

~ Chapter 2: Against All Reason ~

Ryz'n and her family sat round the oak captain's table which they employed now as a card table to play five handed pitch. The table resided beneath the low-hanging, multi-colored, Tiffany style lamp with the psychedelic-colored shade. All the other cards had been played on this trick. Bryson held his last play even with his head in suspense under the brightly shining overhead lamp. Then he dramatically slapped down his jack of clubs to take the last trick and the game.

"That's eleven. I'm out!" He glanced about the table to see if anyone dared object.

"Well played, Bryce," complimented his mother-in-law with her typically pleasant smile. Mr. Ryan shook his black-haired head in mild disgust. Bryce's classically beautiful bride Sheena was not impressed. Then it began, the nightly ritual of tease and dare between the newlyweds.

"Well, big deal!" Sheena bellowed. "You won a lousy game of pitch! You act like you just won the Super Bowl for Pete's sake. Whaddaya expect you're gonna get for winnin' a lousy game of cards, anyway?"

Sheena was teasing her groom, whom she had dated since their junior year of high school. Bryson grinned from ear to ear. Ryz'n grinned also, flexing her dimples, as she watched their nightly ritual. She understood well how much her sister loved to flirt, her brother-in-law as well. Six months of marriage had not diluted either's enthusiasm for the chase.

"YOU, BABY!" claimed Bryson. "Gonna collect my winnings right now, too."

They jumped out of their chairs, with Sheena letting out a yell, while Bryson chased his young bride around the table, catching her easily, far too easily in Ryz'n's opinion. They smooched. Then the muscular, six-foot three-inch, football player picked up his five-foot, four-inch, one hundred and fifteen pound bride and toted her on his hip with one hand as though she were a child. "Goodnight all." He excused himself and headed downstairs with his trophy, laughing and kicking on his hip. For privacy, the young couple had been sharing the lone downstairs bedroom for the last three weeks. Mrs. Ryan and Ryz'n bid them a cheery goodnight, but the choleric Mr. Ryan followed the pair to the top of the stairs. He leaned upon the white wrought iron railing that shielded the open stairwell from the kitchen and called down after them in a hoarse whisper.

"Hey, try and keep a lid on it down there, will ya? Cripes sake! These walls are paper thin, ya know!"

"OK, Pops," replied the son-in-law. "Mum's the word. Got that, Baby?"

"Shut up, Bryson! Just shut up!" However, the young bride's laugh rose devilishly from behind her chastisement, loud enough for all to hear.

Mr. Ryan returned to the round, darkly stained oak table, again shaking his head in mild disgust. “Pops!” he muttered. “Pops!” He asked his wife and older daughter if they wanted to play three-handed pitch, but neither his spouse nor Ryz’n cared to play cards any longer. He shrugged, resumed his seat and began to play solitaire on the round, oaken table at the back of living room.

“Think I’ll crochet a while,” offered Ryz’n’s mom, indifferently. She left the card table to walk around the bulky, lumpy, grey upholstered couch. The couch separated the dining area from the front parlor. She sat down in her wooden rocker with the pale blue seat cushion, her back to the screened porch, to take up her knitting needles. Scruffy Junior, the family’s pet skye terrier, followed her mistress to lay down by her feet next to the knitting basket. The propeller-like ceiling fan whirred lowly and wobbled unevenly above the long, rectangular, mahogany coffee table in the center of the second story parlor. The south by southeast breezes, typical of the Outer Banks in the afternoon, which had blown the gossamer curtains earlier, had just as typically evaporated by night.

Even so, Ryz’n noticed the air was unusually still, yet close. The house had become stuffy. The slow, rhythmic whirring of the overhead fans helped a little. Ryz’n also got up from the card table to stroll barefoot across the throw rugs which covered most of the open dining and living rooms. She shuffled lazily, even whimsically out onto the screened-in front porch. Ryz’n knelt on the porch’s bench swing which hung from the porch ceiling, as she looked out towards the ocean, whose not too distant waves she could hear plainly.

“Looks like quite a storm is brewing up out of the southeast, Mother. I can smell rain coming.”

“Well, it’s too muggy and warm to close up just yet, My Baby. We’ll wait ‘til the storm hits for that, Dear. It’s not hurricane season yet, thank the Lord. At least, I hope not.”

“OK, Mom.”

Ryz’n wandered around the spacious plank-floored, screen-enclosed porch, before she returned inside to sit on the lumpy, grey couch. She pulled one of the huge, soft green and brown corduroy couch pillows to her midsection, wrapping both of her arms tightly around the pillow. The girl rested her chin over the pillow top and stared into the empty TV screen.

Ha! That old Admiral!

That old television set was like the style of most of the furniture here—early marriage. Most of what her parents had borrowed or received as handouts when they had started out, they had used to stock this beach house. Ryz’n had offered to buy new furniture for them several times, but they preferred the early marriage set. They claimed the old things held too many good memories for them, like that old Admiral. The TV was made of hard, black plastic with an old-gold control panel, embossed with the black letters “A D M I R A L.” Ryz’n recalled watching early morning cartoons on that Admiral as a kid with Sheena. Her folks had carted that relic of a black and white television everywhere: to Ramstein Air

Force Base AFB, back to Warner-Robins, then up to Landrews AFB and finally down here to Kill Devil Hills, NC. And it still worked, kind of. In as much as this isolated, sandy peninsula was the home of the Wright brothers first flights, somehow Ryz'n thought it only appropriate, after living at all those air force bases, that her family and this old Admiral should wind up together at the birthplace of flight.

This was the family's last night on the Banks. Tomorrow, they were supposed to return home from vacation to Crest Hill Heights, Maryland. Her parents had to get back to work. The family had spent three weeks here after Ryz'n's graduation from M&L University. It was supposed to have been three weeks of relaxing family time, but the rest of their Rock band members had come down from Maryland to practice. Ryz'n did not have the heart to turn them out, especially since they all needed the practice badly to break in J.J., their new lead guitar player. After almost two weeks, her dad had had enough and asked the band to leave. Ever since then, Ryz'n had felt a certain tension hung in the air between her and her parents. She could not identify what it was, but there was something. She figured they would let her know soon enough. Meanwhile, Ryz'n turned her thoughts to the ball game she had been watching earlier on the Admiral. That college game had reminded her of her husband.

Reminded me? As if I need reminding.

Everything reminded her of him. Still, she recalled how much he loved to play ball. Being with her and playing baseball, playing baseball and being with her—they were his two favorite things to do, he used to say. His music was a distant third. Wasn't that ironic? Because it was his music that had made them all rich beyond her imagination, that had helped her pay off her parent's mortgages, both of them, and would have replaced this furniture, too, had her mom and dad let her. Ryz'n had been glad to do it for them. *Yep, glad.*

But she had been thinking of Nicky, of romancing with him. Yes, and Nicky would romance her anywhere. Well, anywhere they could be alone together. Like she, he was not an exhibitionist. He would never have pulled that stunt in front of her parents that Bryson had just pulled with Sheena. But then, like Sheena, Bryson got along better with her dad than Nicky did, better than Ryz'n did, too, for that matter.

Ryz'n giggled to herself. Nicky was wild and unpredictable. He could make loving fun. There was no one like him. She had never known anyone else. She didn't want to know anyone else.

As Ryz'n stared into the empty, dark, green TV screen, dreaming of her boy-groom, Nicky appeared, as he had on their first date. That was when she had taught him, or had tried to teach him, what he had termed the "twisty flips" at the Base pool. Ryz'n recalled that today was June 7th, 1975, the four year anniversary of her and Nick's high school graduation. She remembered how they had received their diplomas together out on the floor of the University of Maryland's Cole Field House, right under the Terps home basket, or where the basket would

have been had it not been stored away for the ceremonies. She wasn't certain, but Ryz'n thought she and Nicky had been the first married couple from the then five-year old Pocomoke Senior High School to graduate on the same stage at the same time. Ryz'n knew for certain they were the first married couple to graduate in the top ten per cent of their class and to win athletic awards for softball and baseball, respectively.

While Ryz'n dreamed, Mrs. Ryan, sat, crocheting opposite her daughter, on the other side of the long, wooden coffee table. She cleared her throat loudly. Ryz'n was so absorbed in the blank television screen, she hardly noticed. Mrs. Ryan cleared her throat again, louder this time. Scruffy Junior perked up her ears though she failed to rise. Ryz'n heard but failed to heed her mother's warning signal. She knew her mom used throat clearing in much the same manner as Captain Horatio Hornblower had, to gain or divert attention, but Ryz'n was too busy enjoying herself to acknowledge her mom. Neither did Ryz'n's dad respond. He was focused on his game of solitaire. Mrs. Ryan cleared her throat a third time, louder still. Finally, her husband of twenty-two years picked up on his wife's guttural flare, turning his head toward her. Annoyed, Ryz'n again ignored her mom. Her mother simply nodded toward Ryz'n, who sat between her two parents,, staring at the blank TV screen, with her profile to each of them.

"Hey Baby," called her father. "How 'bout a little gin rummy?"

No response.

"Ryz'n? Wouldn't you like to play a little gin rummy with your old Dad?"

No response. Ryz'n was ignoring them, for she was no longer there. She was in another world with Nick. They were dating. They were marrying. They were honeymooning. They were—

"Ryzanna, Baby, your Father is speaking to you." Mrs. Ryan had leaned forward to speak across the coffee table directly to her daughter. The skye terrier at Mrs. Ryan's feet barked once as if to answer and cocked her head to listen.

"What? What Mother?"

"Daddy would like you to play gin rummy with him."

"Oh gee, Mom. I don't feel much like it."

"Well, how about some cribbage? You always loved that game, Ry."

Mr. Ryan chimed. "Sure that'd be swell, if I can just find that cribbage board. We haven't played cribbage in a while." He turned to the hutch for the board.

"Maybe some other time, Daddy. I don't feel much like playing games right now." The parents exchanged exasperated looks of concern over Ryz'n's head.

"Well ... all right then. We can watch TV. Let's see what's on." Mr. Ryan rose from the captain's table to turn on the TV set. Her dad was about five-foot nine inches tall and 180 pounds, a little bit roly-poly, but a handsome man with bright green eyes, dark straight hair, a ruddy complexion and a neatly trimmed black moustache, ala Zorro. Ryz'n stopped him from turning on the TV set.

"No Daddy, I *was* watching TV!" Mr. Ryan looked at his daughter suspiciously, then at his wife and back again to Ryz'n.

Mrs. Ryan asked. "But, My Baby, the TV isn't even turned on. How could you watch it, Honey?"

"Oh, but it was on, Mother. And it's playin' my favorite show, "Nicky!", written, directed and produced by Ryz'n, starring Nicky and Ryz'n. Yes, it's definitely my favorite show, Mom. And it always has a happy ending, with Nicky coming home to me, to my arms." Ryz'n squeezed the large, green pillow to her chest as though it were her missing husband and stared at the set dreamily. Ryz'n's dad came around the couch to rest his hands on his knees as he bowed before his elder daughter, between her and the TV.

"Look Baby, we all want Nicky to come home to your arms. Believe me, we do. We pray for that every night, your Mother and I. But, but, well it's been two and a half years, Baby. You, you just have to be realistic. You have to, well, you have to look to the future now, Ry." His voice softened. "Nick may not ever come home, Honey." He glanced toward his wife and back to Ryz'n. "We just have to face it, Baby." Ryz'n bit her tongue out of respect and slowly simmered.

"I know it's tough to accept, but you've just graduated from college Ryz'n, and with honors no less. We're so proud of you, your Mother and I. You're a beautiful, talented young woman, Ryzanna. You can do anything you want. Go into business, if you like. Or maybe, with that new guitar player, the band will take off again this summer? You said he's the second coming of Jimi Hendrix!" Mr. Ryan shook his head despondently, muttering under his breath. "God help us, he sure sounded like it." Then, louder, he offered. "Or, if the band doesn't pan out, you could still return to your music career, if not as a performer, as a composer then. You can do anything, anything you want. With the name you've already made for yourself, you could even become an actress on Broadway, maybe?"

Ryz'n shook her head in disbelief. It seemed her father's eternal idea of the highest calling a female could attain was to become an actress on Broadway.

His daughter's contradictory peer prompted a change in course. "Well, maybe not. All right then, but the point is Honey, there isn't anything you can't do, if you put your mind to it. And your mother and I will support you, no matter what you choose. Won't we, Rose?" He turned to his wife for encouragement. She had not missed a stitch with her knitting nor a word that had been spoken.

"Sure we will. Of course, we will." Her mom replied, constantly crocheting.

"But Ry, you gotta look forward now, not back, Honey," pleaded Mr. Ryan.

"I am looking forward, Daddy. I'm looking forward to the day Nicky comes home to me. That's where my focus is, where it has always been." Seeking to avoid an argument on a subject over which she maintained little self control, Ryz'n shifted directions shrewdly. "But that doesn't mean I don't have plans or aspirations. I didn't tell you this before, but I've been accepted by three universities into their graduate schools of business. I have to decide by the middle of the month which school to attend." Ryz'n grinned broadly.

Her mother gushed and temporarily halted her crocheting.

“Well, that’s wonderful My Baby, just wonderful. Why didn’t you tell us this great news before? Which schools are they? M&L for one, right?” She eyed her daughter, hopefully expectant.

“Yes Mother, M&L is one of them. The other two are Stanford and the University of California at Los Angeles. You know, UCLA.”

“Stanford and UCLA?” asked her father skeptically. “They’re both excellent schools, but they are clear the hell cross country, Honey. You’d be all alone out there. Sheena and Bryson still have another semester left, maybe another year left at M&L. Perhaps you ought to go back to M&L again? Hey?”

“So my kid sister and her husband can watch over me? So you can see me on weekends and make sure I’m OK? Thought you just said, you’d support me, no matter what I chose.”

Mrs. Ryan asked diplomatically, “Well, which one are you choosing, Dearest?”

“I don’t know yet, but I’m leaning toward UCLA.”

“UCLA? But—”

“Roy, let her finish. Go ahead, My Baby. Why UCLA?”

Ryz’n became excited as she explained her rationale.

“Well, it’s an excellent school, for one thing. Vicky Vernier just graduated from there. She’s received a grant to pursue a graduate degree in math there, so she’ll be a graduate assistant. She thinks we can room together. Plus, UCLA has a top-flight swimming and diving program—Division 1A! That’s big time college competition in the PAC Ten, ya know? And I still have a year of eligibility left. I thought, well, I don’t know. It’s just a crazy idea, I guess ...” Ryz’n cast her eyes down, somewhat embarrassed to reveal one of her wilder aspirations.

“What? What is it, Honey?” asked her mother.

“Well, I’ve won everywhere I’ve dived. But the NAIA is no NCAA, not even close. But maybe, if I could stack up well out there, well ... Well, the Olympic trials are next year. I don’t know. I know it sounds crazy, I guess ...” But Ryz’n’s dad didn’t think so. Suddenly, he encouraged her enthusiastically.

“No Baby, that’s a great idea! Really it is. You never know, ‘til you try. And it will give you something to look forward to, something to ...”

“Something to take my mind off of Nicky? Is that what you mean? Well, nothing will ever, EVER do that!” Ryz’n felt herself become flustered, but she checked her temper once again in spite of herself, holding her emotions below the boiling point so she could persevere.

“The other reason, I’m thinking about UCLA is because I feel Nicky is out there somewhere. He’s somewhere out west there, somewhere where they can play baseball year round. Like Hawaii, or maybe Arizona, maybe Southern Cal, I don’t know, but L. A. is in the center of it all. I can maybe find a good private investigator to keep on the back of the one I’ve already gotten, who keeps his hands in my pockets, with nothing to show for it!” Mr. Ryan became miffed.

“He’s got nothing to show for it, because there’s nothing to find! Look, Honey. You’re hung up on that whole amnesia thing, because of that Dixon lead last winter. But that proved false. You talked with Mrs. Dixon herself. She said she had never seen anyone who fit Nick’s description.”

“Father, all that means is that Nick, assuming he has taken Dixon’s identity because he doesn’t know any better, hasn’t been able to find Mrs. Dixon yet. She told me she’d notify me if Nicky turned up.”

“You said right, ‘assuming’ and you know what it means to ‘assume?’ Makes an ‘ass’ out of ‘u’ and ‘me,’” claimed Ryz’n’s dad derisively. That was it for Ryz’n. She turned sarcastically on her father.

“Is that what you’re afraid of Daddy, that I’ll look like an ‘ass’, waiting for Nicky to come home or that you will?”

Now, Mr. Ryan was hurt and angry. His eyes became a bright pair of emeralds. An imposing, broad-shouldered figure, behind his finely trimmed, black moustache, he leaned over his daughter now. He shook his finger and delivered the speech Ryz’n knew he had wanted to make all along. Her dad was not much of one to beat around the bush.

“You wanna know where your precious husband is? I’ll tell you where he is! He’s over in some mass grave in South Viet Nam. Or maybe not. Maybe his bones are lying out in the jungle somewhere, all that’s left after the wild animals and vultures have picked his corpse clean! If he comes home at all, it will be in a body bag!” Mrs. Ryan dropped her hands and knitting into her lap, obviously stunned at her husband’s anger-inspired, explicit pejorative.

Ryz’n jumped to her feet abruptly, causing her dad to stumble rearwards. He accidentally tripped back over the coffee table, landing with a thud upon his posterior, at his wife’s feet. Scruffy yelped and jumped out of the way just before getting squashed. She milled about nervously as if she were trying to understand what was happening among these suddenly insane humans. Nevertheless, that accident, though it startled Ryz’n momentarily, did not preclude her from speaking her mind. In a very few ways, she was like her dad and, under appropriate conditions like these, the flaring of her temper was one of those ways. She felt her eyes flash bright and the vein pop out on her forehead.

“You never liked him, Daddy! I know it, ever since that first cookout when you interrogated him, like you were the, the Spanish Inquisition!” Ryz’n now shook her forefinger at him.

“That’s not true, Ryzanna.” Once more, he looked to his wife for support, but she remained silent, so he continued in his own defense. “You know, I only wanted what was best for you Honey, then, as well as now.”

The shapely but athletic five-foot three-inch, one hundred and five pound mighty mite of a girl stalked around the end of the coffee table, standing over her prone father, glaring at him. Passion burned within her. Again, she shook her forefinger pointedly at her father, who remained seated next to his wife’s legs.

“Mark my words: He’s coming home. He’s coming home alive and he’s coming home well! And listen . . .” She paused to listen to the muffled sounds of distant combat, drifting upstairs from the newlywed’s downstairs bedroom. Ryz’n pointed towards the stairwell with one hand and beat her chest with the other, as she addressed her parents, looking them directly in their eyes. “When Nicky gets back here, we’re gonna shake this whole place down! Understand?”

The incensed young woman stalked off, heading downstairs. Scruffy liked to follow the action and, right now, Ryz’n was where it’s at. The pooch trotted after the angered young woman, who turned back to shout defiantly at her parents, “And if you all don’t mind, please excuse me!”

Mrs. Ryan called out to her daughter in a saccharine, condescending manner, “Of course, Dear, but where are you going? You know the storm is coming?”

Her daughter replied angrily, “Well! I feel like FISH!” Ryz’n expectantly watched for her mother’s reaction

Apprehension drew a picture upon her mother’s furrowed face. “Oh, dear, oh dear!” sighed Mrs. Ryan to herself more than her husband. Ryz’n disappeared down the inside stairs. Her mom raised her voice to reach Ryz’n below.

“Well Baby, make sure you get it OFF THE BOTTOM of the freezer and candle it, PLEASE? Don’t forget to CANDLE IT, BEFORE you eat it, Hon?”

Incensed herself now, she berated her husband loudly. “Now Roy, you see what you’ve done? She’s going to eat that raw fish again!” From the foot of the stairs, Ryz’n heard her mother admonish her dad. That didn’t happen often. She paused to listen. The sounds of combat had faded from the downstairs bedroom and the airy spaciousness of the resort home enabled Ryz’n to eavesdrop as her parents began to argue. She pivoted on her heel and quietly climbed a couple of stairs, but deftly remained out of her parents’ sight. Her dad was speaking now.

“Don’t tell me, woman. I did what you wanted. I challenged her. We both know what I said is true. You agree with me. Well, we’ve all been walking on eggshells around her for the last couple of years. It’s high time she faced the facts. Maybe she’s upset now. But she’ll get over it. UCLA and diving might be the best things for her. She’ll meet someone out there, maybe one of them blonde California surfers. Anybody. And she’ll forget all about Nick. And we can all forget about him and get on with our lives!” Her dad spat out the last words as though he had had a bad taste in his mouth for sometime and had finally expectorated the cause.

“Forget about him, Roy? That’s what you want? To forget about him?” You want to forget about your first son-in-law? The apple of our first born’s eye? The father of our only grandchild? How could you be so callous, so disaffected? I’m sorely ashamed of you Roy. I’m, I’m gravely disappointed in you.” Her suddenly downcast tone saddened Ryz’n.

“Aw come on Rose. What do you want from me? I liked the boy well enough.”

“Oh, really? You know, there’s much truth in what Ry said a few minutes ago.”

“Well, once I got to know him, Hon, you know I did. I wanna remember him, sure I do, but as a fallen hero, not as a ... returning ghost! You know that, Rose.”

Ryz’n felt her dad’s tone begged sympathy. She feared her mother might soften. Ryz’n crept up the stairs enough to peep over the parquet floor.

“Sure Honey, I know, I know.” Begging a truce, Mrs. Ryan kissed her husband gently, then more passionately. “Suppose we go upstairs now, Dear? But quietly, hmmm?” She smiled a white flag.

Roy relented, briefly returning his wife’s grin, as she helped him up off the floor. The pair retired upstairs to their bedroom. On their way up, they called down a good night to Ryz’n, who had hopped quietly down the steps and out of sight, without being noticed.

* * *

Wearing her cuffed forest green and gold, plaid shorts, Ryz’n stood over the concrete, basement utility room sink on the balls of her bare feet, with her legs locked at the knees and spread stiffly apart. Still incensed by the argument with her parents, she cleaned and scaled two, seven to eight-inch herring that she had pulled out of the bottom of their commercial freezer. Her parents amicable reconciliation and early retirement only served to increase her anger. She washed salt off the day-old bloaters, then candled them against the unprotected overhead one hundred-watt light bulb that dangled by a naked wire above the freezer. The fish looked OK. While she waited for them to thaw, she sucked on a bottle of Miller High life that she had withdrawn from the basement refrigerator.

“Body BAG! Humpf!”

She was ticked! Ryz’n took out her frustration by banging on the fish with a wooden mallet normally reserved for cracking open hard shell crab legs. She hoped such whacking would hasten the thawing process. Ryz’n chugged angrily on her beer and paced the smooth finished, cement slab that was the utility room floor. As a Roman Catholic, Ry thought beer was okay, though she preferred wine. She drained her beer and opened a new bottle with Nicky’s bottle opener.

They were romancing. She just knew they were romancing all around and above her. Very well, let them romance.

Her new bra was irritating her something fierce, just under the left breast, nearest her sternum, where the wire stem dug into her. The thing had been irritating her all evening. Ryz’n unbuttoned completely her sleeveless, light cotton blouse so she could remove the troublesome bra. She lifted up her breast to inspect the irritated area beneath. The spot was red. There were a couple pimples side by side just coming to heads that were the source of the problem. She fired the bra into the dirty clothes basket near the washing machine. Scruffy Junior’s head followed the flight of the flying brazier. The dog’s tail wagged innocently. “36!” yelled Ryz’n at no one. *Shoulda got a 38!*

All the swimming, diving, exercising and pull-ups she performed daily had expanded her chest, back and shoulder muscles again. She had known that. “But 38! For cryin’ out loud!” She guessed she’d have to bounce back to the larger

size once more. But it always made her feel like a bit of an Amazon since she was barely three inches over five feet. Surely, Sheena would make fun of her when she found out. And her mother would wag her head with concern because “no female on [her] side of the family had been so broad.” Ryz’n had thought that buying a larger cup size would accommodate the expanded size of her back and chest muscles, making the 36-inch bra fit fine, but it hadn’t worked out that way.

“Pickles!”

But the brazier was new. If she worked it in, hand washed it a couple of times in cold water and stretched it a little, it would be okay. She had gotten some Outer Banks sand up under herself and it had caused the pimples. It wasn’t the first time it had ever happened. The wire cup had not helped matters any, either. She promised herself to try one without the wiring. She knew she really did not need to protrude anymore than she did already. While the new bra had bothered her, it really was not the source of her irritability. Her argument with her father resurfaced in her mind now causing Ryz’n to grow impatient.

Tired of waiting, using her left hand, she smashed the fish with the wooden crab mallet so ferociously that Scruffy Junior jumped and yelped as ice and frozen fish bits flew across the room. The dog remained on her paws, pacing nervously around the corner of the utility wash basin. Scruffy knew something was up. Taking a handy, sharp knife, Ryz’n severed the tiny, flimsy spines from the fish heads but left the heads attached to the bodies and then slit the fish backs lengthwise. She removed their spines by reaching into the fish, pinching the bone between her thumb and one edge of a can-opener and yanked the spine out from their necks. Then, she tossed the skeletons into the trash basket. It always amused her to see how many of the ancillary bones she could pull out along with the spine. Those that eluded her, she would eat with the fish. Scruffy went to inspect the wastebasket.

“NO SCRUFFFY! NO!” Ryz’n glared at the dog, which backed away from trash basket, the object of her curiosity. Ryz’n removed the wastebasket to the top of the closed washing machine.

Guzzling her second beer, she drained it more quickly than the first. Still irate, she took another couple bottles of Miller High Life out of the refrigerator. Then, clutching fish in one fist and beer bottles by their necks in the other, she dashed outside into the rain which had begun to fall in earnest. Scruffy followed but halted under the outside, open wooden steps. The storm had begun. *The dog has more sense than I do.* Ryz’n back-tracked to open the basement screen door for the obedient pooch.

“Go on girl, you don’t want to get soaked, but I do. Go on, now, go back inside.” Ryz’n whistled lowly and Scruffy hustled back inside the basement, as Ryz’n let the screen door slam shut behind the obedient pooch.

With her shirt tail flapping in the breeze, Ryz’n ran up the four flights of outside stairs to the top floor, to the observation deck on top of the house. She sat

on the wooden observation bench in the thunderstorm. The four-story jog did not even faze her. Her wind was undisturbed, though her head was spinning a little from the beer. She was thankful to be in decent shape, as she always was. The last few weeks on the Banks, she had run and swam a few miles each day.

Ryz'n wanted to avoid the world right now and cool down. She had picked an excellent spot to do both. High above all the other sparsely scattered beach resort homes, she could see the world, but, in the total blackness of this storm, there was no one to see her. The old coast road near the ocean was dark, as was the newer highway a hundred yards behind her. And the rain was definitely cooling. Through the occasional gusting winds, she could hear the heavy storm surf crashing against the beach a few hundred yards from her, but the pitch black night prevented her from making out the angry white caps, she knew existed. It was not very bright of her to sit in their crow's nest during a thunderstorm, in what was arguably the highest point around, outside of the dunes the other side of the highway. She knew it, but she didn't care. If God wanted to take her now, so be it! The beer and the four-story sprint had made her boldly light headed. The storm intensified, pelting her with wind and cool, driven wetness.

There were a very few things which could set Ryz'n off like the finale of a Fourth of July fireworks display, similar to display she had demonstrated earlier downstairs. Her father had touched upon the number one item on that list: speaking ill of her husband or, what amounted to the same thing in her loyal mind, speaking disparagingly of his return. Ryz'n protected Nicky fiercely from any sort of gossip, slander or even premature, pessimistic talk of his death. Her parents knew that. Anyone who knew her, knew that. Maybe she had placed her husband up on a pedestal. *But doggone it! Nicky deserves it.* In Ryz'n's mind, her father had crossed the line just now down in the living room. Even her mother, whom Ryz'n loved dearly, could not escape Ryz'n's wrath on that subject. Impervious to the cool black rain which pummeled her, Ryz'n reflected now upon how her mother had raised her more like a sister, than a child, giving her responsibilities as well as allowing her freedoms at a very early age.

Ryz'n had always been her mother's little helper. She had always taken pleasure in serving others. ("A natural helper girl" is what Nicky had dubbed her.) This was especially true after her mom had gone to work to help pay the family's bills. Ryz'n took care of both Sheena and the house, first down at Warner-Robins and then, later up in Crest Hill Heights. That was after her dad had been transferred to Landrews Air Force Base during the summer of '65. Despite the mere fifteen months difference in age between Ryz'n and her kid sister Sheena, their mom always had left Ryz'n in charge and expected her to be the "mother" for Sheena. And she had been. In fact, Ryz'n had served in her role so well that Mrs. Ryan had come to rely more and more heavily upon her elder daughter's assistance as both daughters grew older. This was true not only in her helping care for Sheena, but also in performing all the household chores, as well. Ryz'n's almost unflinching obedience had endeared her to her mother even more,

which further had encouraged Mrs. Ryan to treat Ryz'n, at times, more like a sister than a daughter. The special bond between mother and firstborn had incensed Sheena. Nevertheless, Ryz'n and her look-alike mom had spoiled Sheena, who couldn't cook a meal for herself if her life depended on it. Still, Sheena was her dad's favorite and Ryz'n knew it, just as she was her mother's.

Even though Ryz'n understood she always had been and would be her mother's "Baby," she was still upset with her mom tonight. She knew her dad would never have spoken out like that about Nicky in front of her mom, if he had not had her mother's tacit approval beforehand. Ryz'n realized he had spoken for both of them. And it pained her to know her mother shared her father's sentiments about Nick. The whole scene in the living room was the result of that ominous, brooding tension she had sensed. And it hurt Ryz'n to know her beloved mother was a conspirator in it. The black void around Ryz'n matched the black pitch of her mood. Her thick, wet hair was slowly assuming the feel of a wet mop.

Alone, in front of the observation deck's weathered, wooden bench, the cool, wind-swept rain pelted her angrily. Ryz'n was plenty hot, so the storm felt refreshing. She took no offense to Mother Nature. The rain plastered her thin, flapping, cotton blouse to her right torso, rendering the cloth transparent against her olive skin. However, during her run, her left side had become uncovered by the storm. The pummeling, cool rain had exposed her bare chest now, as the wind blew her shirttail away from her. *Good! Clean out those darned pimples!* Besides there was no one around to notice, absolutely no one.

There were few homes on the Banks at this time and Kill Devil Hills was no different from the other sparsely populated, hardy hamlets on this narrow, oversized sand bar called the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Moreover, in order to preserve their view of the ocean, the Ryans had purchased the immediate, surrounding lots with a very small portion of Ryz'n's record fortune. The couple of scattered homes near them were all dark. Even in broad daylight, the observation deck afforded Ryz'n and her sister enough privacy to conceal their complete sunbathing needs. No, Ryz'n was alone. She was the only one crazy enough to be out in such a storm. She stood up as if to defy the elements for their harshness or her invisible neighbors for their real or imagined curiosity. The enveloping wet blackness was interminable. As she looked out around her, with the sting of the cool liquid pellets upon her skin, Ryz'n felt as though she were floating in a black pitch which was without beginning or end.

Still angry, Ryz'n plopped down on the rain-soaked bench. She felt a cold wetness seep through the bottom of her cotton short-shorts, wetting her whole behind. She liked it. The wet was refreshingly cool. Sitting up here, totally unprotected, in the storm was strange behavior. She knew it was. Such behavior had prompted her mother to make those appointments for her with the psychiatrist. But she felt free and her behavior was no more bizarre than her husband's. *Now that boy could do some weird things.* And he would invite her to behave similarly. Like most of his bizarre suggestions, Ryz'n invariably had

found his advice to be sound—method to his madness. Sooner or later, she would come around unobtrusively to adopt her husband’s “tips,” as he called them.

Over the ocean, an occasional lightening bolt would penetrate the all encompassing black, stormy night, followed by corresponding thunder. Then Ryz’n would flinch reflexively. Behind the bench was a short, squat cupola, that contained a trap door to the attic. Although painted white with a sharply pitched tin roof in the form of a round topped hexagon, even the cupola appeared dark and grey in the storm. Yet, it stood only about a foot behind the bench.

Ryz’n took the tail of each herring between the thumb and forefinger of each hand. She lay the fish across her inner thighs. She popped the top off one of the beers with her husband’s bottle opener hanging from her neck, took a couple of swigs and wedged the other bottle between her legs. Heavy rain knocked the fish down into the sluice that ran between her legs. She had to raise her knees up to keep the darn things from swimming away. Then Ryz’n began the ritual which she had developed into an art form over the last couple of years.

She followed her superstitious game plan methodically for she wanted to insure that she would receive the pot at the end of the rainbow—the pacifying ripples. If all was done as she planned, she hoped to receive the small, silent inward ripples of contentment which she believed were her just reward. As she proceeded, Ryz’n thought about the origins of her bizarre behavior.

It had begun when she had seen the wrong foreign film by accident over the Christmas break during her junior year of high school. She was supposed to have seen the Greek political thriller “Z”, but when she and her friends arrived at the artsy, uptown Biograph Theatre, they found some English-subtitled, German film playing. The film ended when a newly pregnant working girl saw her lover off to sea. In her gloom and sorrow, the woman went to a restaurant and ate raw fish. At first, the raw fish made her sick, but the young woman persisted until she could stomach the unsavory meal. Soon, the woman grew to like the raw herring and finally, she craved it obsessively, consuming one whole fish after another. Time lapse photography showed her eating many such meals. Her gluttony was ravenous and unrequited.

After Nicky had been in Vietnam a while, Ryz’n recalled the raw fish-eating, working girl from that film. She had decided to give the fish thing a try when her mother’s recommended solution to requite Ryz’n’s desolate condition had failed. Her mom had related how she had handled such aching loneliness when Ryz’n’s dad had shipped out on a tour of duty to Japan for the Air Force. Her mom had just given birth to Sheena, so the family had remained behind, while her dad had gone overseas alone. Some evenings, after her mother had put her two babies down for the night, she said she would take a glass of wine and a good book and sit in a warm bath and read. Her mother had found the exercise to be helpfully relaxing and pleasantly consoling in a mellow sort of way. When she had seen herself in Ryz’n’s deep longing for her absent Nick, she suggested Ryz’n try it.

Ryz'n had recognized her condition as a deep, unreachable, yearning that grew outward from the pit of her stomach. She had tried her mom's suggested remedy by sipping some Chablis and digesting a book provided by her former, best friend Allena Larrabee. But Ryz'n could not read that trash. Such filth made her feel dirty inside like she needed to make confession. As weird as this fish deal was, and she knew it was darned strange, she felt no need to confess over it.

Her fish-eating ritual was not something Ryz'n could lay at Nicky's doorstep, either. True, it was because of his absence that she did it. However, it was entirely something she had dreamed up solely by and for herself to help her over the rough spots when he was away. And those rough spots seemed to occur on special downers like the one tonight or about every four to six weeks without such prompting. She was in such a low spot now. Her yearning for Nick was yet unquenched.

Ryz'n paused to throw her head back, squint her eyelids and slurp on her Miller's or, alternately, to extend her tongue simply to drink in the rain, which tumbled in torrents now.

"Ummm, this is better than the bath, Nicky. Invigorating more so than relaxing, but the wet is the same." *I'm weird. I know it.* She shook her head in wonder at her own eccentric behavior. "You never minded me being weird, Nicky. In fact, believe you kinda liked it... But the cool is a pleasant change of pace, don't ya think? Even if it don't relax me quite the way the warm bath does."

Satisfied so far, she proceeded with her superstitious rites. Taking the herring now by the tail, Ryz'n sniffed at the fish. She inhaled deeply and smiled. She was weird. She knew it. Sheena reminded her of that fact several times a day and her mother thought she needed to see a psychiatrist.

"Maybe she's right? Maybe so?" She wondered aloud into the beating rain.

Ryz'n lowered the fish to her lap to ponder the suggestion as if the reality of her odd behavior had struck home for the first time.

"Yeah, right, but hey, Mom and Sheena have their husbands inside. What would they do if the tables were turned? It's been three years and two months, since I last saw Nicky."

"Three years and two months!" she repeated aloud in disbelief and blurted out.

"That's a heckuva long time between drinks, Baby. A darn, long time!"

A gale caught hold of her heavy mop-like hair, laying it out from her like the ears of a Bassett Hound in full gallop. She sighed with exhilaration.

Ryz'n giggled, momentarily breaking the spell of her unique ceremony, because she knew she was strange, out here getting drenched in the middle of a storm, eating raw fish, whole. Sometimes, at times like this, she wondered just what the heck she was doing anyway. Then she remembered the loneliness that drove her and the ripples, the peaceful ripples which waited like the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, if she imagined hard enough ... if she could just ...

Rain still fell heavily. Ryz'n threw her head back, raised the herring above her face, slowly dropping it into her mouth, biting rapidly, piercing the skin and

drawing out its juices. She repeated the act then devoured the fish whole, as if by rote. Lightening flashed unexpectedly, right before her eyes. Thunder pealed in quick succession.

She saw him! *Oh my Lord! My ... sweet Lord ...*

Framed in the white light, Nick rose up just before and above her. A second bolt of lightening struck close by. She flinched. *There! There he is again!* It had to be him, for there was no one else for her. The love-starved girl saw her boy-groom just as she had seen him that night, that magical night down at the beaver ponds. Now, he reached out and touched her and his touch was magic! She rocked gently in her wet seat.

Again, lightening flashed abruptly close by, an extended flash with the thunder following quickly behind it. So engrossed in her lover was she that the bride did not jump this time. Instead, she glimpsed Nicky for the spilt seconds of that flash, framed against the briefly but torridly white-lit sky.

“Nicky, Sweetie,” she purred.

There he stood, looming larger than life, soaked in rain, but, like she, impervious to the elements. His unique close-set, two-toned eyes melted her from the inside out. Her eyes widened with the slimy, satisfying, slithering sensation of the herring swimming inside of her. She felt her shirttail slap freely but violently about her in the cool gale, while her long, wet, dense locks tugged at her like a soaked flag, snapped by heavily brisk winds. The yellow ribbon she always wore for him amid her thick long curls, although wet and down beaten, held its grasp to her head. The cold rain pelted her unmercifully, running over her face and down her exposed chest and thighs in rushing, cold rivulets. However, these harsh elements were merely background scenery. She barely noticed them. She could hardly believe her good fortune. Seeing him was far, far more than she had expected from this fantastic, late night snack.

It took a couple of minutes but the fish, which had initially felt like a whale within her, ceased to swim down into her stomach, dissolving into her, becoming just a gob with a tail. Like the diminishing fish, the image of her missing husband melted before her eyes also. While she waited for what she hoped would come, Ryz’n closed her eyes once more. Could he resurrect behind her eyelids once again, profiled against a lightening bolt of white for her astonished gaze?

“Ooooh yes!” She resurrected him. But in vain, she reached for him.

At first, like always, Ryz’n had felt like the python that had swallowed a man. However, the gob seemed to disintegrate the farther down it swam, winding its way, until it felt as small as a pebble, passing downward behind her diaphragm. And, as it sometimes did, as she had hoped it would, for reasons beyond her comprehension, she felt her insides become like the flat surface of a pond. This was the beginning for what she hoped. That smooth, tranquil pond surface differed sharply with the intensity of the stinging cold, wet pellets pummeling her slick skin. And that inner peace contrasted favorably with the turmoil of her soul. Yet, somehow the contrast magnified the peaceful calm growing within her.

The pebble sank down, down, striking that mellow surface at a point in the pit of her stomach somewhere deep, deep within the core of her. Her internal pond began to ripple outward in ever widening, concentric circles. She purred long and low, folding in upon herself against the bench. Her sense of him was so real, so severe, she could not even smile. She hung her head back over the bench top, letting her hair dangle behind the bench back and sway with the breeze. In sweet peace, the girl faced the heavens with her eyes closed, letting the rain drown her, permitting it to satiate her in its raw, cool wetness. Ryz'n spread her arms out wide, resting them and her hands upon the top of the bench back. She crossed her ankles and pointed her toes outward. Her rain-soaked bottom slipped forward along the bench's horizontal rain-slicked, wooden slats. Cold, black rain, thick as oil, poured over her face, dripping deliciously off her nose and chin.

Then, the ripples appeared magically, just as she had hoped. They crept outward little by little, spreading out from the pit of her being, radiating soothingly to the farthest points of her body. Yes, she even felt them spread as far as her toes, her fingertips, her wet backside and even to the ends of the kinked, wet mop upon her head. Satisfied, Ryz'n leaned back with a sweet, languid sense of fulfillment, riding the last of the fast fading ripples, as she would the tail end of a wave upon her surfboard. Her upturned face placidly accepted the full brunt of the storm. What a contradiction, she mused—peace within the storm. Then she opened her eyes and mouth widely and burped loud enough and long enough to make any camel jockey proud. She laughed loudly, but stopped abruptly.

They're romancing. I just know they're romancing inside. Very well, let them romance.

Once again she closed her eyes to replicate the lightening, reframing the image of her masculine husband against her eyelids. Again, she reached for him, but again he was not there.

“Ooh! That was for you Nicky! For you, Sweetie!” Ryz'n began to cry softly. “Thank You Lord for permitting me a glimpse, even a glimpse. Oh! He's so different now, older now, no longer a boy but a man, now. I know, I know. He's all shot up, all carved up, God help him. But thank You, thank You Lord just the same, that he's alive and that he's coming home to me, just as You promised. I do believe.” She sniffled. “I know You won't let me down. I trust in You for his safe return. You know I do, Almighty Father.” She sniffled some more.

Then Ryz'n collected herself. She rose against the storm to stand in the pouring down of rain. Her shirt tail and hair still fluttering wildly, buffeted by the storm. Ryz'n toasted her invisible husband, draining her bottle of beer.

“To you, My Love,” she toasted. Ryz'n swapped the empty with the other unopened bottle, still held tightly between her legs. She placed the empty on its side next to her in the crook of the seat back and the bench. The bottle wobbled in the storm, but it did not roll. Then she pried the bottle cap off the unopened beer with the small, flat mini-opener Nicky had given her to keep for him, his opener that hung always around her neck. Her expression stiffened.

The second herring slipped from her lap to the deck, as she stood up, turned shakily into the wind with her legs tightly crossed at the ankles to hold the bottle in place, and lifted both hands outward to the heavens. Her summer, cotton top filled like a sail straining against the ocean storm breeze, lifting completely off her shoulders. Only the crooks of her elbows tethered the blouse. Had she stretched out her hands behind her, she would have lost the sail entirely. Surely, she thought the blouse would have traveled farther than the Wright Brothers first flight, which had occurred not a mile away. There was no need to worry. Ryz'n was alone with her husband, thanks to the combination of fish, beer and storm.

Ryz'n was plenty high now. She staggered against the forceful, heavy winds. At her size and weight, three beers were more than sufficient to make her a little goofy. And she had some difficulty maintaining her balance in the gusting storm breezes. To fortify herself, Ryz'n opened her stance and slugged on the fresh beer, nearly finishing it. She inhaled deeply of the storm that washed her clean.

She looked and felt as though she had just surfaced from the bottom of the ocean. Completely drenched, Ryz'n observed her now-uncurled mop hair and the omnipresent, yellow ribbon, which hung limply over her face and shoulders. She felt as though she were bobbing in the black, stormy sea, with the wind blustering about her in the pitch of night. She let the rain wash over her, drenching her, almost drowning her. It was cool. It was clean. Most importantly, it was wet! Rolling thunder and lightening in the distance did not deter her, as Ryz'n reveled in the cool, rain-drenching wetness. Goose pimples covered her flesh, while the peaceful tingle of the last of the fast-fading ripples vanished into the placid, inner pool from which they had spawned.

Ever since she had known Nicky, but was unable to be with him for any length of time, Ryz'n had craved raw fish. The German film had sown that seed within her psyche, but Nick's absence had made it grow and blossom. Ryz'n enjoyed herring best, but she wasn't particular in a pinch, as long as the fish was raw and about a half foot or a little longer. She sometimes enjoyed consuming the fish in a warm shower or, preferably, a bath, along with a bottle of Chablis.

Ryz'n knew people, that is family and friends, thought she was weird, especially after Sheena had caught Ryz'n in the act once and blabbed all. That had occurred down in their off-campus cottage at M&L. Sheena had never let Ryz'n live down that incident. However, since Nick had been gone so long, Ryz'n could care less about Sheena's teasing or tale-bearing.

Every six weeks or so, when all else had failed, when Ryz'n felt prayer had left her empty, or at times like this tonight when anger so overrode her reason, or when she was so desperately lonely, feeling so low, so bummed out, Ryz'n didn't care what anyone else thought. On such rare occasions, she sought and usually found solace in those quiet, peacefully calming, ripples of contentment, which the whole ritual most times delivered. It seemed the more desperately lonely she was, like tonight, the more likely the ripples were to surface.

Of course, those tiny ripples failed to stand up to the real deal. They were merely tiny, quiet, placid ripplelets, small compensation for her deep longing. And, more importantly, they were nothing she would have to make confession over. Eating raw fish to help surmount her longing for her missing husband most certainly was weird, but Ryz'n could feel no guilt over, none whatsoever. Three years and two months were indeed a long time between drinks for a young woman like herself, who always had enjoyed so very much intimacy with her husband. After all, the Good Lord in all His wisdom, had created man and woman to be together, united in holy matrimony. Ryz'n heartily approved. At the tender age of seventeen, she and Nick had bought in to that plan whole-heartedly.

The stormy June night on the Outer Banks of North Carolina began to prick at Ryz'n's conscience however. Far out of character for her, she had lost control earlier with her dad. Partly placated now, Ryz'n realized she had gone too far, despite her Dad's provocation in a matter that was dearest to her heart. She would have to apologize. It was the only right thing to do. Yet, she did not want to think about making humble apologies right now. There was time enough for that tomorrow. Right now, she hoped to see her husband again, while she yet sensed his mysterious presence.

The herring and beer had helped Ryz'n to fill the hole that had yearned, aching deep within the pit of her stomach. Usually, one herring was enough to fill the void. But a real downer like this one tonight was definitely a two herring night. *Absolutely!* She picked up the other fish, which had slid from the sluice in her lap down to the drenched, wood planking beneath her feet. Dripping wet with rain but with gusto, she resumed her wet, love seat upon the wooden observation bench to repeat her unusual ceremony.

In her own inimitable way, Ryz'n had no doubt she was loving Nick. "Very well, let us love again, Sweetie." She whispered softly, sincerely, into the tempest, staring into the black teeth of the storm for him. Ryz'n leaned her neck and head back over the bench so that her long thick locks once more hung loose, swaying behind the bench by rain-driven gusts. She reveled in the persistent storm washing over her and squinted her eyes, peering into the wet blackness.

"Come to me now, Nicky--once more for me, Honey." She saluted the stormy sky with her beer bottle in one hand and her half-foot long herring in the other.

"They're inside together downstairs, all of them. But so are we together, in the wind and the rain, unhidden before Our lord, just the two of us up here on the roof unafraid. We are, aren't we Sweetie?" She leaned back against the bench, rocking gently on her drenched, wooden seat. Ryz'n raised the herring high, pinching its tail between her thumb and forefinger, tilted her head back and closed her eyes and let the fish swim into her. The frame of white lightening appeared against the black insides of her eyelids. *Again!* And there he was, once more, her boy-groom, just as she recalled him. Ryz'n purred.

"Yes, My Love. Come to me. And be with me again, My Baby".

He came.