

In the Ford, Dave got serious, asking everyone to put on their seat belts. He fixed his rear view mirror so he could keep an eye on Little Nick in the back seat, as well as on the traffic behind him. Dixie noted that the Falcon's sea green vinyl interior matched the exterior color of the car. The others asked how Dixie had gotten along with Johnny and they tried to give a little more background on Johnny and Nick's relationship. They related that the two had become fast friends in grade school. And although Nick had always been so tiny, his combination of musical talent and athleticism had always impressed Johnny enough, so that he didn't pick on Nick as much as he did everyone else. Perhaps more importantly, nor did Johnny let others pick on Nick either. The boys budded around up into high school until Johnny met R.J. Remfoukas, Johnny's first girlfriend. Then the two pals more or less went separate ways, until Johnny convinced Nick to play football in their senior year.

Most people in the Heights considered Johnny "So Fine" to be arguably one of the best, if not *the* best athlete ever to graduate from Pocomoke High. Although a year older than Dixie, he had graduated with Dixie and Dave and Trish in the class of '71. Dixie remarked that Johnny was built like an athlete with a strong frame and upturned rump. Trish acknowledged that Johnny's haunches were one of the reasons that Johnny, like Nick, was very fleet of foot. In fact, during their junior year Coach Shaunny had given both of the boys special dispensation to miss baseball practice to run the post season sprint relays with the Pocomoke track team. The result was Pocomoke High's first ever state championship in a track event, the four by four-hundred relays and finished second in the four by one hundreds. They noted Johnny was particularly proud of the fact that all four of the championship sprint relay team runners were white.

"So, if Johnny's so good, so fast, why is he only playing flag football now?" Dixie asked with genuine curiosity. Trish sighed deeply and explained.

"Well, it's kind of one of those things. Ya see Johnny got a full ride down to Carolina Tech out of high school." Dixie looked through her, as Trish's half opened shirt front flapped in the breeze against her unveiled chest.

"Well Nicky, of course, you don't know. Well anyway, the fall of seventy-one was the last year the NCAA made freshman ineligible for varsity sports. Johnny quarterbacked Tech's freshman squad, but they didn't pass the ball enough to suit Johnny's taste. Then too, Tech has always been a little fish in the little pond of ACC football. Tech's a private school and only has about thirty-five hundred students. And there weren't enough freshman football players to go around, so the coaches asked Johnny to help out on defense."

"And he don't like that," interjected Dave over the onrushing road winds streaming through the open window. Dave caught Dixie's eye in the rear view mirror, frowned and shook his side to side. "Johnny don't like gettin' hit."

## *A Day at the Beach*

“Jimmy don’t mind it though,” laughed Val. “Jimmy, that’s Johnny’s younger brother—he graduated with me—he’s a real character, too, but a decent sort. Jimmy was just an animal out there on the gridiron.”

Dave chimed in “T-R-U! He played linebacker and blocking back. Jimmy loved ta light ya up!”

“Yeah,” added Val, “Jimmy played football as if he was a heat-seeking missile. I think he was motivated by Johnny.”

“How’s that?” asked Dixie.

“Well, I think he imagined Johnny as the opponent and every time he got the chance, he really nailed the guy. In his mind though, he was really always creatin’ Johnny, you know, to get even for all the times Johnny messed him over, growing up.”

Dixie turned to Trish for a rebuttal but none came. Seated behind the driver, Trish said nothing. Dave asked if that was too much wind on Trish, but she said it was fine. Apparently deaf and dumb, she tied her hair in a long blonde ponytail, while Dixie sat on the passenger side of the car behind Val who had tied a scarf over her head. The only air conditioning they had was natural, coming through the Falcon’s rolled-down front windows and the two opened front side vents. As they had gotten out onto the highway, heading into the morning sun, and picked up speed, they had to lean into the center of the car and yell at one another to make themselves heard over the din of the rushing road noise. Both girls turned to face Dixie with Val resting her chin on top of the seat back in front of him. Dixie was the center of attention, as he seemed to be wherever he went these days, which was still quite a unique phenomenon for him, a very much different experience from the last couple of years. How different his life was back here! He could hardly get over it. He was convinced they were not talking about him, but rather about some unrelated kid, he was meeting for only the first time.

Finally Trish spoke. She ignored Val’s abrasive interruption, by picking up where she had left off.

“Scoring points is Johnny’s thing Nicky, not defense. He’s strictly an offensive kind of guy. That’s his mind set.”

I could see that at breakfast thought Dixie.

“Johnny likes to stand back there and toss touchdown passes without getting touched. That’s why this flag game is so perfect for him. Anyway, down at Tech, Johnny started resenting the coaches. Football became a real chore for him and he was having difficulty with the books, as well. It was hard for him and he was lonely, too. So was I. We missed each other a lot. I drove down there to visit him a few times on the weekend, but it wasn’t near enough. I felt worse and worse each time I left him. The whole thing was just torture for both of us. I don’t know how Ryz’n stood it all these years.” Trish shook her head. “You’re one lucky guy to have her stay faithful all this time. For sure.”

“Yeah,” yelled Val facing backwards over top of the bench seat. “We all thought you were dead Nick, all except Ry.”

“Well, Johnny believed Nick was alive, too, remember? He always said ‘no gook was gonna kill Little Nick.’ Johnny said, ‘Nick was always too lucky for that.’”

## *Out at Home*

Dave confirmed Trish's remark, "Yup, that's what Johnny always said."

*Lucky? Right! Though it could be worse.*

"So anyway, Johnny came home from Tech for Christmas and never went back. He's learned the roofing business. He's a master roofer by day and a part time student out at Maryland, too, like me." Trish smiled wanly. "Does that answer your question, Nick?"

Nick nodded, "Sure, I guess so." Dave piped up from the front seat.

"Hey, I bet Johnny asked you to play on our football team, am I right?" Dave shouted over his shoulder and glanced at Nicky via the rear view mirror.

"T-R-U! You are right, Dave." Dixie answered via the mirror, as well in Dave's vernacular.

"I bet he didn't even ask how you were doin'. Am I right?"

"Right again!" Dixie wagged his head up and down once.

"That's Johnny, boy! The guy don't see his best friend for three and a half years and don't say anything except to ask him help him win a football game!"

"Hey, let's talk about something other than Johnny, hunh Dave?" Val pulled back on some hair that was whipping about her face, sticking it back up under her scarf as she glared sideways at her husband. "Like Nick here?"

"Sure Val, no problem."

They discussed some of their favorite Little Nick stories. Trish described how she first met Nick, when he introduced himself to her in homeroom the start of their senior year, looking like some kind of Elvis imposter reject on crutches. Her father had just transferred into the area and, it turned out, her family resided directly behind Nick, one block over. She couldn't believe anyone would try to dress and look like Elvis in 1970. Nursing a bum leg at the time from a baseball injury incurred that summer, however, Nick did persuade her to play ping-pong with him that Friday night. She had thought Nick wanted to put a move on her, only to discover Nick had invited Johnny over expressly to meet Trish. Nick had not been interested in Trish. He merely had played matchmaker for Johnny, although Johnny did not realize it until later. As far as Johnny knew, he was coming over to Nick's for their ritual Friday evening ping-pong match. Johnny used those contests to help settle his nerves and sharpen his wits and reflexes, which stimulated him to play his best on the gridiron the next day. Of course, that was only the first week of school, implied Trish, so you all did not have a game the next day, but you were getting into the ritual for the coming year so to speak.

"Johnny's always got an angle," yelled Dave over his shoulder.

Trish started to laugh now, explaining that Ry had found out about Nick's ping-pong date with her, so she had come over to Nick's uninvited, "ready to fight for her man!" Trish chuckled and Val did, too. Ryz'n had worn this terribly tight, low-cut, super sexy outfit. Trish cracked up, proclaiming that "Ry could barely walk in the tight dress and she bounced more than the ping-pong balls!" Valerie concurred that that sounded like something Ryz'n would do if she suspected a threat from Trish or anyone else whom she feared might be going after Nicky.

Val said there were only a couple, three things maybe that could really set Ryz'n off. And Nick, receiving attention from another girl, topped the list. This somewhat

## *A Day at the Beach*

confirmed what Lena had told him. Dixie was picking up as much knowledge about Ryz'n as he was about himself, which was fine because he needed all the help he could get there.

Then Trish told about the time Ryz'n nailed Nick and Lena with a couple fast-pitched softballs, after Lena had too enthusiastically congratulated Nick after a varsity baseball victory. Val, who had been eyewitness to the event, added that Ry's first toss was errant. Ryz'n actually had missed Nick and hit Lena by accident, which is what touched off the whole incident. Trish explained that she and Val were on the softball team, which had been waiting to take the field for practice following the varsity baseball game. Trish further explained that then, when Lena opened her big mouth, Ryz'n retrieved the ball and nailed her. Trish described how Lena dropped as if Ryz'n had shot her in the leg, when the pitch skipped off the turf and caught the girl right in the kneecap. The sound of the ball striking Lena's knee had cracked so loudly, it sounded as if someone had fired a gunshot, the way it echoed off the dark brick school walls. Ryz'n and Nick got into an argument over the incident, right out behind second base of the baseball diamond, which served as center field for the softball practice field. Well, Coach Shaunny had the baseball team sitting on the hill behind third base for a post game talk. Dave interjected that he was one of the members of the baseball team, sitting there, watching the whole thing, too. The softball coach, who was holding up practice for Ryz'n, got in Nick's face and told him to leave her players alone when they were on *her* time. So, Nick told the old biddy to take a hike. When Ryz'n tried to escape him, Nick threw her over his shoulder and hauled her off to that big old Pontiac convertible of theirs in the student parking lot next to the ball field. Trish bellowed.

"Yeah, Nick, everyone was watching you two, when, after a few minutes, you both disappeared out of sight in the back seat of your big old Pontiac and then that old convertible started to rockin' and rollin'. You see, the top was up and I guess so were you. Ha! Mann, you two 'bout wore out the springs on that thing." They all laughed, as Trish put her hands out flat and motioned downward for them to calm down because she hadn't finished her story.

"Right, right but get this, the best part is afterwards. Ryz'n backs out of the car, see, straightening her hair and buttoning up her P.E. bloomer-blouse. Then, just as cool as you please, she calmly saunters back to the field to practice with us, just as if nothing had happened, like her crap don't stink, ya know? Ha! Only there's a long, wet stain on the back of her bloomers, which she hadn't noticed. And the whole time though she's wearing this dirt- eatin' grin on her face. You remember that, Val?"

There was another round of laughter.

"Yeah. Oooh! I'll never forget it. That incident was the inspiration for that song of yours, uh, what's it called?"

"Some Nerve," said Dave.

"No," corrected Dixie. "It was 'That Light Meant Go.'"

"Yeah, that's it; That Light Meant Go When It turned Red.' That was top ten I think nationally; number one around here, as most of your tunes were. But how'd you know that, Nick?"

## Out at Home

“Allena Yikes told me that story this morning.”

“This morning, hunh? Yeah, we saw you two on the door step. Kind o’ early to be visitin’, ain’t it Nick?” intoned Dave suspiciously. Trish’s facial expression piqued. Facing the pair in the rear seat, Val reached across the top of front seat to swat Dave on the arm with the back of her hand.

“Ouch, Honey. You want me to wreck?”

She rose up and bumped her head on the dome light in the process.

“Double ouch! No. I want you not to go jumping to wrong conclusions.”

Val was sticking up for him, thought Dixie.

“I’m sure Nicky had a perfectly good reason for *kissing Lena on her front porch this morning*. Right, Nick?” Her own tone was a little less suspicious than her husband’s but just as curious.

“Uh, exactly right, Val. Lena was just trying, uh, to spark my memory like you all are doing now.”

Trish asked sarcastically.

“Well, just how far did she go to spark it, Nicky?” Dixie took no offense. Instead he turned the tables on them and grinned slyly.

“Well girls and boys, since my recall is still a blank, obviously not far enough!” It was as though he had let the air out of a balloon. The tension dissipated as they all laughed.

Trish cried, “Now you sound and act just like the Nick we all know.”

“Doggone it.” Dixie whistled and changed the subject when a thought occurred to him.

“Gee! You know when you put a popular song like that together with the real events that inspired it, well, it makes you think twice. So tell me now. Johnny said, I wrote a song about dating a black Air Force sergeant? Can that be right?”

“Sometimes,” replied Val. “Yeah, it’s true all right. You brought her to your Junior Prom. Dave and I were there. We sat at Ryz’n’s table when you introduced her to us.”

“That was before my time, Nick,” advised Trish. She shrugged, unable to add or detract.

“Heck Nicky, you did that with all your songs and Ryz’n did, too, with hers. Guess all songwriters do,” or so Dave reasoned.

“Ryz’n is a great girl, Nicky,” proclaimed Val. “You’re really lucky to have her, but you should know there’s only three things I know of that will set her off like a roman candle. She’s normally very clam, very cool, and outgoing, but when she goes off, Mann, she leaves this orbit, lemme tell ya.”

“It’s her Irish temper,” opined Dave.

“Shhhh! I’m tellin’ this Dave. I think I know her better than you. We’ve been neighbors and schoolmates for almost ten years.”

“OK, OK! Go ‘head and tell it then.”

“Just keep your eyes on the road, Baby.”

## *A Day at the Beach*

Dixie reached up and tapped Val's forearm, resting on top of the seat back. He wanted to hear this to see if Val's knowledge jibed with Lena's. "OK! So, what are these three things I should avoid?"

"Well, one: if anyone speaks badly of YOU, NICK SHEEBOOM, she is all over them in a heartbeat with a vengeance, too. She wouldn't defend anyone else like that, not even herself. Ya know, I've seen her attacked verbally in the most vicious manner more than once, but she always swallowed her tongue. But God help the sinner, who says something bad about you.

"The second thing that sets her off is, if she finds out or even suspects you have seen another woman. Look out brother, because she'll lose it fast. If she finds out about you and Lena this morning, I shudder to think what might happen."

"But she won't find out about that, will she? Val? Trish?" Dave interceded ominously and swiveled his head to meet the eyes of the two girls. "Cuz I know she won't find out from me," swore Dave over the din of the rushing air. The girls dropped their jaws in sanctimonious disdain. Before they could retort, Dixie intervened and Dave returned his attention to his driving.

"Yeah, I trust you all. We're old friends, right?" He grinned slyly. "So Val, you said there's a third pitfall I should avoid with Ryz'n?"

"Um-hmm. Any derogatory mention made about Ry's figure will also set her off, too."

"T-R-U," yelled Dave. "You are so right!"

"Yeah, I found out about that last one the other night, just joking around. She's still angry with me."

"So that's why she left for the beach ahead of you?"

"Yeah Val. That's it. Isn't that crazy?"

"Only for Ryz'n. She can't ever forget she was chubby once. That's funny ain't it, I mean when you look at her now? But that's OK, Nicky. You'll make it up to her today, right?"

"Right! T-R-U!"

\* \* \*

Upon arriving at the Surf'sWell beach resort hotel in Ocean city Maryland, a little before eleven, the clerk at the front desk informed them that "Ms. Sheeboom was not visiting the hotel this weekend." Instead, "her penthouse had been let for the week to another private party." Despite his sporadic stutter, Dixie argued firmly with the adamant clerk, but to no avail. Then Dixie finally looked at the directions he had been given and showed them to Dave, who told him those directions were to the Ryan's beach house in Kill Devil Hills, NC. One of the other clerks at the desk called Dixie back to the desk. She gave him a message, from Ryz'n, left for him not too long ago, to call her in North Carolina and left the number. She must have figured what might happen, but how could she know? It was the same phone number on the paper containing the directions. Dixie called but the line was busy. He called again and again, but still there was nothing but a busy tone.

## *Out at Home*

The other three consoled him. Dave was upset as well. If he had known this, he said he could have left Nick alone and taken the northern route to the Delaware beaches and saved a half an hour or more of driving time. Dave had counted on using Ryz'n's penthouse to change and shower. However, because he knew there were public bathhouses up at the Delaware State Park at Indian River, they decided to head up the highway, grab some sandwiches on the way and spend the day at the State beach. Dixie called Ryz'n once more from the hotel, but the line remained busy. He decided to make the best of the day with his traveling companions and to call Ryz'n continually until he reached her.

\* \* \*

Ryz'n had been anxiously pacing the downstairs floor of the Ryan's Outer Banks beach vacation home. She had gone out early that morning, fishing with her dad and then she swam in the ocean, simulating her usual daily regimen in the base pool. She came home and exercised, but she had difficulty doing pull-ups for their vacation home had no pull-up bar. Instead, she had used an exposed, wooden support beam she had found in an abandoned, unfinished home on an overgrown lot down the street. The squared-edged, wooden beam dug into her hands, precluding her from completing her normal ten repetitions. She did the best she could, because she was determined to look her best for her husband. Now she was home, showered and dressed for the day and very anxious for her husband's arrival.

Nick had not arrived. He had not called. She itched to apologize to him for her atrocious behavior the other night. Ryz'n picked up the downstairs phone from its cradle and called the Sheeboom residence. She spoke with Mrs. Sheeboom who complained Nicholas had not come home all night. He had come in around 7:30 this morning to pick up a few things. Then, she said he had taken off with Dave Morris and Val Vernier in Dave's car to go to find me at the beach. Mrs. Sheeboom asked if they had arrived yet.

In her mind, Ryz'n objected. That could not be right. The Ryans had not invited Dave and Val down to the Banks. Ryz'n's mother-in-law also said she had contacted Coach Shaughnessy this morning and learned that Nick had left the Coach's house late last night with Allena Yikes. Mrs. Sheeboom had reached Allena at her parents' home this morning. Allena had related to her that Nicholas was supposedly going to the beach to visit Ryz'n, but Allena had noticed that Nick's bike was still parked on the street outside the Larrabee's house. Mrs. Sheeboom apologized to Ryz'n that she was unable to help her daughter-in-law further.

Ryz'n assured Mrs. Sheeboom that Nick had not yet arrived and it would be impossible for him to do so until two p.m. and that's if there were no traffic back-ups. She thanked her mother-in-law and assured her everything would be all right. Yet, Ryz'n was anything but sure that it would be. She assumed the stance. Subconsciously, she began nervously twirling her diamond engagement ring, in the cute little flower petal setting she adored so much, about her ring finger. Ryz'n hung up the phone, leaned her bottom on the back of the couch and thought a minute. She decided to call Mrs. Vernier, who explained that Dave and Val were going to the beach and they were

## *A Day at the Beach*

taking Trish Allein along. Yes, Mrs. Vernier said that Nick had left with Val and Dave, but she hadn't thought he was going to the beach with them. Then again, she could still see Nick's motorcycle parked outside the Larrabee's. Ryz'n thanked Mrs. Vernier.

What had the Larrabees to do with Nicky? What was Nick doing with Lena at the Coach's barbecue? Ooooh! Ryz'n knew she should not have listened to her mother. She should have stuck like glue to her husband. When Lena and Matt were having problems, which was often, that girl was capable of anything! Nick was in a very fragile state right now. There was no telling what would happen if his memory broke through. Ryz'n wanted to be there when it did to make sure he recalled the right memories, not the wrong ones, certainly not those he shared with her ex-best friend Allena Larrabee Yikes! What was that darned Lena up to? Ryz'n knew her ex-best friend was having troubles with her husband. *But she wouldn't dare—*

Ryz'n's mother came down the stairs to find Ry sitting on the back of the couch with the phone in her lap, staring into space, twirling her engagement ring like crazy. A loud monotonous tone emanated from the phone's mouth piece.

"Well, Ryzanna, are you going to use that instrument or just hold onto it all day? You've been on the phone for nearly an hour, Dear!"

"What? No. I mean yes. Oh! I don't know."

"Well, what's wrong, My Baby?" Mrs. Ryan assumed her nurturing mother hen role that came to her so easily, too easily thought Ryz'n at this advanced stage of her life.

"Oh, it's Nicky. I think he messed up."

"Again?" Mrs. Ryan grinned.

"Oh Mother! This is serious. I think he may have gone to Ocean City by mistake. I knew I should never have let him out of my sight."

"Nonsense. I wrote the directions myself."

"Yes, I know but ..."

Ryz'n explained what she learned from her two earlier, lengthy phone calls to Crest Hill.

"Well, well, I see. He must not have read my directions. Maybe he didn't find them? Surely, once he gets to the Surf'sWell, he'll know to come down here."

"But if he rode down with Val and Dave, how's he going to do that?"

"Look baby, just call the Surf'sWell and ask them to give a message to Nick when he comes to have him call us. I suppose we can go get him, but we have to know that he will be there before we take off." Her mother pursed her lips at Ryz'n in a serious, motherly fashion.

"OK, Mother." Ryz'n called the desk clerk at the Surf'sWell and, when she was informed no one fitting Nick's description had arrived, she left her message for Nick.

Mother patted daughter on the head, smiled and went downstairs.

"It'll be alright My Baby. Nick's a big boy now. You'll see."

Ryz'n did not mention to her mother the thought uppermost on her mind, that Nick's motorcycle was parked out in front of the Larrabee's and that Lena had accompanied him to the Coach's cookout last night. Ryz'n knew about Lena's renewed martial difficulties. She knew Matt occasionally strayed and stayed overnight near a job site

## *Out at Home*

around Fredericksburg. And she was all too aware of the history between Nick and Lena. And she also knew all too well how her ex-best friend's mind worked. After Ryz'n left the message at the Surf'sWell and her mother had left the room, Ryz'n garnered the courage to call her old friend, her next door neighbor and onetime rival Lena Yikes. She called her at the Larrabees' place, as her mother-in-law had earlier, guessing Allena might be there if Matt weren't around. Sure enough, Lena answered the phone.

"Hello? Lena?"

"Yes. Who is this, Ry?"

"Yes, Lena, it's Ry. How are you?"

"Not very well, actually and you?"

"I'm fine, fine. I won't keep you but a minute. I'm a little worried over Nicky and I understand his motorcycle is out in front of your house. You don't happen to know where he is now, do you?" Ryz'n could hear Mikey screaming in the background and figured the little tike was the cause of his mother's current unease.

"Gee, I don't Ry. I saw him drive off with Val and Dave early this morning."

"How early?"

"Ummm, around seven, seven-thirty, maybe?"

Ryz'n could tell by the overly innocent tone in Lena's voice that her old friend was holding something back. Ryz'n pondered her next move. Should she turn nasty or remain calm? If she turned on Lena and was wrong, it would damage their tenuous friendship, which had been repaired with slow difficulty after being ruptured once so long ago over Nicky, at a time when she and Lena had been the best of friends. However, if it came down to Lena's current watered down friendship or the love of her life, there wasn't much of a choice to make really, was there?

"Alright, let's cut the bull Lena. What's up with you and Nick? I'm gonna find out one way or another, sooner or later so you might as well fess up now."

"Look Ry, maybe we can discuss this some other time. I have a splitting headache. Mikey is being a regular pill! And I haven't heard from his father since yesterday!"

"Well, maybe if you didn't stay out half the night with other women's husbands, you wouldn't have those problems."

"Look Ry, now don't lose that Irish temper of yours. It wasn't at all like what you think."

"Oh, it wasn't like that, hunh? Please *do* tell me just how it was then."

"Well, hold on a sec ..." Ryz'n heard Lena put the phone down. She heard a distant Lena say, 'No, now Mikey I told you NO!?"

WHACK! Mikey burst into tears. "Now you just sit right there and behave, mister, or you'll get it again!" Ryz'n heard Lena pick up the phone again.

"I'm sorry. Where, where were we?"

"Nicky! You were going to tell—"

"Oh yes, yes." Lena breathed deeply. "Well, we went over to Coach Shaunny's cookout. I believe you were invited were you not, but then you weren't around last night, were you?" Ryz'n could hear the lilting sneer in her old friend's voice.

## *A Day at the Beach*

Zingo! Lena always knew how to counter punch!

“Yes, I know where I was and what I did last night, and I didn’t spend the evening with someone else’s husband, that’s for sure. But I want to know about you and Nicky, that is the topic of this call.” Mrs. Ryan re-entered the room and said she was looking for the dustpan. Ryz’n turned away from her and spoke into the receiver in a softer tone. “Well Lena, I’m listening.”

“Well, honey there’s nothing to it. Honestly. We just went down there, to the Coach’s, and tried to stimulate some old memories, you know?”

“Yes, that’s what worries me, you trying to stimulate my husband with old memories, my husband who doesn’t even remember who I am!” Ryz’n raised her voice, as her mother found the dustpan, but hovered about to eavesdrop. Now Lena counterattacked.

“Well, don’t get short with me, honey. What’s the matter, can’t you stimulate him yourself?”

Ohhh that Lena! It was ironic how they were falling back into the same old continuum of verbal sparring, of punch and counter-punch. Ryz’n sensed they both realized it. They had been almost sisters for nearly five years and they knew how to push each other’s buttons like sisters, too.

“You aren’t within throwing distance, Lena, or I’d fire one into your knee again.”

“I just bet you would, too. Look, I’m thinking Matt may call, so I’d like to leave the line free, OK?”

“When you finish telling me about last night, right?”

“What’s to tell? We went to the cookout, ate, told stories and had a good time. Ya know Ryzanna, it really should have been you there with him, not me—your long lost war hero whom you haven’t seen for three years. Why the hell weren’t you with your husband?”

“That’s none of your business. It’s between me and Nicky.”

“Yeah, well at the park, he told me he had made some joking remark about your figure and you went ballistic on him. He thinks you’re some kind of a cuckoo bird.”

“What do you mean by ‘at the park?’ I thought you ate at the Coach’s house?”

“We did—*for dinner!* But we slept at Clairton and had breakfast at IHOP, like we did before. If that’s what you wanted to know, *sweetie!*”

“You witch! You spent the night with him? I can’t believe you!?!”

“... Mikey, leave grandma’s knick-knacks alone or I’m gonna have to spank you again, honey. That’s a good boy... Yeah, we spent the night together, but not like you think ... Ry?”

“Yes, I’m listening,” Ryz’n sounded calm but she felt the steam rising off her head and the ring was twirling madly about her finger.

“Well, we slept, slept?—sheesh! We closed our eyes at Clairton Park. He let me use his sleeping bag and he slept in the grass and got his ass chewed off by bugs. It was a real romantic evening. Let me tell you! But you know Ryzanna: it never would have happened if you had been where you were supposed to be!”

## *Out at Home*

“Or if you had been home with your son, where you were supposed to be, not to mention your own FLIPPIN’ HUSBAND!”

“Look, you called me. You asked. I answered. Now—No, no, no, Mikey—”

CRASH!

“DAMN IT MICHAEL MATTHEW YIKES! YOU’RE GONNA GET IT NOW, BUSTER! NO. NO-You come, you come back here you little—Ryz’n? I gotta go. Bye!”

Ryz’n heard the receiver on the other end of the line slam down. She dropped her chin to her chest and slumped. With the phone in her right hand and the receiver in her left, she turned the receiver horizontally across her face and pressed her mouth into it, fighting back the tears. Lena was right. Her place had been with her husband. Ryz’n was wrong to have come down to The Banks to rest up.

From behind her, Ry’s mother asked her older daughter what the trouble was. Ryz’n would say only that they both had been wrong about Ryz’n’s coming down to the beach house without Nicky. She returned the phone to its stand and then slammed the receiver down on the cradle for emphasis. She slammed it so hard that the receiver actually bounced with one end resting almost imperceptibly cockeyed, diagonally on one end of the cradle. Yet she was too angry to pay attention to it.

\* \* \*

Later, Dixie tried a couple times to get through to Ryz’n: once from the sub sandwich shop on the beach side of the coastal highway near the state line and then again from the pay phone at the Delaware state park bathhouse. However, Ry’s line was always busy. Dixie joined his traveling companions to enjoy the sun and surf with them out on the beach. Yet, the nagging suspicion that he should be with Ryz’n never completely left him.

Frolicking with Dave, Val and Trish was an unusual experience for him. For in his brief two-year existence, he had always been pretty much a loner. His one good buddy in the Corps had been an alcoholic and they mostly had frequented bars or secret gambling clubs on Oahu, looking for easy pickings in money and women. It had been his experience that once you had the former; you got the latter without much difficulty. When he had been with Rose, Lori Lei or Donna and the kids, there had never been any outsiders around. And those women had all been considerably older than he. Now with these three kids his own age, Dixie got a taste of how life might have been for him in high school to be socializing with a group of friends, with no pressures. He liked it. It was a little as if he were playing on a coed ball club.

Having seen the Pacific Ocean often, but never the Atlantic, Dixie remarked to them how different the Atlantic was—so green. Val, who had lived several years in California as an Air Force brat, and Trish who lived on Camp Pendleton with her folks, could confirm Dixie’s observation.

Dave brought out his football. He and Dixie tossed it around with on the beach. Dave remarked favorably on the strength of Dixie’s arm. The girls joined the boys for a four-person game of ‘touch’ football: Val and Dixie versus Dave and Trish. Afterwards, Dixie removed his fake ear and the foursome went swimming in the ocean to cool off.

## *A Day at the Beach*

It wasn't long before the girls switched sides from touch football for "chicken fights" in the surf, with Val on Dave's shoulders and Trish up on Dixie's. That ended when the lifeguard complained. So, they bodysurfed and played around in the water. The day was gorgeous: mid eighties, sunny, with a steady fifteen to twenty mile an hour breeze out of the south.

Strolling back to their beach blanket, Val caught up to Dixie and mentioned that the sun and surf were having a positive effect on his bug bites. Then she confided in a low whisper that not only she and Dave, but also her parents as well, had seen Dixie with Lena on the Larrabee's porch that morning. She said there were a lot of early risers in the neighborhood, so the odds were good that Ryz'n would find out. Val whispered that through Sheena, and Val's own sister Vicky, Ryz'n had become one of her better friends. She questioned if Dixie realized what a good deal he had in Ryz'n. Dixie thanked her for her concern but he assured her, there was nothing between him and Lena. Val let out a sigh of relief.

Trish and Dave approached and plopped down, each one on a towel. Val and Dixie joined them. They all watched with curiosity as Nicky carefully reattached his fake ear. Their good manners precluded them from speaking about it. Val redirected their attention to her longtime friend and neighbor Ryz'n.

"I was just telling Nick here, what a great treasure he has in Ryz'n. We told you three things that set her off, but that's it. I mentioned that, those exceptions aside, she is a fairly meek person, just as we discussed earlier in the car. She enjoys people and likes to please, but not to the point of disobeying her God. I think the thing I most admire about Ryzanna is her faithfulness, which stems from her great faith in God. Maybe she has grown a bit conceited lately, but she really doesn't have that big of a head, though she very easily could. Ry and Sheena still live with their Mom and Dad when she could own her own place and live anywhere. Shoot! She could live in their penthouse back at that resort hotel, but she stays with her family and leases out the resort. You may not know it Nick, but your wife's a millionaire. I guess that makes you one, too. And when Ry puts her mind to something—look out! Like when she lost nearly thirty pounds her junior year!

"And she didn't give in to the big record moguls in L.A. either, for what she knew was right. That cost GRT their record contract, which just expired a month or so ago. What does that tell you about her? She's a fine Catholic girl, Nick. She always knew you were coming back Nicky, because she trusted in the Lord to bring you home safely. She didn't go out on ya, either, when she had plenty of offers from some very rich and famous people, too. That showed me a lot, because all the rest of us—well, we thought you were dead. We figured she should get on with her life without you."

"Except Johnny, remember," volunteered Trish. "Ya see for me Nicky, Ry has always been CLUTCH. I think that's what Johnny would say, too, if he stopped to think about it. I mean Ry's always come through when something was on the line, whether it was a softball game, getting the best site for the Prom, learning to perform on stage or whatever or working to improve her college boards so she could go to M&L with you. Believe me Nicky, when that girl puts her mind on something, she can

## Out at Home

get it done. And we would never have won the county softball championship without her our last year. She came out from behind the plate to learn how to pitch, like you taught her, and won some big games for us. But you're right, Val. Her basically kind personality has never changed much, despite her success."

"What do you like best about her Dave?" asked Dixie.

Dave chuckled. "That's easy. She's the sexiest girl I know."

"DAVE!" Val reached over and slugged her fiancé on his arm with the back of her fist.

"Ouch! Oh, except for you of course, Baby." Val looked as if she was going to clobber him again.

"That's not what I mean! MEN! Shoot! Besides, you have to give a character quality, not a physical attribute." Val scolded Dave with a hot look.

"Since when? You said to tell what we like best about her and that's it. Besides sexy isn't just physical. And Ry is sexy. The really kool thing about her is she just don't know it. Of course, you're sexy too, Baby!"

"Yeah right. Don't try to make up to me now, Dave."

"Well, it's true Val! Most everybody who went to school with us feel the same way and, in Ryz'n's case, so do millions of Rock'N'Roll fans around the country. So I'm not alone here. She wasn't always like that, Nicky. Her walk was always there, I guess. That swish and sway you described in your song. It's just that nobody noticed it much when she was so pudgy, except you and maybe Don, I guess. But that girl changed, I mean physically changed during our junior year—she underwent a regular metamorphosis. Ryz'n lost weight and gained inches and curves in all the right places. Sheena said her sister lost nearly thirty pounds that year and kept it off, too!

"Yeah, that's the hard part," admitted Trish, "keeping it off."

"Then, when she started to date you over the summer, she started dressing differently, real uh ..."

"Sharp?" proffered Trish.

"Yeah, real sharp!" Dave exclaimed.

"Yeah, of course that was after school to please you, Nicky," added Val. "In school, she dressed modestly the same as she always did."

"Most times, not always," corrected Trish.

"Yeah, well sure but what's wrong with that?" Dave was defensive. "It made her feel good to dress in a manner that pleased Nicky. I don't see anything wrong with that."

"No, I guess not," confessed Val. Slightly contrite now, she murmured that maybe she should dress a little sharper for Dave, when Trish interrupted.

"Maybe *he* should have dressed to please *her*," suggested Trish.

"Maybe *he* did," insinuated Dave. She was sure as sh—"

"Dave!"

"Well, she was real happy with Nicky. How many people you know got married twice inside of two months without being divorced in-between?"

## *A Day at the Beach*

“Yeah, Nicky, that’s right. Your wedding up to Holy Trinity was the biggest in the history of the Heights, or so I’ve been told.” Trish said she wasn’t certain of that, but she knew it was the biggest in the five years she had lived there.

Dave started laughing. “Do you remember our Senior Prom—that argument Ry and Nicky had?”

“Yeah,” said Val giggling “and GRT wouldn’t play the prom or any other prom that night just so the band members could go out as couples to our Prom, just like anybody else.”

“That’s right and Nicky and Ry barely got out of Ryz’n’s front door together before they blew up at each other. HA!” Dave warmed to his story as the heavy sun overhead warmed them and the beach breeze picked up out of the southeast. “Cary, Vicky, me and Val and Fizzy and Cheryl were following you in Cary’s car, Nicky. Yeah, and it was supposed to be you and Ry along with Sheena, Bryce, Tony and Terri. You all were gonna squeeze into your old Sixty-Seven Bonneville that big boat, not the one you got now, or should I say the one Bryson and Sheena have now.” He grinned. “Yeah we were going over to the La Bella Vista in Roslyn for a romantic Italian dinner at this restaurant that sits on top of a high rise brick apartment building, overlooking the Potomac and all the D.C. memorials and monuments.”

Val spoke up impudently. “Right! You made the reservations, Nick. And it was Lena Yikes, er Larrabee, who caused that mess up, too, now that I think about it. Nicky was visiting her before we left, all dressed up in his tux and everything.”

“That’s cuz she was still recovering from Ryz’n’s fastball blast,” added Trish. She couldn’t walk, let alone dance for the prom. And Nicky went over to the Larrabee’s to console her. Remember, later Matt carried her into the Prom?”

“Well, if we’re going to be that particular, let’s get all the facts straight. Nicky wasn’t going to the prom with Ryz’n anyway. Technically, he was Sheena’s date and Bryson was Ry’s date that night.”

Trish put her hand up over her open mouth. “That’s right. That’s right. Now I remember. Funny how, you forget about those details.”

“Why was that?” asked Dixie.

“You and Ry were both seniors and Sheena and Bryson were both juniors. A junior couple couldn’t go to the Senior Prom. I know because that’s how I got to go with Dave, who was a senior. And as head of the Prom committee, Ryz’n couldn’t make an exception for her kid sister, so she came up with that idea. As we said, that girl can get it done.”

“What I recall,” said Dave. “Is Ryz’n and Nicky getting in this big argument walking down the sidewalk, while we followed along behind them in Cary’s car, at about five miles per hour. But the argument wasn’t about Allena Yikes. It was about the dress that Ryz’n was wearing, or not wearing, actually, I should say. Evidently, Nick, you had bought some expensive, fancy, SEXY outfit for Ryz’n to wear. I never saw it, but I heard was some kind o’ smokin.”

Trish interjected, “Yeah, well I saw it. The thing was skin tight and made of gold lamé at the very bottom and top, but mostly the rest was like a nylon mesh, like hose

## *Out at Home*

cryin' out loud! It had those like gold, sparkly, sequined pasty things embedded in various motifs in the nylon that covered her torso. It was like a Sixties party dress, practically backless and strapless. Oh yeah, I remember that all right, stuck like skin. Kind o' like some of them negligée-like dresses Marilyn Monroe wore in "Some Like It Hot." No wonder Ry wouldn't wear it! Men!" She turned her in head in feigned disgust.

"Yeah," added Dave. "Sure, that's right. And Ryz'n had promised Nicky she would wear it to Prom and, evidently, she had worn it for pre-Prom pictures at the Ryan's home. However, she changed her mind about wearin' it to Prom and then she changed her dress. She wasn't going to wear that lewd thing after all. Turns out, Mr. Ryan had refused her to wear it, even though she was married to Nick at the time!"

Trish interrupted to say that Nicky always liked to put on a show, especially at a public forum like the prom and he wanted Ry to put on a show with him.

"I remember," offered Val. "And she was. Shoot! She was a show in herself. Her old man wouldn't let Ry out of the house wearing that thing. I saw it later and it went way beyond sharp. Darned rag showed dang near everything she had, which was considerable! Ryz'n was in a bind. Her father had told her to do one thing and her husband of six months was telling her to do just the opposite. That was a tough dilemma for her."

"Well, that's true. However, correct me if I'm wrong," interjected Dave. "But I seem to recall Mr. Ryan giving her away to Nicky up in front of God and everybody else at Holy Trinity."

"That's right Dave," Val agreed. "And I believe Ryz'n realized that as well later, but not before but she ruined her evening."

"Anyway," continued Dave with relish, "all the kids in the neighborhood, who were out playing ball in the street, stopped to watch and listen to Nick and Ryz'n feud, as they fought their way down the sidewalk. Finally, Ryz'n got in the Bonneville and we left."

"What about me?" Dixie asked in suspense.

"We left you standing there in the street, Mann," cried Dave. "Ha! You started playing wiffleball with the neighborhood kids—in your tux, no less! Ha! Ha! As we rolled by, you announced that you didn't want to go with Ryz'n, after she had 'welshed.'" Giggling, Val nodded in agreement and added, "Both of you can be darn stubborn, Nick."

Trish added: "There's more to the story though, Nicky. Johnny and me left the prom early, I dunno, around eleven and took Ryz'n back to her parent's place, because she was havin' just a terrible time without you. As president of the senior class, she had worked so hard all year to make our Prom the best it could possibly be, and she had done a fantastic job by the way, but only now she couldn't enjoy it, not without you. We took her home, I mean to her folks place. Well, Johnny and I waited for several minutes in the car, while she changed back into this awesome outfit you had purchased for her at such great expense. And that was before the royalties had started to flow in, too, Nick. Ry told me how you all really couldn't afford that gown at that time." Trish

## *A Day at the Beach*

grimaced slightly and nodded. “Anyway, with Ry’s figure in that dress, well, she was really something to behold—she still is; especially, as that dress and her heels were the only things she was wearing—and don’t think Johnny didn’t notice that, either.

“So, at her request, we took Ry back to your apartment in Walnut Hill with her almost wearing this chorus girl, piece-of-almost-nothing outfit. From the parking lot, we watched her go in your apartment. Before she went inside though, she stood on the concrete patio in front of the sliding glass door. Me and Johnny got a kick out of her as she pushed the bodice up under her chest but tugged the low-cut hem down lower over her knockers, as if that was possible without showing everything, because the lamé covered only halfway down her boobs. That outfit was so tight and so short everywhere, the thing looked as if it was two sizes too small. She was hanging out everywhere. Johnny was getting a big kick out of it, too—too big, and I was getting ticked. Then Ry assumed a kind of a sexy stance, jiggled her ass a couple of times, tossed back her head, threw open the sliding door and strutted inside.” Trish chuckled. “Don’t know what happened after that, because I made Johnny leave for our own rendezvous ... but I can imagine.” They sat, chuckling silently to themselves for a minute.

Dixie did not care to believe what he had heard. He said Mr. Ryan and Ryz’n had been right and that he would not want Ryz’n or any wife of his to dress like that in public. Everyone sobered up at Dixie’s indignation, realizing once again that he was not the Little Nick they had known. Finally, Val nudged Dave to change the subject.

“Gee Dave, you still never said what character trait you liked best about Ry?” Val nudged him again, prompting him to answer.

“‘Sexy,’ I said ‘sexy’ and that’s what I meant.”

“Yeah, we know that, but that’s a physical trait. We’re talkin’ about qualities of character.”

“That’s not what you said. Besides, sexy is as much a character trait as it is physical, maybe more so, for some people who don’t have Ryz’n’s classy chassis, can be awful sexy, too.”

“Classy chassis ain’t the topic under discussion. It’s *character* qualities, I’m talkin’ about.”

“Well, you never said that at first, Val. Besides, ain’t classy chassis what Trish has been talkin about?”

“I know, but *character* qualities is what I was thinkin’ about, Honey. Now, if we’re gonna be married Sweetie, you gotta know what I’m thinkin’ even if I’m talkin’ different.” Dave looked at his fiancé quizzically. Then he looked at each of the others in the same manner. Trish and Dixie merely shrugged and giggled.

“OK, OK Honey, guess I’m still learnin’ after five years. OK, lemme see. Character trait, hunh? Umm, then I would have to say GUTS, definitely. The girl has got GUTS!”

“What makes you say that Dave?” Dixie was seriously interested in Dave’s opinion.

“Well, gee! Just look at what she’s been through. After you left, she took over that band and led it all by herself. She stood up to the big record studio, as we said earlier,

## *Out at Home*

when they tried to rewrite their contract with GRT and tried to get her and Sheena to sell sex instead of music. And with you being gone, Nicky, she handled all the business end of it, too, which she had never done before. She wrote some songs that sold, maybe not as well as yours, but still .... She's learned to be a showman, I mean a real show—an entertainer, you know. She wasn't a natural like you, Nick. No, she had to work at it. Actually, in your absence, Ryz'n became more as you were and now, with you back, you're quieter now, more like she used to be. It's kind of a reversal, if you don't mind a wrestling term."

"That's right, Dave," added Trish. That's exactly right, I hadn't thought of it in quite that way. But then there's more to it than that. Ry did all that, sure, but she also fought the bureaucracy, even the President, to find you Nicky. I still can't believe she went to Viet Nam, after we had pulled out over there. She found servicemen from your old unit and searched up the rivers, in the jungles, looking in mass graves for your remains. I can't imagine her doin' all that."

"Can't imagine anyone doin' all that,'" observed Val incredulously. "And I know she was hurting inside. We heard her that night, remember Dave, when we visited her and Sheena and Bryce at M&L?"

"Yeah, I remember, she let us use her room, while she slept on the couch. Ya see Nick, now that's the kind of person she is, very kind, very considerate. There she was a big rock star and she slept on the couch to let us have her room. Yep! And those walls in that tiny cottage were paper thin and we heard her sobbing—sobbing over you, Nick."

The next day Sheena told me and Dave that Ryz'n had cried her heart out over you many a night down there all alone in her bedroom. But Ry never cried in public. I've never seen her cry, have you Trish?"

"No, never. She's always smiling, always upbeat."

"She is something else, Nicky, really, quite a gem. I heard you all had a little misunderstanding the other night. It must be hard for you not having any history to go on, but believe us there's plenty. So don't sell her short, Nick, not after a stupid little misunderstanding." For confirmation, Val winked and nodded at him once.

These three, unlike the other peers whom he had met, seemed to be truly interested in reuniting him and Ryz'n. They were not looking to Dixie to resolve their own problems such as by playing football, or engaging in some illicit romantic adventures, or merely using him as an entertaining centerpiece for a dull evening. No, these three, like Father Vizconni, seemed genuinely to have his and Ryz'n's interests at heart. Encouraged by their sincerity and their knowledge, Dixie asked them to tell him more of his history with Ry. The trio responded with relish, enthusiastically telling stories on Ryz'n and Nick until they all succumbed to the heat. Then they jumped into the ocean to cool off one last time before they hit the park showers to wash off the sand and suntan oil.

Afterwards, they ate down the road at the Fenwick Inn. Then, Dave drove them several miles further south to Ocean City (OC). They strolled the celebrated but crowded OC board walk for a couple hours, pointing out to Nick some sites where he

## *A Day at the Beach*

had recorded teen history. Finally, they turned left onto the fishing pier heading east out over the water. Dave stopped them on the left side of the pier, about a third of the way out, to identify the most notable spot of all, where Little Nick had thrown both Matt Yikes and Stan Steinmetz into the drink below.

Val recalled Lena had started that fiasco, too, by kissing Nick right there on the pier in front of Matt, God and half of Pocomoke High, who were visiting the beach resort for the Fourth of July holiday weekend.

“Was Ry there?” asked Dixie.

“She was there,” said Dave “but she was going with Don at the time. She tried to stick up for you even then, but Matt and Stan wouldn’t listen. And then, Don held her back, too. She and Don broke up shortly after that incident and it was you and Ryz’n from then on. Of course, you weren’t alone there on the fishing pier. Shoot! You were never without a girl on your arm, Nick. That occasion, you were with Little Mau! Remember her, Val?”

“Ughhh. Little Mau, a true died in the wool hophead!”

“Come on Val, I suppose your crap, don’t stink. Remember! Nicky was the one, who pulled you out of Mau’s place before the cops arrived. You were in no condition then to hold your nose up, either.”

“Just tell him everything, why don’t ya Dave?” Val furrowed her brow towards her beau and started walking east out to the end of the pier. The others followed, walking four abreast, skirting the many other Saturday night pedestrians, with the guys on the outside and Val between Dave and Trish.

“That was before I moved into the Heights,” offered Trish to Dixie. Then she turned to Val. “But wasn’t Mau the one who supposedly got pregnant and her dad, who was in the Air Force, got the family transferred to Texas to hush it all up?”

“Bingo, Trish!” replied Val.

“Come on Val,” countered Dave in a pinched tone. “You don’t know that for a fact—that she got pregnant. Nobody does.”

“Maureen and her dad do. And ... maybe ... maybe Nicky, here.” Val squirmed and cast a sidelong glance at Dixie.

“Nicky? Why me?” Dixie stopped in his tracks.

“Because *you* were the impregnator! It had to be you, Nick. You were the only one who ever went with Little Mau,” concluded Val.

“Is that the ‘Little Mau’ on the record?”

“The very same.”

“Mann, what kind of a person was I?”

“Oh! You were really something else, Nicky. HA!” Val slapped her thigh as she strolled. “I know my dad almost died when you took me out. He went from smokin’ a half pack to two packs a day for the three weeks we were seeing each other. That’s also why the colored Air Force Sergeant you were datin’ got transferred to Hawaii. All of the dad’s over on ‘Double G’ Street felt that way about you, Nick. They were afraid of you after what happened with Little Mau. They didn’t want you around their daughters, but when you showed up with a black girl, well, that really scared ‘em.”

## *Out at Home*

“Why is that? I’d think that would be the answer to their prayers.”

“No. Because Pocomoke had over a hundred black students—the most of any high school in the County at that time. That was before bussing took hold in the County a couple years later. See, all the parents were afraid that if the black guys at school saw you dating a black girl, they would think it was OK for them to date, me and the other white girls. You really broke a big taboo when you brought that colored chick to the junior prom. It scared a lot of people, including your Dad, too. Mrs. Allein, Johnny’s mom, even brought the matter up before the PTA, where your Dad was the president. Then Lieutenant Colonel Martine and my dad met with the base commander at Bolling, where the girl was stationed, and got her transferred to Hawaii.

“Lieutenant Colonel Martine?”

“Yeah, he lives across the street from me. His daughter was Corrine and she was something else, too. You went with her a while, also, kind of on and off.”

“And Johnny, too, from what I hear,” smirked Trish.

“Yep,” Double G Street is really somethin’ special,” mused Dave.

“What was that?—’Double G’? You mentioned that before, but I don’t recall seeing that street sign.”

“Oh, you know Nicky, it’s 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue,” volunteered Val off-handedly. “That’s what you dubbed it on account of all the ‘Great Girls’ on that street. Great Girls? Double G, get it? You used to deliver newspapers over there, so you kind of became aware of all the pulchritude on our street before most of the other guys our age.”

They reached the end of the boarded pier now and leaned up against the corner railing, staring into the integrated inky black of the sea and sky, listening to the sporadic slap of breakers wash against the wooden pilings beneath them. Dixie guessed the breeze was softer than it had been during the day, maybe five to ten miles an hour. Inadvertently, all four paused and turned their noses to the meager sea breeze and gulped in the fine, fresh salt air. They enjoyed the moment until Val, eager to resume her story, picked up where she had left off.

“Yeah. Besides me and Vicky, and the Ryan’s of course, there was Kim Kowalski, homecoming queen and cheerleader captain, Corrine Martine, Laurie Catherine and Allena. You went with all of us at one time or another Nicky, except for my sister and Kim. And Little Mau lived right around the corner on Gaither too, with Mary Ann whom you also dated briefly. And Maggie Ponds lived there as well but she was Stan’s girlfriend.”

Dixie shook his head.

“Gee I don’t think I want to hear anymore. If I really did all these things, I think I must have been a really bad guy. How could one high school kid do all that?”

“You never slept Nick,” replied Val casually. “Probably not more than maybe two, three hours a night, usually less. Ry said that some nights you never slept at all. You used to say your internal alarm clock was an early bird. And you had too much goin’ on inside your head to go to sleep—always, there were new songs, new lyrics, new arrangements, how to pick up a guy’s curve ball, somethin’—always something, and especially before your boat came in, like another new angle for making some dough.”

## *A Day at the Beach*

Dixie thought about it and it was true, he never needed much sleep, four hours was sufficient. He could even get by on two, if he had to. Dr. Mandl had advised Dixie that his lesser capacity for sleep resulted from his unique ability to achieve deep R.E.M. sleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Val began giggling and choking at the same time. Dixie reached over the railing and clapped her on the back a couple times.

“Are you OK, Val?”

Val pressed against her chest above her heart with the flat of her hand, fluttered her eyelashes and shook her head affirmatively.

“Oh! My Goodness! Val exclaimed. “I just thought of something and choked on my own laughter.”

She turned her back to the ocean and leaned back against the wooden railing. The others did the same, so that now Dave and Val occupied the left side of the corner and Trish and Dixie the right. They leaned their elbows back on the rail top and halfway faced each other.

“What’s that?” asked Trish.

“I’ll never forget the first time Nicky picked me up to take me out on a date. You remember Dave, I told you this story?” Dave nodded profusely and grinned from ear to ear. “Go ahead and tell them Val. It’s good for a laugh.”

Val turned her back to the lean against the corner of the wooden railing, while the others turned to face her, lounging on the tip rail with their forearms.

“Yeah, sure! Why not? Well, I came out from the bedroom to the living room where Nicky was waiting for me. Both my parents and my sister and Cary, Cary Geller that is, Vicky’s boyfriend were sitting around the living room watching to see how my Dad would interrogate Nick. And he did just that.

“You see, because of Little Mau, you had a bad reputation Nick, as a teenage gigolo, and my Dad wasn’t going to cut you any slack. I think he was hoping he could scare you off, but he was dead wrong on that idea. I recall, he got up out of his chair and stood toe to toe with you in the middle of the living room when you first came in, kind of towering over you cuz you were hardly bigger than I am now, and he asked you why you wanted to take me out.”

Val began to giggle again as she covered her mouth with her hand. Then, she blurted out.

“And then Nick, you told him that we wanted to ‘get to know each other better.’ Ha!

“And my Dad bellows: “That’s what I’m worried about. Now just how the heck do you propose to do that, son?” And you replied as polite as can be, ‘by the proper and polite use of interpersonal communications, Sir.’ HA! HA!

“Cary, who was sitting in the corner with Vick, cracked up at that answer. But Dad was undeterred. He pressed your further for an answer. Now we were only sixteen year-old kids back then Nicky, but you were serious as a heartbeat and very convincing to me, if not to Cary and my sister Vicky, who were giggling together over in the corner. Well, you told Dad you intended to ‘provoke stimulating and thoughtful conversation on a variety of topics.’

## *Out at Home*

“‘Such as,’ asked my Dad.

“‘Well sir, topics such as current events, sports, our NASA space program, astronomy and other heavenly bodies.’ Then Dad said alright, ‘just as long as you keep your hands off this heavenly body’ and he tapped me on the shoulder. Well, Nicky you couldn’t have been more condescending if you had tried. You turned your nose up in the air and said, ‘Perish the thought, sir.’ And Dad said, ‘That’s what I’m telling *you* to do, Son!’

“‘Don’t worry about a thing, Colonel Vernier,’ you said. ‘I have the situation entirely under control.’

“‘Kid,’ says my Dad. ‘You’ve got more bullspit with you than a wagon load of manure. With the total tonnage of pure-bred bullspit you carry around, you’ll probably wind up President of the United States some day.’

“My Dad was as sarcastic as all get out Nick, but you took it as a genuine compliment and thanked him profusely and shook his hand. Meanwhile, Cary could contain himself no longer and fell out of his chair, laughing hysterically.”

The foursome cracked up now, laughing uncontrollably, oblivious to the stares of fellow board walkers. When Dixie expressed concern about his past behavior after the laughter had subsided, the others just brushed it aside.

“No Nick. You were great, Mann, really GREAT,” consoled Dave. “You were really a trip and everybody knew it. Everyone wondered what stunt Little Nick would pull next. And you know what? You usually exceeded our expectations. You got us the state Four by One Hundred relay championship and the state baseball championship; both are our only state titles in school history. Then the next year, our senior year, you saved our baseball season from disaster. You won a couple games for the football team nearly single-handedly, well, you and Johnny that is. And hey, you even invented the ‘Spring Book.’”

“Spring Book? What’s that?”

“Yeah!” added Trish. “It’s the supplemental yearbook which records spring activities like the Proms and spring sports, and other events that are too late to make the regular yearbook. You said it was a shame football and basketball hogged the limelight. You wanted to give the spring sports some attention. The yearbook staff was too worn out producing the official yearbook to help much, but you and Ry were amateur photographers and you got some of your ballplayer friends to help. But the biggest asset you had going for you was your neighbor from across the street, the little Italian guy, you know, what’s-his-name, Sombrero or something like that, who worked at the University of Maryland Print Shop to make the pictorial pamphlets in short order. They still make the booklet for Pocomoke to this day. And Mann, something always was happenin’ around you, Nicky, always.”

Dave agreed heartily. “It was amazing because you used to be such a little guy, not much bigger than Val, here. The air around you was always like ELECTRIC. Like Ryz’n, you could make it happen—on the ball field, on the stage in front of an audience, or even on a fishing pier or just walkin’ down the halls at school.” As if he were providing proof, Dave pointed down the pier, to remind him of where Little Nick

## *A Day at the Beach*

had deposited Steinmetz and Yikes into the drink. “Yep! When Ryz’n hooked up with you, it was incredible. And when your songs started appearing on the radio, why, when you two walked down the halls at school, the air crinkled. Kids in the hallways would part like the Red Sea for you two.”

“That’s true, Nicky,” confirmed Trish. “You were a living legend then and you still are now, especially after all your success with GRT and this MIA thing.”

“Yeah, this MIA thing,” admitted Dixie self-consciously. The other three became sullen.

Quietly, Dave suggested they move on. They strolled back down the length of the pier and around the corner onto the boardwalk, following their noses to the Boardwalk and Sixth, where they bought some of the famous Boardwalk Fries. The foursome munched fries and walked the board, as Dave pointed out *The Irish Brogue*, a club at the corner of The Board and North Fourth Street, which Nick and GRT had played a couple times back in the day. As they approached the old free-standing, iron boardwalk clock, they observed that it read ten-oh-five.

Trish was surprised at the lateness of the hour. She said she had to be heading home. Dave and Val, who also had only come for the day, said they needed to be heading home, as well. They offered to carry Dixie back to the Heights with them or his amicable companions said they could drop him somewhere along the way, so he could hitch a ride the following day to see Ry for her birthday. Dixie went with option number two, choosing to be dropped at a 40 Winks Motel outside Salisbury off Highway 13, which ran north-south parallel to the coast. Once again, he relayed Johnny’s earlier message to Trish, who blushed beneath her freckled tan. Then he thanked them all for a fun and informative day and, even though he had treated them to lunch and dinner, he slipped Dave a ten-spot for gas. Dave accepted the bill graciously, noting Little Nick had always been very generous with his money, too, even when he did not have much.

Dixie called Ryz’n twice more before he retired around midnight, but the line was still busy. He reasoned that the receiver must be off the hook. He hoped that was an accident and that she was not still ticked off with him. One thing he reflected upon before he fell asleep, which helped confirm this area was his home, he noticed he spoke very much like his friends. His accent was very much like theirs. The people in the Islands or on the left coast had questioned Dix’s accent, wondering about his native origin. Now that he knew, Dix felt a bit like the ugly duckling when it had grown to become a swan. He smiled and hoped the rest of his metamorphosis into Nick Sheeboom would be equally rewarding. He figured Ryz’n was just the person to make that happen.