

Friday afternoon, Dixie had gotten hung up with his brother and the school teachers, who were practically begging him to come and install swimming pools for them. He had advised them that he had other matters on his mind and he would let them know. He had decided to blow the Coach off, too, and travel with his in-laws down to see Ryz'n at their beach home, although Dix had not yet informed the Coach of his plans. He could do that from the Ryans' place. Mr. Ryan had been right on one point, at least: Ryz'n was more important than the Coach. When Dixie reached the Ryans' place late, around four p.m., he found, much to his chagrin that the Ryans had left for the beach without him. However, Mrs. Ryan had left him directions, as well as the address and phone number to their beach resort home, stuck inside her front screen door. There was also a note, penned in his mother-in-law's neat, blocky handwriting. Ignoring the directions, Dixie read the note.

In the note, Mrs. Ryan apologized for not waiting for him any longer, but that it was already three-thirty and she and her husband were anxious to beat the weekend traffic out of town. She reassured Dixie that his bride was anxious to see him.

As he read the note, out of the corner of his eye, Dixie spied, a taffy-haired, young woman park and get out of a beat-up, old Chevy Bel Air in front of the house next door. Dixie stuffed the note and the unread directions into his pants pocket, as he observed the girl curiously. The fit young woman, honey-blond hair, was following a red-headed toddler up the sidewalk. She had a baby's bag slung over her shoulder and what appeared to be a bag of groceries in her arms. She shifted the groceries to her left arm and, noticing Dixie, waved excitedly at him with her free right hand. Dixie did not recognize the young woman at all. The girl called his name and motioned energetically for him to cross the adjacent lawns to her.

As Dixie approached her, she came to meet him, but the toddler had other plans. He was making a U-bie back towards the street. The young woman quickly set her bags down on the clover-laden lawn to run after the little fellow, cutting off his path to the curb. The carrot-headed little devil veered away from her grasp and made a beeline for the Ryans' yard, laughing and looking back over his shoulder at his pursuing mom, whom he had just faked out. Looking backwards, the tike did not see Dixie who knelt down on one knee to receive him as if he would a grounder in the outfield. The tike ran right into Dixie's hands. When the youngster turned his head forward to spy a strange, mustachioed, long-haired man holding him, he burst into tears. Panting heavily, the woman caught up to both of them.

"Here give him to me," she suggested, breathing hard, her modest bosom heaving.

The pert, young sandy-haired woman featured a matching sandy tan which covered her freckled face, as well as a turned up button of a nose. Smiling her gratitude, she took the crying boy from Dixie. "There, there, she cooed. "That's what happens, Mikey, when you run away like that. Come on now, cutie. This is just Little Nick, who ain't so little anymore. But he's sure not that scary, sweetie."

The young woman rocked the baby with one arm to settle him down. With her other hand, she reached into her large A-line skirt pocket to retrieve a used Kleenex to wipe the child's runny eyes and nose.

"There ya go, Sugar. Now, no need to be scared of Nicky here, Baby. He's an old friend. Isn't that right Nick?"

She beamed at Dixie. Warmly genuine, the young mother's good cheer was infectious. Her entire demeanor fairly glowed. Dixie felt something totally inexplicable stir inside him. Her infectious glow seemed to penetrate his very skin. Mikey's crying slowed to a snuffle. He squirmed in her arms. Now that the crisis had abated, he wanted to get down and motor some more, but she held him tightly.

"I'm afraid you have the advantage of me, Ma'am. But I sure hope you aren't going to tell me this, this is *my* child." He only half-joked, because after all the stories he had heard about him in the last couple days, he could suspect anything. He was pleased that he had not stuttered.

She laughed easily but sharply. "No, I won't tell you that, Nick." Then she became deadly serious, lowered her voice and furrowed her brows.

"But he very easily could have been, very easily."

She didn't laugh this time. She arched her eyebrows and raised her chin slightly. "Yes, he sure could have been." Dixie became somewhat chagrined, as his joke backfired on him. She stared hard at him for a minute. "I'm Lena Yikes. And this is my son Mikey. Say 'Hi' Mikey," but the boy swatted her in the nose and shouted "Down."

"Hello Mikey!" answered Dixie. (*Mike Yikes? Yikes! Bet that kid will have a tough time in school with a name like that.*)

"Allena, Allena honey, need some help from Grandma?" A matronly woman stepped down the front stoop of the house next door, waving her hand.

"OK Mikey, run on over to Grandma now. Show her how *fast* you can run!" Lena grinned encouragement. The boy gurgled and laughed as she set him on the grass. His previous woes were forgotten as quickly as they had arisen. Mom had pushed the right buttons, for the miniature redhead ran straight to his grandmother. All eyes watched him run. Dixie envied the kid for the sheer, unrestrained joy he exuded.

"What a tiger," observed Dixie, as he smelled a kind of stale, acrid odor that he couldn't quite place. He sloughed it off.

"Yeah, he is that and more!"

The woman, who called herself "Lena," was obviously proud and pleased with her boy. The girl turned her head back to her mother and yelled, "Be there in a minute, Mother." Then she returned her radiant, high beam attention to Dixie. They watched together as the older woman scooped up the little dickens and disappeared with the boy inside the house. Something struck him about the young mother before him, but he just couldn't put a finger on what it might be. The inability to grasp what he thought he knew was tearing him up.

"You don't remember me Nick, not even from the other night? Me and Matt were down at your parent's place your first night back."

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“Oh yeah, that’s right. You were with the big guy: red-head—curly hair and freckles.”

“Right, Matt Yikes.”

They nodded at each other nervously for several seconds before she invited him inside. He refused politely at first, but she insisted. So he helped her carry in the groceries as well as some other baby stuff she had left stowed inside the Chevy.

Dixie followed her up the front stoop and into the rambler. From the porch, the same musty, acrid odor crept into his senses, only it was much stronger now. Then, down to his right, he noticed the hedge of boxwoods guarding the length of the house. Strange odor for a shrub he thought as he walked inside, but he had smelled that scent before.

The living room had a floor plan similar to his parents’ home. Sparsely furnished and clothed in beige, the few pieces of furniture leant the room a spaciousness it did not truly possess. A two-seat overstuffed, light brown leather sofa, like the kind you might find in an executive’s office lounged against the far wall. A leather recliner matched the sofa in texture and in color, backed up to the dining room archway. A narrow, clear glass coffee table trimmed in beige and with four matching wooden beige legs laid menacingly low parallel to the sofa. Dixie mentally noted that the beveled glass edge of the coffee table appeared to lie smugly in wait of its next victim like a Venus fly trap. He thought that was a dangerous piece of furniture to have around a toddler. A console television rested beneath the front picture window, which was bordered by floor length beige-gold drapes. Yet, the entire near side of the living room was empty of any furnishings, permitting plenty of traffic room for those visiting the rest of the house. The scent of baking permeated the place.

Dixie met Mrs. Larrabee, Lena’s mother, who excitedly began to tell tales on Little Nick. A woman about the age of his mom, Mrs. Larrabee was similar to her daughter in all respects, from her healthy, slender build to her taffy, but greying hair color. She said she remembered seeing Dixie with “Allena” at mass once. That was when Allena had first started dating him. She recalled how he had been so polite to eat do-nuts with them after mass, when he obviously had not wanted to do so.

Mikey became cranky. Allena explained the little guy had missed his normal nap time, shopping with her. She put him down for a late nap, while the adults talked and laughed about old times. Dixie smiled and accepted Mrs. Larrabee’s offer of a Pepsi.

Lena received a phone call which he noted visibly distressed her. After she had hung up the phone, Lena explained to Dixie that her husband Matt wouldn’t be home again that night. Matt was building houses down southwest of Fredericksburg, some sixty miles away, at a new development called Lake Anna. When he worked this late, his company paid for his lodging in Fredericksburg. Thus, he found it easier to stay there several days at a time. Only, he *was* supposed to come home for *weekends!* The houses they were constructing were behind schedule, due to some recent heavy rains so she said Matt would not be home until the next evening. Though the girl was obviously disappointed, she feigned indifference by raising her naturally upturned nose in the air as nonchalantly as she could. However, Dixie suspected she was mustering all the poise she could manage, just to keep her tears at bay.

Mrs. Larrabee consoled Allena by reminding her that Matt was making these sacrifices for her and the baby. Allena nodded and smiled, but Dixie noted the girl seemed tense and ill at ease now, where before she had been infectiously joyous. Her husband's phone call had stunted the easy laughter she had displayed earlier. Dixie thought maybe it was time for him to skee-daddle. Allena was lost in thought when Dixie rose to leave. He thanked them for the Pepsi they had provided. Allena rose from her reverie with a start.

"Leave? Now? Why? You just got here and there's so much to catch up on!"

The phone call, which had put a downer on the entire household, had made Dixie a bit nervy, too. Though he knew this sounded ridiculous, somehow, he felt he was to blame, as if he were butting in on these people's private affairs.

"Well, I, I'm supposed to g-go to a c-c-cook-out at the c-c-coach's house."

"With Ryz'n?"

"Well, Ry-Ryz'n can't m-make it. Sh-sh-she's at the b-b--"

"The beach, yes I know. That's right." She finished his sentence for him, as she rested her chin in her thumb and forefinger and placed her free hand akimbo on her hip. Dixie watched the wheels spinning in the young woman's head.

"Is Coach Shaunny who you're talking about?"

"Yeah."

She winked and flashed a wide grin and turned to her Mom with her bon vivance restored. "Mother, would you mind taking care of Mikey this evening? I sure would like to go to the cook-out with Nick here and see the Coach and his wife. It's been a long time. I mean, if that's OK by you, Nicky? OK? You know Nick, I kept score for you guys back when."

"Well, I, I gu-guesso."

"Mama, will you?"

"Sure Honey, I'd love to take care of Mikey. He's the only boy we have around here and I'm sure your father will be delighted as well. Only, we'll miss you for dinner, Honey. You always brighten up the place so. But, no you go on. If Matt's not coming back 'til tomorrow, we'll plan on having dinner together then, all of us, all right?"

"Thank you Mother! Thank you so much."

She kissed her mother on the cheek, as she grabbed and squeezed her upper arms in her excitement. To Dixie, the girl seemed genuinely pleased at her unexpected liberation, as if she just had received a "Get of Jail Free" card. "Just give me a few minutes to clean up and change. I'll be right with you, Nicky. I promise I won't be but a few minutes." She chimed pertly.

Lena disappeared down the bedroom hallway. Before Dixie could resume his seat, the front screen door creaked when a middle-aged gentleman stepped inside. His narrow shoulders sloped as if they carried a great weight. His heavy eyelids drooped behind his spectacles. As he crossed the threshold, the man looked tired to Dixie. He unmasked his face by haltingly removing his wire-rimmed glasses and wiped them with a handkerchief. Then he dabbed at his high forehead, which fronted his sparsely covered, greying dome. His attire was suspenders, a white shirt and grey tie and he

carried his tan suit coat over one arm. Sweat ringed his collar and underarms. Mrs. Larrabee crossed the room quickly, greeting him with a beatific kiss on the cheek. She apprised him of the situation and introduced her husband to Dixie. Mrs. Larrabee excused herself to make her spouse “a highball,” Mr. Larrabee sighed, shook Dixie’s hand and motioned for Dixie to sit down on the couch.

Once he had relaxed in his recliner for a minute, a glimmer of a smile crossed his face and he began to talk softly. He fondly recalled the time Nick brought Allena and four other girls home after they had been out all night “celebrating” the school’s first state baseball championship. He told Dixie that Little Nick had been a “wild one,” but that he also had been “a danged good paper boy, best they had ever had.” He scowled as he wished out loud that the current crop of paper boys “were only half as good.”

Allena emerged wearing an apricot, short-sleeved, poor boy top with a forest green, A-lined mini-skirt and light brown sandals. She stopped a few feet from Dixie, posing like a model. The young woman carried a small light brown, leather purse slung over her shoulder that matched her brown leather sandals. Much like Ryz’n, this girl also wore a small, gold crucifix and short-chained necklace over her breastbone and she parted her taffy-hued hair high up on the right side with her bangs swept over, across her forehead. A brown plastic clasp held her bangs in place. Her shoulder length hair dropped straight down and turned outward, resting upon her shoulders. She fairly modeled Ryz’n’s taste in fashions. Dixie thought she looked like a teenager, who had just stepped through a time warp. Obviously, she had covered her light freckles with some make-up, added long, dark fake eyelashes and curled her shoulder length hair into a flip. She emitted a smart visceral, vivacious aura that knocked Dixie’s socks off.

*Mann! What was it about Crest Hill Heights that produced such attractive women?!?!*

She cut an impressive figure, not quite as overwhelming as Ryz’n’s (then who did?), but impressive nonetheless. About five-feet four or five inches tall, she was a cute girl with an equally cute, hourglass shape that evidently had not been adversely affected by child-bearing. One never would have thought she was already a mother of a pistol like Mikey. She looked like a teeny bopper, who might have stepped right out of 1969.

“What do you think, Nick? This is what I wore when we were going together. Bring back any memories?”

She smiled and gazed wistfully at him, much as Ryz’n had done so many times since his return.

Dixie studied his former flame. He thought for sure he could remember that figure and he tried hard but, as usual, he came up empty.

“I’m sa-sa-sorry. I sh-sh-sure wish I da-did. You look ... well, pr-pretty fa-fa-fa-fantastic.” He threw his hands out to his sides and then clapped them together. “J-Just fa-fa-fantastic!”

She blushed like the schoolgirl she had once been and glowed even more radiantly. Her mother remarked that she had not seen her beam so brightly since Mikey was born.

“Well, you two go along and have a good time now,” she encouraged. “What time should we expect you back, Honey,” asked her father.

“Dad,” she scolded. “I don’t know. I have a key, so don’t wait up. I’ll try to be very quiet when I come in.”

Mr. Larrabee kissed his daughter on the cheek, as she bent down towards him.

“Now Allena, you know we worry about you no matter how old you are. We still worry about your sister Ally and she’s been out of the house for ten years. It goes with the territory. You’ll see.” He thumbed his fist towards Mikey on the other side of the wall. Allena straightened up. Then her dad turned to Dixie. “Young man, you be careful tonight. We are very appreciative of what you did for this country over in Viet Nam. I’m sorry you’ve had, had to pay such a . . . such a steep price for us over there. I, I . . .”

Dixie rescued the old fellow with a smile and a clear, intelligible response.

“That’s OK, Mr. Larrabee. As far as I can remember, I’ve always been this way, never knew anything different. Good-bye, sir.”

Lena’s father shook Dixie’s hand. He felt Dixie’s missing digits and pulled his hand away quickly, as if he were embarrassed that he had all his fingers while the young vet did not. That initial reaction was common among those familiar with his circumstance when they first greeted him. To prevent further embarrassment for Mr. Larrabee, Dixie tried to escape by backing away suddenly, when he caught the sharp corner of the coffee table with the back of his left calf. He smothered a grimace behind a forced smile so that no one knew how badly his leg smarted. He dourly noted the table was the obstacle he had warned himself to avoid earlier—*so much for advance scouting!* Lena helped him up and he muttered something about the table being dangerous for little Mikey. Mr. Larrabee agreed and asked Dixie to help him move it up to their attic. This Dixie did. Then he came back downstairs and left with Allena.

The taffy-haired woman rode behind him on the Honda, wearing a gold and green calico scarf to protect her hair. They cut through the suddenly muggy, late afternoon on Dixie’s Honda, with Lena directing him down Veer Avenue to Clairton Acres. He had warned her that riding on the bike with her mini-skirt could prove difficult. She had thrown her head back and said she did not care. She said she no longer embarrassed easily. Besides, she reminded him she had managed it on their many previous excursions on his scooter. She said tonight that she was *free*—for an evening. Then she smiled deeply. As they waited at stop lights, the girl had informed him this night was for reliving old memories and being kids again, something she had almost forgotten how to do. At the numerous stop lights, Lena had told him riding on the back of his bike reminded her of the last time they had visited the Coach for a cookout. As they traveled south, Dixie could not fail to notice that she sat right up unnecessarily close behind him the whole way, squeezing him tightly as they rode. She knew the signals he used for stop and go and turning without having to be told.

When they arrived at the brick rambler and its adjoining car-port, the Coach and his wife rolled out the red carpet for them. Dixie and Allena explained their odd pairing to the older couple, but it didn’t seem to bother the Shaughnessys. The Coach apologized to Dixie for the promise he had made about taking Dixie to watch the DC Printers play in Clairton Regional Park that night. Coach had learned since that the Printers were

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playing an away game over in Vienna, Virginia. However, he assured Dixie the Printers would be playing at Clairton Regional Park, just a couple miles away, on Monday night. Dixie told him it was OK, but, inside, Dix was a bit ticked. Had he known that, they could have done this deal on Monday with Ryz'n and he would be with her right now, making up to her for the other night. After they had eaten out in the back yard, the foursome came inside to the finished basement to escape the blood-sucking insects. Then, as everyone else seemed to do back here, the other three ganged up on Dixie to tell "Little Nick" stories, the most famous of which, among their collective recall, had become known as "the potato incident." The short legged, long-waisted, brunette Mrs. Shaughnessy, in particular rolled with laughter, as she retold the story.

She explained that Nick and Lena had been about to leave the Coach's annual post season team cookout. They were the last guests to leave by well over an hour and the hour had been late. She said Lena and Nick were about out the door when Nick had asked for a potato without saying why he had wanted it. Cracking up, the short-haired brunette recalled Nick had said to her "Well, I dunno. I just think it's a good time for one, don't you?" The Coach's cute wife slapped her thigh and leaned forward, laughing hysterically, almost falling off her seat. Dixie, Lena and the Coach could not help but join her for her enthusiasm was contagious. When she recovered sufficiently, she resumed her tale.

"Well, it was after midnight for Pete's sake! And Little Nick wants a potato, a 'skinny' potato, no less! Ha! You had asked for a banana earlier, but we were all out. Shoot! Then when I gave it to you—"

"What, the banana or the potato?" asked Dixie.

"Well the potato, for cyrin' out loud! I just said we were out of bananas." She reached over and swiped the back of her hand at his knee. "So you asked for a potato, a skinny one ..." She laughed so hard that she doubled over in her chair again, moved to tears at the recollection. "And when I asked you why you wanted a potato, you said, 'it's, it's a-a—a good time' HA! HA! HA!—'for one, don't you think?' ... Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Then, when I gave you the darned thing, you cut it in half, lengthwise. When I asked why, you did that you said it was 'too big!'" She assumed another laughing jag.

The Coach held up his hands and shook his head at his wife's hysterics, but she talked on, undeterred.

"You see, it was only afterwards that we learned Little Nick, I mean you Nick wanted to stuff the potato up Matt Yikes' tailpipe," explained Mrs. Shaughnessy. "I mean the exhaust pipe to his car, that is. Ha! And it worked. Old Matt's car stopped all right, sputtering and coughing and him and his buddy—Amore had to push the thing along back out front here. Then you and Lena had been waiting and watching from up on the hill, up the street and you waved good-bye and took off. Ha! Ha! It was hilarious!"

The coach added that it wasn't too hilarious for Matt and Amore who, unfortunately, had ridden with Matt that evening. They told more stories on Little Nick throughout the evening with each one trying to top the other, usually successfully.

At the end of the evening, Coach Shaughnessy gave Dixie the name and phone number of the manager of the DC Printers. He explained he had found Dixie a spot on the Printers, which was *the* local amateur “Metropolitan Baseball League” team. Dixie would have to join the local chapter of the printer’s union, but for the ball players that was mostly a formality, a matter of signing some papers. He mentioned Mr. Gasch also helped out with the team and there were several former Pocomoke High players on the club. He assured Dixie these were guys Dixie had played with before and who would be happy to play ball with him again. Dixie thanked the coach and his wife for the evening and bid his hosts farewell.

Back on Dixie’s Honda, Lena coaxed Dixie to ride up under the power lines on the backside of the Coach’s development, as they had done that night a little more than five years ago, when they were baiting Matt and Amore. Then she directed him back up the coach’s street to the spot where she told him they had watched Matt, down the block, conk out in the car repeatedly, due to the potato blocking his exhaust pipe. She had not been able to see, because it was so dark. But Dixie, with his keen eyesight, had been able to see fine and he had described the comic events to her as if he were broadcasting a radio play-by-play. Dixie could relate to that, because he had very good night vision. However all this other stuff about this Little Nick character was totally foreign to him. Dixie knew he would never play a nasty trick on someone like that now. At least, he didn’t think he would.

Allena let him know that she wanted to relive that historic night as much as she possibly could, probably more for her own sake than for his, thought Dixie. Toward that end, she directed Dixie down to the Patio Center, his brother Ramon’s place of business. She warned him what lay ahead. Jock Henson lived on the place with his young family. As she had predicted, that Neanderthal emerged from his one-story, sandstone house in his boxer shorts with pistol in hand to stop them, just as he had five years ago. Allena intervened and explained who she was and who Nick was. The nearly toothless, thirty-something trucker, with dark hair, brows and wild, Siberian Husky, light blue eyes grabbed Dixie by the shoulders. He shocked Dixie by unexpectedly pulling Dixie towards him, almost pulling him off the bike. The wild-eyed man stared into Dixie’s peepers as if he were a man possessed. Then the guy had a *Eureka* moment.

“Little Nick Sheeboom! Be damned! Why, you’re the onliest bastard that’s got crazier eyes than me!” He clapped Dixie on the back to welcome him home. He brought out his wife and kids to greet “Little Nick” and Lena. Dixie learned that Ramon had told the Henson’s that Dixie was back, but they hadn’t believed it! Now, even these hillbillies told stories on him.

*Sheesh! It seemed everyone had a Little Nick story to tell.*

Allena explained that she and Nick had come down here to relive old memories. She had asked if she and Nicky could stick their feet in the Bilnor above ground display pool. Jock asked if they were going to go skinny dipping again and Allena said no that would be going too far, after all both Dixie and she were married, but to different people. Jill suggested loudly for Dixie to truly prompt his memory, he should go back

to the shed, strip and take a shower with the garden hose, as he used to do after work, before he used to go off to play ball. That's when her son little Frank would turn the water off, before Little Nick could rinse the soapy lather off himself. Then Nick, in his teenage birthday suit, would chase after Little Frank. Jill emphasized that was a Little Nick memory she had never forgotten and laughed, vibrating her protruding, little mama's belly.

Jock permitted Dixie and Allena to use the pool, but they were to remain quiet, because "I don' wanna hef ta do no 'xplainin' to no cops." Jock and Jill were happy to respect the young couple's privacy but told Dixie to come back around during the daytime, like a sane person, instead of in the dead of night like some "thievin' skulker." Dixie agreed.

Then he rode Allena around the lot to the display pool as his Honda's tires crunched over the gravel and dirt drive. The pool's swing down ladder was locked in the "up" position. Dixie boosted Allena up onto the deck, so she could climb over the low, metal pool railing. Then he followed her. She took off her sandals, panty hose and her scarf, before sitting down on the redwood deck by the edge of the pool to dangle her legs over the side into the cool water. Dixie observed that Allena had great looking, shapely legs, not unlike Ryz'n's. She invited Dixie to copy her, so he removed his boots and socks, rolled up his pants legs, sat beside her, dangling his hairy legs in the water also. The still, lukewarm water shimmered beneath pale moonlight shooting a soothing sensation up his legs to his loins. He lit up one of his Luckys. Allena laughed as she recalled their skinny-dipping episode and how old Jock and Jill had wanted to join them, but luckily, Little Nick had convinced them otherwise.

Her laughter trailed off as she thought about what had happened to both of them since then. She remarked wistfully that she had often wondered "what if." What if it had been she and Nick instead of her and Matt? Candidly and somewhat whimsically, she voiced her thoughts to him. Embarrassed, Dixie shrugged and smiled weakly.

"You don't remember a single thing I'm talking about, do you?" Again he shrugged. "Nick, you got one of those Luckys handy? Sure could go for one now."

He questioned her with a disapproving glance.

"I stopped smoking, you know, when I was pregnant, I mean, and I don't smoke around Little Matt, but ..." She licked her lips as Dixie handed her his smoking nail.

"Take this one." He handed her his cigarette. She took it, inhaled deeply and took her time to exhale.

"Ummmm. Simple personal pleasures like an occasional stiff drink, a quiet smoke, pistachio ice cream and a good screw, that's what it's all about." She caught the surprise in his eyes.

"Well, I, uh, didn't mean to put it quite in such blunt terms, but well, you know what I mean, don't you, Nicky?"

Dixie arched his brows and echoed doubtfully. "That's what it's all about?"

She nodded. "And I haven't had a good screw in a while, Nick." She spoke with hunger in her eyes. As she was about to speak further, Dixie cut her off when he reached across his body and hers to finger the short-chained, gold crucifix she wore on

her chest. He didn't know why he did that. But the gold crucifix looked identical to Ryz'n's. He had seen a lot of churches with a lot of crosses and while he wasn't fully sure of all the meaning behind the relic, he respected it nonetheless as a sacred symbol. Dixie repeated his previous question as if it was a statement, but again he did not know why he did it.

Miffed, Lena knocked his hand away and jumped up dripping water all over him and the redwood pool deck. Her hands shook as she dragged quickly but deeply on the cigarette. Dixie stood up with her, but she turned away from him. With an impressive right arm, the girl fired her cigarette butt onto the gravel and dirt driveway. She strode briskly over to grab the round, beige, top metal rail of the deck with both fists, pulling back and then pushing forward, rocking back and forth on her bare feet. He didn't know if she were fuming or crying. Dixie didn't know what to do. He walked behind her and stopped her rocking by taking hold of her upper arms just below her shoulders with his two strong, calloused hands.

"Look Lena, I didn't mean to upset ya. I'm sorry if I did ..." His tone was tender. His usually sandpaper-rough voice was gentle, without a tint of stuttering. "... But I just don't think that flimsy railing can take much more of that jerking." He mumbled this last observation. Suddenly, Lena spun around into him and kissed him with a passion of years gone by. Caught off guard, Dixie responded to her ardor. Not unlike Ryz'n, this girl knew how to kiss, too. These Maryland girls were something else. The thought, too, of the Michigander Moons passed through his brain like a lightning bolt. She had not kissed too badly, either, as he recalled their brief Smoky Mountain romantic rendezvous of a few nights ago. Just as quickly, his brain switched to an image of his wife kissing him in the hallway of his parent's house. He pushed off Allena.

"Ryz'n!" He whispered.

As Dixie broke off the embrace, Allena still had her eyes closed. "We better head home, now Lena." She opened her eyes slowly and laid her head against his chest.

"In a minute, OK, Nicky? In a minute."

Lena held him close with her arms tied tightly about his waist. She began to sob gently. Dixie petted the top of her head through her hair, rubbed her back, and told the melancholy girl everything would be all right. After several minutes of holding each other so close, they could feel the other's heartbeat regulated to his/her own. Lena chuckled at his mention of that fact. Sill grinning, she said she was ready to go now. Dixie draped his black leather motorcycle jacket around her and even zipped it up for her. Lena chided him for being a chauvinist. He explained that she would need that jacket when they got a few miles down the road. She kissed him on the cheek. Then Lena asked him to stop by Clairton Regional Park, as he had done five years before. She tied her colorful scarf back over head.

The pair rode about five miles north and west to reach the park off Drift Road. Once again, the couple had to sneak in the park around the heavily chained, yellow-painted, iron gate that closed across the park entrance road. Lena explained they had done the same thing five years earlier. She took him to the vale, which was surrounded by tall

shade trees between the day baseball field and the lighted softball field nearer to Drift Road. She explained they had camped here five years ago.

He remarked about the sweet scent in the air and asked if it was her perfume. She grinned and nixed that idea.

“Nah, it’s the honeysuckle. Can’t you see the vines growing on those shrubs over there?”

“Yeah, I sure do, those little white-yellow flowers.”

“Yeah, you got good eyes to see that. But then you always could see at night. Nope, I can’t see it but I sure can smell it. Here, wait a sec.”

The girl skipped away to the nearby bushes and tugged at the vine. She brought her treasure back to him. She handed him part of the vine that she had just torn off.

“The heat is killing them now. Usually, the blossoms are gone by this time of year. But we had a cool, late wet spring this year. You can see how these flowers are yellowing and withering now?”

“Yeah, yeah I see can that.”

“At their height, they’re pure white and real pungent. Here, watch me.”

Lena pulled off one of the larger, whiter flowers from the green stem, attaching it to the vine. Then she held it up to her lips as she would a trumpet. Dixie thought it kind of looked like a miniature trumpet.

“Now, what ya do is you stick the little flower stem between your teeth and suck on it with your tongue. Don’t clamp down too hard on the stem or you’ll cut off the nectar.” Then she smiled coyly, “You know what I mean, doncha Nick?”

“Yeah, Ryz’n showed me.” He grinned slyly at her and she pouted. He tried it and sure enough, that sweet nectar rolled over his tongue, like a breath of sweet air.

“Yeah,” he remarked with surprise. “Yeah, I got it.”

“Did ya, Baby?”

“Sure, sure I did.”

“I wouldn’t mind gettin’ a little myself, ya know?”

Nick played dumb. “OK, here!” He tore off another flower from the vine, she held in her hand and offered the blossom to her. She asked him to place the blossom in her mouth and he did. Then she sucked on it. She made quite a production of it.

“Pretty sweet, but not as sweet as it could be,” she moaned. “It ain’t quite like the real thing, not as good as it could be I mean. You know, *real* sweet.” She looked at him wantonly.

“Ah-hem! I th-th-think, we should sti-st-stick to the fa-flowers, we already ga-got. Know what I mean? *Baby?*”

She laughed lightly and agreed to his suggestion. They took turns sucking on the blossoms. When they had used up all the good blossoms left on the vine, she threw the vine aside and they sat down on a side of the shallow vale.

She told him about their brief romance some five years ago and all the circumstances surrounding it. The wistful Allena related how they spent the night there after the potato incident and their skinny-dip in the above ground display pool. She remarked causally that, then as now, she noticed he carried a sleeping bag on the back of his bike

out of habit and asked if they could spend the night together again, as they had five years ago. When Dixie hesitated, his former flame promised she would behave and, if she got out of line, they could just leave.

Dixie consented. Since he could not recall her, he had no real feelings for her, except for a bit of sympathy and a strong sense of physical attraction. He felt a little sorry for her marital problems, but he mainly hoped the pert cutie might yet spur some memories for him. He was forced to admit he did like her open, affable, quick-to-laugh personality. He figured they could use each other, mentally, that is. Besides, something about this girl really appealed to him. He believed he was on the verge of a breakthrough. He felt he was close to remembering her and, if he could recall her, then he could recall Ryz'n. This last was uppermost in his mind. Lena possessed the same wholesome, girl-next-door brand of sensuality exhibited by his wife. Dixie spread the sleeping bag out, allowing her to get in, while he laid in the grass, using his leather jacket to fend off the bugs, as best as he could. As a Marine, he was used to letting the bugs chew on him. Still, he didn't like it.

Noting his chivalrous behavior, Lena giggled. Pointing to the bag, she chimed, "Just like Sir Walter Raleigh spreading his cape for Queen Elizabeth, hey Nick?" Dixie shrugged and smiled lightly.

"Just seemed the right thing to do. 'Sides, I'm used to the bugs chewin' on my carcass."

"You know, you always were polite Nicky, if nothin' else, you were always polite. Ha! Oh you'd bang heck out of a girl if she wanted ya to, but you were always polite about it, both before and afterwards."

"Yeah? What about during?"

"*During?* Ha! During, you was a natural born world-shaker, just like they said in 'Cool Hand Luke', yessir—but always polite, Nick, always." She reached over by her head, plucked a long blade of grass, stuck it between her teeth and grinned broadly. Dixie smiled reluctantly.

"Why back then Nicky, you were larger than life and cuter than Bobby Sherman." She started to giggle.

"Whaddaya mean?"

Lena shook her head and her caramel hair rolled back and forth over shoulders. "Well," she gurgled some more. "There was the night we celebrated Pocomoke's baseball championship."

"What about it?"

"Ha! Well, you wanted to celebrate in style, so you invited me and four other girls to celebrate with you."

"You and four other girls?"

"Yeah. Can you believe it?"

"No, I sure can't? Was Ry one of 'em?"

"Oh, hell no! She was still dating Don. No, Ry wasn't one of them, though she wished she could have been. See, you were like larger than life back then, even though, physically you were just a squirt. I'm five-four and a half and I haven't grown a bit

## *Out at Home*

since the ninth grade. And back then, barefoot, we looked each other right in the eye. Ha!” Lena slapped her thigh. “Yeah, there was Corrine Carson, Tami Mancell, Terri Schieffer, DJ and me. You took us down to the Pall Mall in Georgetown in that super fine aqua Bonneville convertible you bought. We were all under age, but you sneaked us in somehow. I’m still not quite sure how you managed that feat.” She pondered a moment. “You made a song about it, ‘Bonafide’, do you know it?”

“Yeah, I think so. It’s on the tape I made.” She started to sing the popular tune, but Dix interrupted her before she could cut into the third verse. “Hey, tell me Lena. Were these girls, well, were they all as good lookin’ as you?”

“Good lookin’ as me? Shoot! They were better looking than me, all except DJ that is. I’m just kind of cute, that’s all. But those girls? Well . . .” Dixie shook his head again and she added, “But *I* was the one who got to sit next to ya all night, Baby.” She winked knowingly.

“That’s darned hard to believe Lena; I mean all those girls and all.”

“Well, like Ripley, you can believe it or not. I ain’t exactly chopped liver, ya know. Ha! But it’s true. You see Nicky, you were just . . . special. Yeah, that’s it, special. You had had that local hit record that winter and you had just won the baseball championship. You were, like I said, you were larger than life Nick and cuter than Bobby Sherman. All the girls wanted to be with you. And since you had just broken up with your last girlfriend, you were single and free.”

“So I needed five girls to replace her, hunh?”

“Ha! Yeah, I guess so. Yeah, we all had a ball that night. We ate and danced at the Pall Mall, rode up the GW Parkway, got loaded, stopped at a scenic overlook and danced to the car radio. Then, we turned around and rode back down the Parkway and crossed over the Memorial Bridge and parked along the Tidal Basin for a little turtle dovin’. We all took turns necking with ya, seeing which of us could steam you up the most. Ha! But then, everybody had to pee, cuz we had been drinking so much beer.” She winked. “Tami had bought the beer with her fake ID. Well, you took us to some low budget motel you knew about, down along Route 1 in Virginia over by the airport. We bought junk food out of vending machines and finished off the beer in an isolated room you got for us. We had a real party. We all got so loaded that the five of us girls voted in favor of playing strip poker. You were against it, but majority wins in a democracy. Well, we tricked ya into losing the card game and shedding your shorts. After that, the booze got to us and we all dropped off one by one. And there was no hanky-panky at all! Nope, not one bit. Ha!”

“No hanky-panky at all?”

“Nope, not that night anyway, none, unless ya count when we took turns neckin’ with ya when we parked over at the Tidal Basin.”

“Based on other tales I’ve heard about me, I find ‘no hanky-panky’ a bit hard to swallow. That set-up sounds as if it were made to order for a one-eyed cat, peepin’ in a seafood store, like it says in the old song!”

“Ha! Well, you got that right, Nick. But, as I said, you were always a perfect gentleman. Never did nothin’ the girls didn’t want. That’s why we loved ya so.”

“And all of ya, all five of ya, didn’t want to, to ...”

“Oh no. No! Sure, of course, we all *wanted* to, but none of us would let any of the others alone with ya. I think I slept with one eye open all night.”

“Unh-hunh. And then you tricked me into losing? How’d ya do that, I wonder?” asked Dixie bewildered.

“Well, we appealed to your high sense of chivalry Baby, which ran very deep in you, and we all played on it. As we were all in various stages of undress, we said you should close your eyes to finish out the game. Ha! And you did. Then we stacked the deck against ya. I think you knew it, but you played along. After all, it was five against one.”

“Oh, I see. You five girls took advantage of me?”

“Yeah, we did,” stated Lena proudly. “You were always such a good sport. You weren’t the macho type. That’s one more reason why we were all crazy about ya.”

“Then when I woke up the next morning, I found your note saying you had gone to deliver your newspapers and would be back for us as soon as possible. You had left us coffee and do-nuts for breakfast! Aw, you were always so sweet Nicky, and such a cutie. Why it was no wonder we all loved you so.” Allena took the blade of grass from her mouth and tickled his forehead with it.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Nick listened, chewing on a blade of grass of his own, while he rested his forearm on a bent right knee. “I can’t believe it,” he replied.

“Well, you better believe it, because it’s all true. Ha! I found out later from Dad that he had whacked you over the head with the newspaper you had delivered to him that morning. And he demanded to know where I was and if I was OK? While you confirmed our well-being, you wouldn’t divulge our location. You said the sooner you could finish delivering papers, the sooner you could get all of us home to all the concerned parents.”

Lena went silent in retrospection.

“And that was it?”

“Yeah, pretty much. You came back and got us and took each of us home. Ha! We were all hung over. And you had to deal with five irate fathers that morning! Ha! Well six, I guess if you include your own. You see the fathers of all of us girls had called your parents to complain about you!” Unable to contain her mirth, Lena broke out laughing uncontrollably. “You really caught Hell that day Nick! Oh! You were a trip, Nicky. You really were.”

He could not fathom dating five beautiful girls at once and spending the night together with all of them in a motel. While Lena calmed down and sniffed the soft, sweet scent of late spring honeysuckle, which floated like nectar upon the heavy night air, his thoughts turned strangely to the other night with Ryz’n. Lena brought him back to her and the present.

“But we didn’t always think of you like that, Nick, like some kind of Don Juan. No, not always.”

“Whaddaya mean?”

“Well, most everybody in school, me included, used to think you were a little light in the slippers.”

“Light in the slippers? What the heck does that mean?”

“You know, like you were light in the loafers, a bit funny, not funny ha-ha, but funny-strange, weird.”

“Well, that sure explains it. Shoot!” Nicked pulled grass and flicked it at her.

She chuckled and brushed the grass away.

“Aw, you know what I mean, Nicky. Shoot, you were prettier than ninety per cent of the girls in school. And you didn’t have any dark moustache then to cloak those striking, delicate features of yours. Shoot! You didn’t even shave then. I don’t believe you shaved a single whisker ‘til after you graduated. And then, your hands ...”

Suddenly embarrassed, Allena looked down at her hands and clasped them together, as if to hide them, much as her father had done earlier in the evening

“You mean my gestures were effeminate, or should I say *are* effeminate?”

“Oh no, Nick. Why, they aren’t near as bad now as they used to be ... Oh, I’m sorry, I, I didn’t mean to—”

“Aw fahgeddabouddit.”

“Well shoot! We all used to think it, until I found out first-hand, no pun intended (she giggled in spite of herself) that I was all wet and that you were all right, after all. You know how it is in high school with all the rumors and gossip. Talk is cheap when the story is good.”

“Yeah, guess that’s true everywhere. So *everybody* used to think that, hunh? Who is everybody? Ryz’n, too, I suppose.”

“Well no, not Ryz’n. No, no. She wasn’t even dating you then, but she couldn’t believe anything even remotely bad about her knight in shining armor, whom she admired from afar with unrequited love.” Lena leaned back with one hand over her heart and placed the back of her other hand against her forehead, opened her mouth wide with the blade of grass stuck to her upper lip, batted her eyelashes and sighed in a mocking fashion, before she resumed her explanation. “Ha! Oh no, not Ry! By everybody, I meant the social crowd, the football crowd that more or less ruled the school. Then too, there was Little Mau. She didn’t believe it either, but then she, uh, knew different, from first hand experience, just as I would learn later. Ha! Ha! You know, Maureen cold-cocked Matt once at a dance you were playing in the auditorium?” Dixie shot her a questioning glance. “Yep! She did. That was when you and Mau were going together, hot and heavy. Yeah, Matt made a snide remark about the fairy way you were dancing up on stage—oops! I’m sorry, Nicky.” Dix waved off her faux-pas.

“Kind of like being ‘a little light in the slippers,’ hey?” he joked.

Allena waved her blade of grass in the air.

“Ha! Ha! Yeah, exactly. You always had a good sense of humor, too, Nick, dry but good. You could always laugh at yourself. Yeah, Little Mau put Matt in his place that night and he deserved it, as he usually does, the sonovabitch.” She tossed her blade of grass in anger and picked up another, waving it in the air.

“Umm, smell that Nick? Gosh this is so much like the last time we were here with that overflowing scent of late season honeysuckle. And there’s all this clover and that magnolia over there is in full bloom. Oh, I just love these scents. Don’t you?” Again, she turned her naturally up-turned nose to the summer night and inhaled deeply. Dixie was still thinking of Ryz’n and did not reply. She reached out and tickled his chin with her freshly picked, long blade of grass.

“What?” He responded, perplexed.

“Don’t you smell that sweet honeysuckle, the clover and stuff? Aren’t you breathing in this sweet summer night air?” Dix growled in the driest tone he could muster.

“Well, what the hell do ya think I’m doin’?”

She laughed lightly and twirled her chewed blade of grass in front of his nose.

“What? Did I say something? Do you remember something?”

Dixie shook his head negatively and failed to suppress a chuckle. Then he looked away and took an exaggerated, deep breath.

“Oh *you!* She swatted him across the cheek with the blade of grass she held. Well, what is it? It *is* something. I can tell. Hope I, I didn’t upset you, Baby.”

*Baby?* He sighed. “No, no. I just recalled something, but from the other night with Ryz’n, not from five years ago.”

“Oh yes! I, I heard somethin’ about that.” Her tone was suddenly serious.

“You did?”

“Not much, but I am living next door to her folks right now, ya know? But you tell me about it, if it’ll make you feel any better. Go ahead Baby. I can help. I know your wife like the back of my hand. Trust me. We’ve lived side by side more or less since the summer of Sixty-Five.”

“You can help, hunh? You got two strong arms and you can help?”

“Ha! Sure me and Billy Swan. I can’t speak for him, but my arms get strong towing that little carrot-top around all day. So go ahead.”

Dixie smiled and sat up drawing his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms about them, hugging himself, as might a teenage girl about to spill the beans. He rocked a little forward and backward on his butt. She waited patiently, propped on her right elbow, chewing the blade of grass under the honeysuckle-sweet, Southern Maryland night sky. He spoke reticently. This was private stuff, but whom else could he turn to?

“Well, we were, we were about to go to bed and we were jes’ jokin’ around kind o’ sparrin’, verbal sparrin’, easy-fun-like, ya know, like we’re doin’ right now?” Nick looked at Allena, who smiled encouragingly at him.

“Yeah, you were flirtin’. A little verbal foreplay? Yeah, I get it. Though I don’t remember when I had any of it last. All I get, if I’m lucky, that is, is slam bam, thank you ma’am. But that’s my problem. G’head, I’m listenin’ to yours.”

Dixie glanced cock-eyed at her. He sympathized with her problems, but that’s as far as he’d go.

“Well, I don’t wanna make a big deal out of it, but ... Well, I guess I, I made a remark, a kind of a facetious remark, a bad joke, if you know what I mean, about her

figure, to ... I dunno, keep her from bein' conceited, I guess,. cuz she's got such a, such a great lookin' figure ya know ... I dunno. But I sure as shootin' screwed up! That's for sure!" Nick shrugged his shoulders in disgust and looked to Allena for understanding, which she rendered through her inquiring expression.

"So what was this remark, this bad joke?"

"Well, I said that her waist looked a little larger than it should, just jokin' though ya see? To keep her from bein' conceited, because she's beggin' me for compliments and her waist is like so perfect and so tiny and Bamm!! She takes off like a ruptured duck and I ain't seen her since."

Allena looked at him somewhat shocked. Then, she slapped her hip hard with the flat of her free hand and cackled, like Coach Shaunny's wife had earlier.

Perplexed, Dixie asked what was wrong, what was so funny. Allena pulled herself together and sat up, visibly shaking. A tear dripped out of her squinting, eyes. She reached towards him, placing a hand upon his right shoulder.

"Oh Nicky, Nicky. You stepped into one of Ry's booby traps." She laughed harder. *It was the booby trap I was tryin' to avoid that got me into this mess.*

"Just as you did when you caught your leg on that booby trap of a coffee table back home. OH? You didn't think I noticed? Hunh?" She raised her eyebrows. "Yeah, I noticed, but you didn't seem to mind, so I let it go."

"What? What do you mean—about Ryz'n? Forget the coffee table."

"Well, your wife is as well-intentioned and normally as easy going an individual as there is on this planet, *EXCEPT*, except there are a few things that will set her off like a Fourth of July fireworks display."

"Yeah, like what?"

"Well, you just told me one—her weight, her waist, her figure!" Lena placed her hand over her mouth as she laughed. "Ya see, Nicky, she was a bit chubby up into high school—until you came along, that is. You helped her lose weight and develop that terrific figure of hers." The girl stopped chuckling and gritted her teeth. "Too damn good now, damn near obscene, if you ask me, and well she knows, it too." Lena glanced darkly at Dixie. "Don't think she doesn't!"

"You're instincts were right on about that, Nicky. Yeah, I think she has gotten a little conceited, but Hell! In her shoes, I would have been much more so, I'm sure. She's all fussed, because, she's put on a few pounds and a couple of inches back around her waist since you left for the service. And she thinks you—" Lena began to convulse with laughter. Still holding her hand over her mouth, she brought her knees up to her chin. "She must have thought you noticed! A HA, HA! Can you believe that? How could you notice something as small as that when you can't even remember your own frickin' name? Ha!"

Not seeing the humor in that remark, Dixie admonished Lena.

"Well, she looked real fine to me, just fine."

Lena nodded with laughter. "That's the whole point. That's why it's so funny. She's gotten so conceited about her figure that she forgets you don't even remember what she looked like three years ago. And she sets great store by your opinion of her. Shoot!"

She worships the ground you walk on. Ya see another thing that sets her off is you—that is, anything that is spoken negatively about you. If anyone says anything against you or if she suspects another woman is trying to horn in on you, she'll jump right down her throat in a heartbeat. Believe me, I know. Before you left she was jealous as heck over any girl that you admired. Why, if she knew we were here alone like this now—Oooh Mann! She used to be jealous as heck over me! You know one time she tore my knee up somethin' fierce when she fired a softball at me? And all because I gave you a little congratulatory kiss after you had just helped us win a ballgame.” Lena's light brown eyes burned like coals at the memory.

“You know that *GRT* song ‘That Light Meant GO When It Turned Red?’”

“Yeah, I heard it. It's pretty good, kind o' long, but pretty rockin'.” Lena nodded and simpered knowingly.

“Yeah! Well, it's about you, me and Ryz'n. I was the one she hit with that softball!”

“You mean that was for real?”

“Darn right, it was real. Just like “Bonafide” was real. My knee was messed up for some time after that. Lucky I avoided surgery. You had to carry me out to the car to go to Prom. It still bothers me sometimes when it rains or snows.”

“Well, why were we kissing, then?”

“Oh, spit! Like I just said, it was just a little congratulatory peck for winning the last game, which assured us a winning season. That's all! I, er, me and Vicky, Vicky Vernier that is, were the scorekeeper and statistician. You all, the ball club I mean, had started really poor our senior year, and after winning the State the year before, well, it was quite a comedown, a disappointing senior season, to say the least. Fact was, we didn't have no pitchin' our senior year. But you rallied the others and turned things around Nick, helping us to finish just above five hundred. It was quite a feat actually, considering we didn't have any pitchin' to speak of.” She marveled and reflected.

“Yeah our pitchin' really sucked that year.”

“Anyway, that's how jealous Ry is when it comes to you. And when it comes to her figure—that you helped her forge—for you, of all people to say something negative about it ... Well, considering the strain she's been under lately, I guess it was just too much for her. She blew a gasket, I guess.” Dixie shook his head in disbelief.

“I can't believe that making such a poor joke, that it would affect her like that.”

“Well, you don't know Ryzanna then. Like I said she worships you. Although, since you've been gone, she has become her own woman. I give her that much.” Lena nodded with admiration. “She sure stood up to those dirty old Hollywood record moguls when they wanted her to, to, well to change *GRT*'s act. Of course, Halo Platters dropped their option with the band just a couple months ago. They didn't like Ryz'n's soft rock approach; even if that is all you hear on the radio today. Hmm! They wanted something different, something really rocking like you used to give 'em, Nick. Yeah, bet that's it. ‘What the people need is a way to make 'em smile. It ain't hard to do, if you know how'—ring any bells, hunh?” She giggled at her Doobie Brothers rip-off. “Well, it doesn't matter now. Ry's got some new talent out o' Baltimore and with you back—”

“Hold on there woman! I’m not with any band and I don’t intend to get up in front of a bunch of strangers and make a fool out of myself. Make sure you pass that on to any curious ears!” Dixie shook his head. “No way!” Lena’s jaw dropped. “Nope, not me,” he repeated. There was a moment of silence. A thought just occurred to him. Out of the blue, Dixie asked incredulously.

“Wait a minute. Are you saying she was skinnier then even than she is now?”

“What, hunh? Oh heck yeah. She looked like a walking skeleton, just shoulders, boobs and a bubblicious butt! You don’t remember when you first started going together. It was just after me and you broke up, as a matter of fact. That was the time that Ryz’n nearly starved herself to death. She had barricaded herself inside her bedroom for several days, over a fight with her father about you. Mr. Ryan, who can be a real trip, too, let me tell you—well you’ll find out, if you haven’t already. That’s where Ryz’n gets that Irish temper of hers, though she controls it pretty well, I must admit, except on certain issues, as I’ve explained. Well anyway, on this occasion, her dad had refused Ryz’n to see you. In fact, after four days of starving herself, you wound up breaking into Ryz’n’s bedroom through her bedroom window. You found her in a coma and she had messed all over herself. Anyway, you and Mrs. Ryan took her to the hospital where they revived her and fed her intravenously for a couple days. Actually, you saved her life. But that’s how strongly she felt about you and still does!”

“That’s incredible! I mean truly incredible. Why didn’t her family do something about it before Little Nick, I mean, er I, stepped in?”

“Well, the story is, her old man was so upset about the whole thing, he couldn’t bear to break into her room and force her to do anything. He figured she’d have to come out sooner or later to use the bathroom. He never figured she’d have the willpower to stay in there until it was nearly too late.”

“It’s the same silent, stubborn streak that helped her hold out for you these last few years. Believe me, she’s had a lot of offers, a lot of temptations, but except for—well ... she’s been very faithful. Don’t believe I could have been as faithful under the same circumstances. Say, I’m awful thirsty, Nick. Guess we’ll have to walk down to the water fountain for a drink.”

“No, I got my canteen right here. Nick walked over to his bike and, unscrewed the cap on the canteen, came back and offered her a swig. “Sorry, I don’t have a cup for you.” He shrugged.

“Yep, you’ve always been quite the gentleman, Nicky.” She smiled and slugged on the canteen, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand afterwards. Dixie took his turn and did likewise. The water was warm.

Lena recollected aloud about him, her, Ryz’n and Matt. She talked his ear off. She told Dixie how she and he had both chased a foul ball right over there, along and outside the fence that ran parallel to the day baseball field’s right field foul line. She had arrived at the ball first. They had fought playfully over the ball and in playing over it; Nick had grabbed her and kissed her passionately right in front of the whole team, which was taking BP out on the field. Matt, her present husband, who was her boyfriend at the time, had become livid. “There were sparks between us,” she assured

him. “Yessir, there were. And after we kissed, I didn’t even realize you had removed the ball from my hand. After the game, when we got back to Pocomoke, you and Matt fought over her out behind the school. Dixie was astonished when she advised him that he had put Matt in the hospital. Her casual explanation for that unbelievable occurrence was simple: “You knew some kind of karate stuff that you had learned at the Boy’s Club.” That was all she said, dismissing the whole thing with a flick of her hand. “Anyway Matt deserved it, just like he does now. He can be such a, a creep!”

“Was this before or after the potato incident?”

“Before.”

“No wonder your husband wanted to take you home, or follow us home, after the Coach’s party!”

“Well, there were some deep, sub-surface fissures in our relationship before that. Trust me! But I’d have to admit you were the dynamite that cracked the whole thing wide open.”

Then she confessed to Dixie her suspicions about her philandering husband. Dixie listened sympathetically. He did not mind, but he told her she should not be hoping that he would put Matt in his place again as he had back when. Eventually, he tuned her out and drifted off to sleep, but his dreams were filled with the tales she had told.

Dawn had broken by the time Dixie woke up something after five a.m. He stepped into the nearby woods to relieve himself. When he returned, Dixie stood over Lena looking down at the girl with the turned-up nose and the curved eyebrows. He smiled to himself and squatted down next to her. She lay sleeping near the crest of the rise on one side of the vale, a well chewed blade of grass nearly falling from her lower lip. His feet were below her, his head above. She looked like an angel. He brushed her cheek lightly with the back of his fingers causing her to stir. When she recognized him, Lena smiled and stretched, planting a sprightly kiss on his mouth, surprising him with her decent morning breath.

*Must be remnants of that honeysuckle nectar.*

“Good morning, Nicky. Just like old times, well almost anyway.” Then she giggled.

“That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it?” asked Dixie. “Relive old times?”

“Well, as close as we could get anyway, given our, uh, chaste circumstances.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Well, five years ago, we shared the sleeping bag and got to know each other better.”

“Yeah? How much better?”

“Oh, ‘bout as good as you can in a sleeping bag.” She grinned. “We got to know each other better a few times that night.”

“I see. So I short-changed ya last night, hunh?”

“Well, let’s just say, that under the circumstances, I’m only a little disappointed. Say! You gonna take me to IHOP for breakfast now, like ya did before, yes?” He grinned, shaking his head.

“Sure, if ya want.”

“I want. My stomach’s growlin’ somethin’ fierce.”

“Let’s go.”

## *Out at Home*

“Let’s make a move, Baby. That’s what you always used to say, Nicky. And brother, you sure made some, let me tell ya. I’m gonna make one right now. Back in a minute.”

She tied her scarf on her head and hopped into the nearby woods to take care of business. When she returned, he gave her his leather jacket again and she directed him to the IHOP off St. Bartholomew Road back in the Heights, which was open round the clock. As they ate, Lena described how she kept getting sick the last time they were there and how she had believed she was pregnant. The young woman cracked up remembering the expression on Nick’s face, when he thought that he had been the father. When Dixie asked sincerely, if he had been, she laughed all the harder because she claimed he featured that same, stupid, deer-caught-in-the-headlights expression she claimed he had evinced five years previous.

Noting the irony of the situation, she laughed so hard, she cried. When she finally calmed down, the giggling Lena reassured him now, as she had then. “No” he had not been the father and his sireship would have been an impossibility given the extent and timing of their previous amorous liaisons. She repeated that it had not been he. However, she noted with all sincerity how admirably chivalrous it had been of him to have offered to marry her at the time. Lena became deadly serious, as she reached across the table to place her hand over his. She swore that she had never forgotten his earnest offer right across this table and had often wondered how her life would have been, had she accepted. “That’s why I said Mikey and me, too, could have been yours—ours.” She patted his hand, became silent and slowly removed her small, soft hand from his. Once again, she turned aside and her mind wandered off into some deep, distant place Dixie could not fathom. He called for the check.

They rode Dixie’s Honda 750 the couple of miles back to her parents’ house. He walked her to the door. Dixie could see the paperboy had delivered the Larrabee’s “Post” and told Lena her Dad would be happy. She chuckled.

“Nicky, you always could make me laugh or pay me some honest compliment that would pick me up and lift me out of my doldrums. You sure had a way about you.” She loosed her scarf and shook her lengthy caramel-colored hair out.

That unconscious, natural act spurred something in his nether regions. This girl has an unassuming, natural charm that moved him.

“Well, it’s easy to give compliments to a wonderful woman like you Lena, and I don’t just say that about all the girls I sleep with.” He laughed and she joined him. He waited for her to go in, but she did not. She calmed down and searched his eyes. Then she took off his jacket and handed it back to him.

“I’m sorry, Nicky. I mean that I couldn’t help you to remember. I did just everything, well ... almost, everything I could and even if I had done *EVERYTHING*, it wouldn’t have helped either of us, well maybe for the moment, maybe. But the long term results would have been disastrous—no matter *what* Matt *is* doing now. That Bastard! But you knew that already, didn’t you? Without me having to tell you?”

“Well, I know that cross you wear on your chest means something to you that maybe you don’t realize right now, something more important than the whim of the moment. Ryz’n has one like it, too. I guess it’s a popular item. But I’m sure if you pray and then

talk to your husband, you can work things out. You've got a wonderful little guy there to raise, I think it'll be better for him if he's got both his mom and his pop to help him along the way, don't you?"

Lena nodded sadly. She opened the screen door and unlocked the front door, pushing it ajar. Then she turned back to him.

"You were always smart Nicky, always *so* smart. Like you were always a few steps ahead of the rest of us kids, ya know? We just didn't realize it then because you did such weird and crazy things sometimes. Yeah, we didn't realize it, 'til you had that first national hit record. But now, you've really grown up. Ryz'n is one lucky girl, though I wouldn't have traded places with her these last three years, not for anything. Ry went through Hell over you, Nick! We all did, I guess, in our own ways. See, as crazy and talented as you were, you were one of us, a Pocomoke Warrior, a resident of The Heights ... and we hoped for you and we hurt for you, too ..." Once more, her voice trailed off. Then she smacked the doorframe smartly.

"Ry should be happy now. She deserves some happiness after all the crap she's been through. Tell her I said 'hello', but *please* don't tell her about this. I mean our, about our, our date?" She seemed baffled as to exactly how to term their liaison. "You let me do that, Nicky. Lena arched her brows, in hopes he would concur. "You see, me and Ry go way back, before you even. This crucifix you mentioned—" Lena fingered the medal against her breastbone—"is exactly like Ryz'n's, a short chain, the crucifix sets right beneath my collarbone. Yup, just like Ry's. Our moms went together and bought them for us for our confirmation in eighth grade. Ya see, me and Ry have a lot in common."

The youthful Mrs. Yikes smiled sweetly. Then, she rose on her toes, again catching him off guard. She reached her arms about his neck, trailing the scarf over his back to deliver another impassioned, strong, wet embrace to Dixie, as she had kissed him last night by the pool. Before he realized it, her tongue had slipped halfway over his. Dixie's arousal was noticeable to both of them, as Lena forced her loins up against his. Dixie pulled back from her mouth a few inches. She opened her eyes this time to peer into his.

"I could have loved you so easily, Nicky. I think I did."

She let go of him to caress his right cheek with her left hand. She smiled wanly and her eyes moistened. Then she stepped back through the doorway and disappeared inside the house without saying goodbye or turning back.