

## After the Party

Perched on the Vernier's redwood back porch deck, this muggy, warm Friday night in early September, Ryzanna Ryan had been pretending to converse, with the amiable Don, her gorgeous, kid sister Sheena, and Bernie Lockes. Bernie was Sheena's latest romantic interest. Tall, dark and handsome, Bernie and Don were both juniors, JayVee football players. However, Ry did not care much for football players right now. She was more interested in scouring the yard for a particular baseball player who had skipped out of the party earlier after an altercation with a couple other, much larger football players. As Ryz'n's eyes wandered over the backyard party, suddenly, she spotted the one she was seeking: Little Nick. The little guy stood all by his lonesome, drooping over the back yard fence, looking like a descendant of Charlie Chaplin's famous Little Tramp. Only Nick's old-fashioned, Fifties, baggy, oversized suit was beige in color, not black.

*Just like Nicky to be off alone like that. Well, at least he has come back to the party. I'll get another turn at bat with him now.*

Ryz'n, the school's stocky softball catcher and a homeroom class representative started to excuse herself from her group to go talk with Nicky, but just then, Cary Geller and their hostess Vicky Vernier cornered Nick against the backyard fence. Standing among the shadows of the Vernier's back porch deck, Ryz'n turned her back, ignoring the banter amongst her little party, to watch her inimitable classmate Nick Sheeboom. Rather than socialize, Ryz'n chose to lose herself in reverie over the dark-haired, waif-like boy with the adorable close-set, two-toned eyes, who lounged lazily in the dark against the Vernier's backyard, chain-link fence.

Ryz'n had met Little Nick in homeroom a year ago, the first day of their sophomore year and was smitten by him. Immediately and without reservations, she had fallen for his unique, cocky manner and his two-toned eyes: one black as coal and the other an electric blue. Ryz'n could never comprehend why some, guys—footballers mostly, considered Nicky's eyes, with their long, dark lashes and even longer and darker eyebrows to be effeminate. Ryz'n found Nicky's eyes to be intriguing, even dreamy. The same could be said for his full, red lips. In the last year, she had wondered often how soft those lips would be to kiss. The more she had admired Nicky from a distance, the more he had attracted her and the more he seemed to rebuff her.

Although Ryz'n had always found Nicky a little strange, that is to say, eccentric, she had never considered him truly bad as did most of the rest of the high school population. She found all the negative rumors about him hard to believe. If anything, those rumors had intrigued her even more. The idle gossip about Nick contradicted the attractive, talented boy she knew. Nick was ever unfailingly polite to her wherever she encountered him at school or in her neighborhood on his paper route, but he was also unfailingly distant, too, always distant. Don was okay, but she felt no heat with Donny. However whenever Nicky was around, he drew her irresistibly to him like a magnet. She often felt herself blush if their eyes happened to meet. Sometimes she felt as if she could just eat him up with a spoon, as if he were pistachio ice cream. While other times, she had wanted to mother him, like the little boy she felt he really was behind all the false bravado he displayed to others. She had never felt such emotions towards any other boy. She believed instinctively that Little Nick needed someone like her, someone to tone him down a bit, to sort of smooth out his rough edges and she sure wanted to be that someone. Ryz'n whispered to herself hopefully.

"I could be that someone. I think we'd be good together, I really—"

“Hey, Ry! Didn’t you hear what I just said?” Exasperated, her kid sister Sheena, who was standing next to her, swatted Ryz’n on her triceps, raising Ryz’n from her reverie.

“Hunh? What?”

1

“I said it would be cool if Donny came over tomorrow afternoon, right? And Bernie, too, you know, ‘to study’ for a while? No football games till next week ya know.”

*(Sheena study?” Riight!)*

Sheena, with her long dark hair parted down the middle in the fashion of the day, wearing her showy, bright orange culottes and matching orange halter top, leaned against the wooden deck’s foundation structure. She proudly hooked her arm inside the arm of the tall, offensive lineman Bernie Lockes. Like Don, Bernie was clad in dungarees, a pair of Brogans and a polo shirt comprised of their school colors, navy blue and old gold., which seemed to be the de facto street uniform among the football players. Sheena winked slyly up at her latest, handsome, new beau, as Ryz’n replied.

“Oh, yeah I guess it’d be ok. But isn’t Mom working tomorrow?”

“Yeah, exactly!” Sheena smiled devilishly towards her sister. “Dad, too!” Bernie grinned.

Ryz’n doubted if Bernie had ever studied a day in his life. Even Don could not suppress a smile. However, Ryz’n knew Sheena’s “study” reference was no more than a ruse. Disinterested, Ry returned to her private world, softly whispering to her sister and her friends: “Oh, okay, I guess so”. Sheena shook her head, clucking her tongue at her distracted, pathetic listless older sister. Sheena returned to hold center court with the boys, as Sheena always did.

Wasn’t that always the way, thought Ryz’n, with her kid sister always taking the front seat, just as she did in the family car? How embarrassing it was to accompany Sheena to the base pool or sit next to her on the school bus or even to this party tonight right down the street from their home? Ry’s classically beautiful sibling with her clear skin, even, symmetrical features and dynamite figure attracted boys like a bitch in heat. However, Ryz’n knew, Sheena would turn her nose up at Little Nick, who Sheena abhorred because, according to her, he was “such a shrimp and a frickin’ weirdo to boot!”

Ryz’n loved her kid sister dearly. She had practically raised Sheena, while their mother had worked as a secretary to help pay off the mortgages on the family’s two homes. Yet now, playing second fiddle to her kid sister on the high school social scene caused Ryz’n no little heartburn. It did not help matters that Ryz’n was a good twenty plus pounds overweight with unsightly patches of facial acne. However, with Nicky in tow, she would not have to worry about being the third wheel while she chauffeured her kid sister (who had yet to obtain her driver’s license) on dates. Nor would she need to concern herself about Sheena trying to steal Nicky from her. Perhaps, Sheena might want to disown Ry for hanging out with Little Nick, because most people believed the little guy to be such a disreputable kook. But she would not try to steal him from her. That was certain. Moreover, Sheena still believed the false tale that Nicky preferred boys to girls. Ryz’n had felt that false rumor could not be true or she would not receive such strong, erogenous vibes whenever she was near the little guy. Besides, then there were those later, titillating rumors about Little Nick and other girls, such as Little Mo, not to mention the young Widow Ready.

That prattle, which had questioned Nick's manhood, had worried Ryz'n at one time. She and Nicky did not share many classes, but when she had tried to make herself available to him, he had shown no interest in her. He had been too busy with other things, such as his Boy's Club sports or his rock band. Activities, which she had observed reluctantly, involved only males and not females. Nicky did exhibit perhaps an occasional feminine mannerism, a hand gesture or a stance, but she had never truly believed him to be homosexual. Then, last spring, Little Mo had dispelled that rumor completely, blowing it to smithereens in the biggest scandal of the year and causing Ryz'n no end of jealousy. But now Maureen was gone. Her Dad had transferred to an Air Force base in Texas. Ryz'n had made up her mind to snag Nicky while he was available. That's all there was to it! And here was her chance to land this strange, little fish, before he eluded her a second time tonight. Looking over her shoulder now, she spied Cary and Vicky leaving Little Nick alone once more back in the corner against the fence.

"Hey RY!!"

"What, what is it *now*, Sis?" Ryz'n was itching to confront Little Nick.

"Where is your mind tonight, Ryzanna?"

"Well, I—"

"Look Sis, it's midnight and Bernie's gonna walk me home. You and Don wanna come along?"

Staring through the dark at Little Nick, Ryz'n responded indifferently, "Uh no, I, uh, I need to see somebody first before I leave."

Sheena feigned exasperation, for the benefit of the boys Ryz'n supposed, and dinged her older sister with a mocking tone. "Who? They've all left. It's gonna rain, for Pete's sake. Wise up Ry! The party's over. They're turning out the lights for cryin' out loud!" Sure enough, the back porch lights had just winked out. Sheena's quick glance around had overlooked Little Nick lounging in the dark against the back fence. Sheena relented. "Well, okay, do what you want, but you know Mom and Dad want us home by midnight, right?"

Shrugging her shoulders and shaking her head in disbelief at her older sister's disinterested attitude, Sheena looked at Don and Bernie apologetically. However, Ryz'n muttered, "Yeah, okay, I'll be home in a few minutes. See ya." Departing suddenly, Ryz'n turned away to hustle over towards the back fence with Don trailing right behind her.

"Nick!" Ryz'n called out as she approached him. "Where did you go? We looked all over for you!"

Little Nick spotted Ryz'n coming towards him. However, Nick pretended he didn't see her. He sheepishly ducked his head away and leaned over the fence. The kid acted as if he were hiding something in his coat. Speaking loudly and with genuine concern now in her naturally smoky voice, Ry caught Nick's attention. As Nick swiveled his head back to Ryz'n, he appeared to swallow something. Ry watched his Adam's apple bob deeply. He spread his free hand outward in a cavalier manner.

"Hey! Ryah," he croaked in his natural gravelly baritone. "Ah hadn't noticed earlier but ya look kind o' cute in that outfit." Behind an oddly languid smile, he sparkled as best as he could for her in a slovenly manner.

Unlike her sister's showy orange fashions, Ryz'n was wearing a pair of tan Keds, a plain, brown A-line skirt and a matching brown sleeveless, collarless, cotton blouse, which she had buttoned completely up the front.

"You feeling all right, Nicky?" Concern registered in both her tone and manner.

"Feelin' great, Ry, jes' great. I'm jes' flyin'!" He waved his free hand as if it were the flapping wing of a condor. "And you got a super throaty voice there, Ry. You know, kind o' sultry, sexy-like. Do you sing?"

"Well, I sang in the school choir last year but ..."

He stared at her with a goofy expression. Since she had spoken to him openly the other day after Tuesday's homeroom, Nicky seemed to take it for granted that she permitted him to be one of a select few, who addressed her so familiarly. Ryz'n had no idea why Nick thought that suddenly he could address her in such a manner, but his informality appealed to her. Except, right now, it did not. Something was not quite right with this picture. On a hunch, she stepped closer to him to find out what was amiss. She sniffed at his breath.

"Why Nicky! You smell like *beer!*" She said, turning up her nose. She withdrew a step to scold him. "Have you been drinking?"

Nick shook his head slowly in a negative fashion. With wide open, innocent eyes, he replied, "YES." Standing beside her, Don laughed aloud. Nick grinned, sensing he might have an ally. He withdrew a beer can from behind his back to offer Don a swig. Ryz'n rebuked Little Nick as though she were his mother.

"Where did you get that?" He pulled the can back from Don, offering it to Ryz'n instead.

"Ah 'pol'gize Rah, laydeez fusst."

He proffered her the beer, but she pushed it aside, scolding him. He *was* drunk. The little twerp was drunk and he had the audacity to offer her a beer, right here in the Vernier's back yard. Suddenly, his drunken, slurred speech, which had been so charming, irritated her.

"How *could you* insult the Verniers like this, Nicky? And, after the way Vicky stuck up for you tonight with those football players?" Ryz'n sensed she had landed a sharp verbal jab that had snapped his head back.

"But it's only one beer, Ry," he countered, bewildered.

"That's not the point, Nicholas. It's the principal of the thing. The Verniers don't even drink alcohol. They don't approve of it. And, even if they did, they could be arrested for permitting liquor to high school kids on their premises." Swinging her hips to the right and pointing her left foot outward and forward of her right, Ryz'n crossed her arms beneath her ample chest. She paused for a second to gather her thoughts, while Nick merely bowed his head in subdued silence. "And offering Don that beer! Why, he could get kicked off the team for accepting that!" Cowed by her righteous indignation, Little Nick hung his head. Don, too, stared at the ground, embarrassed.

“Well, I, I guess youah raiight, Ryah. I ...” Nick’s right foot at the ground uncomfortably.

“You mean, you *KNOW* I’m right.” She noticed the boys spying her animated bosom heaving beneath her cotton blouse, as if it had a life of its own. But she was so hot, their ogling stares didn’t register.

Not only was she mad at Nick, she was also angry with herself for scolding Nick and displaying such emotion for Nick in front of Don. Moreover, she was angry for potentially alienating Nicky, the boy she longed for. And she was also angry with Nick himself for making her angry and for possibly further damaging *his* dubious reputation, if that were even possible.

Nick lowered the beer can. Without looking up and slurring his words, Nick said she would make a great mother one day. His uncanny remark defused her. Yet he was right..

*Why do I feel like **mothering** Little Nick all the time, anyway?*

The ever affable Frank Farlane sauntered over to them to tell Don that he was leaving and Don had better come along now if he wanted a ride home. The other guests had gone. Frank also congratulated Little Nick on his earlier musical performance down in the Vernier’s basement. Don pecked Ryz’n on the cheek and confirmed their study date for early tomorrow afternoon. He hinted to her that he did not feel quite right about leaving her alone with Little Nick in such condition.

“Frank can drop you too Ryz’n, if you want?”

“What? Uh, no, no thanks, Donny. I only live two doors away. I’ll be all right. Honest. Don’t worry.”

Don retorted under his breath, “Yeah, I know it’s just that ...”

He turned, shielding himself from Nick to jerk a perturbed thumb back at the inebriated goofball. Ryz’n dismissed Don gently. “Oh, it’ll be OK, Donny. I’ll see you tomorrow. Promise.” She gave him her A-number-one, three-dimple smile. Ryz’n was still marveling that Don had kissed her on her acne cheek and in front of Nick, too! It was not that she felt any excitement in his kiss, but his gesture seemed so natural, so effortless, it showed he truly cared for her. Apparently, her glowing smile was enough to pacify Don, because he said good night and left the midget couple alone. Ryz’n returned Don’s wave when he reached the fence gate across the yard at the side of the house. She still marveled at his peck on her cheek.

“Don’s a nice guy, Ry, a real nice guy. Maybe you *should* go with him.”

Irritated again, Ryz’n swiveled her head as well as her attention back around to Nick.

“Is that what you want me to do, Nicky?” She was more than a bit hot and she was fishing for something to hold onto. Nick was the one she wanted, always had been since she first had met him a year ago. However, Don had just kissed her. Nick never had.

“Does it matter to you, what I want?” He had parried her question with a question of his own.

That was not what she had wanted to hear. Ryz’n felt she had extended far too much of herself to him during the scolding in front of Don, too. Her anger, she thought, had revealed too much of her feeling for the boy. Although she wanted Nick badly, she preferred that he would want her, at least a little bit, too. The reasons she had used against Nicky earlier were valid, but they were not the primary

reasons she was angry with him. The real reason was that she did not want his reputation tarnished, any worse than it already was. It vexed her to see him jeopardize his reputation in such a foolish and cavalier manner. She liked him far too much to watch him self-destruct and had displayed far too much of her proverbial slip by chastising him.

Nick was bright, gifted and athletic, even if he was a shrimp. She could see him becoming a National Honor Society (NHS) member, if he did not mess up with an incident such as this, involving alcohol. For Ryz'n, entering the NHS would be the apex of scholastic achievement at Pocomoke High, one she hoped to earn for herself one day, one she hoped could get both of them into a four-year college, Nicky too. However, she also knew she had neither the brains nor talent possessed by this kid wavering before her. He was a musical prodigy who had scored well over 1400 on the PSAT, a score that she knew registered in the top five per cent of their class. She had not come close to that achievement.

“What do *you* think?” Despite her attempt at patience, a touch of anger singed her smoky voice.

“I told you what I think,” replied Nick in reference to Don.

Ryz'n dropped her hands and her guard.

“Nicky, I just don't understand you.”

“Well, that makes two of us, Ry, cuz, most times, I don't understand me, either.”

He had spoken seriously but then he winked his left, black eye at her. “Come on now, I'll walk ya home or maybe you can walk me?” His two-toned eyes twinkled. He wore devilment about him as if it were a comfortable robe. To her, Nick appeared to be like one of the “wee ones, the mischievous little people,” about whom her Irish grandfather had told so many yarns to her and Sheena when they themselves were merely wee ones.

Grinning, Little Nick raised his eyebrows and lifted his left arm, begging her assistance. “Hey?” He nodded her way, waving his head towards his upraised arm. She balked at aiding him. “Come on, Ryah. I ain't too turrblee heavee, honess.” Smiling, he winked at her again, motioning his head as before. Just as her grin had reassured Don a moment ago, now his mischievous leprechaun's simper was disarming her. Her anger evaporated.

Slowly, silently, with a growing sense of anticipation, Ryz'n peered into his laughing close-set, two-toned eyes, those mesmerizing eyes. She darted back and forth between the pitch black and electric blue irises. Instead of blushing as before, she felt herself turn out to him and then, just as she took his hand, without warning—

SNAP! CRACKLE! POP! *Whoa! What is that?* A brief current of white hot, static electricity, surged through their fingertips, surprising them both, as their hands abruptly recoiled from each other. Astonished, they stared at their hands, then at each other and laughed nervously.

“Mus' be curruhnts in the airah, from that stoahm, tha's comin'. Come on, Ryah! It'll be alraight. Really, really, it will.” Then he giggled, “Leas' Ah hope so. Don' think we'll 'lectracoot each othah. Come on, Ryah, pleeze? I, uh, really need youah help, ya know?”

Again, he smiled and, even with effort, she could not help but mirror his lazy smile with her three-dimpled version. It was strange how he seemed so easily to turn on and off a drunken, slurred southern accent, depending on how serious he was. One beer could not cause such linguistic gymnastics. Then, maybe that one beer was just the tip of an alcoholic iceberg. Of course, coming from Georgia, she could, if she chose, assume her native Georgia accent, but she did not. She did not want to make light of this moment. It was too special for that. Without further fireworks, Ryz'n braced him up on her right shoulder by wrapping her right arm around his back as they walked across and out of the Vernier's back yard. Nick hid his beer beneath his baggy, old-fashioned coat. Ry could feel his lean body beneath the baggy suit. She slid her hand up from his waist, along his ribs and then back down his firm torso. Her hands came to rest on top of his solid, small, upturned rump that same, mesmerizing rump about which she often had daydreamed. Unlike the soft, baggy suit, Nick's body was hard, firm and tightly curved. In fact, contrary to the dumpy appearance afforded by his loose wardrobe, Nick's body, unlike her own, was hard everywhere, slab-muscled without an ounce of fat. He may have been little but he was all solid muscle. Ryz'n was strolling on clouds as she walked beside him.

Both of them realized Nick could have gone it alone. However, instinctively she knew both of them also realized they should take advantage of this situation. Such a fortuitous occurrence did not come along every day. The other guests had already melted away into the warm, muggy September night. Distant thunder to the southwest and a dark, cloud-covered sky warned them rain was not far off. From just outside the back gate, Ryz'n and Nick bid their good-byes, thanking their hostesses Vicky and Val, who stood on the back porch deck with Cary. They strolled on, halting out of sight around the side of the house, where Nick's three-speed rested against the wall. Nick withdrew the beer can he had concealed beneath his coat. He offered Ryz'n a drink but she declined.

"Aw, come on, Ry. It's only a couple o' sips o' beer. It ain't gonna kill ya."

"Gee, I don't know Nicky. What were we just talking about?"

"I dunno. You were talkin', I was jes' listen'n." Nick watched her nonplussed reaction. "Mann, I never figured you for such a prude, Ry."

They remained entwined, neither of them wanting to let go of the other. Ry glanced at him, then checked around for witnesses and finding none, acquiesced. It had taken her a year to be alone with Nick. She was not about to blow it now by being a "prude" over a little warm beer. Besides, she was thirsty and she liked beer, though not as much as she liked white wine. Besides, the more she drank, the less there was for him. He sure didn't need anymore. As a practicing Roman Catholic, Ry and her family had no inhibitions against drinking, just against getting drunk. In truth, Ryz'n had little, if any, compunction over sipping the beer, only over where she was drinking it. Her parents had permitted her and Sheena to have a glass of wine or beer on special occasions at home. Nick held the can for her, while she sipped furtively, three or four gulps. Nick drank a little more and left a swallow for her. She finished off the can. Then, he raised the can high over his head, tilted his head back and shook out the last drops. Some fell into his mouth and some onto her protruding bosom.

"You missed," she observed wryly.

"Well, now, then there, that all depends on what I was aimin' at, now don't it, Ry?" Nick asked slyly. Grinning like a lecher, he added. "You're targets are bigger than mine."

Ryz'n rolled her eyes and shook her head, feigning disgust. Secretly, she was proud, even delighted to know he had appreciated a couple of her finer points, which, only recently, had begun to blossom fully, though much belatedly to suit her taste. Finally at sixteen, she was inheriting her mother's buxom chest, even overtaking her precocious kid sister in that department. Nick's observation had inspired her. For reasons she did not fully comprehend and without drawing attention to herself, Ry unhooked the top two buttons on her collarless blouse, mimicking the way the other girls wore their blouses. She would not have done that for anyone else except Nick. And surprised herself now that she had done as much even for him. Something about him attracted her, always had. No one else came close to approaching the magnetism that he held for her. She did not know why. She wondered if there were anything, she wouldn't do for him. He didn't know that; never would, if she could help it.

Nick crumpled the empty can with his right, stuffing the empty in his pocket. He picked up his bike from the brick wall and turned it around. He walked the bike with one hand on the handle bar, the other still around her shoulders. Supporting him as before, she walked him, as he walked the bike, though she did not need to do so. The wind had kicked up out of the southwest, at a steady pace, slapping her hair about her face. Storm clouds had gathered overhead, concealing God's heavenly handiwork. The first scattered big, cold drops began to fall.

Ruffled only by the breeze, they walked like a real couple slowly down the concrete sidewalk. Strolling causally, intermittent, cool raindrops pelted them here and there. Like sponges, they soaked up the stimulating currents passing between them, marveling at the new fiery physical sensation, which the raindrops could not quench. Ry's house was only a couple doors away, just the other side of Allena Larrabee's place. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Still, the two of them walked slowly, arm-in-arm without speaking. Goose bumps raised on their skin. Were the bumps due to the electricity of the approaching storm or to the close, novel, unusually magnetic, physical sensations passing between them? Ry did not know. Neither did she care. The unique stimulation, which reached deep down inside her, was sufficient unto itself. Her juices were flowing now. Despite the cooling storm, she felt extremely open to him—a flower turning out her petals to receive the warm rays of the sun.

Looking down, for the first time, Nick remarked casually on the small gold crucifix, hanging around her neck. The medallion, dangling at the end of a fine gold chain just beneath her breastbone, had been a confirmation present from her parents. She wore it always. Nick observed aloud that the crucifix bumped rhythmically against her chest as they walked. Her unbuttoned blouse had freed the pendant from its hiding place. Yet, he said nothing about that. For Ry, this moment was too precious to fill with words. She felt he sensed that, as well. A peaceful quiet hung over them in the face of the approaching storm.

Even though she strolled arm-in-arm with Peck's Bad Boy of Pocomoke High, Ry never had felt such a singularly simultaneous combination of peace and excitement. Walking home with Nick just felt right. Made her feel legit, as if she had arrived. No longer was she Sheena's chunky sister, who had failed to make the varsity cheerleader squad. No longer was she the teen besieged by so many medical problems the last couple years. All of that was behind her now. She was healthy and Nicky was beside her. She wondered if Nick tingled with the same electrical excitement that she felt now, as they had earlier, during their shocking hand-shake. Did he still feel as if he were the class weirdo, the "Peck's bad boy" of Pocomoke High? Was he even 'Little' Nick now, or just Nick? Did he feel like he belonged too, because of her? As she felt accepted just being with him? From the pacific look on his face, she assumed he did. They were right for each other. She always had known they would be.

Nearly as tall as Little Nick, Ry walked a bit away from him so she could lean her head down onto his shoulder, while she maintained her arm about his slender waist. How could she have such a sense of

anticipation, of excitement, walking here with Nicky, yet feel so perfectly calm, as well? She thought it was a lover's question and she wondered if he felt the same. Nicky was the one she wanted, not Don. She hoped she could make both Nick and Don understand that, without hurting Don's feelings or compromising her pride or her principals for Nick. She was well aware of the rumors about Nick and Little Mo, before Mo had moved to Texas with her family. And then, there had been the ribald rumors about Nick and the young Widow Ready ...

When they reached her home, Nick propped his bike up next to the Ryans' well lit, black, wrought-iron, lamp post, just inside the yard, halfway up the driveway, next to the flat, slate step sidewalk. The rain fell faster and more evenly. Engrossed in this moment of innocent wonder, they took no notice of the elements. In fact, they walked even slower, if that were possible. They strolled aimlessly up the Ryans' slate sidewalk, to the front stoop, then up the half dozen cement steps to the door of the sandy-hued, brick rambler. Nick let go of her when she reached the porch landing, hanging back, halfway up the stoop steps. To the right of the front door, a wall lamp shed light over the front porch. Reluctantly, Ryz'n stepped up onto the porch and turned back to him.

"Come inside Nicky, at least 'til the storm passes." She stood just under the protection offered by the overhanging porch roof. However, when Nick demurred, Ryz'n felt her face fall. She was disappointed. She watched as Nick struggled to think and speak clearly, despite the booze and the cantankerous elements.

"What would your parents think of me, Ry, like this?"

Nick turned his fingertips inwards, placing them on his chest and then motioned outwards with his arms open wide. He was still high; however, she sensed the cold rain was bringing him down fast. Wet with rain herself, Ryz'n knew Nick had a point, but she was not about to retract her invitation, either. He pointed over the roofs to the left in the direction of Little Mo's former house and intoned:

"It wouldn't be good, now, ya know? You know what I mean, Ry. You know what they all say 'bout me." She understood, but understanding did not make his refusal any more palatable. "Well, I'm stepping in, Nicky."

Hoping he would follow her, Ryz'n stepped inside the doorstep and held the screen door open for him. The main door was wide open behind her, back up against the closet door. Ry extended him a hand, palm up, beckoning to him. She cooed to him, her smoky voice catching in her throat as it so often did.

"Come on Nicky; come in out of the rain, please. You're getting drenched."

It was raining very hard now and, because he had not come up under the protection of the porch roof, he was receiving a good soaking. The wind had increased again by half. Lightning flashed, briefly profiling Nicky against a white sky, and a few seconds later thunder bolted. Yet, Nick stood calmly as if he were standing in the middle of a sunny afternoon.

"Ry?"

Ryz'n flinched from the sound of a voice behind her inside the house. Ignoring Nick for the moment, she turned about to confront Sheena, looming several feet behind her at the entrance to the bedroom hallway, just outside the living room, on the other side of the combination, console television Hi-Fi set. Her sister's long, dark brown hair draped over either side of her face as she stuck her head around

the corner out into the living room, hiding her body in the hallway. Ryz'n had believed incorrectly that she and Nicky were alone, that her family had retired for the evening.

"*What is it*, Sheena?" Ryz'n asked, stomping her left foot.

"Mom and Dad have gone to bed. They said you should do the same after you lock up. And turn out the lights. I'll be out of the bathroom in a few minutes."

"All right, you delivered the message." Ryz'n rolled her eyes, but Sheena persisted.

"Who's out there, Don?" Sheena nodded curiously towards the front door.

Her busybody sister squinted her eyelids and craned her neck to look around Ryz'n out the door. When Ryz'n leaned her body to obscure her sister's view, Sheena motioned again with her head towards the front yard asking Ryz'n who she was screening. Once more Ryz'n blocked her sister's view. Ry was about to answer when she heard her mother's patronizing voice from the distant master bedroom.

"Girls? Let's get to bed now."

Sheena turned her head down the hallway and replied, "OK, Mom. I'm getting ready now." Then she pivoted back to Ryz'n, "And you had better get ready, too, *Big Sister*."

Then Sheena disappeared to the left, down the hall out of Ry's sight. Undeterred by her family's interruption, Ryz'n turned back around to Little Nick, hoping he was still there. Soaked, but undaunted, Nick had waited patiently in the storm. He was holding his hands out from his hips, palms upward, shaking his head and shoulders in a most exaggerated fashion, as if he were a dog shaking himself dry after an unwanted bath. The rainwater flew off his long shaggy, black mane in all directions. His signature pompadour had washed away completely. Given his current condition and remembering the rumors about Nick and Mo, Ryz'n reluctantly accepted his decision not to come in. She yearned for him so much that she was not at all sure that she could control herself with him now on her folks' couch, or would want to. Then the rumors would be floating around about her. Besides, her mother had spoken and that was that. Nick was right. Actually, he was looking out for her best interests. That thought warmed her heart and she desired him all the more for it.

Ry watched as Nick ascended the front concrete stoop and removed his suit coat. He stepped up onto the porch landing with his right foot, just out of the rain, and offered her the wet coat with his right hand, but that was as far as Nick would venture. He said he did not want the suit coat ruined in his ride home.

"Keep it for me, please? Will ya Ry? 'Til tomorrah?"

Propping the screen door open with her right hand, Ryz'n stepped down onto the porch with her left foot, reached out, took the wet coat from him and folded it across her right arm.

"You know Ry? You look like some kind of an angel standing there like that, framed against the house lights. Like a silhouette, bigger than life."

Before she could respond at his lovely compliment, Nick stepped back off the landing onto the second step, back out into the rain. She stayed in the safety of the doorway and switched the coat to her left

arm, still holding the door open for him with her right. Ryz'n made it obvious to him that she hoped he would change his mind and come inside. He replied that he considered such a possible course of action to be imprudent, considering his inebriated state and her loveliness. Her response to his sweet compliment caught in her throat. Before she could speak, he changed direction completely by recalling their conversation from the first day of school.

"Say Ry? The other day you said you'd teach me the twisty flips. How 'bout tomorrah? Can you teach me tomorrah?"

Ryz'n felt her whole countenance brighten. "Well, sure, I'd love to, Nicky. Why don't you pick me up around ten?" She watched with delight as his face lit up, before he glanced down in despair.

"Gee Ry, I'd like to, really I would, but, ya know, I, I, well ya know, I still ain't got my license yet." Besides, now that I think about it, my pool closed last weekend. Oh well!"

"Oh! Well? That's no problem because I've got my license and the Base pool is still open on weekends though the month. How 'bout I pick you up, then? Say around ten, OK? We'll go over to the Base Pool. And bring your suit and a towel." She beamed encouragingly.

"All Riiight! That—why that, sounds great, just great! I'm really lookin' forward to it, Ry, really!" His beaming face, despite the downpour, told her all she wanted to know.

"Well, all right then! Look, Nicky, you're getting' soaked, *Baby!*"

*Oops!* Ryz'n covered her gaping mouth with her left hand. What had she said? Ignoring her slip of the tongue, her term of endearment, Nick looked down at his drenched, black, satin shirt, now plastered against his skin. Screwing his eyes up into the rain, he stretched both hands towards the heavens and proclaimed.

"It's cool. Feels goo-oo-ood." He rocked ever so slightly on the top step.

Thank goodness, he had not noticed her embarrassing slip of the tongue, Ry crossed and folded her arms, with his wet coat between them, consciously covering her pudgy middle and placing her arms, under her expansive, wet breasts. Subconsciously she pushed her showy bosom up a little to catch some air because the humidity was oppressive. Again, Nick took note, stopping his rain dance antics to stare sheepishly. With his baggy, Fifties, suit coat folded between her arms, Ryz'n leaned sideways with her shoulder against the door jam. She held open the screen door with her right foot as an invitation and to view him without obstruction. His duck-like antics prompted her to speak.

"YOU ARE A NUT!" She exclaimed with a begrudging smile and shake of the head as the storm dumped on him.

Ignoring her, Nick became reflective. "Ry?" His voice sounded like that of a little boy, rather than his natural, bullfrog croak.

"Yes?" she asked in a tone that matched his concern.

"Do you think God loves you?"

Now where did that one come from? *What kind of a question is that to ask while you're standing in a driving rainstorm after midnight?* She answered haltingly, not sure what he was driving at.

"Well, sure . . . I mean, of course, I do. But, why, why do you ask?"

"Do you think He loves me, too? I ain't no Roman Catholic like you, ya know?"

Perplexed, she uncrossed her arms and pushed the screen door open further with her right hand, still holding his coat over her left forearm. He had a point. He wasn't Catholic. She hesitated. She looked at him, totally drenched, just standing in the heavy, driving rain, motionless, helpless. His long hair, which, earlier he had piled up on top of his head in typical greaser fashion, now hung limply around his face, dripping wet down past his chin and completely covering his dark brown eye. The right, blue eye alone remained free to question her. *Did God love him?* He must, because she sure did.

"Yes, Nicky, I do." Her naturally husky voice softened. "I don't see how He could help it."

Little Nick did not smile much, but now he let out a grin so huge, she thought she could count each of his gleaming white teeth, not to mention his prominent, gold-capped, upper front tooth. Now it was her turn to bask in the happiness she had just given to him. In so doing, she mirrored his glowing beam. In his joy, forgetting that he was on the steps, Little Nick bent his head backwards and stuck out his tongue to catch some raindrops. But he bent his head back too far and slipped. Losing his footing, he fell off the edge of the second step. Sliding back on his heels and with his arms flailing in large backwards windmills, Nick was unable to regain his balance. Unable to stop, the Little Tramp slid, haltingly, down one step at a time, Chaplinesque, as if he were in slow motion. Losing control, Nick's body twisted to his right. Clutching at the guard rail behind him with his left hand, Nick fell backwards with his right arm swinging wildly back against the black, wrought-iron rail that guarded either side of the cement porch steps. He slid unencumbered down to the bottom of the cement stairs with his back bumping roughly against the downward slanting top support rail. He seized the end of the top railing for support, landing miraculously on his feet, half squatting, upon the slate step sidewalk. He was OK Ryz'n swallowed her heart back to its home and exhaled deeply.

Completely unfazed, Nick remarked rather philosophically, "Gee, hope I can do bettah than that at the pool tomorra with the twisty flips."

Relieved but exasperated, Ryz'n reassumed the role of mother that came so easily to her where Little Nick was concerned. "Please be careful, Nicky. You should come in out of the rain, like any sane person would. You could get seriously hurt or killed, even, riding on the streets in this weather."

The rain pounded Nick relentlessly, but he said he was used to it now. Besides, he claimed that he had ridden through storms before, delivering newspapers on his morning paper route. He ignored her warnings, as well as nature's, when again lightening flashed and thunder pealed not too far away. For an instant, lightening framed Nick against a blinding bright, white sky. Ryz'n observed the frail vulnerability of human nature against the elements in the person of one Nick Sheeboom and the sight became horrifyingly real. Wet blackness consumed him once more with the light vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. Undisturbed, Little Nick pulled a pair of heavy duty rubber bands from his pants pocket. When she asked what he was doing, Nick explained that he had gotten his pant legs caught in the chain before and it was a messy pain in the butt to put the chain back on its track. He said it hadn't done his suit pants any good either. They "got all smeared with grease," he related, "so I use these rubber bands to time the legs down."

“Oh,” said Ryz’n with an understanding nod. The boy looked as though he was about to do some serious riding.

“Aw, I be awright, Ry.” Focusing his attention on placing the rubber bands around his pant legs, Nick spoke with an easy indifference that belayed her fears. “Don’t worry about a thing!”

“Oh? How can you be so sure you’ll be OK?”

“Well, because,” he raised his drowned head up to address her directly, “because God loves me!” He beamed at her again with the rain pouring over his swarthy face, one blue eye peeping between his long, dark wet locks. “Ya jes’ said so yase’f, Ry.”

She could not believe this kid! He was truly something else! But he was leaving and she had not yet received all the assurance from him that she desired. Before he reached for his parked bicycle, Ryz’n stepped out onto the porch, keeping herself and his coat under the protective roof to call out.

“Nicky?” He pivoted around toward to face her.

“Yeah?”

Ryz’n lowered her head as well as the pitch of her smoky voice, enhancing more than usual her natural, sultry intonation.

“That was really, you know, kind of special . . . walking home with you tonight, I mean.”

Vulnerable, she waited, hoping for a reciprocal response.

Nick brightened casually to reply with a nervous chuckle. “Yeah, well, gee Ry, it was for me, too.” But she wanted more and she pressed him for it.

“Was it really, Nicky?”

“Yeah, well sure it was. I mean, you betcha it was.” He winked his blue eye at her to confirm his sincerity. Nick shook his head and stepped back over the blue slate stepping stones towards his bike.

Ryz’n watched him go, not completely satisfied. She hugged herself and unconsciously squeezed her thighs together. Her juices were flowing again. She rocked gently back and forth caressing his coat up under her double chin. Nick reached his bike under the lamp post, turned it around towards home and climbed up on the saddle. Then he stopped.

“Ya know somethin’, Ry?”

Nick twisted about upon his bike seat, with his strong, square chin hanging back over his left shoulder. He rested his feet on the pedals in coaster position and used his left hand to balance himself against the lamp post, rocking gently back and forth. Apparently, he gave no thought to the intermittent lightening.

“No, what Nick?” She waited on the porch rocking gently, still openly vulnerable.

“Ah think, I mean I, uh, think, you and . . . me, well, that is ...”

“Yeah? What about you and me, Nicky?” This was it, what she wanted to hear. It was coming.

“Well, you know. I dunno, I mean, well, we might . . .” Nick squirmed like a fish out of water, despite his present soaking. He turned his head as if to study the lamp post, blinking the rainwater out of his eyes. Sensing what he wanted to confess, Ryz’n could not wait for him to finish even though he was the one getting drenched, so she jumped in to save him.

“You mean, you think we might be good together, is that what you mean, Nicky?”

He turned to face her again, lighting up like the lamp above his head. She felt his charming light pass into her, as if it were a chain reaction, the same way the current had passed through their fingertips earlier.

“Ya really think so, Ry?”

Now it was Ryz’n’s turn to become reflective. He had turned the tables on her again, answering a question with a question, just as he had done in Vicky’s back yard after Don left. She paused before she answered in measured tones.

“Yeah, Nicky, yeah I do. Don’t you think so, too?” She waited, anticipating his concurrence.

“Well, I, I think . . .” Ry bit her lip.

“Yes, what do you think, Nicky?” Another bolt of lightning flashed followed closely by thunder. “Baby, you better let go of that iron post in this lightening.” Ryz’n did not give her term of endearment a second thought, and from his casual lack of reaction, neither did he. Yet, he ignored her warning.

“Well, I think, I think—” He laughed. “Ya know Ry, I think that . . .”

“What do you think Nick?”

“Well—“ He pushed off the lamp post and dropped his hands to his sides, “Well, I BELIEVE YA!” He grinned widely, catching the post with his left hand as he fell back into it.

Ryz’n slumped down with a relieved sigh, though it was not quite the response she had anticipated. Maybe she had been had. Yet she was thrilled, nonetheless, because she believed that he believed her, too. Nick shoved off the post once more, and waving, headed off through the storm.

“Tomorra, Ry!” He yelled: “The Twisty Flips!”

He spiraled his right forefinger upwards into the raining downpour and, keeping one hand on the handlebars, pedaled down her driveway and out into the street,.

Not completely satisfied with that joking response but trying to match his wit as well as his earlier southern twang, Ryz’n raised her voice and slipped back into her native, central Georgia accent.

“Well, y’all know what Miss Scabhlett says ‘bout tomorra, doncha?”

“What?’ he called over his shoulder.

“Tomorraah is anotheah day,” she yelled.

With the back of his head and hand to her, he nodded and waved farewell.

Ryz’n watched from the front stoop, as Nick, apparently without a care in the world, biked down the stormy slack streets he knew so well from all his early morning paper deliveries. Shoot! He even delivered a daily morning paper to her house. Yet he never had conversed much with her, though he did speak regularly with her mom, whom Ryz’n so much resembled in physical appearance as well as in behavior. Ry kept her eye upon Nick until he vanished up around the corner out of sight. Still holding his coat, she sniffed it. It smelled of rain, beer, pine needles and Old Spice with just a hint of sweat. The scent moved her—Nicky’s scent, aroused something deep within her, recalling for her their sweet, slow, stimulating walk home together.

Ryz’n carried his wet coat inside, removed the crumpled, empty beer can from the pocket and tossed the can into the kitchen wastebasket. Then she returned to the front door, turned off the outside lights, closed the door and locked up. Her kid sister came out of the bathroom, shouting that it was free. Ryz’n got ready for bed and retired to her room to say her prayers. She lay in the dark of her private, dry, warm, green and yellow world full of soft textures. A room she had fashioned out of lace, ribbons and bows; yet, her catcher’s gear and softball bat stoodl visible in the corner. She recalled Don’s surprising goodnight kiss, forcing her to realize she would have to dismiss him definitely now in favor of Nicky. However, like Miss Scarlett she did not want to think about that now. She would think about that tomorrow. Right now, she would rather think about Nicky, about how right it had felt holding him tonight. She thought about the shock of their first touch. From her bed on the opposite side of the paper-thin drywall, Sheena whispered softly through their room-connecting, baseboard vent.

“Ry? Who were you talking with out in the rain, for Pete’s sakes? Was it Don?”

Ryz’n looked over at Nick’s coat, which she had folded neatly over the back of the desk chair.

“Oh, just a NUT, I guess,” but she uttered the derogatory term, smiling dreamily, with a warmth in her heart that was unmistakable in her voice.

“You guess, hunh? Well, what does that make you?”

Indeed, what did that make her?

“Good night, Sheena.”

Ryz’n lay on her back, in her pajamas, staring up at the yellow canopy above her bed. As was her custom, she fingered the gold crucifix on her chest with her right hand while, with her left hand, she played with the strands of her dense, shoulder length hair. The rain, which had pounded the roof just a short while ago, diminished to little more than a drizzle. The heavens were silent once more. The storm had passed quickly. Nick lived about a mile away. Ryz’n prayed he had made it home safely.

She knew not whether some or any of those rumors about Nicky were true. Yet, where there was so much smoke, she guessed there probably was a flame or two. Actually, his dark reputation made him more alluring to her. Loose talk did not matter to her. Besides, she could tone him down a bit. Hadn’t her mom done as much for her dad? The main thing was that she had him now, right? And she was not about to let him go. Ryz’n wondered if Nick felt the same. From the beaming look on his face

when he had left, she felt certain he did. And it warmed her heart to think so. She would find out “tomorra” for sure. After all, “tomorra” was another day, now wasn’t it?

Strangely serenely happy now, Ryz’n no longer felt alone. Neither did she feel second rate. For the first time since her dad had slapped her in front of everyone on her thirteenth birthday, Ry felt secure. She had someone, someone of substance, someone with great promise, who did not mind that she carried a few extra pounds on her short frame or a few temporary pimples on her face. And she was not about to let him go, despite his lack of stature or his oversized, kooky reputation. Ry drifted off to sleep pondering her kid sister’s question. And she hoped for what “tomorra” might bring.

***Copyright 2004 © Dixie Wells***