

~ 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, hmmm, 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 Stiehmohr 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, Stiehmohr 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. Stiehmohr 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, Stiehmohr 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, Stiehmohr hoped his indulgence of the *Lest We Forget* tour would ingratiate him to her. Stiehmohr 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 Stiehmohr sarcastically had re-dubbed *Let's Please Forget*). Stiehmohr 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, Stiehmohr had sought to take advantage of her alleged philandering nature, but he had assumed wrongly.

Ryz'n had become aware of Stiehmohr'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. Stiehmohr 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, Stiehmohr chose to believe the lie. In fact, he was counting on the lie to be true.

When Stiehmohr 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 half a dozen top forty hits, including a top ten, top twenty, and three top thirty hits (Ryz'n's title song for the L. P. peaked at thirty-five). However, *Lest We Forget* had not turned out to be the

mega seller album Stiehmohr had anticipated. The platter had not “busted out” the way the Halo brass had hoped, even with the *GRT* name on the cover. In Stiehmohr’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 Stiehmohr 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 Stiehmohr. 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, Stiehmohr 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 Stiehmohr’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.

Stiehmohr 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 Stiehmohr had added he would use it only as “a last resort.” Stiehmohr 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.

Stiehmohr 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. Stiehmohr 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 Stiehmohr 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 Stiehmohr 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. Stiehmohr 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, Stiehmohr, 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 Stiehmohr. 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."

Stiehmohr 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. Stiehlmoir 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. Stiehlmoir 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's 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 recon'd 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 examine 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 than 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 and tenth grades, fine but dark wisps of hair had surfaced mysteriously 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 woman 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.”

Fear and Faith

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, hmmm-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?