades over his nose and pecked him on the lips once more. 'Becca captured the moment on film again, before Moons stepped back from the bike. Dixie kicked down into first gear, awakening the seventy horses beneath him. He raised his chin in an informal salute. Then, in neutral he rotated the gas throttle backward and moved out with the Honda's four-in-one cycle shattering the peaceful calm of the Smoky Mountain night air. 'Becca stepped back out of the way. Dixie kicked down to first, popped a mini wheelie just for show and drove off into the patchy, foggy night without looking back.

What a crazy kid that Moons was, he thought as he rode off into the dark grey-blue Smokies' fog. Dixie hoped he had not made a mistake in giving her that address. Ah, he'd never see her again. But what Moons had said about the little rocker's hair color troubled him. He sure hoped he wasn't leaving his true silhouette girl behind in the Smoky Mountains. *Anh, maybe the rich bitch's hair is dyed?* Well, he could not dwell upon that now. Dixie was embarking on the last leg of his journey. He was anxious to see if there truly was a pot of gold at the end of his rainbow or, even better, a silhouette girl. After all, he was almost there.

~ Chapter 18: Last Leg ~

It was about eleven p. m. on what was fast becoming a dark and nasty night. As the fog worsened, a steady drizzle developed. Dixie was a little more than five hundred miles from his destination, though he did not realize that yet fully. The veteran biker had ridden back carefully out over the winding switchbacks of the Smokies, the same way he had entered. Then he had turned north on highway I-40, following it to I-81, which he took northeastward through the tri-cities into the hills of Southwestern Virginia.

Dixie suddenly realized these had been the very hills Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia had failed to reach, when they were trapped by Grant at the Appomattox Court House. Despite the poor traveling conditions, Dixie's mind wandered. That Moons had been more than a pleasant diversion. She was something else. Moons had narrowed, temporarily anyway, that huge, cold gap in his soul. He thought about the gently admonishing Voice he had felt once again in his heart. It occurred to him that the Voice seemed to reverberate stronger, if he obeyed it, which he had done recently. Conversely, the gentlemanly Voice would tend to melt away when he did not heed its message. That is what had happened with Lori Lei and Donna, after he had come to know them well.

A light rain began to fall, so Dixie pulled off the interstate into a gas station, to fill up and put on his Marine poncho. He first removed his leather jacket because the heavy muggy air precluded the need for it. He stuffed the jacket in his duffle bag. Then he clamped his small sized Porpoise batting helmet tightly on his head over the hood of his poncho. He tied the second poncho over his duffle.

Virginia! This is the state of all the presidents: Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe, even Woodrow Wilson, they were all born here. The Old Dominion was a state of history! It was the state of his confederate heroes: Lee, Jackson and Stuart, underdogs all, who had achieved so much in the face of such overwhelming odds. Dixie was ever keen on underdogs and on history, especially U. S. history. To think he was in this place, where so much of it had been made, pumped him up in spite of the weather.

He had about 350 miles left to travel. It was a little after two a. m. The rain intensified, plastering his shades and blurring his vision. He was glad for his helmet. The number of big rigs on this stretch of highway at this hour surprised him. But the rain smelled good. He had been lucky because it had not rained his whole trip. However now, the rain was welcome, refreshingly cleansing.

To ignore the nasty riding conditions, Dixie's let his mind drift. Astride the Honda, he serpentined, climbing over the rain-slicked mountainous interstate highway. He was thinking of the various women in his life and how he would never have met them if the former men in their lives had treated them even

halfway decently. Of course with Rosalita, it was a little different. Her husband had not planned on being killed in the War. Yeah, Rose's situation was a little different. Dixie had just come her way at the right time and happened to remind her of her late husband. Lori Lei had shot her cop boyfriend in the foot, crippling him, after he had failed to heed her repeated warnings to stop abusing her. She got off with a self-defense plea. The police commissioner himself had reinstated her to duty to prove such abuse would not be tolerated on his force. Then Big Jim had virtually abandoned Donna and the kids by volunteering for three tours in Nam and another in Germany, leaving his family behind each time. Even the young Molly Two Moons had experienced some kind of trouble with that Greg character. Although he wasn't certain, Dixie surmised some type of unwanted physical abuse had been involved.

How could some guys be so danged stupid? All these women were great. Dixie merely treated them politely, as he wanted to be treated himself, and they were all over him. By comparison to their prior partners, they all had thought he was the greatest thing in pants.

Dixie wondered about this Rock'N'Roll girl who was supposed to be his wife. Had there been some "nice guy" come into her life, when she was vulnerable and lonely? Like Big Jim had suggested? Maybe this mystery comforter was there now, "being kind" to her? Dixie figured it was none of his business. After all, he did not know her one bit. She didn't owe him a thing, not one thing. Still, he wondered if she didn't have a comforter and it unnerved him a little to think she might, though he couldn't understand why. Then he got mad at himself. He had no right to get upset over something like that, real or imagined. She was nothin' to him. Of course, if she were the silhouette girl ...

Failing to pay attention to the encroaching nasty weather and the dual lane highway, Dixie had sneaked up quickly upon a piggy-backer fuel tanker, while another big semi-truck barreled up behind his Honda. Dixie tried to pass to his left. Yet another tractor-trailer loaded down with new Chevvies appeared precipitously out of the black night foggy spray. That tractor-trailer began to pass him. Dixie slipped back into the right lane. The front-running fuel tanker's mud flaps were not making it. Sheets of rainwater were thrown back onto the motorbike rider by the huge tractor-trailer's rapidly revolving tires. Abruptly, the gusting wind had turned nasty! The big, roaring semis seemed to travel in a pack like marauding wolves.

Dixie gasped for breath. Fast approaching Roanoke on the downhill side of the mountain, suddenly the trailing big rig pulled up dangerously close behind Dixie. The irate trucker vented his anger by blowing his air horn long and loud. Dixie realized the following trucker was having trouble braking on the rain slicked road. The three big rigs had him sandwiched between them. It all had happened too quickly. He had had no time to analyze how he had become boxed in, in this manner. These tractor-trailers were hurtling pell-mell down the dangerously wet, sloping mountainside with Dixie stuck in amongst them. He tried bravely to

maintain his edge, while the trucks threw sheets of rainwater onto him from their large tires. And that gusting wind! He could hardly control the bike

The rig behind Dixie came ahead strong while the one in front of him braked hard, as they descended around a subtle curve to the left. Unable to stop, the trucker behind Dixie again pulled on his air horn, while he rode up Dixie's backside. Afraid the trucker would overrun him, Dixie leaned left into the curve against the gusting wind, edging his bike across the dual lane road's center white stripes. The tractor-trailer loaded down with Chevvies had passed him by. But without seeing it and without warning, another diesel truck sped up from out of the mist behind Dixie in the passing lane to his left.

It's a damned trucker's convention! Sudden, treacherous gusts shook the bike.

A sickening sensation stole into his stomach. He fought the shakes and leaned low over his soaked bedroll and handlebars. All his options seemed blocked. *This might be it.* The handlebars shook violently. *Damn that shifting wind*!

The front tires from the truck in front and to his right showered him with road water. Dixie thought he could reach out and touch the truck. It was that close. He frantically glanced back to his left again searching for an avenue of escape. Instead, the darned trucker's front headlights were right in Dix's eyes. The lights loomed so large and bright that Dixie felt as though they were right on top of him. He faced back around, blinded. He couldn't see didley in the cool rain and truck back spray. He rode by feel but worried the tread on his tires was not up to these dangerous conditions.

Dixie tried to sneak in front of the rig passing to his left and get out in the open and let his Honda fly. However, the trucker passing to Dixie's left accelerated and pulled on his horn, boxing Dixie in and leaving the biker no room to maneuver to his left. Dixie broke into a cold sweat now, gripping the Honda's handlebars until his knuckles were white. He had no choice but to edge back into the right lane again, between the two trucks, as the curve began to bend back to the right. The sickening feeling inched down into the pit of his stomach.

Seeing bright spots before his eyes, Dixie leaned hard to his right. He managed to squeeze back in between the two tractor-trailers in the right lane. The guy behind blasted Dix unmercifully with his air horn, again. That guy couldn't slow up. He was trying, but he couldn't. Dixie could hear the trucker's failing brakes, as they screeched and hissed. Dix had no choice but to swerve off the road, skidding onto the bumpy asphalt and cinder shoulder. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, hoping to blot out the bright headlights stuck in his brain. The violent wind changed direction dramatically. The Honda wobbled through a long puddle. Dixie feared losing his edge. He fought the impulse to apply the brakes. He knew if he did, it would cost him control of the bike and possibly his life.

Instead, he leaned forward with his feet on the rear footrests, laying flat out over the handlebars. Squinting his eyes, the frightened war hero did all he could to hold the wildly gyrating handlebars in place. Somehow he maintained his edge

through the large puddles. His knees squeezed either side of the gas tank while his chin rested on the sleeping bag tethered across the handlebars. He felt sick.

"Help, Lord!" he whispered frantically. "I need Ya. NOW!"

Dixie accelerated through the skid and finally caught a break, as the highway bent back sharply to his right. His sight returned as abruptly as it had been taken from him. He found himself on the inside of the curve now. Dixie leaned strongly into the curve and accelerated. The gusting wind abated. The handlebars quit pulling all over the place. His body jostled as he bumped uncontrollably along the rough right shoulder. The tires caught firm ground and Dix rotated the gas all the way down. He took off like a ruptured duck. Dixie nearly popped a wheelie, as he passed both of the trucks. Like the Road Runner leaving Wiley Coyote behind him in the dust, Dixie left the big rigs receding into the rain and mist behind him.

He veered left, back onto the highway as the interstate straightened and bottomed out, prior to climbing the next slope. Dixie afforded himself the luxury of glancing over his left shoulder at the trucks he had just passed. They were fast fading out of sight in the dense fog and rain ...

Mann! That was a close one! "Thanks, Lord. Mann, WHEW! That was just too, too close for comfort." Dixie permitted himself a long, slow exhale.

Still shaken, he pulled off the interstate at an all night truck stop several miles up the road at the Route 311 exit into Roanoke. He needed a break. A smoke and a bite to eat seemed like a real good idea. His upper torso and the top of his head were dry. They had been protected by his helmet and poncho, but he was soaked to the skin everywhere else, up to his midriff. The rain and water had blown up under his poncho to drench his cords. Even his feet were wet somehow through his recently purchased square-toed, brown, leather Dingos.

Dixie wobbled as he walked into the diner to sit down at a booth in the back next to the window. The middle aged woman who took his order complained about her feet and said he looked "white as a sheet." Dixie just nodded at her feeblely, with his hands shaking and his teeth chattering.

This was one of those Fifties kind of diners you see in the movies, a long and narrow affair. Record selection turners for the juke adorned each table, as well as the counter. The juke box had been spinning Hank Williams, Sr. when Dixie came in. It was playing Hank Williams, Sr. now and it would be playing Hank Williams, Sr. when Dixie left. The counter was long and silver with about a dozen of those round, stainless steel stools with fake, burgundy leather cushions for seats. Fake, red leather cushions adorned the stool tops. They were the kind of stools kids loved to spin around and around. The dirty linoleum floor was far from new, despite the evidence of a recent mopping. A dozen booths with fake, dark red, leather benches and tan Formica table tops lined the walls.

Dixie took his time over his meal, watching through the dark, ceiling-high, rain-splattered window to his left. Across the front window, Dixie read backwards the neon name of "Smoky Joe's Café". Looking outside, he noticed

the thunderstorm was dissipating over the interstate below him. His body yet shook involuntarily, as did his hands. His eyes twitched while he unsuccessfully tried to blink away the dogged, bright white truck headlights from behind his optic nerves. To steady those nerves, Dixie enjoyed a Lucky Strike both before and after he ate.

He found that he could hold his after-meal smoke steady without his hand shaking. That was something he had failed to do before he had eaten. It was unusual for him to smoke this much, but that narrow escape had unnerved him. He had not see worth a darn with Niagara Falls in his face and those bright lights in his eyes. And you never could tell how deep those puddles might be.

Damned handlebars had pulled all over the place! Be best if I let this storm pass, just sit this one out. That wind! Need to get some new tires, Mann!

Dixie flicked some ashes in the tray under the record selection box and waited out the storm. He began to relax some and his reflections turned to Moons, Donna, and the Voice. Darned strange, the way this inner speech still questioned him about a wife he never knew he had until a couple days ago. Nevertheless, recently, Dixie had reluctantly heeded its mysterious internal warnings and the Voice's reverberations had increased in vigor and frequency. He thought about his trip thus far. Maybe he should get a room, start out in the daylight. His whole purpose in riding at night was to avoid heavy traffic as well as the heat of the day. He had not counted on so many crazy tractor-trailer drivers and heavy rain.

Why don't those truckers drive during the day and leave the highway to me at night? That wind and hydroplaning can be dangerous stuff! Need some new tires!

The melody he had not been able to shake from his head throughout his trip came to the front of his mind again, despite the assuming, castigating wail of "Your Cheatin' Heart" blaring from the juke box. The tune in Dixie's head had begun after Donna had offered him her charms under the lemon tree. As he contemplated the mysterious Voice's questioning him about his wife, now some verse came to mind as well. He asked the waitress for a pen, which she provided. Since everyone claimed he was such a great songwriter, he reasoned he should no longer sublimate his natural impulses to compose.

Dixie took a napkin from the dispenser on the table. He opened the tissue up to write upon it. With a Lucky between his lips, he pored over the napkin oblivious to the noises of the diner, including Hank Williams, Sr. , though old Hank must have influenced Dixie a bit. Because, in twenty minutes, Dix had scribbled out, in hieroglyphics that only he could decipher, the lyrics to a country tune entitled "The Voice of Choice." And this is what he wrote:

The Voice Of Choice

Sometimes deep within,
I get a funny feelin'
That starts me to kneelin'
And keeps me from sin.

I don't know why.
But the Voice always seems to scare me,
Though It never speaks unfairly
It's really kind of shy.

(Chorus)
I've come to learn, this Voice
Gives me pause to stop and think,
Nudging me to pull back and to shrink (in awe).
But It just ain't makin' noise.
And if I heed Its gentle pleas,
It gives me rest for my soul
And e-ven in-ner peace—It's the Voice of Choice!

Was I insane?
To listen to that question?
Too ashamed to ever mention,
That it was always the same?

"What . . . about . . . your wife?"
Those were the words that were spoken.
And although my memory's broken,
They cut me like a knife.

Chorus
Yes, that's what I heard,
Though I often failed to listen,
Kept on lovin', kept on missin'
Losing peace, ignoring those wise words.

Then I learned of her,
That I had a wife to call my own.
That I need never be alone
And I was sure.

Chorus

He sang the tune softly, slowly to himself as he drew lightly on his nail. The catchy tune was simple, but fluid. Something about the song felt right to him. He was pleased with it, even though the songs lyric's hopefully presumed this "new" wife would be the answer to his prayers.

Dixie considered staying overnight, but the silhouette girl beckoned to him. For some reason, he felt compelled to learn her mysterious secret. Moons had reminded him of her. Now, the silhouette girl's sultry image drew him on like a tempting siren. Dixie resolved to find her today. She had been seducing him for over two years—his entire life! Yes. He was going to find out today if this Ryzanna was the dream girl he was seeking. The rain had ceased. Still, he was concerned about the wet roads and the crazy truckers. Suddenly, he recalled some scripture, from the Old Testament, "Joshua," perhaps, which he repeated aloud.

"Be strong and of good courage for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

Damn straight.

Fortified now by food for body and as well as for soul, he would forge ahead.

Dixie refolded the napkin which bore his song and shoved it into his billfold. He noticed the picture of Donna in her bikini had slipped from its preeminent place in his wallet. He returned the photo to its former, prominent location, where he could view it easily whenever he opened the wallet. He studied the picture for a second or two. There she stood in profile with her gut sucked in, her face turned toward him, hands behind her head, elbows out, posing seductively in her bikini. Dixie shook his head and muttered to himself. "Damn. Hate to leave them big ones." He clucked his tongue, resignedly, as he shook his head from side to side. Then he smashed his cigarette butt into the ashtray on the table. He left a tip and the booth and squished in his boots as he stopped in the rest room on his way out.

It was a little after 4 a.m. Sunup was not far off. The rain was just a sprinkle now. Dixie extracted some Desenex foot powder from his athletic bag and removed is boots. He sprinkled the white powder into his boots and replaced the can in his bag. He tugged on his poncho, stuck the Porpoise batting helmet back on his head, climbed onto his bike and left for the gas station around the corner. Dixie had about half a tank of gas, but he could not make it to DC on that. He could make it on a full tank. This would be his last stop for fuel. He crossed the street to the gas station, where he filled up.

Spurred on by his silhouetted vision, as well as by the prospect of finding himself, the young adventurer was fortified in his heart by the encouraging scripture. The foot powder drying his dogs also helped. Dixie followed I-81 up to New Market. From there, he exited the interstate to head northeast on Route 211. He recognized the names of New Market and Luray as historic Civil War sites. He would like to have stopped to investigate, but that silhouette girl kept drawing him onward. It seemed the closer he came to his destination, the stronger she pulled at him. For some reason, he had an overpowering notion that if he could

reach Maryland, she would not slip away from him into the mist this time. This time, he would be able to grab her and hold on to her for good.

He left Luray and the Shenandoah Valley (Jackson's Valley) to climb the western slope of the Massanutten Mountain. He stopped to remove his poncho on the side of the road upon the mountain's crest, where he crossed over the famous Appalachian Trail and Skyline Drive. Dawn had broken some time before. The early morning, patchy fog did not obscure the glorious greenery of the sunny Blue Ridge foothills or the Virginia farm land below him. Nor did it obscure the sweet, fresh scent of the early morning dew and the abundant, wild honeysuckle. As he biked down the eastern slope of the Massanutten Mountain, Dixie took pleasure in leaning into the wicked switchback turns, which forced him to slow to 15 mph. Rt. 211 had some horrendous hairpin turns as it wove over the Blue Ridge. However, the road's surface had dried and Dixie survived without incident. After a couple hours more of scenic riding, he arrived in Fairfax, Virginia, near the nation's capitol, the District of Columbia. It was close to nine.

He entered a "7-11" convenience store to buy some cigarettes, drink a soda and swallow a do-nut. But mostly, he was looking for a detailed map of the area that would help him find this Crest Hill Heights in Maryland. He came across a "DC and Vicinity – Inside the Beltway" map. In his excitement upon finding the map, he forgot to purchase the Luckies. Dixie looked for Crest Hill in the City Index at the back of the map and found it.

All right! His heart fluttered. He hoped there was not more than one Crest Hill Heights in this tiny state. When he looked that town up in the neighborhood map and found 21st Avenue, he knew he was home free. The store clerk directed Dixie to the "Beltway," heading east. Dixie was fatigued. It had been a rough night, but it was just a little bit further now. As he rode around the freeway that encircles the Nation's Capitol known as the Beltway, he could not help but wonder if he had not been here before. Drained from his exhausting night adventures, he rode on adrenaline now. When he crossed the Wilson Bridge over the Potomac River into Maryland, Dixie looked up river, past National Airport and Bolling Air Force Base, which stood on opposing banks of the river, to spy briefly the Washington Monument. He had seen the celebrated structure in books and on television but never in person. He tried to recall if he had not seen the memorial before, but, as usual, he drew only a blank. Crossing over the gaps in the drawbridge's steel grate surface suddenly unnerved him.

Focused so much on his failed recollection and the scary effect of riding over the grates, Dixie crossed the Wilson Bridge and messed up. He found that he had missed the exit for St. Bartholomew Road, which he should have taken. Instead, He rode onto the next exit heading west onto Veer Ave (Rte. 5) This was a wide, four-lane, concrete thoroughfare bisected by an equally wide grassy median that shrunk in width the closer he approached the District of Columbia. After not quite a mile, he noticed a couple of car dealerships on a hill, all with high glass-enclosed showrooms and a three-story, tan, bricked garden apartment complex on

his right. There were a couple shopping centers on his left, across the highway. He noted the one that housed a dry cleaners. The Royal George Motor Inn loomed ahead on his right. Dixie turned into the motel lot to study his bearings.

He was at the intersection of Coolbrook Street and Veer Avenue. Facing across the highway and a bit to his right, stood a Gulf station which faced onto Coolbrook. Behind and to the left of the Gulf Station there was a small shopping mall with the dry cleaners he had noted. Caddy-cornered from him, also to his right, across the traffic lighted-intersection, loomed a six story, concrete, professional building. A small asphalt parking lot, bordered by leafy green shade trees surrounded the building. A residential neighborhood lay just beyond the professional building to the west. He recognized nothing.

Dixie studied the map to see how he had missed his turn off the freeway. His eyes followed the route he should have taken on the map. He located St. Bartholomew to Wheeler, Wheeler to Stuyvesant to 21st Avenue. Then he saw where Stuyvesant ran parallel to and just a block southeast of Coolbrook, the street intersecting Veer avenue right at the light in front of him.

Dixie was exhausted and he needed to clean up. He decided it might be wise to get a room. It was about a half past nine. The people he wanted to visit were probably out about their daily business anyway. Moreover, if they did not know him, he would need a place to stay. He could lodge in this two-story motel just behind him, The Royal George Motor Inn. He decided to make The Royal George his base of operations. He parked in front of the motel's lobby under the protective drive-thru overhang and went inside to reserve a room.

The place was pretty classy, no "40 Winks." The architecture had a New Orleans creole feel to it. Black wrought iron brocade gates and rails guarded the entrance and around the second story veranda. The exterior was constructed of mortar and whitewashed brick. The lobby featured a plush red and black interior decor, which extended into a fancy, small restaurant and to a lounge, as well.

He paid for the room key to room 222. Dix took all his gear up to the room on the second floor and unpacked. He planned on staying in this place for a while. The room also had red, black and ivory interior with a plush carpet, two queen sized beds, a color TV and the latest in bathroom fixtures, including a little ice dispenser. Overhead, the ivory-hued ceiling sported fashionable textural swirls that looked to him like cake frosting.

Fancy place. Yeah, real swank!

A long, wide mirror crossed a vanity alcove, above a long counter on the opposite side of the room from the front door. Both mirror and counter extended halfway across the bedroom's width. Dixie could see himself in that mirror from clear across the room when he stepped inside the front door. Another large mirror hung over the writing desk to right the of the TV. Dixie felt comfortable in the room. He liked it, even if he didn't like seeing his reflection every way he turned.

He humped the double garment bag across the four lane highway that was Veer Avenue to the dry cleaners. He wanted everything pressed and both suits dry-cleaned. He asked the dry cleaner to have his grey silk suit ready by 4 p.m.

Dix returned to the motel, jogged up the flight of concrete steps and strolled down the veranda to his room to crash. He was utterly exhausted, as he had been after each night of his journey. He thanked God for preserving his safety and prayed for His continuous blessing. Then Dixie plopped on the closest bed and slipped into a coma-like sleep. He awoke about six hours later—anxious, for he had awakened, knowing where he was and why he was there. Dixie ran across the highway to the dry cleaners to pick up all his clothes, which were all ready and waiting for him. He paid extra for same day service.

Anxiously, he cleaned his teeth, showered, shaved and dressed. He was thankful for the moustache, for it meant less face to shave or cut. Besides, the 'stache was growing in thick and full, making him appear older and more distinguished. So far, the girls seemed to like it. Dixie climbed into the light grey silk suit he had purchased in Manila and had just reclaimed from the cleaners. He shod his naked feet in soft, pliable, thatched, summer loafers. They were light grey Gucci's which complemented his grey suit well. He also wore a powder blue, form fitting, crew neck, sleeveless shirt, because he thought the powder blue matched well with the grey. Dixie was so nervous. He could not keep his hands from shaking, despite chain-smoking three Lucky Strikes. He decided to have a couple drinks down at the motel lounge to calm his nerves.

Anxiously, he made his way downstairs to the lounge where he stood alone at the bar to order a shooter. The quiet cool of the dim, dark, lounge interior soothed him a little. "Knock on Wood" played softly over the lounge's audio system. He recognized it from the Oldies shows. "Umm, great tune," whispered Dixie to himself. He asked the bartender for a shot of Jim Beam and an Oly for a chaser.

The bartender, who had identified himself initially as "Mack," had never heard of an Oly. He asked Dixie for ID, which Dixie provided. Then the bartender ticked off the brand names of beer that he sold and said he had Miller and Bud on tap. Dixie ordered a Miller High Life as he toed the bar foot rest with his Gucci.

When he downed the bourbon without so much as batting an eye, the bartender remarked that it was somewhat early in the evening to start such heavy drinking. The alcohol warmed Dixie's insides, sliding smoothly down his gullet. He smiled reassuringly at the concerned barkeep, holding up the mug of beer to toast him.

"To your health, Mack!" Dixie winked, downing half the chaser. "Yeah! That's better, much better." He sighed deeply.

"Have a rough day, kid?"

Dixie chuckled involuntarily. "Had a rough life!" He replied with a chuckle.

"I hear that!" concurred Mack, mildly sardonic.

Mack wore his official bartender's garb: a red vest, white shirt, black bow tie and black slacks. His thinning, close cropped, sandy hair was combed to the side. His nose had been broken and patched up more than once. He looked to be in his

forties. Dixie reasoned Mack might have been a boxer or maybe a football player back in the days of the leather helmet. When Mack had fetched Dixie his drinks, Dixie had noticed that Mack had limped noticeably on his right leg.

Mack was eyeing Dixie as well. He looked queerly at Dixie's missing fingers and then at the left side of Dixie's head. He nodded. Dixie chuckled softly to himself. *Me and this Mack character are a couple of real winners.* Perhaps Max had read Dixie's mind, because he asked:

"How'd you lose that ear, kid,, if you don't mind my askin'?"

Dixie felt for his left ear, semi-shocked with disbelief. In his anxiety, he had forgotten to apply it.

"Darn! Forgot my ear. Thanks for telling me, Mack."

Dix gulped down his beer, asking Mack to set him up again and excused himself. He promised he would be right back with his ear. Dixie strode swiftly out of the bar, leaving the barkeep with a strange, bewildered look on his face.

True to his word, Dixie returned to the empty lounge in a couple of minutes. Not only was he wearing his ear, but he also wore the two gold caps on his upper two fake, front teeth, which he had also forgotten to apply earlier. Upon Dixie's return to the lounge, Mack had to notice that Dixie had two complete ears now, but he did not comment upon them, thankfully. Instead, Mack had another boilermaker waiting for Dixie. Aside from the two of them, the bar was empty. Dixie asked Mack if he had ever heard of a band called "*GRT*?"

Mack slung his bar towel over his left shoulder and slid down along the bar a little closer to Dixie. From Mack's affable expression, Dixie recognized that that Mack also sported his own gold front tooth.

"Sure, they used to play here. At least that's what I heard. But that was before my time." The bartender motioned with his head to the back corner. There, a triangular eighteen-inch high riser served as a stage. A postage stamp parquet dance floor lay in front of the stage.

"Yeah, most of the band members are from right around here in Crest Hill or down the road in Woldorn. That band put this place on the map, so to speak. I understand most of the band members went to Pocomoke High School."

"Yeah? Where is that exactly, Mack?"

"Not far, two, three miles maybe. Just cross over Veer and head down Coolbrook until it ends at the shopping center, the Crest Hill Heights Shopping Center. Then jump left and then jog right onto Stuyvesant. Follow it 'til it ends. Turn right onto Wheeler at the light and follow it for a quarter of a mile. From there the signs off Wheeler lead you left, down to the school. It's down at the bottom of a steep hill, kinda in a big ditch. Can't miss it. It's all that's there."

Because Dixie had studied that part of the map thoroughly earlier, he could track along with the bartender's directions.

"Is it a big high school?"

"Anh, I dunno. They got about oh, fifteen-sixteen hundred students, something like that. They're a double "A" school, if that's what ya mean."

"Double 'A,' what's that?"

"You know. That's the top level for varsity sports in the state."

Dixie nodded. The first boilermaker had helped, but it had not cured him of his case of nerves. He bolted his second shot of bourbon. Suddenly, he felt loosey-goosey and considered that maybe he should have something to eat, but he wasn't certain that he could keep any food down, due to his nerves.

"You look like you've done that a few times before, kid," observed Mack referring to Dixie's drinking.

Dixie grinned. "Couple of times, I guess." The whiskey burned inside him.

"I guess." Mack grinned. "Say, you staying here, in the motel, I mean?" The man's tone was casual but interested. Dixie could tell the barkeep was not trying to be nosey, just friendly, just passing the time until the five o'clock, after work crowd began to arrive.

"Yes sir, up in 222."

"So ya here on business? Pleasure?"

"Little of both, I guess. Should know better about that this evening." Dixie caressed his beer mug with both hands. Then he hoisted it and sucked on his High Life before he set the glass back down on the bar. The brew tasted fine, real fine, as good as any Oly. Neither spoke for a minute.

"So that band played there, hunh?" Dixie pointed to a small corner bandstand.

"Well, I guess that's the spot. Like I said that was before my time here."

"Umm" acknowledged Dixie as he swallowed some more of the High Life. "That's right, you did say that."

The young vet downed another swig of brew and set the mug down on the highly varnished black bar top. Dixie leaned forward on his elbows and forearms looking at the glasses stacked in a neat pyramid before the mirror behind the bar.

"Ya keep a neat bar, Mack," observed Dixie with wry approval.

"Thanks, I try. Won't be so easy, later on."

"Do a good business, do ya?"

"Tuesday night is 'Ladies night.'" Mack cocked his brow and smiled.

"I see", replied Dixie with a grin of his own. "That piece of information could come in handy." He smiled again. Mack nodded. The bar's dark cool felt fine.

Dixie sipped his beer lazily. He was in no rush now that the liquor had taken its hold upon him. That soft click that so often accompanied his imbibing had switched on in his brain. He was no longer anxious. His alcoholic remedy was working just fine. However, if he kept drinking like this, he would never get to this girl's house. *Dang! I'll never even get back up the stairs to my room!* He had planned to go over to find this Ryzanna girl after six, but he could not wait that long. He would shoot for five instead. *Shoot! Maybe I'll get lucky and get another free dinner*? The alcohol had helped settle his nerves. It was ten to five now. He pulled out the last Lucky in his pack and lit up. Dixie drank his beer slowly, coolly. Mack saw him fumble with his empty pack and offered to take it off his hands.

"Thanks, Mack." Dixie tossed the empty cigarette package to Mack, who snagged it easily. "Say, ya got any cigarettes for sale?" Since he had forgotten to buy any at the convenience store, he was empty now.

"Back by the rest rooms and phones. Back there, kid." He pointed directly across the room to the open alcove, opposite the bar. Dixie started to leave. "Hey, kid! They're eighty-five a pack. Got enough change? They ain't no dollar changer in that machine." Dixie felt in his pants pocket and found he didn't. Mack read his expression. "Here kid, here's four quarters for a dollar." Dixie nodded and pulled a bill from his wallet and looked around a bit disoriented. He was a little lightheaded.

Mack grinned at his woozy behavior and once more pointed to the alcove on the other side of the dark room. Dixie thanked him and walked across the dark, cool, eerily quiet lounge to buy a pack of Luckys. After purchasing the cigarettes, he entered the empty, rest room to relieve himself. He was calm. He felt good. After all the disappointments he had experienced, he told himself not to get his hopes up. Worst case, he would find a team to play ball for and investigate the area. There was a lot of history around here. He also would like to see the Atlantic Ocean. Then he recalled his ace in the hole—*Moons!* He had almost forgotten about her and he had only just seen her last night. That girl was truly something else! Something special! Now he was glad he had given her that address. He washed up.

Between the shooters, the Luckies and the promise of Two Moons on his horizon, Dixie felt confident, no matter what were to happen tonight. He returned to the bar to finish his beer and dropped the barkeep a handsome tip in parting.

"Well Mack: Hope for the best, but be prepared for the worst. That's my motto." Dixie strolled to the entrance.

"Hey kid!"

Dixie turned around, pulling the cigarette from his mouth, acknowledging the bartender by raising his chin, as was his custom.

"Hope everything works out for ya tonight." The barkeep smiled amiably. He seemed sincere. Dixie winked his black eye at the bartender.

"Me too, Mack, but gotta back up plan, if it don't." Dixie was feeling no pain.

He waved his James Dean-Jett Rink wave. Dixie saluted Mack with his maimed right hand, from the tip of his head outward and then slid his right hand down parallel to his body and finally out at a right angle to his waist. The wave said that 'everything is cool, Mann.' He disappeared through the lounge entrance into the late afternoon, summer sunshine. Yeah, he was feeling good!

Ya know, that James Dean was one heck of an actor, Boy!

Nodding to himself, he walked out into the sunlight, out to his bike and put on his wraparound shades, just like James Dean himself might have done. Dixie was hii-iigh! With only a donut and two back-to-back boilermakers between him and the diner over twelve hours ago, Dix was feeling no pain. Out of habit, he pulled two thick rubber bands from his pocket to tie down his flared suit pant legs to

keep them clean during the ride. He giggled as he had a little difficulty pulling the rubber bands up over his shoes and suit pant legs. To maintain his balance he had to enlist the aid of the motel wall for support.

For a split second, Dixie felt as if he had been here before, something which happened to him occasionally. But, like always, the sensation left him as quickly as it had come. His rational mind took over. Dix would have to get gas sooner or later. He would make it later. He had not flipped to his reserve tank yet. Even so, across the highway, he noticed the Gulf Station which he had seen earlier. From what Mack had said about those directions to Pocomoke High, Dixie could follow this Coolbrook down to Stuyvesant. From there, he should be able to find 21st Street, er Avenue. That's what he did. He felt good. He felt right. The liquor had really loosened him up but had not dulled his reactions, or so he thought. He wasn't flying yet, just floatin'. He sang a song by The Eagles about James Dean.

Helluva way to die. Darned gruesome!

The storm he had run into the previous night in the Blue Ridge must have passed through here earlier in the day while he had slept. The evidence lay in the many puddles he had to dodge on the shaded, sun-dappled street. He skirted the puddles. He did not want to sully his freshly cleaned and pressed, favorite suit. Dixie tooled past the Crest Hill Heights Shopping Center which stood to his right. He noted the presence of a liquor store for his future shopping convenience. This side of the median-divided street was one-way.

To his left, on the opposite side of the street, a row of two-story, brick duplex homes faced into the late afternoon sun. A grassy, fifteen-foot wide, clover-filled median separated his lane from the opposite, one-way lane to his left. The scent of honeysuckle drifted to him from the other side of the road where some late-flowering bushes and a blossoming Magnolia tree grew near a telephone pole. The scent of honeysuckle reminded him of Moons. He smiled at the memory of her, of her electric blue eyes and her pair of white, round moons. Not paying attention to the road, he nipped the edge of a puddle, spraying his right, lower pant leg with some stagnant rainwater, but he hardly noticed. He was feeling too good. He stopped at the traffic light for 23rd Boulevard and coolly flicked his cigarette butt into the concrete sewer drain, carved into the curb, beside the road. He surveyed the area, a suburb built sometime after the Second World War.

When he crossed the intersection, he noticed brick, single-family ramblers now lined both sides of the street. Dixie located 21st Avenue on the other side of a Baptist church that featured a tall, white steeple. Despite his double shooters, Dixie's heart started pounding again, as he turned right onto 21st Avenue. This was her street. And this was probably his hometown. The fact that he had recognized nothing so far could not lower his spirits.

"Yeah buddy! Got a feelin' I'm almost home now, Baby," he whispered. "Damn long way from Manila and Hawaii. But yeah, I'm almost there."

~ Chapter 19: Reunion ~

The late afternoon of Tuesday, the 17th of June, 1975 was balmy, not stifling hot or humid, but close to 80 degrees. The sky was mostly pale blue, almost cloudless. A couple of scattered puddles on the streets and sidewalks served notice that a storm had passed though town recently. But the storm was long gone now. It was the kind of day where the birds sang merrily, the air was sweet and a body felt glad to be alive. You couldn't breathe without taking in the freshly sweet scent of clover, honeysuckle, honey locusts and magnolia blossoms, which blended together to form a soft, invigorating, nectar-filled inhalant. Dixie hoped that sweet scent was leading him to his sweet pea, as he drove slowly down the residential streets lined by a variety of differently colored, brick rambler homes.

There were not as many shade trees in this neighborhood as there were adorning the brick duplexes he had passed nearer the shopping center. However, the June flowers were out in full force. It seemed like every house he passed featured at least one window box or flower bed. There were peonies, impatiens, pansies, roses, rhododendrons, and day lilies. Beautiful, just beautiful. But Dixie focused his concentration on finding the person who might be the girl of his dreams. He had never seen so much red brick in his life!

The one and a half-story homes looked to be about ten years old, based on their style and the height of the shade trees and shrubs in the yards. Grey, white or tan, shingled roofs sloped precipitously towards the front yards, covering half the height of the homes. Everything was so green, more like the islands than Southern California. When Dixie had crossed east of the Sabine and later the Red Rivers, he had noticed the large quantity and variety of green shade trees. The trees of Crest Hill Heights exceeded that greenery. In fact, the greenery amazed him, as did the preponderance of red brick. He liked it. That greenery gave the place a fresh, lively feeling, unlike the dull year-round, barren, brown of the Southern California hills.

Dixie passed over two or three cross streets before he hit the twenty-two hundred block. The odd numbered houses were on his left. He counted them down 2229, 2227, 2225. His heart grew larger in his chest with each home he passed. Out of habit, he kick-shifted down into neutral, cut his engine, and drifted the bike up behind a parked car on the right side of the street. Dixie had learned to "cut and glide" in residential neighborhoods after people on Donna's court had complained about the noise from his bike's four-in-one exhaust. He always had thought the bike ran pretty quietly, but he had not wanted to cause trouble for Donna, so he had cut the engine and glided. That precaution had become habit with him in neighborhoods like this one. He kicked down the block stand and

rocked the bike back on it. He didn't want to take a chance some kids might come along, playing around when he wasn't there and knock it over. Righting the bike after a fall could be a real back breaker. Once, out a Donna's, the boys had tipped the bike over. Dixie had thought he'd rupture himself trying to right it.

Dixie dismounted, feeling a little light headed from the booze and the ride. He had parked beside a blossoming magnolia. He removed the rubber bands from around his pant legs with little difficulty, placing them in his pocket and then he turned to survey the houses across the street. He combed his long, dark, wind-blown mane straight back, as was his custom. He patted the hair on top and behind his head, feeling the waves that formed naturally. Donna had said his hair reminded her of Errol Flynn's in one of the first color film's ever made, *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. Dixie studied the scene before him, hoping to recognize something, anything. Across the street, the sun was high yet directly in his line of view. His cheap dark glasses helped immensely.

These brick ramblers were about fifty feet in length, on lots maybe seventy-five feet wide. The homes had gray shingle roofs with front stoops about six steps high. Slate or concrete sidewalks led either directly from the street, at right angles or in a serpentine manner from the driveways to the front steps. Each house had a long, concrete driveway off to the side of the home, but there would always be two driveways side by side, one for each adjacent house. Thus, each rambler had one side with just lawn and no driveway between its neighbors.

Dixie had parked against the concrete curb, across the asphalt street just past the driveways for 2225 and 2223. The sweet, pungent scent of the magnolia's white blossoms whetted his palette. Scattered oak and maple trees stood in the yards of the homes on Dixie's side, the north side of the street. However, the homes directly across from him, including the Ryan's sandy-hued brick home, had green grass yards devoid of any shade trees.

Funny. For a "rich bitch", this neighborhood is pretty modest. Maybe she don't have the bills everybody thinks she's got.

The single lane driveway for 2221 was on the right, the opposite, side of the house, from where Dixie stood, facing it. A black, iron light pole, about seven feet high, stood on the house side of the right-angled slate sidewalk, halfway between the stoop and the driveway. Dixie could not count them, but there must have been a hundred yellow ribbons tied around that light pole. He recalled Tony Orlando's song and reflected upon Donna's prediction.

A quaint, cobalt blue, slate walkway wound through the green front lawn stepping from the concrete driveway to the front stoop. The stoop top and the four-foot high brick and mortar veranda jumped out at the casual observer. Recessed under the overhanging roof and shielded by a brick wall on the left, the porch featured a black, wrought iron rail fence. The fancy looking rail guarded both sides of the stoop and the two sides of the veranda's perimeter not buttressed by the brick house. Consisting of about a half dozen steps of finished cement, the green-painted stoop was about six feet wide and little under five feet

high. The top of the stoop and the veranda were covered in some type of green outdoor carpet. Three evenly spaced, three-foot high azalea bushes conceal the brick wall supporting the veranda to the right of the stoop. The home's roof extended over the porch. Two forest green Adirondack rocking chairs lounged on the veranda along either side of a low, round, black metal table. A black, corner, iron brocade brace extended from the driveway side corner of the roof down to the corner of the iron veranda railing. A similar brace ran down along the driveway side of the brick wall next to a forest green downspout. Dixie couldn't help but notice some kind of yellow ribbon entwined around the top of the veranda's black, iron railing.

Damn! Hope I don't disappoint them. Hope I'm the guy they're expecting.

A tall, extra wide, picture window ran the length of the veranda. A set of Venetian blinds was drawn fully down at either end of the window, leaving the center portion of the window open to what lay behind it. Dixie could not make out much through the center glass. He thought he saw a floor lamp to the right.

Azaleas also fronted the sand colored, brick wall, on the opposite, left side of the front stoop. What must have been two large bedroom windows sat about seven feet off the ground on the left side of the house. Their blinds and shades were pulled down about two thirds of the way. The windows were braced by a pair of decorative, louvered, wood shutters. Like the downspouts and eaves, these fake, wooden shutters were painted forest green, but they were trimmed with an off white color that matched the roof shingles. A shallow cape cod roof peaked above the open brick between the two windows. A small, octagonal window was set in the brick, a few feat below the peak of the cape cod roof. A giant metal TV antenna sprouted from the top of the chimney on the right side of the roof.

Dixie recognized nothing. But the yellow ribbons certified this must be the right place. He just hoped he was the right guy. From prior disappointments, he knew it could be darned embarrassing if he weren't. His hands began shaking again. Dixie fished out his new pack of Lucky's from his suit coat pocket and unwrapped the top, as he resumed his inspection of this foreign place. For all his hard riding during the last few nights, strangely, he was in no hurry now.

A rich bitch who lives with her parent's in a working class neighborhood—now that's FAR OUT! He chuckled nervously, as he drew a Lucky from the pack.

There were three cars in the driveway. Two other cars, including a baby blue, open convertible Starfire and a Ford station wagon, were parked along the curb in front of the house just this side of the driveway entrance. Parked at the head of the driveway, along the right side of the house, he detected the back of a beat up, old, black Chevy Monza rag top. Parked in the driveway behind the Monza, was a late model, vermillion Cadillac Seville. Behind the Caddy, closest to the street, was an older, well maintained, navy blue Pontiac Bonneville convertible. The Bonneville's trunk was wide open. The two sleek convertibles caught his eye.

The front door of the house flung open, emitting a large, muscular, curly haired, young man. He carried a number of travel bags. Dixie stopped fooling

with his pack of Luckys to watch. The porter's long, curly hair style matched that of the rocker John Oates. He appeared to have been pushed out of the house, banging open the screen door loudly, as he went. He was about Dixie's age.

So, that's the comforter? Not bad.

Following behind him was a short girl with long, straight black hair, parted in the middle, which reached down as far as the small of her back. An orange head band around her forehead held her long, dark hair in place. In fact, she was clad all in orange: orange flip-flops, hot pants and a stylish kind of broad strapped, orange halter top that featured large, pointed collars. The collars covered her otherwise bare, front shoulders. Her back was completely bare except for the halter's lower back strap. Dixie did a double take, thinking for a minute, she was Moons, who, by some miracle, had arrived here ahead of him. Yet, when he heard the girl's voice, he knew she wasn't Moons. Then, Moons was taller, too.

Dixie leaned back against his bike as he subconsciously fished for the lighter in his suit coat pocket. He was in no rush to make his presence known. He packed down the tobacco of his cancer stick against the top of the package. Dix retrieved his lighter from his pants pocket and casually lit up. Inhaling deeply, he began to relax again. The fresh taste of the Lucky resurrected the effect of the booze. All the while, Dixie watched the scene playing out before him little more than a hundred feet away, across the street in the front yard of 2221. He wanted to enjoy this moment, sensing somehow his life might be about to change forever.

Dix made himself a mental note that he was smoking a lot lately, but he focused on the people across the street. He thought, like Moons, the girl in the yard bore a strong resemblance to the silhouette girl, too. But she was too small in stature to be the object of his dream. Besides, how many silhouette girls could there possibly be? They seemed to be everywhere. Dixie always had believed the silhouette girl was unique and was made especially for him. Now, he wondered.

The curly haired fellow was huge, very muscular. He looked like he could be a football player especially with that number 80 football jersey he wore on his back. Only his hair was too long for a football player. His curly "doo' made him look like one of the Three Musketeers. However, the spitfire of a brunette sure seemed to have him wrapped around her finger. The young man wore brown sandals and cutoff khakis. Trimmed in navy blue and old gold with a navy blue number '80,' the jersey hung loosely over his cutoffs. The guy was following the orange-clad girl's instructions to the letter. She was working him like a dog. After he had laid the luggage in the trunk of the Bonneville, she ordered him back into the house for more stuff.

Dixie smiled to himself. *If THAT is the silhouette girl,* (he jabbed the cigarette, held between his left hand fingers, in the girl's direction) *that guy can keep her.* Dixie croaked quietly, "I sure ain't fightin that big cat for HER. No way, Mann!" Must be the liquor that promoted his sudden, atypical penchant for soliloquy.

He dragged slowly on the nail. The perfect combination of booze, no food and cigarettes had really relaxed him. From head to toe, he felt good, real good, warm

yet smooth and light. Dixie wrapped his right arm around his ribs, inadvertently closing and bunching up his suit coat. He rested his left elbow over the back of his right wrist, smoking the nail with his left hand. He was no longer anxious. The orange, boss girl stood in the yard, halfway between the car and the front steps. The top of the parked station wagon blocked her lower half from his view.

Imploring something, she retreated towards the porch, again bringing herself into Dixie's full view. The girl had a cute shape and tantalizing, long, dark hair. Dixie had to give her that much, but her bossiness rubbed him the wrong way. He could not hear what she was saying now, as she spoke away from him towards the front door. Again, the door opened and the young Adonis burst forth, loaded down as before, this time with beach paraphernalia. He hurried to the car with the orange terrier of a girl nipping at his heels. Then the girl-terrier turned back to the house yelling loud enough for the whole block to hear.

"RYZANNA!"

Dixie's ears perked up. The young man loading the car had dropped something on the ground. Dixie could not see what, as the two cars parked against the curb in front of the house again obscured his view of the yard there. The girl in the yard was reprimanding the curly haired muscleman for his sloppy work, when an attractive older woman stepped out from behind the front screen door. Probably in her late thirties, the woman was wearing a sleeveless brown shift covered with a tan, half-apron tied about her waist. This woman was heftier than the boss girl. Yet her apron failed to conceal her own shapeliness, even if her curves were a bit more rounded with age than those of the girl in orange.

"Hmm," observed Dixie. "Must be the mother. You can see where the daughter gets her figure," he observed talking to himself again. The older woman on the steps called to the girl in the yard.

"Sheena? Think you might need these, Honey." She tossed the girl in orange some keys. "Sheena" caught the keys, looked at them and dropped her head. Then she raised both her head and hands high, before she let both hands and chin drop abruptly. She slapped the sides of her hot pants which barely covered her protruding buttocks. Dixie noticed that in addition to a gleaming diamond ring, the girl wore a large, fire opal ring on her outstretched, left hand.

This chick really likes orange!

Semi-humbled, the young woman cried and beat her chest with both fists in an overly dramatic, mocking fashion.

"Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. Thanks, Mom."

"Well, that's what mothers are for, Dear." The handsome mother smiled quaintly at her contrite offspring.

Sheena? What a name! Sheena? Yeah! *Sure, she's the other girl in the band with her picture on the latest album cover—the sister. Sure.* Dixie recognized her now.

As this byplay had occurred, Dixie drew on his Lucky, still undetected. He wondered how long it would be before they noticed him spying on them.

Suddenly, Dixie became aware of another short female. Evidently, she had slipped out of the house onto the porch quietly, during the mea culpa episode. Initially unnoticed by Dixie, she emerged now from behind the mother. He saw her. She must be the "Ryzanna" who had just been paged.

This girl's hair was several shades lighter than either of the other two women, but her face was strikingly similar to the mother's, at least from this distance. The girl carried a pair of what looked to be heavy wool blankets, folded in quarters, and pressed firmly against her right side under her arm. Turned towards the driveway, she held the blankets in a way that obscured her body from Dixie. But he could see her bare, tanned legs—"Gorgeous" slipped from his mouth without coercion, as did his cigarette when he pulled it down to gawk.

She'd make any chorus line in Vegas with them stems, if she was a little taller.

Dixie sucked hard on his nail. He needed that butt right now. He was only a hundred feet or so from them. Yet, they were all so absorbed in their own affairs, none of them had noticed him, standing diagonally across the street. He leaned back against his bike, inhaling the pungent fragrance of the magnolia, above his tobacco smoke. Again, he wondered how long his advantage would last.

Now Dixie riveted his eyes on the short, lighter hued brunette on the porch. The girl chuckled at this "Sheena's" forgetfulness. Dixie zeroed in on the porch girl, the one, he believed was Ryzanna. His keen eye took in everything about the attractive girl, as Sheena chastised her sister's lack of initiative.

"For cryin' out loud, Ryz'n. That's all you brought out?"

"I brought what you told me to bring, Sheena. I swear, if anyone doesn't do exactly as you say, you get ticked off. Now, it seems like, you get ticked even if they do. Do you want the blankets or not?" Ryz'n held the blankets out before her. Sheena placed her hands akimbo.

"My! Aren't we touchy? Hope that husband of yours gets here quick, so you'll snap out of it. Of course, I want the blankets. Put 'em in the trunk, PLE-EASE?"

'Husband of yours?' How could they know he was coming right now? Could Sheena be referring to someone else? Had that helpful record company secretary called ahead to warn them?

However, Dixie could not dwell upon such thoughts now. He was much too much mesmerized by the lovely vision on the front stoop across the street. From Dixie's viewpoint, that girl seemed to be spraying sunshine out all around her.

Ryz'n shifted the blankets to her left arm, using her right hand to grasp the stoop's iron handrail. When she turned to descend the stoop, the girl was wide open to his view. The sight of her figure about knocked Dixie back over his bike. "Be damned," whispered Dixie to himself in awe. "She's got the face of a cheerleader and the body of a—-Wow! What a fox! A bodacious fox at that!" He had never seen an hourglass so sharply defined on any woman or girl before, ever! Not even in Vegas! He called Big Jim's words to mind. "Nobody's got a wife that looks like that." *And I'm Nobody? Be damned.* "Be double damned!"

Ryz'n hesitated, halting on the third stoop step. She looked perplexed as though she had just heard a strange noise. The girl was wearing high-waisted, forest green short shorts (not "hot pants") with broad cuffs, a sleeveless, yellow, scooped neck, mid-riff, summer top and there was a necklace or something dangling from her neck. The midriff seam of the top, almost but did not quite reach the high waist band of her shorts. Nevertheless, her navel was covered, a fact that Dixie appreciated. However, she could have been wearing a burlap sack thought Dixie and still her womanly virtues could not have been hidden from him, not the way she looked.

The girl was barefoot, but she wore a yellow ribbon in her wavy, shoulder length hair, which was parted high on the right side of her head. Her hair appeared to be a smoky grey-brown, the color of hot coffee, no, make that hot cocoa surrounding a marshmallow, taken with a couple spoonfuls of cream. Like him, she parted her hair very high. She had pulled her long bangs apart so that they framed either side of her face and then curled them up so the tips of the curls brushed her prominent cheekbones. However, unlike Dixie, this girl's hair reached down to her broad shoulders and a little beyond. Her prolific hair growth was unmistakable. Like the orange, head band on Sheena, the yellow ribbon held this girl's hair in place, keeping it from falling in her eyes.

Dixie's keen eyes were burning a hole through his custom-made FosterGrants as he observed the girl, who was about twenty-five yards from him. He studied her meticulously from the yellow ribbon about her head to her hot pink-painted toenails which he could barely make out, even with his superior vision. From the light pole, which was halfway to the driveway, the boss girl again began to prod this other girl, whom she had called "Ryz'n", from her perch on the porch steps. However, Ryz'n ignored her.

Dixie felt the brunette with the glorious shape and the yellow ribbon in her hair sensed she was being watched. He was right, for she lifted her head now, looking for something. Slowly, as if she had radar, the curvaceous cutie in the green shorts turned her head his way. When she found him, her eyes locked onto his face. His excellent vision had proved him well. She was indeed gorgeous! Truly something else. But Dixie hid behind his wraparound shades.

* * *

Ryz'n had walked down a few steps of the stoop, when she stopped dead in her tracks! She felt uneasy, as if someone were staring at her. She looked up across the street. Then, turning her head to her right about forty-five degrees, she found the individual whose gaze she felt penetrating her like a laser.

There, caddy-cornered across the street from Ryz'n, stood a young man with long, dark, wavy, almost shoulder-length hair. Long black sideburns and a matching, trim, dark moustache, leaning up against a parked motorcycle. Wraparound, dark sunglasses, similar to those she owned, masked him like Zorro. He dressed in a stylish unbuttoned light grey suit coat with matching, flared, grey slacks, a powder blue shirt, and matching light grey loafers. From

what she could make out, his feet appeared to be sockless. He was smoking a cigarette with his left hand, while he had shoved his right hand out of sight down into his suit pants pocket.

The stranger stood, immobile, on his left foot only, relaxing back against his bike with his right foot crossed over his left. He appeared calm, peaceful, as if he were at home here, but he was a stranger to her, to this neighborhood. He was looking straight at her. She gasped.

Could it be Nicky?

But it wasn't possible. Big Jim said Nicky couldn't get here until tomorrow at the earliest. Yet the stranger's motorbike was parked behind him! Ryz'n's heart rose in her throat and her chest began to heave. The more she studied the stranger, the more she knew.

It's him. It just has to be him!

"Roy! Roy! Come here QUICK! COME QUICK!" Her mom's urgent voice sounded from the stoop above her, shattering the moment's supreme stillness.

Suddenly, everything began happening in a slow motion vacuum for Ryz'n. Behind her, she heard her mother speaking urgently in a backwards direction through the front screen door to her father, who, Ryz'n knew, was planted in his easy chair reading the evening newspaper. Prompted by the urgency in her mother's voice, Ryz'n heard her dad appear momentarily behind her, pushing open the screen door. Sheena, who had just caught the keys from her mother had been urging Ryz'n to hurry up with the blankets, when the director of operations caught herself in mid sentence. She, too, followed her sister's line of sight to the man leaning against the motor cycle. Bryson, when he pulled his head from the trunk of the Bonneville, also stopped, as if entranced, to look at the mysterious motorcycle man. Behind her Ryz'n heard the screen door creak open, while from the left corner of her eye, she saw her sister and Bryson freeze in their tracks as though she were dreaming them.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph!" gasped her dad loudly behind her.

"Oh, Roy!" exclaimed Mrs. Ryan.

Ryz'n heard her parents above and behind her, but she did not heed them. Slowly, she moved the blankets to her left hand, before she let go of them altogether, dropping them down the last couple of porch steps. Ryz'n raised her left hand unconsciously to her mouth, in an expression, common both to her and her mother. Then, without taking her eyes off the biker across the street, Ryz'n took one long, light stride over the last steps to the grass. She began to walk, haltingly at first, towards the mysterious visitor.

Her heart, like her mind, raced a mile a minute, while everything else around her seemed to slow down. Her gait quickened. Her stomach felt queasy, then hollow. Her mouth became dry and her palms began to perspire. She felt herself flush from head to toe. Could this really be happening? This was not one of the many dreams she had imagined about this moment, was it*? It can't be*. He wasn't

supposed to be here for another two days yet! Wouldn't that be just like Nicky? Early or late, but he was rarely on time, except when they were ...

The breathless, barefoot girl picked up speed as she crossed the yard diagonally toward the stranger. The green zoysia grass tickled the soles of her feet, but she scarcely noticed. She wanted to pinch herself, but her trance-like state would not permit such a simple feat.

She never took her eyes from him. Neither did he redirect his vision away from her. As she began to jog across the yard towards him, the biker moved for the first time. He casually flicked his cigarette away with his left hand, while his right remained buried in his pocket. The man began to cross the narrow, residential street. When a car honked to his left, he held up coolly to let the car pass. Then, most deliberately, he angled right, across the street towards her.

Ryz'n remembered she had promised herself she would not throw herself at him. She didn't want to embarrass him or herself. She remembered the psychiatrist's cautions. She paused just past the concrete pedestrian sidewalk that bordered the avenue, at the edge of the grass next to the concrete curb. Ryz'n waited dutifully as she had been for these three years past. She became conscious she was barefoot but, for some, strange reason, she noticed her recently painted toenails shone a glossy pink. With her right hand over her mouth and her left down by her side, she realized her fingernails were also glossed in pink. *Who CARES about nails? What thoughts at a time like this!* Ryz'n nervously spun her diamond engagement ring about her ring finger.

The stranger came close but he halted in the macadam street, a couple feet from the curb, squarely facing her. His right hand remained buried in his pocket. His dark glasses still masked his face. He gave no sign that he recognized her. *Could he remember her?* Ryz'n's heart thundered. *Is it him?* He seemed too big for her Nicky. She tried, but could not swallow.

Ryz'n could not see his eyes for his large, dark glasses obscured them. Devoid of any facial expression, his nose and mouth, or what was not obscured by the moustache, looked like they belonged to her Nicky. That trim, coal black moustache had not been present in the recent baseball photos given her by the Peppermount coach, but Ryz'n needed to see those eyes!

She had experienced her share of imposters over the last year, more than one a gig when she had been touring with the band. She searched his cool, expressionless face, but those darned glasses ... Now, overcome with emotion, unable to speak, Ryz'n made a subconscious, halfhearted motion with her left hand toward her eyes and over her head, in effect, asking him to remove his sunglasses. He did so haltingly, placing them in his left pants' pocket, leaving his left hand in his pocket with the glasses and his right out of sight in his suit coat pocket. Then he raised his head and simply stared directly into her eyes.

"OH, MY GOSH!" cried Ryz'n. "There they are!" she gushed. Unforgettable and larger than life! With the left eye just as black as coal and the right, an bright

electric blue! Now her left hand shot upward to join her right in covering her suddenly gaping mouth. She exclaimed in a smoky, hoarse, choked whisper:

"NICKY!" *Nobody has eyes like you, Nicky! Nobody!* Without thinking about all her precautions and warnings, Ryz'n leaped from the curb into his arms. He had no choice but to catch her. She wrapped both arms around his neck and both legs around his waist. Overcome with emotion, she turned her head to the left and buried the right side of her face into his rock solid upper chest and left shoulder.

Despite her prior plans to remain dignified, to hold back for fear of scaring her timid husband off, Ryz'n had attacked him like that Spider Lady from Saigon might have. Ryz'n had behaved just as coarsely as she imagined that prostitute described by Big Jim might have acted. Nevertheless, Ryz'n wrapped both her arms and her legs around her husband, the stranger, back from the grave. She hugged him so tightly, she suspected he might mistake her for the boa constrictor he had feared in his sleep in Nam. His body felt just as hard and lean to her as ever, only he was larger everywhere. Her arms did not reach around him as far as they once had. She could no longer clasp her hands around his shoulders and behind his back. He was a man now. It was true. She buried her face in the side of his neck for a few seconds before she pulled back.

Her husband's discomfort registered with Ryz'n, as evidenced by him holding his hands out helplessly in the air above her shoulders. She was holding him, not the other way around. Obviously, not knowing what he should do, he inadvertently but clearly displayed his missing fingers to her, as well as to the others. The family stood stock still, in place behind her, like deer caught in headlights. The sight of his maimed hand opened the flood gates for Ryz'n and she rained tears of joy mixed with grief on his shoulder and collarbone. Dixie looked past Ryz'n to the Ryan's, for what? Help? Direction?

Dixie knew Donna was a big, strong woman, but neither she, nor Miss Riordan, nor anyone else, ever held him as tightly as this little mighty mite did. *Jeeze! She is strong! Like a danged Boa Constrictor!* He could feel the firmness of her well toned muscles in both her legs and her arms. However, her substantial bust like her double, facial cheeks were soft, as was her heavy, luxuriantly thick hair. Her eyes! He had never seen eyes quite like them before, with that combination of a large, soft round irises and their pronounced almond-shaped setting. Their emerald hue contrasted sharply with the pitch black brows and long lashes. Aside from her pictures on *GRT*'s album covers, he did not recognize her. He wished he did. Still, in her presence like this, a shiver shot down his spine and sliced through his soul, fracturing that cold void within. Nevertheless, she sure as hell recognized him. *That's for damned sure.*

Ryz'n heard her mother weeping uncontrollably behind her. Her dad had stepped out onto the porch to comfort his wife. In an excited voice, the patriarch consoled his wife in a tone loud enough for all to hear.

"It's him, Rose. By God, it IS him! I'll be damned! I never ... thought, never ... thought we'd see him again. He left us a boy and now ... now, why now, he has come home a man."

"A boy, a man! Who cares?" Mrs. Ryan sniffled, "He's alive! And he's come home to our Baby. That's what's important!" Dixie noticed Sheena and her manservant standing on the other side of the yard, several feet apart. Disbelief laced with wonder lined their open-mouthed, slack-jawed faces as well.

Dixie had been holding his hands out above Ryz'n's shoulders, as if he were under arrest. However, the more she cried, the more she squeezed. And the tighter she clung to him, the more this beautiful stranger moved him to compassion for her. Her scent of lemons engulfed him, reminding him of the tree in Donna's backyard. *Must be her perfume 'cause they sure ain't no lemon trees around here.* Despite all this heavy emotion, Dixie remained amazingly calm.

Out of compassion for her present state now, rather than from any memory of her, Dixie held Ryz'n close. He gently rubbed her back slowly with his left hand. Dixie felt her powerful, broad shoulders were like those of an athlete. With his deformed right hand, he tenderly stroked the back of her head, through her dense, wavy hair. Ryz'n responded by burying her tear-stained face into his left shoulder. Her hair was not only long, but wavy and luxuriantly thick He could not recall anyone with hair quite so dense as this girl's light, hot chocolate colored, brown-grey locks. He marveled that her hair actually had its own weight to it like one of those guys he had read about in the Old Testament. As if climbing out of a deep well, Dixie consciously raised himself from his admiring stupor for her beauty. He felt he should say something.

But what could he say to soothe this distraught woman, sobbing softly upon his shoulder? He remembered what Big Jim had told him when they had first met. It seemed appropriate, so he paraphrased Jim's words now to her. Softly, he whispered soothingly into her right ear, so only they two could hear.

"O ... K ... OK it's ... O ... Kay ... We ma-de it. Yes, we ... di-did it ... Sh-Shhhhh, Shhhhh, n-now." He cooed very slowly, deliberately, as experience had taught him to do in stressful situations. The shooters and his deliberate manner helped cloak his typical speech impediment. "There ... now. There ... now ... Sh-Shhhhh, Shhhhh. We ... ma-de it." He spoke in that croaky, froglike voice that Ryz'n knew belonged uniquely to her husband.

As soon as she heard his inimitable croak, she hugged him even more tightly, if that were possible. He responded to her ever tighter clutch, repeating even more gently. "There ... now ... . There ... now ... Shhhhh! Shhhhh! We ... ma-de it. Yes, we, we di-did it. Sh-Shhhhh!"

Ryz'n responded to his soothing words, by stifling her tears and pulling her head back to look upon the husband she had missed for over three years. For his part, Dixie fished a handkerchief out of his pants pocket for this distressed, gorgeous stranger. This girl was light, so easy to hold, much lighter than Donna, more like a feather. Dixie felt she could not have weighed much more than a hundred pounds, if that. She wiped her eyes, blowing her nose hard with the gift she had just received. He chose to ignore the mild, sleepless semi-circles beneath her lovely eyes. Her low forehead appealed to his sense of beauty. Ryz'n's, legs remained wrapped about his waist, her right arm about his neck with her tear-stained face right next to his. Dixie held her with one arm around her slim waist, as he might have held Andre or Little Jim.

When she had finished sniffling, Ryz'n arched her back and raised up like a horsewoman in her saddle to stuff his handkerchief into her shorts pocket. She proclaimed bravely. "Just like old times, Nicky." Then she laughed self-consciously. Ryz'n stared deep into his eyes seeking in vain for a sign that he knew her. She found none. Painfully now, she began to realize that his soft encouragement had misled her. She had heard what she had wanted to hear in his tender words and tone. She had seen what she had wanted to see in his kind expressions. She had felt what she had wanted to feel in his warm embrace. A sinking fear seeped into her consciousness. Suddenly, it dawned upon her that for all his polite kindness, this man was not returning her passion like Nicky would have. She had thought wrongly that he was her "Nicky" and she, his love. Now, she wondered—*No! I'll show him right now how much we love each other.* Without warning, Ryz'n wrapped both her arms around the back of his neck, pulling his lips toward her, and kissed him as she had dreamed of doing for some three years.

Her forward actions took him aback. Dixie loosened his grip on Ryz'n, resting his hands lightly on her back and shoulder, but he allowed her to cling to him. While he did not back his head away from her, neither did he match her zeal. He remained fearfully frozen in neutral.

An alarm sounded within Ryz'n's brain as she recognized Dixie's lack of reciprocity. Again, her stomach churned. Once more, she realized suddenly that he saw her as a stranger, nothing more. The gorgeous girl had promised herself that she would not embarrass her husband by forcing herself upon him, if he did not recognize her, yet she had embarrassed them both anyway. She had steeled herself against this possibility. Deep down in her heart however, she had been sure that Nicky would remember her when he saw her. Certainly he would recall her when he kissed her, but now he had not, and it hurt. It hurt deeply. Too late,

she realized, those soft, encouraging words Nick had just spoken to her, were words from a stranger who merely had taken compassion upon her acute distress.

Ryz'n felt totally abashed, ashamed to have foisted herself upon him in the very manner, in which she had promised herself that she would not. The young woman broke her hold upon him and, in so doing, his light grasp on her as well. Bashfully, she slid off of him, down onto the curb. With her hands clasped behind her and her head bent towards the ground, Ryz'n looked up to him from under her long, natural eyelashes to apologize.

"Sorry, I, I thought you recognized me."

Ill at ease, Ryz'n turned her head aside, to the left, dabbing at her eyes with the linen tissue. Then, feeling noticeably self conscious, she crossed her arms beneath her bosom. She diffidently squeezed herself tightly, flexing her biceps and triceps beneath her fingers, trying to physically restrain herself from doing anything else quite so stupid.

The sultry sound of her smoky voice thrilled him. Then, for the first time, Dixie noticed her necklace was in fact two necklaces. One held a crucifix at the end of a fine gold chain. The other necklace was silver and the chain disappeared down into her cleavage which was largely uncovered by the steeply scooped neck of her cotton blouse.

"N-No, I'm ... the one ... sorreee. I wisha ha-a-ad rec-rec, know ... n ... you." Outwardly, Dixie smiled, but inwardly, he was ticked at himself for speaking like an idiot, especially in front of this girl at this time, especially when he had had no difficulties in speaking with that saucy Moons the previous night. *Dummy up, you idiot!.* His heart was pounding like a blacksmith's hammer against an anvil. He needed another shooter. No, make that several shooters. Dixie promised himself to speak only if necessary and then very deliberately.

His noble response had encouraged her, partly salving the wound she had unwittingly opened. She, too, forced a weak smile. But his reply also revealed his diffidence and the breadth of gap between him and the husband she had known. The family Ryan had been watching this homecoming, too stunned to speak. Now Sheena came to herself and walked boldly up to greet her brother-in-law.

"Hello Nick! Ya probably don't remember me either, but I'm Sheena, Ry's sister."

The orange, boss girl now peered deep into Dixie's eyes, evidently searching for the same light of recognition her sister had just sought and failed to find. However, Dixie did not recognize her either. He shrugged helplessly at his sister-in-law. Her pleasant smile began to dissolve and her lower lip began to tremble. She cried in distress.

"Oh, Nicky!"

Disturbed, she raised the back of her hand to her lip as if to stop its trembling. She backed away from him shaking her head, seeking comfort from the football player, who stood a couple steps behind her.

Then Mrs. Ryan approached Dixie gingerly. She reacted much as her elder daughter had done moments earlier, though she was more subdued. She did not kiss Dixie on the mouth, but rather on the cheek and hugged him closely. The woman introduced herself as both "Rose" and "Mom." It was a good minute before she let go of him, stepping away dabbing her eyes with her apron. Obviously, Ryz'n strongly favored her mother. Dixie thought it would not have been much of a stretch to picture the mother and daughter as sisters. The mother was heftier, obviously, but that aside, only their eye and hair color were different, with the mother's eyes and hair dark brown like Sheena's. Yet the face, the double cheeks, the bone structure, the figure, the expressions were all the same as her first born.

The young man in the #80 white football jersey, trimmed in old gold and navy blue, again stepped forward. He slipped his arm around Sheena's waist and inched her forward with him towards Dixie. He whispered softly into the girl's ear. She nodded and he let go of her while he greeted Dixie.

"Hey, Nicky. It's great to have ya home, Mann. Really cool. I'm Sheena's husband, Bryson. OK?" He waited for Nick's response, so Nick smiled faintly. "But hey! You and me go way back, Mann. Been a long time dude, a long, long time." He smiled pleasantly with a mouthful of even, white teeth and his penetrating, soft brown eyes offered Dixie a genuine welcome that was confirmed by a hearty handshake. Dixie simply nodded. *This guy acts normal.*

Then the young man backed away to coddle and soothe his wife. Finally, Mr. Ryan stepped forward to shake hands with his long lost son-in-law. The two men eyed each other warily. Mr. Ryan was a portly five-foot nine inches with bright green eyes, a ruddy complexion and a thick, full head of dark brown hair. Mr. Ryan awkwardly offered his hand in friendship. Dixie took it in his and shook with the man who was his father-in-law. Then clumsily, Mr. Ryan stepped into Dixie and hugged him stiffly. He stepped back just as quickly, as if such an act of familiarity did not come easily to him.

"Welcome home, SON," he said. "I'm Roy, Roy Ryan. You, uh, well, it's so good to have you back. She ... " He nodded to Ryz'n, "She always said you'd 'come home, come home alive and come home well.' She always said that ... " Mr. Ryan shook his head in joy and incredulity, as he choked up. Overcome with emotion, a lone drop of water fell from his eye, but he ignored it as if it had not happened. Slowly he retreated backwards a few steps towards the house. The man's dark hair clashed with his bright green eyes. Like Dixie, he sported a gold-capped tooth, only his was an upper, eye tooth. A few inches shorter than Dixie, this man exhibited a budding, beer belly. The tattooed blue wings of a U. S. Air Force chevron on his upper arm, extended partly below the short sleeve of his sky blue, polyester shirt. For several long seconds, they all stared, looking at one another, tongue-tied. The Ryans seemed afraid of pulling an embarrassing stunt like Ryz'n had perpetrated minutes earlier. And Dixie, well he was just afraid, period. He hoped he wouldn't talk like an idiot.

Composed once again, it was Ryz'n who dispelled the clumsy silence.

"Well, Nick! Are you hungry? We were about to eat dinner. Right, Mom?"

Dixie considered one good thing about driving at night and sleeping during the day was that when he woke in the evenings, people—no, make that beautiful young women—were forever offering him dinner. He grinned to himself and croaked softly "OK."

"Oh yes, it's just about ready, Nicholas. In fact, I better get back to the kitchen before I burn that meatloaf," replied Dixie's mother-in-law.

Mrs. Ryan started to leave to re-enter the house, but she could not resist first walking over to squeeze her son-in-law tightly and kiss him once more.

"It really is SO GOOD to have you home, William Nicholas!" She reached up to pinch his cheek smartly and between clenched teeth she said. "God bless you, Son. God bless you! You are a honest-to-God living answer to prayer." Letting go of his cheek, she agreed with her proclamation. "Yes Nicholas, you truly are."

William Nicholas? So that's my name? William Nicholas Sheeboom? Damn!

As she began to leave the second time, dabbing at the corner of her eye with the edge of her apron, Ryz'n caught her mother's attention.

"What is it Ryzanna?"

The girl cleared her throat and mouthed something that Dixie could not make out and that her mother failed to comprehend, but Sheena did. "MEATLOAF!" she blurted out, forthrightly. An exchange of quizzical looks passed between mother and older daughter, until Ryz'n was forced to raise her right hand to shield her mouth from Dixie's view, but not his hearing. She whispered, "Mother, Nick doesn't like meatloaf." She shook her head negatively to emphasize the point.

"Oh!" responded Mrs. Ryan. She ignored her daughter's desire for discretion. "Nicholas? Your wife has reminded me that you don't care for meatloaf. I forgot about that. Why don't you come into the kitchen with me now and we can pick out something else for you, OK?" She smiled broadly.

Dixie shook his head negatively and put up both hands together, palms outward.

"'s O…K, Ma'a'a'am." The Corps had taught him to eat anything and like it.

Ryz'n stepped between her mother and her husband. "Are you sure, Nicky? You don't have to be polite. We're your family, you know? And I know how much you dislike meatloaf—"

Dixie cut her off, "I ... eat," was all he said but he winked and smiled at her for reassurance.

Pleasantly surprised, Ryz'n returned his smile. Mr. Ryan stepped around behind Dixie to herd them all across the lawn, up the steps and into the house. Dixie went ahead of Mr. Ryan, but he stopped behind Ryz'n at the foot of the stoop. Casually, he reached down to his right to pick up the blankets Ryz'n had dropped a few minutes ago. Dixie turned back past his father-in-law to follow the too narrowly spaced blue slate steps that led across the lawn to the driveway.

Ryz'n, who had been just ahead of her husband on the steps, turned and saw him crossing the yard. She jumped back to the ground in front of her father to join Nicky. She reached her husband in time to help him pick up the shoes Bryce had dropped in the yard. They laughed nervously after they bumped heads lightly, stooping to pick up the shoes. Gently, Ryz'n took from him the shoe he had retrieved. Then she placed both shoes neatly in the empty near corner of the trunk of the Bonneville. Dixie spread the blankets out on top of the luggage. As he closed the trunk lid, he told her to watch her fingers, placing his own right hand close to the trunk jam. After he slammed the lid shut, Dixie jumped back in horror, revealing his finger stubs to her. The booze had loosened his natural inhibitions enough to play the buffoon, as he had with Moons and the acid rain last night.

The girl did not know what to make of his pretense at first. Initially, she felt, in horror that he had cut off his fingers, but the lack of blood belayed that idea. When she realized he was OK, merely choosing this as a forum to reveal a deformity, Ryz'n did not know whether to laugh or cry. She chose the former option because this was the first Nick-like thing he had done.

He laughed with her, making a joke of the fact he had only two fingers on his right hand. As they turned to go in the house for dinner, Ryz'n leaned back over the trunk of the car purposefully, forcing him to go around her left side. Then, she consciously took up his mutilated right hand in her left, her ring hand. Against his stubs, Dixie could feel her miniscule diamond engagement ring beneath two, smooth gold wedding bands. However, he did not know why she wore two wedding bands.

Startled a bit by her action, Dix looked down at her graceful, perfectly lovely petite hand, holding his larger, maimed one. Then, again, he admiringly looked up at her. Ryz'n had steeled herself previously to make no big deal over his wounds. She didn't want to blow that promise as she had their initial greeting. She smiled sweetly, proclaiming matter of factly, "Let's eat, Nicky".

Dix was trying to read her. If this beautiful, strange creature wanted to divorce him, she certainly did not act like it. Nevertheless, he still did not feel like he was this "Nick" character they all claimed him to be, despite their earnest attestations to the contrary.

Dixie encouraged the cute brunette to ascend the front steps before him. Her wholesome, natural beauty overpowered him. The girl's long, heavy cocoa colored hair bounced down off unusually broad shoulder blades, as she stepped pertly ahead of him. She could have made a shampoo commercial, he mused. Her curvaceously attractive walk caught his eye. *GRT*'s top ten hit "Her Swish and Her Sway" came to Dixie's mind and he began to hum the tune. The natural, unaffected swing of her broad, tightly rounded hips from side to side now served him like a hypnotist's watch. Her upright buttocks were as perfectly round as Moons', only larger, more tightly woven and firmer, less jigglely. Even so, her hips rolled lazily, independent of one another, yet in a perfectly alluring harmony

that counterbalanced her natural walk. Her pressed, forest green, cuffed shorts with the thin black and gold plaid stripes, only accentuated her natural wonders.

Dixie froze in his tracks to linger behind and watch her mount the front stoop. Truly bewitched by her magical spell, she was obviously unconscious of her unaffected swish and sway. Oblivious to the effect of her walk upon him, she climbed the steps naively innocent. Her deeply tanned, showgirl's legs came into his view. Suddenly, he remembered an old Fifties movie newsreel that had come with some movie films to the Kaneohe rec. hall. Restricted to base that weekend, he recalled the newsreel had depicted an old Miss America contest. The winner had been a lovely short, swarthy girl, full of personality with chunky cheeks, a bright smile and a build like a brick house, not unlike this girl on the stoop. He could not recall the petite, beauty queen's name, but she had spoken with a southern drawl. And now this Ryzanna reminded him of that former beauty. His humming grew louder and he sang the chorus under his breath.

Well, I was watchin', was just the other day,
I watched her walkin', watched her swish and her sway.
Ya know, it wasn't her fault, that she moved thataway.
No, that's how God made her, with her swish and her sway.

She must have heard him, because as quickly as she opened the screen door, Ryz'n let the door go and turned on him.

"Why, Nicky! You do remember, you do remember! You've been spoofin' us all along. Isn't that just like you to pull a trick like that," she reckoned.

"Hunh? Re-remember what?"

"That song, that song you were just singing."

Dixie scratched his head confused.

"Oh yeah, I heard it on one of my ta-tapes. It's a g-g-good one, a real tata-toe-tap-tapper." He smiled sheepishly because of his stutter.

"Oh." Her shoulders slumped considerably and her countenance melted.

"I thought that walking behind me had jogged your memory. After all, you always said it was my 'naturally alluring walk' that had inspired you to write that song back when we were in high school. But, you don't recall that either, do you?" Her whole visage seemed to droop momentarily as she pouted.

Dixie shook his head sadly, indicating that he couldn't accommodate her. But with those double boiler makers in his blood stream and no food in his stomach, he added with a devilish sparkle in his eye. "B-B-But I guess I musta been right, b-b-because it s-sure is in-insp-spirin'." It was the first time he had acknowledged something Nick had done as his own and he felt a bit plagiaristic.

She tilted her head, looking at him quizzically. Dixie pointed to her behind.

"Tra-Truly an in-in-spi-spiration. A real th-thing of ba-ba-beauty." He grinned despite his stutter and so did she.

"Well now, maybe you haven't changed so much after all, Baby," admitted the girl in her inherently husky voice. She stepped onto the threshold and held the door for him. "Come on in, Nicky." Again, she showered upon him her characteristic, dimpled smile.

The dimples warmed his heart. This girl was something else. He was eager to follow her. He started to climb the rest of the stairs. Yet, when she turned to beckon him into the house, the girl profiled herself upon the threshold of the open front doorway and Dixie hesitated. Her awesome profile revealed a slightly upturned rump that must have protruded close to half of a foot out behind her, as well as an ample chest that must have protruded nearly the same distance ahead of her. Yet, she had the flattest of bellies! For the briefest of instants, Dixie felt very strongly that he had been here with her before, but he just could not place it. Just as quickly, the sensation was gone, spinning off into inner space. Like so much else, he was powerless to recall it. Dixie bit his lip in frustration.

He let go of the thought and mused that she was perfectly balanced. However, as she turned and he followed her inside, Dixie acknowledged the true secret of her Wonder Woman build. It was her slightly long but incredibly, almost surreally, slender waist which truly set her figure apart from that of any woman he had ever known. The girl's classic, hourglass chassis was difficult for him to fathom. Her sharply inward curving waist was downright tiny, producing the steep, svelte S-shaped curves no matter which way she turned. Big Jim had been right. Dix wondered that her equally superior, healthy looking legs could receive the nourishment they needed through such a narrow funnel. They must have, for she had the legs of a Forties Hollywood glamour queen. As he studied her physique, it occurred to Dixie that she was, in fact, a dichotomy. Her slight stature, slighter waistline and her deeply dimpled smile rendered her petite. Yet, the breadth of her hips, shoulders and chest made her appear larger than she was.

Like Moons, this girl possessed both hips and shoulders that were equally broad and a well developed chest. Dixie convinced himself however that it was the waist that set the two shapely women apart. Yet, in spite of all her obvious, natural sensuality, this Ryzanna emanated a wholesome, spring-like, cheerleader quality. The girl appeared to be chaste, even virginal. Her unassuming manner, combined with her guileless allure, just knocked him out. He considered that maybe it was those baby faced, schoolgirl-like cheeks and false double chin that countered her natural animal magnetism to produce for him another fascinating dichotomy. Yes, definitely, those double cheeks played a part as they contrasted with her inviting, full lips.

"Come on inside, Nicky. We're letting the bugs in, Baby—Oh, that veranda! We had that built since you've been gone, but most everything else is the same." She acted as if he would know the difference. Dixie merely smiled politely, for he had not been thinking of the veranda at all.

After he climbed the stoop, Dixie was still staring at her, when his coat sleeve caught on the screen door knob. The door tugged at him, precluding his entry to

the house. As he unhooked his sleeve from the knob, Dixie glanced back momentarily over his shoulder to his bike. There, proudly, stood the symbol of his heretofore freedom and joy. The modified, black and silver chrome chopper looked alone and out of place. Dixie reckoned that the bike looked as foreign and isolated as he felt in this east coast, suburban, middle class neighborhood of modest brick ramblers, family sedans and station wagons. Yes, the bike looked as out of place as he felt. That was for certain. Three cars in succession passed by, heading down the street in the direction from which he had come. Dixie guessed they were commuters returning home from work.

The thought semi-flashed through his still semi-inebriated brain that he was moving away from one world and into another, alien world from which he might never return. It also had occurred to him, when this female knockout had profiled herself in the doorway, that this Ryz'n very well could be his silhouette girl.

If only her hair was darker and she was only a little larger ...

The girl in his vision had been larger than life, like an Amazon, like Donna. Dixie did not see how this diminutive though shapely, athletic creature could fill the shoes of the dark-haired, larger than life silhouette which inhabited his vision.

On second thought, he considered the old saying that good things come in small packages. Now, here she was smiling at him sweetly, displaying perfectly even, white teeth and emanating an inexplicably healthy but sexually, bright glow. He counted no fewer than six dimples, three in each cheek. Yes, this young woman embodied a sanguine glow which radiated not just from her bright visage, but throughout her whole persona. *Hope for the best and be prepared for the worst, Dix*. But he looked again at her blooming cheerleader smile, discarded his pessimism and fairly jumped across the threshold in response to her overtures.

As the pair entered the house, the screen door slammed behind them. Sheena let loose of a caramel colored Skye terrier, no more than ten inches high, which joyfully attacked the freshly reunited couple. Barking and wagging its short tail, the perfectly groomed animal made straight for Ryz'n. Ryz'n bowed down to greet the family pet enthusiastically and introduced the dog to Dixie as Scruffy Junior. The Ryan's petite pet featured scruffy, long, overgrown eyebrows, finely trimmed bangs and a long, shaggy coat which lent the dog it's cute bearing and fostered its name. Even the pooch had a yellow bow tied in its forelocks, which caused Dixie to chuckle silently. He could not see the dog's eyes, but he could clearly see the dog's fierce, little white teeth inside its dark mouth. The animal barked prodigiously at Dixie as he knelt, as Ryz'n had, to pet the dog.

Dixie was not much of an animal lover, but he made peace with the dog by offering her the back of his left hand to sniff and lick. Satisfied, "Junior" trotted happily over the firmly cushioned, vermillion pile carpet to the pillow box that served as her lounge. Ryz'n explained that her dad felt outnumbered by females in his own house, so he convinced them to call the pet Junior even though she was a bitch—that is if they wanted to keep the pet. The dog's bed lay beside Mr. Ryan's living room, easy chair, just outside the dining room alcove. However,

officially, that is to say legally, Ryz'n informed Dixie that the pet's name was Scruffy Junior, and that "Senior" had passed while Dixie had been in the service.

Dixie glanced around to find the room and the furniture to be a cool study in various shades of green and brown. The cool colors enveloped him in a comfortably refreshing welcome. The room increased in lightness of greenery, the higher one's eye roamed. The vermillion, pile carpet supported mostly mint green furniture, while the walls behind the furniture were a spring green. Overhead, the plaster ceiling was a pale yellow-green.

Dixie felt as though he had stumbled upon an inviting, cool forest glen. Vermillion floor length drapes matched the carpet and hung one-third open over the wide, front picture window. Identical curtains were opened fully by a narrower window at the opposite end of the room which overlooked the back of the driveway. Mint green shades hung halfway down the glass windows from the ceiling. The three-cushion sofa and the one recliner to his right were in sculpted, upholstered, mint green. The other, larger recliner was constructed of dark brown leather. Between the two recliners sat an eighteen-inch high octagon of brown leather and wood. Mr. Ryan was relaxing in the large brown easy chair now. A smaller brown lamp stand between the sofa and the smaller recliner held a dark green shaded ceramic lamp. A pole lamp, holding three lights like branches on a tree, ran from ceiling to floor between the brown leather recliner and the lamp stand. Magazines and papers littered the lamp table.

Because Dixie knew he was supposed to have been here before, he studied the room meticulously, hoping to find the Rosetta Stone to his memory. His in-laws remained silent, letting him look, probably hoping he would recall something, too. A breathtaking, two by three-foot, in-flight picture of the Air Force's Fabulous Thunderbirds, spewing exhaust behind the famed jets, caught his eye. The jets soared in perfect formation above and behind Mr. Ryan's head inside of a glass frame. On the opposite side of the room from Dixie stood an old, black, upright piano and bench. There were several trophies on top of the upright and some gold records enclosed in frames on the wall above the piano. Against the narrower wall, to Dixie's left, stood three dark cherry cabinet structures side by side by side, each about three feet tall by two and a half-feet wide. First came a three shelf book case next to a hi-fi phonograph set and last, was a television cabinet, containing a TV set much younger than the cabinet housing it. At the far end of the wall began a hallway, which disappeared around the corner to his left. Dixie assumed the bedrooms lay around that corner. Immediately to his left, just this side of the first cherry wood cabinet, hung the open front door which was thrown back against some other closed white-painted, wooden door, possibly a closet. As he looked, the Ryans seated themselves, so Dixie took a seat, also.

So this is how the other half lives? Certainly you could fit the small half of Donna's place inside this room. Middle America in all its glory, hunh? Still, it did not approach the mansion of a rock star, not like the ones he had seen up in

the Hollywood hills. Maybe those millions that were supposed to be his were just an apparition. He sure saw no sign of any big money here.

While her husband was making his household inventory, waiting for the cook to announce "Dinner is now," Ryz'n became unhappy with the seating arrangement. Her unhappiness stemmed from the fact that Sheena and Bryson had flopped smack dab in the middle of the couch, beneath the wide, front picture window, making it impossible for Ryz'n to sit next to Nick on the sofa. She narrowed her eyes to shoot darts at her sister. Mr. Ryan relaxed in "his" chair in the far living room corner, next to the dog and nearest the dining room. Ryz'n understood the location gave him a commanding view of both the dining and living rooms, as well as visual access to the kitchen. Nick sat on a brown, fake leather hassock just inside the open front door at the near end of the three-cushioned couch.

Ryz'n spurned her mother's chair at the opposite end of the couch to sit on the piano bench directly across the narrow room from Nick. She glared at Sheena who obviously did not have a clue about her faux pas. Mr. Ryan suggested "Nick" sit in Mrs. Ryan's chair since the matron was in the kitchen. Ryz'n determined to sit in her husband's lap if he did. It was all she could do to keep from jumping on him anyway.

The only advantage to sitting opposite her husband, rather than next to him, was that she could give him a thorough visual going over without being too obvious. She studied him while he studied his surroundings. And she just couldn't get enough of that. She could not get over the fact that he had grown almost four inches! He was bigger everywhere, confirming what she had felt earlier in his arms. From what she could see, the Peppermount baseball roster had listed his dimensions accurately. Always a mesomorph, Nick definitely had grown a few inches and gained about thirty pounds. His chest and shoulders were broader, as were his thighs. His arms bulged beneath his suit coat, which seemed by contrast to be just a bit too small for him. In fact, his whole muscular body seemed to burst through his suit. He was definitely a man now, yet no less handsome than her boy-groom of three and a half years ago, but less of a "pretty boy," perhaps due to the moustache. Yes, he was more ruggedly handsome now.

His thick, black moustache overshadowed the feminine aura given off by his naturally full red lips, and equally long eyelashes and brows. Back in high school, those lips and eyes, which some had described as feminine, had more than once prompted rumors disputing Nick's masculinity. Nick had dispelled such rumors roughly on more than one occasion, in spite of his then midget stature. His upper two front, gold-capped teeth jumped out from his shy smile now, also overriding any so-called feminine features. Yes, Ryz'n had lost none of her attraction for him. In fact, now she felt even more attracted to him, if that were possible. She did not feel this was due merely to their long separation, because the more she looked upon him, the more he seemed a stranger to her. However, as a stranger, Nick sure was an attractive one!

Then she caught sight of his beautifully unique two-toned eyes again, which stamped him positively as her Nicky. She wanted him. She wanted him right now! *Forget this meatloaf stuff!* Ryz'n crossed her legs and clasped her hands together resting them upon her crossed knee. She composed herself with the promise that he would be fulfilling all her dreams completely, soon enough. She beamed his way, hopefully hiding her growing desire for him, and appearing like a picture of propriety.

For his part, Dixie felt odd as hell. Obviously, these people knew him as "Nick" and they expected him to behave like "Nick." Only problem was, he did not have a clue how to do that. He would try to act as politely as possible and try not to offend anyone. If that meant eating meatloaf, then hell! He would eat meatloaf. He did not like the darned stuff. That knockout of a girl had been right about that, but he would eat it just the same and like it. The Marines had taught him that much. In fact, with his looks he had always thought if his baseball career fell through, he could always become an actor. Because the Corps had taught him how to act better than any darned Actor's Studio ever could have. That is, if he could ever learn how to speak as well as any ten-year old kid. He was trying not to let his stuttering embarrass him here, but it was difficult.

They all, except Mrs. Ryan, sat in the living room enduring an uncomfortable silence. Dixie presumed the matron was in the kitchen cooking dinner. He noticed Ryz'n could not keep from staring at him. For his part, Dixie tried to look everywhere but at her. Yet, he could not help but steal glimpses of her surreptitiously. He was unsuccessful, for she never seemed to take her glassy, expressive, large emerald eyes off him. Only the far corners of her almond-formed eyes were white. The thing was, no one knew what to say, so they sat quietly, trying not to stare impolitely at each other.

Finally, Mr. Ryan suggested Ryz'n give them a song, since, after all, she was sitting at the piano. She refused politely until Dixie echoed her father's request. Then Ryz'n played two of their compositions: "Husband Mine", which she had composed, followed by "Dear One," written by Nick five years ago. Seated on the brown leather hassock, Dixie watched from behind Ryz'n as her hands skipped lightly and effortlessly over the keys.

For the latter song, she asked Nick to join her on the piano bench, where she could see him. Instead, Dixie crossed the room to stand at the "treble clef" end of the piano. He leaned his right forearm on top of the upright, as she played and sang just to him. Either she was one hell of an actress or she was supremely sincere. *This was the "rich bitch" that Donna had described?* He shook his head.

The girl played the upright and sang the sad, haunting melody in a plaintive manner. His eyes grew misty, even though he had heard it several times on his cassette tape without any emotional reaction. Somehow, her simple, sincere Patsy Cline-like rendering of the lilting, doleful melody touched him deeply. She sang soulfully, directly to him, as though they were alone in the house. The girl crooned with unvarnished sincerity and the natural catch in her smoky voice just

knocked him out. The lyrics weren't too great, but it was that haunting melody that got to him.

(My-y-y Dear, My Dea-earrest One)

Dear One,
Oh, oh, oh, oh my De-ear One,
Oh, oh, oh, oh, my dear, de-earest one,
It gets darkest before dawn,
Ye-e-e-esss, darkest before dawn.

Dear One,
Oh, oh, oh, oh, De-ear One,
Oh, oh, oh, oh, my dear, dea-earrest one,
Ple-ease li-sten to me dear,
Listen my-y-y dear.
(Bridge)
My Dear One, you know that I love you.
Yes, I, I love you, so-o much you know.
And Dear One,
I give my life for you, just for you.
Please give your life to me, too.
(Please Dear One)
(Bridge)
Dear One,
Oh, oh, oh, oh my dear one, (my lovely one)
Oh, oh, oh, oh, my dear, my dearest one-hon,
You have no-thing to fear,
No-ooh-ooh-ooo-oooh, please don't fear.

Dixie could not speak. What an angel she was! Incredible! Under a different setting, the plaintive ballad and the manner in which she had delivered it might have been humorous or quite possibly even maudlin. However, given their circumstances, it was neither. It was perfect. Perhaps the piano was not as effective as the twangy, steel guitar on his tape, but the honest, raw emotion she delivered was untouchable. He opened his mouth to thank her, but words failed to appear. Again, he questioned himself, that this was the "rich bitch" that Donna had described to him. *This is the spoiled Rock'N'Roller who wants to divorce me to take my(?) money, my money?* With moist eyes of her own, this loving girl reached up with her right hand to take hold gently of her husband's maimed fist, which hung down over the top front edge of the upright. Her gentle, warm touch unfurled his clenched fist. With equal warmth, she looked deep into his eyes.

"Don't you remember, Nicky?" she implored in her raspy tone. "You composed that song right here at this very piano just after you took me to the hospital? When I almost starved myself to death? Remember? When Father had forbid me to see you anymore?" The girl looked hopefully, soulfully, penetratingly at him for some kind of recognition. Her tender affection overwhelmed him. She slid her hand warmly into his. Dixie forgot his in-laws, seated behind him. Suddenly, he felt as comfortable with her right now as if he had his head resting upon Donna's bountiful, soft bosom. Dixie wanted badly to say "Yes" to please this earnest, young beauty, who was trying so, so hard to help him regain his memory, but he could not lie. And he could not bear to tell her he did not think he ever would regain it. All the doctors had told him recovery was a long shot and to be thankful for what he did have—his life and most of his faculties. Fortunately, he did not have to lie to her, because his mother-in-law stepped in from the dining room, right behind him. The matron announced rather urgently that dinner was ready so they should all wash up.

Ryz'n tugged on the stubs of his maimed hand, to help her stand up from the bench. Once more, he noticed, she had shown him, his wounds did not offend her. Yet Dixie knew these visible wounds were merely the tip of the iceberg. He worried at what she would think about what she would find below the surface.

"Come on, Sweetie, I'll show you where the bathroom is," she offered graciously. But Bryson and Sheena beat them to the washroom.

This was too much for Ryz'n. She let go of Dixie's hand to scold her sister and brother-in-law, suggesting coldly that they use the other bathroom, off the master bedroom. Dixie watched his wife's beautifully, wide, expressive black eyebrows, suddenly flatten out into a single, hard, contiguous line across her forehead. Her large evenly spaced white teeth, like two rows of Chiclets, one atop the other, gleamed blazingly between full, pink-glossed lips. Her hazel-green eyes turned emerald with emotion. *This is one attractive woman, no doubt abut it! Even Donna had admitted that much, all be it grudgingly. And this was a pretty, even a "nice" girl. Yeah buddy! She's special, like Moons.*

Surely though, there was something special about her that he couldn't quite read, something Moons hadn't offered, nor Donna or Rose or any of them. He just couldn't quite place what it was about this woman that was so refreshingly unique, so ingenuous. It was something beyond the corporal. Furthermore, Ryzanna did not appear to be wearing any make-up, aside from some pink lip gloss and pink nail paint. She did not need any. She had "the look" that elusively wholesome, yet naively sexy look, which he had seen rarely. Amused now, he watched, as this attractive "angel" turned into a little tigress, attacking in his behalf. He was glad not to be on the receiving end of her ire.

"All right, all right. Come on Bryson, we'll use the other one. Jeeze—Louise!"

Sheena pulled Bryson from the small foyer that led to the bathroom, directing him on down the hall and to the right.

Ryz'n regained her composure and turned to her husband, still embarrassed, and sighed deeply. Then she chuckled slightly but somewhat nervously. "Sorry," she apologized for his sister's rudeness. Dixie just smiled and shrugged as if to say "no problem." She led him around the piano into the hall bathroom to wash up. When he was done, she exchanged places with him.

When she exited the washroom, Ryz'n caught him standing in the open door way to her bedroom, which was on the front of the house, across the hall from the bathroom foyer. She found him inspecting the many pictures that filled her room.

"Yep! All those pictures are you, Nicky: In high school, on the ball field, in the studio, on tour, just out around here when we were dating, over in Nam even and out at your grandparents' place in Clear Lake. And on the road trip we took with your Uncle Bill to the Badlands, Rapid City and Mount Rushmore. I got the idea from you, ya know? I mean, about blowing up the pictures and plastering them on the walls like that."

Dixie looked back at her as she spoke, then back to her bedroom walls filled with overblown pictures of him and her. He could not believe his eyes. Those pictures sure as hell looked like him, as he might have looked as a teenager. Maybe he really was this Nicky character after all, but how come he couldn't remember? It gnawed at him. He seemed to forget that he was supposed to have been shot in the back of the head at close range with a pistol. His anger over his amnesia began to rise, but he calmed himself. He had to. If he got excited, he wouldn't be able to speak at all. He felt as if he was putting a jigsaw puzzle together now, where he was the subject of the puzzle, but none of the pieces fit.

Ryz'n leaned against her bedroom doorjamb with her arms folded beneath her chest, one foot crossed over the other, as his had been earlier when he had leaned against his motorbike. Ryz'n observed him curiously, hopeful the pictures might spur his recall. Sheena called from the living room that dinner was on the table, but Ryz'n said nothing, not wanting to break the spell the photos held for him.

However, Dixie had heard the dinner call, too. He began to turn his body away slowly, even as he continued to stare at the photos on the walls. As he turned, he accidentally bumped into the light but firm Ryz'n, knocking her from her perch, back into the briefly recessed wall that led from her bedroom to the hallway.

"Oh, ahm turrblee s-s-orree."

He bent over to help right her, as she leaned, half squatting back against the wall. She stood up right before his face. Their eyes locked. She wanted to kiss him so badly that she could hardly restrain herself, but she didn't want to repeat her earlier miscue, either. Dixie felt a similar urge, but he backed off.

"Me-meat-loaf," he announced, diffusing the situation.

She laughed nervously, repeating his tepid announcement. As they walked back through the house to the dining room, Dixie again noticed four, six-inch high gold trophies resting atop the upright piano. He had been so engrossed in her loveliness earlier, he had dwelled on nothing else. In addition, hanging on the living room wall above the piano, he noticed separate, glass frames enclosing

gold records and magazine covers in the pattern of a giant 'X' on the wall. Two single gold records formed the outer top points of the 'X'. Two more gold records overlaid each other, sharing the same glass enclosed case comprised the juncture of the 'X', while below two magazine covers, also framed in glass casings, formed the base of the 'X'.

Ryz'n identified the gold trophies on the piano as their Golden Disc awards, which the band had won for three of their songs. She pointed out that their band, *Good Rockin' Tonight* (*GRT*), was the only music act to win the award three consecutive years in three different categories, R&B, Country and Western, and Popular. When Dixie asked about the fourth award, Ryz'n told him it was for "Best Newcomers" in the Rock'N'Roll category back in 1971.

The double gold albums in the center represented the million plus sales of *Good Rockin' Tonight*, their first LP. She explained proudly the other two gold albums represented their second and third LPs, *More Good Rockin' Tonight* and *Still More Good Rockin' Tonight*, which broke the hundred thousand sales mark nine and six times, respectively. At his request, she explained that a gold album represented five hundred thousand sold copies of a record album. Then she explained that the magazine covers highlighted *GRT* as artists of the year for both 1971 and 1972. *Spin* was an internationally known R&B rag, while *Backbeat* was an equally renown Rock'N'Roll publication.

"Who thought up the na-names for the rec-rec, uh al-ba-bums?" asked Dixie.

"Why, you did Baby! Except for *Lest We Forget,* the last one of course. They were all your idea," glowed Ryz'n, squeezing his hand.

Dixie nodded skeptically. "Shrewd. Mo-most o-o-riginal," he mused.

She laughed agreeably. "Oh definitely. You were nothing if not original, Sweetie. Ha! See, you figured keeping the name of the band in the album title would make it easier for the public to remember who we were. They'd associate each new album with the last, see? And buy accordingly. And it worked, too!"

"Yeah? F-Fell off a b-bit after the f-first couple," he observed in all neutrality.

"Oh no, Baby. When you consider that you weren't around to promote them at all with live concerts and stuff, they really sold very well. Still are, as a matter of fact. Royalties keep flowing in every month. The *More* album might just go twice gold yet. It topped the nine hundred and sixty thousand mark last month. You wait and see. Especially now that you've come home, Baby." She winked.

Her last remark made him wince. That whole record deal just wasn't for him.

Baseball! That's my thing.

From around the corner, they heard Sheena's exasperated voice: "Hey Ryz'n! We're gonna start eatin' without ya, if ya don't get your tails in here PRONTO!"

Mildly ashamed of her sister's ill-mannered behavior, Ryz'n turned to her husband and shook her head, clucking simply "Sheena!" as if that explained everything. Then she grinned and coaxed, "Come on, Nicky. It's time for meatloaf with the in-laws."

~ Chapter 21: Meatloaf ~

Ryz'n took Dixie by the hand and led him through the Roman archway into the cozy dining room, where the others were seated and waiting for them. Once inside the dining room, Dixie glanced around at the set-up. Mr. Ryan sat at the head of the table, nearest the back wall of the house. Mrs. Ryan sat opposite her husband at the foot of the table, closest to the living room. The seating arrangement was such that the daughters sat opposite each other, on either side of their father, while the sons-in-law sat opposite each other on either side of Mrs. Ryan. Ryz'n and Dixie sat together with the kitchen door just a few feet behind them. The food was on the table and consisted of mashed potatoes, beans, coleslaw and meatloaf, which Dixie sniffed before he saw it. In the center of the table sat a fresh floral piece filled with various colored impatiens. Dixie held the chair for his wife, while Sheena laughed at her brother-in-law's formality. As Ryz'n sat down, she thanked her husband for his aid, while she simultaneously shot daggers at her sister once again for her rude behavior.

Dixie noticed a pair of matching large, dark cherry wood, glass-enclosed, china cabinets diagonally opposite him in the opposite corners of the room. One was behind and to Mr. Ryan's left with the other one behind and to his spouse's right. China plates in one and crystal glassware in the other stood on display for all to see. Cherry wood seemed to be the furniture of choice for the Ryan household. Between the cabinets stood a large sash window, opposite Dixie and Ryz'n. A similar window rested in the wall behind Mr. Ryan. Because the shades were not completely drawn on the window behind his father-in-law, Dixie glimpsed what looked like a deck and some kind of white framed shed out back. A short, chain link fence bordered the grassy, green back yard. Full length, cream-colored curtains trimmed in gold fringe adorned both windows. The dinning room walls were papered in a green and gold motif of forest scenery, featuring majestic-looking deer.

Dixie observed everything acutely, hoping he might recall something, anything, but no dice. He didn't even recognize what passed for a magnificent glass chandelier light fixture, in the ceiling directly over the table. As he sat down, Dixie peeked around Mrs. Ryan to find Scruffy Jr.'s box empty.

"We serve Scruffy out on the back porch in good weather and in the kitchen in bad," explained his mother-in-law, reading his mind. Dixie nodded. Now that was just fine by him and seemed like a sensible thing to do. She added, "We're all drinking beer with our meals. I took the liberty of pouring you one, Nicholas. I hope that was all right. Of course, we have other beverages—"

"No, no Ma'am ... be-be-beer's j-just per-per uh fine."

Something was in the air. Dixie sensed it. It was as though the freshness of this idyllic, late June afternoon permeated the Ryan home, serving up hope, thankfulness and joy in ample quantities for all seated here about the dining room table. But there was something else looming with a portent that was less than harmonious. Dixie could just feel it.

Before they ate, the family paused to give thanks, as was their custom. Mr. Ryan led the prayer:

"Bless us Father in these Thy gifts which we are about to receive from Thy bounty through Christ Our Lord. Ame—OH! And thank You Lord so much, for bringing our Boy home to us, alive and well. AH-MEN!"

"AH-MEN!"

The family echoed their agreement in a loud chorus with each one crossing themselves afterwards. Dixie, who had been observing them closely, crossed himself, as well. They all noticed his belated, uncharacteristic action.

"Well Nicholas, have you converted?" inquired his mother-in-law hopefully.

Pa-Par-don me, Ma'am?"

"Have you converted to Catholicism?"

"Uh, n-no."

"Well, why did you bless yourself, just then Dear?"

Dixie, who had just been trying merely to get along, just trying to fit in, evidently had committed a faux pas. Embarrassed, he simply shrugged. Like a little kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, he looked down at his plate and the white linen tablecloth upon which it sat.

Mr. Ryan began passing the food to his right, where Ryz'n would intercept it and serve Dixie first and then herself before passing the plates onward, through Dixie to her mother. Dixie noticed approvingly that she gave him a thin, single piece of meatloaf, but a triple helping of mashed potatoes. Obviously, she knew his likes and dislikes, when it came to food, at least.

Although Mrs. Ryan had not intended to embarrass her long lost son-in-law with that remark about conversion, nevertheless, she had. As a result, an uncomfortable quiet fell across the dinner table now, while they slowly began to eat. Never shy, Sheena eventually broke the silence.

"This saltshaker is empty," she chimed, mildly perturbed. She persisted in vigorously shaking the shaker, vainly hoping to dislodge some salt, but none was forthcoming. The Ryans glanced at Ryz'n who jumped out of her seat quickly. She reached across the table to accept the saltshaker from her sister and disappeared just as quickly into the kitchen behind her chair. Dixie watched in mildly stunned silence.

Upbeat, Bryson picked up the conversation.

"Well, gee Nick, you sure got a lotta medals, Mann," he chuckled. "Seems like we shoulda won that danged War with all them medals you got."

Dixie turned himself back from watching Ryz'n through the kitchen door. He shook his head negatively, while he mumbled over his plate into his food.

"Don' ... 'memba. Gotta ... cou-cou-ple me-dals ... in ma b-bag for sh-sharp-sh-shoottin.' Ga-got a u-unit cita-tation. N-No-thin' spe ... cial."

"Are you crazy? Why, Ryz'n's gotta a couple shoe boxes full of your medals and citations." Bryson looked to the others for confirmation which they provided with eagerly nodding heads.

Ryz'n returned with the filled saltshaker, sitting down beside Dixie. She passed the shaker to her dad enroute to her sister across the table. Dixie questioned his brother-in-law silently with his eyes. Ryz'n tugged softly on his suit coat sleeve.

"It's true, Nicky. They're in my closet. I can show ya later, if ya like."

She sat down again. Proudly, she dished a triple serving of cold slaw onto his plate and a single serving onto her own. Dixie shook his head in disbelief over the medals. But the girl assured him.

"Seems like you got practically every medal a Marine could get, Nicky, except for the Medal of Honor. And you might even get that one now, after what we learned about that miraculous escape you pulled off from that POW camp!"

Dixie shook his head. Staring vacantly into his food, he mumbled again that he could not believe it. Big Jim had told Dixie of some of their exploits, including the escape, but he never really had mentioned anything about medals.

Again, an uncomfortable silence settled over the dining table. The family ate quietly for a few minutes, when Ryz'n offered a considered opinion.

"You know, I've been thinking." She glanced around the table at her family. "Yes, I've thought about this quite a lot actually, not just right now, but in my dealings with the Cause and the MIA-POW widows over the last couple of years. And, well, it seems to me, there should be a medal for prisoners of war. You know? For all the terrible ordeals you, and all those other boys, went through, Nicky," opined Ryz'n. "I mean, it wasn't like you wanted to get captured. I mean, you certainly did your utmost to avoid capture, right?"

She looked to him for confirmation that she had forgotten he could not give. However, he ate on silently, so she kept talking.

"Well, I feel quite certain you did. It was, why your capture was ... Well it was just part of the fortunes of war. That's all. And you and the other boys should get a prisoner of war medal for all your trials and tribulations. That's what I think anyway. How about you?"

Again she looked to him for a positive response, but none was forthcoming. He merely bobbed his head slightly as he chowed down. He didn't like meatloaf, but this Mrs. Ryan sure could cook it. She had used some garlic and some other herbs, which, in his opinion, made the stuff more than tolerable.

Sheena opined, "Sounds more like the MISfortunes of war, if you ask me, hey Nick?"

Dixie replied absent mindedly: "Uh, yeah, g-guesso." He stopped eating to think out loud about Ryzanna's proposal.

"Medal for b-being a pri-pri-prisoner, hunh? That's a n-n-new one." He reached for and sipped on his glass of beer.

Now that he was thinking about it, Ryz'n became animated.

"Why sure, Baby! That's right. Don't you think that's a good idea? Maybe I should bring it up to our Congressman? He listens to me now, after he saw that my little talk with the President paid off. And maybe we can discuss the Medal of Honor for you while we're at it?"

She smiled brightly, anticipating his response.

Dixie, shook his head slowly in a negative, sober fashion.

"P-President, hunh? Well, ja-ja-gee, I, I dunno 'bout that. Only, ya know I was a pri-prisoner once. G-g-got thrown in the b-b-brig. Di-Didn't get n-no me-dal for that though. N-N-no Sir! The C.O. gave me a "ma-ma-mast" and I got t-t-ten days in the ba-brig and bu-busted down to bu-buck private!"

He chuckled.

Ryz'n's shoulders slumped with her countenance. He sure wasn't helping her to reinforce the heroic image she had of him or that they all had of him, for that matter, even the Corps.

Bryson spoke up excitedly.

"Hey Nick! What'd ya get busted for? Smokin' dope?"

Dixie shook his head.

"So why? You can tell us, Nick. We're all your family here, right Ry? No secrets."

Ry smiled weakly.

Dixie swallowed and raised his fork with a couple beans skewered upon it.

"For bein' st-st-TUPID! That's what."

Bryson persisted. "Yeah? Well, what did ya do? Come on tell us, Mann."

"Yeah," concurred Sheena. "We wanna know." She leaned forward in her low-cut, orange halter top and batted her long lashes at him, ticking her sister off in the process.

Dix looked around the table, all except Ryz'n were nodding in the affirmative and smiling. So Dixie scooped up some mashed potatoes and shoved them in his face and started to speak with his mouth full. However, he caught himself and swallowed twice before he spoke.

"Jes' los' ma-my head is all. Fought b-b-ack when my-my –plata-toon sergeant ca-ca-cold-cocked me once. St-st-tupid!" He shook his head in disgust.

"Shoooo!" exclaimed Bryce. "I bet you really clobbered him, didn't ya Nick? I mean you always did back in school. The bigger they were, the harder they fell. Didn't they, Ry?"

Again, Ry smiled weakly, but her stomach felt queasy. This was not the conversation she had expected to hold. She longed to be alone with her husband, just the two of them. She could not bear to see her ideal, her knight in shining armor, fall off the white steed upon which she had placed him and upheld him for the last three years.

Dixie swallowed some meat loaf and agreed with his brother-in-law.

"Gu-Guess so. But there's where I really ma-messed up. If I had ju-just t-t-took it and d-done nothin', na-nothin' woulda hap-p-pened. B-b-b-ut, I had to cr-cream 'im. St-tupid! But I got a l'il lu-lucky, cause they pr-proved I was unreason'b-bly pro-vo-voked! And cause of my condi-di-dition and all.'"

However, Sheena supported her husband.

"Well you had to defend yourself, Nick. We all respect that." She looked around the table to see several nods.

Dixie grinned, staring at his plate, shaking his head and chuckled.

"You d-don' unna-st-stand. You da-don't da-do that. N-n-not in the Co-Corps, n-n-ot with your plat-too-toon sergeant!"

"That seems a terribly cowardly thing to do—for him to strike you like that," admitted his father-in-law.

"Yes it does, Dear. Why did he do that, Nicholas?" asked Mrs. Ryan.

"Du-dunno M-Ma'am." Dixie frowned, shrugged and shook his head.

"G-Guess, some pe-people just hate for no-no-no reason, I g-g-guess. Think he di-didn't like the way I ta-ta-talked." Dixie curled the right corner of his mouth in a feeble attempt to smile at her.

Mrs. Ryan tried to assuage him. "Well, you learned your lesson, Dear. It's all over now. ' She reached over to tap the table affectionately near his plate and looked at him with sympathetic eyes.

Dixie looked up in earnest.

"Yes Ma-ma'mam, I guessso b-b-but the worst p-p-part was I got bu-busted down to bu-bu-buck, co-co-cost me some ca-cash. B-B-But the Corps upped me b-b-back to Lance 'fore I g-g-got out."

Dixie grinned, but he was kicking himself for stuttering so much. He resolved to speak more deliberately to prevent it.

"Lance? Lance Corporal? Is that all, Nicky?" asked Ryz'n.

"Yeah, that's ... what I was," answered Dixie.

"Well gee, Baby! You were a platoon sergeant when you were captured, Sweetie! You had gotten some in field promotions based on your bravery and your demonstrated natural leadership skills."

She smiled, delighted to shove her white knight back up on his trusty steed.

"Pla-pla-t-toon Sergeant? N-No way, I coulda got so-so high so-so quick.

"But Sweetie, I told ya. You were a bona fide hero."

"Hero, hunh?" Dixie shook his head suspiciously. "That don't seem po-poss'ble neither."

"Well, believe it, Baby, because it's true. Yes, and just before your capture, your superiors were putting in the paperwork for you to go to OCS. I think you would have made a very handsome officer, don't you?" She grinned and arched her right eyebrow.

"An off-off'cer?" asked Dixie in shock. She had spoken heresy. He shook his head 'no' as a light went on in his eyes. Ryz'n noticed the change in his visage.

"Well, what is it, Nicky?"

"Well ... was jes' thinkin. What ... grade was it, exactly? D-Did you say?"

"Well I didn't say, but E6 is the grade that was on your pay stubs."

"Staff Sergeant, hunh? Well, if I c-c-can prove that ... the V. A. would owe me a na-nice ch-chunk of ch-ch-change ... I mean, of ... change. My enti-ti-titlement" (for he could not bring himself to call it a disability benefit) "would come to, oh ... maybe seventy-five bu-bucks m-m-more a month for the last eighteen mo-months. That'd be-be close to a nine hundred ... bucks a year." His eyes widened. "And I'd be g-getting' it from here on out, too." He looked pleased as punch until Sheena burst his bubble.

"Seventy-five dollars a month?" Sheena cracked up. "Hell, Nick! You and Ryz'n make more than three times that much in one day, just in royalties, alone."

Dixie choked on a string bean that got caught in his throat. Ryz'n pounded him on the back and he coughed the bean back up into his mouth. When he gathered himself, he turned to Sheena.

"Could you re ... peat that, p-please? I think I ma-must have ... heard you wrong." He spoke almost perfectly that time. Talk of money always had a way of focusing him.

Ryz'n noticed when he made a conscious effort to slow down his speech, he spoke much more fluently. She recalled the psychiatrist remarks to that effect. Ryz'n answered for her sister.

"Why yes, that's right, Baby. Those records of ours just keep on selling, you see? Like I mentioned earlier. And you negotiated us such an excellent deal with old Mr. Saperstein that those royalties keep flowing in, too. Gee, you spoke very well just then, Honey, very well."

Dixie smiled weakly, a little embarrassed about the fact that he had been stuttering so much to begin with. It angered him, especially after he had spoken so well the day before with those flippin' hippies! But he didn't let that deter the ongoing calculations in his head. Of all his academic subjects, math was one of his best. And when it came to figures, if you gave him the numbers, he could calculate the odds or the profits. Now, if they were right about these royalties, he had it made. That would be somewhere between seventy and eighty grand a year. That was over three times the amount Donna made in a year and she worked her butt off for it. Yet Dixie, without having to lift a finger (except to endorse a royalty check), could split that pot with the girl seated next to him and he'd still be on easy street. He couldn't believe that. Why, he could even become a high roller with that kind of dough. He would not need to worry about having to hedge his bets, except to conceal his play. *How long would this gravy train last?*

While Dixie zoned out on his new financial horizon. Mr. Ryan, who had remained mostly quiet, cleared his throat.

"Well now Nicholas!" he opened in a man-to-man sort of tone. "Speaking of finances, just what do you plan to do with yourself now, Son? For a career, I mean. Now that you're back?"

"Oh Roy! The boy hasn't been home half an hour and you're giving him a job interview. Really, now Honey!" Mrs. Ryan scolded her husband for his lack of taste.

"Well, I don't—"

"It's, OK-K Mrs. Ryan, really." Dixie turned innocently towards her to allay her fears.

"Well, if you say so Nicholas, and please call me Rose or Mom, but you really don't—"

Dixie flashed his A-number-one personality smile at her and she retreated.

"Well, OK, sure, you go right ahead, Son." She smiled sweetly at him.

"So Nick, as I was saying, before I was interrupted." The patriarch flashed his green eyes at his wife before he turned them back to Nick. "Are you going to pick up with your music or maybe go to graduate school first, like our Ryzanna here?" Mr. Ryan reached and leaned far over to his right to pat his eldest approvingly on the back of her left shoulder. "Or are you going to go into business, maybe become a professional person, or maybe go to law school, become a lawyer maybe? You always were pretty good at arguing a point."

Ryz'n watched Mr. Ryan smirk while he glanced briefly at his wife, bespeaking of past battles he had engaged in with his elder son-in-law. Ryz'n's mother shook her head silently indicating her husband should cease this line of commentary. They all waited as Dixie chewed his food thoroughly and swallowed before he would respond. Ryz'n noted the elder couple's byplay had not escaped the returning vet, making Ryz'n, more than a little embarrassed. She had difficulty determining who was more rude, her father or her sister. It was just like old times. She thought Paul Simon was right, "After changes upon changes, we are more or less the same."

As for Dixie, the truth was, he did not know how to answer his father-in-law's question. He knew his grades were pretty lousy. He hoped he could graduate and play baseball as much as possible. That was it. That was his entire career plan! He spoke with all the solemnity, befitting the occasion, as he slowly turned to address Mr. Ryan..

"Well, S-Sir, I'd like to play ... ball in the ... 'Sh-Show.'"

Mr. Ryan looked at his wife, completely bewildered.

"Play ball? In a show?" What the hell kind of an answer is that?" Flabbergasted, Mr. Ryan looked to his spouse for an adequate explanation.

"Father!" scolded Ryz'n.

"Well Honey, I, I'm sorry. I, I didn't mean any offense, really." He looked past his daughter to her husband. "I just, well, maybe I didn't hear the boy so good. Is that right, Nick? Can you clarify your answer for me, Son?"

Dixie looked around. They were all leaning forward, anticipating his response, even the glowing, young woman beside him.

"The B-B-Bigs. Wanna ... play ... in ... the Ma-a-jors, S-Sir."

Mr. Ryan collapsed back into his chair, disenchanted. Nick had just let the air of the older man's balloon. Then his father-in-law leaned forward and slapped both hands on the table on either side of his plate and began to laugh heartily. "Hell Rose! The boy hasn't changed a bit, not one damned bit!" He kept laughing, but Ryz'n defended her husband, shutting her father up in the process.

"Father, if that's what Nicky wants to do, then that's what he'll do! Nick has always been able get it done on the ball field. You know that. He'll do this as well. You'll see, just like you see him sitting here now when you didn't think he would be." She glared at her father, searing that last fact into his brain. Then she turned back around to her husband, petting him sympathetically through the silk suit coat sleeve upon his left forearm.

"You can do it, Nicky. You always said if you could grow a few more inches, you could make the 'Bigs.' And well, you sure have grown! So now you'll do it!" She smiled sweet encouragement upon him. Again, sarcasm overcame Dixie.

The rich bitch, hunh? Why! She was positively angelic!

"Honey, we're out of condiments." Mrs. Ryan passed the relish dish to Ryz'n via Dixie. "There are plenty more in the refrigerator, My Baby," she noted.

Dixie concluded that maybe he should get them, the cream colored swinging kitchen doorway was just a few feet behind him, but Mrs. Ryan very clearly indicated she wanted her eldest to serve them. Again, the girl hopped up with a smile. Then she disappeared through the open, wood-trimmed kitchen door, only to return a couple of minutes later with a relish dish filled with pickles, olives and celery. Dixie noticed this Ryzanna seemed eager to please. He further noticed nobody else seemed to think anything of either the matron's request or her older daughter's sweet, even eager, complicity.

Strange behavior for a spoiled rock star!

Bryson piped up. "Are ya still as fast as ya useta be, Nick?"

"Dunno. Three-f-four or three-three-five to f-first—from the right side."

"Darn! That's plenty quick, Nick. Why don't you come play football for us next year? Down at M&L?" asked Bryce seriously.

Nick shook his head. "That g-game's ta-too, t-too dan-dan-dan-ge-rous!"

"Too dangerous? Hell, that's a hot one comin' from you."

The Ryans, except for Ryz'n, laughed. Mistakenly, they believed Nick was jesting when he wasn't. Instinctively, Ryz'n knew that. Just back from the kitchen with the condiments, she was not sure how her husband would react to their ill-timed laughter. His naivety overwhelmed her. He merely smiled affably and kept on eating, as he hunched over his plate. Ryz'n noticed he ate left-handed, as did she. Unlike her, however, he was not naturally a southpaw. Out of curiosity, she asked him why he ate like one. Dixie said he just preferred it. At the same time, he shoved his maimed right hand deeper between his legs, under his napkin. The conversation lulled again for several minutes. Never lacking for words, Sheena kick-started their chat.

"Hey Ry, you and Nicky are gonna come down to the Banks with us now, aren't you?" Dixie looked at Ryz'n. He did not know what Sheena meant. Ryz'n explained:

"Nicky: Sheena and Bryce are going to our beach resort home on the Outer Banks of North Carolina for the rest of the week. It's near where the Wright Brothers made the first flight?" She looked for recognition from him, but he merely blinked.

"Anyway, that's why we were loading up the car outside. If you want, we can go down there, too. Bryce has a football camp he has to leave for on Sunday afternoon, but we, that is the rest of the family, plan to stay another day." She beamed proudly, "Actually, Sunday's my birthday and we had thought we'd all celebrate it together down at the beach."

Ryz'n studied his blank stare, taking it as a lack of enthusiasm for the suggestion. Before he could answer, Bryson asked for another napkin. Ryz'n noticed the empty napkin holder in the center of the table, but she continued.

"Maybe we can go down to the Banks over the weekend. OK? If you want?"

"Oh dear," exhaled Mrs. Ryan cutting in on her daughter's request and acknowledging the lack of napkins. "I'm afraid Nick's return has just befuddled me. I'm so happy. I guess, I guess I wasn't concentrating on my chores." She smiled weakly. Again, her elder daughter came to her rescue.

"It's OK, Mom, I can get them. No problem." She exited to retrieve some napkins. Dixie thought this Ryz'n was like a jack-in-the-box. Now he could understand why her waist was so dang slender. The poor girl never gets a chance to eat. However, she sure moved like a goddess, make that a temptress, a guileless temptress, if such a creature existed. *Maybe that's what a goddess is?* He had never thought of that.

"How old will you be?" asked Dixie perfectly, before she crossed the kitchen threshold, surprising them all and himself as well, with his elocution. Ryz'n stopped in the kitchen doorway to turn back to him. Happily, she replied.

"Why Baby, I'll be twenty-two, twenty-two on the twenty-second. And you'll be twenty-two on the twenty-second also, the twenty-second of September!" She smiled pertly. So that was his real birthday! He was a year and half younger than he had guessed. After he acknowledged her, she turned back around for the napkins. When she returned, Dixie deadpanned:

"Oh, I s-see. You're an older wo-woman."

His sly smile belied his dry delivery, causing her to giggle like a schoolgirl. He had maintained his sense of humor and that was good. That was very good, but she couldn't help but think that he had plenty of experience with older women! However, now was not the time for that discussion, she reckoned. Besides, as far as she knew, Nick had no inkling of her talk with Donna Dixon. She just hoped Sheena would keep her trap shut just this once. Ryz'n got her wish for her family merely chuckled at Nick's dry wit, as well.

Ryz'n had only just returned with the napkins and resumed her seat at the table, when Mr. Ryan observed Dixie had finished his beer, as had he.

"Believe Nicholas could use a refill, Ryzanna, and so could I," requested Mr. Ryan holding up his empty glass.

"Me, too," piped in Bryson, who shook his empty beer mug between his long fingers. Ryz'n placed her napkin on the table, as she began to rise again, when her husband stopped her.

Dixie seized her right forearm firmly in protest. "No, I can d-do it. You eat," ordered Dixie, resolutely. As he rose, Dixie felt the wispy softness of her dark, hirsute forearm, which surprised but also pleased him. The long, dark wispy hairs lay densely flat against the contour of her arm. Neither Lori Lei nor Donna had exhibited that unusual characteristic. Moons may have been unshaven, but she wasn't as densely hairy as this girl. Dixie discovered pleasantly that Ryz'n's hirsutism intrigued him, raising his curiosity. Ryz'n acquiesced to his wish. Her obedience likewise pleased him.

"There should be some cold ones in the refrigerator, Nicky" suggested the young woman softly as she smiled brightly up at him.

Dixie rose, removed his grey silk suit coat, and hung it over the back of his chair to reveal his lean, muscular, athletic frame. The muscles bulged from his sleeveless, snug, cotton crew neck shirt. It did not escape Dixie that Ryz'n's gorgeous, now emerald, eyes almost popped out of her head as she studied him unabashedly.

She recalled he had always been muscular, but now his muscles were so huge! Truly, he was a man now. Evidently Sheena was no less impressed.

Dixie felt Sheena's eyes burning through him as well, but he ignored her. He winked at Ryz'n, lightly patting her on the right shoulder, as he turned past her into the kitchen. Ryz'n touched the top of his hand lightly as he pulled it from her shoulder. It was all Ryz'n could do to maintain her composure. She wanted him all to herself, now and for as long as she chose. *Hang in there a little longer, Ry.*

From the kitchen, Dixie heard his father-in-law's whisper as he mildly chastised his eldest. She should be waiting on her long lost husband, not the other way around. Meanwhile, Dixie looked around the kitchen and found nothing special, nothing familiar anyway. There was a closed white painted door the near side of the refrigerator and he wondered what lay behind it. Dixie located three beers on the second shelf of the refrigerator, all National Bohemian brand, a brand that was unfamiliar to him. Nevertheless, he pulled the bottles out of the icebox and brought them into the dining room. He set them down on the corner of the table between Ryz'n and her father. The bottle tops were not twist off. Dixie pulled his bottle opener out from under his shirt, letting it dangle from its chain against his chest.

Ryz'n also extracted her mini bottle opener that she carried on a chain around her neck from beneath her blouse. But her husband proved to be faster on the draw. He popped the top off one of the bottles. The bottle cap flipped out of

control, wildly landing on the table, hopping and spinning over to his left, bouncing across the tablecloth and dancing into Mr. Ryan's mashed potatoes. The room hushed as son-in-law and father-in-law studied each other awkwardly for a second with neither one speaking.

"Sorree, Sir. I'll ... g-get it." Dixie began to reach for the metal cap but his father-in-law used the back of his open right hand to shield Dixie from his food.

"I can do that myself. Thank you," he objected indignantly.

Dixie nodded. "Sir. Yes Sir!" He responded as he might to the platoon sergeant. *It was good to know somebody here besides Ryz'n could do something for themselves!* However, Dixie chose not to voice his opinion. He left the bottle of National Bo for Mr. Ryan, to pour for himself. Ryz'n used Nick's opener to open Bryce's bottle, which she passed to him across the table by way of Sheena, who rose to accept it. Dixie started to open his own bottle of beer when Mr. Ryan eyed him suspiciously and commanded his son-in-law to move back to his seat first. Dixie complied.

Once seated, Dixie grinned, holding his bottle opener between his thumb and forefinger out towards Ryz'n's. "Just ... like me," he beamed.

Ryz'n gushed, only too happy to describe the origin of her opener.

"Why sure Nicky, you gave this to me." She held the opener and the chain out from her chest. "And asked me to wear it and keep it for you. Don't you remember? Guess I don't need to keep it anymore."

She leaned in toward him and began to remove the opener's chain from behind her neck, to hand it over to him, but he held up his left hand to decline.

"You keep it. I, I have ... one."

"Well, OK, if that's what you want Nicky." She appeared a little disappointed as she slid the flat, round opener back down between her sizable breasts, causing Dixie to swallow hard. "But I have something else I've been keeping for you, too, Nicky. I carry it everywhere."

Ryz'n reached for her front shorts pocket. However, her shorts fit so snugly, she had to stand to reach in the pocket. Ryz'n pushed her chair back with the backs of her legs, inhaling deeply, to retrieve the contents from the pocket of her cuffed short-shorts. She sucked in her middle and reached into her pocket. Once again, the severe shapeliness of her womanly figure, highlighted by her slender waist, struck Dixie hard, like a lightening bolt, right between the eyes. *Mann! This girl is positively stacked!* It was not as if he had not noticed earlier, because, of course, he had. However, at the table she had mesmerized him with her humility, her fairness of face, her effervescent, cheerleader personality and her helpful, positive, complicit demeanor. Bowled over by her ebulliently buoyant personality, he had forgotten for a few minutes how stacked she truly was!

Again, he felt as safe and secure in her dimpled smile, as he had resting upon Donna's treasure chest. Moreover, there was a freshness about this girl, which he had noticed earlier, too, but whose origin he still could not decipher. There was a kind of a glow about her, for lack of a better term, that neither Rose, Donna or

Lori Lei had emanated. Suddenly, with a relieved sigh, Ryz'n produced a harmonica from her shorts pocket.

"This is yours, too, Baby. You asked me to keep it for you and I have, just like the opener, just like ... just like everything." As she sat back down, her naturally raspy voice softened to a low purr, as if they were the only two in the room.

Her look was warmer even than her tone. Her large, almond-shaped, emerald eyes peered passionately into his soul. From beneath long, raven black eyelashes and dense, naturally arched, sweeping eyebrows, Ryz'n invited him to dive into her welcoming, wet emerald pools. Full, glossy pink lips begged him to kiss her. Aroused, but embarrassed, Dixie cleared his throat.

Sensing his emotions but realizing unfortunately, this was neither the time or place for their first embrace, Ryz'n saved him by redirecting him to the object in her hand.

"Ya see, I blow it out every once in a while, to clean out the lint, but I carry it everywhere. Now here! It's for you and I've kept it for you, Sweetie. I want you to have it back now. You've made us a lot of cash with this blues harp, Baby."

She proffered the mouth organ to him, as though it were some kind of relic. She took his right hand very matter of factly and placed the mouth organ in it. Then she closed his fingers around the harmonica. Dixie's hand tingled warmly as he received the harmonica with uncertainty. Ryz'n lowered herself back into her seat and mentioned, "It's a USMC harmonica. You've been playin' it since you were a kid. It's the one you made all our hit records with, Nicky."

Dixie had already turned down the bottle opener, he couldn't turn this down. Besides, he thought he might like to try out the mouth organ sometime, when he was alone. He accepted the gift as graciously, as she had bestowed it upon him.

The other diners looked on a little sheepishly. This was a private moment for the reunited young couple and the looks on their faces showed Dixie that they felt like intruders. However, Ryzanna was all aglow. The heavy, syrupy tone of the conversation evidently repulsed Sheena. She had sat silent far too long, for her anyway. Now she showed her displeasure as only she could, by jibing sarcastically:

"'Well, now, then, there', as you used to say Nicky, guess we won't have to be buying so much herring anymore." Bryson laughed out loud, involuntarily. Ryz'n's velvet tone hardened as she asked her sister to please change the subject.

"But why should I?" asked her kid sister in a mock, snooty sneer. "Nicky might like to know about his wife's famous raw fish diet. Whaddaya think, Nick?"

Recalling the tenderness of her touch, Dixie was still looking into his wife's green eyes, which had flashed briefly across the table towards her sister. He was not used to answering to the moniker of "Nicky," so he ignored his sister-in-law's challenge.

"Hey Nick! Whaddaya say?" repeated the insistent Sheena a little louder.

"Excuse me?" replied Dixie. *She sounds like a damned ballplayer!*

His speech was flowing more fluently now. These were just regular folks with his best interests at heart. He was feeling more and more relaxed here.

"About the raw herring?"

"What a-b-bout it?"

"SHEEE-NAAA! Please!" Impulsively, Ryz'n turned her whole attention upon her kid sister.

"Please? OK. Well, it's like this Nick. When your wife gets horny, which is pretty darn often, she finds eating raw herring helps her to overcome her craving for you." The others grimaced in embarrassment.

Ryz'n rested her head in her hands with her elbows resting upon the table straddling her plate, but Ry's obvious grief did not deter Sheena.

"I'm not talking about little sardines, Nicky. I'm talking six to eight-inch herring." Sheena paused to allow her remark to sink into her brother-in-law. She held her hands more than half a foot apart over her plate to indicate the size of the fish. But Dixie simply kept eating, glancing up at her from time to time, giving her only perfunctory recognition. Ryz'n was peeved, but the others listened with interest.

Ryz'n parted her semi-circular, cupped hands, speaking through them as if they were a megaphone.

"All right Sheena, you've made your point." Ryz'n dropped her hands to the table. "Now can we get onto something else? And quit being so prosaic." Ryz'n was more than mildly perturbed and she spoke in a condescending tone.

"PROSAIC?!?! Well, ain't we edumacated? Shooooeee! Besides, I haven't finished yet, Sis!" Sheena picked up a quarter of a dill pickle that had been sliced lengthwise. She held it by one end to demonstrate her point. "She takes 'em like this see? By the tail? Then she—"

Ryz'n sat bolt upright with her forearms on the table now. "SHEENA! Mother, please make her stop!" Though trying not to laugh, by covering his mouth and holding his sides, Bryson was laughing so hard his body shook, which only served to encourage his wife all the more. Dixie looked toward the patriarch for order. However, ignoring his younger daughter's behavior, Mr. Ryan concentrated sublimely on his meal. Dixie concluded that evidently his non-intervention in his daughters' squabbles was the man's normal practice. Meanwhile, Sheena proceeded, as she imagined Ryz'n would have.

"She licks off the salt that it's been stored in, like this. Then she drinks her beer or wine or whatever. And she uses that long tongue of hers, like this."

Sheena tilted her head back and lowered the pickle inside her mouth, lowering down into her throat repeatedly. Then, clamping her mouth around the end of the pickle near her fingertips, she bit down and slowly extracted the pickle out of her still closed mouth. She left only the husk to simulate the spine of the herring and a bit of pickle on the opposite end to simulate the fish head. She chewed a couple times, swallowed and chugged on her beer, believing she had mimicked her older sister's ritual perfectly, when, in fact, she had not come close. Sheena eyed the

last of the pickle. Then she lowered it slightly and tried to flick a long tongue up to wrap around it like a lizard snagging it's prey. Ryz'n glared at her sister. *For cryin' out loud, she can't even get it right!*

From the corner of his eye, Dixie could see Ryz'n's face becoming redder and redder, even scarlet, as a vein popped out along her forehead beneath her bangs. At the same time, her now clenched fists became whiter and whiter as her knuckles dug into the white linen tablecloth. Unconsciously, she pulled the cloth so hard that the serving dishes as well as the floral centerpiece were dragged towards her. With Ryz'n slowly boiling, Sheena ripped off the imaginary fish's "head" from its "spine." She sumptuously sucked the remainder into her mouth.

Ryz'n simply could not understand her sister's outrageous behavior. Whether she was trying far too hard to impress Nick, or Bryson, or simply was going way overboard to make Nick feel a part of the family, Ryz'n neither knew nor cared. The two of them had gotten along so well on their recent jaunt to California. Sheena had been so sweet and supportive. And now this, this despicable, juvenile display! It was as if Sheena were suddenly intentionally thrusting them back into junior high school.

It had been a long, long while, since those school days when she and Sheen had shared their last, honest-to-goodness, knock-down, drag-out battle. However, it was not so long ago that Ryz'n couldn't recall how she had kicked her kid sister's butt. Although Sheena had matured faster than her older sister, she could never lick Ryz'n. Ryz'n had been too determined and always had outlasted Sheena, primarily because Ryz'n had a much higher tolerance for pain than her kid sister. (That tolerance had frightened Ryz'n. Because deep within, where she was too afraid to look, Ryz'n had learned that pain could please her.) Ryz'n had thought she and her sister had long since outgrown such barbaric behavior. But now, Ryz'n was about ready to kick her sister's behind again, if Sheena wouldn't just *SHUT UP!*

Beneath Ryz'n's normally placid demeanor and self-deprecating manner lay the toughness of the former, terrier-sized softball catcher. As the only southpaw catcher in the league, she had made All-County in part because of her pluck as much as her quick release. That tigress never had shirked from blocking the plate against a hard-charging base runner, regardless of the size of the opponent. In fact, she had anticipated and relished the contact.

And Sheena would not let up. She swooned, feigning orgasmic ecstasy, briefly. Finally, she lay back against the back of her chair and broke out laughing uncontrollably, as did her husband, who had ceased trying to control himself. In the midst of his convulsions, he reminded his wife about the bottle of beer.

Mrs. Ryan, who had been wringing her hands, as well as her napkin, set the napkin down and spoke for the first time. "Now that's quite enough Sheena Sherree, more than enough!" remanded Mrs. Ryan sternly, calling her baby by her full name. "You've had your little joke, now let it go."

She turned to Dixie and spoke in a placating tone, forcing a very meek smile, in an effort to smooth things over.

"You see Nicholas we're just a very informal family here, Honey."

The mild reprimand did not pacify Ryz'n, who was boiling. Nor did it dissuade Mrs. Ryan's snickering, younger daughter. Sheena persisted, unwilling to leave any supposed, tawdry detail unmentioned.

"Oh yeah, she'll keep the beer bottle or wine bottle, as the case may be, between her legs when she does it. She really gets into the fish, moanin' and groanin', rockin'n'rollin'. Sometimes, she'll have two or three. It don't seem to matter whether she's already eaten or not, though usually she enjoys these feasts late at night, often in the bathtub."

Sheena grinned like a devil, before she resumed.

"Of course, we don't really know for sure what all goes on in there."

The raconteur slung a sly, sideways glance at Dixie as she drew the last word out sufficiently to cast suspicion upon her sister's bathroom conduct. "But you know what? One time, she—"

Without warning, a beautiful volcano erupted beside Dixie. Ryz'n shot to her feet like a rocket, propelled by the slapping of her open palms upon the tabletop, knocking her chair recklessly backwards as she rose.

"DAMN IT! THAT IS E-NOUGH! E-NOUGH! DO YOU HEAR ME, SHEENA? I'd like to see how you would handle the situation, if Bryson weren't around for THREE AND A HALF YEARS! In fact, I can IMAGINE how YOU'D handle it!" Ryz'n snatched up her napkin with her left hand, crumpling the tissue into a ball. Now Sheena became indignant.

"What is that supposed to mean?" cried Sheena angrily. "What are you implying? Just who—" The doorbell rang.

Bryson, who was in the best position to see who it was, leaned to his left to look around his mother-in-law and whispered in a smug, hushed tone, "It's Don."

"Don Juan?" Sheena repeated in loud sarcasm and batted her eyelids coquettishly, as she tilted her head gaily to her right. Then she brought her elbows into her sides, enmeshing her fingers together, placing the heels of her palms downward and slightly apart. She rested her chin on the top side of her clasped fingers, still batting her eyelids heavily.

"Oh, shut up, Sheena! I'll handle this," shot back Ryz'n snidely.

The agitated Ryz'n then fired a strike, hitting her sister squarely in the nose with her wadded up napkin fastball. Dixie marveled at that stunt for Ryz'n had not thrown at all "like a girl". No, she threw like an honest to goodness ballplayer. *This girl really is something else. And she's a southpaw, to boot!* Ryz'n simply amazed him.

After Ryz'n had beaned her sister, she pivoted sharply about on her heel while brushing her hair back from her forehead, preparatory to answering the doorbell. She righted her chair, gruffly placing it under the table. As she passed behind Dixie, he noticed she mechanically slipped the flat bottle opener back inside her

cleavage, which was heaving with rage beneath her blouse. The opener had popped out from its lair during her tirade and she had replaced it with a well-practiced, automatic motion. Then, Ryz'n stopped just short of the living room to take a deep breath and collect herself. She turned about, whispering quietly, over Dixie's head to her sister in an amazingly calm but still forceful tone.

"You better behave yourself now Sheena or you're liable to be thumbing your way down to the Banks!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Sheena again, indignantly.

"Well, you'll have to ask Nicky." Ryz'n reached back and out to her side to touch her husband's shoulder. "It's his car you have loaded up out there, not yours. He just might want to cruise in it himself, now that he's home."

Dixie turned his head to look up at his wife, who smiled, winked and tapped him on the shoulder twice, before she turned and strolled calmly to the front door, apparently fully relaxed now.

Dixie marveled at her, shaking his head to think that she had been able to regain her self control as well as her sense of humor so dramatically. Bryson interrupted his brother-n-law's thoughts.

"Uh, say Nicky? Seriously, Ry's got a point there. Uh, you did loan us the keys three years ago and well, the car IS in your name."

Dixie turned around to face his brother-in-law, but he said nothing, giving the impression he might be thinking about reclaiming his'63 Bonneville convertible. Bryson took the opportunity to turn on the charm.

"She sure is a great handling car, Nick. Real fun to drive, especially in the summer with the top down. Not much on gas mileage, but she sure can scoot! Hugs them curves tighter than I hug Sheena's. Yeah, Mann! Jes' great for runnin' 'round the back country roads, 'specially them hills down at M&L. And—"

Sheena shoved an elbow into her husband's ribs and frowned at him because Ryz'n had opened the front door and her greeting had become audible.

"Why, Don? What a pleasant surprise. Come on in," offered Ryz'n in a most amiable tone. Dixie noted that all trace of irritability had dropped from Ryz'n's smoky alto. Her honey tone dripped with sweet hospitality. Dixie heard the screen door creak open and a deep male voice respond.

"Well, hello Ry. I thought you knew I might stop by. Last night, remember, I—" Sheena giggled across the table from Dixie. Bryson pretended to eat and maintained a straight face. Dixie did not know what was going on. Mrs. Ryan sighed deeply, rolling her eyes and setting her fork down hard on her plate. She placed her forehead in her left hand and her elbow on the table, while Mr. Ryan belched loudly. He chugged on his beer, seemingly unconcerned.

"Why certainly, Don. Come on in. Please do."

Dixie heard the screen door swing shut. He assumed Don had stepped further into the living room. He couldn't see the visitor, but he could hear him fine.

"Well, I, I didn't think you'd all still be eating, Ry. I, I can come back later, if you like?"

Undaunted by the fastball to her nose, Sheena leaned toward Bryson and yelled past her mother, out around the corner of the dining room archway.

"Hey, Donny. Come on in. We're about done. Besides, we've got a surprise for you." Then whispering into her dish, she said smugly, "A helluva surprise!"

Sheena's outburst had distracted Dixie from his meal. He looked up from his dish, where suddenly he found that he could see vaguely what was happening around the corner in the living room. By peering over his mother-in-law's Sixties style bouffant hairdo, Dixie could look through the archway separating the living and dining rooms. From the reflection in the glass frame of the picture of the Thunderbirds above Mr. Ryan's easy chair, Dixie could make out the elongated images of Ryz'n and the newcomer in the other room.

Ryz'n leaned forward to shoot her sister a nasty glare around the corner of the archway. At the same time, she spread her left hand towards the dining room for Don. She acted like a hostess revealing what's behind "Door Number Three" on the television show "Let's Make A Deal." Dixie smirked to himself that Ryz'n and Don traversed the living room toward the dining room as though they were doing the crossover step in the "Cha-Cha-Cha."

Ryz'n proclaimed, "Yes, we have some wonderful news, Don, truly amazing."

"Oh, really? What is it? Hello Bryson, Sheena, Mr. and Mrs. Ry—Ry?" Dixie stood up to make Don's acquaintance.

Don Leipzig, had well groomed, David Cassidy-styled sandy brown hair that crept over his long, pointed white and blue shirt collar. His face was squarish and he had dark brown, straight eyebrows but light brown eyes. In his light tan platform shoes, he stood eye to eye with Dixie, but Don carried a thicker build. Dixie sized this dude up and silently dubbed him "Disco Don." Disco Don was dressed in sky blue, flared, polyester slacks, held up by a wide, white leather belt, and a matching long sleeved, tight, satin, powder blue shirt. The tightly tapered shirt featured French cuffs and the obligatory, contemporary, long, pointed collar. His shirt was unbuttoned down his sternum to his midriff, revealing a wiry light brown mat of chest hair that rose to the base of his neck. A large linked, gold chain encircled his throat. Dixie was not in the habit of judging men's looks, but he would have to admit, if pressed, this guy wasn't too bad.

There was a difficult history among the three of them with which Ryz'n and Don were familiar, but Dixie was not. Ryz'n knew Don was an old high school beau of hers who had taken to visiting the Ryan household again, whenever he knew Ryz'n would be available. Don had always carried a torch for her, which she had found flattering. While she could never accept him totally, she could not bring herself to douse that torch outright. She had hinted to Don on many occasions that he should look elsewhere. And he had, but he always seemed to come back to her. The longer Nick remained absent, the more frequent and intense his visits had become. Unfortunately for Don, between Ryz'n's touring schedule, her searching for Nick and her schooling the last three years, Ryz'n seldom had been available to him for social outings.

When Don saw Dixie, he lost his voice and the blood drained from his tanned face. Dixie was not sure what he had done to cause such a reaction, but he felt compelled to stand and smile politely for the friendly visitor, who greeted him uncertainly.

"Hey-hello, Nick. I ... I didn't know. I—" The young man swallowed hard. He was quite obviously unnerved by Dixie's presence. *Shocked was more like it.*. It looked to Dixie as if someone had kicked the young visitor in the stomach. Dixie sensed that he must be the kicker. Sheena reached over and elbowed her husband, who nodded.

Ryz'n introduced Dixie to Don.

"Nicky, this is Don Leipzig. He went to school with us," announced Ryz'n.

"Oh well, it's n-n-nish to m-meet you ... D-D-Don." Nick shook hands with the stranger. Don stared at Dixie's hand for a few seconds, making Dixie conscious of his missing fingers and forcing him to retract his hand quickly, hiding it in his pants pocket.

"Meet me? What, are you kiddin'? You don't know me?" Don's incredulity registered plainly across his face as well as in his tone. Ryz'n saw Sheena elbow Bryson again, twice, and smirk, arching her brow.

Dixie placed his hands together behind his rump, rocking back on his heels slowly, staring at Don's platform shoes as he answered. "No, I'm ... afraid I, I d-don't."

Don looked to Ryz'n for an explanation.

"It's true, Donny. Nicky has amnesia, but we're hopeful his memory will return soon. Isn't that right, Nick?" replied Ryz'n pertly.

"Hunh? Oh, oh yeah, 's r-right," replied Dixie, looking up at her skeptically.

"Well gee, I'm glad to see you're back, uh, OK, I mean, Nick. We all thought you were ... well ... dead. Ha! But, well, it's good, it's good ... to, to see you're not." Don grinned sheepishly.

"Thanks, feels g-g-good, too," Dixie joked. Only Ryz'n smiled with her husband, whom she knew appeared so pathetic to the others. They watched this painful introduction in disbelieving, rapt silence.

"So you don't remember who you are, hunh Nick? You don't remember Ry, here?"

He attempted to place a hand on Ryz'n's shoulder, which Ryz'n deftly avoided.

"You don't remember me?" Don cocked his eyebrows.

Nick shook his head negatively, forcing a tepid smile.

Don brightened a little for the first time since he had seen Dixie.

"So you don't remember anybody? Not even your folks?"

Dixie dropped his listless manner and sprang to life, looking sharply into Don's eyes.

"Folks? MY FOLKS! WHAT FOLKS? Where are they?"

The Ryans evinced surprise, no less by Dixie's sudden emotionally forceful manner and tone as they were by his perfect elocution.

Ryz'n explained, "Well Nicky, they're at home, Honey. You know. They just got back from their trip the other day and—"

"What home? WHERE IS IT?"

"Why Nicky, I'm sorry, Sweetie. I guess we should have gone over there first. But I thought we'd go right after dinner, you know?"

"WHERE IS MY HOME? Is it far?"

Dixie clenched his fists by his side. Now it was his turn to get hot. Dixie noted Don was smiling smugly at his predicament. The idea shot through Dixie's mind that this Don must have been seeing him as the famous, proud rocker at a loss. And evidently, Dixie surmised he must have once been and evidently still was the bane of Don's existence, for some unknown reason.

Mrs. Ryan rose from her chair to interrupt.

"We should have taken you over there right away, Honey. I thought about it, too, but I wasn't sure they had gotten back from their—"

"I wanna go there. Right now!" Dix was adamant.

He quickly picked his suit coat off the chair back and slipped it on. Nobody moved or spoke. They were in the middle of dinner for Pete's sake! Dixie looked around for help. Mr. Ryan asked if Dixie did not want to finish his meal first to which Dixie politely declined.

"I'm sorry, but I kind of need to know who I am. Don't stop on my account, please. I don't mean to inconvenience you any more than I already have." Dixie noted Mr. Ryan did not appear inconvenienced at all. He ate and drank, seemingly unconcerned though merely surprised by his son-in-law's fine speech.

Dixie added, "Please, just give me the address and I'll let you finish your meal in peace. Is it close by?"

No longer tongue-tied, Dixie spoke forcefully, perfectly. Ryz'n remembered the VA psychiatrist's advice concerning Nick's inability to speak fluently in emotional or pressure like situations. She considered Nick's present fluent outburst a good sign that he could probably overcome his speech problems, if he kept working at it. However, she could not help but notice unhappily his formal, cold treatment of her family. Even despite the meal they had shared, he obviously failed to recall any of them at all.

Don said he would be glad to take Nick over to his parents' house while the Ryans' finished their meal. However, Ryz'n intervened angrily.

"You will do no such thing, Donald! I'm not giving you a second chance to ruin my life!" Ryz'n glared at Don.

This was an unveiled reference to an underhanded trick Don had pulled their junior year of high school in a similar circumstance. Don's high school shenanigans had effectively separated Ryz'n from Nick for their entire junior year. Don's return glance told her he had understood well her meaning.

Ryz'n asked if she and her spouse could be excused from the dinner table, while she took her husband by the hand.

"Come on, Sweetie. I should have taken you over there before anyway. It was my fault, Baby, and mine alone. I'm sorry. Just let me get my purse. It will only take a minute." Her dimpled smile softened Dixie's attitude considerably.

Then she excused herself to Don. "I'm sorry Donny, but we have to go."

She led Dixie by the hand into the living room. He turned back politely to thank Mrs. Ryan for dinner and said "it was very nice to have made their acquaintances." His sincere remark left them all speechless, until Sheena yelled to her sister that this was just a slick trick by Ryz'n to escape kitchen duty.

Undeterred, Ryz'n dashed into her room to grab her purse and to reapply some hot pink lip gloss and "Love's Fresh Lemon" cologne behind her ears, on her wrists and about her neck and chest. Nicky had always raved over the lemon cologne. *Pickles*! She noticed the sleepless circles under her eyes and quickly brushed over them with some concealer she kept it in a seldom used cosmetics kit. She dug in her closet for a pair of platform sandals and hopped alternately on first one foot and then the other while she hurriedly shod her feet. The platforms would add a couple inches to her stature, diminishing the difference between her height and Nick's. As she finished, Ryz'n almost fell, but found the top of her dressing table to steady herself. Then she noticed on top of her dressing table near her jewelry box, the gold anklet Nicky had given her in high school, which she typically wore. She scooped up the trinket and fastened it around her right ankle, before she hustled back past all of them. She ran into the kitchen with a fleeting "Just a sec, Baby" to Dixie, who waited patiently by the front door.

She followed her post meal custom by applying some honey to the tip and base of her tongue. She also extracted some of the sweet golden liquid into a vial. She stopped the vial with an eyedropper, both of which she carried in her purse. She checked her purse to insure it held her keys and driver's license. On her way out, hurrying past the diners and Don, she apologized to her family again for not being around to help with the dishes. Her mother told her "It was quite all right", although Sheena persisted in protesting loudly to the contrary.

As she opened the screen door Ryz'n yelled, "Oh, hold up, Baby! I'm comin', I'm comin'!"

Ryz'n hustled down the front stoop to join Dixie, who had left the house when she had gone into the kitchen. He was already waiting across the street by his motorcycle. He noticed that she carried a small, dark brown, leather handbag with a long, narrow strap slung over her left shoulder. She had also found a pair of brown leather platform sandals with thick, high soles and heels, which made her a little taller. While he had waited for her, Dixie had tied his flared, silk suit pant legs around his calves with his rubber bands. He mounted the bike, rocking it forward off the kickstand. Then he helped her mount and started the cycle.

"Hold on tight," he yelled over the engine noise. " And lean with me." Nick's normal speech continued to surprise but immensely pleased her.

She yelled over his left shoulder, "And squeeze tight twice to stop. Right?"

Dixie turned back to her, pleasantly surprised.

"Yeah, how did you know that?" he asked over his shoulder.

"We've ridden together before, Baby." She winked at him, grinning from ear to ear, all the while displaying those deep dimples. They donned their dark glasses.

Dixie shook his head in wonderment, but grinned with her nonetheless. They took off with Ryz'n tugging on his arms, indicating the direction in which he should go. As they passed the Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church, just two short blocks from her home, Ryz'n squeezed twice, so Dixie stopped.

"Look Honey! There's Father Vizconni. He married us. He knows you very well, Nick. He helped you out of some jams in high school. Please Nicky, take a minute to say hello to him. He has said many prayers with me for you. Father V. has been as anxious for your return as any of us."

"OK."

Reluctantly, Dixie parked next to the curb, kicking the left stand down and cutting the engine. He helped Ryz'n off the bike and followed her over to the grass-bordered sidewalk between the rectory and the church sanctuary.

"Helloooo! Father Vizconni!" Ryz'n waved heartily catching the priest's attention. "Our prayers have been answered, Father. See! It's Nick, he's come home." She turned to show off Dixie. Then, fairly bursting with excitement, the angelic girl hustled over the concrete walkway to the priest. Evidently, he had been on his way to the sanctuary, when Ryz'n intercepted him. Nick tagged along halfheartedly, half-loping behind her.

Father Vizconni stopped in his tracks, with wild disbelief spreading across his face. Then he cried out.

"NO! Nicholas! Is it really you? Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle! Praise God for the miracles He performs!" Ryz'n motioned for Nick to remove his shades, which he did. The priest came over to pump the young man's hand excitedly. His grin stretched from ear to ear. "It IS you! Son of a gun!"

He pumped Dixie's hand until Dixie believed his arm would fall off. Suddenly and inexplicably, the happy priest shed his joyful exterior. He assumed a dead solemn countenance and stepped back from Dixie, to challenge him playfully.

"Nick Sheeboom? Well, I've heard about you." They stood on the concrete sidewalk between the hall and the sanctuary in the balm of the June evening. The priest looked sternly at Nick, waiting for a response. Dixie looked to Ryz'n for help, but she just nodded, urging him to reply.

"Well, wh-wh-what have you h-heard, Fa-Father?"

The priest, trying hard to suppress a smile, stepped further back from Nick, assumed a gunfighter's stance, and replied slowly, evenly.

"I've heard you're a low-down, Yankee liah!"

Dixie did not know what to make of him. Again, he looked at Ryz'n, who knew what the priest was trying to prove, but she also knew what the priest did not. His sincere efforts were lost upon the amnesiac.

"Well, gee I'm so-sorry, Fa-Father. I, uh, don't know wh-what to ... to s-say."

"Oh Nick, you forgot?" Disappointment registered in the priest's tone. "You're supposed to say: 'Prove it' and then we draw, just like when we first met, like from the western movie "Shane." Surely, you remember that, Nicholas?"

Dixie gave no indication, he recalled the incident or the film.

"Oh, I'll never forget it," proclaimed the crestfallen cleric. "It's still the most unique introduction I've ever had to anyone. Your six-shooter was an opened, uh, a 'loaded' can of Miller High Life that you 'shot' all over me, accidentally of course—right over there, right under the far basket."

Dixie followed the priest's pointing finger to the outdoor asphalt basketball court. The cleric smiled in anticipation of Nick's recall, but all he got in return was another apology and a blank stare from the hapless vet.

Ryz'n explained to Father Vizconni that Nicky's memory had not come back to him yet, but that it would. It was something she hoped the padre would include in his prayers. The dark, wavy-haired priest promised he would be sure to do just that and suggested they go inside the church to pray that very minute. Dixie was anxious to meet his family. Even so, he followed the two Catholics inside the sanctuary anyway, where the priest led them in prayer before the alter.

The cool, dark sanctuary was like a theatre-in-the-round, surrounded by stained glass windows. To their right, on the west side of the building, the early evening sunlight streamed in at a severe angle, highlighting dust particles floating in the air, yet the rays did not quite reach them. Dixie liked the place. He thought it was a good place to pray.

The priest thanked the Lord for His great compassion and mercy in answering their prayers. Then he prayed for Nick's memory to return and for a smooth,

joyous reunion for the newly restored couple. Dixie had a hard time praying, but he did ask God to help him recall his family, too.

When they had finished, Ryz'n excused herself and Nicky, explaining to Father Vizconni that Nick had yet to meet his parents and they wanted to do that as quickly as possible. The kind padre indicated he understood. Ryz'n knew that he always did. The cleric walked them back to Dixie's bike and blessed them. The personable priest advised that he looked forward to seeing the young couple at mass before he left in a few weeks for his new assignment in Jamaica.

Back on the bike, the couple reached a "T" intersection at the end of the street that led away from the church grounds. There were brick and siding duplex homes to his left. A makeshift dump and downward sloping woods lay across the street in front of and below them. A steep hill lined with trees and some three-story brick garden apartments loomed down the hill to their right.

"Which way?" he asked over his shoulder.

Ryz'n still found it difficult to comprehend that her handsome husband did not know his way around his own stomping grounds. Why, he had been at this intersection many, many times.

"Well Honey, if you could go straight as the crow flies, you'd head right for it. But you can't go down the hill through the gully and those woods, not on this bike anyway. So, you can go right or left, it doesn't matter."

Dixie turned right onto Dunlop and rode east, down the hill. At the bottom of the hill, she tugged on his left arm steering him onto the tree-lined 23rd Boulevard with its extra wide, grassy median separating the flow of traffic. They followed 23rd for a few blocks to Catoctin Street, where they took a right for two short blocks. She tugged on his left arm again. After he turned onto 25th Street, she squeezed him twice. He stopped.

"OK, Nicky. This is your street, Sweetie. Your house is down the hill in the middle of the block on the left where the hill flattens out. 5011 is the number. See that burgundy and black T-Bird down on the left?" Dixie stood up and looked where she was pointing.

"Yeah?"

"Well, that's your Dad's car, Baby."

Dixie looked back at Ryz'n, who smiled and nodded. Dix began to get nervous. He took a minute to steady himself by perusing the neighborhood. Unlike the flatness of the Ryan's street, this one was hilly and seemed to be an older neighborhood than the Ryan's. There were more, taller trees and larger shrubs here. The plant life had a greening effect that lent a cozy, laid-back atmosphere to the block. Flower beds and boxes were not as frequent as they were in Ryz'n's neighborhood. Smaller, red brick ramblers lined both sides of the narrow macadam street, while parked cars filled cement driveways. Other cars were parked sporadically against the concrete curbs on both sides of the street, prohibiting the flow of two way traffic.

Dixie looked back at Ryz'n and she smiled to reassure him. He raised his chin in acknowledgement, then, started down the hill. Again, out of habit to avoid disturbing the neighbors, Dixie downshifted into neutral, cutting the engine as he approached his home. Ryz'n tugged on his left arm again, indicating he should pull into the driveway, behind the parked burgundy and black Landau T-Bird. Dixie glided them in behind the Ford.

After Ryz'n hopped off the bike, Nick lowered both kickstands and rocked the bike back upon them before following her.

"This is your home, Nicholas," she instructed him, once again waving her arm towards the brick rambler, much like a television game show hostess.

Dixie keenly studied the two, forty-foot tall, green-leaved, silver maple trees that shaded the front yard on either side of the concrete sidewalk. The walk bisected the grass lawn and ran from the house front stoop to the street curb. Dixie was looking for anything that might spur his recall.

The house was about forty feet long, another red brick rambler, like most of the other homes around there, though it was not as large as the Ryan home. This house had cream-colored shutters, trimmed in dark brown with three brown squares in a vertical pattern spaced evenly on each shutter. The eaves and downspouts were likewise painted brown. A cream-colored wooden facing under the eaves contrasted coolly with the dark brown trim. Dixie spotted a grey window unit air conditioner sticking out of the side of the house past the end of the driveway, but the unit was not running. The windows were open as was the front door, although the front screen door was closed. To the right of the sidewalk, underneath the eaves were three or four recently trimmed bushes. The bushes were tall enough to obscure the windows which were bordered by the false, decorative shutters. To the left of the front stoop, underneath the horizontally long picture window, lay a smooth finished, rose-colored, rectangular, cement block patio. The patio recessed beneath the five-foot wide, overhanging soffit. The back of the small patio, about six by twelve feet, abutted the red brick front wall of the house and, the side of the patio to his right, nestled into the left side of the front stoop. The front of the patio opened to the lawn, while the side to the left was adjacent to the driveway.

In front of the patio, in the form of a half oval, lay a white and pink marble-chip garden, separated from the lawn by scalloped, burgundy-painted, concrete lawn edging. Three short, smoothly finished, grey cement steps led up to a four by three-foot smooth finished cement porch. The porch rose about two feet above the patio. The front door portal was one-half step above the porch. A black welcome mat lay before the front doorstep. The place smelled of spring. Dixie thought maybe, just maybe, it might just smell of home, as well.

Dixie took it all in while Ryz'n led him under the nearest tall maple tree to the sidewalk. Suddenly, he balked and his verbal yips returned, as Mrs. Ryan's spicy meatloaf was doing flips inside his stomach.

"What's that odor?" He sniffed. "Smells like, like peaches."

"Oh Baby, that's the mimosa across the street. It's just starting to bloom. See?"

"Oh, yeah, I see. Smells g-good though. Say, should we b-be ... walking a-cross ... the grass la-like this?" he asked respectfully. Dixie thought, maybe they should walk in the street to access the home by way of the front concrete sidewalk, which led up directly from the street to the front porch. His halting speech reflected his mounting anxiety.

Ryz'n shook her head and giggled.

"Your Dad is the only one who does that." She chortled as if what his dad did, did not matter. They ducked under the low hanging maple branches and strolled up the sidewalk, but Dixie was in no hurry. He was a little scared. His heart was racing. About to meet his parents for the first time, Dixie felt within him a rising, nagging feeling of apprehension that he could not shake. How often had he wondered what his parents might look like!

Dixie followed Ryz'n up the front steps. This house was somewhat smaller than the Ryan's home and the brick was dark red where the Ryan's brick was more of a sand color. Moreover, the front steps were maybe not half the height of the Ryans' front stoop. Ryz'n turned and whispered, "Now take your glasses off and stay behind me, Baby. And maybe, we can surprise them." She put her forefinger to her lips with a "Shhhh!" Ryz'n shunned the buzzer to knock on the frame of the screen door. Pressing her nose to the upper screen, above the monogrammed aluminum '*S*' that hung across the lower screen, she spied her father-in-law. He sat in his recliner chair diagonally across the room, reading The Evening Star, as was his evening custom. She laughed silently to herself.

This house had a mirror or reverse image floor plan of her home and the two fathers were mirror images in their political leanings. Mr. Sheeboom sat in the same spot in a green, cloth recliner, just as her father sat in his recliner. Both patriarchs sat just to the living room side of the archway which separated the living and dining rooms. Both fathers read The Evening Star now, though Ryz'n's dad used to read The Washington Post, when Nicky had delivered it. Her dad had switched to The Star after The Post had broken the scandalous Watergate story. The big difference between the two patriarchs is that Ryz'n's dad is a died-in-the-wool Republican while Mr. Sheeboom was a Democrat, but, of course, each claimed to be Independents. The Star was a Republican newspaper. Mr. Sheeboom read it, so he could "know how those clowns were thinking," thereby keeping a step ahead of them. Or so went the logic, as her father-in-law had explained it to Ryz'n previously. The other reason, not acknowledged by her father-in-law, is that the liberal leaning Washington Post was a morning newspaper and Mr. Sheeboom was not a morning person.

"Hello, Raybo? Raybo, it's Ryz'n."

"Ryzanna?" answered a man's voice from within.

Ryz'n cupped her hands around her temples and double cheeks and pressed her hands and face against the screen. She strained to peer inside as the dapper, convivial, little man leaned forward in his recliner to climb out of his sunken

evening retreat. He half leaned and half lunged forward in fits and starts as he sought to escape the cavernous, deep-seated chair. Once he managed the feat, he folded the newspaper before him and set it down on the floor beside the chair.

Beckoning Ryz'n with one hand while resting the other on the arm of the chair for support, he cried.

"Well, come on in Doll. Come on in." He raised his voice, turning his head to the left.

"Wauneta, Wauneta! We have company. Your youngest daughter-in-law has come to visit." Then he half kicked, half slid the chair's matching green cloth footrest to one side with his right foot. "I didn't even hear you drive up, Doll."

Ryz'n stepped back, as she opened the screen door, bumping into her husband. She whispered for him to remove his shades and to wait there a minute, quietly. As Ryz'n stepped into the house, she raised a forefinger to Nick, again indicating he should wait on the tiny twelve-foot square, front stoop landing. "Well, I guess I was pretty quiet." The Sheeboom household schedule ran a little behind the Ryans. Ryz'n doubted her in-laws had eaten yet.

Dixie watched Ryz'n enter. He couldn't help but notice a wide, shiny, tin gold mailbox with a black lid attached to the brick and mortar wall to the left of the door. He was searching for one of those patterns or motifs he pictured mentally so often. The psychiatrist claimed they might very well be the keys to unlocking his mind. Above the mailbox, a square, four-sided opaque glass enclosed lamp, capped by a squat, black metal pyramid, was fixed on the brick wall. Ryz'n entered inside and moved to Dixie's left, disappearing from view. Dixie stepped up next to the buzzer to stare inside the home without being seen by those within.

He could see that the front door was opened, back against the living room wall on his right. The door sported a large brass knob. Like the shutters and under siding of overhanging roof, the door was painted a cream color and bore the decorative, brown trim, wood outline of three vertically stacked squares. A singular, round brass and glass spy-eye pierced the door about five feet from the bottom. Just past the door, he could make out a five-tiered, glass and chrome étagère filled with knick-knacks. The étagère stood against the wall to his right and just inside the front door. A sculpted, dark gold carpet covered the floor. Across the room, there was a closed, white door of some kind with a brass knob. To the left of that door stood a lovely upholstered two-cushion, off white couch, bordered in gold and covered with a green and gold leaf design. Above the couch hung the bust portrait of a young, dark, Asian woman with a bowl haircut. She did not smile. She looked worn, beat down. A dark hued wooden lamp stand stood at the far end of the couch, supporting a large, beige, ceramic lamp. The lamp featured a row of an elongated design of gold-tinted diamonds encircling the lamp's mid-riff, as well as the rims of the lamp shade. The walls were painted in a light grey or maybe a pale lavender. (Dixie wasn't too great with some colors.) But the baseboard was trimmed in white. To view more of the room, he

would need to move in front of the door, compromising his hidden presence to those inside. To his chagrin, Dix recognized nothing, not one, darned thing!

Mrs. Sheeboom entered the living room. She stood under the archway to the dining room near her husband, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. Evidently, she had been preparing, or cleaning up from, dinner. Ryz'n held up her right forefinger to the couple. Before her mother-in-law could speak, Ryz'n announced with a smug smile.

"Ray! Wauneta! Now I've got a special surprise for you all, a really GREAT surprise."

Ryz'n beamed and pushed the screen door out, opening it for her husband. Dixie stepped uncertainly into his childhood home for the first time in more than three years, for the first time ever as far as he was concerned! Once inside, the closeness of the room reminded him strongly of Donna's little bungalow.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Sheeboom's mouths dropped open wide enough to park a limousine and Mrs. Sheeboom placed her hand over her heart.

"Raybo, Wauneta: Nicholas has come home. Nicky, these ... are your folks." Ryz'n stepped back happily to watch the long overdue reunion.

Slowly, Dixie stepped further into the room, stopping next to Ryz'n. His heart was in his throat. For a minute, both parents and son simply stared at one another. Dixie was looking for something in them that he could recognize. He searched their faces, but concluded he did not look entirely like either one, though he could see bits and pieces of himself in each. They were quite a bit older than Ryz'n's parents were, maybe ten to fifteen years older.

His father was a dapper gentleman nearly half a foot shorter than Dixie. He was dressed casually in pressed, blue, well tailored slacks and a pink designer dress shirt opened at the neck with a starched, white collar and white French cuffs folded twice up his forearm. Bushy, black eyebrows with a smattering of renegade grey hairs and black flashing eyes shone above a straight roman nose, full lips and a heavy five o'clock shadow. He was definitely a distinguished looking gentleman. His wavy hair was dark brown, reminding Dixie of Richard Nixon's hairline or perhaps Humphrey Bogart's in Bogie's younger days. Dixie also noticed Mr. Sheeboom's gold wedding band featured a large, large diamond.

Dixie's mom was shorter and stouter than Ryz'n. She wore a pale purple, round collared, short sleeved, cotton blouse that buttoned in front and a black cotton skirt that stopped at her knees. She wore nylon stockings, no shoes. Her hair, more grey than brown, was styled like that of most of the women her age, like that of the TV character Edith Bunker of the award winning television show. Her features were those of a cheery Mrs. Kris Kringle with ruddy cheeks, a pug nose and green-blue eyes. Her thin, arched eyebrows were long and sweeping, and very expressive. A modest, white pearl necklace encircled her neck.

As Dixie studied the pair, so they studied him. Then, as if on silent cue, both parents walked toward their son. First, Mr. Sheeboom extended his hand as he approached his son. Dixie took it, while Mr. Sheeboom, with misty eyes, pulled

his son toward him, hugging him unashamedly, overlooking his maimed stubs. Dixie did not know what to do or say. He was disappointed that he did not recognize either of his parents. Mr. Sheeboom kissed him on the left cheek. Then, Mrs. Sheeboom followed suit, failing to hold back tears, kissing him on the right cheek and hugging him for several seconds, as well. They both fussed over him in a vain effort to prevent their emotion from overcoming them.

The matron pushed back to hold her son at arm's length, searching his face, looking from one eye to the other. Then she smiled weakly, kissed him again and sniffled. His mother proclaimed, "No one has eyes like that, except you Nicky." Her husband concurred. Shocked surprise stifled any overt display of joy.

However, Dixie was not convinced. He smiled self-consciously and backed away unsteadily. He searched their faces again, still hoping to gain the confirmation they had already received. *Nothing!* His heart sank. He never would have picked them out of a lineup as his folks.

"What's wrong, son?" Mr. Sheeboom asked, suddenly solemn. "You don't recognize your mother and me?" Dixie shook his head. "You don't think you belong to us?"

"N-not sh-sure."

"NOT SURE?" Mrs. Sheeboom ordered. "Remove your right shoe and sock!"

Dixie was confused.

"Go ahead and do as your mother tells you," suggested Mr. Sheeboom.

Dixie glanced to Ryz'n who merely raised her eyebrows, nearly smirking, while she batted her long, black eyelashes at him for concurrence. Dixie removed his grey Gucci lightweight loafer, leaving his secret wad of cash in his shoe, which he held in his hand so the cash would not fall out. He wore no sock.

"Now let me see the bottom of your foot," his mother demanded. Dixie was perplexed. "Go ahead, go ahead."

Dixie twisted towards Ryz'n to balance on his left foot, turning up the sole of his right foot to them by resting his right shinbone over his slightly bent left knee. Then Mrs. Sheeboom balanced likewise, steadying herself by placing her right hand on her husband's left shoulder. She turned up the sole of her nylon stocking-covered, right foot for all to see as well.

"There! See that?"

Dixie looked at her foot first and then his. Right in the center of the sole for each of them was a lone reddish brown mole about a half inch in diameter. Dixie studied both feet closely. When he looked up, she pinched his cheek and slapped her breastbone.

"That's right! You come from me, Nicholas!" They all smiled diffidently with chins lowered and eyes looking up at him that asked, "Do you believe us now?"

Dixie answered their silent question, "I-I guesso. I gu-guess, you're r-right."

"I know I'm right. Now give your mother a good kiss." She pulled him toward her. He hugged her tightly and kissed her cheek firmly, but he felt odd, cold. Dixie did what she asked out of obedience, not heartfelt emotion. The bantam

sized, graying matron, overcome with emotion, began to cry quietly, drying her face with the dishtowel she carried. To steady herself, she stabbed at polite conversation.

"My gosh Ray, look how big he's gotten."

"I know, we couldn't believe it either," agreed Ryz'n. "You would think that, at eighteen, he would have been fully grown, but, obviously, he wasn't."

"Well, I'm sure he's bigger than Ramon," offered Mr. Sheeboom.

Mrs. Sheeboom sniffled and claimed, "I'll bet you're six-foot, aren't you, Nicholas, just like your Uncle Bill, as tall as anyone in our families."

Dixie re-shod his foot making sure his bills did not escape. He held up his left hand placing his forefinger and thumb close together, indicating he was just shy of the high water mark height for members on either side of the family tree.

"Almost there."

"Well, you're hard as a rock, Son."

Mr. Sheeboom's black eyes brimmed wet, but they flashed pride. Nick noticed the gentleman combed his thinning wavy, dark brown hair straight back. His greying sideburns were fashionably wide and long.

"You're in great shape, Son, great shape," complimented his father as he patted Dixie on the triceps underneath his silk suit coat. "But then, you always were."

Ryz'n hooked her left hand inside Dixie's other upper arm. "He sure is," she said as she beamed up to him proudly. However, Dixie reasoned with chagrin that she had not seen the other half of him yet. Nor was he looking forward to letting her see his mutilated side, either. He chose not to think about it now.

Mrs. Sheeboom asked him why he had his pant legs tied up like that and why was he not wearing any socks, didn't his shoes hurt his feet? Dixie replied he managed all right without socks as long as he didn't have to walk too far. He said he preferred not to wear socks, especially with these soft Gucci's. He answered that he had forgotten to remove the rubber bands. He wore them sometimes as a precautionary measure to insure his flared pant legs kept from getting dirty and messed up when he rode his bike. "Bike? What bike?" asked his mother with concern in her voice. He pointed to his motorcycle behind the T-Bird in the driveway. They had to bend over to look through the lower portion of the picture window, left uncovered by the overhanging Venetian blinds. They could barely see the Honda between the low hanging maple tree leaves.

"Oh Nick, you know those things are very dangerous," admonished his mother, as anxiety overshadowed her face. "Are you wearing a helmet? You know state law requires you to wear a helmet around here. You know that, don't you?"

"N-No, I, I didn't ... kn-know that, uh, exactly."

"Well, now you do. Exactly! So you'll have no excuse if you get a ticket." She shook her stubby forefinger at him. Dixie nodded OK. The two couples, a generation apart, stood awkwardly, not knowing what to do next.

"Wauneta! Maybe the kids would like to join us for dinner and, Son, you can tell us where you've been for the last couple years. OK, Nicholas?"

They were all a bit nervous. Dixie believed that perhaps tensions would ease and the conversation flow more naturally, if they proceeded with dinner.

"Well, I g-guess, uh ... we, we ... " Dixie stumbled.

"Well, we're having meatloaf Nicholas and I know you don't like that Son, but I've got some liverwurst and turkey."

Meatloaf? Again? Jeeze! Ryz'n giggled at the announcement of the entrée.

I'll make you a sandwich, Nick, and we have plenty of mashed potatoes and beans. Oh! And kosher dill pickles! I know how you like them. So, you go wash up. Go ahead now, both of you. And where are your bags? At the Ryans?"

"N-no, at a mo-motel, ca-ca-close by."

"Motel? Well, now—"

"Wauneta!" Mr. Sheeboom interrupted. "We can take care of that later. Let the boy eat first and we'll talk. We can take care of the lodging arrangements later."

"Well ... OK, sure," agreed Mrs. Sheeboom. "Now, go along the two of ya. Go ahead."

His mother shooed the young couple towards the bathroom, as she dabbed the dishtowel at her eyes and shook her head in amazement.

The two young people looked at each other, trying not to giggle too loudly.

"Meatloaf?" repeated Ryz'n.

Ryz'n chuckled and Dixie joined her. *Tuesday must be meatloaf night in Crest Hill Heights*. But, the woman was right. He did like dill pickles and liverwurst. Once again, Ryz'n had to show her husband where to wash up, this time in his own boyhood home. Ryz'n leaned against the bathroom foyer wall, watching him wash his hands as she had done earlier. As Dixie stepped out of the washroom, she asked him if he believed they were his parents now. Alone with her, he spoke calmly and slowly without stuttering.

"Well, gee, it's kinda like seeing a map of the world, ya know, and havin' someone tell you the world is round, not flat? Your eyes don't believe, but inside you know it has to be right."

"Why, Baby, you spoke perfectly that time. That was terrific! Some times you speak very well." She took that as a good omen. She felt blessed that he felt comfortable enough to speak so well when they were alone.

Yes, that's a very good sign.

Embarrassed, Dixie ducked his head and slouched his shoulders as he started to move past her into the main hallway.

She's startin' to sound like Donna. Dixie smirked. Ryz'n stepped toward him, pinning him against the linen closet door.

"Oh Sweetie, I didn't mean to hurt ya. I just, I just ... "

Her wistful, plaintive expression was melting him right down, while, at the same time, raising him right up. The attraction between them was overwhelming. Then Ryz'n lifted off her heels, sensing he wanted her as much as she did him. Cupping her left hand around his neck and pulling him down to her, she took a

chance by kissing him ardently, wetly on the mouth. Dixie responded naturally, as each one emblazoned the other with a passion that Dixie had seldom known.

A zinging sensation began at their lips and permeated their bodies, right down to the tips of their toes. The hair rose up on the back of Dixie's neck and forearms. He felt his body temperature increase to the point of being afire where they touched. Sweat broke out around his forehead. This girl had something that drew him like a powerful magnet. She must feel the same, if her enthusiastic reactions were any indication. Certainly, Dixie could ask for no more.

As he kissed Ryz'n, something beyond the physical stimulation he had experienced with other partners overcame him. It was as if that healthy glow which emanated from her, charged into his being as well, and not just his body but into his very soul. And instantly, for the present anyway, the frozen void, which had plagued him as long as he could remember, melted away, replaced with a sweet, inner golden glow, her golden glow. Physically, all the familiar feelings, and more besides, surfaced. There was something he could not identify that went beyond the chemical reactions he had experienced with Moons or Donna, some magic that was uniquely special to this girl.

With their appetites for each other barely whetted, the pair began to engross themselves in their stand-up lovemaking in earnest, when Mrs. Sheeboom padded down the hallway, catching the couple red-handed.

"Oh!" exclaimed the surprised mom. "I didn't realize ... " Abashed, she looked down to the floor to announce dinner was ready. Then she padded away, in a waddle, as quickly as she had come.

Dixie broke off the kiss to head for the dining room, but his little wife would not let him go. She had placed her left arm around his back under his right arm. For Ryz'n had felt that proverbial "old feeling," that same toe-tingling, hair-raising, heart slamming sensation she had not experienced in over three years. Three years and two months, to be exact! And she felt him next to her, like she used to. She knew what that meant, but she wanted to insure that he had felt all that she had as well. Staring once again deeply into his vulnerably child-like, two-toned eyes, she asked in her husky tone with the inimitable little catch.

"Do you remember me now, Baby? Your wife? And don't give me any double talk about globes and such."

Dixie shrugged, attempting to evade her question as well as her grasp and her look. But she would not budge on either issue. She squeezed him, pinning him ever tighter against the linen closet door. Her strength, like her passion, was undeniable.

"Well?"

Dixie took a deep breath, admitting coolly, with hardly any sign of stuttering:

"I can honestly say, I've never, m-make that NEVER, experienced anything quite like that in m-my la-life." Then, thinking of Moons, he qualified his remark to himself. *At least, not that I can recall when I wasn't standing on the edge of a thirty-five hundred foot high cliff*. But Moons had been merely a physical thing.

This now was different, much different. It was physical, sure, but there was more to it. Face to face, he stared deeply into her emerald orbs, ignoring the faded, faint, sleepless semi-circles beneath them. His arms encircled her slender body. Dixie noticed for the second time how large her irises were. They left little room for the whites of her eyes. Having dropped all sign of his speech impediment, Dixie turned into a regular Cyrano DeBergerac when he sincerely croaked:

"And I've never seen eyes as lovely or, or as large as yours ... whose colors change so dramatically as yours do. And ... I've never kissed anyone that tastes of honey like you or bears such a fra-fragrance of lemons the way you do. There's some-something extra special … here between us, some kind of a shine or ... or a glow, a warm glow. I, I dunno what it is. But it sure is new to m-me."

Ryz'n looked at him, initially surprised and subdued. However, she was increasingly delighted, even privileged, once she realized the full scope of his statement. She was equally pleased by the near perfection of his elocution, which she felt she had induced. As far as she knew, she had reached him unlike any other, including the little Filipino nurse, the Hawaiian police detective, or that big boobed, blonde liar. *Still, he doesn't remember ME! I'll make him remember, no matter what it takes.*

"That's OK, Sweetie, for now. Just remember, we used to feel like this all the time, you and me, ALL the time. And that's just for starters. Trust me. And we can feel like that from now on. One day, you'll remember, too. One day, you will. I promise you, My Love.

"The Lord has promised us in his Psalms that He will perfect all that concerns us and this concerns me VERY much. Your memory of me concerns me a great deal, Baby." She bobbed her head sprightly for confirmation and stroked his cheek with the backs of her fingers. She held him so tightly, she constricted Dixie's breathing.

"OK, Ry-Ryzanna. Ya know, I b'lieve ya."

His apparently innocuous statement caused her to let go of him and jump back. Unbeknown to him, it was a phrase he had used often with her in the past, usually in a serio-comic vein. It had become a private joke between them. Ryz'n wondered if his statement was a coincidence or had he just been pretending not to recall? That would be like the old Nick, playing up a situation like this. The way he stumbled in and out of stuttering so easily gave her pause, but nobody is that good of an actor. Still she was unsure.

Ryz'n buried the right side of her head into his chest, listening to his heart pound, as Moons had done the previous night. Again, Dixie questioned Donna's prerogative of "the rich bitch" who just wanted Dixie long enough to divorce him, in favor of a huge property settlement. Donna had to have been wrong on that one. Yet, he realized Donna had given him mixed signals, too. She also had foreseen the yellow ribbons Ryz'n had waiting for him. But then, how would this perfect little Miss Breck feel about him when she got a look at his mutilated lower half?

"We better go eat, or finish eating anyway ... Swee-Sweetie." Dixie had used her term of endearment. He had mimicked her tone also, hoping it would meet with Ryz'n's favor so the little tigress would let him out of the corner. Once again, she glanced up at him suspiciously. It had been he who had first called her "Sweetie" some five years past. It was not a standard term of endearment among her family. Was he recalling or just being polite?

"Meatloaf? You know? That way?" Dixie motioned with his head out, towards the main hallway.

"Oh, Oh yeah, sure. Meatloaf. How could I, uh, forget?" She grinned unevenly. No, this bumbling, innocent act was too much, even for her Nicky to pull off.

The couple made their way to the dining room where Nick's parents awaited. Dixie noticed the seating arrangements as well as the grace were different from those at the Ryan's. At the Ryan's, Ryz'n had sat next to the kitchen door and served as the go-for during dinner. Here, Mrs. Sheeboom sat to her husband's left before the kitchen doorway and served everyone. There was no crossing oneself after the "Amen," either. He noticed even Ryz'n did not cross herself. Then Mr. Sheeboom rose and proposed a toast to Nick upon his safe return.

"We're overjoyed to have you home Son. WELCOME HOME, NCIHOLAS!" The two women rose and raised their glasses of Beaujolais as well to echo his sentiment. Dixie stood and raised his glass to them. They all drank.

"Thanks. A-m-men." Dixie had just closed a toast as if it were a prayer, but no one said anything.

As they reseated themselves, Dixie looked around at the room to see if he could recognize anything. The room was only a bit larger than Donna's dining room. The same sculpted, dark gold carpet that ran throughout the Sheeboom home lay beneath his feet. The blonde dining room furniture was unique. The beige cloth seat cushions of the chairs bore an attractive, gold, fleur-de-lis design. An old silver and gold, plastic tablecloth covered the dining surface.

The ceiling was painted off-white and suspended a unique light fixture that could be raised or lowered from the ceiling via an extendable stitched black cord. The three lamps in the fixture were balanced like the prongs of the peace symbol and shaded by long, cone shaped, metallic gold covers. Those covers reminded Dixie of the three thrusters of an Apollo rocket.

A thirty-inch high blonde buffet stood in the opposite left corner of the room near his father, tucked against the wall behind Ryz'n. The soft lavender-purple walls established an appetizing atmosphere. An off-white, wooden kitchen door swung open between the dining room and kitchen. A handsomely carved, ornate dark brown cuckoo clock perched near the top of the wall behind and to Mr. Sheeboom's left. Two counterweights, in the form of brown pine cones, counter balanced one another and hung next to two long gold chains.

Similar to the Ryan's dining room, there were two sash windows, one on the narrow wall behind Mr. Sheeboom and the other on the wall behind Ryz'n, next to the buffet. The windows were clothed with Venetian blinds and white-gold

curtains that matched those in the living room. A closed wooden door, painted off-white, bearing a brass knob loomed in the wall immediately to Dixie's right. As he had done at the Ryans, Dixie wondered what was behind the closed door.

Still, he recalled none of it. Yet hungry, he dug into his food, trying not to feel sorry for himself. Not having quite finished his meal at his in-laws, Dixie was plenty hungry for some more home cooking. Ryz'n had declined to eat. She was no longer hungry and, besides, she did not want to override the taste of honey Dixie had detected upon her tongue.

Shortly after the toast, Mrs. Sheeboom spied Dixie's missing digits as he ate his sandwich. Choking up, she excused herself from the table. She exited through the kitchen out the back door to stand on the one-story high, back, porch landing that overlooked the backyard. Ryz'n had noticed her mother-in-law's distress. Dixie had been too busy digging into his liverwurst sandwich and mashed potatoes to pay much attention. Even though this was his second dinner, it was a helluva a lot more appetizing than meatloaf! He was still hungry. However, when Mrs. Sheeboom failed to return shortly, he did take notice. "Mr. She-b-b-boom?" questioned Dixie of his father.

"Please, Son, call me Dad." Mr. Sheeboom smiled winningly.

"Sure ... Yes sir. Uh, is her ... f-full? I mean her plate (pointing to this mother's place) is f-full ... and ... "

"I'm sure she'll return soon, Nicholas." His tone was kind and reassuring.

Dixie nodded, "Oh, OK."

Somewhat perturbed, Ryz'n whispered, "William Nicholas! I'm surprised at you. Why, your mother is overcome with emotion because of you. You should go out there and give her a hug and a kiss. That's what she needs from you now."

"She does? You mean, right n-now?" *Mann! It sure is hard to finish a meal back here in Maryland.*

"Yes, right NOW!" Ryz'n hissed and flashed her angry, now emerald green, eyes at him. It was the first time he had felt an inkling of her displeasure and he did not like it.

"OK, OK, I'm go-goin', right n-now.'" *Must be the Irish in her.* Dixie excused himself from the table to console his mother. *But she sure don't look Irish!*

Dixie stepped into the postage stamp of a kitchen around a four-foot square wooden table. He crossed over the dirty white, scuffed, linoleum floor, through the grey and white painted kitchen, out the back porch door. The kitchen floor was marked by a pattern of spaced red, black and grey squares and rectangles. For just a second, he felt as though he may have been there before, but he failed to make the connection. He hesitated, but just as quickly there was nothing, as always. This was darned frustrating for him but, at least, these instances were occurring with increasing frequency. Dixie went out onto the back porch. He found his mother, head down, resting her forearms on and leaning over the top rail of the small, grey second story, back porch. About ten feet high, not more than twelve feet square and made of four-inch wide, grey, wooden planks, the

porch was more like a landing. Brown-painted wooden corner posts supported two brown-painted rails on two sides of the porch. The third side was open to a flight of grey-painted back steps. The steps were built into the back red brick wall of the home on one side. The steps descended a flight, guarded by rails on the backyard side, to a concrete slab which was home to three metal trash cans.

His mother turned to him, dabbing at her nose with a paper napkin. "Aw, William Nicholas, we prayed so hard, for so long. I'm just so happy, so happy you're back. We didn't know if you would ever come home, Son." She flicked her steel blue-grey hair back and brought the scrunched up, ragged tissue to her red nose again. Dixie looked around at the leafy green, tall trees, the wild cherries, maples and locusts that served as a border across the back of the yard. The green of the fifty-foot wide lawn below also struck him. All this green was so different from Southern California. The sun was still hanging just above the swaying green treetops in a clear sky off to his right.

Dixie took a deep breath and then he did something his head told him was wrong, but his heart told him was right. He bent over, turned his mother towards him, hugged her, and kissed her gently on the cheek and proclaimed.

"It's g-good to be ha-home, Mo-Mother."

For Dixie, it seemed as though another man had uttered those words for he had no conviction in speaking them. However, his mother received his words as if they were manna from heaven. She shed tears of joy and hugged him snugly as she dabbed at her nose once more.

Ryz'n had moved to the kitchen door and bent her head low over the tiny wooden kitchen table to look through the kitchen window's lace curtains. She observed mother and son embracing. She shook her head for she knew what Dixie did not—that his mother was not a woman, prone to showing emotion like that. Ryz'n returned to her seat, dabbing at her own eyes, while Dixie escorted his mother back inside to the dining table, where he actually finished his meal this time.

As they dined, Mr. and Mrs. Sheeboom regaled Dixie with questions about his life. They wanted to know everything that had transpired with him from the time he had left them over three years ago to the present. Of course, all those details were impossible for him to provide. Dixie could only detail the last two years, beginning at the Subic Bay Naval Hospital in April of '73 and taking them right up to his arrival at the Ryan's. Mr. Sheeboom also related the details of Dixie's capture and the tragic, near fatal shooting he had suffered. He told of how lucky Dixie had been that a child hat shot up him at him, so the bullet's upward trajectory had traveled through more skull bone than brain tissue. He also described Dixie's good fortune to have the Red Cross visit the Vietnamese village where he was wounded at precisely the time Dixie needed them most. The information stunned Dixie.

Ryz'n also listened with rapt attention. She knew "the good fortune" described by her father-in-law to be answer to prayer. She noticed that over the course of

the conversation, the more her husband spoke, the more his slurring and stuttering subsided, just as they had at her parents' home. She remained silent, merely listening. Ryz'n knew things about Nick that he did not tell about himself, primarily things romantic. Those details he left out. He never mentioned his betrothal to Donna or his love for her two Negro children. Nevertheless, those details were burned into her brain. Mr. Sheeboom was particularly interested in Dixie's athletic feats. He was tickled pink to learn the new, local Washington Wonders expansion, major league baseball franchise had drafted his son. But Mr. Sheeboom approved of his son's decision to earn his degree, before he tried out for the pros. Ryz'n reflected on how much it means to have your dad's approval.

Mrs. Sheeboom carted out some of her celebrated, double-layer, strawberry cake. Ryz'n explained to Dixie that her mother-in-law was famous for her cake. The white, sugar icing of the cake had turned pink from the strawberry juice that she had drained over both layers. The top of each layer was filled with fresh, plump strawberries, so much so that Mrs. Sheeboom had to insert toothpicks around the outer edge of the top layer to keep the strawberries from falling off the white cake.

"It's the end of the strawberry season," she explained. "I hope they're OK."

Dixie tried the unusual dessert and loved it, proclaiming he had never had anything like the cake before. However, his mother corrected him on that score, poking a finger at him for emphasis. As Dixie was finishing off his second piece of the rich cake, the doorbell rang. It was the Sodello's from across the street.

Sitting at the foot of the table, Dixie was the closest to the front door, so he put his fork down and answered the bell. As he rose, the cuckoo clock startled him. He turned just in time to see the little white bird disappear, ducking its beak back behind a closing door. Dixie walked towards the front door and noticed for the first time the handsome, wide, rectangular, teak wood furniture piece that sat beneath the big, front, picture window and served as the home's phonograph-stereo system. Dixie stepped around the cream-colored, leather hassock by the door an opened the screen door with an unsure "Hello."

He greeted a short, balding, man with a hooked, broken nose. He appeared to be in his forties and wore bifocal eyeglasses over youthful blue eyes.

"Nicky! Little Nick! I'll be DAMNED! I thought it was you," he exclaimed loudly. "When I saw you come down the street on that bike—Looky Mae, look!" Speaking in a raspy tone, he turned to a short, stout brunette. Another grandmotherly looking lady and two short, dark haired, blue-eyed teen girls waited on the sidewalk behind him. Didn't I tell ya? HA-HA!" he rasped.

The animated, rotund, little man clapped his hands excitedly. Dixie opened the screen door wide to let them all in. He observed the man's dark brown hair and Elvis sideburns were manicured expertly about his bald pate.

Ryz'n and his parents had come into the living room behind him to greet their guests. Dixie learned the jolly, little man was a long time neighbor from across the street named Dominick Sodello or "Big Nick" to Dixie's "Little Nick." Dixie

now towered over the five-foot five-inch Big Nick, which produced a round of laughter.

In fact, Dixie felt like he had entered Munchkin Land here in Crest Hill Heights. The only person he had encountered larger than himself had been his brother-in-law Bryson, the football player. Dixie invited the Sodellos inside, while Big Nick's younger daughter ran off to spread the word among the neighbors that Little Nick had come home.

Soon, an old-fashioned, block party sprouted in the front yard. It began on the smooth finished, cement block porch, and spread to the patio and the marble-chip garden, as well. Before long, the celebration spilled out into the front yard as the evening waned. Neighbors and friends gathered impromptly in the Sheeboom front yard. By dusk, both cars and pedestrians choked the tiny street in front of the modest, brick home. It was like old home week for everyone except the man of the hour.

The celebration just kind of happened, taking on a life of its own, carrying on well past midnight even though it was just mid-week. Not only immediate neighbors but also former school friends of Nick and Ryz'n somehow learned of Nick's return and dropped by to welcome him home. Thirsty, eager volunteers made several "beer runs." Party snack food appeared as if by magic. With each new-old face that arrived, the same unfortunate model repeated itself for Dixie.

Initial joy and happiness gave way to bewilderment, even embarrassment. Each new-old face would first recognize Dixie as Nick or Little Nick, only to realize sadly that his amnesia precluded him from recalling them. Each former friend or neighbor would retell some humorous incident about Little Nick. Then, when Dixie couldn't recall the story they had just told on him, the tale teller would deflate a little. He or she would rally and console Dixie with a well-intentioned pat on the shoulder or knee. All remarked on how much he had grown.

As the sun went down and a cool evening breeze glided over them, Ryz'n sat wearing her husband's warm, silk, suit coat, enthralled with these tales about her spouse. She alternately sat on her husband's lap or at his feet with her knees drawn up under the coat, so only her head, hands and face were uncovered. Ryz'n had never heard some of these stories from Nick's childhood. Eager to learn more about his early life, she braved the chill without complaint. However, she never let him out of her sight, not for a second. *Shoot*! She never let him out of her touch!

For his part, Dixie sat in the cheap, red and white, thatched, plastic and aluminum, lawn chair on the Sheeboom's six by twelve-foot, pink cement block front patio. Periodically, he leaned back on the two rear feet of the chair to balance himself against the home's front brick wall, beneath the living room picture window. Both the front stoop and patio lay under the protection of the cream colored, overhanging soffit. Neighbors and friends had brought their own lawn chairs and filled the semi-circular, pink and white marble-chip garden that fronted the patio. They sat under the overhanging branches of the green, leaf-

laden, silver maple. Others sat on the front stoop or brought blankets and set them on the grass under the maple tree. The burgundy and black T-Bird sat next to them in the driveway. Some leaned against Mr. Sheeboom's pride and joy, which encouraged him to retrieve more chairs from inside for their comfort and his car's protection.

Mr. Sheeboom made a little speech, describing how grateful the family was for Nick's homecoming. He asked that, because of his son's amnesia, the family would appreciate it if the guests could refrain from mentioning this joyous event to the press. He encouraged all to enjoy themselves and to "please refrain from leaning on the T-Bird."

Dixie listened quietly and patiently to each of the well intentioned tale-tellers. He smiled politely at each successive story, while he slowly got stoned on brewskis. A couple hours past sunset, a precipitous drop in temperature had given rise to a veiled vapor of mist, inducing many of the impromptu partygoers to melt away into the light fog. By midnight, the patchy fog had descended like a blanket over the celebration. The foggy exodus of guests caught the bare-armed Dixie snoring in the lawn chair with Ryz'n seated wearily at his feet, trying to stay warm in his coat. She longed to be alone with her husband.

The Sheebooms bid good night to the delighted revelers who claimed they'd be back "later" to interview the returning hero in more detail. His parents woke Dixie and insisted he assume his old room. However, he protested, claiming he had a motel room for the night. His parents argued that did not matter because he was too inebriated to drive and, besides, the rising ground fog would endanger them on the road. Dixie became downright obstinate. He was not quite as drunk as he let on. He hoped they would realize his sobriety and all would leave him alone, so he could return to the motel without fanfare.

Of course, the two boilermakers and another half dozen beers or so over the last seven hours left him feeling no pain. But then, he had eaten the equivalent of two meals as well. Actually, Dixie had been walking that fine line between maintaining his high and dipping into a hangover low. Initially, he had acted more stoned than he was, as a ruse to end the embarrassment inflicted upon him by this impromptu, homecoming party. His parents argued that he did not even know the name or location of his motel. Dixie extracted his room key from his pocket and dangled it before them. Ryz'n seized the key with her left hand.

"It's room 222, The Royal George Motor Inn. I'll drive him up there," Ryz'n stated officially.

Ryz'n had her own motives for taking him to the motel. She longed to consummate their reunion and not merely to end an unwanted three year hiatus. She also hoped their lovemaking would serve as the incendiary spark that would rekindle his memory. In fact, she was counting on it. Her in-laws' tiny home was not the forum Ryz'n' had had in mind for such memory-making activity. She preferred the half empty, local motel. There she would have him all to herself

without possible interruption. The motel was a preferable, perhaps even the perfect venue for her intentions.

When the Sheebooms protested strongly that Ryz'n could not drive his motorcycle, she assured them sweetly but firmly that she could. She reminded them she had driven Nick's scooter many times before. Nick was loaded, they protested. She could not ride him in that condition. Ryz'n assured them she could ride him in any condition and had done so before, without qualification. Half listening, Dixie merely laughed, saying it would not be a problem that he could drive himself, if needed.

As a compromise, Dixie's father offered to drive them up the hill. But Ryz'n nixed that idea, too. Under that scenario, without wheels, she'd be dependent upon others and she had never liked that, unless her dependency rested on Nick.

Mr. Gasch, the gas station owner and retied D. C. police detective, who lived in the next block, just up the street, had not yet left the party. Now, overhearing the discussion, he offered to follow Nick and Ryz'n the mile up the hill to the motel to insure the kids' safety.

Laughing hysterically now, Dixie plopped back down into the lawn chair, almost tipping it over. He laughed hard as he listened to them argue over his safety. *HIS SAFETY!* He had never heard anyone be so concerned about his welfare before. When they asked him what was so funny. He told them.

His wife became a bit miffed. Ryz'n pushed up the silk sleeves of his coat, which she was wearing to stay warm. Then she knelt down, getting right in her husband's face. She asserted in unmistakable terms that they had all been concerned for his welfare over the last three years to the point of distraction, even severe, chronic depression. She reminded him loudly that he had no idea of the number of prayers said or tears shed on his behalf. "And it was those prayers, and not luck or good fortune, that has brought you home safely!"

Dixie mumbled a slurred apology for his lack of sensitivity, feigning helplessness, like a lost, little boy. His helpless look broke her down. She pushed his long, wavy hair back out of his eyes, caressing his face with both of her hands. She sighed rather helplessly herself. Ryz'n was tired from several sleepless nights. She was beat, but she wanted him very, very badly. And she wanted him now.

"Come on, Baby, let's go."

Smiling, she held his room key aloft wiggling it in the misty June night. Ryz'n helped pull him to his feet, supporting him under his left armpit as she walked him to the bike. He could have navigated his own way, but her assistance pleased him. In intentionally slurred tones, Dixie explained how the bike worked. Based on her previous experience with his scooter, she felt confident she could handle it. And based on her previous experience with him, she felt equally assured, she could handle him as well. She knew they were almost there.

The Honda CB750 was much, much more of a bike than she remembered his little scooter to have been. It was bigger, more powerful, and it had all those gears, but, outwardly, she held her concern in check. Dixie got on first and rocked forward removing the kickstand. He turned the bike down the slight incline of the driveway to point it in the right direction, up the street. Mrs. Sheeboom complained that they were not wearing helmets, but her admonition did not deter them. However, to pacify his mother, Dixie pulled out the two baseball helmets he kept in his saddlebags and plopped the smaller one on Ryz'n's head and the other on his own.

"Just for you, Mother." Dixie drew a silly grin across his face.

"Well, well, I ... " His mother backed off. "You two be careful. Those things are dangerous."

"We will, Wauneta. Don't worry," assured a not-so-sure Ryz'n.

Ryz'n also beamed at her mother-in-law to allay the matron's fears, but she nevertheless blessed herself silently and made a mental prayer asking for travel mercies. Ryz'n reckoned that it would be just terrible if she were to kill them after all they had been through, when they were so close to being together, alone, at last. However, in this case, she reasoned the risks were worth the rewards.

Ryz'n climbed onto the cycle, engulfed by his suit coat. She adjusted the rear view mirrors and, with Dixie showing her what to do, he kick-started the bike for her. She pushed his coat sleeves up her arms with little effect. They took off somewhat unsteadily in the light mist. Dixie sat behind his wife and shifted gears, working the clutch and the gas, which he could do in his sleep. Ryz'n, sitting half on the gas tank, half on the seat, helped steer the bike and he let her apply the front brakes, while he covered the back. However, Dixie could take over both brakes, if the need were to arise. She got them going, so Dixie relaxed after shifting up to third and let her drive. His mind wandered as they rode uphill. He was still high enough not to worry about the journey.

Dixie admired her courage. It was obvious to him, she did not know what she was doing. However, she was game enough to try on a foggy night without realizing that he was not so very drunk as he seemed. Perhaps this act of courage didn't rank with Laurie Lei shooting the Pipeline or scaling a volcano at Kilauea Iki, but this girl impressed him nonetheless. *Yep, she certainly is something else, this one.* She even read his mind better than Rose Rosario or Moons had done. Yes, this Ryzanna was special. And here, wearing his oversized, suit coat and the yellow ribbon in her hair, she looked like an adorable kid playing dress-up in her father's clothes. How lucky was he to have run into two beautiful, alluring

women in successive nights? He had gone a lifetime without such an occurrence. But here it had happened, two nights, back to back.

Truth is stranger than fiction. What odds would Vegas give on something like that? Especially with one in the Smokies and the other in Crest Hill Heights, Maryland? Ha!

Grey fog balls hung like inverted cotton candy cones, iridescent, beneath the street lamps. Somehow, the pair managed to knife through the light mist and negotiate the mile long uphill climb over wet streets to The Heights and the motel. They caught a green light perfectly at the Veer Avenue intersection. Mr. Gasch followed slowly, and not to close behind in his green, '73 Ford Maverick.

When they reached the motel, Ryz'n parked the bike with Dixie's help and stored the helmets, the smaller inside the larger, in the soft, brown leather saddlebags. Again, she blessed herself mentally and thanked the Lord for his protective mercies. For what seemed like the millionth time, she thanked Him for Nicky's safe return. The handsome, roly-poly Mr. Gasch patiently helped Dixie up the outside cement stairs to the second floor veranda and then to Dixie's room. The brief ride had taxed Dixie more than he realized and sent his head to spinning when he touched ground. Ryz'n thanked Mr. Gasch as he propped Dixie against the motel wall next to the door of 222. She assured him that she could handle Nick the rest of the way herself. Mr. Gasch bid the couple "good night" and told Nick once more how glad he was to have him home safely. Then he retraced his steps along the veranda, down the stairs, back to his car, parked in the lot below. He yelled up to them through the patchy mist that if Nick wanted to play baseball this summer, that he could play for his team anytime.

Ryz'n thanked Mr. Gasch again, as he reached his car, by calling softly down to him, over the second story railing. She really had not paid much attention to what he had said and she did not think Nick had heard him either. Truth was: Ryz'n did not care. She had her mind on other things, as did her husband.

The diminutive Ryz'n made sure her hulking, wobbly husband remained propped with his back against the wall, while she unlocked the motel room door. His long, coat sleeves made the task difficult for her, as they kept falling over her small hand and fingers, as they had on the bike ride. To compensate, she removed Dixie's suit coat, handed it to him and proceeded with the lock.

Upon receiving the coat, Dixie folded it fastidiously over his forearm. Then he slid down, by herks and jerks, with his back and butt against the wall, coming to rest on the concrete walkway floor. His boot heels caught up immediately beneath him.

"Know sumpin'?" he blurted out, but she did not respond. She was busy, thinking about her next step.

Ryz'n unlocked and pushed open the door to the darkened room. Then she looked back for her husband, whom she had just heard, wondering where he had gone so quickly. Surprised, she turned to see he now crouched on the concrete veranda walkway beneath her. He squatted there seemingly without a care, butt

up against the wall, next to the doorframe and his coat across his lap. His muscular arms were wrapped around his knees, which he had drawn up almost to his chin.

"What are you doing down there, Baby?" she chuckled.

"Starz." He pointed wildly out under the veranda's overhanging roof. "Hard to see starz back here, back East." Like creeping ivy, the mist climbed up over the veranda's creole style, wrought iron railing, enshrouding them both. Behind the mist, the motel's parking lights blurred eerily.

Ryz'n knelt beside him with her right knee just off the walkway floor to look out above the iron railing and under the veranda's overhanging roof.

"Yes. Close to the city like this, it is, but further down the road, in farm country, it's easier. Although this ground fog doesn't help any right now. You're right though, it's not like out West." She smiled meekly.

Dixie nodded as he had all night long to all the well wishers.

"But we do have the moon every now and then, Baby. In fact, we have a half moon tonight. See it trying to shimmer through the fog? Just under the roof, right out there." She pointed due east. "It is kind of blurry, but our moons can be pretty bright on a clear night." Dixie chuckled with delight, letting his heels slip out from under him, so that he sat down with a thud upon the walkway. His legs stretched out over the concrete.

"Moonz? Yeah, I know 'bout them, both of 'em HA! Ain't no half moonz neither. No sirreee, Bob! They're full and bright, all right. And round, just like potpies! Hungry Man Potpies. HA! Both of 'em!"

Dixie laughed loudly at the joke she did not get. As she began to rise up, he blurted out again, drunkenly, towards the parking lot below.

"RY-ZEN!" He emphasized each syllable loudly and evenly.

"Yes, Sweetie. I'm right here, Baby." She kneeled back down beside him.

"RY-ZEN! What kinda name is that? Nevah heard o' no RY-ZEN before."

Ryz'n chuckled. "Well, there aren't many. In fact, I'm the only one I know of." Dixie nodded in exaggerated triumph. Ryz'n proceeded in a kindly school marm manner. "Now Ryesin, R-Y-E-S-I-N, is the Gaelic form of the Irish ROISIN -- R-O-I-S-I-N, which means Rose. Ha! So in a roundabout way, I'm named after my mom, 'cept she's not Irish at all. Only my dad is. But my mom didn't think the Gaelic Ryesin sounded formal enough for the birth certificate. So she dubbed me Ryzanna, officially that is, while both my folks agreed to nickname me according to the Gaelic, only spelled differently. That's R-Y-Z-apsotrophe-N. OK, Honey? Now maybe we oughtta slip inside, hunh?"

"Apostrophe-N. Hunh!" Dixie shook his head and muttered below his breath "R-Y-apostrophe-N! Gotta 'memba that." He tried but failed to snap his fingers.

Ryz'n had explained the name thing, patiently. Now she nudged him easily and smiled an unassuming smile.

"Let's go in, Sweetie." But Nick spoke as if he had not heard her suggestion.

"Ryz'n, R-Y-Z-apostrophe!-N. Hunh ! Ryz'n the Rose, the IRISH rose. Ha! So that makes you my wild Irish rose, hunh? HA-HA! Gee, Ryzanna! You don't look Irish a-tall, a-tall. Umm, 'cept maybe sometimes in the color of those beautiful, cat eyes of yours. Ya know, you don' seem so wild ta me, either. 'Cept when you went after your sistah at dinner tonight. Yeah! But she deserved it."

It was obvious to Ryz'n that her husband was feeling no pain. She hoped he would prove more serviceable than a melted candle. But at this rate, she wasn't so sure.

"Well, there are times when Sheena could drive even Father V. to be wild."

"Is that so?" asked a wide-eyed Dixie in mock sincerity. He was in no hurry to enter the bridal chamber.

"Yes, that is so," replied Ryz'n politely, playing along. "But you know, there were times when you thought I was pretty 'wild,' Baby, 'a crazy woman,' you said, 'a regular, raving lunatic.'"

"Is that so?" repeated Dixie like a parrot. "Do tell."

"Yes, that is so," she countered once again. "And I am telling."

"Oh, no. How so?" Nick was quite the rhyming thespian. He acted as if he were drinking tea at a tea party with his pinky raised politely in the air. Ryz'n thought he needed a cold dose of reality to remind him of the situation at hand.

"Well, Sweetie, those were your words to describe me—IN BED." Ryz'n smiled sublimely, as she raised her eyebrows. Wide-eyed, Dixie swallowed hard and looked innocently at her.

"That's right, Sweetie. And it's been a long, long while since I've been wild in bed—not since you left, see?"

Again, Dixie swallowed hard, wide-eyed and nodded ever so humbly that he understood, like a schoolboy being corrected by his teacher.

"Good," nodded Ryz'n. "Now that we understand each other . . ."

Three years and two months. That's a lot of water over the dam. A lot of fish under the bridge. But there will be no fish tonight, Sweetie. No, there will be no need for fish tonight.

Ryz'n rose with her shoulder and hip, pushing open the door, which had resettled itself into the jam. With sweet anticipation, she stepped one foot across the threshold. Ryz'n spoke softly and tenderly in her natural, throaty tone.

"Come on Honey, let's go inside. Come on into me, Sweetie, and we'll make some memories you won't ever forget, memories that won't fade away. I promise you. And who knows, Baby? Maybe, spark some old ones, too." She winked and nodded hopefully towards the room.

Dixie thought the naturally sultry tone of her voice had lowered half an octave more than usual and her typical, vocal catch had caught a little harder, as well. Her eyes gleamed a wild, emerald green and her moist, pink lips lilted playfully, beckoning to him.

In a way, Ryz'n was grateful for his semi-inebriated state. It would ease the tensions, enabling them to reacquaint with one another more easily. The shaded

light bulb over the door flickered and died. Ryz'n took its passing as a good omen for romance. She broadened both her eyes and open arms, inviting him to come into love her, to love her now.

Dixie looked up to her. He had ceased laughing. He still failed to remember her. For that reason, he felt guilty. He felt guilty because he knew what she expected. Obviously, she knew him, she loved him, and she wanted him. He no longer had any allusions on that score. He had no more concern that she was the 'rich bitch' after whatever fortune he allegedly had (of which, by the way, he had yet to see a dime). He had only just met her, but he liked her fine. He guessed that he might be able to love her and melt that frozen vacuum in the pit of his soul forever. Yes, Dixie thought he could love her, in time. But, now? Right now? This minute?

He did not want her to view his nasty wounds. She didn't know how terribly ugly they were. Moons had seen them by accident when he had climbed, shivering, out of the mountain stream. But Moons had been a temporary condition like chicken pox. He'd never see her again. But this, this was different. He couldn't just spring the harsh, ugly evidence of his atrocities upon this kind, lovely girl whose lemon-sweet aroma glowed about her like a soft light.

Ryz'n watched patiently as her husband tried to rise up on his left foot that was nearest to her, but his smooth-soled Gucci kept slipping out from under him. When he turned his head and cheek to the wall, looking up to her for help, his long, unkempt, black hair hung in his face. Apparently, defeated by gravity, he lifted merely his right arm, extending it across his face towards her. Although only slightly flexed, his long, hard, bicep and tricep bulged before her eyes.

"Help me? Please?" asked Dixie, humbly sincere.

Ryz'n peered in and around his wavy bangs and through the inimitable black and blue windows to his soul.

"It'd be my pleasure, Baby." She moaned audibly sultry, as she reached back and grasped his wrist, still straddling the now darkened threshold.

Her sultry, poised reply astonished her, because the composed sound of her voice did not reflect the speed-racing rate of her heart. She felt as she did just before she opened a live concert. Ryz'n hid her nervous anticipation well. She never had realized it would all have lead to this, when she had first fallen for Nicky, the first time she had seen him in homeroom, opening day of their sophomore year. Then he was merely Little Nick, the pint-sized, gifted, erratic, class weirdo. Yet here they were, together again, after so, so long.

Ryz'n had been employing the "Abigail" approach so far with moderate success, as Father V. had recommended. But now she was contemplating switching to plan "B," or the "Bathsheba" plan, for the nightcap. Her intuition told her the moment was right for such a switch. And how could a priest understand something like this, anyway?

Electricity vaulted through their grasp, as she took hold of his maimed right hand in both of her smaller ones. Ryz'n lowered her center of gravity and leaned

her right hip back against the inside of the doorframe to pull up on him, drawing him up erect. For Nicky, she could do this. For him, she would become a temptress. Hadn't they all, from Sheena to Stiehlmohr, said she was one naturally—in her walk, in her throaty talk, in her easy, fluid manner. They claimed she was too unconscious of her natural instincts. She was inhibited and needed artificial inducements to drop those inhibitions. No, all she needed was Nicky. He was the only magic elixir she required and she would prove it now.

Dixie was beginning to believe her—this girl of dimples who was so cheerfully bright, so ready to help. There was something new about her now, something in the naively, inviting way she had slid her hip down and up against the door frame, with her knees half bent and, then, locked together. There was also something in the way her well toned arms pressed against either side of her substantial bosom, as she drew him up. Certainly, there was something in the way her eyes had gleamed when she spoke to him. This was another side to her that lured him, that tempted him. *Oh yeah!* She was overcoming his guilt and his shame all right. He was fast becoming a believer in this girl. *Maybe I should—go inside and make memories that would not fade away.*

This girl reminded him so much of Rose Rosario in her helpful demeanor and her ability to anticipate his every need. Yet, for Rose, Dixie had held only an unrequited, courtly love, not a physical one. Now he wondered if his feelings for this, this, stranger, this alien bride, should remain courtly. Should he pass over this threshold to romance her so soon? If he did, would he break the logjam in his mind and spark his recall. Would this beauty prove all those shrinks wrong? *Mann, that would be something to tell that Dr. Mandl, really something!* But how would she react to his terrible wounds?

He had told her earlier that evening, when they had first met, that they had "made it" and, in one sense, they had. However, absent his memory of her or until they made new memories to replace the old, they had not made it truly all the way back, not yet. He knew they had both sensed that. Now, mesmerized by her gorgeous grace, and in awe of her overwhelmingly innocent beauty, Dixie stood dumbstruck before his comely bride. His maimed hand electrified in hers. Her grasp fired up his insides. The gaze, from her enticing emerald eyes through those long, dark lashes, was defrosting rapidly the cold vacuum of his soul. Her lovely, full pink lips parted, as she returned his awestruck gaze. She couldn't realize what she was doing to him. The air between them charged like an electric field in the eerie neo darkness. She just couldn't help it anymore than she could help that sultry voice or her mesmerizing walk. It's just the way she is. *The girl just can't help it, Mann.* Without speaking further, Ryz'n had deepened her spell over him.

Softly, silently, gently, Ryz'n tugged on his bad hand to draw him inside. She wondered, how could he be so helpless now, so vulnerable, yet, at the same time appear, so, so virile. His masculine frame seemed to bulge everywhere out of his stylish, form-fitting clothes. She sensed within him a vigorous potency that

belied his helpless, sleepy, vulnerably boyish demeanor. *Those eyes, those eyes!* They drew her on, shining out from his deeply tanned face. A dense patch of ground fog enveloped them. The mist dived around them, darting through the open door into the darkened room like a heat-seeking missile, blurring their profiles and pointing their way.

No, they had not made it all the way home, yet. Ryz'n had seemed to read his mind on that score, too. Despite his motto, Dixie had been disappointed by his failure to recall any shred of his former life. There had been that one moment earlier, when she had been profiled in the front doorway of her home, when, just for an instant, Dixie had experienced a strong sensation of déjà vu. Yet, that feeling had passed as quickly as it had come. Then tonight, with each new-old acquaintance he had met, whom he did not know, and with each anecdote they had told on him, which he could not recall, his handicap had been driven painfully home to him. However, he had not been disappointed in her, not at all. No, she had championed him. She had nurtured him all evening, even more lovingly than the gruff Donna ever had.

This ravishing Ryzanna, without being solicitous, had stood by him all night. She had shone upon him like a solitary light in a dark room. Her radiance had warmed him, thawing that frozen void within. Now she drew him on like a bright light draws a moth. Once more, she stood leaning back against the corner of the door frame. Her feet flat on the floor, straddling the thresh hold. Her shapely thighs, uncovered by her cuffed, green shorts, together with her gorgeous lower legs acted in unison to lock straight at the knees and spread apart provocatively. Her left hand, about eye-high, with her fingers wrapped around the door's edge, propped the door ajar. She straddled the doorway, luring him inside like a silent siren in a classical Greek tragedy. Her presence, like her lemon scent, saturated his mind. Her head and backside pressed back against the door frame profiling her natural beauty in the mist and darkness. The dainty, outstretched right hand pulled patiently, invitingly, on his deformed right claw. She called to him softly, seductively, in her instinctively smoky speech, coaxing him to come inside. Unlike Donna or Moons, this girl's allure was ingenuously but powerfully subtle.

All night long, this beautiful young woman had befriended him, nurtured him, even mothered him. Now she had morphed into the mother of all seducers. A chameleon, she had suddenly become a naively bewitching little creature, who drew him onward and upward, and against whom he felt absolutely powerless to resist. *This isn't real. This couldn't be real.* Maybe it was the ominously boding déjà vu of the mist which worried him. *What had Jim said?*

"Nobody has a wife that looks like that."

'Nobody?' Well, at least that part was true enough.

"Come on inside, Sweetie." She purred softly. "Come on into me now, Baby."

Ryz'n could sense the Bathsheba she never knew she had within her sober self, pouring our from her body, through the very pores of her skin. She could feel it encircling and drawing around him in the mist like an invisible net, ensnaring

him in her web of love and desire. She almost giggled for she couldn't believe she was capable of purposefully exuding such powerful, overt, animal enticement without being high. Ryz'n could never picture herself as a voluptuous, alluring Bathsheba, even though people always claimed she had such qualities. Her natural proclivity was more towards the modestly warmly prim, hospitable Abigail—like the helper girl she had been at dinner tonight. But there was something greater at play here tonight, something greater, like that first time with Nicky down at the beaver ponds in La Placa. It was as if she were weaving a spell about him, a spell against which his strapping virility was powerless to withstand. She had never wanted him more, not even the first time. Until now, Ryz'n had not thought that was possible. The very concept of that inaugural, passionate event now invoked goose bumps to rise on her dark olive skin and her juices flowed within. She almost had him. *Pickles! I only need to play him a little more and then reel him in a little, just inside the door, just like fishin' with Dad and then ...* Her breath caught in her throat at that thought and she began to take long, slow, deep breaths.

Once more, Ryz'n pulled softly on his deformed hand. With the other hand by his side, Dixie pressed his unfolding suit coat into his waist with his wrist and forearm. He pinched his thigh through his snug fitting, silk slacks to make sure he was not dreaming. He shook his head in disbelief as the mist thickened about them. Incredibly, a reasonable facsimile of his unique, recurring vision was alive right there in front of him and about to dissolve in the fog once more right before his eyes! Just as it had so often in his dreams.

No! Not again! This can't be happening to me again! I'm awake. I'm not zonin', not now, am I? No!

He pinched himself again to make certain. And there was Ryz'n reassuring him, cooing huskily once more through the surreal fog. She drew out her words like molasses, pouring her lemon-scented sweetness over him.

"Ya know Honey, it's been a long, long time, Baby. Yes, it has. But we're home now, Sweetie. Well, almost anyway. Yes ... we're almost there." She repeated her litany of hope as much to assure herself as to convince him.

Home? Is that what she had said?

This motel room I rented for nineteen-fifty? This concrete, veranda floor beneath me? And this beautiful, strange girl whom I have never seen before in my life? They were home?

Aw shoot! What is home anyway?

Home was just another four-letter word to Dixie, something he had only come close to achieving with Donna and the boys, but something he had never realized. It was merely a hopeful vision like the silhouette girl that had been snatched away in the twinkling of an eye. *Hope for the best and expect the worst.*

But this lovely vision before him had just promised that they were home. *That she is home, too*. And there was nothing but assurance in her tender tone and in

her warm manner. She exhibited a confidence that was not arrogant, but a confidence that was modest and as sure and certain as the sunrise.

Damn! If she really is HOME, I can't imagine heaven being any lovelier ...

And she's still here.

Ryz'n had not evaporated with the mist, not this time. Instead, a soft, golden glow appeared to enshroud her. *Must be the booze!*

Ryz'n lingered over him, patiently waiting, watching. She had had a great deal of practice. Three years and two months amounted to eleven hundred and fifty-six days—and nights. That's how long it had been, since his 1972 Easter leave. She knew because she had lived and counted every one of those days and nights. For eleven hundred and fifty-six days and nights, she had worried. She had feared. She had hoped and she had prayed. And she had remained faithful, despite what that lyin' Tommy Tremain claimed.

Well, I may have had a few lapses when I was under the influence, but I did remain celibate, I know I did! But the point is …

For eleven hundred and fifty-six days and nights, she had yearned and she had desired for Nick's safe return. And now, he had come home, a little bit chewed up perhaps, in body as well as in mind, maybe. However, she could not have been happier. He was here, right before her, ripe for her taking.

She would make him whole, again. She would restore what was lacking, his verve, his joie de vivre, his confidence, yes, even his memory. And she was going to start right now, using her own special prescription of restorative powers. *My charms have always proven to be successful on you in the past, Nicky. Those psychiatrists can just tale a flyin' leap.*

Dixie floundered. His mind raced ahead of his heart. Was this real or was he zoning? And if it were real, did he really want to do this now? He didn't even know this girl, really. *What about my wounds? What will she think?* Dixie swallowed hard. He could almost taste her lips of honey. His reservations of shame and guilt evaporated with the receding mist, as her enticing scent of lemons consumed him.

Now, once more smiling sweetly but concealing her ravenous desire, Ry smiled at him for what must have been the thousandth time. She lovingly tugged at him, yet again. As her anticipation intensified, Ryz'n's breathing increased noticeably and her chest began to heave. Yet, her inviting demeanor and voice remained calm and gentle. Ryz'n coaxed him softly, patiently.

"Come, just a little further, Sweetie. We're almost there. Come in to me …"

He came.

Almost There portrays the efforts of a lonely, young, M.I.A. widow to locate her amnesiac husband in the wake of the destruction left by the Viet Nam War.

In the first week of June 1975, the multi-talented, handsome Ryzanna Sheeboom, recently graduated from college, stands poised to embark upon her adult life. However, she is unwilling to pursue a career until she has resolved, unequivocally, the mystery of her missing husband Nicholas. Almost two and a half years have passed since the Government officially declared Nick Sheeboom as missing in action at the close of the Vietnam campaign. Standing alone among her family and friends, Ryz'n believes firmly that God has kept her husband alive for her to find. A continent away, unknown to Ryz'n, an amnesiac war veteran attends Peppermount University on a baseball scholarship under the mistaken identity of James "Dixie" Strickler. As Dixie prepares to marry in San Diego, into the only family he has known outside of the Marine Corps, unforeseen circumstances intervene to prevent the marriage, pointing him back east, perhaps to his past.

Almost There chronicles an incredible but pivotal ten days in the lives of this lost, war torn couple when their disparate worlds miraculously converge. Distinctively told from the dual perspectives of each of the main characters, this piece of cross-genre, light fiction will provide the reader with two stories in one suspenseful tale.

About the Author

Dixie Wells is a first time author who lives with a spouse of twenty-eight years and their teenage son in McLean, Virginia. A married daughter Kelly lives with her husband in nearby New Market, Maryland.