

Dixie awoke early the next morning, relieved to have escaped the police last night. Without compunction, he decided to follow Ryz'n's advice and go home to mother. To the delight of his folks, Dixie packed up all his belongings, settled his motel bill and moved into his parent's house. He resolved to make up with Ryz'n, but his father had other ideas.

"Duty first, Son, duty first."

In route to his work downtown, Dixie's father dropped Dix at the dentist's office before eight. The dentist, who was also a skilled orthodontist, was most cooperative. Not only did he provide the requisite dental records and x-rays requested by Master Sergeant Lattimore, but he used those x-rays as a guide to adjust Dixie's porcelain bridge, restoring his original front-toothed gap so that the bridge fit more comfortably. He also took a mold and offered to make Dixie a bridge with bona fide gold dentures for six hundred dollars if he wanted. The idea of a pair of gold teeth appealed to Dixie and so, flushed with cash, he agreed.

Finding himself afoot, Dix walked his dental records across the John Phillip Souza Bridge on Pennsylvania Avenue. He arrived at the Navy Yard, less than two miles away, where he received V.I.P. treatment from the Commandant and his staff. Sergeant Major Lattimore had burned the midnight oil last night and contacted Jim Dixon in La Jolla and learned of the incredible, lost war experiences of Nick Sheeboom. In fact, the Top was so enthralled with Dixon's story of Sheeboom, that he did not leave his office until midnight, after he had pieced together all of the details. Lattimore had made several phone calls, speaking with fellow returned prisoners of war whom Sheeboom had helped rescue, as well as medical staff and former fellow patients of Dixie's from Manila to Hawaii to the West Coast.

By the time the Commandant had read Lattimore's full report, he was seriously considering nominating Dixie for the nation's highest military honors. When the Commandant related his intentions to Dix, he surprised the Commandant and the Sergeant Major by requesting, respectfully, that they not make those recommendations. Dixie felt that a hero who could not remember his heroic actions was not much of a hero at all. Rather, he was only a four-flusher. The Commandant disagreed. Moreover, he felt the country needed a hero. Viet Nam, Watergate and the resignations of the Vice-President and the President all had conspired to leave a bad taste in the collective mouth of the public about the leadership of the country, no less the military. The Commandant was convinced the country was in dire need of some first class mouthwash in the form of a hero with a brand name of Sheeboom. Again, Dixie declined respectfully, leaving two of the Marines' top leaders mystified.

While Dix spent the rest of the day sightseeing his forgotten hometown, he thought continually of Ryz'n and of how he could make things right between them. He met his father and some of his father's co-workers for lunch in the cafeteria in the bowels of the Agriculture Department. Then he carried on with his study of the monuments and memorials that reside proudly in the Nation's Capitol. He stared a long while across

Old Friends

the cherry tree-lined, tidal basin at the Jefferson Memorial, while he waited to catch a ride home with his Dad. Dixie felt somehow as though he had rested beside those glassy, calm waters previously. On their ride home, his Dad told him of a local amateur baseball team, based in R. G. County. The D.C. Printers might have an open roster spot. Mr. Negrosone, one of his father's co-workers and former teammates (for Dixie learned the two had both played ball for one of USDA's agency teams twenty years ago), had a son who pitched for the Printers. The son was certain Dixie could join the club. Dixie reminded his Dad that both Mr. Gasch and Coach Shaughnessy already were working to get Dixie on that club, as well. He also reminded his father he was going down to Coach Shaughnessy's house the next night to meet the Printers' manager over at some nearby ballpark.

* * *

During dinner, Mrs. Sheeboom mentioned that Ryz'n had called three times that day asking to speak to him. After dinner, Dixie returned her call, but Mrs. Ryan explained that Ryz'n had already gone down to the beach with a girlfriend. However, Mrs. Ryan assured Dixie that his wife was looking forward to meeting him Friday evening. She and Mr. Ryan would be happy to take him down to their beach cottage on Friday afternoon. She said the trip should take about six hours. Dixie's mother-in-law suggested that he should be at the Ryan's house by 3:30 p.m. His mother-in-law assured him that Ryz'n was just fine. Still, Dixie hung up the phone with a sour sensation in his stomach. He knew he had screwed up last night with Ryz'n. He wanted to make it up to her somehow. Now she had left him.

Dixie's Dad had set up the home movie projector in the living room. He wanted to trace his son's life on film, sort of a homemade "This is *Your Life*." Dixie didn't feel much like it, because his mind was on Ryz'n, but he watched anyway. He actually did see some scenes and people that provoked flashbacks for him. He told them so, but a couple of hours were all he could take at one time before his head began to ache. Dixie told them that as well. He said he needed to get out, get some air, so he hopped on his Honda and drove up to the Heights, where he ran into Tommy Mack and Father Vizconni in Giorgio's cocktail restaurant and lounge. The three discussed old times over a couple of beers. Of course, Tommy had root beer—he was in training. Mostly Dixie listened to the other two. After all, what he could offer to their reminiscences? Tommy left a little after ten, but the priest stuck around with Dixie.

Dixie sensed the self-effacing priest possessed wisdom beyond his years, for he could not have been much beyond thirty. Vizconni asked softly where Ryz'n was and what was "Nicky" doing in the bar without her? Dixie offered a fumbling, half explanation, but the priest was not buying it. The humble cleric dug deeper. Dixie learned Vince Vizconni was a soft-spoken man with kind eyes and quick ears. And the Lord knew, Dixie needed badly to talk with someone, who was not a well-meaning family member. The beer had weakened Dixie's defense and loosened his tongue. Before he knew it, and contrary to his close-mouthed nature, with scarcely a stutter, he was confiding all to the sympathetic young priest.

Dixie spoke about Donna and the mishap with Ryz'n in the motel room, though he skirted the more salacious details. Now Dixie suggested that maybe he was not good enough for Ryz'n. He sure could not measure up to being the bona fide legend everyone claimed him to be. He dared not consider himself all that they claimed. In fact, it was inconceivable to him. What if he could not remember Ryz'n and their marriage? Worse, what if he could and then could not measure up to his past self? Further, if he could recall her, he would probably recall Vietnam. Based on the ugly wounds the War allegedly had perpetrated upon his person, he was not sure he wanted to recollect all that had happened to him, even if it meant not recalling his lovely wife.

Father V. listened patiently. His kind, soft brown eyes encouraged Dixie. When Dixie had finished, the good Father spoke reassuringly. Father Vizconni now spoke with him about faith, about how God works all things, both good and bad, to good for those He loves and who trust in Him. He related that Ryz'n's faith had been an inspiration even to him. He said he had been Ryz'n's priest for almost ten years. He had given her the sacraments of Holy Communion, Confirmation, Penance and Matrimony. The padre confessed that he was happy to have enjoyed her confidences over the years and to watch her grow up into a fine, responsible daughter of the Church. Observing the growth in her faith over the years had warmed his heart. Few, as young as she, had been beset with such trying circumstances. Yet, Ry had remained resolute in her trust in Jesus Christ, that He would bring Nick back safely. The priest pointed out that, what Dixie had considered a fluke—the Peppermount team advancing to the College World Series—had not been a fluke at all. That God incidence had postponed Dixie's misguided and adulterous marriage to Donna and precluded misery for him, Ryz'n and the Dixons as well. No, there had been no fluke at all. Rather, what Dixie had taken for a fluke, God had worked to good. He quoted scripture to Dixie. "The act was ordained by the sovereign hand of the Lord, **Who works all things to good, to them who love God and are called according to his purpose.**" Vizconni claimed God had worked to good for the Dixon family by reuniting them and to good for both Ryz'n and Dixie by reuniting them as well. The priest added with a twinkle in his eye that things had not worked out too badly for the Peppermount Porpoises, either. Dixie laughed, toasting the priest, faith and God. Vince Vizconni drained his glass on that toast.

"Of course Padre," chuckled Dixie, "the L.A. Zorros, who we upset in the Regionals, weren't too pleased about it."

"Well now Nicholas, who is to say what good the Lord hath wrought with them as well?"

"A-men, Father."

Nick rode the priest the few short blocks back to the rectory on the back of his bike. Father V. thought he might like to try driving the motorcycle himself sometime. Dixie said he could do it right now if he wanted. He showed Father Vizconni how to operate the bike and cheered the cleric on as he rode around on the church and school parking lots. They made so much noise that Father Luigi came out from the rectory to investigate the cause of the racket. When he had finished, Father Vizconni thanked

Nick for a “surprising and entertaining evening.” Before he left, the priest reminded “Nick” that he had witnessed a rocky, previous engagement between Nick and Ryz’n, which had also had its rough spots. However, in the end, the Lord had worked out everything, helping the couple to consummate their love in holy matrimony, overcoming all obstacles. The good Father assured Dixie the Lord would do so again. Dixie thanked him for his wisdom and his trusting ways and they parted company. Dixie had not known many priests, well any priests for that matter, but that guy was alright.

It was getting late, but, for no special reason, Dixie decided to swing past Ryz’n’s home, even though she was not there. He raised the Ryans from their bed. Both Mr. and Mrs. Ryan reminded him about their next day trip to the beach. They were going to celebrate “Ryz’n’s twenty-second birthday on Sunday, the twenty-second.” They, or at least *Mrs.* Ryan, very much wanted “Nick” to be there and so did Ryz’n, who was already at the resort with a girlfriend, Sheena and Bryson. Dixie explained he would have to come down on Saturday, because he reminded them that he had promised to attend a cookout with Coach Shaughnessy Friday evening. The Coach had found a baseball team for him and wanted Dixie to meet the manager. Dixie thought the Ryan’s had remembered his acceptance of the Coach’s invitation from the call he had taken after dinner at the Sheeboom’s house the other night. Mr. Ryan told him to cancel the cookout. However, when Dixie reminded them that Ryz’n was supposed to be with him at the Coach’s house, too, Mrs. Ryan acquiesced to his wishes. She recalled Ryz’n’s concurrence with that dinner date. Then, Mr. Ryan asked Dixie bluntly what was more important his former coach or his wife? Dixie could not even stutter an intelligible response. He stumbled down their front stoop and bid his in-laws farewell, as kindly as he could manage.

He tried a different route home. He rode on Stuyvesant, past the Crest Hill shopping center and turned left onto 26th Avenue. This route took a couple of minutes longer but he was learning his way around, trying to figure things out. He was enjoying the effects of the ride, which combined favorably with the beer swimming in his head and the sweet summer floral scents, especially the pungent magnolia blossoms. He imagined himself floating up to heaven on such sweet summer scents, as the night breeze lifted his long locks off the back of his sweating neck. He tooled through the blocks of green-lawned, brick ramblers and Cape Cods, where a group of young people on the right side of the street flagged him down, as he approached the intersection with Adirondack Street. Dixie signaled to make a left turn, when—

“Yo Nick, Nick! Hey, pull over Mann!”

Startled, Dixie downshifted into neutral and pulled over to the concrete curb, as the whole group of young people idly scrambled down the lawn’s short grassy rise to greet him. A tall, angular blonde with thick, tight curls and hairy, bony legs assailed him.

“Nick!” You don’t remember me? You forgot me since the other night? For cyrin’ out loud!”

“The other night? What do you mean the other night?”

Out at Home

Dixie drifted to a stop, placing both feet on the pavement to steady the bike, but he kept the engine running.

The tall, lean, young man featured a present day head full of coarse tight, golden curls. Wearing cut-off blue jeans and a white T-Shirt, the curly-haired blonde gripped the Honda's right handlebar firmly.

"Mann, Nick! I knew you had amnesia, but this is crazy."

He looked around for approval to the half a dozen or more others who watched from the curb. "I'm Paul Salvarano. Yes? And that's my brother Phil." He pointed a few steps behind him to a heavy-set guy with dirty blonde hair draped over his ears and forehead. Both brothers wore blue, Levi cut-offs and T-shirts.

"We visited you night before last? At the block party, remember? We've known you since we started grade school together. Come on, Mann!"

The outgoing, curly-haired blonde smacked his hands together in front of Dixie's face, as if to wake Dixie out of a trance. Dixie noticed the guy had a way of moving, of doing things, which Dixie found to be unique. He kind of hunched his shoulders and lowered his head and ambled slew-footed, but he could hop surprisingly quickly, when he wanted. White blond hair also covered his arms and legs. With his aquiline beak, he appeared to Dixie as if he were some majestic bird of prey, flapping its wings in an excited angular, rhythmic manner.

Dixie fumbled and mumbled an unconvincing response as he acknowledged the pair of brothers. Behind them, he noted a brick rambler similar to that of Dixie's parents. However, this house featured a cape-cod roof over the left half of the structure. A horizontal ripple crossed their yard as if it were a solitary ocean wave that was frozen in place as green grass. Two concrete steps rode the crest of the grassy wave. In fact, now that he thought about it, their place was just a couple of blocks from the folks' home.

Phil stepped forward shyly to shake Dixie's hand. The contrast between the two boys was stark. Although both brothers wore thick moustaches, were blue-eyed and exceeded six-feet in height, Phil's locks were several shades darker than his brother and the personality differences between the two were striking. Paul had a wiry, hairy frame and an outgoing temperament. Dixie guessed from his bold greeting that he might be a bit of a rascal. His golden locks were so thick and coarse they stood in uncombed ringlets all over his scalp, like a Caesar of old. His kid brother Phil was completely different, straight-laced, no curls, slightly rotund, gentle and soft spoken. Paul explained that Nick and Phil had been close buddies throughout their school years. Dixie scrutinized Phil closely, but, try as he might, he could evince no memory of the guy.

Dixie turned off the Honda, kicked the stand down and climbed off his bike, hoping that maybe he could recollect someone here.

"That's right," cried Paul. "Hop off that bad boy and say hello to everyone. Come on up here and shoot the bull, like we used to." He grinned with delight, as Dixie obliged.

Paul escorted him up the sidewalk where he introduced Dix to everyone. Although it was getting late, this group of young well wishers seemed anxious to greet Dixie.

Old Friends

Some had been sitting on lawn chairs. Others simply had rested upon the green lawn itself under the giant old maple tree that dwarfed half their yard. All had walked down the gentle rise in the lawn to greet him, except for an older couple who sat, unmoved, a few yards away, back on the front porch steps.

Paul introduced his two sisters, Annette and Livvi. They too were blond, blue-eyed and attractive. Both were slightly less than average in height but they were both solidly constructed. Livvi looked to be a teen with long straight blond hair, parted in the center of her head. She blushed deeply, when she shook Dixie's hand. The shorter-cropped Annette was obviously older, an adult. In turn, she shook Dixie's hand and grinned widely. Dixie learned that Annette evidently had come back home with her baby girl for a short visit from their home in Minnesota. The baby was inside, bedded down for the night. Annette related that she used to baby-sit for Dix when he was younger. When Dixie asked if he had behaved himself for her, she guffawed and said, "Sometimes." The young woman had a most radiant, clean, wholesome white-toothed, smile.

Next up was the round-spectacled, round-headed, mustachioed Rocco Niccolini, named after his Uncle Rocco the barber, who, Dixie learned, barbered in the chair opposite Mario up at the Esquire Barber Shop. Rocco greeted Dixie heartily as well, displaying a multi-gapped, toothy grin and presented his girl Sal. Sal showered a cheery, infectious beam upon Dixie from beneath heavy eyebrows and a brown, shag hair cut. Dixie could not help but notice her healthy build was attractively curvy, too. He wondered what was in this Maryland water back east that favored these girls so much. He figured California girls had nothing on their feminine eastern cousins; despite The Beach Boys' song to the contrary. While Dixie was ogling Sally, Rocco introduced a shorter, thin and thinly mustachioed guy by the name of Fred. Rocco explained that Nick couldn't possibly know Fred who was a latecomer to their scene. He said Fred was interested primarily in the youngest Salvarano, Livvi, who was several years his junior. However, Rocco half-joked that the rest of the Salvaranos were present to ensure Fred's interest remained purely metaphysical.

Finally, Paul presented his girlfriend Natasha Slutskaya, who was also a friend and high school classmate of Livvi. Natasha was movie star handsome, a real shapely head-turner. She had bobbed her auburn hair, as well, in the style of the popular female singer Tenille of the Captain and Tenille. Strictly from a physical perspective, Natasha appeared to Dixie to be a seventeen-year old going on twenty-seven.

Nick learned that the girls, less Annette, all worked behind the counter up to the local Roy Rogers restaurant. Phil's girlfriend, Dee-Dee was working a shift there right now. On summer break from Wisconsin State, the Salvarano brothers were installing swimming pools to pay for their girl and gas money over the long break. Jokingly, they asked Dixie if he were going to join them and the school teachers in installing swimming pools for Ramon again, agreeing that it would be just like old times if Dixie signed on. To their obvious surprise, Dixie didn't reject their offer outright. Phil remarked that he could not understand why Dixie would want to sweat, with them in the heat, digging ditches, with the all money *GRT* had amassed.

Out at Home

Dixie confessed objectively that if the job could help him regain his memory, maybe he should pursue it. The sincerely cold reality of his remark silenced their laughter. Dixie remembered his brother did have work plans for him. Paul explained that the school teachers worked as subcontractors exclusively to Ramon, installing the pools that he sold. So whether Dixie worked for Ramon directly or subcontracted to the school teachers, Dixie, Paul and Phil would wind up working together.

“Who is that? Little Nicky Sheeboom?”

A nasal, high-pitched twang chirped from a dark-haired, bespectacled, older gentleman who had been sitting quietly next to a plump middle-aged blonde under the porch light on the front stoop. Paul laughed. “Come on Nick.” He motioned with his curly locks towards the porch. “It’s my Dad.”

Dixie followed Paul, as the sea of well-wishers parted for them as the Red Sea had done for the escaping Hebrews. Dixie and Paul stopped on the concrete sidewalk at the foot of the stoop in front of the older couple. Neither of them moved, but Paul made the formal introduction.

“Nick,” announced Paul proudly. “This is my Mom and Dad.”

Dixie reached out to Mr. Salvarano, who took his hand without rising off the concrete stoop. The man’s salt and pepper grey hair appeared to be trained to lay backwards in Fifty’s style, but he had flipped part of his forelocks down as a concession to the times.

“Well Ma, look at this,” he proclaimed with mock surprise in his nasal tone. Little Nicky Sheeboom has come home, after all this time. Well, well. Now don’t that take the hair off’n a frog?”

His dry manner baffled Dixie, who did not know if the gentleman was joking or just couldn’t give a hoot. From the laughter of the others who had gathered around them, Dixie took it to be the former. Mrs. Salvarano also remained seated and shook Dixie’s hand from her concrete perch.

“You know Nick, I can’t count the number of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches I made for you and Phil.” She chuckled through watery eyes.

Dixie could see where Mr. and Mrs. Salvarano had produced four good-looking kids: two boys sandwiched between, a pair of lovely blonde, bookend daughters. Paul favored his father and Phil his mother. Familiar with his ailment, the family launched into telling Little Nick stories. The kids gathered the lawn chairs towards the porch, where they sat or lounged on the steps and nearby grass to listen. Dixie listened carefully, noting the zest of the teller, for the speaker’s enthusiasm revealed more to him about the storyteller than the story did about him.

One story in particular, which interested him, concerned an accident during a Little Nick sleepover at the Salvaranos when he was about eight. Evidently at that time, the Salvaranos had lived in a duplex over on Dickens Street near the Stamp Farm, where Ryz’n and Dixie had purchased the strawberries earlier that day. Well, it seemed that somehow Little Nick had fallen while lying down for the night on a cot. The fall had caused his upper two front teeth to pierce his lower lip, chipping one of the teeth. That tooth had required a cap. A gold cap had been Little Nick’s preference. Mrs. Salvarano

said there was blood everywhere and later she had regretted that they had not taken Little Nick to the emergency room at the time of the accident, because he probably should have had stitches in his lip.

With the tip of his tongue, Dixie felt the two lumps on the lower inside of his lip, which were left so long ago by the puncture from his two front teeth in that cot incident. The ladies had always enjoyed exploring those lumps, telling him that they liked to run the tip of their tongues over them. Supposedly, the lumps made his kisses more intriguing, more unique, not to mention his lower lip was fatter than it would normally have been. And they had seemed to like that, as well.

Paul asked Dixie to smile for them, which he did, displaying his dental plate of two, fake gold-capped teeth. When they questioned him about it, he mentioned he was not sure exactly how he had lost his teeth. He could only repeat what James Dixon, his fellow comrade in arms, had told him. Apparently, the VC had knocked his two front teeth out to steal the gold off his capped tooth. When Dixie's audience fell silent, he brushed the whole thing off and told them not to feel bad about it, because he didn't. He smiled to reassure them he could not even remember the incident.

The easy-going Phil lightened the mood by quietly proffering another humorous Little Nick story. Phil told about how he and "Little Nick" had worked out in the snow in February to prepare an obsessed Nick for the upcoming high school baseball season. Phil recalled he had to keep hitting Nick flies, because grounders didn't travel very far in that white fluffy stuff. Phil also talked about the time one hot summer's day when a gang of the Dickens Street kids and Little Nick were playing baseball on the ball field behind the grade school. They had knocked the cover off Nick's baseball. The more they played, the more they knocked off the yarn surrounding the core of the ball. Soon there was nothing left of the baseball but the hard rubber core. Suddenly, playing the game had become secondary to the musical chair effect of trying to determine who would be the lucky kid to bat when all the yarn was all off and only the hard rubber core remained. As it turned out, Paul was the lucky recipient. Pitching left handed, Phil laid the rubber core in there for his brother to swat and Paul promptly clocked it to dead center, out of sight, over the field and the two-story, red brick schoolhouse as well. Paul concurred that, to be sure, the core had traveled at least as deep as one of Mantle's prodigious shots.

The brothers also told stories about camping out in the Salvaranos back yard in an old army surplus tent where Paul stealthily used his telescope to observe "the neighboring heavenly bodies."

"Yeah, right!" Phil chimed. It happened, those would have been the "heavenly bodies" of next-door neighbors Lanna Roland on the left or the Widow Ready on the right, viewed through their respective bathroom and bedroom windows. Now, eight years later, Phil still was complaining that Paul got thirty second turns on the scope while the others had only received fifteen seconds a piece. Paul defended himself, justifying the disparity by reminding them all that, after all, it had been *his* telescope which they had used for their astronomical/anatomical observations.

Out at Home

Mrs. Salvarano expressed mild surprise at these revelations. Although she did recall that she had mentioned later to Mrs. Sheeboom about Little Nick's unusual nocturnal habits, prowling around the Ready place, that night and quite often afterwards. Smirking, Paul reminded Dixie that Little Nick always seemed to hold a special place in Mrs. Ready's heart, ever since Nick's miraculous though comical escape from her German Shepherd one hot, humid summer's night. Everyone guffawed, as if they knew the story, but Dixie could not figure out why they were laughing so heartily. So Paul relayed the tale with relish. His Mrs. Ready telescope tale had occurred one hot August night back in 1967 ...

The boys were camped out in an army tent in the Salvarano's backyard with Nick's transistor radio softly playing the latest tunes. They were all fourteen to fifteen, except Nick who was still six weeks from turning fourteen. There had been the typical argument over the fair use of the telescope. However, there wasn't much action going on that night. In fact, the later it got, the more disappointing their prospects became as neither heavenly body had appeared in her respective orbit. Murmurs of discontent spread among the junior astronomers in the tent upon the crest in the Salvarano's backyard. So Paul and Ralph, Paul's best buddy, had dared Little Nick to scale the Widow's back wall to get an up close and personal view of her. They hoped Nick might lure the young widow over to her open second-story bedroom window where the rest of them could glimpse her *bona fides*, so to speak.

Arethra Franklin was belting out "R-E-S-P-E-C-T" over Nick's transistor, which Nick said he appreciated since he wasn't getting much respect from the older boys. The shapely, young widow next door had a welcome habit of leaving her screen-less double sash windows open, as she took in the night air in a bra top. Her only child Little Billy slept in his bedroom in the front of the house. Word had it that the nubile, young widow would lie on her bed in the late evening reading cheap novels near the open second story window to catch any cooling breeze she could.

The boys had also learned through little boy Billy that Mrs. Ready maintained an electric floor fan, which she placed on top of her short, wide bureau and propped up under some telephone books, next to her open bedroom windows. She kept a couple trays of ice on the window sill behind the fan to draw in cool air. Every twenty minutes or so, she'd exchange the melted ice trays for fresh, frozen ones from the refrigerator in the kitchen. During these tray exchange trips, the cute young widow occasionally appeared in her birthday suit before the open windows. The curious teens in the backyard pup tent had fed their adolescent hormones previously by observing this much anticipated feminine phenomenon, however brief the sighting. Now they knew Mrs. Ready's chest set of navel oranges was worth the wait. Even so, the weather, no less the moon and the stars and, most importantly, the Widow Ready's fan had to be aligned just right to catch the heavenly glimpses they sought. For sure, the young widow's solid brace of oranges had perked the astronomical and anatomical interests of the hopeful, young, backyard Galileos on a couple of prior occasions. However, this night, her heavenly alignment or something was out of whack. Because, although a

Old Friends

partial moon darted fleetingly between some night clouds and the fan was not blocking their view, still Mrs. Ready had failed to appear in her natural orbit.

Paul and Ralph had lost patience. They triple-dared Little Nick to get something started, as he did on the baseball field. They suggested the limber Nick try climbing the side of the widow's house. When Little Nick balked, the boys claimed that he had no hair on his butt, if he chickened. Little Nick had been called out. He had no choice, except to accept the dare or remain labeled a shave-tail forever.

Only after the unsuspecting Nick had climbed over the chain-link fence, which separated the two yards, did the boys warn him to watch out for the Ready's German shepherd "Topsy." Topsy slept in her doghouse beneath the Widow's second story bedroom. The dog was notorious for its ferocity, because little Billy Ready mistreated her cruelly.

The other boys sunk back inside the tent to observe, as a growling Topsy crept out of her house when Little Nick tentatively approached the fence. Little Nick usually did not have much of a way with dogs, not even with the Salvarano's cocker spaniel, but Nick calmed the bitch this time by calling her by name and letting the dog lick his hand. Shrewdly, Nick gave the dog some PEZ that he carried in his pocket as reserve, emergency rations for the overnight. Little Nick made friends with Topsy and even played with the dog a little. With the lure of the PEZ, Little Nick even got Topsy to roll over on her back and let Nick scratch her belly. The noise from the electric fan in the window above must have blocked Mrs. Ready from hearing Topsy in the yard below, because, much to Paul's chagrin, the Widow refused to surface. When Little Nick thought the dog had been calmed enough, he picked up a painter's ladder that lay on its side next to the house and extended the ladder to its full length.

Topsy began to bark when Nick leaned the ladder against the two-story brick duplex, just inside the short, chain-link fence that separated the Salvaranos back yard from the Ready's. Nick threw Topsy a couple of PEZ, one toward the fence bordering either side of the narrow, twenty-five foot wide yard. The dog went for Nick's diversion, while Little Nick scrambled up the ladder next to the brick seam that bisected the duplex from top to bottom—

Phil interrupted Paul's tale again long enough to remind Dixie that Little Nick had been under doctor's orders to be on restricted physical activity at this time because he was still recovering from an attack of rheumatic fever earlier that year. Nick was not supposed to be doing anything like that, climbing fences and mounting ladders for fear of a relapse of the disease that had plagued him all spring. Moreover, Phil claimed that he had told Ralph and Paul that they should take back their dares and not force Nick into such a relapse. (Dixie had already heard about his bout with rheumatic fever from his parents, so Phil's quip only confirmed their story.) Paul resumed his tale by reminding them that no self-respecting kid on Dickens Street ever took back a dare, not one like that, regardless of a doctor's orders . . .

Well, the dog began to bark again. Little Nick flicked the PEZ as he had before with the same silencing results. Nick surveyed the mountain he was about to scale. Two brick seams formed a cross upon the duplex with the one vertical seem, separating the

Out at Home

Ready's home from the Salvaranos. The other horizontal seam crossed both homes, ten feet off the ground, separating the first from the second story. Spaced a half a foot apart, perpendicular to the wall, two rows of bricks inserted into the wall formed the brick seams. With his left foot wedged between the vertical brick seam and the brick wall itself, Nick lifted his right foot from the top most rung of the ladder onto the top of the decorative wooden shutter which bordered the left side of the dining room window. Paul laughed and said Little Nick had looked like a Spider Man comic strip, as he dug his fingertips into the concrete spacing between the bricks. Still there was no sight of the young widow.

Balancing on his right foot atop the shutter, Nick reached farther up the brick seam with his left foot. Nick's right hand was little more than a foot below the Widow's brick bedroom window sill now. In a daring move, Paul said that Little Nick fairly jumped off the shutter, shifting his full weight to his left foot wedged into the brick seam and the wall. Then Nick leapt quickly again, as if he were playing vertical hopscotch. Reaching up and back to his right, Little Nick grabbed hold of the window sill with his right hand. He was there! Had he missed, Topsy would have gotten a midnight snack

By pushing off with his left foot and pulling with his right hand, Nick had now reached the sill with his left hand, as well. For balance, he slid his right hand down along the top of the brick window sill a foot or so. From that point he wriggled and inched his wedged left foot up along the vertical seam. Then he placed his right foot on the modest brick outcropping atop the horizontal seam. By grabbing hold of the widow's second-story, bedroom window sill with both hands, he pulled himself up to where he could see inside the bedroom.

Back in the tent, Paul observed, "that was a hell of a feat for a thirteen-year old kid recovering from rheumatic fever, or for anyone for that matter!" While Paul gawked over Nick's derring-do, Ralph mad a move for the telescope. Paul and Ralph began fighting over the scope and Phil piped in that he was hoping the dog stayed quiet, but she didn't. So Nick, hanging by his left foot and hand, used his right hand to extract a PEZ and repeated his earlier PEZ-tossing tactic. It worked, but Paul wondered if the little guy's reserve rations weren't running low. Meanwhile, Nick struggled to regain the sill with his right hand.

From his perch in the tent, Paul was becoming angry. Nick was making good on the dare, but the tent crew were not spying any heavenly orbs or navel oranges, either, for that matter. Inspired, Paul crawled out of the tent, which sat atop the low hill that rose up in the back yard. He knew old Topsy, the Ready's dog, was leashed to a long chain, which prevented the dog from jumping the fence or coming up to the crest of the rise. Imitating a mean, little Billy Ready trick, Paul picked up a handy baseball bat, crawled over to the chain-link fence and, running the bat across the links, growled at Topsy. Enraged, the dog jumped into the fence, barking and growling. Paul quickly retreated into the safety of the tent, but he had achieved his purpose, much to Phil's chagrin, who was more concerned for his friend's safety than in viewing the Widow's *bona*

fides. However just as Paul had hoped, Topsy had set off such a racket that Mrs. Ready came to the window to scold the bitch.

Little Nick ducked his head down just below the brick ledge, but he could not resist looking up. Paul cried out laughing that Little Nick didn't need any telescope then. Nick must have caught an eyeful at point blank range, when Mrs. Ready shocked Nick by leaning out of the window to quiet Topsy. Paul laughed then that Little Nick looked up and lost his footing against the horizontal brick wall seam beneath him. He clung to the brick window sill literally by his fingertips, with his feet swaying back and forth freely beneath him . . .

Paul imitated Nick's predicament for his rapt audience by walking over to a low-lying branch of their large maple tree and hung from two hands, while his feet dangled helplessly above the imaginary Topsy's dog house. Paul reached up with one hand, latched onto a twig and shook the leaves growing upon it. Paul explained his hand clutching the shaking twig resembled Nick's free hand latching on, in desperation, to a fistful of a black lace bra, thus overexposing half of the widow's *bona fides*. After Paul had earned some lusty laughs, he let loose of the limb. However, Phil interrupted his brother to remark that he didn't remember seeing all that. Then Rocco, who had not even been part of the story, injected that was because Paul had had the telescope, not Phil! Laughter sprouted all around, subsiding only when Paul resumed his tale . . .

Now, once more watching through his telescope, Paul remarked Little Nick's exploit was better than watching a James Bond movie. It had sex, suspense, adventure, everything. Nick screamed for help, as his feet dangled against the back of the house with his toes about ten feet above the leaping, snarling, irate Topsy, who, having devoured the Pez, had gone off again. Barking wildly, the German shepherd jumped up against the wall, crashing into the step ladder repeatedly, finally knocking it to the ground, with a clatter they feared would wake up half the neighborhood. Nick had lost his safety net, his means of escape. The pandering boys in the pup tent were horrified. However, at the same time, they could not help but laugh at the surreal sight. There was Nick dangling perilously above the opened jaws of the leaping Topsy, with the widow's wildly flopping, black-laced, splotchy, pink and white bosom hovering like a standard over both boy and dog. Nick's swaying dead weight had pulled the widow far over the window's ledge to where Mrs. Ready was in peril of falling completely out of the house herself. It was a sight right out of an old silent, slapstick movie.

Annette interrupted to ask, why didn't the boys go over to the fence and distract Topsy? Paul replied, "What and miss the show of a lifetime?" He shook his head negatively and resumed his story as if his sister had just uttered blasphemy.

Now from her second story bedroom window, Mrs. Ready heard the boys cracking up beside themselves in the tent. Ranting and fuming, she bowed her neck to keep from falling under Nick's weight pulling her down and, much to the boys' viewing

Out at Home

pleasure, turned her anger towards them. Phil added they hadn't needed the telescope to spy that sight. Paul agreed and related that Nick, who was losing his grip, stared heavenward into the widow's heaving chest, hoping against hope that she might pull him to safety before her brazier snapped.

Mrs. Ready and the boys heard Nick's meek, mournful cry of "Help, please, help!" right below her, followed by his pitifully faint, fading cry, "I'm ... I'm out of ... Pez!" (Paul cracked up at this juncture, as did they all.) Then Little Nick's left hand slipped and the brick edge cut across his palm, granting the incensed Topsy a whiff of his dripping blood. Nick was dangling from the window ledge by his right hand alone now, saved solely by his death grip on the widow's elastic bra band. If Nick slipped, no amount of PEZ would deter Topsy this time.

"Please help me, ma'am," begged Nick in an amazingly calm, meek tone.

The shocked widow and the youthful midnight rambler made eye contact. With no time to speak, Mrs. Ready leaned even further out of the window, much to the delight of the astronomers who didn't need to fight over the telescope to enjoy this show. With her white-pink bosom heaving before her, eluding the cups of her décolleté, black lace bra, the rather game widow grabbed Little Nick with both of her hands around his right arm. She leaned backwards for all that she was worth and tugged mightily on his arm. Having lost his footholds on the brick wall, Nick grabbed desperately onto her right arm with his left hand and flattened the toes and balls of his feet against the side of the house, in a gravity-defying attempt to scale the brick. Sweating from the oppressive August night, Paul, carrying the scope, Phil and Ralph had crawled out of the tent to watch in stunned suspense as Nick did all he could to help the busty widow help him clamber up safely over the sill and come inside to her. Forgoing their former stealthy concealment, the boys had cheered in unison as the widow heaved mightily. They yelled repeatedly "One-Two-Three-Pull—Pull-Pull." They broke into a rhythmic chant as if they were cheering on a tug-of-war.

And pull, the game young widow did. She pulled Little Nick's head up, over and onto the window sill. Little Nick clawed upward with his bloody, free left hand grasping for anything he could snag. What he snagged was the front hem of her brassiere.

Without warning, her front-fastening bra snapped open wildly and Nick grabbed onto the right side of the elastic hem, hanging on to it for all he was worth. At the same time, the little guy pulled the delicate lace brassiere down over the widow's left shoulder and down her left arm, as he lost his footing and slipped back downwards towards the snarling snout of Topsy. The widow's head and her freed bosom jerked violently and turned sideways, falling out over the sill. Directly beneath Little Nick, an incensed Topsy tried to climb the wall, as well. The boys watched in open-mouthed suspense. Much to their delight however, the widow held firm to Nick. She was a real gamer, the Widow. Raising her head and arching her back, they watched as the young woman grit her teeth, reached down to grab onto Nick's backside and, once more with a mighty effort, heaved up and back. With her forearms beneath her and pressing up into her ample breasts, the teens got the show of a lifetime. The action was so fast and

furious that Paul eschewed the telescope, claiming the “darned thing was gettin’ in the way.” Meanwhile Little Nick was helping his comely rescuer, by snagging the sill with his free hand. Then he scrambled quickly upward, like the soldier in “The Dirty Dozen” when the rope he was climbing was shot out from under him. Outside the tent, the boys watched expectantly as the young widow and Nick disappeared head-first through the bedroom window, falling into the house with a loudly discernible thud. The electric fan crashed loudly to the floor out of sight, amid a clattering of objects.

It had looked as though the handsome widow had reached around Nick’s skinny behind, clutched a chunk of his little butt in her hand and hauled his ass inside right on top of her. Even Topsy seemed to sense the urgency of the moment as she had silenced herself. Listening intently, the boys heard a couple of loud, dull groans after the fall, which emanated from two distinct voices filtering back out of the window over the muggy night air.

“What happened next,” Paul complained, has long since been a mystery, a matter of supreme conjecture, which has never been resolved and which to this day has served as another one of the several building blocks in the legend of Little Nick Sheeboom.” Dixie asked what that might be. Laughing, Paul resumed his story.

Nick had entered the holy of holies in a rather unceremonious fashion. Nevertheless, he *had* breached the young widow’s bed chamber, but the thing was: Nick didn’t exit. The boys in the backyard waited and waited. Little Nick didn’t appear. The Widow’s bedroom light extinguished, but there was nothing more, no sound, no nothing. After a while, occasionally, the boys heard voices and other unintelligible noises wafting on the air from the direction of the Widow’s yet open window. The teens argued amongst themselves concerning Nick’s fate. They kicked themselves for not having been smart enough to pull off Little Nick’s stunt themselves. Paul, in particular, found sleep impossible. The backyard boys decided that, when the heat came down, as they were sure it would, they would be better off if they stayed inside the tent and pretended to sleep. However, as the night crept by with no sign of Nick, their covert pup tent arguments about Nick’s circumstances renewed in whispers and eventually escalated in tone.

“Nick’s hurt probably,” explained Phil, “and Mrs. Ready is nursing the poor guy back to health—with mouth-to-mouth, probably.”

“Nah,” Ralph argued. He’s in big trouble. She’s got him down on the telephone right now, callin’ his old man, I’ll bet. She’s just waitin’ for Nick’s old man to come and take him home to whomp his ass. The boy’s in some serious spit, I’m tellin’ ya.” Ralph concluded his argument with a knowing nod to the wise. Phil asked his older brother what he thought. Paul shook his head and thought for a second before he spoke, revealing the wisdom of his years.

“Well, if I had to guess, I’ll bet Little Nick ain’t so little no more.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” asked Ralph.

Out at Home

“Well, I bet he’s gettin’ himself some. That’s my guess!” The three boys fell silent, as they stared in respectful awe out of the tent up at the widow’s still open second story bedroom window, each contemplating Nick’s fate and fashioning it according to his own private fantasy.

They remained quiet, imagining the best for Little Nick, when almost an hour later they heard Mrs. Ready’s sometime live-in boyfriend stumble home loaded, well after midnight. Then, after what seemed an eternity, the boys could hear Mrs. Ready ask her boyfriend to bring Topsy in and place the watch dog down in the basement for the night. Shortly thereafter, the boys witnessed both dog and man disappear inside, through the basement door, but still there was no sign of Little Nick.

Where could he be?

Suddenly, Little Nick slammed the Salvarono’s back yard chain-link gate on the side of the house opposite the widow’s place. The little guy scooted up the grassy knoll, where he eagerly dived in to join the boys in the tent.

Breathless, covered with bloody hand and arm bandages, but grinning from ear to ear, Little Nick returned to the heavenly body observation tent in triumph. Although Paul and Ralph grilled him mercilessly, Little Nick never divulged the details of his nocturnal visit with the Widow Ready. From that moment forward, Little Nick demanded and received first dibs on the use of the telescope as well as a full thirty seconds of eyeballing, just like Paul ...

The audience on the Salvaranos front stoop laughed robustly, but they still wanted to know what had happened between Mrs. Ready and Little Nick that night eight years ago. Nevertheless, Dixie could say honestly now that he could not remember a thing.

“Darned convenient, losing your memory like that Nick,” observed Paul dryly, but everyone chuckled.

Undeterred however, Paul claimed the best adventure the Salvaranos had shared with Little Nick was the “tire” incident, when they ranged in age from ten to twelve. That was the summer Paul had the green hair. Paul explained that he had colored his white blond hair with green food coloring in order to impress a girl, one Kathy Stone. Moreover, Mrs. Salvarano could find no remedy to remove the green after the stunt had served its purpose. She gave Paul a short crew cut but Paul had to let the stubble of green hair grow out over the course of the summer.

Green hair? Dixie could hardly picture that. The stories these guys told were great, but his beer high had long since worn off. Dixie scarcely listened to the “Tire” story, which was something about him and the Salvaranos rolling a tire down a steep, concrete sluice and across and up the side of an open sewer, and further across a street, scaring unsuspecting motorists on the Boulevard half to death as a free-rolling tire rolled appeared suddenly across their path. It wasn’t that Dixie didn’t enjoy these tales, which he assumed grew in stature with each retelling. It was just that he was unable to recall any of them. Absent recollection, they were just so many anecdotes about some stranger by the moniker of Little Nick Sheeboom, whom he found difficult to believe was he.

Old Friends

As the party on the Salvarano's front lawn joked and told tales of his misspent youth, a light blue-grey Volkswagen "Bug" pulled up at the curb in front of Dixie's bike. The driver honked the horn. Dixie had noticed a couple of VW bugs in the Salvarano's driveway behind a navy blue Ford sedan. There was also a VW "Bug" in the yard on blocks. He had learned that the Salvarano boys worked on VW's as a sideline to earn a little extra cash. Dixie assumed the driver of the "Bug" at the curb was another customer. However, he quickly discovered this new arrival was not a welcome guest at all. According to Phil's whisper, the driver was one Bernie Lockes, a current or former beau (depending on who was speaking) of Natasha Slutskaya, Paul's latest flame. When the driver honked a second time Natasha popped up, but Paul told her to sit back down, that he would handle the matter. As Paul ambled in his typical easy-going, slew-footed manner down the sidewalk, Phil voiced the thought that was on all their minds. Trouble was brewing.

Phil whispered to Dixie that Bernie Lockes was a former classmate of theirs. Bernie had also played ball with Nick in the Boy's Club as well as in high school. Phil said Bernie was what most girls dreamed of—tall, broad-shouldered, dark and handsome. Dixie learned that Bernie had an adventurous spirit and a ready smile. However, Bernie was not one of the sharpest tools in the shed. Phil whispered that Bernie was one of the guys Nick had talked into rejoining the baseball team their senior year, after the team had mutinied against Coach Shaughnessy. However, according to Phil, Bernie had not always made the best choices in life. For instance, right now he was boxing up to the Crest Hill Boys Club and getting his head mashed in half the time for his trouble. He also danced as a go-go dancer down at the Cockpit Club, near Landrews Air Force Base. And now, Bernie was under the mistaken impression that Natasha was still his girlfriend.

From a safe distance up the sidewalk, Dixie listened keenly as the two young suitors argued at the curb over the comely Natasha. Soon, the teenage girl became fed up with the whole scene and declared to all that she wanted to go home. Both Paul and Bernie claimed the privilege of escorting the teen beauty. Paul started to go ballistic. He ranted at the top of his lungs, gesticulating wildly with his hands and arms. Bernie was holding his ground while Dixie watched the boxer clench his fists. But Paul behaved as a man possessed and, surprisingly, Paul's larger rival back-pedaled a step, probably to obtain a better striking distance, thought Dixie.

At this juncture, Dixie intervened before Bernie could plant one on his nemesis. Dixie solved the problem by offering to take the young lady home. It was evident to him that both of these young studs held a certain amount of respect, if not outright fondness for Little Nick. Moreover, they must have trusted him, because they concurred with Dixie's suggestion. So Dixie pulled Natasha up behind him on the Honda and took off, after she enthusiastically had kissed Paul good night for all to see.

Natasha told Dixie that she just lived up the Boulevard in the Walnut Hill apartments, just below the crest of the hill, near the Baptist Church, less than a mile away. Bernie followed right behind them in his VW. When they arrived in front of Natasha's ground floor garden apartment, Bernie pulled up in his Bug next to Dixie's

bike in the sloping apartment parking lot. Bernie had wanted to speak with Natasha, but the girl ignored him. She thanked Dixie hurriedly and then ran into her darkened ground floor apartment after quickly opening a sliding glass door. Bernie ran after her, but to no avail as she slammed the glass door behind her. Natasha was a beauty. There was no doubt about that—a genuine Hollywood type beauty. Dixie could understand why both these two dudes were after her.

“Sorry, Mann,” moaned Dixie in a halfhearted effort to comfort the downcast Bernie. Lost in thought, Bernie remained silent and feebly began drifting back towards his Bug. Dixie thought the guy looked as if his stomach had just been kicked out and imagined that’s how he must have looked when he had gotten that “Dear John” letter from Rose Rosario a couple of Christmases ago. Dixie was about to leave, when a woman, who looked a great deal like Natasha called to him from the shadows behind the apartment’s sliding glass door. She beckoned Dixie toward her.

The woman slid open the door and stepped through, stiffing Bernie, who had yet to leave. Then she slid the glass door to a close behind her and presented herself grandly to Dixie. Wearing a red kimono robe and keeping one hand behind her on the door handle, the woman ignored the forlorn, slumping Bernie, who stood on the sidewalk halfway to the parking lot. The older, Natasha look-a-like said she knew of Nick Sheeboom, the war hero, and wanted to know more. She said she and Natasha had moved into the neighborhood only a couple of years ago from New York City. She spoke with an overbearing accent that sounded Russian to Nick. A rather attractive woman, she wore a kind of red satin kimono robe, trimmed in black and covered with decorative gold dragons at odd angles to one another.

Dixie and the Russian woman talked as though Bernie weren’t there, which made Dixie feel more than a little awkward, because Bernie stood close enough to hear them. Disgusted and humiliated, Bernie left abruptly, stalking off down the grassy embankment in long strides. Before he left, Bernie turned and yelled back to them. “Watch out for that woman, Nick. She’s a snake in the grass.” Ticked off, he stepped into his car and peeled out as best as the driver of a Bug can. With Bernie gone, the bobbed, red-head finally introduced herself as Tonya Slutskaya, Natasha’s older sister. Miss Slutskaya told him to ignore Bernie and invited Dixie inside for some lemonade.

He accepted and they conversed briefly at the dark dining room table. She talked in the overbearing accent of the Cossack breed and Dixie listened quietly, sipping his lemonade. Listening was a faculty Dixie had cultivated out of necessity to cover his embarrassing speech patterns and females always seemed to love him for it, except that is for Ryz’n the other night in the motel. Ryz’n had wanted more from him, more than he had been prepared to give then. Tonya followed the rule and not the exception however, as he listened to her with interest and without need of speaking.

After he finished his lemonade, Dixie said good night and rose to leave. Tonya escorted him out the door down the grassy bank to the parking lot in front of the three-story, red brick, garden apartment building. She hinted strongly that she hoped they might see more of each other and startled him by kissing him lightly on the cheek. Dixie reminded her, not so gently, that even though he did not wear a ring, he was a

Old Friends

married man. He smiled, waved and rode away. As she waved back, her red kimono fell fully open, providing Dixie with a little sweeter nightcap than he had expected. Luckily, he maintained his balance on the Honda. As he rode away he wondered if she had pulled that stunt on purpose. She was attractive enough, a big woman, who reminded him a little of Donna as most all women over five and a half feet seemed to do these days, only this one was a real, ruddy Cossack. She did not seem like “a snake in the grass” to him. However, Dixie really had only one woman on his mind now and she was less than five and a half feet tall and she was no Cossack, either.