

Ryz'n responded to his soothing words, by stifling her tears and pulling her head back to look upon the husband she had missed for over three years. For his part, Dixie fished a handkerchief out of his pants pocket for this distressed, gorgeous stranger. This girl was light, so easy to hold, much lighter than Donna, more like a feather. Dixie felt she could not have weighed much more than a hundred pounds, if that. She wiped her eyes, blowing her nose hard with the gift she had just received. He chose to ignore the mild, sleepless semi-circles beneath her lovely eyes. Her low forehead appealed to his sense of beauty. Ryz'n's, legs remained wrapped about his waist, her right arm about his neck with her tear-stained face right next to his. Dixie held her with one arm around her slim waist, as he might have held Andre or Little Jim.

When she had finished sniffing, Ryz'n arched her back and raised up like a horsewoman in her saddle to stuff his handkerchief into her shorts pocket. She proclaimed bravely. "Just like old times, Nicky." Then she laughed self-consciously. Ryz'n stared deep into his eyes seeking in vain for a sign that he knew her. She found none. Painfully now, she began to realize that his soft encouragement had misled her. She had heard what she had wanted to hear in his tender words and tone. She had seen what she had wanted to see in his kind expressions. She had felt what she had wanted to feel in his warm embrace. A sinking fear seeped into her consciousness. Suddenly, it dawned upon her that for all his polite kindness, this man was not returning her passion like Nicky would have. She had thought wrongly that he was her "Nicky" and she, his love. Now, she wondered—*No! I'll show him right now how much we love each other.* Without warning, Ryz'n wrapped both her arms around the back of his neck, pulling his lips toward her, and kissed him as she had dreamed of doing for some three years.

Her forward actions took him aback. Dixie loosened his grip on Ryz'n, resting his hands lightly on her back and shoulder, but he allowed her to cling to him. While he did not back his head away from her, neither did he match her zeal. He remained fearfully frozen in neutral.

An alarm sounded within Ryz'n's brain as she recognized Dixie's lack of reciprocity. Again, her stomach churned. Once more, she realized suddenly that he saw her as a stranger, nothing more. The gorgeous girl had promised herself that she would not embarrass her husband by forcing herself upon him, if he did not recognize her, yet she had embarrassed them both anyway. She had steeled herself against this possibility. Deep down in her heart however, she had been sure that Nicky would remember her when he saw her. Certainly he would recall her when he kissed her, but now he had not, and it hurt. It hurt deeply. Too late,

she realized, those soft, encouraging words Nick had just spoken to her, were words from a stranger who merely had taken compassion upon her acute distress.

Ryz'n felt totally abashed, ashamed to have foisted herself upon him in the very manner, in which she had promised herself that she would not. The young woman broke her hold upon him and, in so doing, his light grasp on her as well. Bashfully, she slid off of him, down onto the curb. With her hands clasped behind her and her head bent towards the ground, Ryz'n looked up to him from under her long, natural eyelashes to apologize.

"Sorry, I, I thought you recognized me."

Ill at ease, Ryz'n turned her head aside, to the left, dabbing at her eyes with the linen tissue. Then, feeling noticeably self-conscious, she crossed her arms beneath her bosom. She diffidently squeezed herself tightly, flexing her biceps and triceps beneath her fingers, trying to physically restrain herself from doing anything else quite so stupid.

The sultry sound of her smoky voice thrilled him. Then, for the first time, Dixie noticed her necklace was in fact two necklaces. One held a crucifix at the end of a fine gold chain. The other necklace was silver and the chain disappeared down into her cleavage which was largely uncovered by the steeply scooped neck of her cotton blouse.

"N-No, I'm ... the one ... sorreee. I wisha ha-a-ad rec-rec, know ... n ... you." Outwardly, Dixie smiled, but inwardly, he was ticked at himself for speaking like an idiot, especially in front of this girl at this time, especially when he had had no difficulties in speaking with that saucy Moons the previous night. *Dummy up, you idiot!* His heart was pounding like a blacksmith's hammer against an anvil. He needed another shooter. No, make that several shooters. Dixie promised himself to speak only if necessary and then very deliberately.

His noble response had encouraged her, partly salving the wound she had unwittingly opened. She, too, forced a weak smile. But his reply also revealed his diffidence and the breadth of gap between him and the husband she had known. The family Ryan had been watching this homecoming, too stunned to speak. Now Sheena came to herself and walked boldly up to greet her brother-in-law.

"Hello Nick! Ya probably don't remember me either, but I'm Sheena, Ry's sister."

The orange, boss girl now peered deep into Dixie's eyes, evidently searching for the same light of recognition her sister had just sought and failed to find. However, Dixie did not recognize her either. He shrugged helplessly at his sister-in-law. Her pleasant smile began to dissolve and her lower lip began to tremble. She cried in distress.

"Oh, Nicky!"

Disturbed, she raised the back of her hand to her lip as if to stop its trembling. She backed away from him shaking her head, seeking comfort from the football player, who stood a couple steps behind her.

Then Mrs. Ryan approached Dixie gingerly. She reacted much as her elder daughter had done moments earlier, though she was more subdued. She did not kiss Dixie on the mouth, but rather on the cheek and hugged him closely. The woman introduced herself as both “Rose” and “Mom.” It was a good minute before she let go of him, stepping away dabbing her eyes with her apron. Obviously, Ryz’n strongly favored her mother. Dixie thought it would not have been much of a stretch to picture the mother and daughter as sisters. The mother was heftier, obviously, but that aside, only their eye and hair color were different, with the mother’s eyes and hair dark brown like Sheena’s. Yet the face, the double cheeks, the bone structure, the figure, the expressions were all the same as her first born.

The young man in the #80 white football jersey, trimmed in old gold and navy blue, again stepped forward. He slipped his arm around Sheena’s waist and inched her forward with him towards Dixie. He whispered softly into the girl’s ear. She nodded and he let go of her while he greeted Dixie.

“Hey, Nicky. It’s great to have ya home, Mann. Really cool. I’m Sheena’s husband, Bryson. OK?” He waited for Nick’s response, so Nick smiled faintly. “But hey! You and me go way back, Mann. Been a long time dude, a long, long time.” He smiled pleasantly with a mouthful of even, white teeth and his penetrating, soft brown eyes offered Dixie a genuine welcome that was confirmed by a hearty handshake. Dixie simply nodded. *This guy acts normal.*

Then the young man backed away to coddle and soothe his wife. Finally, Mr. Ryan stepped forward to shake hands with his long lost son-in-law. The two men eyed each other warily. Mr. Ryan was a portly five-foot nine inches with bright green eyes, a ruddy complexion and a thick, full head of dark brown hair. Mr. Ryan awkwardly offered his hand in friendship. Dixie took it in his and shook with the man who was his father-in-law. Then clumsily, Mr. Ryan stepped into Dixie and hugged him stiffly. He stepped back just as quickly, as if such an act of familiarity did not come easily to him.

“Welcome home, SON,” he said. “I’m Roy, Roy Ryan. You, uh, well, it’s so good to have you back. She ...” He nodded to Ryz’n, “She always said you’d ‘come home, come home alive and come home well.’ She always said that ...” Mr. Ryan shook his head in joy and incredulity, as he choked up. Overcome with emotion, a lone drop of water fell from his eye, but he ignored it as if it had not happened. Slowly he retreated backwards a few steps towards the house. The man’s dark hair clashed with his bright green eyes. Like Dixie, he sported a gold-capped tooth, only his was an upper, eye tooth. A few inches shorter than Dixie, this man exhibited a budding, beer belly. The tattooed blue wings of a U. S. Air Force chevron on his upper arm, extended partly below the short sleeve of his sky blue, polyester shirt. For several long seconds, they all stared, looking at one another, tongue-tied. The Ryans seemed afraid of pulling an embarrassing stunt like Ryz’n had perpetrated minutes earlier. And Dixie, well he was just afraid, period. He hoped he wouldn’t talk like an idiot.

Composed once again, it was Ryz'n who dispelled the clumsy silence.

"Well, Nick! Are you hungry? We were about to eat dinner. Right, Mom?"

Dixie considered one good thing about driving at night and sleeping during the day was that when he woke in the evenings, people—no, make that beautiful young women—were forever offering him dinner. He grinned to himself and croaked softly "OK."

"Oh yes, it's just about ready, Nicholas. In fact, I better get back to the kitchen before I burn that meatloaf," replied Dixie's mother-in-law.

Mrs. Ryan started to leave to re-enter the house, but she could not resist first walking over to squeeze her son-in-law tightly and kiss him once more.

"It really is SO GOOD to have you home, William Nicholas!" She reached up to pinch his cheek smartly and between clenched teeth she said. "God bless you, Son. God bless you! You are a honest-to-God living answer to prayer." Letting go of his cheek, she agreed with her proclamation. "Yes Nicholas, you truly are."

William Nicholas? So that's my name? William Nicholas Sheeboom? Damn!

As she began to leave the second time, dabbing at the corner of her eye with the edge of her apron, Ryz'n caught her mother's attention.

"What is it Ryzanna?"

The girl cleared her throat and mouthed something that Dixie could not make out and that her mother failed to comprehend, but Sheena did. "MEATLOAF!" she blurted out, forthrightly. An exchange of quizzical looks passed between mother and older daughter, until Ryz'n was forced to raise her right hand to shield her mouth from Dixie's view, but not his hearing. She whispered, "Mother, Nick doesn't like meatloaf." She shook her head negatively to emphasize the point.

"Oh!" responded Mrs. Ryan. She ignored her daughter's desire for discretion. "Nicholas? Your wife has reminded me that you don't care for meatloaf. I forgot about that. Why don't you come into the kitchen with me now and we can pick out something else for you, OK?" She smiled broadly.

Dixie shook his head negatively and put up both hands together, palms outward.

"s O...K, Ma'a'a'am." The Corps had taught him to eat anything and like it.

Ryz'n stepped between her mother and her husband. "Are you sure, Nicky? You don't have to be polite. We're your family, you know? And I know how much you dislike meatloaf—"

Dixie cut her off, "I ... eat," was all he said but he winked and smiled at her for reassurance.

Pleasantly surprised, Ryz'n returned his smile. Mr. Ryan stepped around behind Dixie to herd them all across the lawn, up the steps and into the house. Dixie went ahead of Mr. Ryan, but he stopped behind Ryz'n at the foot of the stoop. Casually, he reached down to his right to pick up the blankets Ryz'n had dropped a few minutes ago. Dixie turned back past his father-in-law to follow the too narrowly spaced blue slate steps that led across the lawn to the driveway.

Ryz'n, who had been just ahead of her husband on the steps, turned and saw him crossing the yard. She jumped back to the ground in front of her father to join Nicky. She reached her husband in time to help him pick up the shoes Bryce had dropped in the yard. They laughed nervously after they bumped heads lightly, stooping to pick up the shoes. Gently, Ryz'n took from him the shoe he had retrieved. Then she placed both shoes neatly in the empty near corner of the trunk of the Bonneville. Dixie spread the blankets out on top of the luggage. As he closed the trunk lid, he told her to watch her fingers, placing his own right hand close to the trunk jam. After he slammed the lid shut, Dixie jumped back in horror, revealing his finger stubs to her. The booze had loosened his natural inhibitions enough to play the buffoon, as he had with Moons and the acid rain last night.

The girl did not know what to make of his pretense at first. Initially, she felt, in horror that he had cut off his fingers, but the lack of blood belayed that idea. When she realized he was OK, merely choosing this as a forum to reveal a deformity, Ryz'n did not know whether to laugh or cry. She chose the former option because this was the first Nick-like thing he had done.

He laughed with her, making a joke of the fact he had only two fingers on his right hand. As they turned to go in the house for dinner, Ryz'n leaned back over the trunk of the car purposefully, forcing him to go around her left side. Then, she consciously took up his mutilated right hand in her left, her ring hand. Against his stubs, Dixie could feel her miniscule diamond engagement ring beneath two, smooth gold wedding bands. However, he did not know why she wore two wedding bands.

Startled a bit by her action, Dix looked down at her graceful, perfectly lovely petite hand, holding his larger, maimed one. Then, again, he admiringly looked up at her. Ryz'n had steeled herself previously to make no big deal over his wounds. She didn't want to blow that promise as she had their initial greeting. She smiled sweetly, proclaiming matter of factly, "Let's eat, Nicky".

Dix was trying to read her. If this beautiful, strange creature wanted to divorce him, she certainly did not act like it. Nevertheless, he still did not feel like he was this "Nick" character they all claimed him to be, despite their earnest attestations to the contrary.

Dixie encouraged the cute brunette to ascend the front steps before him. Her wholesome, natural beauty overpowered him. The girl's long, heavy cocoa colored hair bounced down off unusually broad shoulder blades, as she stepped pertly ahead of him. She could have made a shampoo commercial, he mused. Her curvaceously attractive walk caught his eye. *GRT*'s top ten hit "Her Swish and Her Sway" came to Dixie's mind and he began to hum the tune. The natural, unaffected swing of her broad, tightly rounded hips from side to side now served him like a hypnotist's watch. Her upright buttocks were as perfectly round as Moons', only larger, more tightly woven and firmer, less jigglely. Even so, her hips rolled lazily, independent of one another, yet in a perfectly alluring harmony

that counterbalanced her natural walk. Her pressed, forest green, cuffed shorts with the thin black and gold plaid stripes, only accentuated her natural wonders.

Dixie froze in his tracks to linger behind and watch her mount the front stoop. Truly bewitched by her magical spell, she was obviously unconscious of her unaffected swish and sway. Oblivious to the effect of her walk upon him, she climbed the steps naively innocent. Her deeply tanned, showgirl's legs came into his view. Suddenly, he remembered an old Fifties movie newsreel that had come with some movie films to the Kaneohe rec. hall. Restricted to base that weekend, he recalled the newsreel had depicted an old Miss America contest. The winner had been a lovely short, swarthy girl, full of personality with chunky cheeks, a bright smile and a build like a brick house, not unlike this girl on the stoop. He could not recall the petite, beauty queen's name, but she had spoken with a southern drawl. And now this Ryzanna reminded him of that former beauty. His humming grew louder and he sang the chorus under his breath.

Well, I was watchin', was just the other day,
I watched her walkin', watched her swish and her sway.
Ya know, it wasn't her fault, that she moved thataway.
No, that's how God made her, with her swish and her sway.

She must have heard him, because as quickly as she opened the screen door, Ryz'n let the door go and turned on him.

"Why, Nicky! You do remember, you do remember! You've been spoofin' us all along. Isn't that just like you to pull a trick like that," she reckoned.

"Hunh? Re-remember what?"

"That song, that song you were just singing."

Dixie scratched his head confused.

"Oh yeah, I heard it on one of my ta-tapes. It's a g-g-good one, a real tata-toe-tap-tapper." He smiled sheepishly because of his stutter.

"Oh." Her shoulders slumped considerably and her countenance melted.

"I thought that walking behind me had jogged your memory. After all, you always said it was my 'naturally alluring walk' that had inspired you to write that song back when we were in high school. But, you don't recall that either, do you?" Her whole visage seemed to droop momentarily as she pouted.

Dixie shook his head sadly, indicating that he couldn't accommodate her. But with those double boiler makers in his blood stream and no food in his stomach, he added with a devilish sparkle in his eye. "B-B-But I guess I musta been right, b-b-because it s-sure is in-insp-spirin'." It was the first time he had acknowledged something Nick had done as his own and he felt a bit plagiaristic.

She tilted her head, looking at him quizzically. Dixie pointed to her behind.

"Tra-Truly an in-in-spi-spiration. A real th-thing of ba-ba-beauty." He grinned despite his stutter and so did she.

“Well now, maybe you haven’t changed so much after all, Baby,” admitted the girl in her inherently husky voice. She stepped onto the threshold and held the door for him. “Come on in, Nicky.” Again, she showered upon him her characteristic, dimpled smile.

The dimples warmed his heart. This girl was something else. He was eager to follow her. He started to climb the rest of the stairs. Yet, when she turned to beckon him into the house, the girl profiled herself upon the threshold of the open front doorway and Dixie hesitated. Her awesome profile revealed a slightly upturned rump that must have protruded close to half of a foot out behind her, as well as an ample chest that must have protruded nearly the same distance ahead of her. Yet, she had the flattest of bellies! For the briefest of instants, Dixie felt very strongly that he had been here with her before, but he just could not place it. Just as quickly, the sensation was gone, spinning off into inner space. Like so much else, he was powerless to recall it. Dixie bit his lip in frustration.

He let go of the thought and mused that she was perfectly balanced. However, as she turned and he followed her inside, Dixie acknowledged the true secret of her Wonder Woman build. It was her slightly long but incredibly, almost surreally, slender waist which truly set her figure apart from that of any woman he had ever known. The girl’s classic, hourglass chassis was difficult for him to fathom. Her sharply inward curving waist was downright tiny, producing the steep, svelte S-shaped curves no matter which way she turned. Big Jim had been right. Dix wondered that her equally superior, healthy looking legs could receive the nourishment they needed through such a narrow funnel. They must have, for she had the legs of a Forties Hollywood glamour queen. As he studied her physique, it occurred to Dixie that she was, in fact, a dichotomy. Her slight stature, slighter waistline and her deeply dimpled smile rendered her petite. Yet, the breadth of her hips, shoulders and chest made her appear larger than she was.

Like Moons, this girl possessed both hips and shoulders that were equally broad and a well developed chest. Dixie convinced himself however that it was the waist that set the two shapely women apart. Yet, in spite of all her obvious, natural sensuality, this Ryzanna emanated a wholesome, spring-like, cheerleader quality. The girl appeared to be chaste, even virginal. Her unassuming manner, combined with her guileless allure, just knocked him out. He considered that maybe it was those baby faced, schoolgirl-like cheeks and false double chin that countered her natural animal magnetism to produce for him another fascinating dichotomy. Yes, definitely, those double cheeks played a part as they contrasted with her inviting, full lips.

“Come on inside, Nicky. We’re letting the bugs in, Baby—Oh, that veranda! We had that built since you’ve been gone, but most everything else is the same.” She acted as if he would know the difference. Dixie merely smiled politely, for he had not been thinking of the veranda at all.

After he climbed the stoop, Dixie was still staring at her, when his coat sleeve caught on the screen door knob. The door tugged at him, precluding his entry to

the house. As he unhooked his sleeve from the knob, Dixie glanced back momentarily over his shoulder to his bike. There, proudly, stood the symbol of his heretofore freedom and joy. The modified, black and silver chrome chopper looked alone and out of place. Dixie reckoned that the bike looked as foreign and isolated as he felt in this east coast, suburban, middle class neighborhood of modest brick ramblers, family sedans and station wagons. Yes, the bike looked as out of place as he felt. That was for certain. Three cars in succession passed by, heading down the street in the direction from which he had come. Dixie guessed they were commuters returning home from work.

The thought semi-flashed through his still semi-inebriated brain that he was moving away from one world and into another, alien world from which he might never return. It also had occurred to him, when this female knockout had profiled herself in the doorway, that this Ryz'n very well could be his silhouette girl.

If only her hair was darker and she was only a little larger ...

The girl in his vision had been larger than life, like an Amazon, like Donna. Dixie did not see how this diminutive though shapely, athletic creature could fill the shoes of the dark-haired, larger than life silhouette which inhabited his vision.

On second thought, he considered the old saying that good things come in small packages. Now, here she was smiling at him sweetly, displaying perfectly even, white teeth and emanating an inexplicably healthy but sexually, bright glow. He counted no fewer than six dimples, three in each cheek. Yes, this young woman embodied a sanguine glow which radiated not just from her bright visage, but throughout her whole persona. *Hope for the best and be prepared for the worst, Dix.* But he looked again at her blooming cheerleader smile, discarded his pessimism and fairly jumped across the threshold in response to her overtures.

As the pair entered the house, the screen door slammed behind them. Sheena let loose of a caramel colored Skye terrier, no more than ten inches high, which joyfully attacked the freshly reunited couple. Barking and wagging its short tail, the perfectly groomed animal made straight for Ryz'n. Ryz'n bowed down to greet the family pet enthusiastically and introduced the dog to Dixie as Scruffy Junior. The Ryan's petite pet featured scruffy, long, overgrown eyebrows, finely trimmed bangs and a long, shaggy coat which lent the dog its cute bearing and fostered its name. Even the pooch had a yellow bow tied in its forelocks, which caused Dixie to chuckle silently. He could not see the dog's eyes, but he could clearly see the dog's fierce, little white teeth inside its dark mouth. The animal barked prodigiously at Dixie as he knelt, as Ryz'n had, to pet the dog.

Dixie was not much of an animal lover, but he made peace with the dog by offering her the back of his left hand to sniff and lick. Satisfied, "Junior" trotted happily over the firmly cushioned, vermilion pile carpet to the pillow box that served as her lounge. Ryz'n explained that her dad felt outnumbered by females in his own house, so he convinced them to call the pet Junior even though she was a bitch—that is if they wanted to keep the pet. The dog's bed lay beside Mr. Ryan's living room, easy chair, just outside the dining room alcove. However,

officially, that is to say legally, Ryz'n informed Dixie that the pet's name was Scruffy Junior, and that "Senior" had passed while Dixie had been in the service.

Dixie glanced around to find the room and the furniture to be a cool study in various shades of green and brown. The cool colors enveloped him in a comfortably refreshing welcome. The room increased in lightness of greenery, the higher one's eye roamed. The vermillion, pile carpet supported mostly mint green furniture, while the walls behind the furniture were a spring green. Overhead, the plaster ceiling was a pale yellow-green.

Dixie felt as though he had stumbled upon an inviting, cool forest glen. Vermillion floor length drapes matched the carpet and hung one-third open over the wide, front picture window. Identical curtains were opened fully by a narrower window at the opposite end of the room which overlooked the back of the driveway. Mint green shades hung halfway down the glass windows from the ceiling. The three-cushion sofa and the one recliner to his right were in sculpted, upholstered, mint green. The other, larger recliner was constructed of dark brown leather. Between the two recliners sat an eighteen-inch high octagon of brown leather and wood. Mr. Ryan was relaxing in the large brown easy chair now. A smaller brown lamp stand between the sofa and the smaller recliner held a dark green shaded ceramic lamp. A pole lamp, holding three lights like branches on a tree, ran from ceiling to floor between the brown leather recliner and the lamp stand. Magazines and papers littered the lamp table.

Because Dixie knew he was supposed to have been here before, he studied the room meticulously, hoping to find the Rosetta Stone to his memory. His in-laws remained silent, letting him look, probably hoping he would recall something, too. A breathtaking, two by three-foot, in-flight picture of the Air Force's Fabulous Thunderbirds, spewing exhaust behind the famed jets, caught his eye. The jets soared in perfect formation above and behind Mr. Ryan's head inside of a glass frame. On the opposite side of the room from Dixie stood an old, black, upright piano and bench. There were several trophies on top of the upright and some gold records enclosed in frames on the wall above the piano. Against the narrower wall, to Dixie's left, stood three dark cherry cabinet structures side by side by side, each about three feet tall by two and a half-feet wide. First came a three shelf book case next to a hi-fi phonograph set and last, was a television cabinet, containing a TV set much younger than the cabinet housing it. At the far end of the wall began a hallway, which disappeared around the corner to his left. Dixie assumed the bedrooms lay around that corner. Immediately to his left, just this side of the first cherry wood cabinet, hung the open front door which was thrown back against some other closed white-painted, wooden door, possibly a closet. As he looked, the Ryans seated themselves, so Dixie took a seat, also.

So this is how the other half lives? Certainly you could fit the small half of Donna's place inside this room. Middle America in all its glory, hunh? Still, it did not approach the mansion of a rock star, not like the ones he had seen up in

the Hollywood hills. Maybe those millions that were supposed to be his were just an apparition. He sure saw no sign of any big money here.

While her husband was making his household inventory, waiting for the cook to announce “Dinner is now,” Ryz’n became unhappy with the seating arrangement. Her unhappiness stemmed from the fact that Sheena and Bryson had flopped smack dab in the middle of the couch, beneath the wide, front picture window, making it impossible for Ryz’n to sit next to Nick on the sofa. She narrowed her eyes to shoot darts at her sister. Mr. Ryan relaxed in “his” chair in the far living room corner, next to the dog and nearest the dining room. Ryz’n understood the location gave him a commanding view of both the dining and living rooms, as well as visual access to the kitchen. Nick sat on a brown, fake leather hassock just inside the open front door at the near end of the three-cushioned couch.

Ryz’n spurned her mother’s chair at the opposite end of the couch to sit on the piano bench directly across the narrow room from Nick. She glared at Sheena who obviously did not have a clue about her faux pas. Mr. Ryan suggested “Nick” sit in Mrs. Ryan’s chair since the matron was in the kitchen. Ryz’n determined to sit in her husband’s lap if he did. It was all she could do to keep from jumping on him anyway.

The only advantage to sitting opposite her husband, rather than next to him, was that she could give him a thorough visual going over without being too obvious. She studied him while he studied his surroundings. And she just couldn’t get enough of that. She could not get over the fact that he had grown almost four inches! He was bigger everywhere, confirming what she had felt earlier in his arms. From what she could see, the Peppermount baseball roster had listed his dimensions accurately. Always a mesomorph, Nick definitely had grown a few inches and gained about thirty pounds. His chest and shoulders were broader, as were his thighs. His arms bulged beneath his suit coat, which seemed by contrast to be just a bit too small for him. In fact, his whole muscular body seemed to burst through his suit. He was definitely a man now, yet no less handsome than her boy-groom of three and a half years ago, but less of a “pretty boy,” perhaps due to the moustache. Yes, he was more ruggedly handsome now.

His thick, black moustache overshadowed the feminine aura given off by his naturally full red lips, and equally long eyelashes and brows. Back in high school, those lips and eyes, which some had described as feminine, had more than once prompted rumors disputing Nick’s masculinity. Nick had dispelled such rumors roughly on more than one occasion, in spite of his then midget stature. His upper two front, gold-capped teeth jumped out from his shy smile now, also overriding any so-called feminine features. Yes, Ryz’n had lost none of her attraction for him. In fact, now she felt even more attracted to him, if that were possible. She did not feel this was due merely to their long separation, because the more she looked upon him, the more he seemed a stranger to her. However, as a stranger, Nick sure was an attractive one!

Then she caught sight of his beautifully unique two-toned eyes again, which stamped him positively as her Nicky. She wanted him. She wanted him right now! *Forget this meatloaf stuff!* Ryz'n crossed her legs and clasped her hands together resting them upon her crossed knee. She composed herself with the promise that he would be fulfilling all her dreams completely, soon enough. She beamed his way, hopefully hiding her growing desire for him, and appearing like a picture of propriety.

For his part, Dixie felt odd as hell. Obviously, these people knew him as "Nick" and they expected him to behave like "Nick." Only problem was, he did not have a clue how to do that. He would try to act as politely as possible and try not to offend anyone. If that meant eating meatloaf, then hell! He would eat meatloaf. He did not like the darned stuff. That knockout of a girl had been right about that, but he would eat it just the same and like it. The Marines had taught him that much. In fact, with his looks he had always thought if his baseball career fell through, he could always become an actor. Because the Corps had taught him how to act better than any darned Actor's Studio ever could have. That is, if he could ever learn how to speak as well as any ten-year old kid. He was trying not to let his stuttering embarrass him here, but it was difficult.

They all, except Mrs. Ryan, sat in the living room enduring an uncomfortable silence. Dixie presumed the matron was in the kitchen cooking dinner. He noticed Ryz'n could not keep from staring at him. For his part, Dixie tried to look everywhere but at her. Yet, he could not help but steal glimpses of her surreptitiously. He was unsuccessful, for she never seemed to take her glassy, expressive, large emerald eyes off him. Only the far corners of her almond-formed eyes were white. The thing was, no one knew what to say, so they sat quietly, trying not to stare impolitely at each other.

Finally, Mr. Ryan suggested Ryz'n give them a song, since, after all, she was sitting at the piano. She refused politely until Dixie echoed her father's request. Then Ryz'n played two of their compositions: "Husband Mine", which she had composed, followed by "Dear One," written by Nick five years ago. Seated on the brown leather hassock, Dixie watched from behind Ryz'n as her hands skipped lightly and effortlessly over the keys.

For the latter song, she asked Nick to join her on the piano bench, where she could see him. Instead, Dixie crossed the room to stand at the "treble clef" end of the piano. He leaned his right forearm on top of the upright, as she played and sang just to him. Either she was one hell of an actress or she was supremely sincere. *This was the "rich bitch" that Donna had described?* He shook his head.

The girl played the upright and sang the sad, haunting melody in a plaintive manner. His eyes grew misty, even though he had heard it several times on his cassette tape without any emotional reaction. Somehow, her simple, sincere Patsy Cline-like rendering of the lilting, doleful melody touched him deeply. She sang soulfully, directly to him, as though they were alone in the house. The girl crooned with unvarnished sincerity and the natural catch in her smoky voice just

Almost There

knocked him out. The lyrics weren't too great, but it was that haunting melody that got to him.

(My-y-y Dear, My Dea-earrest One)

Dear One,
Oh, oh, oh, oh my De-ear One,
Oh, oh, oh, oh, my dear, de-earrest one,
It gets darkest before dawn,
Ye-e-e-esss, darkest before dawn.

Dear One,
Oh, oh, oh, oh, De-ear One,
Oh, oh, oh, oh, my dear, dea-earrest one,
Ple-ease li-sten to me dear,
Listen my-y-y dear.

(Bridge)

My Dear One, you know that I love you.
Yes, I, I love you, so-o much you know.

And Dear One,
I give my life for you, just for you.
Please give your life to me, too.

(Please Dear One)

(Bridge)

Dear One,
Oh, oh, oh, oh my dear one, (my lovely one)
Oh, oh, oh, oh, my dear, my dearest one-hon,
You have no-thing to fear,
No-oo-h-oo-h-ooo-oooh, please don't fear.

Dixie could not speak. What an angel she was! Incredible! Under a different setting, the plaintive ballad and the manner in which she had delivered it might have been humorous or quite possibly even maudlin. However, given their circumstances, it was neither. It was perfect. Perhaps the piano was not as effective as the twangy, steel guitar on his tape, but the honest, raw emotion she delivered was untouchable. He opened his mouth to thank her, but words failed to appear. Again, he questioned himself, that this was the "rich bitch" that Donna had described to him. *This is the spoiled Rock'N'Roller who wants to divorce me to take my(?) money, my money?* With moist eyes of her own, this loving girl reached up with her right hand to take hold gently of her husband's maimed fist, which hung down over the top front edge of the upright. Her gentle, warm touch unfurled his clenched fist. With equal warmth, she looked deep into his eyes.

“Don’t you remember, Nicky?” she implored in her raspy tone. “You composed that song right here at this very piano just after you took me to the hospital? When I almost starved myself to death? Remember? When Father had forbid me to see you anymore?” The girl looked hopefully, soulfully, penetratingly at him for some kind of recognition. Her tender affection overwhelmed him. She slid her hand warmly into his. Dixie forgot his in-laws, seated behind him. Suddenly, he felt as comfortable with her right now as if he had his head resting upon Donna’s bountiful, soft bosom. Dixie wanted badly to say “Yes” to please this earnest, young beauty, who was trying so, so hard to help him regain his memory, but he could not lie. And he could not bear to tell her he did not think he ever would regain it. All the doctors had told him recovery was a long shot and to be thankful for what he did have—his life and most of his faculties. Fortunately, he did not have to lie to her, because his mother-in-law stepped in from the dining room, right behind him. The matron announced rather urgently that dinner was ready so they should all wash up.

Ryz’n tugged on the stubs of his maimed hand, to help her stand up from the bench. Once more, he noticed, she had shown him, his wounds did not offend her. Yet Dixie knew these visible wounds were merely the tip of the iceberg. He worried at what she would think about what she would find below the surface.

“Come on, Sweetie, I’ll show you where the bathroom is,” she offered graciously. But Bryson and Sheena beat them to the washroom.

This was too much for Ryz’n. She let go of Dixie’s hand to scold her sister and brother-in-law, suggesting coldly that they use the other bathroom, off the master bedroom. Dixie watched his wife’s beautifully, wide, expressive black eyebrows, suddenly flatten out into a single, hard, contiguous line across her forehead. Her large evenly spaced white teeth, like two rows of Chiclets, one atop the other, gleamed blazingly between full, pink-glossed lips. Her hazel-green eyes turned emerald with emotion. *This is one attractive woman, no doubt about it! Even Donna had admitted that much, all be it grudgingly. And this was a pretty, even a “nice” girl. Yeah buddy! She’s special, like Moons.*

Surely though, there was something special about her that he couldn’t quite read, something Moons hadn’t offered, nor Donna or Rose or any of them. He just couldn’t quite place what it was about this woman that was so refreshingly unique, so ingenuous. It was something beyond the corporal. Furthermore, Ryzanna did not appear to be wearing any make-up, aside from some pink lip gloss and pink nail paint. She did not need any. She had “the look” that elusively wholesome, yet naively sexy look, which he had seen rarely. Amused now, he watched, as this attractive “angel” turned into a little tigress, attacking in his behalf. He was glad not to be on the receiving end of her ire.

“All right, all right. Come on Bryson, we’ll use the other one. Jeeze—Louise!”

Sheena pulled Bryson from the small foyer that led to the bathroom, directing him on down the hall and to the right.

Ryz'n regained her composure and turned to her husband, still embarrassed, and sighed deeply. Then she chuckled slightly but somewhat nervously. "Sorry," she apologized for his sister's rudeness. Dixie just smiled and shrugged as if to say "no problem." She led him around the piano into the hall bathroom to wash up. When he was done, she exchanged places with him.

When she exited the washroom, Ryz'n caught him standing in the open doorway to her bedroom, which was on the front of the house, across the hall from the bathroom foyer. She found him inspecting the many pictures that filled her room.

"Yep! All those pictures are you, Nicky: In high school, on the ball field, in the studio, on tour, just out around here when we were dating, over in Nam even and out at your grandparents' place in Clear Lake. And on the road trip we took with your Uncle Bill to the Badlands, Rapid City and Mount Rushmore. I got the idea from you, ya know? I mean, about blowing up the pictures and plastering them on the walls like that."

Dixie looked back at her as she spoke, then back to her bedroom walls filled with overblown pictures of him and her. He could not believe his eyes. Those pictures sure as hell looked like him, as he might have looked as a teenager. Maybe he really was this Nicky character after all, but how come he couldn't remember? It gnawed at him. He seemed to forget that he was supposed to have been shot in the back of the head at close range with a pistol. His anger over his amnesia began to rise, but he calmed himself. He had to. If he got excited, he wouldn't be able to speak at all. He felt as if he was putting a jigsaw puzzle together now, where he was the subject of the puzzle, but none of the pieces fit.

Ryz'n leaned against her bedroom doorjamb with her arms folded beneath her chest, one foot crossed over the other, as his had been earlier when he had leaned against his motorbike. Ryz'n observed him curiously, hopeful the pictures might spur his recall. Sheena called from the living room that dinner was on the table, but Ryz'n said nothing, not wanting to break the spell the photos held for him.

However, Dixie had heard the dinner call, too. He began to turn his body away slowly, even as he continued to stare at the photos on the walls. As he turned, he accidentally bumped into the light but firm Ryz'n, knocking her from her perch, back into the briefly recessed wall that led from her bedroom to the hallway.

"Oh, ahm turrblee s-s-orree."

He bent over to help right her, as she leaned, half squatting back against the wall. She stood up right before his face. Their eyes locked. She wanted to kiss him so badly that she could hardly restrain herself, but she didn't want to repeat her earlier miscue, either. Dixie felt a similar urge, but he backed off.

"Me-meat-loaf," he announced, diffusing the situation.

She laughed nervously, repeating his tepid announcement. As they walked back through the house to the dining room, Dixie again noticed four, six-inch high gold trophies resting atop the upright piano. He had been so engrossed in her loveliness earlier, he had dwelled on nothing else. In addition, hanging on the living room wall above the piano, he noticed separate, glass frames enclosing

gold records and magazine covers in the pattern of a giant 'X' on the wall. Two single gold records formed the outer top points of the 'X'. Two more gold records overlaid each other, sharing the same glass enclosed case comprised the juncture of the 'X', while below two magazine covers, also framed in glass casings, formed the base of the 'X'.

Ryz'n identified the gold trophies on the piano as their Golden Disc awards, which the band had won for three of their songs. She pointed out that their band, *Good Rockin' Tonite (GRT)*, was the only music act to win the award three consecutive years in three different categories, R&B, Country and Western, and Popular. When Dixie asked about the fourth award, Ryz'n told him it was for "Best Newcomers" in the Rock'N'Roll category back in 1971.

The double gold albums in the center represented the million plus sales of *Good Rockin' Tonight*, their first LP. She explained proudly the other two gold albums represented their second and third LPs, *More Good Rockin' Tonight* and *Still More Good Rockin' Tonight*, which broke the hundred thousand sales mark nine and six times, respectively. At his request, she explained that a gold album represented five hundred thousand sold copies of a record album. Then she explained that the magazine covers highlighted *GRT* as artists of the year for both 1971 and 1972. *Spin* was an internationally known R&B rag, while *Backbeat* was an equally renown Rock'N'Roll publication.

"Who thought up the na-names for the rec-rec, uh al-ba-bums?" asked Dixie.

"Why, you did Baby! Except for *Lest We Forget*, the last one of course. They were all your idea," glowed Ryz'n, squeezing his hand.

Dixie nodded skeptically. "Shrewd. Mo-most o-o-riginal," he mused.

She laughed agreeably. "Oh definitely. You were nothing if not original, Sweetie. Ha! See, you figured keeping the name of the band in the album title would make it easier for the public to remember who we were. They'd associate each new album with the last, see? And buy accordingly. And it worked, too!"

"Yeah? F-Fell off a b-bit after the f-first couple," he observed in all neutrality.

"Oh no, Baby. When you consider that you weren't around to promote them at all with live concerts and stuff, they really sold very well. Still are, as a matter of fact. Royalties keep flowing in every month. The *More* album might just go twice gold yet. It topped the nine hundred and sixty thousand mark last month. You wait and see. Especially now that you've come home, Baby." She winked.

Her last remark made him wince. That whole record deal just wasn't for him.

Baseball! That's my thing.

From around the corner, they heard Sheena's exasperated voice: "Hey Ryz'n! We're gonna start eatin' without ya, if ya don't get your tails in here PRONTO!"

Mildly ashamed of her sister's ill-mannered behavior, Ryz'n turned to her husband and shook her head, clucking simply "Sheena!" as if that explained everything. Then she grinned and coaxed, "Come on, Nicky. It's time for meatloaf with the in-laws."