

As the second storm of the night swept over her parents' resort home in Kill Devil Hills, Ryz'n was conversing with her God. Self-sentenced to her solitary bedroom for the night and crying heavily, she was completely distraught. Nicky had not shown up for her birthday. Between heavy sobs, she chastised herself for not staying home with him and for listening to her mother's suggestion to come down here to The Banks, instead. Ryz'n had berated her mother earlier in the evening for her part in the fiasco. Ryz'n had also berated herself for accidentally leaving the phone off the hook, which Bryson had discovered only this morning and much to her chagrin. To a lesser extent, she begrudged Sheena and Bryson their joy in love, which they always seemed to have, because they were always together. And *this* was supposed to have been Ryz'n's big day. Earlier, she had found some little solace in her friend Barb's great compassion. However, right now, Ryz'n was alone in her room with the door shut, crying heavily because all she could do was weep. She wanted to sob uncontrollably now as hard as she had cried when she was a child. And she did. She wept.

Startled, she rose up on her elbows. Ry thought she had heard a knock on her door. As she listened, her sobbing throttled down. There was another, a louder knock.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Baby—your old man."

*Dad?* "Yes, what do you want?" Ryz'n sniffled and dabbed at her eyes and runny nose with a handy Kleenex.

"I'd like to come in and talk with you for a minute, Pumpkin."

*Pumpkin?* Her dad had not called her "Pumpkin" since, since, well yeah, since Nick. Instead, he had treated her more as if she were a Jack o' Lantern than a pumpkin.

"Well, well all right, just a second, please." She needed to gather herself to look presentable.

She had been lying on her stomach on top of her bed wearing nothing but her favorite piece of sleepwear, one of Nick's old American Legion baseball inner shirts. The short sleeve shirt was mostly white cotton, but was ribbed throughout with silk, which gave the shirt a shimmering look and a soft feel that she cherished. The shoulders and short sleeves were green, while the rest of the shirt was a silvery white. The shirt held one button and a loop to close the four-inch hem at the top. Nicky had never buttoned the shirt when he played, imitating the big leaguers in the Show. She did not button it either imitating him, yet invariably revealing some cleavage. Now, she buttoned up and turned down the covers, so she could pull the sheet over her. Nicky's size "large" shirt had shrunk some, barely covering all of Ryz'n's bountiful assets, but the sheets took care of the rest. Once she was sufficiently covered, Ryz'n bid her father enter.

Her dad opened the unlocked door and entered cautiously. He flicked on the light switch, causing Ryz'n to throw her left hand and forearm over her face to shield her eyes from the light. Mr. Ryan glanced about and quickly turned the light off.

"Sorry, Pumpkin. Had to make sure there were no land mines from here to you."

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Ryz'n was a neat freak. She figured her father must have been thinking of Sheena and her messy ways. *Have Dad and I grown so far apart that he does not know my habits from Sheena's?* Her dad walked across the room and sat down on the side of the bed beside her. Ry lay on her back with her head propped up by a couple of pillows.

"Why don't you tell me what's upsetting you, dear?" He forced a sympathetic smile. She could see he was making an honest effort here, so she played along, the little girl role she used to play so long ago, hoping it would smooth the way.

"Oh Daddy, it's just so terrible."

"What is, Baby?"

"Me and Nicky!"

Nicky had always been the core of discontent between her father and her. Her original desires for Nick had distanced her from her dad so long ago. She wondered now if she and her Dad could productively broach that sensitive topic, because they had never been able to do so previously.

"I see, yes. Well, you have had some really tough breaks lately, Baby, but things will work out for the best. They usually do. You'll see." He patted her thigh reassuringly.

His sympathetic tone persuaded her. She felt she could talk to him about Nick now. It shocked and surprised her at how quickly everything spilled out of her in such rapid-fire succession to the man with whom she never spoke regarding any matter of her heart.

"I know Daddy and some of it, well, a lot of it, is my fault. You see since he came back, I've behaved like a, well like a basket case. I never should have come down here without him. I've taken more time away from the band than I should have, too. And now I've wasted my short time with Nicky. We've got that new guitarist who we have to work in. He's good, but he hasn't played with us, not on stage. We've got almost two dozen Top 40 songs to work into our sets. You know we haven't played the club circuit since, well, since Nicky left. We were only playing our own stuff on tour when we were touring for Halo. And if I'm putting my time in with the band, I'm not putting it in with Nick and I'm afraid I might lose him." She hesitated to sniffle until she snatched another Kleenex from the box on the bed beside her. Her father listened without comment, but nodded his head in sympathy.

"I love him so Daddy, and now I'll have to ignore him for a while. I've signed contracts, you know. These club owners are counting on GRT. Many of them, like Mr. Rowdy and Giovanni Gusti, are people who took a chance on us when we first started out. I wanna give back to them a little, you know?"

"That's the way I'd hope you feel, Ry. You've always had a good heart, like when you took in that stray, one-eyed cat down at Warner-Robbins. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember." She nodded, and reflected that the tabby cat was a fighter, too.

"And being Barbara's friend when no else would? You have always had compassion for those who were in need or different, like Nicholas for that matter. I've often thought it appropriate that you ask St. Brigid to intercede in prayer in your behalf more

often than the Holy Mother. Because there is no cause more unique, or in need, or lost than that of Nick Sheeboom.”

*Oh-Oh!* Here it comes, thought Ryz’n.

“Now Daddy, don’t start.” He patted her forearm gently.

“OK, Baby. Mea culpa. Now can’t you have Nick come to your jam sessions or whatever you call them? He might want to even play with the band, like old times. That would be sensational, wouldn’t it?”

“Oh Daddy, he can’t do that. He’s not ready for that yet. But ...”

“But what, Pumpkin?”

“Well, I don’t even know where he is right now. He could be hurt or he could be ...”

“Could be? What’s really troubling you Honey?”

Ryz’n began to tear up and she leaned forward to hug her father, who placed a comforting arm about her. Between sobs, she confessed that Dixie had spent the night with Allena Yikes on Friday, after Allena had taken Ryz’n’s place with Nick at the coach’s cookout. She sobbed for a few minutes in her father’s arms. When she finally blew her nose on some Kleenex and leaned back against her pillows wiping the tears so they would not stream backward into her ears, her father spoke.

“Look Baby, you know that Lena never had a lick of sense and that Nicky has always had two heads. You knew that when you married him, over my protests I must add.” He spoke softly, smiling wistfully, to soften his criticism of his son-in-law.

“Two heads? What do you mean by two heads?”

“You know, Baby. Nicky’s always had two heads. One rests on his neck and the other resides below his belt. There’s always been a war between the two for control over him. When he married you Honey, you could reason with the one head and you had your own means of controlling the other. I was surprised, but things were actually working out between you two before he left for the service. But now ...”

“What about now?” Ryz’n sat up wide-eyed and alert.

Alarmed, she sat up straight, studying her father closely. Her father sighed.

“Well, now he’s lost his mind. He’s lost his governor. There’s nothing for his lower head to battle with. There’s no telling who he’s been with or how many. Your private investigators overseas found a couple, right? How many more do you think there were? You remember how he was before he met you.”

Ryz’n turned her gaze away to the window, as she recalled Nicky’s many consorts before she had snagged him.

“Your mother says you and Nicky haven’t, er, uh, consummated your reunion yet—well, maybe that’s good, Honey. Because he should have a thorough medical exam first and make sure he uses protection, be—”

“Stop! Stop! How can you say such things about my husband? *My* husband, Father! What kind of a person do you think he is? He hasn’t lost his mind, just his memory. Besides, Nicky got ‘saved’, according to the Pentecostals, after that car accident that nearly killed us both. The Holy Spirit lives inside of him as He lives inside of us. The Spirit wouldn’t allow Nicky to just go off half-cocked like that. (Ryz’n thought that was poor choice of words, but she persevered as though she had said nothing amiss.)

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You know, yes, I did some checking on Nicky too, with my private eye back here, after Nicky went overseas. And in high school Nick never, no not once, was he ever untrue to a girl that he was dating, even though all those rumors floated around school about him. And you know how talk is cheap when the story is juicy.”

“Look Honey, I’m your Father. Sometimes I have to point out unpleasant facts to help you see everything clearly, you know, to see the bigger picture? For your sake Pumpkin, I hope everything you said is true and I am wrong. However, it pays to be safe. Have the boy checked out to protect yourself. It’s a small thing to ask him, but it could prevent a lot of pain and suffering for everyone, may even save your life. And if he cares for you at all, it will be no trouble to him.” Ryz’n shook her head in disbelief.

“This is why you came into speak with me, Father? This is what was on your mind?”

“Well, not exactly. I hoped to cheer you up. I don’t like to see you so depressed, Ryzanna, but I guess I put my foot in my mouth again. That was not my intention. You shouldn’t worry, Baby. Nick has been wounded what three-four times? He has made a miraculous escape and found his way back to you even though he’s lost his mi—I mean memory. Surely, he can make it down here from O.C., OK. Don’t worry about that.”

“But I’m wondering if he even tried. Don’t you see? Maybe he went back to Lena?” Ryz’n started to sob again.

“Oh Baby. There, there.” Ryz’n’s dad took her in his arms and hugged her long. Initially rigid, Ryz’n relaxed and allowed her father to comfort her.

A gust of wind blew through the open sash window as a crash of thunder heralded another storm. The rain began pelting down and the lightning flashed. Mr. Ryan got up to shut the window, as sheets of rain blew through the flying frilly, light cotton curtains.

“Another storm. Good night to be thankful for four strong walls and a roof over our heads, right Pumpkin?”

“Good for us. But what if Nicky’s out in this storm?”

“Come now, Honey. Even a dog, I mean, even Nicholas has got sense enough to come in out of the rain.” He kissed her good night on the forehead. “Your mother and I will be gone before you get up in the morning. Got to get back to work, you know. Now don’t forget to clean up and lock up before you leave. You know what needs to be done for the agency. And let us know where you are and when you leave and get home. And, oh yes, let us know if you hear anything from Nicholas, OK, Pumpkin?”

“OK, Daddy.”

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But Dixie had not come in out of the rain. In fact, he was stuck without a ride right out in the middle of nowhere on the East Carolina shore, halfway between the hamlets of Coinjock and Grandy. Hitching along Route 158, he shivered under a driving downpour, hoping for a ride to take him to the Banks. One fiasco after another that day had forced him to miss his Ryz’n’s twenty-second birthday. He knew she would be ticked and hoped she would not hold a grudge against him. After all, it was not as if he had not tried to get there. Rain drenched through his clothes and water dripped into his

ears and down his face and neck. He huddled for scant protection against the foundation of a billboard, which ironically enough, was advertising the sale of comfortable, new homes on the Outer Banks. An isolated car zoomed past him down the virgin highway, ignoring his outstretched thumb. Dejected, Dixie watched as the vehicle passed unimpeded. Cold, wet pellets fired down upon him, actually stinging his skin. He had no sooner turned his head back around than he heard a loud crack, like a nearby rifle shot. Looking back down the highway, Dixie saw the car veer wildly to the right and heard that sickening, tire-squealing highway sound. The driver tried to hold the vehicle on the road, but failed. There was not much of a shoulder, just flat, mostly open ground. The vehicle halted abruptly when it ran into a pine tree a few hundred yards away.

The tire must have blown out, thought Dixie. At least, that is how it had sounded. He was the only one around to help. Two flats in one night with two different vehicles? *You gotta be kidding me!* Toting his sea bag across his back, Dixie left his makeshift lean-to to run down the road against the wind-driven rain. He squinted, leaning into the stinging downpour as soaked bands of hair pressed against his forehead. The car remained motionless, but the lights were still on. As Dixie approached, he could hear the motor running and saw the vehicle spewing exhaust. It was a muscle car, a black-over-red Chevelle Super Sport, looked to be a 1972 model, similar to the one Lori had owned over in Honolulu. Those bad boys could really fly!

Dixie approached the driver's side cautiously. Someone lay drooped over the steering wheel. This was bad. Dixie said a quick prayer that the person was alive. He opened the door with sheets of wind-blown rain driving down and sideways against the car. A young, blond-haired woman slumped over the steering wheel. She faced towards him. Dixie saw no blood. However, he did notice the windshield was cracked but not broken through, as if her head had struck it. The car was running, but somehow the transmission had been knocked into neutral. Her foot was off the gas, but she was not going anywhere with that pine tree in front of her. She was not wearing her seat belt. Without touching her, Dixie flicked rain water onto her face for about half a minute. The pale girl roused, turned to him and promptly vomited at his feet. Dixie knocked back against the inside of the opened driver's door, stepping back into a puddle to avoid her waste, but too late. His soaked feet fully caught her signature greeting.

Gees' o' flips, thought Dixie. He hoped Ryz'n's birthday would end soon. He was not sure he could take much more of this celebration and good cheer. The stunned woman sat back, and laid her head across the front of the seat back between the headrest and the frame of the open door. Rain blew in against her face. Dixie gave her a minute to collect herself. He found a puddle deep enough to wash her vomit from his shoes. When she stirred behind him, Dix reached around the steering wheel to turn off the ignition, but the girl rolled her head towards him. He backed off.

"Gee, I'm sorry, Mister. I'm so sorry."

"Anh, it's all right. I didn't much care for them shoes, anyway." When he laughed, the rain poured down upon his face, running into his mouth in streaming rivulets.

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She forced a weak smile, as her head slipped off the edge of the seat back. Dixie caught it and placed her back straight against the headrest. The girl winced as her blond locks fell across her face. Dixie pulled them aside. Apart from the two of them, the highway was lifeless and there were no buildings around. They were alone. She coughed. Dixie stepped back, fearing a repeat vomit.

The blonde smiled weakly. “No, I’m not gonna do that to ya again, Mister. You’re OK ... for now, anyway.” She had blue eyes and wide, sandy brown eyebrows.

“You hurt anywhere else besides your head?” The blonde groped over her body, spending several seconds prodding and caressing her belly with her hands. She looked upward and whispered, “Thank you.” Then she raised her head and stretched her legs.

*That’s a good sign, a very good sign!*

Then relieved, she looked at Dixie. “No, no. It’s just that my head hurts bad, real bad. But I’m all right. We’re both all right, praise God.”

“Lemme take a look.” Dixie took her head in his hands and she complied by pointing out the injured spot. By the dome light, he could make out a large bump forming in the center of the crown of her head. There was some swelling and a little blood, but nothing to be concerned about.

“I got some aspirin in my sea bag, if, if you think you could handle it.”

“Thanks so much, but I don’t think I should be shoving aspirin into my stomach just now, maybe later. But thank you all the same.”

“Yeah, I hear ya.”

Dixie stood in the rain, with thunder and lightning all around wondering just how all right she truly was. You could never tell with head injuries. He sure wished there was some sign of life around here. Having failed to flip off the running car engine earlier, he reached across her now and turned off the ignition. Then he stood upright in the downpour. If he could fix her car, he could take her somewhere for help.

“Hmm.” He yelled so she could hear him over the storm. “Sounded like you had a blow-out, Miss.”

“Yes, yes that must have been it. Couldn’t control her. Fortunately, the Lord could.”

*The Lord?* “Yeah, right. Hey! Lemme take a look at things. You be OK for a minute?” Dixie asked with genuine concern. She nodded and winced.

When he started to shut the door, she asked him to roll down the window some. She needed the air. He complied and closed her door softly. Then he shuffled around to the front side of the car, leaving his sea bag on the car roof and purposefully dragging his feet through every puddle he could find, and there were many, in an effort to wash the vomit completely from his Adidas. He figured that she sure had eaten well that night. He forced himself to sniff upward into the rain-washed air, lest he get sick himself. Then he checked out the car.

Fortunately, the pine she had smashed into was not very big, maybe ten feet high. The force of the car had kind of uprooted it and knocked the tree backwards a bit, snapping off some boughs in the process. The mangled bumper stuck to the frame somehow. The collision had smashed in the driver’s side front grill, as well as the driver’s side front headlight. With great difficulty, Dixie reached across some tree

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branches and lifted the partially propped hood. The radiator was OK. The frame appeared to be bent just a hair back into the battery casing or maybe it was the other way around. Dix stepped back away from the side of the car toward the road and asked her to try to start it up.

The car started OK. He signaled her to cut the engine. She complied and slumped back against the seat as if that simple act had consumed all her energy. The engine seemed to work without a problem. He stepped back to the car to shut the hood, but could not snag the latch because the hook to the latch was bent backward. *Dammit!* Dixie placed his sea bag on the hood temporarily to hold it down. The rain was just pummeling him and he could not afford to have all that rainwater blowing all under the hood. Then he walked around the passenger side checking out the tires as he went. He saw it. The right rear tire had a hole the size of a golf ball near the rim. "Good thing it was the rear and not the front tire," observed Dixie to himself. "She'd never have held her for as long as she did." He got up resignedly and knocked on the front passenger door window. The driving rain plastered him relentlessly. The girl leaned shakily across the seat to unlock the passenger door for him. She managed to unlatch it for him. Then he sat down in the bench seat next to her and closed the door behind him. He tried to sound hopeful.

"Whew! Rough night!" he exhaled grandly. "Glad it's June and not January." He slapped the rain off his face and squeezed his hands over and through his rain-drenched mane.

"Yes, we have much to be thankful for," admitted the girl.

Dixie thought hers to be a curious response, given their circumstances.

"My name's Nicholas, but I go by Dixie." Dixie smiled and offered her his hand. She returned the smile and feebly took his hand.

"Oh my goodness, your hand is freezing," she noted.

"Well, that rain comes from the upper atmosphere, Miss. It's plenty cold up there and I've been out in it a while."

"But why?"

"I'm lookin' for a ride to Kill Devil Hills."

"Well, Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ has answered your prayer."

"Really? How did you know I was praying back there?"

"I didn't, but *He* did. And He's answered my prayer, too."

"Oh, how's that?"

"Well, I prayed He'd help me get home safely on this awesome, stormy night and He's brought you to help me. He had you waiting for me like a guardian angel, you see?"

"He had *me* waiting out in this weather for *you* to come along, just so *I* could help *you*? Well, pardon me for mentioning it Miss, but if you had stopped for me back there, maybe we wouldn't be in this predicament now." Dixie smiled as kindly he could under the circumstances.

"Unh-hunh. Well, I suppose so, but I was running late, and well, you're right I really should have stopped. I was thinking about it and then Bam! Well, the Lord has

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worked my mistake to our mutual good. Because now you are my guardian angel tonight and I guess I'm yours."

"He has, hunh? Just, how do you figure that?"

"Well, I can help you, too."

"You, help me?"

"Sure, with a ride."

"Unh hunh. And where do you live?"

"Kill Devil Hills."

Dixie was stunned. "No kiddin'? Cuz that's where I'm headed." Dixie was pleasantly surprised, as she grinned. "The Lord moves in mysterious ways, I guess, don't He, Miss?"

"He most certainly does, Mr. Dixie. Our God is an awesome God."

"Well, I hope He can help us get that tire fixed and lock your hood down, once the storm passes, otherwise we could have problems."

"Oh, I think He can manage that. Let's pray for it."

Before he knew it, she had taken hold of Dixie's cold, wet hand in hers and proceeded to pray. Dixie bowed his head and concurred with "Amen" when she stopped.

They talked as the storm front moved through. The girl said she was from Philadelphia. Her name was Dorothy Cavendish. She had come down to the Banks for vacation after her senior year of high school and never went back home. She had met a local boy, whose parents owned a diner type of restaurant in Kill Devil Hills. She fell in love and married the boy. Then he joined the Navy for the educational benefits. He was on sea duty now over in the Mediterranean. She was almost six months pregnant with their first and proud of it. Dixie listened with interest, as she talked about her faith. She and her husband worshipped at the Assembly of God Church back near Coinjock. She had just come from an evening service back up the road. The Spirit had been upon the congregation mightily this evening. She claimed many had spoken in tongues and the praise and worship music far exceeded the normally allotted service hours. That's why she was late getting home.

The storm lulled. Dorothy apologized for monopolizing the conversation, but Dixie assured her that he had enjoyed listening to her. That compliment drew a big smile across her flushed face. He wondered what she had meant by "speaking in tongues" but he had decided not to question her about it. He might get more information than he wanted, because, once she got to talking, that little woman did not let up, kind of like this storm, which had picked up again. He guessed that was a good sign though, showed her head was all right, but you could never tell with head injuries. When the storm paused, he asked her for the car keys so he could open the trunk to get at the spare. As he stepped out of the Super Sport, Dix ruminated on his circumstances.

*Two flat tires inside of four hours, was this real or was he dreaming all of this? His wife's birthday? Sheesh! If he was dreaming, then why did he still smell Dorothy's puke rising from his shoe tops?*

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No, this was more like a nightmare. Of course, he was danged cold and wet, soaked through wet. He wondered if this would qualify as a wet dream. That was rather a weak joke, but he chuckled to himself nonetheless. Given his situation, Dixie thought chuckling was better than cursing or crying.

*What a day! What a night!*

That phony preacher man had attacked him that morning. Then the cop had picked him up in the afternoon and now, two flats in one night. Sheesh! He heard that similar events often occurred in threes and that the “third time was the charm.” He sure hoped that was not true now. Besides, similar events usually occurred to him in pairs, like this tire thing here. *Well, we’ll see.*

As he worked replacing the flat tire, he darned if Dixie did not have trouble with one lug nut that just would not break free. Exasperated, Dix returned to Dorothy in defeat and explained the problem.

“Oh, dear.” Her wide, sandy brown brows furrowed. “There’s only one thing to do.”

She bid him sit right next to her again, turned into him and took each of his hands in each of hers. Then, with her eyes closed shut, she prayed for deliverance. When she was done, she thanked God for answering her prayer. She urged Dixie to try once again to remove the lug nut. Dixie looked at her askance, but he got out and walked back to the rear tire, half expecting to find the lug nut lying on the ground. It wasn’t. In fact, the thing had not budged and he still could not budge it. He cursed. So much for that sweet prayer, he thought. Dixie stood with the tire iron in his hand. He felt like chucking it as far as he could. Instead, he petulantly thrust it into the rear of the opened trunk. The tire iron clanked against something, something metallic but the noise was muffled. He looked in the trunk, lifted up the flap of a blanket and found one of those cross tire irons.

He took the cross tire iron out of the trunk and tried it on the recalcitrant lug. The cross tire iron allowed him to distribute pressure more evenly, as well as exert it more forcefully, by jerking down with his left hand and pulling up with his right simultaneously. *Two flats in one night? Two? Geeze! This could not be happenin’. No way! And this couldn’t be puke he was smellin’ risin’ from his feet either and this couldn’t be a storm drenchin’ him to the bone. No, it was all a big frickin’ nightmare, with a pregnant teen angel in it no less. Sheeze!* He jerked on the tire iron again and darn if the nut did not break free. However, the thing broke so cleanly free that it surprised him, giving way suddenly and causing him to lose his balance. He fell forward and to his left, striking his head rudely against the edge of the fender above the wheel. “Shee-ittt!” Dixie cursed as he jacked up the car a little more to clear the ground. Then he pulled the blow-out off the rim and replaced it with the spare. Then, cursing his general bad luck, he lowered the car and put everything back in its place in the trunk.

Dorothy had been resting her throbbing head against the seatback and door, as she laid her body out across the front seat. When he told her he had fixed the tire, she bid him sit down next to her again, as he had once before. She made room on the front seat and she prayed with him once more, this time in thanksgiving. Dixie explained that

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there was no divine intervention for what had transpired. He said he just happened to find the other tire iron by accident.

“Just happened to find it, by accident?” Dorothy questioned.

“Well, yeah. I got pis—I mean, ticked off. And I threw the other tire iron in the trunk. I heard it clang against something under a blanket, which turned out to be the cross tire iron we needed.

“What makes you think the Lord didn’t orchestrate that whole thing, Mr. Dixie? Do you think He is prone to accidents?” Dorothy laughed slightly, which caused her to wince.

“Ya know Dorothy? There are probably four billion people in the world. You think God is big enough to handle the problems of each and every one?”

“My God is. He created the world and everything in it, so why would He create something too big for Him to handle?”

“Well, don’t get mad now, Dorothy. I’m not saying He did and I’m not saying He didn’t. But do you really think He has the capability to get involved in all the details of every person’s life or that He even cares to?”

“He can ‘for those who love Him and are called according to his purpose!’ That’s in the book of Romans, Chapter Eight, verses twenty-eight to thirty. And in First Peter, Chapter Five, verse seven, Peter said ‘to cast all your cares upon Him for He cares for you.’ Besides Dixie, whom else do you know who has given up their life for you? Who else has died so you might live? If He’s that interested, interested enough to die for you, don’t you think He’d be interested to live for you, too, in every aspect of your life?”

Dixie stared hard at her. She had stumped him. Now she had claimed that she was only nineteen, but she spoke with the wisdom of a ninety-year old. Dixie rubbed his chin. His bandage had fallen off somewhere along the way, but the knife wound from the phony preacher no longer bled. Dixie was wet, tired and his feet smelled of vomit. He did not wish to argue. Besides, the girl did have a point.

“Look Dorothy, I don’t know. I don’t know. It’s something I’ll have to think on. I’m not refutin’ it, ya understand, it’s just well ... Well, I mean, pardon me for saying so, but it sounds a bit like Santa Claus, ya know? How can he deliver all them presents in one night?” The pregnant teen grinned.

“God is real, Mr. Dixie. He is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent and eternal. Santa Claus is not. Santa Claus was a Christian man in Turkey around two or three hundred A.D. who left presents on people’s door steps, knocked on the door and ran away. He was mortal, not divine. But God never, ever runs away, Mr. Dixie. Once you have accepted Him, He will never leave you or forsake you. That’s in the Book of Hebrews, Chapter Thirteen, Verse Five.”

Dixie rubbed his chin some more as the wheels of his brain chewed on her assertions.

“Well, what do you think Mr. Dixie?”

“Well, ya know Dorothy?”

“What?”

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“I kind o’ tend to believe ya. Leastways, I’d like to, but—”

“You do? Well that’s just great. Let’s pray right now then.”

“No-no-no-no-nope, I’d rather just get on down the road. I’m wet and soaked clear through and it’s been a long, rough day. I’d just as soon pray later, if ya don’t mind.”

“OK, you drive though, OK Mr. Dixie? And I’ll pray as we go.”

“Amen to that sweet prayer, Dorothy!” Dixie retorted. They chuckled together.

Dixie started around to the other side of the car and slid behind the wheel. As he started the engine up and backed the car up a few feet, Dixie noticed his drenched sea bag sitting atop the hood. He smacked the heels of his hands against the top of the steering wheel and bit his lower lip to keep from cursing in the girl’s presence.

“What’s wrong Mr. Dixie?” He shook his head negatively.

“Ahh! The latch on the hood is busted. I can’t close it. That’s why my sea bag is sittin’ up there to hold the thing down. Guess we could use another prayer, hunh?”

“Sea bag? Are you a sailor, too?” She inquired innocently.

Dixie was tired and ticked and he didn’t feel like any more small talk. The thing that really ticked him was there hadn’t been a single damned soul drive by to help them during this whole incident. They might as well have been out in the middle of the sea.

“No Miss, I’m a Marine.”

“Oh! Well that’s almost the same thing.” Dixie’s temper was rising. He gritted his teeth.

“No Miss, there ain’t nothing quite the same as a United States Marine. He is a totally unique animal!” Dixie flashed his white teeth at her in a quick grimace. “And right now this Marine is in need of something to tie down that hood.”

“How ‘bout some twine?”

“Twine?”

“Yes. There’s some tied to the bottom latch of the trunk, leftover from our Christmas tree last winter. Would that help?”

“You sure about that, Miss? I don’t remember seeing any—”

“You take a peek and see if there isn’t.” She forced a pert smile to encourage him.

Dixie opened the car door to check. Mann! He was tired. This had been some day. He did not remember seeing any twine in the trunk, but he turned the engine off, stepped out in to the storm yet again and, by faith, walked back to open up the trunk. Sure enough, the twine was there, just as she had said it would be, tucked up under the trunk latch. How had he missed it? Dix cut the twine loose from the latch with his pen knife and used the twine to tie down the hood. Then he tossed his sea bag into the back seat.

Dixie nodded to Dorothy that all was well. However, as he climbed behind the wheel once more, he could not help but ask her. “Say, why do you keep twine from a Christmas tree in your trunk until June?”

“Thought maybe I might need it sometime, like for next year’s Christmas tree.” She responded pertly. “Guess I was right, ya think?”

“Yeah, Christmas came early this year, like about six months early to be precise.”

## *Out at Home*

Dixie grimaced and drove them east across the bridge over Currituck Sound and then south down the Banks to Kill Devil Hills. Only the right headlight worked and he had a devil of a time seeing around the cracks in the windshield caused by Dorothy's head. He thought it a miracle that she had not squished her stomach into the steering wheel. He spent half the time hanging his head out of the window, like a panting dog, to make sure he stayed between the road lines and did not hit anything. Dorothy seemed to recover rapidly from her disastrous episode, as she pointed out rather cheerily the hill where the Wright brothers made their first flight. As with the passing storm, the pregnant girl's headache seemed to have subsided as well, because her spirits had picked up decidedly. Dixie concluded, somewhat sardonically, that it must be an answer to prayer. Dorothy heartily agreed and tapped his thigh for confirmation. Whenever Dixie slowed down to see better, Dorothy would encourage him onward, noting confidently that Jesus was with them through every storm of life.

Lights were out everywhere. The Banks were dark, but she pointed out the Wright Brothers Memorial on the big hill off to the right. The storm must have knocked out the power. With his unique night vision, Dixie had no difficulty reading the street signs in the dark, which amazed Dorothy. At her direction, He turned east off 158 onto Pamlico Avenue and then took the first right onto Orville Place. He followed the nearly deserted street down almost to the next intersection with Wilbur Way where he found the last house on the right. The entire block both contained only two homes on the west side of the street in this sparsely populated coastal town of Kill Devil Hills.

"Why, this is where those Rock'N'Roll girls stay sometimes," interjected Dorothy.

"Yeeup. That's why I'm here. One of 'em is my wife."

"No kiddin'! Well, ain't she the blessed one?"

Dixie pulled up to stare incredulously at her, but the pregnant girl simply beamed like a true angel. *Blessed One? Because of him? The way she thinks, this girl surely must be an angel.*

"I sure hope she shares your high opinion of me after missing her birthday today, Dorothy."

"Why Mr. Dixie, I don't see how she could share any other opinion, do you?"

The pregnant teen's pleasant demeanor convinced him of her sincerity and he sure as hell hoped she was right. Ryz'n could get ticked off over the lamest things, but Dixie knew his present faux pas gave her legitimate grounds for a big time vocal battering. The rain had trailed off to a sparse staccato drizzle. Dixie got out and pulled his sea bag out of the back seat, before Dorothy slid over to sit behind the wheel.

"Now Mr. Dixie, our restaurant, The Wright Brothers Restaurant, is just down around the corner here." She motioned up and to the left with her forefinger. "You stop by for something to eat tomorrow and you can have anything you want, on the house—your wife too, OK?"

Dixie nodded. "OK, Dorothy. You sure you'll be all right to drive home? I don't feel quite right about lettin' ya leave like this?"

"Oh, I'm Ok now. I've been prayin'." She grinned, "Just have a tiny headache now. Besides, I only live the other side of the restaurant. Over there, with my in-laws."

## Guardian Angels

Again, she pointed southeasterly to a building a couple short blocks away. “They’re good people. You stop by and see for yourself.”

“Well OK, then. Sure do appreciate the lift.”

“It was my pleasure. The Lord let us help each other out tonight, Mr. Dixie—like guardian angels. Now don’t forget what we discussed.”

“No, no, I won’t, Dorothy.”

She reached through the window to take hold of Dixie’s forearm and pulled down on it. Dixie bent over to see what she wanted. Dorothy reached up with her left hand to the back of his shoulder to pull him closer. The blonde pecked him on the cheek and whispered in his eyes.

“You *were* my guardian angel tonight, Mr. Dixie. Thank you with all my heart.” She placed Dixie’s right hand over her pregnant belly. Surprised, Dixie jumped back a bit pulling his hand back through the opened window.

“The baby was kicking,” she observed. “I guess it has stopped now. Just wanted you to know you were an angel for both me and my baby, too.” She smiled.

“Whoa! I don’t know about bein’ no angel, Dorothy. I think it was more like the reverse, like you were mine. Bye now and thanks again.” Dixie stood back erect and motioned softly for her to go.

“God bless you, Mr. Dixie Nicholas.”

She wiggled her fingers on her free hand as she waved goodbye and drove to the corner, where she made a left and then a right, disappearing behind a building. Dixie dropped his sea bag in the street and trotted down around the corner after her to make sure she was all right. He observed her as she got out of the car and entered a building. She had it made it safely.

*Wow! Wasn’t that something! I’m an angel, a guardian angle no less, a regular knight in shining armor! Ha! Boy! Sure hope Ryz’n sees it like that, after missing her birthday and all.*

\* \* \*

Dixie walked back to the Ryan’s place and surveyed his new surroundings. This resort home looked like an old wooden frame house featuring a screened in second story veranda, supported by story-high perimeter of stilts and, underneath, next to the two-car carport, by an inner foundation of grey cinder blocks. The structure was one-two, no three and a half stories high, by his reckoning, if he counted the carport level. The bottom floor was half carport, half house. Ryz’n’s convertible was parked off to the side of the concrete driveway in the mud and her Dad’s Ford Torino Squire station wagon was parked under the carport. The second floor had a large, wrap-around, screened-in porch with a natural, wood-slatted, bench-backed swing. He heard the thing creaking unevenly as a steady breeze rocked the swing and back and forth and tinkled some wind chimes, hanging from the porch ceiling. Another weather-beaten floor rose up a story above the screened-in porch. Must be bedrooms, he figured. And yet higher still, perched a little white cupola with an unguarded walkway and a white, wooden bench.

## *Out at Home*

Because it was well after midnight, Dixie chose not to disturb the household. He took off his shoes and socks and threw them in the trashcan. *What a stench! Angel vomit! Darn! Sure hate to loose 'em good Adidas like that!* Then he unpacked his sea bag and hung up his wet things on a clothesline that ran beneath the open-aired carport. Dixie found a mostly dry pair of sliding shorts he had stored inside his athletic bag. He stripped off all his wet things and put on the dry shorts. Then he opened the back of Mr. Ryan's wagon, pulled out some luggage onto the concrete carport floor, put the back seat down and opened the tailgate. He found a couple puddles to rinse off his stinking bare feet and turned back around to the car. With the tail gate down, he just had enough room to crawl in and lay down to sleep.

Dixie thought about his crazy day and prayed to thank the Lord for protecting him and Dorothy. He asked forgiveness for kicking the phony preacher when the creep was down, noting with a caveat that he never would have done it had he been wearing his Dingos. Dorothy's spirituality had rubbed off on him. He tried to forgive the preacher for molesting him. Mercifully, he fell asleep quickly, despite the preying mosquitoes.

\* \* \*

A couple hours later, Dixie woke to the sound of a man cursing and a small dog panting and barking next to his head. In the pre-dawn dark, he managed to realize his father-in-law had fallen over one of the bags Dixie had thrown out beside the station wagon. Dixie heard a loud whisper.

"Scruffy, shhhh, shhhh. Rose! Damn it, Rose! Why did you pull our stuff out of here?"

"But I didn't Roy. I—"

Dixie rose up and identified himself.

"Hello Mrs. Ryan, Mr. Ryan. Hello Scruffy." Dixie petted the dog whose tail wagged excitedly, as she busied herself sniffing all the glorious scents Dixie carried.

"Judas Priest boy! Ya scared me half to death. You tryin' to give us a heart attack?"

"Oh, no sir. It's just that I got in late and didn't want to wake you, so I slept here."

"Nicholas! Oh, you're all right!" Joyfully, Mrs. Ryan reached over the open tail gate to hug and kiss him. "Thank God, you're alright. Come on. Let me take you inside. You can sleep down on the basement sofa. I'd let you sleep in our bed, but we just pulled all the sheets off for the renters later today and I don't want to wake up the girls."

Dixie picked up his belongings and followed her inside, while Mr. Ryan looked scornfully askance at him. His mother-in-law set him up on the sofa with a pillow and a blanket. She said she looked forward to seeing him back up in Crest Hill. Mrs. Ryan explained that she and Mr. Ryan didn't have time to chat. Both she and her husband were going to be late for work back in town, if they didn't take off right now. As she exited the basement, Dixie heard Mr. Ryan outside complain loudly that it stunk to high heaven out there. They drove off home, taking the dog with them. Dixie lay down on the couch in the finished basement to complete his night's rest.