

Nick and Ry arrived at the Sheebooms just as her father-in-law “Raybo” served the second round of drinks to Ryz’n’s mom and dad in the Sheebooms’ sculpted, gold-carpeted, living room. Ryz’n and Nick sat together on the beige, green and gold-trimmed sofa facing the wide picture window and joined in the “happy hour.” When the host called for another round, the hostess insisted dinner could not wait for a third round, but the two fathers prevailed upon her for one more round nonetheless. Ry’s mother-in-law observed that “the lasagna could be reheated, if necessary.” Ryz’n and Nick joined their elders in a hard liquor toast to the return of the conquering hero. Mrs. Sheeboom abstained. Nick’s mom typically limited herself to a single beer before dinner or a single glass of wine with her meal. By the time Wauneta actually served the food, “happy hour” had taken its effect. All the guests were as ebulliently happy as their host was.

Raybo sat in front of the back window at the head of the table, facing Nick, who sat at the foot of table, framed by the dull pink dining archway to the living room and the picture window behind him. Ryz’n had always found her in-laws’ blonde dining room furniture pleasantly refreshing. To Raybo’s left, in front of the white, wooden, swinging kitchen door, sat his better half, where she could best serve her guests. Ryz’n sat next to her mother-in-law with the closed basement door behind her and with Nick at the foot of the table just to her left. Her dad sat directly across from her, while her mom was seated diagonally across the table from her between Ryz’n’s dad and Raybo. Nick’s mom liked the arrangement because she said it accommodated the two left-handed Ryan women, who could eat freely without bumping into their neighbor by sitting at the left ends of the table. Raybo graced the meal with great formality but sincere thanks and dinner ensued. The diners shifted into small talk as the food was passed.

Raybo stated his approval of Nick’s visit to the Navy Yard. For the second night in a row, Mr. Ryan asked about Nick’s plans. After Nick complimented his mother on the lasagna, Nick repeated his plans of the previous night. He wanted to finish school and play baseball professionally, if he could swing it. Nick added his desire to remain here for most of the summer to “discover who he was.”

Her mother-in-law seized upon that opportunity to note Nick could best do that by moving back home, where she remarked, “... like this morning, where many memories were awaiting your discovery.” Ryz’n cringed at her mother-in-law’s suggestion. She knew if Nick moved back home, she and Nick would have little privacy and Ryz’n wanted all the privacy with her husband that she could muster before they went off to school together at summer’s end.

Nick told his mother he had been considering moving back home, but he did not want to upset their household schedule. Of course, his parents insisted there would be no problem. Aghast, Ryz’n quickly pointed out that Uncle Bill was arriving for a visit the upcoming weekend. In addition, had not Wauneta mentioned something about her

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mother coming for a visit as well? Ryz'n hinted hopefully that perhaps it would be easier on her mother-in-law, if Nick maintained "a place of his own" this summer.

"Nonsense," replied Wauneta. "Bill will take our room, so he can have the half bathroom to himself. Mother can take the middle bedroom when she arrives. Nick will sleep in his old room, which is all the better for recollecting. Ray and I will sleep downstairs. After all, it will only be for a few weeks."

Aghast, Ryz'n dropped her fork to her plate.

"But what about me, Wauneta? Where will I sleep?"

"Well, I, I hadn't thought about that," replied Nick's mom somewhat taken aback. "I suppose you could sleep where you're sleeping now, wouldn't hurt for a week or two."

Ryz'n had always harbored a suspicion that her mother-in-law may have believed that Ryz'n had tricked Nick into marrying her back in high school with a phantom pregnancy. Her in-laws had never wanted Nick to marry until he had completed college. Like everyone else, they never suspected Nick's music aspirations would amount to anything. They had questioned and suspected anything or anyone that might derail their boy from getting his education and following his father into a career as a civil servant with the federal government. Ryz'n had always suspected that she might be the prime suspect of their fears. After nearly a week of insomnia and two freshly downed cocktails, coupled with as many glasses of wine, Ryz'n had freed herself from any inhibitions she may have harbored towards her mother-in-law. The young woman turned unsteadily to her right to address the matron sitting next to her.

"Wauneta! How can you even suggest such a thing! What are you trying to do, break Nicky and me apart?"

"Well no Honey, of course not. I guess I forgot about ... Well, you can stay here, too. Of course, you can, Ry. Why, I'll fix up the couch. It will only be for a couple of weeks anyway." The matron repeated the phrase which was fast becoming her mantra.

"It will, hunh?" Ryz'n rose to her feet, pushing the blonde wooden and silver and gold upholstered dining chair backwards with the back of her legs. "Well, you can just FOR-GET that! I'm sleeping with my husband, period! I don't care if it's in the bathtub or out in the back yard, as we used to do. cuz we've been separated long enough!" Turning to face Nick and remembering the photograph she had found, Ryz'n added in a slurred tone, "Unless, unless that's not what Nicky wants." Her smoky voice became uncharacteristically fragile, like that of a little girl. "Is that what you want, Baby, to sleep alone, without me?"

Everyone looked to Nick who, like Ryz'n, was feeling no pain. He eyed her up and down as if he might eye a triple-dipped, chocolate ice cream cone. In her tipsy state, she felt herself exuding sex appeal and beauty but somehow, right now, definitely more sex appeal. She was just loaded enough to sense her power over him. *Beauty and sex appeal—that was a heckuva lethal combination! Sleep without her? You have to be kidding! No way could he say that now.* And he did not disappoint her.

"No Dear, that wouldn't be prudent." He spoke fluently with all the husbandly decorum he could muster, shaking his head and appearing to suppress a laugh.

Out at Home

“That’s right, it wouldn’t,” agreed her father-in-law laughing out loud. “You two honeymooners can have our room.”

“But Ray,” interposed his wife, “What about Bill? You know he has special needs because of his wheelchair. He’ll need the privacy of that bathroom.”

“We can work around that, Doll. Bill can have the use of our bathroom all to himself, during set times of the day. It can all be worked out to the satisfaction of everyone. You’ll see, Satisfaction guaranteed, hey Ryzanna?” He winked at his daughter-in-law, raising his wine glass to her.

Ryz’n smiled weakly. She was a little unsure. How would it be making love on her in-law’s bed while they slept just below them in the basement and while the other rooms were filled with even more “sleeping” in-laws? This was a tiny house, no bigger than twenty by forty feet. The walls were paper thin, too. Years ago, she and Nick had learned that embarrassing lesson. However, hadn’t she just claimed to sleep anywhere as long as she and Nicky were together? She could not back out now on her minutes-old proclamation.

Swaying slightly on her feet, Ryz’n raised her glass to her father-in-law:

“Darn right, Raybo, satisfaction guaranteed,” she echoed, grinning. They drank to each other.

“Ryzanna! What has gotten into you My Baby?” Mrs. Ryan’s brow furrowed as she leaned over her dinner place towards her daughter. “You have been behaving totally out of character ever since Nick arrived.”

“Well, Mother, I, I ... Well, to borrow a quote from your favorite book—‘Frankly, My Dear, I don’t give a damn!’”

Ryz’n raised her wineglass in a less than respectful salute to her mother.

“See here!” cried Mr. Ryan. “I don’t believe I much care for the tone of this conversation Ryzanna Christine and, Ray, I hold you responsible.”

“Now hold on a minute Roy. Don’t over react. You know we only want what’s best for the kids.”

Mrs. Ryan held her hands out toward each father on either of side her.

“Now please, Fathers, Fathers, please and Ryz’n you, too. This dinner is to celebrate the fantastic, blessed, improbable, even unrealistic reunion of Nick and Ry. They have been separated for so, so long. Please, Fathers, let’s just, just continue to make this a celebration, not a, not an arbitration. Now, I think it only proper that our children know they are welcome to stay with either of us, if they so choose, or to go on their own, if they so desire. We, that is to say Roy and I, still have an empty bedroom and it would be no trouble to have Nick stay with us. In fact, it would be both an honor and a blessing to have my son-in-law reside with us.” She turned to Nick and proclaimed, “Yes, it would be an honor Nicholas, if you would come live with us, Son.” She smiled sweetly at Nick then, turning to her husband on the right, added, “Wouldn’t it, Roy?”

Apparently, her mom had quelled a quarrel before it had blossomed into full bloom, thereby forcing her dad to comply or else he would look like a fool. Grudgingly, Ry’s dad shrugged his shoulders and gave his consent to keep the peace.

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“Well, I guess so, but it seems dang strange to me.” Mr. Ryan raised his hands off the table. “Here is a kid, who, for as long as I’ve known him, wanted only to get away from home, be independent. Now, all of a sudden, he—” Rosalie Ryan placed her hand gently on her husband’s forearm, lowering it slowly down to the table.

“Why, of course Rosalie. The boy’s always welcome with us. You know that.”

“Well,” said Ryz’n with an inebriated air of finality. “That’s settled. Thank you Daddy, Mother. We can take turns, possibly one week here and another at home, until we, er Nick that is, feels comfortable with us getting a place of our own.” She turned to her husband. “It’s not what I’d prefer exactly, Nicky, but well, what do you think?”

“Gee, I-I hadn’t thought about it. I guess, I guess we could do that. Yes, I-I guess ... we could do that.”

Silence prevailed momentarily. Nick’s ambivalence forced Ryz’n to sit down with what felt to her at best like a hollow victory. Leaning back in his chair and looking to his right, her dad suddenly cleared his throat to query his son-in-law.

“Well Nick. Guess it was fortunate for us that your bat got hot at the end of the season, hunh?”

That one was from out of the blue thought Ryz’n. What was her old man driving at? Her dad, who Ryz’n knew had a penchant for asking the wrong question at the wrong time, had asked a real zinger. A sinking sensation developed in the pit of Ryz’n’s stomach. She harked back to previous ill-fated meals between the two families, at least one of which had ended with Little Nick knocking her father to the ground. All present were aware of the infamous picnic incident in her backyard, all except of course for Nick, here.

Perplexed by her father’s bizarre remark at this time, Nick responded simply.

“Yeah, I guesso.”

Perhaps sensing an opening, Mr. Ryan clarified his question.

“I mean, if it hadn’t, I understand you’d be married with a ready-made Oreo family right now, out in California.”

The question appeared to take Nick aback. He shifted uncomfortably, but he said nothing. Ry could sense her husband wondering how the hell her dad could have known that. *Sheena!* Her kid sister must have blabbed. Pickles! That was the only explanation Ry could think of. And it dawned upon her that if Dad knew, then they must all know. Eyebrows rose around the table, but nothing was said. Again, an awkward silence prevailed for a few, long seconds.

Finally, Nick’s dad asked rather indignantly, “What the hell is that supposed to mean exactly, Roy?”

Before anyone could respond, Nick’s mom jumped up to retrieve Ryz’n’s strawberry birthday cake from the kitchen. “I think it’s time for cake,” she proclaimed matter of fact. “I’ll be right back.” However, as she disappeared through the white swinging door into the kitchen, her dad ignored Raybo and persisted unabashedly to question Nick. He leaned over his plate, turning to his son-in-law.

“That’s all over though, right Nick? You do intend to stay with our Ryzanna, now don’t you?”

Out at Home

With her body rigid, Ryz'n interrupted him in a slurred but stern voice:

"Father, he just answered that, didn't he? What are you trying to do? Mess things up? I declare, you couldn't do a better job if you had tried."

"I'm trying to discern the young man's true intentions, Sweetheart. After all three years and four months is a lot o' water under the bridge. I'm simply looking out for your best interests Daughter. Now I heard *you* just now. You said what you were going to do, while Nick here just sort of went along. His response seemed a bit uncertain, a bit lacking. Perhaps, he has other plans in mind. I'd like to hear him answer for himself, please, without any interference or coaxing."

Ryz'n demurred, lowering her head, so her father turned once again to his son-in-law.

"Well, Nick what do *you* say?"

Nicky looked down at his empty plate anxiously for several seconds, before he stuttered. His long locks fell about his chin.

"I, I hope, t-to, really ha-hope it c-can work ou-out-t. Ne-need to g-get to-to know each-ch other be-be-better." His stammering speech seemed to mirror his state of mind.

"I see, and just how had *you* planned on doing that, son?"

Nick appeared extremely anxious. He flipped his unused spoon repeatedly upon the white linen table cloth, while he stared down into his plate. They all waited for his reply.

"Da-da-da—dating. Ma-Ma-Maybe we ca-could d-d-d-do what we d-d-d-did ba-befa-fa-fore and sp-sp-spur me-mem-mem'ries."

Nick's tepid, stammering response surprised Ryz'n. In fact, she was crestfallen. However, she consoled herself with a secret confidence. All she had to do was to make love with him one time and he would be hers again. He may have amnesia. He may have other physical wounds. He may have lost his confidence, but underneath everything, in the core of his being, she still believed Nicky was Nicky. She knew what they had had together, if only briefly. She knew what he liked. She knew the chemistry between them was out of sight and had always been since their first date when she had massaged him that late summer's day at the base pool. One good night with her and this "da-da-da-dating" talk would vanish like the wind. She knew that as well as she knew there was a God in heaven.

"Well, I hope, for Ryz'n's sake," intoned Mr. Ryan skeptically, "that is the case. I'm certain her present wealth and fortune will have no bearing on your ultimate decision."

That crack was uncalled for and Ry knew they all knew it. Fortunately, Wauneta had had returned with the cake during this conversation, placed it on the table and had finished lighting Ryz'n's birthday candles. The double-layered, pink-white icing strawberry cake was chock full of strawberries on top of each layer. Her mother-in-law had lit twenty-two candles around the cake, ostensibly to celebrate Ryz'n's birthday, but, practically, the candles, along with some strategically placed toothpicks, around the circumference, helped to hold the dozens of strawberries on top of the cake.

"Her fortune?"

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Ry's father-in-law bellowed from the head of the table, refusing to let that remark pass uncontested.

"Well, you've got some nerve coming in here and making that remark, Roy! Since you're asking all these deep personal questions, here's one for you. You know, I always wondered why you didn't accompany your daughter over to that hell hole, they call a country to look for Nick." He turned to his wife and begged, "Do you believe this crap, Wauneta?" Ryz'n's Dad became almost apoplectic.

But the hostess waved to the cake and responded lightly, "Now Ray, please, let's, let's just enjoy celebrating our daughter-in-law's birthday, her twenty-second, which will be here on Sunday. She's such a gracious, beautiful, young woman, such a credit to her family." Wauneta smiled hopefully and turned from her husband to Ryz'n, seated beside her. "Now Ry, you make a wish Honey." Tempers simmered as the prospect of the mouthwatering strawberry cake seemed to defuse the situation temporarily.

"And smart, too. Yes, being twenty-two is smart, very smart I think." Ryz'n giggled giddily at her joke. As Ryz'n made her wish, Raybo jibed, "Yes, thank God she takes after her mother!"

"I'll be ... I don't have to put up with—"

Ry's dad threw down his napkin as if he were throwing down a gauntlet and began to rise from the table. However, her mother prevented matters from escalating once again, by reaching to her right under the table and did something drastic to her dad, which propelled him back onto his chair. Her mother began sweetly singing 'Happy Birthday' to Ryz'n. (Damn it Rose," he muttered painfully. "That hurt!") But her mom sang on and the rest of the party followed haltingly. After the traditional happy birthday well wishes were made to Ryz'n, a truce descended upon the dinner party while they devoured the cake and strawberries. As they ate, in a revelatory moment of thanks, Ryz'n spontaneously pulled up and thanked Her Maker aloud for Nick's return, unabashedly proclaiming the occurrence a miracle, to which they all agreed. The cake, the well wishes and the smile on Ryz'n's face defeated the ominous tone of the preceding conversation. In her joy, Ryz'n forgot temporarily about Dixie's reticence. And the strawberries were juicier and sweeter than one had a right to expect so late in the season. The pone rang.

They quieted as Wauneta answered the call just inside the kitchen door. It was Coach Shaughnessy. Nick's mom handed him the phone in his seat as the cord stretched into the dining room and around Ryz'n. The table was silent as they listened to Nick's half of the conversation. When he rose to hang up the phone, they prompted him to explain what the call was about. Evidently, the coach had invited Dixie and Ryz'n to stop by his place Friday around six for a small cookout, after which they would watch a local amateur baseball team in nearby Clairton Park. Nick had covered the receiver with his hand to relay the invitation to Ryz'n. She said she'd be happy to go with him to the cookout, so Nick told the Coach they would both be there Friday evening.

Out at Home

As he hung up the phone in the kitchen, Mrs. Ryan reminded her daughter of their weekend plans for the beach house and her birthday celebration down there. Ryz'n said she had not forgotten and that she and Nick would be there. However, Nick's dad picked up where he had left off.

"Ok, now that that's settled. Let's finish pursuing this other topic, about a chocolate or 'oreo' family in California." From her conversation at the front door with her father-in-law this morning, Ryz'n thought Raybo had known about Donna and her family. Evidently, from his surprised expression, he had not known about the racial issues involved. Mrs. Ryan shot halfway out of her chair, effectively heading Raybo off.

"Oh my Gosh! Ry, we forgot Barbara Maher's party her little dessert. Remember My Baby you and Nick were supposed to drop by Barbara Maher's house for 'dessert'? But I told her we had dinner plans here. Remember? But you could stop by afterwards."

"Oh yes, yes Mother." Ryz'n glanced at the dark wooden, hand-carved cuckoo clock, which was about to chime eight times just above her father-in-law's head. "And we were supposed to have been there at seven! Come on Nicky, we gotta make a move." She rose rather unsteadily with Nick providing her a helping hand. The young couple thanked the Sheebooms "for a truly excellent meal," excused themselves and departed in a hurry for the Maher residence. Both she and Nick were glad to have escaped the third degree inquisition which their parents had been about to perpetrate on them. But Ry would liked to have polished off her slice of birthday cake.