

~ Chapter 1: First Night Back ~

Silver slivers of mist slipped silently by, surrounding the twisted black iron that comprised the motel veranda's Creole style railing. A soft, Southern Maryland, summer night fog snaked across a shadowy, second story, concrete porch into the open, dark doorway of a motel room. Inside Room 222 of the Royal George Inn, an absence of light cloaked a black and red interior décor. Dixie watched as a shapely young woman stepped inside the doorway and flipped the light switch up and down to no effect. The motel room remained dark, as did the outside overhead door light, which had whimpered and died only moments ago.

*They had made it.*

Those were his first words to her earlier that fine June evening when they first had met out on her parents' front curb. Now, Dixie wished he never had uttered that well intentioned lie. He merely had wanted to console her during her shock and distress at seeing him again, at his resurrection, so to speak. Sure. In one sense, he had been right. Despite all the naysayers, the two of them in his or her persistent way had prevailed against the odds over the last three years. Dixie had survived the War and the many wounds he had received, including the one to the back of his head that nearly had killed him. From what she had said earlier in the evening, evidently she had remained faithful and true to him, despite the many temptations offered up by her tawdry music profession. She had confessed to him that she never had doubted that one day, despite the improbabilities; the Lord would answer her penitent, persistent prayers. He would end their long, painful separation and restore him to her.

This lovely young woman was nothing like the spoiled brat, Rock'N'Roll star, his former fiancée Donna Dixon had described to him. He understood now however that Donna would have said and done anything to try to hold him and, in fact, she had. Yet, he could not fault Donna for trying. He had loved Donna. Moreover, he had respected her as a single mother, raising two great kids on the slender income she gleaned from her home hair-dressing business. Dixie had loved Donna's kids as much as he had admired Donna's courage, among some of her other fine attributes.

However, this girl here, this smoky-haired, brunette cutie traipsing lightly through the shadowy mist here before him, this girl who claimed to be his wife, was something truly special. Unfortunately, he could not recall a blessed thing about her. Funny ain't it, how a bullet to the back of the head at close range could foul up a guy's memory that way? No, he could not recall her at all, but she sure seemed willing to help spark his memory.

Dixie watched as the curvy, young woman tread warily inside the darkened room. She stumbled softly into some previously invisible dresser drawers on her right.

"Ouch"! Doggone it! Say? Hold the door wide open a sec, will ya Sweetie? 'Til I find a light that works."

Dixie knew she was tired. It was well after two a.m., yet the girl's lilting tone was playful. Her naturally smoky, whiskey and cigarette, vocal tones were as sultry, as they had been just now out on the veranda where she had enticed him. They were alone

## *Out at Home*

now, finally. The few guests at this sleepy, suburban Washington, DC, two-story colonial brick motel had retired hours ago. Dix opened the door fully, pushing it against the wall.

Fog crept further into the room, born upon what little illumination emanated from the veranda's other door lamps and the motor inn's parking lot lamps downstairs. Just for a second, through the mist, a faint gleam refracted from the fog and seized about her classic, hourglass figure. Misty light enshrouded her in a silver spiral, as she sashayed across the room. The silver mist wrapped itself about her, clinging to her figure like a serpentine ghost. The young woman glowed surreally. She shone silvery iridescent, more as though she were some wondrous, silver apparition than a live human being. Then the eerie, ethereal, live, silver portrait evaporated with the mist, leaving the girl alone in the dark. Dixie blinked hard twice and shook his head. For an instant, just an instant, she had reminded him of the constantly disappearing silhouette girl in his recurring visions. Those visions had kept him sane the last couple of years and helped to fill the broad, frozen vacuum of his soul. However now, he shook off the vanishing apparition, as he might have shaken off a bad-hop grounder to the shin.

Dixie recovered his senses even though he was still half-drunk from a night of celebratory merrymaking. He was glad that he had obeyed her request to let the faint, distant lamplight into the room, too. The light let him focus intently on her backside as her attractively broad, rounded hips swayed to and fro naturally. She crossed to the far side of the murky motel room without a clue of the effect her bouncing caboose had upon him. He reasoned that this girl might be short, but she sure ain't small.

Sublimely unconscious of her naively sexy ways, she swished and swayed her path to the hardly discernible vanity counter at the back of the room, where she turned on both the foyer and vanity alcove lights, again with negative results. Having adjusted to the dark interior, Dixie's keen eyes observed the ironed-on creases on her smart, forest green, cuffed short-shorts still held their form on either cheek of her round behind. However, this girl, this woman here before him, was someone distinctively unique from any other woman he had known. Surely, she was different. Although she claimed to be his wife, he could not recall a darned thing about her. No, he could not recall her at all, but it pleased him warmly that she sure acted more than willing to help him spark his memory

*Yeah, it sure is funny, what havoc one little twenty-two caliber bullet could create among one's brain cells.*

"Try that switch, the farthest one on the wall behind ya, Baby." She flicked her forefinger towards the wall behind his left shoulder.

Dixie reached back and flipped the switch next to the door, but nothing happened. He flipped it off again. That's strange. He knew the bathroom light had worked this afternoon when he had showered, but he did not recall trying the other lights. He had wanted only to sleep after a tough night of long distance, cross-country riding on his Honda 750.

## *First Night Back*

She called back over her left shoulder, cheerfully innocent. “Well, looks like the outside light and the front table lamp aren’t the only lights not working, Sweetie.” Turning towards him, she sauntered his way. “But that’s OK Baby, as long as we are.”

She grinned shyly. *Geeze!* The girl moves as if she’s “all over alive,” as they said in those old cowboy movies. And the great thing of it was she did not even know it. She possessed the same naturally sultry rhythm in her gait as she did in the tone of her voice. It amused him to think that she not only talked the talk, but also walked the walk. Dixie recalled an early Rock’N’Roll movie he had shown in the rec. hall over at Kaneohe. The film’s theme song was “The Girl Can’t Help It” by Little Richard. And that lyric fit this girl here to a *T*. “‘Moves like jell-o on springs.’ Oh yeah,” mumbled Dixie. “She sure does, just like Marilyn Monroe walking along the railroad track in ‘Some Like It Hot.’”

“What’s that Sweetie? What ‘does?’”

Right now, she seemed too preoccupied with the lighting or rather the lack of lighting to follow up her question. “Why don’t ya pull those curtains open and crack the blinds. That oughtta help some. And I be right with ya, Honey, as soon as I hang up your suit coat on the rack here.”

He obeyed her requests. And sure enough, as the curtains opened, silver-grey light eerily filled the room, punctuated by the bizarre horizontal shadows of the half open Venetian blinds. The uncanny light was just about right for a romantic night. Dixie studied her some more as she fumbled for a free hanger in the closet.

How old did she say she was?

Let’s see, she said she would be twenty-two next week—yeah, on the twenty-second! And he would be twenty-two on the twenty-second, as well, on the twenty-second of September. He remembered because she said good things always happened for her on the twenty-second, no matter what month it was. She was much younger than Donna. That was certain. Donna was going to turn twenty-nine in August. He and Donna used to guess how old he might be since he could not remember. Donna said he had to be at least twenty-five. Donn had claimed he could not have been any younger, because he acted so mature, even more mature than she did much of the time. He always felt Donna had been wrong about his age. He was not that mature. He was just afraid to talk, afraid to let others hear him slur and stutter. Donna had misconstrued a forced quiet nature for maturity. But he had not argued with her about it. He was the kind of guy who was willing to go along to get along.

“OH! My goodness! Pure silk isn’t it, Honey?”

“What?”

She held the suit coat collar to the light and studied the label.

“Made in Manila? Hmmm. Yes, that is a fine suit coat, Baby. You can shut the door now, Honey. Keep the bugs out. Never mind. I get it ... You save your energy.”

Smiling, she hung up the coat and hustled over past him to shut the motel room door. Then she softly sauntered back to him. Dixie stood at the foot of the nearer of the room’s two double beds, unable to believe his great fortune. The sparse, grey lighting was just perfect. Her silhouette did remind him of *the* silhouette, the one, which had

## *Out at Home*

haunted his mind the last two-plus years, since he had come out of a coma back in Subic Bay. Could this woman-child really be the silhouette girl of his recurring vision? But she was far too short. The silhouette goddess of his vision was larger than life, like an Amazon, like, well, like Donna, except that Donna is a blonde and the silhouette girl's hair is dark, very dark.

Yep! This girl here is short, but she sure ain't small at all. Except for that waist! It's darn near invisible! Good golly, Miss Molly! What had Big Jim said about this woman? "Nobody's got a wife looks like that—Nobody!" Big Jim was right and now Dixie was Nobody. She looked even better in person than she did on those album covers.

*Nobody?*

That is what he was alright. Actually, now, he had two identities, but he still felt like nobody. He was the self-proclaimed James Dean Todd "Dixie" Strickler—the slightly mentally disabled, sometimes stuttering ex-Marine without a family or a past, who played baseball on scholarship at Peppermount University. And, just tonight, he learns for the first time, for certain, that he is really another person altogether, a William Nicholas Sheeboom of Crest Hill Heights, Maryland. Before he entered the service, he was supposed to have been a former, rapidly rising Rock'N'Roller, whose meteoric shooting star vanished as quickly as it had risen. Now the once bright star of the missing Nick Sheeboom had receded into the forsaken frozen wastelands of Rock'N'Roll outer space. He was a "late-great" semi-legend, even a burgeoning cult figure or so he was told. However, anonymous thus far, Dixie suspected this Nick's miraculous resurrection in him, coupled with Dix's own lack of memory were about to make both he and Little Nick has-beens and frauds at the ripe old age of twenty-one.

Perhaps more importantly, Dixie also had learned that he was not alone in the world, after all. He had family—parents, a brother and more friends than he thought possible, not to mention this handsome wife. All this he had discovered in the last nine hours and he could hardly believe his good fortune. Still, he had to temper all of this good news. None of it had sunk in yet. Life had let him down too many times in the past couple of years. Due to his loss of memory, he had learned the hard way to expect the worst, but hope for the best. Yes, that was his motto. He repeated the phrase now silently as if it were a mantra, as a self-reassuring, mental pinch on the cheek.

Right now, Dixie had two main concerns. One: he had to remember to answer to his real name of "Nick" from now on, instead of "Dixie." And two: he could not allow this gorgeous apparition to view his nasty war wounds. Earlier, by accident, she had discovered his maimed right hand. Gamely, she had forced a smile and taken his wounded hand in hers and warmly suggested they go inside her parent's home for dinner. She had caressed his stubs without making a fuss. And while she had heard about the missing top half of his left ear, she had not yet seen it. His prosthetic had covered that wound all evening. However, the scars he hid below the belt were particularly grotesque and even more embarrassing. He knew what she was expecting now. Everything that had transpired since first he had met her this evening had led to this moment, but he just could not let her view him. He just couldn't. He did not feel

## *First Night Back*

right about it, not yet anyway. He had only spent this one evening with her. He did not even know her yet, for cripe's sake! He just could not do it—

“What’s a matta, Sweetie? I’m not gonna bite ya, now. Honest—that is, unless ya want me to.” Inherently smoky with a natural slightly hoarse catch in her voice, she had no idea how her husky alto turned him on. No wonder she had sold so many records! The coquette showered her three-dimple grin upon him.

“Here. Let me help ya take that shirt off Honey.” She possessed the double-cheeked, innocent, dimpled face of a high school cheerleader and the incredible body of a, a—

Before he could finish his lewd thought, the girl stepped to him, grasping the shirt on either side of his waist and pulling the powder blue, cotton fabric out of his silk pants. The night’s worth of beer swimming in his brain made him stagger.

“Whoa boy! Hang in there, she cooed. “Yeah. Raise your arms up, Baby. Atta Boy.”

She lifted the sleeveless, pale blue crew neck up over his head and arms as if he were a little boy, preparing for his evening bath, mussing his wavy jet black, shoulder length hair in the process. “There, that wasn’t so difficult, now was it?” Again, she smiled brightly, but her bright smile turned into a gaping yawn, which she politely covered with her left hand.

“Scuse me. Guess I’m a bit tired.” Dixie shot her a questioning glance, which she quickly rebutted. “Oh, oh, but not *too* tired.” Batting her long, dark lashes at him, she patted his black hair down over his head and gave him the twice over.

“My goodness, Nicky! You always were in top shape. I know you’re a ballplayer and all. But ... well GEE WHIZ! You’re just so, so big, so hard, well—everywhere! Mother was right for sure. You left us an eighteen year-old boy and came home a man! Who would have thought three years and two months would have made such a big difference in your size, at your age, Sweetie? You turned out to be even more of a late bloomer than I was, Baby. And frankly, I didn’t think that was possible!”

She dropped the hand covering her gaping mouth, neglecting to conceal the pleased astonishment in her eyes. She reached toward his hirsute pecs, but she stopped short and self-consciously hid her hands behind her back.

Rocking back on his heels unsteadily, Dixie groaned because he knew she would not be so pleased when she observed his war-marred lower half. He had to stop this. He had to stop it now. But how? How could he defuse the situation in a way that would not affront her? She knew him as her husband of nearly five years. They had gone to high school together, for crying out aloud, or so he had been told. She had been waiting patiently for him to come home to her for over three years! And yet, because of his memory loss, he had known her for barely nine hours!

In awe of her overwhelming, innocent beauty, Dixie swayed before her, staring into her enticing, soft emerald eyes. Ryz’n’s lovely, full pink lips parted, deepening her spell over him. Even her name was desirable—Ryz’n, which rhymes with horizon— at least, that, is what she had just now told him a few minutes ago out on the veranda. Softly, silently, she drew him into her arms.

*Mann! She kisses like an angel! What an angel too, one who knows how to enjoy a kiss and she ain’t even half-loaded like me.*

## *Out at Home*

He was falling under her spell, just as he had out on the veranda minutes earlier, when they had embraced in earnest. Sweat broke out on his brow and he began to shake. He searched his mind for a way out of this delightful predicament.

“Ummm,” she moaned. “I knew we still had it, Sweetie. I just knew it! Those sparklers are growin’ inside of me, startin’ to shoot off every which way, just as they used to do. Ummm! And the juices, the juices are starting to flow. And I was afraid you were too loaded ... I should have known better.” She tightened her grip about his waist and smothered her groan in another slow, wet kiss.

What to do, what to do, wondered Dixie. Then it came to him. *Too loaded? That’s it!* Suddenly more unsteady on his feet, Dixie backed up into the bed, wavered, seized his stomach with both arms, and made a ghastly face.

“What is it, Nicky? What’s wrong, Baby?”

“Oh, I d-dunno. The room is sp-spinnin’. Sorry. Pa-please ex—excuse me.”

Bending over from the waist, Dixie covered his mouth and bolted past his shocked wife as a scared rabbit would. He crossed the motel room uncertainly, ducked through the alcove and threw himself into the bathroom, where he shut and locked the door behind him. Safely inside the bathroom, Dixie blinked as his eyes adjusted to the harsh glare of the bathroom light, as it caromed wickedly off the white tile walls. He noted ironically that this was the only working light in the place.

He filled a plastic motel cup with water from the tub spigot and poured the water into the toilet while he loudly faked retching. After a couple more phony vomits, he wondered if James Dean could have acted any better. He moaned and groaned while he rocked back against the bathtub feigning nausea. The plastic, opaque shower curtain between him and the tub provided little respite from the tub’s hard enamel against his back. Sighing deeply, as though he were greatly relieved, he planned his next move.

He would flush the toilet, toss the cup in the trash can, walk out into the bedroom and pass out on one of the beds. She would have to leave him alone then. He would have to muster all the discipline he had learned in the Corps, but he had no doubts he could pull it off. She would have no other choice, until morning anyway. And then, then ... Then, they had to make that early breakfast they had promised his parents! Yes, that’s it! That should buy him enough time to where he could gently break to her the news of the atrocities, which the War had perpetrated upon his lower body. After that confession, maybe she would not be so anxious to consummate their overdue reunion. Perhaps, she would react differently from Lori Lei and Donna who, when confronted with his wounds, had only redoubled their efforts to entice him. And that would be alright, too, but at least then she would know what to expect.

Even though this handsome girl-next-door claimed to be his wife and obviously cared very much for him, and, despite his beer high, Dixie did not feel right about his deception. Such tactics ran contrary to his nature. He felt like a heel, but he also felt desperate. He needed to buy some time. He just was not ready, even if she did look like a fox, a bodacious, phat fox at that! He just could not face her now, could not give her what she desired, not now, not right now, not until he knew her a little better.

\* \* \*

## *First Night Back*

On the other side of the door, Ryz'n waited, filled with concern. She hoped her sudden advances had not made him sick. She prayed it had been the beer, from the impromptu raucous, alcoholic homecoming that had spawned the block party at her in-laws' home. He had ridden about twenty-eight hundred miles in four nights on his motorcycle to get to her. The physically draining ride along with all the other shocks he had faced today were enough to make anyone ill. His over-indulgence all evening with the revelers, whom he did not know, not to mention eating her mother's stomach-wrenching meatloaf, which she knew he loathed, all could have been enough to make anyone ill.

*It wasn't me? Was it? It could not have been anything I did that made him ill, could it? Was I too forward, too fast?*

Waiting pensively outside the closed bathroom door, Ryz'n watched the door suddenly swing open. She stepped aside as Nick burst through the doorway. It struck her oddly only now that the bathroom light was working fine. Nick staggered out of the bathroom, caroming weakly off the motel walls, seemingly far drunker than when he had entered.

Perhaps he's weak—"My Poor Baby."

"Ooooh!" Dixie moaned.

Staggering forward to the far bed, Nick pivoted and plopped down upon his back, with his arms sprawled across the double bed closer to the door. Without movement or sound, he lay. Apparently, he was unconscious. His grey, thatched, Gucci-shod feet hung over the edge of the bed, leaving his lower legs and feet suspended in air above the plush floor carpet. His eyes were closed.

"Why, he's passed out—like a light!" Ryz'n whispered unconsciously.

Unsure what to think or do next, Ryz'n watched him warily. She entered the bathroom to devise her own plan and inspect the damage he may have left in his wake. There was none, no residue, no stench, no nothing. "Whew! That's good." She remarked with quiet relief. When she emerged, she left the light on and the door open. Then she tried gently but vainly, to rouse him, to garner his attention. She stood over her snoring, unconscious spouse and began speaking to him as if he were conscious. She spoke aloud, quietly and confidently, as she had become accustomed to doing during his long absence, when she thought she had been alone.

"Well Nicky, Daddy was right. You haven't changed a bit, Baby. This is just like our wedding night, our *second* wedding night, that is. Remember? I had to carry *you* over the threshold in a dead man's lift that night. Of course, you don't remember. You were passed out drunk, just as you are now, about as worthless as a melted candle. Pickles!"

She stood silently with her arms crossed, scarcely smiling for several seconds, as she recalled the frustrating memory. "Of course, we were just kids then—seventeen, the both of us. And you were a heck of a lot smaller than you are now. A heck of a lot smaller! About thirty, forty pounds lighter I'd say and probably nearly four inches shorter, too." She paused for a response. However, receiving none, she bantered on with her quiet soliloquy, quite unabashed.

## *Out at Home*

“Well, I could never carry you now of course. You’ve grown too danged big! Lucky for you, this is your first night back. I won’t give ya the ice water bath treatment I gave ya on our second wedding night.” She chuckled to herself at the thought of it. Then she wagged a deceptively long, chastising forefinger at his slain figure. “But you deserved it, that time, Sweetie. You most certainly did. There was no excuse for you getting bombed out of your gourd like that at our reception and passing out, after you had bragged to everyone all evening on how we got married on the shortest day of the year, so we could enjoy the longest night! Hmmpf! The longest night!!” She threw her nose up in the air and folded her arms across her ample chest.

Ryz’n paced back and forth between the room’s twin double beds, deftly avoiding contact with her husband’s feet hanging over the bed, as she quietly kibitzed with herself. All the while, she kept an eye on her fallen husband in the vain hope that he might stir. The light from the bathroom aided her vision, but because the light did not turn corners, she strained to perceive objects in the room. She noted the outside light piercing through the Venetian blinds crossed horizontally over his naked torso, lending a surreal, macabre quality to the scene. The Kafkaesque slanted bars of alternating light and shadow crossing over his body made him appear jailed or caged, like some wild animal, captured and anesthetized in a darkly surreal scene from a strange mutation of “Mutual of Omaha’s Wild Kingdom.” However, the bizarre sight did not interrupt her train of thought.

“Well, you know what Baby? We did enjoy the longest night, after all. Because I made sure we did. And thanks to that ice water shower-bath, you came through for me, too, just as you always did, Sweetie.” She paused to smile down at him and continued to whisper, hoping he would wake. “Yes sir, just as you always did ...” She grinned at the memory as well as her hope for a repeat performance now. Yet, when the object of her affections failed to stir, her grin melted away.

She stopped pacing to cozy up beside him, as he lay half-naked across the bed. The young bride playfully and gently fingered his long, wavy locks and reached around his head to kiss him ever so lightly upon the cheek. She lightly skimmed the backs of her long pink, French-manicured fingernails over the strange apparition that was his new, soft, trimly groomed moustache. She really liked his new moustache. It detracted from the delicacy of his nose and his full, almost feminine, pink lips and focused instead upon his masculine features. She giggled silently, yet hoping he might wake to please her again, as he had done so often, so long ago in the past. Propping herself on her right elbow near his outstretched left triceps, with her bare legs together, her knees drawn up pulling her feet up beneath her, Ryz’n caressed Nick with her French-painted fingernails. Her fingertips flowed lightly, nearly imperceptibly, over his neck, shoulders and chest. Still, he remained silently supine. In fact, he did not even flinch. He was out for sure.

*Pickles!*

Again, she whispered. “Don’t remember you having so much chest hair Honey, but I like it. Yes, I like it just fine.” The numerous soft hairs shaped themselves to the contours of his well-defined pectoral muscles. Ryz’n considered taking him by force,

## *First Night Back*

but she decided against it. If he woke up ... well, OK, but she would not force herself upon him no matter how much she desired to do so, as she had that afternoon out at the curb. She had embarrassed him, her and her family with that emotional display. However, disappointed and frustrated now by his earlier eager complicity out on the veranda, she could not help but feel terribly let down now.

It was his first night back. It had been a rough one for him. All those people at the impromptu block party who knew him, but whom he could not recall, had thrown him for a loop. She had seen how his lack of recall had disappointed him. Each time he could not remember someone, it just seemed to cut him a little deeper. Consequently, he drank a little more. Ryz'n had said nothing. What could she have said? She had promised him his memory would return just as he, at long last, had returned to her, even though the doctors could not make such a promise. What more could she do, given his present state? Although she wanted her long overdue husband badly now, Ry decided to do what would be best for him—put him to bed and let him sleep it off. Driving that motorcycle across the country in four nights, as he had done, would have exhausted anyone. There would be plenty of time for loving later. Yes, there would be plenty of time, a lifetime.

Resigned to her continued fate of abstinence for the night, Ryz'n crawled off the bed, where she stood to study her long, lost husband. His upper arms were massive. The triceps were gigantic while the long biceps, though large, were more muscularly lean than bulky. She reminded herself proudly that he was a Second Team All-American. His forearms, as with most baseball players she knew, were extremely well developed. Nevertheless, his muscular arms were not grotesquely chunky like those of Bryson, her bulky football-playing brother-in-law. No, Nick had the solid, toned, angular physique of a baseball player. His firm, well-defined pecs also were hard and flat but they were not bulky. Yet, with the aid of the horizontal bars of light filtering between the window blinds, she could clearly see their strong definition. And his belly was nothing, nothing but flat, tranquil hardness, a veritable grid of hard, square muscles. There was not an ounce of fat on the boy. Then, Little Nick had always been a mesomorph, ever since she had known him, since they had shared homeroom their first year of high school.

Suddenly, deep inside her, Ryz'n came alive as she had when she had kissed him a few minutes ago and earlier outside the bathroom at his parents' home. His abdomen scarcely moved as he breathed, oblivious to her and all that waked. Gosh! He's so, so ... so edible. Here comes that old fever again. She could not leave him like that, could she? Leave him, to sleep hanging off the bed in his grey silk, suit pants and his expensive grey Gucci loafers? No, she could not do that. But she could undress him. That's a very wifely act, she mused, a kind consideration on her part and if he happened to wake ... well ... She grinned.

“Well, now, then, there,’ as you used to say, Sweetie.”

Ryz'n gingerly removed one of his grey thatched Gucci's from his sock-less foot, when something, some bit of tightly folded paper, fell to the floor at the foot of the bed. She bent down curiously to pick up the paper. Closer inspection revealed it was cash money, folded tightly multiple times. It was U.S. currency.

## *Out at Home*

Astonished, Ryz'n sunk slowly to the floor. Sitting sidesaddle on the thick carpet now near his exposed bare foot, she unfolded the currency beneath a bar of horizontal light from the window to find five, one-hundred dollar bills encasing two, five-hundred dollar bills. Ryz'n shook her head, first in amusement, then in amazement. Perplexed, she laid the bills on the nightstand between the two queen-sized, double beds. She whispered.

"How on earth did you get these five hundred-dollar bills, Nicholas? Who is this?" She held the bill to the faint bathroom light and squinted at the portrait. "William McKinley? I thought they didn't make these big bills anymore? I've never seen such a bill and I've seen a lot of cash in my business."

She shook her head and pulled off his other Gucci loafer, wondering what it might contain. No folded bills fell out this time. She checked the lightweight loafer, tipped it over and shook it. Still, no money fell to the floor.

"Well! Kind o' lopsided there weren't ya, Baby? Keepin' all your eggs in one shoe, were ya? Ha!"

She chuckled softly again. She knelt down to place his lightweight loafers together neatly under the unfolded luggage stand, opposite the beds and across the aisle to her left. Turning back to him, by the faint light from the bathroom, Ryz'n observed something sticking to the sole of her husband's left foot. Closer examination disclosed another wad of bills. She laughed lowly and covered her mouth to muffle the sound, as she peeled off the folded bills stuck to the sole of his foot. There were five, one-hundred dollar bills wrapped around another obsolete bill, a thousand-dollar bill on his left foot. She inspected the paper currency closely, for in all her numerous, heavy cash dealings, she had never seen so many zeros on an American bill.

"Grover Cleveland?" She read this time beneath the portrait of the old president adorning the bill. "Who the heck is he? Thought he was a pitcher for the Cubs or somebody? Well now. I know these bills have been out of circulation for at least six years. I remember getting that question wrong on a civics exam once."

She walked around his feet and placed all the bills on the nightstand, pressing them out as flat as possible. Yet, they remained quite rumpled and curled up at the ends. She wheeled to her left, towards him and whispered.

"Well, I'll be! 'If that don't take the hair off a frog,' as you used to say Baby. Guess you were pretty well balanced after all, Nicky. Sorry I, uh, short changed ya."

She giggled again cheerily at her wit, covering her mouth as before. His homecoming had made her giddy, despite, or perhaps because of his premature retirement for the evening. With Nick passed out, she felt as if she could let down a little, so she exhaled a loud, long rush of air. Fatigue overtook her abruptly. However, she could not overlook her wifely duties. Ryz'n knew she was nothing, if not dutiful.

"Well, Nicky! Now you shouldn't sleep in you suit trousers. I'm sure Mama Wauneta taught you better than that!"

Ryz'n crawled onto the bed beside him to loosen his belt and pants. Sleepily, Dixie half rolled away from her toward the foot of the bed.

"Hey! Where ya goin' there big boy?"

## *First Night Back*

Ryz'n pulled his hip back over to finish what she had begun, hoping he might wake. Then she placed her hands around the backs of his heels and lifted his legs up. She scooch-stepped sideways between the beds and around the foot of his bed, spinning him involuntarily upon his butt. Ry stopped at the foot of the bed to right him flat out and lowered his legs onto the spread. She waited to see if he had woken, but he had not. He did not even stir. There was nothing. Then he snored. Ryz'n shook her head in disbelief, so she carried on dutifully. She pulled off his pants and shook her head with surprise when she saw that he wore nothing beneath them. At least, that much was like Little Nick, she mused. Averting her eyes from the preferred object of her desires, Ryz'n focused instead upon removing the pants. The left pant leg hung up on something near Nick's ankle. She worked to remove the pant leg, only to discover a pistol in an ankle holster was impeding the pantsing operation.

"What's this?" she blurted out in disbelief.

Ryz'n unhooked the holster gingerly. Her heart beat faster as she extracted a pistol from the holster. She fingered the weapon curiously, weighing it in her hand. The handgun was lighter than she expected. She carried it over to the vanity where she examined the revolver more thoroughly. The gun had varnished wooden grips and a finely finished, ruddy wooden handle, which appeared to be highly varnished walnut. There was also a single screw in the handle and above the screw was a circular, golden emblem of some kind embedded in the varnished wood. A similar emblem was notched in white against the black iron beneath the trigger. The stark contrast in colors enabled her to view what appeared to be an Olde English S superimposed over a W. A small raised sight sat atop the snub-nosed black iron barrel. The pistol was a five-chamber revolver and beneath the chambers she read, "Licensed Trademark of Smith & Wesson Corp." Then on the side of the black snub barrel, she read: "Chiefs Special S."

The weapon intrigued her. Feeling a surprising, new found sense of power just holding it, Ryz'n crossed to the vanity, laid the ankle holster next to the sink and stepped back from the counter. She glanced over her shoulder to make sure her husband was still snoring. He was, so she spread her feet to shoulder width to gain a firm base, locked her knees and, leaning back a little, held the weapon with two hands at arm's length as she had seen Angie Dickinson do on "The Police Woman" television show. Squinting her right eye, Ry sighted down the gun's barrel with her left eye, targeting her reflection in the mirror. She kept her left trigger finger over the guard ring instead of the trigger, squeezed and whispered hoarsely.

"Pow! Pow! Pow!"

She imagined having blown away the bad guy or, in this case, the bad girl in the mirror. Ry pulled the weapon back and put the barrel to her lips and blew, as the guys do in the movies and cracked up at her own giddy silliness, almost dropping the Smith & Wesson in the process, scaring the dickens out of her. Suddenly frightened that she might, in fact, drop the weapon and discharge it accidentally, she replaced the handgun into the holster. Then, with a new, healthy respect for the revolver, she picked up the whole apparatus gingerly, pinching it between her thumbs and forefingers and carried

## *Out at Home*

it at arm's length, as if it were a snake. She set the thing down gently on the dresser bureau behind her.

"Shooo! Lucky, I didn't blow my brains out!" She sighed heavily. Still, she could not deny that holding the thing in her hands had felt strangely too good to be true. Gripping the handgun had imbued her with a sense of power she rarely felt, except sometimes when she performed live on stage with the band. Sarcastically, she figured that playing with the gun would be the only bang she got out of this evening.

Forgetting her "Police Woman" antics, Ryz'n turned about and resumed her more mundane, domestic duties, by picking up her husband's pants. She folded them neatly and carried them to the opened closet. As she hung them over a hanger, something plopped onto the floor. It was Nick's wallet. She hung up the pants and stooped down to inspect the wallet's contents, but her manners would not permit her to do so. She decided against such subterfuge, even though she was inspecting everything else he had. In this matter, her hypocrisy could not overcome her peculiar Roman Catholic sense of morals. Checking out her spouse's person was all right, but somehow, she felt that checking out his wallet would be going too far. True, he was her husband. However, the unique circumstances surrounding his return also rendered him a stranger to her. Gingerly, she placed his billfold on the nearby bureau of drawers. Secretly, she feared she might find evidence of his treacherous, lying, former fiancée in his billfold. She had found enough surprises for one night and wanted to find no more on that score. She was ill-prepared now to deal with re-opening the still fresh wounds caused by that adulterous Amazon's audacious mendacity.

Still curious about him though, Ryz'n returned to her prone husband and uncovered something on his right instep. Stooping down, she discovered a leather-sheathed, six-inch stiletto tied around his lower leg. As she had done with the pistol, now she removed the blade for a better look and held the thing out toward the light, still burning in the bathroom. The faint light gleamed off the glinting steel blade. Shocked now, she forgot to whisper and blurted out clearly.

"My God, Nicky! What have you been doing? Why do you need all these weapons? And carry all that cash!" She sighed deeply and turned to him in desperation.

"Oh Nicky, Nicky. It's going to be all right now, Honey. I don't know what you've been doing to support yourself and that lying witch in San Diego, but you won't have to do it any longer, Sweetie. We're rich, Baby—rich! And it's all because of you!" Still, she shuddered as she set the stiletto and its sheath down, laying it on the bureau next to the holstered pistol.

"My Gosh, Nicky! This scene resembles a danged cowboy—no—make that a gangster movie, for Pete's sake!"

She observed him now with real concern, real fright in her heart. Then, once more perceiving his nakedness, Ryz'n decided, against her better judgment, to inspect her husband's war wounds. She knew all about them from the official medical reports delivered to her by the Corps and the Navy, as well as, in a roundabout way, from his war letters to her. She had long been curious to inspect the damage first-hand. Of course, all he would say in his letters to her from Nam about his wounds was that he

## *First Night Back*

had “got a little Nicked up—Ha! Ha!” However, she had known better and longed for some time with a morbid curiosity to learn the true severity of his ghastly injuries. Now was her chance, while he snored in a drunken stupor.

Earlier in the evening, she had done her best to ignore or, at least, to make light of his missing fingers. Yet, it had taken all her poise to keep from bawling outright when first she had observed his maimed, right hand. And she had glanced repeatedly at the top of his left ear, which she knew was false but could not help but marvel at the genuine appearance of the cosmetic prosthetic, which concealed the wound. But now ...

She squinted, adjusting her eyes to the half-lit motel room. Because of her less than honest, sleuthing state of mind, the room suddenly appeared to her to be unnaturally seedy. Ryz’n surveyed her young husband’s nude, athletic form from head to foot. He was built just as well as she had remembered, but he was larger—everywhere. His torso was like that of a mature, spreading oak. A bar of light fell across his left shoulder. Something was out of place. Ryz’n bent forward to notice a small round red and white mark, just beneath his left collar bone. From his letters to her and the medical reports, she knew he had been shot there. The circular scar was about an inch in diameter. She lingered over the wound, moving her head back and forth trying to catch it just right in the half light. Ryz’n touched the scar lightly with her left fore and middle fingers. “Oh Baby!” She whispered. She leaned down and tenderly pressed her lips to the wound. Pulling on his shoulder a tad and bending down over it, she could look upon his back beneath the collar bone where she spotted the exit wound. The exit wound was considerably larger than the entry wound she had just kissed. She wanted to cry, but she bucked up, as she had done so often over the past three years.

On the point of his shoulder, she spotted the fading, jagged scars, which they both had incurred crawling through the broken window of their overturned and burning Bonneville convertible. They had survived that near fatal car accident on the Beltway after Nick had fallen asleep at the wheel, the summer after they had graduated from high school. Like him, her glass cut marks, which fell across the points of both of her hips, had shrunk and begun to fade. She noticed his flesh, marred during that car accident, compared unfavorably with the starker, more recent bullet wounds. Ry shook her head and braced herself for worse as she resumed her inspection.

Ryz’n moved down his body, directing her gaze below his slim waist. From the military medical reports she had received, she knew these wounds would be the worst. His quadriceps were massive, making his starkly strong calves appear slender by comparison. She recalled how he had confided in her that his quads and his muscular, upturned derriere, of which she was so fond, had produced his schoolboy fleetness of foot. With her folks earlier at the dinner table, Nick had confessed he got to first base routinely in 3.4 seconds from the right side of the plate. Although he had not mentioned it, she knew that was Big League speed. His admission had prompted her brother-in-law to invite Nick onto the M&L football squad, which Nick had declined, claiming football was too dangerous. That innocent remark had sparked a rise out of

## *Out at Home*

her family, because they were well aware of the many dangers he had survived just to get back to them.

Ryz'n cautiously inspected his inner, upper left quad. How embarrassing would it be for both of them if he were to wake now? She prayed to Saint Brigid in intercession that he would not. Groping lightly, more to the inside of his sparsely hairy thigh, she searched with bated breath until she found what she feared she might find. There were three parallel, but staggered gouges or grooves an inch or so apart, of varying lengths and depths. In the silver light, she could see that the tracer wounds had left seared, red and white, splotchy, hairless skin that was twisted and lumpy. Like St. Thomas with the Lord's nail prints, Ryz'n had to believe. She placed her right forefinger ever so lightly in the deepest gouge, which she estimated was nearly an inch deep and about as wide. She whispered in a hushed, frightened tone of disappointment.

"Oh My God, My God, why, why did You permit this?"

Ryz'n was concerned with something else she considered even more important, something she had worried about ever since she had received that notorious casualty report well over two years ago. She needed to know whether he could ever father another child with her. She wanted, in the worst way, to bear his children, their *own* children, maybe not right this minute but certainly in the not too distant future. She needed to know if he could manage the feat. The military's medical reports about Nick were unclear on this point. She had known even before they had married that his low sperm counts bordered on the infertile range. And she was no more fertile than he was. Due to complications arising from her appendectomy about ten years ago, as well as from certain congenital defects in her reproductive system, Ryz'n's gynecologist had predicted it was highly unlikely she could conceive. According to all the experts, her lone conception by Nick back in high school had proven to be as miraculous as the Immaculate Conception. Then, after the miracle had occurred, the doctor had had to recant his erroneous professional opinion with some mumbo jumbo about, "beating the odds of random chance." Five weeks into their senior year of high school, Ryz'n had lost the miraculous, God-given gift of an eleven-week old fetus in an unjustifiably wanton, senseless manner. The loss of the child in her first term had enabled her and Nick's families to cloak the incident in secrecy, which they yet maintained. However, Ry had incurred mental and emotional scars far more serious and fresh than any she ever had experienced any other place on her body. Those psychological scars haunted her to this day. Yes, the memory of her irresponsible loss of Nick's unborn child at the tender age of seventeen haunted her as did no other injury, like a preying, unrelenting ghost. She could not, would not think of that now, not now. She could not mourn their past when, she had to find out about their future.

Ryz'n could not help but whisper, with smug satisfaction, "No problems here," as she blithely brushed aside his beefy member with the back of her right hand to attain the object of her inspection. However, she stopped abruptly to regard what she so absent-mindedly had discarded. *Thank God*, he was in tact. She said a quick prayer and asked forgiveness for her cavalier attitude. Oh, it was late and her mind was playing tricks on her. That's all.

## *First Night Back*

Both astonished and bewildered, Ryz'n refocused on the task at hand. She had to do this. It was not pleasant for her by any means. And if he woke now, she did not know how she could explain herself. But she had to know. Next to wanting Nicky, she wanted children more than anything. And she wanted *his* children, no one else's. Back in high school, each of their respective doctors had diagnosed both she and Nick as infertile. That was even before their first marriage. However, her "miraculous" conception had proven those diagnoses ridiculously inept. Even so, she did not need another fly in the ointment fouling things up now. The odds of random chance were against them enough as it was. Ryz'n adjusted her head and leaned in to peer more closely at the true object of her inspection or, to be more accurate, what was left of it. In the half-light, Ryz'n witnessed first hand the maimed sac that contained what was left of his lone testicle, or "the lonely bull." At least, that is what he had dubbed it kiddingly in his war correspondences with her, after he had lost the other one in a firefight. (Nick had joked in his letter to her that he had devised the sarcastic moniker in honor of the title of Herb Alpert's once famous gold record album.) She held him and her hope for future generations in the palm of her hand now, pushing the "bull" around on her palm with her thumb and rolling it over her fingers as if the thing were an oblong golf ball. She gauged its size and shape, hoping it could still pass muster, as if such judgments and handling were a true test of the thing's fertility. She satisfied herself that the lonely bull was in tact as well. *Thank God for that, too.* Then she felt something odd on his patched-up sac.

"Pickles!" Something had pricked her fingertip. She dropped him and jerked her head back quickly to inspect the cause.

Truly, here was an ugly, ugly scar, with a ragged excess of flat skin, where the surgeon had sewn the sac back together awkwardly, creating a rigid, triangular, sail-like shape. A detached Ryz'n used the prison-like bars of horizontal light to relocate the bag, hold it up and clinically inspect the ghoulish wound. Once again, the rigidly jagged, triangular point of the sac pricked her forefinger mildly, as she ran her finger across it for a second time. "Oh no! This must be terribly uncomfortable for you." Forgetting that her mouth was wide open, she accidentally drooled upon him, but still he did not stir. Half-moaning, he kept snoring. He was really out! Thank God for that, too.

"Oooh, My Poor Baby... My Poor Baby!" She began to sniffle. "You were so beautiful, Sweetie. What am I to do with you now, Nicky? What am I to do?"

Oblivious to her cries and without waking, Nick rolled lazily onto his right side, towards the window, throwing his left knee over his right leg beneath him, covering the object of her inspection. However, his movements revealed his mutilated backside to her. Ryz'n squelched a sob to carry on her examination. She brushed her fingers lightly over his now exposed, deeply scarred right buttock. Most of the lower inside half had been blow away by the exit wounds from the same enemy fire, which had blasted away his testicle and gouged out his thigh. She could not restrain herself and called out loudly.

## *Out at Home*

“Oh my God, Nicky! That’s terrible, just terrible!” There was a hitch in his snoring, but nothing more.

Even though she feared she might wake him, Ryz’n frantically fingered the ghastly wounds; hoping they were not real. In the scant light, she discovered chunky rough ridges, edged gouges and lumpy, twisted, white and red-pink, once-seared flesh, which now served as the lower, inner third of his remaining right buttock. Ryz’n choked up. She could not help herself this time. Forgetting completely her recent, favorable assessment of his upper half, Ryz’n realized the complete picture now. Her beautiful boy-groom, her musician-athlete, so physically perfect in everyway, so well proportioned, so well sculpted, so gifted in so many ways before he had left her, had returned to her now all shot to pieces! Her head bowed unconsciously and her hair fell, brushing against his left, unmarred buttock.

“You’re all shot up, Baby! And for what? What a waste!” she sniffled. “What a terrible, terrible waste!”

Dumbfounded, Ryz’n turned her head aside to stare at him. Again, she observed how oddly the thin, alternating pattern of horizontal shadows and piercing bars of light through the Venetian blinds sliced up the eerie, grey light from the faint outside motel parking lamps. Those sterile, grid-like shadows surgically sliced his body multiple times lengthwise from head to foot. Suddenly, he reminded her of a corpse laying cold and still upon a coroner’s table, his body ready for an autopsy. That morbid thought shivered inside her stunned brain, reverberating icily through her body to her soul. Ryz’n could not take it. She rose weeping and hurriedly left his bedside to get some tissues blow her nose.

Still shaky, she returned to find he had rolled onto his right side away from her. Nick had brought his knees halfway up to his chest and arched his torso into a fetal position. He had clasped his hands together and shoved them down in between his lower thighs, in a pose not unlike the famous Goya painting. In effect, his changed position hid completely all of his wounds. The result was uncanny. Suddenly, he looked perfectly normal. He looked ... whole. The terrible scars seemed to have vanished. She blinked. Still partly stunned, and moving mechanically like a robot, Ryz’n dutifully pulled the spread from the other, unused side of the bed, to cover him, as if he were a cadaver on a morgue gurney.

*Stop IT! Stop IT Girl! Get hold of yourself!*

His sudden, deep snore caught her off guard, reminding her that he was alive and well, offering some black comic relief to the macabre scene, even as the ghoulish light through the blinds still appeared to pierce his curled up body. Ryz’n exhaled deeply.

The room had become warm and stuffy on this early summer’s night. She walked to the air conditioner (A/C)/heating unit beneath the room’s picture window to flip on the A/C. However, it did not work any better than the lights. She would call the front desk in the morning. Probably a fuse had blown out. She did not want to chance anyone coming up now who might wake him. If he woke for any reason now, she wanted it to be for her and for her alone. She opened the room’s pair of sash windows behind the downed, half-opened blinds to let in a little fresh air.

## *First Night Back*

Ryz'n returned to the bathroom to take care of her personal needs. Then she switched off the lone working light in the place. Nick sure had picked a lulu of a room. Nick. Nick ... What had he called himself tonight, Dixie? Ha! What a name to give yourself! She understood that right now he was ill, loaded and fatigued. She would have to restrain her wants and temper her own desires to do what was best for him. Still, Ryz'n could not wait to show him how much she needed him, how much she desired him. She would promise him that his ugly wounds would not inhibit her in the least. In fact, right now she could hardly keep from showing him just how she felt, how much she wanted him and how very little those scars mattered. Yet, the boy needed his rest, as did she. She had not slept well for four nights, not since she had heard he had headed east to find her.

Exhausted and resigned to celibacy for yet another night, Ryz'n wearily stripped off the brief articles of summer clothing she was wearing. She folded them neatly and laid them on the foot of the unused double bed, nearest the vanity alcove. Next, she removed the expensive custom-made Lady Rolex Nick had given her their last Christmas together. Then she pulled over her head his bottle opener and chain, which she had kept for him while he was away and which he refused to take back at dinner. Ryz'n also removed the anklet, which he also had given her, because she had broken the chain too many times during her sleep. She also slipped from her locks the yellow ribbon, which she had worn in his honor as a missing P.O.W. She laid these three items respectfully on the nightstand between the two beds. However, as always, she retained her short, gold-chained crucifix, which she wore despite the risk of breaking the chain, a mishap that had occurred only once.

Ryz'n knelt down humbly on both knees next to the motel bed to pray silently, in her bedtime ritual of supplication. She blessed herself, weeping tears of uncontrollable joy in thanksgiving to the Lord for His goodness and mercy in answering her prayers by returning her husband to her. Clothed only in grateful humility, with her eyes closed and her hands folded above the bed, nearly sitting upon her raised heels, Ry arched her back in the perfect posture, which her mother had enforced upon her since childhood. She prayed with her toes flat against and digging into the plush carpet, so that the curved soles of her feet matched the stringent arch of her back, as was her custom. The discomfiting stance, she claimed, kept her mind from wandering during her supplications and helped her to concentrate on her prayers. She sincerely prayed three "Hail Mary's" and three "Our Father's" before she again thanked the Lord for his faithfulness in hearing her prayers regarding Nicky for the last three years. Ryz'n effusively entreated Mother Mary in intercession that God would help Nicky remember their mutual past and that the Lord would miraculously bless them once more with children. She earnestly promised to take better care of the baby next time and, according to her teaching under the tutelage of Granpa Ryan. She thanked St. Patrick and St. Brigid, the Irish patron saint of fugitives for all her help in bringing Nick back home and St. Anthony, too. After she had finished, the girl crossed herself, kissed her crucifix and meekly entered into bed with her husband for the first time in more than three years.

## *Out at Home*

When Ryz'n finally climbed wearily between the sheets beside him, she rose up, leaned over to kiss her husband on the cheek and whispered hoarsely. "We'll do the best we can with what we have, Sweetie." She began to sniffle again involuntarily. "It might not be as great as it was, but, well, maybe it will be better. Who knows? After all, we're older and more mature. But together we'll ... we'll make it work ... somehow. We just gotta ... somehow. And you'll remember me. I swear I'll make you remember. And if I can't, the Lord will. G'night, Baby." She kissed him between his massive shoulder blades, through the thin red-ribbed spread, which she had draped over him.

Ryz'n snuggled up close to her husband's back by slipping her right arm under the spread beneath him and draped her left arm over his side. She put her nose into the back of his thick, dark, wavy mane. She breathed deeply, inhaling the scent that had eluded her for three years, the combined scent of Old Spice, sunshine and pine needles and, best of all, Nicky. Again, the juices started to flow inside of her. With her left hand, she reached over his left arm, inside the folded spread, and stroked the wispy trail down along his sternum, over his midriff to his stomach. She edged up and kissed him on the back of his head and whispered behind his ear.

"You're home now, Nicky. Home. Thank God, we did make it, just as you said earlier. Thank Our Good Lord Jesus Christ, Mother Mary, Saint Patrick, Saint Brigid, Saint Anthony and all the saints to whom I've prayed for three years and two months. You're home, sweet home, now Baby and I'll never lose you again."

Ryz'n lowered her head and sobbed silently into the nape of her husband's neck. She wrapped herself about him, two fetal figures, fitting together like hand in glove.

"No, never again."