

After Ryz'n and Dixie had cleaned up from breakfast, Dixie showered and changed. Sheena finally stumbled downstairs late, asking for something to eat. The others had eaten most of the good stuff, so Ryz'n fixed her sister toast with jam and poured her some coffee. Barb took Dixie on an energetic tour of the Ryans' beach resort home. Ryz'n informed all of them they had to clean up and leave by noon. The real estate company, which leased the property when the Ryans weren't using it, had a rental family coming in at four that afternoon. The maid service had to get in and tidy up before then. Ryz'n explained that normally, the company would let the place from Saturday to Saturday or Sunday to Sunday, but as the Ryans had wanted to spend Ryz'n's birthday in the house, they had cut a special deal with another family to rent them the place for the remainder of the week at a reduced fee. Dixie said nothing, but he hoped the maids would empty the garbage can with his stinking puked on shoes.

Dixie stowed their duds in the spacious trunk of Ry's Starfire, while the sisters changed their clothes for the trip. He tried to keep his bare feet in the shade of the car as much as possible to protect his naked soles from the sizzling, white concrete. He could not help but feel rather naked in his bare feet. He wished he had brought his Dingos along. However, he figured if they were just going right home, he should be OK, and he was not about to pull those stinking Adidas out of the garbage. Before he could close the car trunk, Ryz'n appeared on the upper landing. She bounced saucily down the exterior, open wooden stairs looking like a glamorous, Fifties movie star, carrying her bag as well as a laundry bag of dirty clothes. She wore open-toed black high-heels, a high-waisted, black cotton mini-skirt and a mid-riff, green, and très décolleté peasant blouse. His gold locket looked good dangling tantalizingly just above her deep cleavage and the gathered top hem of her blouse. He noticed she also sported pink and white, French-painted toenails, too, to match her fingernails. While her outfit seemed a bit much for the task at hand, he sure was not about to ask her to change. She looked more than good to him. *The girl had great legs!* Moreover, Ryz'n had pulled the elastic hem of the puffy blouse down off her lightly tanned shoulders looking like a muchacha dancing in a cantina in one of those south-of-the-border westerns. All she lacked were the castanets. Of course, no western cantina muchacha ever wore a mini-skirt like this one. *Pretty sexy for lunchtime—sexy but sharp! However, I'm not going to complain. No, I'm not complaining at all.*

Then he noticed something strange, something he had not noticed before. Right under his gaze, outside in the sun, the pigment of her skin began to darken. Within a few minutes, her smooth olive skin appeared deeply and wondrously tanned, as it had earlier out on the beach. While he was observing this phenomenon, Barb exited the house followed well behind by Sheena. Barb wore sandals, old-fashioned, plaid Bermuda shorts and a sleeveless, collarless, white button-up, cotton shirt. In anticipation of the wind-blown, top-down, ride home, Barb explained she was wearing thick prescription sunglasses now in place of her contacts. She confessed the glasses more than a little bit expensive. Wearing the glasses and with her bobbed, shag, Barb's

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pudgy visage took on the appearance of a Hollywood owl. Dixie suppressed a chuckle. Barb carried both her and Sheena's bags. He wondered why Barb had humbled herself like that.

Ryz'n pecked Dixie pertly on the cheek, as a wife should, and he caught a whiff of her honey-dripping lips and that lemon perfume he found so fetching. Ry walked past him dumped her bag and the laundry bag into the trunk, as a mom might, without a second thought. Smiling broadly, Dixie turned back around and looked up the stairs. Suddenly, he felt the color drain from his face. Ryz'n must have noticed for she said something, but her words never reached his inner ear. Squinting into the noonday sun, up to the top of the staircase, Dix was struck dumb by the sight of a simply stunning young woman.

The modern Venus descended the outside wooden stairs barefoot and barelegged with her dark hair dripping wet. Fresh from the shower, hiding behind her shades, wearing frayed cut-off jeans and a red and orange, floral motif, two-piece, swimsuit bra top, Dixie could not believe this wondrous apparition.

It's Molly Two Moons! How could that be? The same figure, the same top, the same cut-offs, the same tan legs. Even the same red-painted toenails! My Gosh! Yet, Dixie knew that this apparition could not possibly be the girl with whom he had hiked the Smokey's just a few days ago. *Sheena. It had to be Sheena! Right?* The shades covering her eyes and nose and the wet hair made her locks appear a darker brown, but still her hair was not the raven-colored hair of Moons.

"Nicky! Nicky!"

Dixie heard what seemed to be a distant voice. He felt a light slap on the cheek. "Nicky! What has gotten into you?" It was Ryz'n's voice, whom he was ignoring.

"For gosh sake! You look as though you've seen a ghost!"

Dixie swallowed hard before he tore his gaze away from the miraculous beauty in cut-offs. "Uh, I, uh, thought I sa-saw as-someone, someone I knew."

"*Sheena?*" asked Ryz'n in disbelief. "You remembered her and not me?" Dixie forced a weak grin.

"No, no, not Sheena! So-someone else."

"Unh-hunh, who?"

Ryz'n's tone was incriminating and she quickly assumed the stance. Her left leg locked rigidly beneath her and she placed a tapping right foot before her, while her arms crossed beneath her chest acting upon her like a corset. Her more than ample cleavage deepened and all but swallowed his gold locket right up. He wondered if there might be an omen here. However, Ry was in no romantic mood now. She was plainly ticked.

"Oh, nobody in particular," he lied and smiled faintly. "Just an acquaintance, who dressed like that. That's all, Ry."

Sheena had descended the stairs and walked up to the pair, while Barb stood mute next to the Starfire's car fender. "What's all the hub-bub? What's up?" asked Sheena.

Barb ventured a quiet reply, "Nicky here, says you remind him of an old acquaintance in that outfit."

“Oh really? Why, this l’il ol’ thing?” She stopped on a step and made a half pirouette and then reversed her motion.

“Yes, I know.” Ryz’n replied testily. Dixie shook his head and clucked his tongue.

“The resemblance is uncanny, about the same size, the same clothes. Hmm!”

Sheena reached the ground and twirled about now, as if she were on display, which she was, and sang out with a sly grin, “It’s just li’l ol’ me, Sheena, your little sister, so to speak.” Ryz’n was getting more and more ticked. She voiced her disapproval emphatically, as Dixie shook his head in wonderment.

“It *is* amazing. It must be a mirage. Sheena, if you could just remove your ta-t, uh, your sunglasses, we could dispel this whole, crazy situation.” Ryz’n again folded her arms beneath her chest, resuming the stance, lowered her chin and glared over her shades at her husband.

“Do it, Sheena,” ordered Ryz’n. We gotta get goin’. We haven’t got time for this!”

Sheena pulled off her shades to reveal her big, brown eyes, which were nothing like Moons’ electric blue eyes. Dixie grinned, kissed his sister-in-law lightly on the forehead as a big brother should and thanked her for her cooperation. Sheena retorted.

“You know Nicky; I believe you *really have* flipped!” Sheena observed. “Come on Barb, get in the car and let’s get something to eat. I’m hungry. That toast and jam don’t go but so far. My stomach is grumbling.”

Nick took the bags from Barb, while she and Sheena climbed into the Starfire. Ryz’n stared hard and long at him.

“My own *sister!* How *could* you?”

“What are you talking about? She reminded me of someone that’s all.”

“Yeah, who?”

“Nobody!”

“Yeah, well that nobody, sure had you floundering all about with your tongue hanging out of you trap like a panting hound dog!”

“Come on, Ry, it wasn’t like that, was it?”

“Hmmpf! Just get in the car, Nicholas. You really try my patience. You really do. Come on, let’s go.” She slammed the trunk shut. They climbed in the car and left, but he knew Ryz’n was hot.

They had met the rental agency deadline and vacated the premises by noon. Sheena complained again that Ryz’n’s skimpy breakfast hadn’t gone very far with her, so she suggested they stop in at the restaurant around the corner for a quick bite for the road. The others weren’t hungry, but they did not want to punish Sheena for rising late, either.

Ryz’n stopped at the nearby Wright Brothers Restaurant. Dixie had said nothing to her about where they should or should not eat, instead letting Ryz’n pick the place on her own. Earlier on the beach, he had never gotten around to telling her about his guardian angel from last night. He hoped his laxity in that regard did not come back to bite him in the butt now. Maybe Dorothy was taking the day off sick? Inside, the eatery looked like any other diner, filled with brown leather booths and grey Formica table tops. All the signs out front had read “No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service.” Dixie and his

bare feet soon learned he had no cause for worry. Heads turned to stare as his party of pulchritude entered the establishment, but none of the heads were staring at Dixie's bare feet or anyone else's feet, either. The three girls, primarily the Ryan sisters, commanded everyone's attention, as they sashayed across the linoleum floor. Yet, one by one, the fair number of lunch-hour customers returned their attentions to their meals. A few of the men did stare after the sisters, but Ryz'n told Dixie not to worry about it. She and Sheena had learned to take the stares for granted. On the contrary, she proclaimed casually that if there had been no stares, now that would have been unusual.

A couple of square Formica-topped tables sat four, in the midst of the grey and green linoleum tiled restaurant floor. Business was good. There weren't too many places available, but Ryz'n located an empty table beneath a drop down ceiling lamp. A replica of the Wright Brothers first flight plane hung, suspended by wires from the center of the ceiling above.

"I declare Ry," remarked Sheena, "with that bright light shining down on you, I can practically see through that old threadbare peasant blouse of yours, even with my sunglasses on. Thought you threw that thing away years ago, Sis." The foursome sat down at an empty, square table. Dixie and Barb removed their sunglasses but the two rockers did not. Ryz'n confessed off-handedly and rather lamely that her top was the only clean one she had left. Sheena wasn't buying it.

"Umm, and it looks like you're not wearin' anything underneath it, either." Sheena pulled her shades down her nose to look more closely at Ryz'n, who had sat down next to her. "Unh-hunh, I thought so."

Under her breath and through clenched teeth, Ryz'n responded angrily.

"Shoo-shush, Sheena! I *am* too. Now just forget it." But her kid sister would not let it go.

"I can't get over you wearing that outfit Ry. I thought you got rid of that déclassé stuff a long time ago. Didn't you Barb?"

"Why, yes I, I did," nodded Barb while Sheena clucked her tongue in disbelief and Ryz'n squirmed self-consciously in her seat.

Then Sheena snapped her fingers. "—Wait! Wait just a cott'n-pick'n minute! Oh, I get it now."

"Get what?" asked Barb. Barb was not alone in her ignorance because Dixie did not "get it" either.

Ignoring Barb, Sheena spoke directly to Ryz'n.

"You're puttin' on this out-of-fashion show just for Nicky, aren't you? The blouse, the skirt, that shelf bra—"

Ryz'n grit her teeth and jerked her shoulders around toward Sheena.

Sheena jumped off her chair. "Ouch! Damn it, Ryzanna, you didn't have to do *that!*" Ryz'n had kicked Sheena under the table.

No sooner had the words left Sheena's mouth than a perky, young blonde with wide eyebrows descended upon their table with a pot of steaming coffee in her hand. She hid her slender body beneath a loosely fitting, black smock. The youthful waitress carried

an angelic glow about her, as if each eye held a lit candle. No sooner had she arrived that she broke into a radiant smile.

“Why Mr. Dixie!”

Her mouth gaped open. The young waitress leaned over and plastered Dixie with a grateful kiss on his cheek.

“I’m so glad you decided to take me up on that offer—*my angel!*”

“What kind offer is that?” asked Ryz’n irritably. The waitress was about to respond when she jumped. Her eyes widened as she placed her free hand over Dixie’s shoulder.

“Why, Mr. Dixie, here!”

Unabashed, the cheery waitress took Dix’s hand in her free one and placed them both over her stomach. The other women at the table sat and watched, somewhat dumbfounded. Dixie looked up to her, perplexed.

“I’m sorry, I don’t—” The blonde stepped toward Dixie and quickly pulled his head and ear next to her belly. Ryz’n watched in horror as Dixie’s eyes widened. He both heard and felt the wee one beneath the blonde’s camouflaging server’s smock. He grinned. “Yes, yes,” he concurred. “You were right.”

Ryz’n was not happy. “Listen Miss, I don’t much appreciate my husband nuzzling other women’s bellies!” Startled, the waitress broke away from Dixie, spilling some of the hot coffee onto the floor. Having lost all trace of hazel, Dixie observed Ryz’n’s angry eyes now flashed emerald green hard upon the happy waitress.

“Oh, I’m sorry, ma’am. You must be Mrs. Dixie. Could you hand me a couple napkins from the dispenser there please.” Ryz’n seethed at the grinning blonde while Barbara retrieved the napkins for her. The girl promptly took the napkins and stooped down on one knee to wipe up the spilled coffee off the linoleum floor. Holding the coffee pot away from her, she turned to face up to Dixie. “I’m sorry Mr. Dixie; I don’t remember your last name.” She finished cleaning up the mess and turned to look up at Ryz’n again. “But—well, ma’am, I’m Dorothy Cavendish.” Smiling, she rose off her bent knee from the floor. “Your husband was my answer to prayer last night in that horrible storm. Yes ma’am he came through for me as no other man has, right when I needed him most.” Dixie sensed the girl’s naïve sincerity was unlikely to affect Ryz’n.

“Nick was your answer to prayer last night? That’s funny. I heard a lot of strange things that happened to him yesterday, but I don’t recall hearing about him being *your* answer to prayer. In fact, I don’t recall him mentioning *you at all.*” Ry turned to him sarcastically. “You neglected to mention *that one, DEAR!*”

“Well, Ry,” Dixie explained. “I was ga-ga-gonna t-tell ya, but we, we reached the ba-ba-beach and you wanted to swim. After that, I g-guess I ka-ka-ka-kind of fo-fo-fo-forgot a-ba-ba-bout it. Had other things on my ma-mind.” He grinned, hopeful she would understand. But she merely smirked.

“Oh, you forgot about being an answer to a young woman’s prayer and coming through for her in a storm ‘AS NO OTHER MAN HAS?’ Now, how in Judas’ name could you possibly forget about something like THAT?” As was her custom for anonymity, Ryz’n, was wearing her shades in this public place. Now she jerked them

down her nose now to look angrily over the frames at her husband seated across from her. Sheena snickered, while Barb rolled her eyes.

“Please, Mrs. Dixie,” pleaded the waitress innocently. “You don’t understand.” Ryzanna folded her arms beneath her chest, as she had earlier out by the car and glared over her shades at the waitress.

“Oh! Well, please explain, Miss. I’m just anxious as all-get-out to be enlightened. And, by the way, my name is *Mrs.* Nicholas Sheeboom! And this man you refer to as ‘Mr. Dixie’ is *my* husband!” The girl squealed.

“Oh! So you’re the Rock’N’Roll star! And Dixie Nicholas here is *your* husband? Well, I should have known. I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance ma’am, so very pleased indeed.” She shifted the pot of coffee to her left hand and took Ryz’n’s hand in her right, shaking it firmly. Ryz’n mellowed a tad.

“Yes, well, he probably forgot to mention that, too!”

“No ma’am, no indeed he did not. He mentioned it after all the excitement had died down. I guess I did most of the talkin’ last night, as I usually do. Dixie here did most of the action. I guess he’s more of what you call the strong, silent type.” She smiled warmly at Dixie, who merely buried his head in his hands. “But wait a minute.” A reticent Dixie looked up. The girl assumed a Eureka expression upon her angelic visage. “So you’re saying this is Nicholas, that is to say Nick Sheeboom, *The Little Nick*?” Perplexed, she turned, remarking dryly to Dixie. “Why, I thought you was dead?” She looked at Dix in utter astonishment, as though she were seeing him for the first time.

“Don’t worry, Honey. When we get back out to the car, he will be.” promised Ryz’n.

“Doahothy! We have otha customahs, Hon.” A middle-aged man wearing a chef’s hat called from the kitchen through the service window.

“That’s my father-in-law. He’s the owner, chief cook and bottle washer around here.” She nodded. “Look. You all think about what you’d like to have and I’ll be right back for your orders. Oh! Here, help yourself to the coffee.” Belatedly, the girl set the pot of java down on the table. However, before she scurried off towards the kitchen, she turned back to Dixie.

“Oh, Dixie, remember now, as my guardian angel, whatever you want is on the house.” She grinned at him and left. Truly incensed now, Ryz’n launched into her husband, while Barb and Sheena looked on curiously.

“What the heck is this all about William Nicholas? Guardian angel? *Mistah Dixie!* What are you doing cuddling that girl’s stomach and in front of me and in public, too?”

“This ought to be good,” opined Sheena, who, like Barb, had bitten her lip to remain silent throughout the whole encounter. “This is just like old times, Nicky. Don’t know how you manage to do it. Didn’t know then and don’t know now. But you certainly have a special knack for romantic intrigue. So, why don’t you enlighten us all? We’re all ears.” Sheena looked like the cat that had swallowed the proverbial canary.

“Be quiet, Sheena. I’ll handle this,” bellowed Ryz’n.

Barb remained quiet with her owlish head bowed, apparently ashamed to be present in this difficult, very private moment. Embarrassed, Dixie looked away from them to

spy Dorothy speaking with the cook through the short order window. As Dixie, was about to explain to his wife, a short, pot-bellied man approached them in animated fashion. He wore a stained, full length linen apron over a T-shirt with a chef's hat on his salt and pepper head. Wiping his hands on a towel, he fairly jogged toward their table. He extended his hand to Dixie, who rose to accept it. The man took Dixie's hand in both of his and pumped earnestly with a broad grin over his face.

"Mistah, I can't thank ya 'nough for what ya did foah ouah Doahothea las' naight. I, I nevah shoulda let her go to that meetin' alone. Mah wahfe was ill and Ah, well ..." He let go of Dixie with one hand and used the towel to dab a tear away from the corner of his eye. "Well, Ah can't thank ya enough. If it's a boy, weah gonna name him 'Joseph Nicholas' afta his Pop and you. And if she's a filleh, we arah gonna name herah 'Dixie Lee' afta you an' me." He beamed, waiting for Dixie's approval, which Dixie gave graciously. "Gotta scoot. Sorreh, but this is ourah buseh tahn o' day. Thanks so much. Whatevah y'all want is on the house." He disappeared behind the kitchen wall. Dorothy dropped into the space just vacated by her father-in-law to take their lunch orders without further incident. Then she scurried away, leaving Dixie to explain himself to the women at his table, which he did as earnestly as possible. However, Ryz'n was not fully satisfied yet.

"So you're saying you changed her blow-out in the storm and that little girl is pregnant, five months worth? Why, she doesn't look pregnant at all." Ryz'n looked to the other girls for confirmation of her conjecture, which they provided.

"Six months. Yeah, either, she's pregnant or she's got one heckuva case of gastritis there," observed Dixie. Sheena chuckled. Ryz'n leaned forward to rest her elbow upon the table and her chin in her hand. Her mood had lightened considerably. Her tone softened and she assumed a lilting southern accent.

"Why Nicholas, you just beat all, Sweetie. I swea-ah you do, Honeh. Two flat ti-ahs in near as many hourahs. Well, Ah declarah!" She adopted a syrupy southern drawl that Dixie could swim in. She acquired a southern belle simper and batted her eyelashes at him, as if she were Scarlett O'Hara.

"So you're not mad?"

"Mad? Now honeh chaile. How could Ah be angreh with such a chilv'rous knight of the ole South by the name of Dixeh?" They all laughed. Dorothy brought their orders, which, aside from Sheena, was nothing more than a beverage for each, the others having already had their fill with Ryz'n's breakfast. Ryz'n insisted on paying for all of them and she slipped Dorothy a fifty-dollar tip when they left.

"For the baby," she whispered to the pert little waitress. The effervescent Dorothy hugged and kissed Ryz'n. Then she hugged and kissed Dixie, though with a little more gusto and for a little longer than she had kissed and hugged Ryz'n. Ryz'n noticed the extra attention, too, but she confessed that she knew how that was, when your man was gone so long. She did not make a fuss, though after they had walked out into the bright noonday sunlight, she mentioned to him that she did not much care for the girl's extra attentions, either, no matter how well-intentioned they may have been.

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Dixie informed Ryz'n he was supposed to be at Clairton Regional for a baseball game by six and asked how long it would take to get home. It was almost one.

"Well, Baby, why didn't you say that before? We'll be hard pressed to make that time now, unless we speed."

Each member of the foursome donned his or her shades, looking like the cast of Fifties B-movie, and jumped into the Starfire, while Ryz'n dropped the top and took off in a cloud of dust. After his unpleasant recent road experiences, Dixie thought that now this was the way to travel—sitting on the plush leather seats of a classic convertible surrounded by a bevy of beautiful girls.

"Hey?" He said to no one in particular. "Say? This looks like livin'." In response, Ryz'n said those sounded like song lyrics, smiled and peeled out of the dirt and gravel parking lot. She was on a mission to get Dixie to the ball game on time.

As Ryz'n tore over those back Carolina country roads, she must have been taking every shortcut she knew just to shave off a few more minutes here and there from the journey to get him to the ballpark on time. Dixie lay back, his long, dense locks billowing in the breeze, his shades shielding his pupils from the summer sun. He was careening over the Carolina countryside with three beauties. Well. make that two and a half, but one of them was a real lulu and she was his. They sped out of Carolina through the Great Dismal Swamp back into Virginia, turning northwest onto Route 460, a four lane highway, that seemed oversized for the minimal amount of traffic it attracted.

Ryz'n was flying. She was doing seventy-five easy in the fifty-five mile zone, sailing above the peanut fields on either side on this flat, straight road that traversed the coastal plain of southeastern Virginia. Dixie sat with his back angled against the corner of the front passenger seat, studying his wife. The other two girls were taking a beating in the open back seat from the road winds and the searing sun. If they minded, they failed to complain. Barbara looked as though she was truly enjoying the ride from behind her prescription sunglasses. Dixie could not tell if his sister-in-law was asleep or awake, sitting underneath her wrap-around shades behind him. Her impassive expression was totally non-committal. The longish hair of both girls flapped against the seatback behind them like a streaking basset hound's long ears. Dixie cradled his head in the corner formed by the seatback and the passenger door. He had to slide down a bit to keep the pointy, rectangular door arm rest from poking him in the small of his back. His legs splayed, with his right leg plastered against the side of the powder blue door and his left leg flung carelessly across the similarly blue leather seat. His bent knee rested against the lower seat back on the long chrome console that separated the two front bucket seats. His bent, lower left leg ran along the console with his left ankle resting on the chrome seat divider near the automatic stick shift, with his bare foot dangling languidly over the edge of the console near Ryz'n's right leg.

Although Ryz'n remained as motionless as a statue of a Greek goddess, he was sure she was awake, because every so often, she'd push another button on the radio to evade a commercial and pick up a fresh rock tune. Mann, she was just incredible. He couldn't believe he knew her, much less that he was married to her. Once more, he

recalled Big Jim's words, "Nobody's got a wife that looks like that!" And he, Dixie—Nick was that lucky Nobody! He couldn't get over how brassy, how forward, she had been out on the beach that morning. Dixie was convinced, if little Paulina had not happened by to visit when she had, Ryz'n would have consummated their reunion right there out in the morning sun with the surf crashing in the background. That thought made him salivate.

Dixie ogled his wife from the concealment of his own wraparound sunglasses. He couldn't help himself. She was still so new, so fresh to him. He watched her thick ponytail dance behind her head, tossed to and from by the road breezes that flowed over the open convertible. She leaned against the driver's door with her left elbow on top of the door and her fingers lightly caressing the steering wheel. He noticed the natural red of her broad-brushed lips and once again, in his imagination, once more, he tasted her salty lips on his, just as he had this morning on the beach.

"See that farm over there to the left, Nicky?"

She jarred him from his reverie as she pointed with her left hand out of the car at a forty-five degree angle to the chrome vent window bar. Ry clutched the steering wheel now with only her right hand at the five o'clock position. Dixie straightened up a bit to improve his angle.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, well the old farmer who lives there is a real nice fella, Baby. We had an accident coming down here one time, ran off the road. He pulled my little Monza out of his muddy field for us with his tractor. His name is Kemp—likes chocolate. I bring him some every time I'm down and send him a box at Christmas, too. He knows all about you. Usually, on the return trip, I stop and bring him some saltwater taffy."

"Well, you can turn around and give him the taffy. It's OK by me. I've missed half the ball season already. I don't suppose ten more minutes will make a difference."

"No, no. He'd like to see ya of course. But he would probably invite us in and we don't have time for all that. And neither does he, I'm sure. Besides, you got me so shook up back there with that cute little waitress, and your Sheena look-a-like acquaintance thing that I forgot to buy the taffy. Say, watch your knee with that stick control, Baby, or you're liable to cost us a transmission."

Dixie slid his left foot back over the top of the console, teeter-tottering it on the edge, but the darn chrome was uncomfortable against his ankle. He slid his foot farther off to relieve his ankle bone. Ryz'n stepped on the gas, pushing the Starfire faster. Dixie watched the tachometer jump. They traveled the sparse country highway in silence for a while, hitting the lone light just right in the small, rural town of Ivor.

As she had done earlier, he shouted over the raucous road noise and the Rock'n'Roll roaring from the speakers.

"Ry?"

"Yes?"

"Well, there's somethin', I been meanin' to ask ya."

"Yes, what's that?"

"Well, I noticed it before, but this morning it really hit me."

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“What hit you?”

“Well, when you were cooking breakfast this morning in the kitchen, your skin was almost white. Then when you came out in the sun, why, you darkened right up. In a few minutes, it was as heavily dark brown, as it is now. How the heck is that, anyway?”

Failing to suppress a smile she gurgled. “It’s in the blood, Baby. Sheena’s the same way.”

Ryz’n motioned backwards with her head towards Sheena. Dixie looked at the younger sister in the back seat. Sure as shootin’! Ryz’n was right. Sheena had been very lightly tanned this morning inside the house and now she was as dark as if she’d been lying on the beach, frying herself all summer.

“Well, how is that possible?”

“I dunno, Baby. Genes, I guess. My mom says it’s due to our Lebanese and Pakistani ancestors.” Dixie looked at her incredulously. *What did that have to do with anything?*

“I thought you said you had Indian ancestors?”

“Yeah, them too. That’s just the way it is. I guess. Probably, our kids will be like that. Ya think?” She turned to him and smiled.

Our kids???

As they regained speed leaving the outskirts of town, Dixie quietly slid back into the corner formed by the door and the back of the leather seat. Cradling his head between the passenger door and the top of the seatback, once more he ogled his tanned wife from behind the safety of his sunglasses. White puffy clouds were extremely sparse now and the Virginia sun beat down upon them unmercifully. Only the balmy road breezes floating over the endless rows of peanut plants on either side of them offered any respite from the sultry heat.

Ry’s long, fat pony-tail danced saucily behind her. Her mousey brown-grey hair pulled tight against her head, behind her dainty right ear. A few wisps of hair had pulled loose from their tight conch and the wind battered the loose wisps frightfully about her ear and neck. Graceful yet strong, the lines to her neck quietly lent confidence to her carriage, supporting firmly a chin, which neither was neither weak nor strong, round nor pointed. Ryz’n’s wrap-around shades yet hid her thoughts from him, as he knew his shades did his from her. For ease of comfort, she had resumed leaning a little to the left, where she could rest her left elbow atop the door and steer at the same time. Her hands guided the convertible by steering from the ten and five o’clock positions on the thin, smooth steering wheel. He observed that for a short person, her fingers were long and gentle—artistic! They reminded him of the fingers of a starfish gently flowing to and fro in the ocean shallows, just beneath the clear water’s surface.

With his enfilading line of fire down the leather bench seat toward her right flank, Dixie had a perfect view of her breastworks. The strong winds haphazardly widened and lowered the already low-cut hem of her worn-out peasant’s blouse. Those same winds also pressed the thin cotton fabric tight against her bust. Sheena’s claims back in the diner had been right on. So threadbare was Ry’s blouse that she appeared to wear

Out at Home

nothing at all beneath the green garment. Pressed by the wind across her chest, the flimsy, green veil held back nothing from his prurient view. Right now, he wished he had never given her that danged locket. The darn thing was hanging down and blocking his view. The threadbare green blouse made her look like the Jolly Green Bust—*Ho! Ho! HO!* Nick chuckled silently to himself.

Forcing himself to work his way up her sternum, Dixie once more noted she possessed the skin of a chameleon. Under the harsh summer sun, her tan had turned inexplicably as brown as the proverbial berry. *'Genes!'* She had said, as if that explained everything. *Sheeesh!* Her legs looked extra long in those open-toed, black spiked heels, which really added a sexy but classy touch to her ensemble. Well, her shapely legs appeared long in spite of her longish waist. The muscled calves had resumed the sleek, graceful contours he had observed in the motel room. He could see for himself how well her legs grew clear up her above her thighs, where that black mini-skirt barely covered her, well, the rest of her.

These thoughts were arousing him and he could do nothing about it, as he began to draw up against his wishes. *Better to think of something else.* But he couldn't rise above his prurient nature. He noticed friction from the rushing wind passed over her left arm, resting on the door, raised the wispy hairs off her arm as static electricity might. He really dug that action. He was big on hair. He didn't know why. And she had plenty in all the right places. Neither Lore Lei nor Donna had been particularly hirsute. Often, he had wished they were. In fact, there was nothing physically about Ryz'n that he did not like. Dixie was ready to forget his wounds and his unfamiliarity with her and romance her whenever she wanted. She was a little bossy sometimes, but what was new about that? Practically all the women he had known in his brief two year and two month existence had been bossy, some more than others. Still, he never really cared for that trait in a woman or in anyone for that matter.

Her slender right hand held the bottom of the steering wheel, while she rested her right forearm in her lap and the crook of her elbow pressed up and into her bosom. He wondered if she were doing that on purpose to entice him. If so, her ploy was working. *The Jolly Green Bust!* This time he could not help but let a smug smile crack his placid façade. She turned her face slightly toward him and frowned. *Could she know what he was thinking? Nah! No way.* He smiled at her as if he were a Cheshire cat.

Ryz'n glared at Nick from behind her sunglasses. Propped in the corner with his leg splayed across the front seat, he appeared to be quite pleased with himself, riding around like a lord on blue leather seats. Yup, he acted as if he owned the place, which he did, Ryz'n soberly reminded herself. But that wasn't the point. She glanced sideways again and followed her line of sight up along his inseam up to his bulging crotch. She bit the inside of her lip. *For that, I nearly made a complete fool of myself on the beach this morning. As it was, I made myself out to be half a fool.* Self-consciously, Ryz'n licked her lips and reconsidered. She checked the rear view mirror and then the road ahead. Barb and Sheena were staring out opposite sides of the car,

each seemingly in a trance wrought by the heavy, constant and noisy road winds, blowing in their faces.

*Pickles! I wish I **had** made a fool out of myself this morning, just a complete and utter fool. Oh Baby ...*

She checked the barren road once more then tilted her head towards her spouse.

“Nicky, just what are you thinkin’? You’re awfully quiet over there.”

Ryz’n was dying to know what was going on behind those Foster-Grants of his. He was as cute as she could ever recall, maybe even cuter with that moustache. Barefoot, because as he had explained he had thrown his putrid shoes in the garbage, now in his tight grey, flared cords and white and purple baseball inner shirt, he reminded her of the kid she once had dated. And this innocent act of his, his lack of memory which made him so vulnerable, made her want to take him in her arms, stroke him and coo to him that everything would be all right. And then, jump his bones as if there was no tomorrow!

However, she could not have him thinking he could do whatever he wanted with whatever woman or girl who happened to cross his path. She couldn’t have him going out with Lena and Trish, picking up strange women on the road and snuggling up to them in public. On that score, she had to teach him right from wrong, to break him as she might break a rambunctious colt, or an unctuous pup, as she had house-broken Scruffy Junior.

The Carpenters “Love Will Keep Us Together” played over the car radio and Ry hoped they were right. She caught sight of him from the corner of her eye. She held her face immobile. Ryz’n had dressed provocatively precisely for his benefit, as she always used to do for him. She had not worn this outfit since he had left over three years ago. She had kept these clothes and others like them hidden away, hoping he would return, when she had promised herself to wear them again, no matter how unfashionable they might become. Little Nick had always loved it when she had “dressed sharp, sexy,” even though his natural preferences had become an acquired taste for her. Absent her husband, Ryz’n had always tried to dress smartly, not so much sharply. Nick had taught her that sharp was sexy and sexy, sharp. Yes, those were his preferences for her fashions. She had accepted his preferences and made them her own, where he alone was concerned. Only for him had she worn skirts so short and so tight that she felt almost naked in them. Only for him did she avoid panty hose in lieu of stockings or, as now, in lieu of anything. Only for him did she permit her D-cup breasts to swim nearly out of her tops. He alone had claimed she had a sexy walk back when she was still a butterball in high school. He had made her and shaped her. He had been the only one whom she had sought to please on so many levels and the area of women’s fashions was no anomaly.

When he was away, the only lurid exceptions to her dress code had come by way of some of her live performances. Sheena, Bryson, Mickey and Halo Platter executives, all, had labored to convince Ryz’n that dressing “sharp” was in the best interest of the band’s success. For them to perform their best, GRT’s out front leader had to look her best. Her fans deserved no less, they claimed. The fact that Bryson encouraged Sheena

to dress sharp on stage, as well, had encouraged Ryz'n likewise to give it a try, even if she couldn't always take the plunge without the aid of some prescription medication. Her new, provocative style achieved the effects of pleasing her fans and sold out arenas to the delight of Halo execs. Amazingly, they sold out that first tour without Nicky.

Still, she would not stoop to make a vulgar display of herself on stage or wear her most lascivious, custom-made costumes, as the Halo executives demanded. On those rare occasions, she needed the prescription medication before a gig to pull her out of one of her many depressions caused by her husband's extended absence. Then, surprised and ashamed, she would learn the next morning that she had incited riots the previous night with her unrestrained, provocative style, which she had not known she possessed. She had shocked herself that she could pull off such a stunt, because Ryz'n knew deep in her soul that she was no femme fatale, no matter what anyone else said. Just because people said she looked so much like a vamp did not mean she was one. Look at how she had failed miserably the other night with Nick in the motel trying to be a Bathsheba. However, that is exactly what she was trying to be again now for him. And that is why she had pulled the shelf bra, peasant blouse, ultra mini-skirt, garters and nylon stockings out of the moth balls and left her underwear in her luggage. Ryz'n glanced sideways at him. Nick arched his eyebrows so that she could see them above his sunglasses. Then she watched him exhale deeply. He had always been an imp, a real little devil, but she had loved him always too, absolutely and without reservation, sometimes in spite of and sometimes because of his impishness. And maybe, just maybe, his impish behavior was part of the reason for her strong attraction to him.

Maybe this "Dixie" was Little Nick after all and he was merely testing her, testing her loyalty. Wouldn't that be just like Little Nick? Well, no matter how she sliced it, she could not permit him to go out on her, to sleep with other women, to go around snuggling girls in public or private. Ryz'n would have to teach him a lesson, to show him that, in this area at least, there could be no compromise between man and wife. The problem was he still had not remembered her, did not fully grasp that he *was indeed* her husband, which provided her with a certain lack of leverage. However, she would prove his amnesia to be merely a surmountable obstacle, not a barrier she could not hurdle. In the back of her mind, she faintly heard Father Vizconni's warnings that vengeance was the Lord's alone. Well, she was not planning on being vengeful now, just instructive. Yes, she would have to teach him a Marine Corps kind of lesson, an act of tough love that he could understand very well and would not soon forget. And she would have to do it quickly, for she had little time before the band would need her, too.

Shoot! Tomorrow, she would have to start whipping the band and their new lead guitarist into shape. Next week, GRT started that local three week tune-up tour. If Nick followed her and the band around, the groupies in those nightclubs would be all over him. Moreover, if he didn't follow the band, he'd be on his own and she would be unable to keep an eye on him. Sheesh! That would be even worse! That would be her worst nightmare. No. She had to do something, something drastic, and she had to do it right now! He had yet to answer her. Maybe he had not heard her. Ryz'n spoke louder.

Tough Love

“Deep thoughts, hunh?”

A smug smirk simpered across his face, sparking an idea in her brain.

“Actually, I was thinking about how beautiful you are Ry, how lucky I am to be with you and how great it feels to be flying down the highway in an open convertible with you. You’re like my dream girl, Ry.” At least he was calling her by her nickname and he *seemed* sincere. Both were positives, but she would have to be tough to squash any untoward behavior from him in the bud. She would have to buck up.

“Unh-hunh. I see. Well, you know Honey, if you keep going out with other women, you might not be so lucky. Your dream girl might turn into a nightmare witch. You ever think of that?” Despite their earlier connection on the beach and his golden gift, which he had placed about her neck that morning, Ryz’n’s forgiving benevolence towards her husband had shifted towards a darker foreboding. His recent escapades with the opposite sex demanded some form of rehabilitation, if not punishment. She thought of her talk with her Dad last night and Nick’s two heads. Nick needed a dose of tough love and now was the time to douse him with it.

“No, what do you mean?” Nick sat forward in his seat.

“I mean, going to the beach with Trish Allein and spending the night with Allena Yikes.” Ryz’n turned toward him, lowering her head as she tugged her shades down the bridge of her nose a bit to peer over the dark glasses at him, just as she had done in the restaurant. “That’s not what a married man does, Baby.”

“But, but, but Ry, you got it all wrong. I mean there was nothin’ to any of that. I mean it was, why, it was harmless. You saw me get more action from pregnant, little Dorothy back there than I did with both of them other two combined.” She slid her glasses back in place, hiding her eyes once more.

“Now don’t lie to me, Nicky. I can’t stand being lied to. I believe that about Trish. But if you’re tellin’ me that you did more with that little waitress than you did with Lena, I say you’re lyin.’”

Nicky placed his right elbow on the top of the door and rubbed his forehead with his right hand. She had struck a nerve.

“La-Look Ryz’n, what I’m s-say-sayin’ is: it meant n-nothin. It me-m-meant ma-more with the waitress, because, because that was, you know, pa-pa-pure?”

“Forget the waitress! What meant nothin’ with Lena that wasn’t *‘pure’*? That’s what I wanna know.”

“She taught me how ta suck—ah-ah-ah suck ah-ah-ahhh-CHOO!”

“SUCK???? Suck what?”

“You’re supposed to say ‘Bless you’ or ‘Gesundheit’ or somethin’, not yell at me.” He pretended to pout.

“Bull! Now suck what, Nicholas?”

“Wha-wha-whatever you want, Darlin.’” He cracked up.

“I don’t appreciate that kind of talk, Nicholas. You should know that.”

“What kind of talk is that?”

“Coarse innuendo.”

“Oh! A goodie-two-shoes, hunh?”

Out at Home

“I *am not* a goodie-two-shoes. But I know what hurts my ears!”

“Well, pardon me all to Hades then. I’ll try to remember that.”

“Oh, so this is just a big game to you, hunh? I’ll show ya.”

“Na-Now hold on Ry. It was ja-just a little ja-ja-joke, that’s all. Na-Now calm da-down. I’ll tell ya.” Nick took a deep breath and composed himself.

“Please, do tell then.”

“She ta-taught me how to suck the sweet ne-ne-nectar out of that vine that ga-grows around here, that honeysuckle. Tha-tha-that’s all.”

“That’s ALL, hunh?????? Like I taught you, I suppose? My lesson didn’t take, but hers did?”

“Aww, well, we held hands la-like a co-co-couple of school ki-ki-kids.”

“Held hands like school kids, hunh? And that’s it?”

“Well, I-I di-did-ki-kiss her ga-good-bye.”

“You what!!!!!”

Ryz’n shot her right fist into his left bicep, quicker than a rattlesnake’s strike.

“Ouch! Ry that hurt. Felt like one of them square-ended, hypodermic needles they shoot ya up with in the Corps.”

“Well, I hope it did hurt. I hope it swells up real bad on you, too. Why, on earth, would you do something like that with her? Don’t you know she’s having martial problems, as it is?”

“Yeah, she ta-ta-told ma-me and well, I thought-t-t she seemed sa-sort o’ da-down, la-lonely, you know. So, well at la-la-least, I know how that-t-t- is. It, it me-meant na-nothing to me, Ry, honest.”

Listen to him stutter, he must be guilty!

“Yeah? Well I know how that is, too—to be lonely, Nicky. I surely do.”

Angered, Ryz’n shoved the purse resting beside her leg to her right, placing it as a sort of imaginary barricade between them upon the console. Then, she pressed down further on the accelerator pushing the speedometer to eighty. She felt safe to speed like this on this sparsely traveled road through the peanut farms. Neither spoke for a minute.

Finally, Ryz’n said, “But you slept with her, didn’t you?” She glanced sideways to catch his response. By the way his jaw dropped and then his teeth clenched, Ryz’n could tell Nick was floored and that he was starting to get pissed with all the twenty questions. And she noticed again how, in anger, he lost the stutters and his speech reflected his anger.

“Not like you think, not at all like that. What kind of a man do you think I am, anyway?”

“Hmmpf! Hey, I know ya, Baby, from way back, know ya like the back of my hand. Don’t forget that!”

“You knew a rocker named Little Nick, but you don’t know *me!*”

“Unh-hunh. Like how then?”

“Like what?”

Tough Love

“You said, you slept with Lena, but ‘not like you think, not at all like that.’ So like how, then?”

She had quoted him back word for word. Nicky looked around. Both girls seemed to be asleep in the back seat. She guessed even if they weren’t, they couldn’t hear the conversation up front over the rushing road winds. Nick turned back to Ryz’n, leaned towards her and pleaded with a loud whisper.

“We slept on the ground at that Clairton Park, where we’re going tonight for the ball game. She slept in my sleeping bag. Shoot, I’ll even show ya the spot, if you like.”

“That must have been quite cozy for the two of you in one sleeping bag.” Ryz’n was testing him to see if his story checked with Lena’s.

“No, not me, just her. Wish I *had* slept in the danged bag! The darn bugs ate me alive. Didn’t you see those bug bites all over me this morning?”

She had. And what’s more his story checked, but she could not let him know that she was pleased with his response. She pressed her advantage.

“Good. You had no business being out there with her, no business whatsoever. How *could you do it*, Nicholas? How could you *hurt me* like this?” Ryz’n slammed her right hand down angrily on top of the purse that divided them.

“I dunno, Ry. Honestly I just don’t know.” His tone seemed to soften. She had him where she wanted him, or did she?

“Gee Ry, since I came back here everything seems to be a dream. Nothin’s real. I do things and hope I can remember something, anything. It’s *surreal*. My mind is stuck in the third grade, for cryin’ out loud! Half the time, I don’t know if I’m alive or dead, or dreamin;’ or wakin’. I can’t seem to trust my own judgment. As I was just sayin’ a few minutes ago, bein’ here with you now is like a dream. It’s, it’s so wonderful, so ta-terrific, it don’t seem real to me. You’re like a wonderful dream to me, Ry.”

Yes, I’ve got him now, right where I want him, but I have to teach him a lesson. He’s melting my heart with that hurt, puppy dog act. But I can’t go soft now. Tough love is the order of the day.

“Your mind may be stuck in the third grade Nicky, but your hormones are sure going on eighteen!” He threw his hands into the air and let them flop helplessly into his lap, as if he had given up.

His vulnerable innocence began to sway her, breaking down her resolve. And again, Ryz’n considered what her father had told her last night, that Nicky had two heads and, with his memory missing now, his second head might be out of control. She had to make sure. His self-defined “dream girl” checked the road in front and behind. As before there was nothing, no sign of traffic. They were between the two small towns of Wakefield and Waverly, on a raised, four-lane asphalt ribbon, surrounded by low-lying peanut fields, which were bordered by wooded windbreaks. It was a hot, quiet Monday afternoon. She figured this would be a good time to give her husband a dose of reality that he would remember, a Marine Corps kind of wake up call. A dose of reality is what some might call it. Others might call it tough love. It really didn’t matter.

Ryz’n slammed on the brakes. The tires squealed as the car fishtailed for a couple hundred yards before she could bring the Starfire under control at a screeching halt,

laying rubber on the blue-grey asphalt behind them. Her passengers stirred, as they fell forward out of their seats and their private reveries. Only the front seat had safety belts. Ryz'n had worn hers, but Nick had not. He had fallen into the dashboard and his dark glasses were knocked askew on his face, but she could see he was unhurt, just ticked. That was good. That's just how she wanted him.

Sheena screamed. "What the Hell?!?!? Are you all right, Barb?"

"I guess so. But I can't find my glasses. Oh, gosh, if they're broken—you know how much they cost?" The back-seaters looked for Barb's glasses.

"Get out, Nicky!" Ryz'n ordered.

"What?" He pulled off his shades to disclose his total surprise and incredulity.

"Here they are under the seat." Sheena handed Barb her glasses.

"You heard me, Nicky. Get out of this car, now." Dixie looked at the other two girls in the back seat for help. "They're all right," Barb said as she inspected her glasses. Barb put her glasses back on her nose and tried to speak up, but Ryz'n shushed her. Annoyed, Ryz'n repeated her command to her husband. Dixie pleaded with her.

"But Baby, you don't—"

"Yes, Baby, I do. Get out. NOW!"

"But I got no shoes, Sweetie."

"That'll teach you to pack better, won't it? Now, GET OUT!"

She could tell Nicky was getting ticked again, and just after he thought he had smoothed her over, too. Ry smirked inwardly. He opened the car door and stepped out onto the hot highway, hopping on alternating feet.

"Shut the door," she ordered. He shut the door. "Now walk around here." Nick hopped and skipped around the front of the car, cussing a blue streak all the way.

"Come here, Nicholas!"

She hung her left arm over the side of the car and spanked the outside of the door, with the flat of her hand, as if she were calling the family pet Scruffy Junior. Her husband stepped next to the door, bouncing up and down, blowing and inhaling heavily. "Give me your hand." Nick raised his left hand and she took it in hers. Then she brushed his locket aside and put the palm of his hand over her cleavage and flat against her heaving chest, over her heart. "Feel that?"

"Your heartbeat. Yeah, yeah, I feel it. Now, can I get back in the car? Geeze Louise, Ry! This asphalt is eating me up! Ouch!" He winced in obvious pain.

However, Ry crooked a finger at him, beckoning him down to her. She reached behind his neck and pulled his head down to her chest, placing his ear over her heart. He started to chuckle in spite of his burring feet. She was making a point all right.

"Yeah, I hear it. I feel it." Then he softly, respectfully, kissed her chest over her heart. He stood erect and replaced his dark glasses. "Yeah, I get it. I get it, just like back at the diner. Now let me back in the car, will ya? My feet are really burnin' up!"

"I'm not sure you do get it, Nicky, but you will. This ain't no dream, Baby. And I ain't some dream girl. This is reality. Live it!"

Tough Love

Then she floored the car, laying rubber for a good thirty yards and leaving him choking on highway dust amongst the peanut fields. Hopping first on one foot and then the other, Dixie stared after her, incredulous, as he watched the Starfire speed away. He was so shocked that for a brief minute he stopped hopping, because he could not even feel the tortuous fires on the soles of his feet due to his astonishment. He thought she was kidding. He figured that she would stop and turn around, but, instead, his wife disappeared down the road, out of sight.

“SHOOT! AH! AH!”

He scrambled off the asphalt into the dirt on the other side of the shoulder. Never had just plain dirt brought such relief to his searing feet. *Dang!* Dixie could not believe she would leave him like that, especially after she had listened sympathetically to his horror stories from yesterday’s road experiences. In disgust, he kicked at the dirt with the heel of his right foot, threw his hands in the air and spun completely around on his heels, incidentally leaving a divot in the dirt.

He looked around and surveyed his situation. The road was a ghost town. Shoot! He hadn’t seen another vehicle since they had left Ivor. What was he going to do? She’d come back. She had to come back. He picked up a rock and slung it side-armed into the peanut field, which lay several feet below the highway. He cursed and fired another rock. Bending down to pick up yet another stone, something caught his eye. About a mile off to the northeast, between the peanut fields, he detected a great deal of dust rising up from a farm road, which paralleled the highway. It was hard to make out, but leading the dust was what looked to be a sports car of some kind. Suddenly, he thought of Cary Grant in “North by Northwest,” alone on the highway with a sinister crop duster approaching him. Shoot, he was even traveling in the same direction as Cary Grant. He looked uneasily around for a crop duster. Yeah! Why not? What else could happen to him on this crazy trip from Hell?

* * *

Back in the Starfire, the girls in the backseat thought Ryz’n had flipped. The more they complained, the more she smirked in the rear view mirror, as she tore down the highway leaving Nick as a speck in the rearview mirror. They halted at stoplight in the town of Wakefield, when the light turned yellow. As they waited for the long red light to change, Sheena took advantage of the situation to jump up front. Barb followed, but she had to sit with one cheek on the chrome center console. Ryz’n told her to be very careful not to hit the Hydra-matic control stick or she’d have to sit in the back. Barb agreed to her terms and asked if Ryz’n were not going back for Nicky.

“In a while,” responded Ryz’n smugly. “My husband needs to learn what is real and what is not. He can’t be using that excuse of trying to ‘recall things’ to do whatever he pleases with whomever he pleases. I believe he’s learning that now, the hard way.” The other two young women were speechless.

About that time, a yellow and black ’69 Pontiac GTO convertible with the top down pulled up beside them. Ryz’n heard the driver down-shift into neutral and the purring sound of the powerful, four-barrel carb revving high, challenging all comers. With cool disdain, she turned to look. There, next to them in that GTO, big as life, slumped her

husband Nick Sheeboom, cradled between the seatback and door, just as he had been in the Starfire only moments ago, chauffeured by a peroxide blonde who looked like she had stepped off the set of a “Hee-Haw” TV show. The collective jaws of all three girls dropped. Ryz’n tugged her glasses off to make sure she wasn’t dreaming herself.

Carefree, Nick sat staring straight ahead, ignoring her, smoking a cigarette, with his right elbow and his burned bare feet resting over top of the car door to catch the breeze. When the light changed, he turned slowly to Ryz’n and mouthed a loud whisper.

“REALITY, BABY. LIVE IT!”

The peroxide blonde pulled away, leaving Ryz’n in shock. Sheena was the first to recover her wits. She laughed loud and long, rocking in her seat, while horns honked behind them, urging Ryz’n to move on.

“You can’t beat Nicky at something like this Ryz’n. You ought to know better than that by now. This type of thing is right up his alley.” Whether in response to the traffic horns behind them or Sheena’s chiding, Ryz’n recovered her senses and peeled out, in pursuit, but she was unable to overtake the GTO until they hit the light in the next little town of Waverly a few miles down the road. Running parallel to and just south of the highway, the afternoon freight had blocked traffic on the crossing street in front of them. The train had just finished taking on cargo and the resulting back-up had queued cars and trucks back through the intersection stopping all traffic on the east-west highway. Bells dinged from the train signal as the freight slowly headed west and the rails rattled beneath the weight of the slowly passing train. Nick, now smugly above it all, sat with his nose in the air and his back to the Starfire, which had pulled up even with the GTO, again. He and the buxom blonde driver were engaged in an animated conversation in the front seat of the muscle car. Ryz’n watched in incredulous awe and a quickly boiling rage as Nick lit a cigarette for his new found friend in the manner of Paul Henried and Bette Davis in “Dark Victory.” To Ryz’n, it appeared that the couple next door seemed to be enjoying the freight’s leisurely passing, taking this choice opportunity to get to know each other better.

Ryz’n boiled to a fury. She felt steam rise from her head. The couple next door became more friendly as the peroxide blonde moved closer to Nick, who rested with his back against the door of the canary yellow GTO. When the blonde reached over and kissed Nicky, the steaming Ryz’n blew. She jumped out of the Starfire, oblivious of her tight mini-skirt and spiked heels, which she had worn purposely to impress her spouse. Totally indifferent to the local citizenry and nearby waiting motorists whom she was impressing instead, Ryz’n hopped and stumbled irately on her high heels across the pavement. She threw open the door of the GTO with a sudden jerk and watched him pour, like a waterfall, backwards out of the car head over heels, into the street at her feet.

Ry held her sunglasses in hand. The train had passed. The warning bells were ceasing. Vehicles blocking the Starfire ahead of them began to move out. Behind them, a pick-up truck, a flatbed truck filled with watermelons and a tractor-trailer loaded with

hogs and two cars began to honk. The diesel trucker pulled on his air horn. The waiting motorists laughed at the soap opera comedy, playing out before them.

Ryz'n stood over Nick, arms akimbo with her legs locked straight at the knees but spread as far as the constriction of the tight mini skirt would allow. Her new gold locket dangled low from the gold chain, hanging from her neck as she bent her head over him, arms akimbo. Her husband lay on his back between her feet squinting up into the sun, looking at his wife upside-down. She realized she was giving him a heck of a truly vibrant dose of reality that she had not planned to give, but she was too ticked to care. However, she did not give Nick much time for reflection. Besides the way he was squinting up into the sun, she was certain Nick was not seeing anything but a dark cavern in front of a glaring white light, if he could see anything at all.

Ryz'n was fit to be tied. Between clenched teeth, Ryz'n ordered as loudly as she could. "*Get ... in ... the flippin' car! Darn you William Nicholas, I'm not going to say it again.*"

"Which one?" He asked innocently, failing to suppress a sly grin, as he pointed questioningly with each hand pointing towards a different car. The blonde leaned closer to Dixie, sticking her head over the side edge of the front seat of the GTO.

"Dixeh, honeh, you best make suah fuhrst that she ain't gonna drop you off in the middle of nowhayah again, Babeh." Ryz'n turned for the first time to acknowledge the peroxide blonde.

"You shut-up blondie. You got no say in this *at all!* Come on Nicholas, let's go. Make a move!" With her hands yet akimbo, she jerked her head towards the Starfire.

"Just the same Dixeh, you bettah think twice, Hon. You know Ah'm willin' to take ya wa-ayevah you wanna go. Won't drop ya halfway through lahk some fo'ks neither. You know, I'll take you all the way, too, honeh." She winked at Ryz'n, who made a move towards her most recent rival. However, Nick hopped up quickly between the two women with the crown of his head rudely brushing the hem of Ry's skirt. A lot of advice and hooting and hollering emanated from the peanut gallery in the traffic behind them. Even oncoming drivers had stopped to watch. But Nicky whispered slyly into Ryz'n's ear.

"I'm with you, Baby, 'all the way,' too."

He winked, grinned and patted her tight fanny, as he stepped casually into the recently vacated back seat of the Starfire. Nick slid across the powder blue leather to lean his back against the far passenger side. With his upper back pasted against the side of the car, he rested his feet against the opposite, driver's side of the seat, laying his feet one above the other on the opposite armrest. The jeers and cheers wailed on from the motorists and passersby on the street.

Ryz'n stared fiery darts at her new nemesis before she slammed shut the door of the GTO in the face of the surprised, oversexed blondie. More applause emanated from the impromptu audience. Then, like a hungry tigress, Ry resumed her spot behind the wheel of the Starfire. "Blondie" crawled back behind the GTO's steering wheel. She stuck a tongue out at Ryz'n and waved to Nick with a sympathetic eye and a pouting lower lip. He acknowledged her with his Jett Rink right-handed wave, as he lay with

his arms crossed and legs splayed out over the back seat. By this time, the train had left town and the light had changed in their favor. Mortified, Ryz'n slammed on the gas and rocketed out of town, peeling rubber once again. She fired through the now green-lighted intersection out of town, to the cheering applause of the waiting motorists and pedestrians.

Then she turned down the radio to yell at him over her shoulder.

"Who was *she*?" Ry was livid, as her two front seat mates snickered.

Nick ignored her for several miles.

"WHO WAS *SHE*?"

Finally, Nick looked over his sunglasses at her as he tapped his breast bone with his left middle finger.

"Are you addressing me?" he asked innocently.

"Darn right, I'm addressing you. Who the hell else you think I'm addressin'?"

"Ry," admonished Nick in an overly soothing tone, "that type of language doesn't become you, Dear." In the front seat, Sheena cracked up and even her good and true confidante Barb snickered, prompting Nick to crack a smile, as well. Ryz'n retorted.

"Look, I don't need any of your smartass crap, Nicholas. Now just tell me who she was! And don't tell me she was some blasted guardian angel, either!"

"Who?"

"*Who*? That peroxide pariah. You know *who*."

"Who? Who's on first?" Nick snickered.

Ryz'n told Barb to slide into the seat with Sheena and when Barb didn't comply quickly enough to satisfy Ryz'n, Ry pushed her friend off the console into Sheena's lap. Once again, Ryz'n slammed on the brakes, but this time she pulled off the road onto the shoulder first. She shoved the car into Park just outside a village called, appropriately enough, Disputanta. Ry took off her glasses and turned around in the seat to face him. She sat up on her knees, leaning on her elbows atop the seat back. Her heaving bosom hung over the back of the seat about to escape its green cotton home. She was hot now! Her emerald eyes scorched him with sparks of green fire.

Nick shook his head back and forth in mock disdain. "*Udderly* ridiculous," he chimed. She leaned over and smacked his thigh with the back of her right hand about as hard as she could. She was not going to put up with any smart aleck stuff from him now. Nick conceded the sharp smack did "smart!" "Good! It was meant to," she added for spite. The trucks and cars that had waited behind them at the railroad tracks now sped by quickly, amid honking horns and much hooting and hollering. As they passed, Nick grinned and waved to them like the culprit he was.

"Cut the crap and tell me. And take those darn glasses off. Doggone it, Nicky! No one, not even Sheena can make me cuss as much as you. Dammit!"

"Truer words were never spoke, Nick," concurred Sheena, who, with Barb, was twisted around in their shared seat, eating this perverse love scene up with a spoon.

"Shut up, Sheena! This is between husband and wife, so *butt out!*"

"Oh, yes ma'am. Only I never seen a wife treat a husband like that, dumping him out in the middle of nowhere, in bare feet no less on a hot road."

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“I said ‘shut up Sheena’ or I’ll dump *you*, right here!” Ryz’n glowered out her kid sister, who backed off.

“I swear Ryzanna, I never see you become such a jerk, except where Nicky is concerned. NEVER!”

Angry, Sheena turned back around to face forward in her seat with her arms across her chest, stifling her unwanted attentions. With one glaring look from Ryz’n, Barb, without a word, meekly turned around, too. Ryz’n shifted her blazing gaze back to her husband.

“Now, who was she!?!?”

Nick swung his feet to the floorboard and leaned forward, just as sweet as pie.

“Why, just like you said Ry, she was another highway guardian angel. That’s all.”

“Angel? My butt! Looked more like a cut-rate whore to me. Now spill it!”

“Baby, please, that type of harsh language doesn’t become you and I don’t appreciate that kind of coarse innuendo, either.” He quoted her back to herself and pronounced “either” the way the English do, while he had turned up his nose, as if his own stuff did not stink. Sheena and Barb guffawed loudly.

“TELL ME!!” Ryz’n reached out and pinched his thigh hard.

“I tell you Ryzanna, it was just a freak but fortuitous meeting on the road. Her name was Angie, short for Angel, just as I said. Angie Pickett, to be exact. Her daddy owns most of these peanut fields around here and some of the packing and shelling plants, too, not to mention half of that little town back there. She was coming into town for some ice cream—yeah at that Dairy Queen back there. That’s all.”

“Ice cream, hunh? She had her lips all over you Nicholas and I never considered you to be much of an ice cream cone.”

“Anh. It was nothin’, Ry. I told her what you did to me and she said, ‘Hey, let’s make her jealous, let’s string her along a ways,’ so we, we did. That’s all.”

“You son of a b—” Ryz’n rose up on her knees and reached back to smack him, but he beat her to the punch, by holding up a single forefinger. “You’re kind o’ overexposed there, Ry. Doncha think?” Suddenly Ryz’n felt the draft where it should not be and glancing down confirmed her suspicions. “Ahhh!” Incensed, she tugged the hem of the worn peasant blouse up over herself.

“Baby, I was just afraid you might catch cold. That’s all,” mused Nick.

“Ohhhh, you! You, I bet you’re lovin’ every bit of this. I bet you love that these red-neck truckers and the other local yokels passing by are gawking hot glimpses of me, too, don’t you?”

“Well Baby, I, I can’t speak for them, but speaking strictly for myself now, why I don’t mind at all, not a’tall. I enjoy ‘gawking hot glimpses of [you].’ Kind o’ liked it better this morning though, out on the beach?” He removed his shades and winked at her before he placed them back on his nose.

“What were you doin’ on the beach this morning, Ry?” blurted out an overly curious Sheena, who had been eavesdropping behind her.

“Thought I told you to mind your own business, Sheena? So *shut up!*”

Then Ryz’n rose and swung wildly at the real object of her ire and missed.

“Nicky, oooohh! We are gonna settle this matter tonight, when we get home, after the game. You can count on it, Mister!”

“Lookin’ forward to it, Sweetie.” He pursed a kiss her way. “‘Specially makin’ up after the fight.” He blew her another kiss.

“Aarrgh!”

Ryz’n turned around and slid back down in her seat angrily. Gritting her teeth contemptuously, she shot him the evil eye, before she peeled out once again. “When Will I Be Loved,” by Linda Ronstadt, blared on the car radio. Ryz’n shifted the music to the custom-installed rear speakers and pumped up the volume. She hoped her recalcitrant husband would get the message.

Five miles down the road, a local cop flagged Ryz’n down for exceeding the speed limit and Ryz’n got the message. The good little catholic girl turned on her considerable southern charm, halving the fine from fifty to twenty-five dollars, but the officer refused to rescind the ticket. Ryz’n knew she deserved the citation. She was willing to accept the consequences for the ticket, but Nicky was still sticking in her craw.

The cop let them go, but only after Barb jumped in the backseat with Nick. Ryz’n proceeded down the highway at a slower pace. Appropriately, Canned Heat’s “On the Road Again” played on the radio. Nick said he had not heard that song before, but he really dug the base line and the lead singer’s ingratiating tenor. Ryz’n said nothing. She was too angry to speak, but she could not keep from wondering how much of his once abundant, natural musical talent was buried somewhere in his subconscious.

Hardly a word was uttered the rest of the trip. Ryz’n’s anger fanned as she drove. The radio blared from the back seat speakers, more to annoy her husband than anything else. However, Ryz’n controlled her ire sufficiently to keep the car close to sixty. The day had begun with such promise, with Nick’s arrival and his gift of the necklace, followed by their swim and amorous beach liaison. But then little Paulina had arrived and later Barb had intervened. And Sheena had appeared with her outfit, which reminded him of yet some other chick, whom she did not know and whom he would not disclose. Then that whole scene in the diner was crazy. It was as he had said. It was—*surreal*. And Ryz’n had become caught up in that surrealism, concocting her own surreal episode with that so-called “dose of reality—tough love” bunk, which had backfired right in her face. Sheena had been right on that score. You just couldn’t beat Nicky at his own game. He always seemed to come out smelling like a rose in these kinds of situations, *les guerres d’amour*, as he used to call them.

Occasionally, Ryz’n caught sight of Nick in the rear view mirror. He hid behind his shades, as did they all, seemingly impervious to every natural element and emotion. The oppressive afternoon sun hung high and hot in the blue summer sky. The road winds offered small relief from the heat. As she drove, Ryz’n felt the soothing power of the big engine beneath her and she mellowed. Ry recalled the time she and Nicky had driven back from the beach at Rehoboth, Delaware in Nick’s old Bonneville convertible with a group of kids on a day just like this one. Five years ago, their seated positions had been reversed, when they had played a teasing, flirtatious game with their

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eyes, tongues and lips, using the rear view mirror as their ambassador of love. The other passengers had zoned out into their own worlds for the two and a half hour return trip from the beach, just as Sheena and Barb were doing now. Ry recalled how five years ago she had just that previous night committed her heart to him and he had committed his to her. Ryz'n remembers that ride home from the beach like no other, as if it were yesterday. Her erotic juices had flowed on that car trip even though she and Nick did not so much as touch one another. All they did was love each other through the rearview mirror. Her present anger could not overcome that vivid memory and, secretly, she hoped he would remember now, too. Perhaps they could play the game again, the rest of the way home, as they had before, and peace and love would be theirs once more. However, spying him lying there complacently in the rear view mirror now, it was obvious, unfortunately, that he did not have a clue.

Ryz'n turned off I-95 at Bowling Green and onto Rte. 301. She wanted to avoid the DC Potomac River bridges and the big city rush hour traffic. Everyone was hungry. However, if they stopped for some fast food, Nicky couldn't make his six p.m. deadline at the ball field. She had been pushing toward that goal, had been busting her butt for it. She even had received a speeding ticket for it. Even when she was angry, Ryz'n always considered herself a dutiful wife; no matter how trying the circumstances and she considered it her wifely duty now to get him to the park on time.