

Once up behind him on his cycle, Ry had stuck to him as white on rice. Ryz'n was ecstatic that HER MAN was home, finally; after three years and two months of hopeful prayer! The bright, sky blue June day was gorgeous. She just hoped she could break through his reticent behavior towards her and help him to overcome his stuttering. Ryz'n was convinced that, despite his apparent change in personality, if she could just love him as she used to do, he would respond as he used to. Then everything would be fine, just fine. She hoped that he would forget about his lying, former fiancée in San Diego. For that matter, she hoped she would as well. Having him home was just too good to be true and Ryz'n mouthed a silent prayer of thanks, as they rode to her in-laws.

Ryz'n had ignored his slurred stuttering, hoping that soon his speech would normalize, as it had last night after a few beers had gurgled their way into his belly. When they arrived at his parent's home, she made it a point to build up his self esteem.

"By the way Honey, did I tell you, but you're lookin' mighty handsome this mornin'. Mighty handsome, indeed!" She giggled as she clutched him tighter and leaned her cheek into his triceps. He wore the same clothes he had worn yesterday, except his shirt was a forest green Ban Lon that was *only* about ten years out of date. He climbed off the bike in the Sheeboom's driveway and then he helped her off.

"My, my! Where on earth did you get that Ban Lon shirt, Honey? Didn't think they made them any more."

"Salvation Army St-Store."

Ryz'n rolled her eyes and smiled.

"Well, at least it's green."

"Yeah, you can pick up some ga-ga-good d-deals there. You know, widows leave stuff of their da-da-dead husband's that ain't ever ba-been used be-be-before, sometimes. Like this, ba-beauty here—no st-st-stains, na-no holes. Works out na-nice don't ya think-think?"

She nodded a pale smile. *My gosh! The boy's a millionaire and he shops at the Dollar Store!*

"Well, it fits you well and like I said, Honey, it *is* a cool shade of green."

* * *

Over breakfast at her in-laws' dining room table, Ryz'n keenly followed the conversation, just as she had last night during dinner at her parents' home. Then, as now, the conversation was very much one-way, but this morning the tables were turned. Now Nick was the interviewer trying to learn about his folks, when last night he had been the one responding to their questions about his recent past. Ryz'n was aware of some of their story, but even she was learning some new information about her in-laws.

As most concerned parents, Nick's folks could not refrain from interrupting Nick to nag him mildly about their concerns for him. The fact that he had been on his own, without parents or any family for over three years, or from his standpoint, for his entire

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life, did not seem to faze them. As Nick conversed with his family, she studied them as she had many times before to see whom Nick favored more, his father or his mother. As always, Ry came away stumped. There were traces of both of his parents in him. Whereas Ryz'n was very much her mother's daughter, Nick was very much a mixture of both his parents.

Ryz'n's in-laws were in their mid-fifties. Both were short and dark-haired. Though they both had high cheek bones, Mr. Sheeboom's coloring was more florid. Mrs. Sheeboom was short-waisted, with penetrating blue-grey eyes and an up-turned nose. Her barrel-chested husband, always dapper, sported a thinning but yet full head of dark, wavy hair and flashing black eyes. Ryz'n thought his facial bone structure to be similar to Bogey's, but she considered "Raybo," as her father-in-law preferred to be called, a more handsome man than the celebrated actor. She had been told her father-in-law had assumed his self-styled moniker for the sake of his grandchildren. The truth was he just did not want folks calling him "Grandpa." His wife Wauneta frosted her hair, which she often wore in the bouffant style, befitting a middle class woman of her age. The couple was twelve to fifteen years older than her own parents were. Yet, they were a handsome looking couple, a feature common to both her and Nick's folks.

Now Raybo repeatedly and strongly suggested that Dixie should report to the Marine Corps Commandant down at the Navy Yard in Southeast DC to clear his MIA status, "immediately, if not sooner." His mother also made it clear she did not like to see Ryz'n and Nick riding on that motorbike, especially without helmets. Her father-in-law gently but firmly suggested that Dixie cut his hair, shave off his moustache, and put on a suit and tie before he went anywhere.

Ryz'n observed Nick keenly to see how he would accept their concerns. Last night, he had been loaded and had laughed at them, when they had begged him not to ride his Honda back to the motel. He had said jeeringly, no one had ever been so concerned about his welfare. Ryz'n had scolded him for his drunken lack of respect for his folks and he had taken her scolding to heart.

Ryz'n imagined that since he had received his medical discharge from the Corps almost eighteen months ago, Nick was not used to having people tell him what to do about his personal affairs. Here at the breakfast table, Nick's parents' requests must have sounded more like commands to him, which clearly unnerved him a bit. Ryz'n could see Nick wanted to please the Sheebooms out of politeness, but she did not know if he would if they kept harping on him. She tried to put herself in his shoes, but it wasn't easy. In fact, it was nearly impossible.

So Ryz'n contented herself with remaining in the background, watching the dynamics play out now between Nick and his folks over breakfast. Nick was vastly different from what she had recalled. That was certain. Unfailingly polite and respectful, now that he was sober, Nick actually listened to everything his parents said. Those were all positives. However, there was no irreverent joking around with his dad, no spontaneous hugs and kisses for his mother, not as there used to be, before he had joined the Corps. Ryz'n tried not to observe him too clinically, but she could not help herself. There he sat before her, back from the dead, larger than life, bigger than she

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had ever remembered him, physically anyway. Yet strangely, now, he seemed smaller somehow.

He was not the same person, not even close to the same self-assured, risk-taking, good time-Charlie, the fun loving, over-active, and over-sexed, over-achieving boy she had married. Yet, she liked this shy, polite Nick. She could see herself falling for him all over again in time, but she certainly wished the Old Nick would re-emerge right now. Yes, she hoped he would carry her off to wherever he wanted to take her, down to the beaver ponds maybe and have his way with her, just as he used to do.

Over breakfast, Nick pressed his parents for more information about themselves. He was hungry to know who he was and where he came from and Ryz'n couldn't blame him for that. His parents complied. He learned that his father grew up just a few miles away in southern Royal George County, while his mother came from a place called Clear Lake, Iowa. They met in the halls of the Department of Agriculture's South Building where Nick's dad was a messenger/spittoon cleaner and she was a personnel clerk. Nick's father explained that he had been married once before, before the war and had become the father of Nick's half brother Ramon, who was twelve years older than Nick. In fact, he mentioned that Ramon was supposed to have joined them for breakfast. Both he and Wauneta lamented that the elder son had yet to arrive.

The couple also explained how they had moved into this little brick rambler right after Nick had been born using Mrs. Sheeboom's civil service retirement fund as a down payment on the place. After that, she never went back to work outside the home. Rather Nick's mom stayed home, taking care of Nick, Ramon and her paralytic mother, a stroke victim. Raybo had passed his G.E.D exam and completed a degree in Public Administration in eight years of night school at The American University. Over the years, Nick's dad had risen through the ranks to have a successful career in the Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS). Raybo explained how his job had taken him on travels around the world and, now that he was about to retire, he planned to take Wauneta with him and show her where his travels had taken him. "Take me along with you, if you lovah me," he would croon mimicking the popular airline commercial jingle.

After Nick had digested his parent's lifelong synopsis along with a slew of pancakes, orange juice and bacon, he asked if he were the only member of the family with two-toned eyes. Ryz'n could see he was very curious about his genetic heritage. She supported him as he pressed his parents for this information.

"Well, um, t-t-tell me Fa-ther. Do-Does anyone else in the fa-family look like me, have eye-eyes like ma-mine?"

Nick's mother answered before her husband could respond.

"Yes, on both sides of the family, you have relatives with eyes similar to yours and that's most unusual indeed. A genetic aberration is how the doctors have described it to me."

The short, greying brunette with an Edith Bunker hairdo and blue-grey eyes spoke seriously. Ryz'n watched Nick's mom as she cocked her head and stabbed a chubby

forefinger into the plastic tablecloth, pressing her finger down hard on the table to emphasize her points.

“You see Nick, your great, great Uncle Nicholas Vankell, and your namesake by the way, although he preferred to be called “Nels” for reasons unknown to us, had a blue right eye and a dark brown left eye, just like you. There is an old grey daguerreotype of him up in my old room back home that reveals his two-toned eyes pretty clearly—one dark and the other light. But he’s not the only one, Nick. No, there’s your dad’s older brother Richard as well, the family’s great celebrity.” She glanced awkwardly at her husband and sat back pleased with her report, leaving the ball in her spouse’s court to speak about his brother.

“Celebrity?” asked Nick quizzically.

“Yes, Nick. Your Father can tell you about him.” She passed a sardonic grin towards her spouse, as if she were passing a baton in a relay race.

Raybo had sat quietly with his back to the dining room’s backyard window, beneath the hand-carved Bavarian cuckoo clock on the wall above his left shoulder. He sat at the table opposite Nick. (Ryz’n knew that clock was one of the many gifts he had brought home from Bavaria during one of his overseas travels.) The dapper-looking gentleman with the flashing, coal black eyes and long black lashes folded his arms across his barrel chest, parted his lips and looked up toward the ceiling, as if the answers he sought lay up there somewhere. Nick followed his gaze hesitantly. Then Nick’s dad lifted his free, left hand to place his thumb under his square chin and forefinger under his lip, thereby covering up the cleft in his chin, still clutching his right arm across his chest and under his left bicep. The gentleman’s bushy, black eyebrows and black wavy hair, contrasted sharply with his graying temples. Having gathered his thoughts now, Nick’s father began to speak soberly.

“Well, let’s see ... as I recall ... there were two individuals that I know of on the Sheeboom side with two-toned eyes, somewhat similar to yours. And I say sh’BOOM, Nicholas. That’s how we pronounce it. There is family in the north end of the county who pronounce it SHEE! BOOM and there are those down Accocek and Indian Stone way who pronounce it SHAY-boom, but we say sh’BOOM. Just so you know.”

“That’s right, Honey.” Ryz’n chimed in— sh’BOOM just like the old Rock’N’Roll tune from the Fifties.”

“OK, sure. I can remember that.” Nick grinned at her small joke. “But what was that you were saying about two relatives who look like me?”

“Yes,” replied Mr. Sheeboom in a formal, authoritative tone. “There are two. One was the first American Sheeboom, a painter by the name of James Hamilton Sheeboom, who emigrated here from Ireland in the early nineteenth century, though he tried to pass himself off with French ancestry. Better for business, you see. Only the wealthy could afford portraits in those days and they looked down upon the shanty Irish. Changing the pronunciation by deemphasizing the heavy accent upon each syllable, he became a respected portrait artist of “French” ancestry in New York City. Some of his works still hang in the New York Metropolitan Museum to this day, as well as in other well-known art galleries. His oil self-portrait clearly shows one blue

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eye and one black eye. Believe we can produce a facsimile of it for you if you care to see it.”

Then Raybo leaned forward over the dining table, speaking in a confidential tone as he became animated and smiled as though he were about to let you in on a secret.

“One of his more famous pieces, which you may have seen, is a pencil sketch of Davy Crockett, the famed frontiersman. Though not very large, the drawing captures the personality of old Davy with his long, swaybacked, broken nose. That nose speaks volumes on the character of the man and of his colorful past. Supposedly, that depiction of old Davy’s nose was so realistic that Davy considered that work his favorite portrait of himself.”

“No kiddin’! Wow! Na-never figured I had such ta-ta-talented ancestry.”

Nick seemed to be impressed by the story. Ryz’n understood why. Her father-in-law told the story in a considerate manner but also with a certain narrator’s flair, which had always intrigued her. And she could see here that her husband felt as she did about his narration.

Nick looked to Ryz’n for confirmation of his dad’s tale, which she provided by grinning broadly and nodding. It warmed her heart to follow Nick’s innocent but excited manner as he learned about himself. The more engrossed he became in the subject, the more his stuttering decreased and the more chance, she hoped, the two of them would have of consummating their relationship.

“Did you know that Ryz’n, I mean Ra-Ry? Did you know I had fa-famous ancestors? Arti-ti-stic, too! How about that?”

“Yeah, I seem to recall something to that effect. They’re famous just like you.”

“Aw, go on.” He hung his head in embarrassment, while she beamed. Then he addressed his father. “Ba-But you said there were t-two people with my eyes, right Father?”

“Yes, I did Son. Please call me Dad, Nick. It’s more natural.”

“Yes sir, Da-Dad.” Nick giggled sheepishly. Ryz’n understood what was natural for the father was unnatural for the son.

“All right Son, that’s better. Yes, then there’s my celebrated older brother ...” The cuckoo struck eight times up on the wall behind the elder gentleman’s head. All but Raybo stopped to turn and watch the little bird sing and bow eight times, but Nick’s Dad remained silent.

No more? Ryz’n’s father-in-law merely sipped on his coffee. Nick prompted his father for more information.

“So, what else Dad, about, uh, my uncle, right? A ce-ce-lebrity?”

Wauneta confirmed, “Yes, that’s right, he’s your dad’s older brother Richard.”

“Your Uncle Richard is famous, too, didn’t you know that, Baby?” prodded Ryz’n.

“How could I know that? I d-didn’t even know I had an Uncle Ri-Richard. Richard Sh-Sheeboom? Hmmm. I b-b-believe I have heard that name, some-where. But ... who is he?”

“Yes, Baby. Rick Sheeboom! You’ve heard of him, the big league ballplayer, the entertainer, the songwriter. He’s starred in and directed a movie that’s out right now called, “Tough Times,” about the Depression. Have you seen it?”

Nick brightened, “Sure, sure. Saw it on the road with the guys. Yeah, that guy who played the street fighter that was him, right?”

“Yes, Baby, that’s right.”

“Daggone! How ‘bout that! He’s in pretty good shape for an old guy. And he’s my uncle? Is that right, Mr., uh, Father, uh Da-Dad? Tell me about him.”

“Well, he is one of my two older brothers,” informed Dixie’s father somewhat reluctantly. “He’s about a year and a half older than I am. He was a highly decorated Marine fighter pilot during World War II, a hero like you Nicholas. In fact, you are much like him in many respects, maybe too much, perhaps. Richard was a nightclub entertainer, an actor, and song writer and, like you, a ballplayer, just as Ryz’n said ... both before and after the war. He scuffed around and did what he could to make ends meet.”

“Song writer? No kiddin’! Where did he play ball?” clearly Nick’s interest was piqued by this celebrated uncle.

“With the bums in Brooklyn, then, later he bounced around a bit. He spent his last year with the Saints in their first expansion season in Los Angeles, in return for a piece of the club, of course.” Raybo’s sarcastic tone darkly colored the last phrase.

“He played in The Show! That’s really incredible, really incredible.” Nick flipped his unused spoon over against the plastic tablecloth repeatedly, as he contemplated what he had just heard. “Mann! Ma-Maybe, I can make it, too, then. It’s, it’s in my-my blood! Sure it is. Do-Does he live around here? I mean, c-can I m-meet him?”

When his dad hesitated, Nick’s mother answered for him.

“He lives out in California, south of Laguna Beach. He’s got homes in Santa Monica and Long Island, and a ranch on the Arizona-New Mexico border, too, not to mention a villa near Acapulco.”

“Well, I’m not sure he still owns the Santa Monica place, Wauneta. Believe he traded it in by purchasing a new home in Palm Springs, I think, but I’m not certain about that. Believe those mud slides scared him,” offered Nick’s dad.

“Gee Raybo, sounds like he’s very well off!” crowed Ryz’n. For, though she knew of the family’s connection to the great celebrity, she never knew much about him. Richard Sheeboom had been a taboo subject for her in-laws, but she never had known why.

“Yes Ryzanna, Richard has done very well for himself, especially when you consider how poorly he began,” confessed her father-in-law, “how poorly we all began ...”

Dixie expected his Dad to continue to talk about his famous brother but he did not. His voice like his gaze trailed off into some distant past.

“Well, uh, Da-D-Dad, you s-say, I’m a lot like him. I thought ma-maybe you c-could tell me so-something more. Ma-maybe, we could call him? I know that area pretty well. Hard to believe he lived in Santa Monica so ca-close to me and I di-

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dididn't even know it. Funny, I na-never worried about the ma-ma-mud slides and the Ma-Mount sits right on the edge of that bla-bl-bluff."

"No. I don't believe calling him would be a good idea, Son," stated his father matter of fact.

"Why not?"

"Well, we don't talk much, you see."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"Well, it's, well, it's kind of a long story, kind of a family thing." A pained expression overcame the man's florid features. "And well, gee it's after eight. I have to get to work. Wauneta?"

He looked to his wife for confirmation. She glanced at the cuckoo clock.

"Well, Sir, you d-don't have to tell me if ya don't want to, I gu-guess."

"Well, I do have to be on my way to the office, Nicholas. Maybe another time, all right?"

The dapper gentleman began to rise from his seat.

"Oh OK, OK, Dad."

Ryz'n could see Nick was clearly disappointed but just as clearly she understood that he did not want to make his family feel uncomfortable. Raybo sighed deeply, almost as if he were in pain.

"Well, all right. I'll try to make this quick because I really do have to go."

He sat back down. Both Nick and Ryz'n brightened for she was as anxious as he was to learn of his famous uncle and the falling out between him and the rest of the family, about which she was clueless.

"You see Son, Richard was always a little different from the rest of us. He was kind of a funny guy, really. By that, I mean different, oddball. He lived with all of us, we six kids all together, but he was rarely at home, and when he was, his mind was off somewhere else. He was a great athlete, even as a kid, a tremendous athlete—the best boxer, the best ballplayer, marbles shooter and swiftest runner ever to come out of Southern Maryland. Yes, you never lost when you were on Brother's team. But ... And this is where he was so different, he also played several instruments and enjoyed school theatrics! That was unheard of from anyone among our family. He was most different from the rest of us in that respect, truly at odds with the rest of us. It seemed as if he wanted to grow up fast, as though he was ashamed of our poverty, ashamed of us, really. The intellectuals among our high school teachers doted on him and he repaid them in like manner. He was always finding excuses to get off the farm and get out of work to be with these intellectual types."

Ryz'n suggested, "Maybe those were the genes of that great ancestor you mentioned—James?"

"Yes, I'm certain of it, though our illustrious ancestor was a portrait painter, not a musician or a thespian. Even so, art is art and there is wisdom in what you say, Doll." He smiled at Ryz'n.

"Once Richard reached high school, he did not live with the family much, unless he absolutely had to work around the place, out in the fields. Often, he did not come home

nights, much as you used to do, Nicholas, too much like you, I'm afraid." Both his parents glanced Nick's way, but Nick's blank expression revealed that he had no idea why, even though Ryz'n did, because many of those nights Nick had been with her.

"Growing up, Richard didn't associate with any of us too much, the kids I mean, except for me. I guess I was as close to him as anyone, closer probably. Actually, I kind of followed him around when we were younger. In high school, he gravitated toward the adults, as I mentioned. By that, I mean those young intellectuals, like the associate priest at our church, the younger teacher's in high school, the brainy types, and the arty types. That was unusual for our family, too. We were just plain folk, more the salt of the earth type of a family, but not Richard. For all the refined artistic and intellectual abilities of our great ancestor James, little had passed down to our family through the generations—except for Richard. I guess he got it all. Yes, what little talent had been passed down had all collected in Richard's genes."

Again, Raybo paused for reflection.

"S-So ... Ma-mister She—I mean Dad, what's the big se-secret? How come you don't com-com-common—ah, talk with him anymore?"

"We exchange Christmas cards, Son, birthday cards. I just received a birthday greeting from him last month, as a matter of fact." He raised his chin somewhat defiantly and clammed up.

"Gee, Raybo," pleaded Ryz'n. "I'd kind of like to know as well. I've always known about him, that he was your brother and all, but I never knew why he was, like, well, like off limits, so to speak." Ryz'n batted her long lashes winningly at her father-in-law. She flattered herself that her father-in-law held a soft spot in his heart for her, especially after their combined efforts in their search for the missing Nick last winter inn Southeast Asia. And he seemed to soften now, lowering his gaze to the plastic, beige tablecloth, which covered the blonde dining table.

"Well, it's not easy to say why something like that happens. I guess ... I guess there were a couple of reasons." An uncomfortable silence ensued.

"Well Dad, if you c-can't say, that's all right. But I would like to know how he ma-made it to the B-Bigs."

"That, you'll have to ask him yourself, because I don't know exactly. He did that before the War while he was out in Hollywood, where he played in the Pacific Coast League. I can only tell you how he started out."

"How?"

Nick's dad opened up.

"Rough! That's how. Hell, we all started out rough. My Old Man was rough on all of us and Richard had a temper, a lulu of a temper. My mother threw Richard out of the house after he nearly killed Pappy in a brawl."

"Pappy?"

"My father. He's living in a nursing home over in Falls Church—terminal, with cancer."

"Oh, I'm so sorry Mr. Sheeboom," remarked Ryz'n soulfully. "When did this happen? I thought it was your younger sister's turn to take care of him?"

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“Well, it was. We found out the night we got back from Hawaii. You know the night you came by with Sheena and we weren’t here? My sister and her husband took us out to eat and they told us then.” Mr. Sheeboom shook his head. “You know, it’s amazing he’s been alive this long. He’s seventy-six, outlived Mother by eighteen years. Doesn’t seem fair. Doesn’t seem just, somehow. Guess all that alcohol he drank over the years must have preserved him like a pickle. Hmmpf, Pappy!”

He shook his head with a half-suppressed chuckle. They all respected his digression and waited for him to speak again . . .

“Yes, I remember it was the night of my thirteenth birthday that Brother and Pappy got into it. I remember because, afterwards my mother gave Brother the lone leftover piece of my strawberry birthday cake for his journey. He had to leave home, you see? He could not stay any longer after he had beaten Pappy like that. I was supposed to get that piece for breakfast the next day. After all, it was my birthday, my cake. You know?”

“The kind of cake we ate last night? Yeah, that was great. Fantastic! I can see why, who got the last piece of that cake would be cause for concern,” declaimed Nick totally fluent.

“There’s more of it out in the kitchen for you Nicholas,” reminded his Mom.

“Great Mrs.—Mom. Maybe after uh, Dad leaves, I can eat it. But, so Sir, that’s why you don’t talk to your ba-brother today? Because he got to eat your piece of ca-cake?”

“Ha! HA! No, no. No, not by any means. But, well, Richard had to leave home after that altercation. He couldn’t stay with us, not with Pappy, anyway.

“The fissure between us occurred, well, it’s difficult to say, probably just before our Mother passed away, back in Fifty-Seven. Brother lost his temper again and you”—the kitchen wall phone rang. Nick’s mom retrieved the mouthpiece from the wall phone a couple steps behind her for her husband who remained seated. They all stopped to listen.

“It’s the office,” pronounced Mrs. Sheeboom solemnly in a hushed tone with her hand over the receiver. Ryz’n thought such a reverent tone normally might have been reserved for church. She handed her husband the phone. Raybo spoke briefly. After he hung up, he apologized to them.

“There’s a minor crisis at the office and I’m afraid I have to go in now. What will they do when I retire in another month?” He chuckled. “We’ll have to finish this story some other time, kids. Nicholas, you *are* going down to the Navy Yard and resolve your identity issue? *Yes?*” Dixie backpedaled.

“Well, sure, sure. Yes Sir.”

“Today, the first thing?”

“Yeah, I ga-guess so. I da-don’t know what Ryzanna has planned, but—”

“Sure Baby, we can fit that in, but we’ll drop by Pocomoke first, OK?” She reassuringly patted her husband’s forearm, which rested on the dining table.

“OK, kids. See you at dinner. Ryz’n, I’m counting on you Doll, to make sure Nicholas does what he’s supposed to do.”

Ryz’n assured him she would, as her father-in-law left to put on his suit coat and tie.

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Logging his breakfast dish to the sink, Dixie dropped a knife on the floor. As he stooped to pick up the knife, he froze. Something was happening, something he had waited for since he had awakened with a gargantuan headache back in Subic Bay, when he was born two years ago at the age of nineteen, though he did not know his age at the time. Dixie ran his fingers over the design of burnt orange and black rectangles and the grey lines that connected them, featured on the scuffed, dingy white linoleum kitchen floor. He froze in a catcher's stance and remembered!

This floor design is the exact motif he had described to Dr. Mandl, his shrink out at the VA hospital. Although Dixie had not known then that it was a floor pattern.

I'm remembering. I *am* remembering!

Slowly, Dixie turned toward the white stove on his right and reached over to open the stove door next to the oven. Smiling, he pulled out a pan. He looked up towards his surprised mother and Ryzanna who, perplexed, had followed him into the postage stamp-sized kitchen, only to halt abruptly behind him.

"This door is 'good'," he said with a mockingly stern face, touching the oven door, "but this door ..." He turned to his left, scooting forward slightly as he opened the cabinet door beneath the sink, "... 'is bad.'" Dixie pulled out a bottle of cleanser, holding it up for them to see. "Bad!" Shaking his head, he repeated as his mother had done years and years ago. The two women stared down at him as if he were crazy. When he realized they did not understand, he broke into a wide grin to explain excitedly.

"I remember, you see? I remember! Those squares and blocks on the floor reminded me. I must have been small, playing in here on the floor. And you," he pointed to his mother, "you, you were younger, thinner and your hair was darker, but you told me, I could play with the things behind the stove door, the pots and the pans, but the things under the sink were bad. I couldn't play with them." He wagged the bottle of cleanser before them. "Later, you made the other cabinet off limits, too, when I pulled out the cereal box and spilled it all over the floor and the same for the liquor cabinet," which he opened for them on the other side of the dishwasher, next to the back porch door, revealing a number and a variety of liquor bottles. "You see? I remember! I remember, I *do* remember! See?" He stood up to hug his mother and kiss her. Truly excited, his whole body quivered. His mother, not given to displays of strong affection, recoiled from him in shock at first, but comprehending the situation, she returned his hug though stiffly.

"This is the first time I have recalled anything, anything at all. Old Doc Mandl said it might happen, probably with my earliest memories coming back to me first. It's possible. Now I see that's it—it IS possible."

A tearful Ryzanna stepped forward to hug him strongly.

"Oh yes, Baby, Yes. It is possible. Doctor Mandl told me and Sheena that it was possible also—unlikely, but possible—when we visited him just a couple weeks ago. In cases of amnesia like yours, he said, 'There are no rules.' Thank you Lord that there are no rules. Thank you for hearing my prayers. Nicky, do you remember me?"

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Her face lit up like a candle and her chest swelled before her with anticipation.

He wanted to please her, to tell her what she longed to hear, but he couldn't and his impotency tempered his own joy. He looked hard at her.

"Gee Ry, I, I'm so-sorry, but I, I d-don't." Ryz'n appeared crestfallen.

"But you might," proffered his mother. "If you remember me, you'll remember her. It is possible, now." His mother wagged a stubby forefinger between them as if by doing so, she could assure the much sought phenomenon. Ryz'n smiled bravely and her mother-in-law hugged both of them, one in each of her short arms.

With the bottle of cleanser still clutched in his left hand, Dixie walked excitedly back into the dining room where his dad had come back to say his goodbyes. Dixie set the cleanser on the table. Then he knelt down, pointing to the gold carpet and picked up imaginary objects off the floor.

"Pennies. I used to pick up pennies here, lots of 'em. But not on this sculpted gold carpet. The carpet with the pennies was grey-beige, very dull."

His father had returned from completing his wardrobe. "Yes. That's right Nicholas! After our weekly Friday night poker games; we'd all leave some pennies for you to find in the morning. Gee whiz, that's been almost twenty years ago now."

"Yeah," replied Dixie smiling, and I'd run into you two in the bedroom, while you still slept and show you my loot. And I remember you! Dad! Yes—YOU." Dixie slapped his father's back. "I recall you lying in bed, for sure. Also, seem to recall—*recall-- can you believe it recall?* I can recall"—the very thought of performing that act made him shiver—"and there were some stale, potato chips, pretzels and peanuts, too, right here." He tapped the dining table soundly with his fist. "But I ate them anyway; a stolen stale treat was more enjoyable than a hearty breakfast." He chuckled.

Dixie, almost giddy with excitement, began to walk about the house from one room to the other, inspecting walls, floors, carpets, anything that might trigger his memory. Doors were opening in his mind, providing him with a giddy charge. Doors that he had never even known existed. His parents and Ryz'n followed behind him, but he scarcely noticed them, using them only as sounding board for confirmation of his memories. He stopped in the rambler's living room near the closet door, before he headed down the bedroom hallway and turned back to his mother.

"A black woman used to live with us, right?"

His mother denied that charge.

"Yes, yes she did. She vacuumed and stuff. She always sang. He started humming "Fly Away" and she, she took me to church at, at nighttime. At least, I think it was church. There were pews and a lot of singin' anyway."

Nick's mom volunteered.

"You're talking about Audelle. She didn't live with us. She worked for us, helped me out a couple times a week with the housecleaning, when your grandmother lived with us after her stroke. Audelle might have babysat you a couple times. But I don't remember anything about her taking you to church at night or at anytime, for that matter."

Nick's dad corrected her gently.

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"I believe she did, Doll, on a couple of occasions when she babysat in the evening for us. I remember her asking me, if it were OK."

"Well, I don't remember that!" retorted his wife.

Dixie began laughing.

"That's funny. That's really funny! I remember something you don't."

They all began to laugh when they realized the veracity of his statement. He couldn't believe this was happening. Last night, he had remembered no one and nothing and felt like a chump. Now, like a kid on Christmas morning, he hurried from room to room looking for gifts of recollection, remarking upon different things that he saw and his family followed excitedly in his foot steps. Stopping at the middle bedroom, he noted there had been huge plastic models of aircraft carriers, battleships, planes, etc. decorating that room and that a boy, a teenager with blonde hair and blue eyes had slept there.

His father offered, "That's your brother Ramon. This was his room originally."

His mother added in an exasperated tone. "Yes, and he was supposed to be here for breakfast!"

As if on cue, they heard footsteps on the front porch and a knock at the screen door.

"Hullooo!" They all heard the voice clearly through the opened front door.

"There he is now," said Wauneta. "Speak of the devil!"

They turned about and retreated down the bedroom hallway toward the living room. Ramon had entered the house and headed gingerly across the living room towards the dining room.

"Hullooo! Smells good, sure could use some breakfast, Wauneta!"

The rest of the family caught up to him as he made an about face at the edge of the dining room. Ramon started laughing, "What is this hide and seek?" Then Dixie glimpsed his blonde-haired and mustachioed half-brother. After looking closely at him for several seconds, Ramon held his arms wide, reaching out to him.

"NICHOLAS!" He walked over to embrace his younger half-brother.

Nicholas did not recognize Ramon. This was not the thin, duck-tailed pimple-faced, blonde he had just remembered. Ramon's hairline was receding rapidly, only half hidden by his comb-over, down his forehead and to the side, which coincided with the fashion of the day. He must have weighed about two hundred and ten to twenty pounds and stood about five-foot ten inches. However, he was a good-looking guy, though Dixie did not consider himself to an expert in judging other men's looks. Dixie was actually just a little taller, a fact that Ramon remarked upon with some surprise.

Ramon's facial features were clean and neat, his nose aquiline, his lips, full, his eyes quite blue, but he had remarkably long, blonde eyelashes. Dixie stared hard at his brother, trying to find a resemblance, maybe around the mouth and nose. His tanned, cherub-like face showed faint traces of acne marks. Of course, Dixie did have one blue eye, yet one had to look close for quite a while to find any physical link between him and Ramon, perhaps around the mouth and nose, but nowhere else.

When Dixie learned that Ramon was only his half brother, with each of them having Mr. Sheeboom for a father, Dixie really became confused. His dad had eyes, features

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and hair, black as coal. It was Mrs. Sheeboom, who had blue-green eyes, yet she was not blood kin to her stepson. Dixie would have thought she would have been the likely common parent from their similar, lighter eye color. His brother laughed at Dixie's skepticism, revealing a wide gap between his upper front teeth, which was similar to, though more pronounced than, Dixie's.

He laughed. "It's true, Nicholas. See you grew a little. Well, you may be a little bit taller now, but I can still say, I'm the best lookin' one in the family." Then he roared louder, a booming laugh that welled up from deep within him, again displaying his widely gapped upper front teeth even more prominently. Still laughing deeply, Ramon hugged Ryz'n, adding a peck on her cheek.

"We always knew he'd come home didn't we, Ryzanna?" Ryz'n nodded and grinned broadly. Grins seemed to be infectious today

Ryz'n was delighted with this turn of events. Now if only Nick would remember me ... Ramon had always been one of the few who sincerely had shared her optimism for Nick's return—and not merely to humor her, either. Now, she reminded them all of that fact. "Sure we did," assured Ryz'n's brother-in-law, squeezing her a little tighter.

Ryz'n was ecstatic that Dixie had begun speaking without a problem, as he became more used to his family and the surroundings, but seeing his half-brother apparently unnerved him a bit.

"Wa-wait a min ... nute. Ramon? You're th-the skin-skinny b-boy with the slick-ked b-back ... hair and duh-duh-duck tails?"

"Well, that was a few years ago now. Whoa! Lot has happened since then." He brushed his hair back. A brief pensive silence followed. "Hey, how 'bout that breakfast now, Wauneta? Actually, I'll settle for some of Raybo's birthday cake, if there's any left?"

Ryz'n knew her mother-in-law's strawberry cake was legendary: a double-layered, white cake with white icing turned pink from the strawberry juice strained over and through it, with each layer covered completely in fresh, ripe strawberries.

"There's just one small piece left and I was saving it for—," Nick's mom was interrupted by her outspoken stepson.

"For me? Ha! Of course. Thanks. I appreciate that Wauneta,"

Ramon ambled though the dining room into the kitchen, as if he owned the place. He helped himself to a fork and sat down at the dining room table to eat the last piece of cake.

"Well, we had finished breakfast anyway. Maybe I'll just make another cake, but I need some strawberries," the matron intoned.

"No problem Wauneta," countered Ryz'n. Nick and I can pick some up for you if Mrs. Stamp has any left. It's a little late in the season for strawberries. Today's the last day of school and I wanted to take Nick over that way. See if he can remember any of the teachers. We can stop by the Stamp farm on the way back."

"Why, thank you Ryzanna. I'd appreciate that. However, I'm afraid they may be sold out until next year. As you said, strawberry season is all but over."

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“What, wh-what school? Wh-what t-teachahs?”

“I’m talking about our high school, Baby—Pocomoke. School ends today and the teachers will have a few minutes to talk to you, maybe stir up some more memories, OK? You know, high school memories that might lead you to remember me?” She glowed, but he was reticent.

“Well, I, I guess it’ll be all r-right.”

“What’s a matter Honey? You don’t sound convinced. What are you afraid of?”

The rest of the family listened intently. Even Ramon paused between bites of cake. Nick complained that he didn’t want to go through another night like last night where everyone fawned over him, expecting him to act as if he knew them, when he didn’t. He not only had felt out of place but more like a hypocrite or a four-flusher. He wasn’t who they thought he was and he refused to act like something he wasn’t. However, Ryz’n and his family pooh-poohed his skepticism.

His mother chided, “You’re William Nicholas Sheeboom and always will be. You’ll remember that you grew up here as our Little Nick, just as you have begun to remember us. You can’t change who you are, Son. You just can’t.” As Nick listened, he became increasingly agitated. He said he had to be himself and not their idea of who they thought he should be.

For a minute, no one spoke. Ryz’n listened in semi-shock as, filled with emotion and visibly frustrated, her husband tried to explain his chagrin.

“This, this N-N-Nick character, Little N-N-Nick or whoever he, he was, isn’t like me at all. If that’s who you all expect ma-me to be, then you m-m-may as well just say ga-g-goodbye to me now, because I’m not-na-ne-not him. I’m, I’m DIXIE! D-I-X-I-E!” He thumped his chest with his right hand similar to a Roman legionnaire, abruptly turned on his heel and stalked across the gold-carpeted living room and out the front door.

Ryz’n and her in-laws stood by speechless, at Nick’s sudden, unexpected outburst. Ramon stopped eating, with a forkful of cake midway to his mouth. However, his dad recovered sufficiently to call after his younger son, reminding him of the list of errands he had told Nick to run that day, starting with the Marine Corps Commandant!

Nick’s blow-up must have embarrassed him as well. Tongue-tied, he ignored his father’s admonitions and strode rapidly across the brief front yard toward his Honda.

Still inside, Ryz’n made excuses for him to his family.

“Well, he’s just not himself, you know. He’s all confused. The main thing is that he is starting to remember some things. The psychiatrist out at Long Beach had said that amnesiacs like Dixie probably would recall their earliest memories first, if they were to recall them at all. Nick’ll be all right. You’ll see.” But when Ry heard her husband kick start his bike out on the driveway, obviously intent upon leaving without her, her reassuring smile melted to a worrisome frown. “Excuse me. I better be going now.” She banged open the screen and ran out the front door, however, she was too late. Dixie had taken off up the street, leaving her standing adrift on the front porch.

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Her father-in-law consoled her through the front screen door, which had shut behind her, "It's all right, Doll. Where can he go? He'll be back. I need to call the office and get a move on myself." He turned to go, but halted at the worried look on her face.

He could go back to that blonde bombshell in San Diego, thought Ryz'n.

Behind her, reading her mind, her father-in-law wheeled back to her and offered some sage advice through the screen door.

"Think he'll go back to that blonde with the paralyzed husband and two kids? Break up that family?"

"Well? I — I don't know but I, I guess not. But how did you know about that?"

"Your sister Sheena called us this morning, before she left for the beach. She thought we should know."

"She did, did she? Why, who gave her the right? I'm sorry Raybo. I wanted to let Nick tell you in his own time."

"Don't blame Sheena, Doll. She called looking for you this morning at your parents' behest and it just slipped out, I guess. She apologized already ... Now, I repeat. Do you think your husband would leave you to break up that family? I can answer that for you! Of course, he won't. Not on your life, he won't! He may not remember WHO he is, but he can't escape WHAT he is, on the inside. I know my boy. He wouldn't do something like that. That's partly why he's here, a small part maybe. But of course, he's here for us, well, but mainly for you, Ryzanna. You know that, don't you?"

The girl listened intently to her father-in-law. She understood how he ticked. They had been through some tough trials together such as those they had experienced in the jungles of Laos searching for Nick. She knew he was right. He usually was. He had an uncanny knack for perceiving human nature. It was one reason why he had become one of the top public servants in the U. S. Department of Agriculture. She nodded somewhat uncertainly towards her gently smiling father-in-law.

Having finished his cake, Ramon mentioned rather casually that he had to be going and asked where Nick was staying. Ryz'n told him they were both staying at the Royal George Motor Inn up in the Heights. Her brother-in-law hugged her before he left and said he'd be back as soon as Wauneta had baked another strawberry cake. Ramon warned that he wanted to get more than one piece next time. To Ryz'n, he appeared totally unconcerned with his half brother's situation or hers, too, for that matter. His cavalier attitude irked her a bit.

Raybo withdrew and called his office to let them know he would be late. Ryz'n helped her mother-in-law clear the breakfast table and wash and dry dishes. Her mother-in-law jabbered away to console her, while Ryz'n tried not to worry. No one else seemed to share her concern. Meanwhile, Ryz'n watched as Ramon headed up towards the Heights in his beat-up, canary yellow Ford Pinto.

* * *

Mr. Gasch, who co-owned the Gulf gas station along with Mr. Hawks, was talking to "Nick" about old times. The suave-looking, roly-poly gentleman seemed an unlikely gas station owner to Dixie. Ignoring Dixie's reticence to converse, the outgoing man mentioned there was a roster spot open on his amateur baseball club. Dixie perked up

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and said he'd like to try out, but Mr. Gasch said that would not be necessary. He joked that the open spot was reserved for an All-American and Dixie was the only one he knew.

Just then, Ramon pulled up beside them in his canary yellow Pinto.

"Hey boy! That was bad manners, running out like that, Nicholas. Got that cute little wife of yours all flustered, afraid you might be skippin' town for California. But I told her you weren't goin' far, right? Hey, Mr. Gasch, glad to see ya. How ya doin'?"

"Hullo Ramon, Good to see ya. I, uh, gotta another customer over here. Great talkin' with ya, Nick. I'll start the paperwork on that roster spot. We gotta go through the Printer's Union and the Metropolitan Baseball League officials, ya know. But I'll handle that. Hope to see ya 'round soon, Nick."

Dixie waved to Mr. Gasch. "Thanks for the fill-up on the house and all." He did not know what Mr. Gasch had meant by "the Printers," but he figured he would find out later.

"Don't mention it. Nothin's too good for our hometown hero!" The roly-poly station owner sauntered over to his next customer, as he smiled sincerely back at Dixie.

"Nice guy, but I wish he'd drop that hero bit." murmured Dixie.

"Yeah, be even nicer, if he'd fill me up for free, too, hey Bub?"

Dixie ignored his "brother" as he waved to Mr. Gasch and watched for a few seconds as the congenial station owner tended to business. Then Dixie started to straddle his bike when Ramon, suggested they take a ride together, "just for a few minutes."

"Hold on there Nicholas. Just a second, I kind o' thought we could drive around a little. Like old times."

Dixie cocked his head to the side, trying to figure out what this guy had in mind. His half brother impressed Dixie as a cool, smooth talker, good time Charlie type, like a salesman, not exactly Dixie's kind of person.

"Come on, Mann. I came all the way up here just to talk with you."

"All the way up here? From where?"

"Woldorn, where'd ya think?"

"Woldorn? Where is that?"

Ramon chuckled.

"Mann, Woldorn is the crossroads of the world. Didn't you know that?" He chuckled louder. "Why you had some of your greatest adventures down that way."

"Is that so? Still don't know where it is," Dixie shrugged nonplussed.

"You ain't flammin' me are ya boy? You really don't know where it is? Ha!" The oddly paired ivory and ebony brothers stared at each other briefly, taking stock of one another. "Well sure, it makes sense, I guess. Come on, hop in and we'll talk; maybe jog your memory a bit. Come on, bro." He grinned an affable, wide, gap-toothed grin and motioned to Nick with his hand to enter the car.

"I dunno—ain't supposed to ride with strangers." Dixie grinned slyly.

"Strangers? Hey, we're flesh and blood, Mann. Can't ya see the resemblance?" He asked facetiously and then crooked up. Ramon opened the passenger side door of his

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Pinto and leaned down, and with a dirt-eating grin and a pert nod of his head, beckoned Nick to step into the compact vehicle.

“No, but I gotta park my bike, first,” Nick conceded.

Mr. Gasch overheard and told “Nick” he could park the bike in the shade of the trees on the other side of the gas station by the mall parking lot. Dixie thanked him and followed his recommendation. Ramon followed him in his little car. Then Dixie climbed into Ramon’s dented and rust-spotted, canary yellow 1971 Ford Pinto. They pulled out of the Gulf station, stopping at the light right there in front of the station, while they waited to cross Veer Avenue’s four lanes.

“So, where are we goin’?” asked Dixie as he settled into the front passenger seat next to his brother, “Woldorn?”

“Ha! Nah, jes’ came from there, Mann. I just told ya. Nah, got some appointments over in D.C. Heights. You can ride along. Keep me company. Don’t worry, Mann. I’ll get you back in time for your own round of appointments.”

“Unh hunh.”

Dixie was not impressed and seriously considered getting out of the Pinto, but the light changed and Ramon accelerated the little car across the intersection, before Dixie could make a move. Ramon pointed under Dixie’s nose down the street they were crossing, “Veer Avenue, a.k.a. Route 5A.”

“About twenty-five miles due south down Veer is Woldorn.” He winked at his kid brother and ten miles further on is La Placa. “Jes’ like old times, hey pardner?”

Nick smiled weakly in response, muttering “If you say so ... pardner.”

Ramon nodded, noticing his brother’s sarcasm.

“Yeah, that’s it. That’s better. You gotta lighten up some, Mann. Relax. Let those old memories come filtering back. Why, it’s like hittin’ a baseball or makin’ love, see? Ya can’t do anything if you’re all up tight, all tensed up. Know what I mean?”

This was the first thing he had said that had made any sense. Dixie nodded and took a deep breath. “Yeah,” he whispered. “Right.”

Ramon guffawed. “Ok, ok, Nicholas, we’re off like a pair of turtles,” as he shifted gears and the lemon-yellow Pinto jerked and chugged along.

Ramon chauffeured his half-brother east, over to Sweetland on Golden Hill Road, where he pointed out his alma mater as they passed Sweetland High. It was a two-story, red brick building that sat about ten feet below street level. From the school’s pragmatic style, it looked to be at least twenty years old, maybe older.

“So that’s the school she’s gonna take me to?”

“That? Nah, that’s my high school, Mann. You went to Pocomoke, Nicholas. That’s in the opposite direction about three miles almost due west of the house. It’s kind of funny, really.” Ramon launched into a story and Dixie could understand why he could be a good salesman. He had the most affable manner Dixie had ever experienced and could easily suck you right into his world.

“Ya see Nicholas, the Suggs family lived three houses down the street from us, ya know. In that white-painted brick house on the other side of the street? In fact, Bax, the oldest, is a year younger than me. He bought the house from his dad, Big Bax, and

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lives there now with a family of his own. Anyway, we, that is, Little Bax and me, went to Sweetland High, back there, together.” He motioned backwards with his thumb, after they had passed by the school. Now Barry, Bax’s younger brother by a few years, went to Surratsdale High which is about ten miles south down Veer Avenue. That’s down just past Clairton, about halfway to Woldorn. Now Danny Suggs, who was a couple years younger than Barry, went to Crossover High when it opened up brand new, too. That would have been about Sixty-four or five. And then, you were a few years behind Danny, and you went to Pocomoke when it opened.

“Funny, ain’t it? We all lived with within three houses of each other, but we all went to four different public high schools. And yours and mine were the closest. HA!”

“Well, why was that? I mean, why did we all go to different high schools?”

“BABY BOOM!”

“Hunh?”

“Our parents couldn’t stop screwin’ each other and had all us kids. There weren’t enough schools to hold us all. So the County had to keep buildin’ new ones.” Ramon turned right onto Marlboro Pike and then made a left, arriving in a small neighborhood of modest brick, wood and shingle frame homes. “This here is D.C. Heights,” he said very matter of fact. “Penn Star is up to the right and then there’s Forestdale.” He pointed his forefinger south.

“Oh, right.” Dixie had no idea what his brother was talking about.

“Yeah, well I’m just O-rientin’ ya to the area. See?” He nodded as if to reassure Dixie that he wouldn’t be popping a geography quiz on him later. Ramon pulled up in front one of the modest, blue-collar homes.

“Come on, get out, Mann. Walk back here with me.” As he accompanied his brother, around the side of a wood and shingle-framed house, Dixie noticed the weather was fine, warm and sunny, with a slight breeze and a bright but pale blue sky. He also noticed his brother assumed a lazy, sauntering, slew-footed gait as they tread across the crabgrass.

Nicholas followed him around to the back of the house where they found an old fifteen-foot square, concrete patio that had been painted mint green. There was an electrical appliance with a long, black electric cord sitting on one end of the patio. Ramon explained.

“These people bought the house, but they don’t like havin’ a green patio. So we’re supposed to get rid of the green paint by grinding it off along with the painted cement finish down to the aggregate.”

“We?”

“Yeah, me and my company: E. Z. Ospri. You don’t remember E-Z-Over either, do ya? Wish I didn’t sometimes, too.” Dixie shook his head. Ramon picked up the grinder to see what was wrong. He fiddled with it. Then he asked “Nicholas” to plug the appliance into the outside outlet on the backside brick wall of the house. Dixie followed the cord that stretched over the green lawn of freshly cut crabgrass to the electrical outlet near the base of the back wall. When he plugged in the cord, the

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machine popped and sparks flew at each end of the cord. The cord was bad. Ramon needed a replacement.

He was about to leave when the lady of the house, a grey-haired lady in her early sixties emerged from the back door ranting that Ramon was “negligent.” She said he had promised that he would have the paint removed by now. She wanted her deposit refunded. Ramon calmed her down and had Dixie plug the cord into the outlet again so he could show her the problem.

“We just rented some defective equipment, ma’am. I’ll have one of my men out here pronto to get it replaced. Why, it won’t take any time to take off this ugly looking green paint. You’ll be sittin’ out here with your husband this weekend barbecuing and admiring that nice aggregate finish. Now, if you don’t mind Ma’am, I’ll step inside and make the necessary phone calls right now.”

He flashed his gapped tooth smile at the old lady. She relented and he disappeared inside the small house with her. He came out about five minutes later with a couple of glasses of iced tea, which he and Dixie downed and then he returned the empty glasses to the lady of the house.

As they strolled back to the Pinto, Dixie admitted, “You sure had the old lady eating out of the palm of your hand, considering she was pretty hot when we first drove up.”

“Anh, nothing to it. I called Ralph. He’s havin’ Lester come over to take care of it. No problem.” Dixie had stopped listening to him as his half-brother drove down one of the D.C. Heights’ side streets.

“Hey, pull over there. Down that street.” Dixie demanded. Ramon took a right as ordered.

“Pull in there.”

They pulled into an oil-spotted, blue gravel, driveway with weeds growing like grass in a median down the center of the drive. The white shingle house had a screened-in front porch that housed a gently rocking porch swing that hung from the porch ceiling. A detached white, wooden garage was before them. A huge, shade tree filled the front yard, protecting the house, them and the drive from the searing mid-June summer rays.

“What is it, Mann? Whaddaya see?”

“I been here before. We’ve been here before.”

“What? Have you flipped?”

“No. I remember now. We were in a black, no; make that a navy blue sedan, an old car, Mann, like the kind James Dean drove in “Rebel Without a Cause.” There was a girl, a sandy blonde teen-ager came off that porch to talk ... to you. She had a southern accent. You got me to play my mouth organ for her. That’s right I had a mouth organ! It was, umm let me see—” Nick closed his eyes and searched ... “Bless ma soul, I love ya, take these arms away. My eyes light up when you call my name ...” Nick remembered the blues harp Ryzanna had given him last night, saying that it belonged to him and she had kept it for him until he came home.

He pulled the harmonica out of his pocket and stared at it. Ramon watched him curiously. Dixie put the organ to his lips and hesitated, unsure of his next step. He

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began to blow haltingly, groping, at first. Something clicked inside his brain, something that reared up quietly out of some dark recesses. Slowly, but surely, the tune tumbled out and Ramon began to sing:

“Ya give me fee-vah in the morning, fee-vah when you hold me ti—ight ...” The brothers began to get into it. Ramon sang terribly, just terribly, but Dixie’s raspy baritone was smooth and pleasing to the ear.

Soon a barefooted woman with auburn hair up in curlers and wearing a light blue summer shift, was knocking on the roof of the Pinto to gain their attention. Ramon had faced towards Dixie so his back was to the angry homeowner, who had approached the car from the driver’s side. She reached inside the car past Ramon and pressed hard on the horn, which startled the Sheeboom brothers.

Ramon recovered his composure and remarked with some wit. “Thanks for your help Ma’am, but I don’t believe this song has any horns, just saxophones and harmonicas.” Caught up in his memory and rediscovered musical abilities, Dixie agreed colorlessly. “Yeah, no horns you’re right.”

The woman in curler was not impressed. In fact, she was quite ticked off.

“Couple o’ clowns, hunh? Just who arah ya and what arah ya doin’ heah in mah drahvway? Didn’t ya heah me callin’ ya? Don’t ansah that. Jes’ go do it elsewherah an’ get on outta heah. Ah don’ wanna know ‘bout it.”

Ramon replied, “OK, OK, we’re leavin’. OK, Nicholas?”

“N-No, no, wait. B-Bobbi Sue. She, she useta live here, r-right? Yes?”

“Darn. You’re right, Nicholas. I completely forgot. Sure. Bobbi Sue Santee. Well, whaddaya know! You remembered and I didn’t.” He turned to the angry woman standing next to the car. “He remembered and I didn’t. How do you like that?”

“I don’t, not one bit. Not git outta herah befoah I call the PO! leece.”

Dixie stared hard out through the windshield at the disgruntled lady.

Ramon agreed, “Fine, but tell me one thing. Does Bobbi Sue Santee still live here?”

“Bobbie-Sue? She ain’t lived herah in ye-ahs. Went back to Sweet Home, Alabama, with my sistah’s folks when them dang niggah protestahs started ma’ahchin’ downtown. Whachu wan’ wid Bobbae-Sue?”

“Believe we just found out ma’am. Thanks for your time.”

Ramon nodded and backed out of the driveway chuckling. They left the woman with arms folded, shouting angrily after them.

“Bobbi Sue” he repeated to himself as he headed out of D.C. Heights back towards Crest Hill. “Gee, I hadn’t thought of her in years. She used to wear those tight sweaters and a ponytail. She was something else, all right.” Ramon fell quiet and Dixie could see the wheels spinning in his head. “We had some good times me and her. It’s funny how you remember all that. You couldn’t have been more than four or five, Nicholas.”

“You used to use me to draw the chicks for you.”

“Yeah, that’s right. My granddad gave me that navy blue ’53 Merc. You’re right. I’d bring you along and the chicks would fall over you—‘such a cute little fellow’, they’d say, ya see. And when you’d play ‘em a tune, they would just fall out.”

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“Yeah, I remember,” Dixie replied in welcome astonishment. And as he relaxed, he spoke fluently. “Then, once you had ‘em, you didn’t need me any more, so you’d drop me back at the house. Yeah, sure I remember.”

“Well at least you got to watch what you wanted to on my TV when I was out, ‘Maverick,’ ‘The Beaver,’ whatever.”

“Nah, I always had to go to bed, couldn’t finish ‘em.”

“Yeah, you had a real underprivileged youth, now didn’t ya? Ha! You were a Mouseketeer as I recall. Who did ya want? Everybody liked Annette, but not you. Who was it you used to like?”

“Darlene.”

Dixie was amazed at how he was suddenly able to recall this bit of trivia. It just came to him as if it had always been there. He recalled the doctor saying, Dixie only needed to squeeze the proper triggers to touch off the recall process, if in fact, his memory cells had not been destroyed by the gun blast or the subsequent surgeries to repair the gunshot wound.

“Yeah, that’s it: Darlene. So why did you like her, again?”

Dixie thought. The “Darlene” had just popped out. Why had he liked her? Yes, I remember. “Liked her curves. She had curves before Annette who was kind o’ skinny when she first started out. Darlene looked healthier to me and she had this show that she was on, right after Mickey Mouse where she was like the granddaughter of some old prospector.”

Ramon added, “Think that was part of the Mickey Mouse Club show, too, some kind o’ serial, like “The Hardy Boys,” you know?” Ramon heaved a sigh: “Bobbi Sue, yeah we had some good times, her and me.”

Ramon had passed Sweetland High again and crossed back over Veer Avenue that served as a kind of dividing line between Crest Hill Heights and the outside world of the Village, Sweetland and beyond. The pair passed the Gulf station, riding down into Crest Hill proper. When Ramon reached the Crest Hill shopping center, he turned left down Lyons and then right onto Kennison. In the middle of the block, he stopped in front of an immaculately maintained two-story, brick duplex.

“Come on, get out Mann. Think my grandparents would like to see ya.”

“*Our* grandparents?”

“No, not *your* grandparents, *my* grandparents, the Wrights.” He chuckled to himself, as they got out of the car and strolled casually up the brief sidewalk to the front steps brick duplex. “They helped raise me, until you came along.”

“Me? What did I have to do with it?”

“Oh, nothin’ much, just everything.” He laughed heartily.

Ramon knocked on the front door and then he walked right in, as if he owned the place, as he had done at his dad’s house.

“Who’s there?” called out a man from the back of the house. A grey-haired gent in spectacles came through the far end of a small dining alcove, wearing a green pair of work pants, supported by suspenders and a sleeveless, white cotton undershirt.

Out at Home

“It’s me, Ramon Boyd,” responded his grandson. “And I brought a visitor.” He winked at Dixie.

From upstairs, above the banister, a woman’s voice replied, “Tommy? Is that you?” The elderly woman descended the stairs hurriedly in a blue and grey housedress.

“What are ya doin’ here in the middle of the day, Son?” She offered her grandson a soft scolding. “You should be out workin’, Honey. Well, who have ya got here now?”

“Mammy. It’s Little Nick. It’s Nicholas; he’s come home to us.”

“Oh my Word! Boyd, Boyd do you see ...?”

“Yes Mother, I see, but I can’t believe ...” The elderly couple joined together from opposite ends of the living room beneath the stairwell banister, which dominated the small parlor. “By golly, Mother! It *is* Nicholas. It is.” Mammy came and clutched Dixie to her sizable bosom as if he were her own long lost child, while Mr. Wright waited his turn to shake the boy’s hand. The Wrights began to tear up, as Mrs. Wright excused herself to retrieve some Kleenex.

“Sit down, sit down, please.” Mr. Wright motioned them towards the sofa.

“Goodness gracious, well, I’ll be!”

The oddly paired boys sat down beside each other on the sofa. The morning sun streamed in over their heads from the picture window. Nick noticed the immaculate room teemed with period furniture covered by doilies and shams and porcelain knick-knacks on shelves. The brown and white banister staircase sturdily climbed the wall opposite him. Dixie felt a real sense of coziness sitting here. Ramon relayed what he knew of Dixie’s story to them, pausing periodically to check if his brother had corrections to make, but Dixie remained quiet. Mrs. Wright offered them a soda, but they declined.

“Well, I guess Ray and Wauneta must be overjoyed. They must be.”

“Well of course, Pappy,” agreed his wife. “I’m overjoyed, so you know they must be. It’s good to have ya home Son. Look at him Pappy! Why Little Nick’s all grown up. He’s a man now.”

“Yes, he is. Son, it’s good to have ya back, REAL good.” The Wrights acted as if they were Dixie’s grandparent’s as well as Ramon’s. But all these people back here sounded alike, acted alike. Their responses to his reappearance all ran together and became blurred by an overdose of surrealism.

Ramon interjected, “Well, Nicholas, do you remember Mammy and Pappy or this place?”

“Pappy?” Nick asked bewildered. “I thought you were terminally ill in a nursing home?”

Ramon laughed. “No, that’s our Grandfather, Dad’s dad, Raymond Sheeboom, Senior. This is Pappy, Boyd Wright, Sr. my mother’s dad. Do you remember him or this place at all?”

Dixie glanced around. There was some vague recognition percolating in his brain, not unlike what he had experienced earlier. Then, suddenly he blurted out:

“Helicopters.” Again, as with “Darlene” earlier, the word just popped out.

Family Origins

Pappy asked if he had heard right, “Helicopters’?” The Wrights looked at each other quizzically. It was a look Dixie had seen exchanged between individuals before when they thought he might be a little off his rocker.

Dixie rose, as if he were in a trance and nodded towards the back of the house.

“Out back. You have helicopters.” He turned to face them with a sure gaze. “That’s what I remember.”

“Son,” said Mr. Wright, “we have a garage, a hammock, a bird bath and some shade trees in the back. There’s an old Indian motorcycle and a car in the garage, but no helicopters.”

“Can we look?” asked Dixie.

Equally bewildered, Mammy said, “Why sure. Come on back through the kitchen.”

Skeptically, they stepped back through the small house, out the back door and down the concrete steps into a manicured, green yard, replete with a bird bath and some lovely shady maple trees. Dixie walked out into the yard, where he bent down and picked up a yellowed, wizened maple tree pod. He stood up and flicked the pod into the air, watching it twirl, as it floated to the ground. He smiled broadly, fully satisfied with himself, turning around to his hosts.

“Whirly birds,” noted Ramon.

“Helicopters,” corrected Dixie.

Ramon smiled in agreement: “Helicopters, yes!” He clapped his younger brother on the back. “Darn right, they are HELICOPTERS!”

“Boyd, the boy is right. God bless him,” cooed Mammy.

“Hey, Tommy! What’s happenin’?”

They all turned toward a nasally voice emanating from the adjacent duplex across the yard on the other side of the chain-link fence. It was Fat Eddie Slipes. Dixie recognized him immediately, despite his fashionable broad sideburns and weak mustache.

“Haven’t seen you in a coon’s age, boy. What you doin’ with yourself?”

“Watchin’ whirly, uh, helicopters!” Ramon deadpanned.

Responding to his boyhood nickname, Ramon picked a maple tree pod off the ground and tossed it up in the air, gleefully watching its whirling descent to the manicured, soft green grass. The elderly couple retreated toward the back stoop. Ramon ushered Dixie over to Eddie, explaining to him Nick’s whole, miraculous story again. Eddie was floored. He explained to Dixie that Dixie had been a sophomore at Pocomoke High when Eddie had been a senior and that Eddie’s kid brother Dickie was the year in between the two of them. He said Dickie was due to get out of the Corps in another month or so.

Dixie heard the phone ring inside the Wright’s house and, while the men talked, Mrs. Wright hustled back up the back steps and inside to answer it. Mrs. Wright returned momentarily and informed Dixie that his wife had just called and wanted him to come home promptly, as she wanted to take him to Pocomoke to meet some of the teachers.

“How did she know I was here?” asked Dixie.

Out at Home

Leaning up against the other side of the fence, Eddie laughed and shook his head, side to side. “Wives! They’re worse than mothers, Mann. They always seem to know.” Then he laughed some more.

The Sheeboom boys bid their good-byes and left. Ramon dropped Dixie at the Gulf Station so he could pick up his bike. He told Dixie he had some more sales calls to make and asked him if he might be interested in helping him out, installing swimming pools for the summer like Little Nick used to do. He said Dixie could work with the Suggs’ boys and the Salvaranos again, just like old times. Dixie said he did not know what he was going to do so he did not want to make any promises. Ramon seemed a bit miffed. He said it did not seem like much to ask, seeing how as Dixie had a lot of free time on his hands and working with the old crew might spark some memories for him. Dixie promised to think about it. Ramon started to leave. Then he stopped the car and yelled over to Dixie who had hopped on his bike.

“Hey? Ya know? That Bobbie Sue was pretty cool. Know what I mean? I had forgotten about her. All right, take it easy, Mann. We’ll be in touch, Nicholas!”

Dixie nodded. “Hey! How come your grandmother and that Eddie call you Tommy?”

Slightly perturbed, his brother replied, “It was a nickname I had as a kid. Forget it. I don’t go by that name anymore. Dropped it when I went into the service. You can call me Ray or you can call me Ramon, just don’t call me Tommy.”

Then he grinned and headed down Veer towards Woldorn, as the Little-Pinto-That-Could clunked and chugged by fits and starts, coughing dense, blue-black smoke in its wake. Ramon’s parting line sounded vaguely familiar to Dixie. Yeah, it was like that comic’s routine—“You can call me Ray or you can call me Jay, but you doesn’t have to call me Mister Johnson”