

~ Chapter 6: The V.A. Man ~

“Sure, I remember, him,” recalled the bespectacled, middle-aged psychiatrist, smiling beneath his graying, sandy goatee. “He’s not the kind of person you forget.”

Dr. Mandl ushered Bill and the Ryan sisters into his office which was a cross between a government bureau and a private psychiatrist’s office. The small man, leaned to his left with his open palm resting face down on the top of his desk. The upper floor room in the VA complex contained a large desk and a burgundy leather swivel-tilt chair, a burgundy leather recliner parallel to the far wall and two burgundy upholstered armchairs with their wooden legs sawed off about four inches. (From Ryz’n’s experiences with psychiatrists, the chair for the patient was often lower than the furniture for the doctor.) Two four-drawer, vertical filing cabinets stood in opposite corners of the room. An impressionist painting hung on one of the cream colored walls behind the doctor’s desk and a cubist work on another, above the recliner. To her left, Ryz’n observed what appeared to be a copy of a Pollock work. The overhead light utilized a dimmer switch and was set rather low. Blinds were drawn across the single window in the wall to the right of the desk. A dull, dirty, dark gold carpet, not wall-to-wall, seemed almost an afterthought. Burgundy and gold thought Ryz’n, this guy must be a closet Redskin fan out here in Ram territory. Still, the small office generated a cozy, close aura.

Dressed in the same navy blue silk suit but with a matching scarlet blouse and belt, Ryz’n sat in the armchair nearest the desk. She wore her hair down, combed neatly in a flip with her trademark yellow-gold ribbon tied as a hair band. Sheena sat in the chair nearest the far wall by the curtained window with her long locks pulled tightly behind her into a pony-tail. Wearing a powder blue A-line skirt and a sky blue and white, snug mid-riff top with puffy shouldered, short sleeves, Sheena dressed more conservatively than she had on the flight out. The waist of her skirt just did cover her navel. Bill wheeled himself in between but somewhat behind the two women. He dressed similarly to the previous day. He rested his forearms on the green leather-padded arms of his chair, folding his hands together in his lap. Ryz’n waited patiently for the psychiatrist to resume.

“I first met him last September. In fact,” Dr. Mandl tilted his grey bearded chin down onto to his chest and looked up over his black frame glasses rather surprised, “he was just in here a few weeks ago, for his quarterly review.” The doctor stepped around behind his desk and sat down in his chair, from where he looked down upon the two women seated in the sawed- off visitor armchairs.

“Yes, he certainly is a difficult individual to forget. Physically, I mean, he stands out from the others. Then, too, he acts a little differently.”

Ryz'n asked with concern, "What do you mean by that Doctor?" The doctor leaned forward in a confidential manner.

"You know, I'm not supposed to discuss my patients with anyone. However ... in this case," he stroked his graying goatee between his left thumb and forefinger, "given his amnesia and the evidence you have shown that this individual may, in fact, be your husband, I will, shall we say, bend that rule? Knowing him as I do, I feel he would want me to disclose the particulars of his case to you, especially, since it only stands to benefit him." Ryz'n nodded her concurrence to the doctor. He leaned back in his swivel chair, satisfied apparently that he at least had her approval if not that of the V. A.

Not unusually, the doctor leaned forward and proceeded in a clinical manner. With each point he made, he lightly tapped the varnished desktop with the middle three fingers of his right hand. "Now, to answer your question: Well, he is not—delusional." The gentleman tapped his fingers twice again. "He doesn't talk to himself (the sisters perked up to exchange glances with each other around Bill at that remark) or get overly excited, not manic anyway." Again, he tapped his fingers and proceeded to do so after each statement he made, as much out of habit Ryz'n surmised, as to drive home his points. "I've seen no clear signs of clinical depression either. Of course, he occasionally suffers from severe headaches and sometimes has difficulty falling asleep. But then, so do many people, who have never suffered his injury and two subsequent brain surgeries."

Concerned by the doctor's revelations, Ryz'n sat forward and placed her left hand over her mouth. "Hmmm. But don't be alarmed however, Miss. His headaches are decreasing in frequency, as well as in duration. He has been thoroughly examined many times, so there is no cause for concern on that score. And I have prescribed a mild sedative to help him sleep." He smiled softly at Ryz'n belaying her concern. She sat back a bit in her chair. "Surprisingly, once he does fall asleep he is able to reach REM sleep quickly and requires only three to five hours of rest. That is very rare."

"Well. Doctor I don't know what you mean by REM sleep, but before my husband left for the service, he could get by on two to three hours of sleep a night for a couple weeks straight. He never ceased to amaze me how he did it."

"Excuse me Ms. Sheeboom. REM stands for rapid eye movement sleep. It is the deepest of the various sleep stages, and is the one in which we dream. For some reason, James cycles through the various stages and acquires the REM stage for an inordinately long period very quickly. I don't know why that is.

"James also mentions that, occasionally, he has speech problems and writing is always very difficult for him. He has been visiting a speech therapist here in the hospital, Dr. Schwartz. But I believe she won't be in the hospital again until, umm ... let me see here." He moved some papers to the side of a small desk calendar and ran his right forefinger over the calendar. He stopped. "Yes, next Monday." Ryz'n interrupted his speech momentarily to make a note of the

therapist's name and date of her availability. She wrote down the information, using a ballpoint pen and a three by five-inch spiral flip pad, stored in her purse.

When she had completed her note, Dr. Mandl proceeded with his assessment of the Strickler kid.

"He sometimes blanks out for a few seconds, has trouble concentrating, 'zoning out' is the term he uses, but I've never witnessed him in that state. He's quiet, reserved—not resentful or hostile. He respects authority, as far as I can tell. Actually, I enjoy speaking with him. Ha! Counseling with Dixie is more like taking a coffee break with one of the other psychiatrists."

"Dixie? Why do you call him that, Dr. Mandl?"

"Did I say 'Dixie?'" The doctor chuckled. "I intended to say James, but 'Dixie' that's his nickname, which he prefers to James or Jim."

"Do you know how he received that nickname, Doctor?"

"I believe he said that, previously, he had been identified incorrectly as one James Dixon, another MIA. He assumed that identity until he found that he was, in fact, not James Dixon. His associates had taken to calling him 'Dixie', so he retained the nickname, but he changed his surname legally."

"To Strickler? Or to Stark?"

"Strickler, I assume. That's the name he's using presently, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. So doctor, you think he's perfectly normal and no threat to himself or anyone else?"

"Well Ma'am, he's not perfectly normal. No one, who cannot remember his identity, is normal. However, I definitely would not consider him a threat to anyone, including himself."

The doctor leaned back in his chair comfortably. "He's adjusting as well as could be expected under the circumstances, even better than could be expected."

"So he's OK? He just doesn't remember anything at all about who he really is, is that it?"

"Yes, yes that's most of it. Of course, there are the speech and writing difficulties I mentioned earlier. He was very fortunate to receive first rate care and speech therapy over in Manila, immediately after his surgery."

"Yes," admitted Ryz'n, "I've met with Lieutenant Rosario who was his nurse at that time, but I thought she had said Nick, er James, had overcome those problems ... " Distracted by the thought of Rose Rosario, Ryz'n's voice trailed off when she said, "Yes, I understand she gave him a lot off personal attention, far beyond what was required ... " The doctor apprehended Ryz'n's drifting.

"Well, you may be thankful she did, Ms. Sheeboom. He might never have regained his speech and writing abilities to the extent that he has, had she not taken such an interest in him so soon after the surgery. She also helped him learn how to walk, to take care of himself, his personal hygiene, I mean, as well as how to read and write. Unlike the amnesia victims you find in Hollywood films, Ma'am, true retrograde amnesiacs, particularly those who have experienced severe trauma like James, have to relearn everything they've forgotten if they are

to function in everyday society. Lieutenant Rosario you see, helped James with all that. She did a truly remarkable job. Either that or ... ”

“Or?” repeated Ryz’n.

“Or, James has some kind of recall neither of us can recognize.”

Ryz’n recovered enough to re-focus on the subject. “So now ‘James,’ as you call him, is able to function normally, despite his loss of memory?”

“Well mostly. You see, as I mentioned, James has certain communication problems. I don’t consider them so severe as to be diagnosed as aphasia or agraphia, or possibly even, dysarthria. However, communication, via the written or spoken word, can prove at times to be quite taxing for James, particularly under conditions of stress. It’s somewhat difficult to tell in James’ case what the correct diagnosis truly is. Although I’m sure Dr. Schwarz, our speech pathologist, could explain these disorders to you much better than I.”

This was news to Ryz’n. She knew from prior investigations that the individual she presumed to be Nick had had a speech impediment. She had learned that much from her interview with Lieutenant Rosario, but she had thought that problem had been cured. Ryz’n voiced her concern now.

“Well, can’t you take a stab at it Doctor? I may not be here next Monday.”

The graying, fifties psychiatrist with the ruddy complexion and grey-blue eyes, which were magnified by his eyeglasses, went on to explain that the evidence of the aphasia was predictable. It generally occurs when Dixie gets overly emotional, or excited or nervous. “Actually, there is a study ongoing at the Mayo Clinic right now by a brilliant doctor by the name of Darley. He is trying to pinpoint the type or characteristics of dysarthria to the location of the lesion within the brain, which is involved with impairment to the neuro-physiological ability to produce speech.” Ryz’n blinked, as she arched her back more severely, to sit up even straighter than her normally impeccable posture.

“Whoa! I’m afraid you lost me there, Doctor. Could you slow down a little, please?” Dr. Mandl chuckled self-consciously, rose out of his chair and sidled around in front of his desk. Then the perky little man leaned back, with his butt resting on the front edge of the large desk, crossed his right foot over his left and folded his hands together below his belt in one large fist. He smiled beneficently.

“Excuse me. Let me try again, Ms. Sheeboom.” Ryz’n nodded. “Well, the brain, as you know, is a highly complex mechanism and extremely delicate.” He paused to see if Ryz’n were tracking with him. She was, so he resumed.

“Assessing the extent of the damage is not always an exact science, nor is the extent of the recovery of the mental faculties that were injured. In James’s case, his brain was penetrated by a bullet as well as by multiple surgeries to remove that bullet and any fragments of it. He suffered extreme edema, that is to say swelling, on those occasions. Exactly what brain cells were destroyed and how the missing or damaged cells will affect his long term memory and communication capabilities— Well, those are difficult questions to answer.”

Again, he paused to study Ryz'n. whose serene countenance provided him the tacit approval he sought to persevere.

"See, we are unable to determine precisely all the cells that were destroyed, although we have a good idea. We also are aware of a hematoma, near the speech centers of his brain, which has been slowly dissolving over two years. It's possible that when that hematoma has dissolved completely, his communication problems may be reduced or eliminated. We're not sure. Probably, it's unlikely."

"Why is that, Doctor?"

"Well, you see when brain cells are deprived of oxygen even over a short period, let alone two years or more, those cells die. There is no replacing them. Whether or not those cells could have transferred their knowledge contents to other healthy cells before they died, we don't know. Given James's development to date that transference may have occurred already or he may not get any better. We just don't know. It depends on whether his brain can find new neural pathways to reach the cells containing the transferences. That is both for his memory recall as well as for his speech and writing capabilities.

"I recommended to James that he may want to visit the Mayo Clinic in Minneapolis. The doctor I mentioned previously, Doctor Darley, is doing some brilliant, ground-breaking research in this area. I believe he can determine at least what we are dealing with in James's case, aphasia or dysarthria. Darley is seeking patients for his research. I mentioned this to Dixie, uh James, also, but he was reluctant to be a 'guinea pig,' as he put it." Dr. Mandl, who was leaning back against the front of his desk, threw his hands in the air, as if to reinforce the idea that he had done all he could do to persuade James to visit the Mayo Clinic.

The psychiatrist repeated his earlier assertion that the evidence of the aphasia was predictable. Thus, there may be hope for Dixie to overcome his communications problems completely. They usually occur when Dixie gets overly emotional, or excited, which, from what he could ascertain, was seldom. And this is why, he asserted, James was purposefully phlegmatic in all things, in order to preclude embarrassing himself publicly.

"Well, he's going to college, Doctor. He must be passing his classes, or he couldn't play baseball. He must be communicating sufficiently for that, anyway."

"Yes, Ms. Sheeboom, you are correct." The psychiatrist laughed. "James is a very special character. He really is quite sharp, once you get past his communications problems. As I said, counseling him is more like having a cup of coffee with some of the other staff members. He has learned all the clinical terminology and talks about his own case in a most clinical manner, as if he were discussing another patient. I mean someone other than himself. He has become comfortable speaking with me, so he speaks without difficulty. Actually, sometimes I have to remind myself we are talking about James." The physician's grey-blue eyes twinkled through the thick lenses of his black frame glasses. In jest, he slapped both hands down against his thighs.

“I see. Doctor, is it possible the hematoma could be removed through surgery to expedite the process?” Dr. Mandl’s jaw dropped and his eyes widened. Ryz’n surmised she had surprised the old man by her acerbic question.

“Why yes, yes it could Ms. Sheeboom, but who is to say another hematoma would not be created as a result of that surgery itself? You see Ma’am, James has indicated he wants no more brain surgery. And I can’t really blame him for that,” confessed the psychiatrist sympathetically. Ryz’n was still confused.

“But I don’t understand Doctor. If he functions well enough to play baseball and attend college, how do his disabilities affect him adversely?”

Again, the doctor’s eyes brightened. “Very good! That’s another very good question, Ma’am.” He smiled at Ryz’n, who tolerated his patronage. “I would say, primarily in the social and academic arenas from what I can ascertain. As I mentioned previously, when he gets emotionally stimulated, overtaxed or stressed, he tends to stutter or slur his words or both. Occasionally, he loses the very words he would like to speak. Consequently, he takes great pains to remain unruffled, unflappable, uh, unemotional. He speaks deliberately, even sparingly. Verbally, he does not react quickly to an interrogator, say to a superior, a professor or a drill sergeant, for instance. Neither does he respond well to taking a written exam. He is phlegmatic to a fault, which causes other to lose patience with him. The more he is forced to respond quickly, the more unable he is to respond at all. I believe this impediment was partially responsible for his medical discharge from the Corps for mental reasons—that and his brief but infrequent mental lapses. To preclude embarrassing himself, he remains a social wallflower, if you will.”

“What would happen Doctor, if this, this impediment did not occur always? I mean if sometimes, he could respond normally in these kinds of emotional, stressful situations. After all, you say he has no problem speaking with you. Is there hope he could be cured?” Ryz’n glanced to Sheena for her approval which she gave with a pert nod. Dr. Mandl furrowed his brow in contemplation.

“Possibly. I really don’t know, Ma’am. Particularly, if those instances occurred with an increasing rate of frequency. It might indicate those cell transferences had occurred previously and he was learning to find them. Of course, when he visits me, there is no stress on him now. But I was explaining his symptoms ...”

“Oh, I’m sorry Doctor. Please go on.”

“Well, that’s all right Ms. Sheeboom.” He smiled patronizingly at Ryz’n. Ryz’n knew he meant well, but she didn’t appreciate his manner. Even so, she said nothing, so he resumed.

“You see his partial agraphia, rather his occasional writer’s block, can become acute, especially under the pressure of taking a test. He sometimes resorts to drawing his own set of hieroglyphics to take notes or answer essay questions. He has a much easier time with multiple choice or True/False questions. However, for most college students, James’s cumulative grade point average would be a source of embarrassment. For James, however, merely passing and being able to

maintain accreditation so he can play baseball, should be considered a point of pride. Though, to his credit, he does not share that conviction.

“From what he has told me, some professors are more receptive than others to his shortcomings. Funny thing is, he can draw and solve mathematical problems all right. I believe that is a testament to the therapy he received immediately after surgery that he has been able to progress so far, as well as to his own willingness to work, of course. Really, what James has accomplished thus far, in so brief a span, is nothing short of remarkable, truly remarkable.” The doctor stared into space. Ryz’n pulled him back to earth.

“Doctor, are these speech and writing problems symptomatic of his amnesia?”

“Oh, only, in their root cause, Ma’am, which is to say both are symptomatic of the injuries to his brain. Neither one caused the other however, if that’s what you mean. Nor will the cure of one necessarily invoke the cure of the other, if a cure is even possible. Although it would be interesting in James’ case, to see what would happen if his memory were to return to him. When one is dealing with the human brain, one never knows.” The doctor smiled down pleasantly at Ryz’n. He had given her reason to hope that Nicky, if this patient were her Nicky, could recover fully.

“So you think he may recover his memory, Doctor? What makes you think that he might?”

“Well, there is one, er, uh, a few things, actually ...” The doctor hesitated, seemingly uncertain whether he should proceed.

“Yes Doctor, what are they?” Ryz’n tried not to appear overly anxious.

“Well ... James has both anterograde and retrograde amnesia. He is unlikely ever to remember the immediate events leading up to the shooting.” *Oh, praise God for that!* “Moreover, contrary to what you may have seen in romantic Hollywood films, amnesiacs like James have to relearn most of the basic functions that comprise their daily routine.” The psychiatrist smiled smugly, proud to relate this fact, unwittingly, for the second time, noted Ryz’n. “To his tremendous credit, James has been able to do that with amazing alacrity. I believe those functions should have been relearned, not necessarily recalled. For him to be passing college level courses now after only two years of therapy is truly incredible! In fact, I would have said it was downright impossible.”

“Yes Doctor, you have made those points already. The psychiatrists in Hawaii told me as much, also, but what about his recall?” Ryz’n was becoming impatient with the doctor’s patronizing, bedside manner.

Covering his error, Dr. Mandl replied, “Oh yes, I apologize for repeating myself. I’m afraid that’s an annoying tendency of mine.” The doctor’s chagrin registered plainly on his face and he stared off into space again. Ryz’n began to think this is the guy who needed the psychiatrist for his own ‘zone outs’. However, she didn’t let on and sought to redirect him.

“Oh, that’s quite all right Doctor, I find myself doing the same thing at times.” Ryz’n smiled winningly at the psychiatrist. “But you were saying why you thought he might regain his memory ...”

“Yes, yes. Very well then, Ma’am. There is something he remembers or thinks he remembers. Here I’ve got it in my folder on him, in here among my notes from our first meeting last September.”

The psychiatrist walked around his desk briskly, unlocked and pulled out a drawer, evidently stocked with folders. He tilted his head back by raising his chin, enabling him to peer through the lower half of his lenses. He scanned intently through the folders and pulled one out of the drawer. He thumbed through the folder and began to speak without paying attention to his visitors.

“Some, as the Navy doctors did, might consider this phenomenon suggests Dixie is, uh, delusional, but I, I tend to disagree ... it’s ah . . . an isolated image, unique and ... oh, where are those notes?” He dug into the back of the manila file folder. “... repeatable, always the same. Yes, let me see ... Ah yes! Here it is. He pulled out a single-sheet of legal pad paper. Now these are his words, so I quote:

There is one thing, Doc. I just can’t shake it and I can’t break through anymore than what’s there in my head. Often when I’m alone, especially at night after I’ve fallen asleep, I see this like dark background, and a full moon. Silver-like water shimmer off to the left. And there, silhouetted against the moon above me is the figure of a nude girl with long hair, like in profile. And I’m looking up at her, and she is larger than life. She is standing up, above me, profiled against the moon. Her features are clean and smooth. She’s really built, Doc. Her waist is perfectly slim but she’s proportioned, like Venus herself. Her body stands out sharp against the moonlight. But the thing is Doc, every time I go to reach for her, the mist envelops her. Then, she evaporates like a mirage into the mist, right before my eyes, just as I’m about to take hold of her. Sometimes afterwards, Doc I, uh, well

...

The doctor chuckled to himself and continued to stare, apparently wistfully, at the paper before him when he spoke.

“He stopped there. No doubt many young men have similar dreams with similar results.” He chuckled. Then he looked up to Ryz’n. “And those were my exact words to him, also, Ms. Sheeboom.” Dr. Mandl looked then at Bill for some male understanding. “I told him the dream was normal and healthy and not to worry about it.” Bill blinked his eyes and half-smiled. “However, then,” added the psychiatrist, “he said something very curious. He said, let me see, he said, here ...” He returned his attention to his notes.

But Doc, you don’t understand. I don’t just dream it, but I actually see her sometimes when I’m awake. That’s when I have

those 'zone out' spells. It's not that I blank out so much, as I just see her. I see the silhouette girl. I never know when this might happen. But I always reach for her through the mist, just as she vanishes like a mirage.

Again, the psychiatrist chortled lightly. "Such 'zone-outs', as he calls them were the primary reasons for his medical discharge—along with his communications difficulties."

The doctor's story was too much for Ryz'n. She broke down, whimpering in a subdued manner, her face in her hands, hiding behind her pink polished nails.

"Miss? I mean Ms. Sheeboom, what's wrong? What is it?"

Ryz'n collected herself. "Oh, Doctor ... I, I am that ... that 'silhouette girl.' You see, that was the first time, the very first time that ... Nick-Nicky and I ... Well, we were down at the beaver ponds by La Placa and ... " Ryz'n lowered her eyes. "The same beaver ponds where we lost our ... our baby, our unborn baby three months later." Ryz'n struggled to restrain her emotions, but it was difficult for her. Sheena left her chair to kneel next to Ryz'n and console her sister.

Leaning forward on the arms of his wheelchair, Bill interrupted the awkward silence that followed, permitting Ryz'n time to recover. "Doctor, do you know where we can find him and, when we do find him, will his memory return?"

"Regarding your first question, all I know, sir, is what is in the file there, nothing more. He's attending Peppermount University on a baseball scholarship. However, school is out for the summer and the season is over. He didn't mention anything to me about his summer plans. His next appointment with me is scheduled for September 4<sup>th</sup> at three p. m. I expect him to keep that appointment, as he has all the others. As far as your second question is concerned, I really don't know. I realize that's not much help to you, but these amnesia cases are very unpredictable.

"I've seen situations where the amnesic recovers completely upon first finding his loved ones. I've seen situations where they never recover. I've seen cases where they recover their memory fully or in part sometime in the future. Usually, the amnesic recovers when there is something, anything, you never can predict what it might be, which triggers that recall. Often, the earliest memories are recalled first. The "silhouette girl," if it is in fact a memory, runs contrary to that trend, but then it must be an extremely powerful image for him. Of course, if his memory cells were destroyed by the gunshot wound to the head or by the subsequent life-saving surgeries to remove the bullet fragments and their contents were never transferred, then he will never recall. He won't recall then, because those cells would have been destroyed forever. Then the silhouette girl would be merely a figment of his imagination."

Having dabbed her eyes with a Kleenex from her handbag, Ryz'n asked, "But Doctor, if he remembers me silhouetted against the moon, that would indicate he still retains those memory cells, wouldn't it?"

“Yes, yes it would or some of them anyway. However, young lady, I must caution you, whom he remembers, may not be you. It may not be a memory. It may be something he imagined or someone else he has known, uh, since his brain surgery. It might be someone he knows with whom he is unable to connect with the girl in his vision.” Ryz’n became anxious, placing her hands down upon either arm of the chair and half rising from her seat.

“But has he ... has he mentioned anyone else?” Her voice tremored with anxiety. “Surely, if that image in his brain were of someone he knew, he would have told you. He might have even sought her out by now.”

“That’s very possible, Ma’am, but as of my last session with him, he had not found her. As far as I could ascertain, he has no idea who she might be. If he has, he hasn’t told me about her. For your sake, I hope that she is still a mystery for him. I hope you are the “silhouette girl.” I hope you find James and that he is your husband. I hope you bear children to make up for the one you lost.” He smiled limply. “However, I would be giving you false hope by misrepresenting the facts ... There is, however, one other encouraging factor.”

Ryz’n sank back slowly into the chair and looked hopefully at the doctor. Sheena, likewise, returned to her seat. “Yes?” Asked Ryz’n tentatively.

“Since our first meeting last September, James has reported other, well, unusual thoughts for lack of a better description.”

“Such as?”

“He has recalled, or seen in his mind’s eye, certain colorful patterns.”

“Patterns?”

“Yes, that’s right. Designs. Let me see here.” The doctor returned to the folder and pulled out some more notes. “Yes, here we are. He says that he occasionally sees such things in his mind as short, squat boxes or rectangles, black, red and grey in hue on a dirty white background. Black and white mosaics as well as a blue grill containing dark horizontal lines have appeared to him as well, as has a white box with streaks. He has also envisioned white squares with little round, tan holes evenly spaced throughout those squares. Here, he has drawn them out. Do any of those objects prompt your memory at all?” The doctor pulled some sheets of lined paper from Strickler’s folder and offered them to Ryz’n.

She inspected the pen and ink sketches thoroughly without positive results.

“No, no I’m afraid they don’t. I wish I could, I ... ” She returned the sketches to the psychiatrist. Ryz’n frantically searched round the room for help. “Is there anything else you can tell us Doctor that might give me just a clue as to what those objects and patterns refer?”

“No, I’m sorry. I’m hopeful those patterns have something to do with his early childhood. If I learn of anything more that may help, please leave me your name and phone number, so I may get in touch with you. I will be meeting with James again in three months. I’m certain you will have found him by then. If not, I will direct him to you. Of that, you may be certain ...

“Oh yes, there is one other thing, Ms. Sheeboom. If you locate James and he slurs his words or stutters, or has trouble finding the right words, please be patient with him. Don’t talk down to him. Listen patiently. Repeat yourself if necessary and make use of facial, body and hand expressions. Encourage him to do likewise. But don’t pity him or patronize him. He’s a man, not a little boy. You understand, I’m sure?”

The doctor stood up, smiling, offering her his hand in parting, signaling their conference had ended. Ryz’n agreed, and gave him one of her business cards, adding her parents’ home phone number on the back. That was the one constant number she had. Even if she weren’t there, her parents could always get in touch with her. Ryz’n shook his hand in parting, as did Sheena and Bill in turn. As they were exiting the office, the doctor checked them at the door with a final thought.

“Mrs. Sheeboom?”

The last to leave, Ryz’n turned around as she reached the office doorway and raised her eyebrows.

“Please take heart. There are two factors in your favor, Ma’am.”

“Yes, and what might those factors be, Doctor?”

“First, James speaks like you. By that, I mean his accent is very similar to yours. He does not speak like a Filipino or a Hawaiian or a Californian for that matter, even though he had to teach himself to speak English again in those parts of the world. That’s very curious. It not only indicates he probably comes from your neck of the woods, but also that he has some subconscious recall he doesn’t even realize himself. Second,” the doctor paused to choose his words carefully. He looked away and then back to her. “Ms. Sheeboom, please don’t think me forward but ... you are the stuff of which young men’s dreams are made.”

“Pardon me, doctor?” Dr. Mandl smirked wanly.

“I mean, except for your diminutive stature, you fulfill the description of the “silhouette girl” admirably. You could very easily be she.” His smirk vanished.

Ryz’n felt her face flush. She knew what the doctor meant. Since she had lost her weight and been on tour with the band, she had received many compliments on her hourglass figure, in polite as well as in crude means. However, she had never expected so overt a compliment from a middle-aged VA psychiatrist.

“Thank you, Doctor. I know that I am she, as well.” She smiled demurely and turned again to leave, but the physician arrested her once more.

“Mrs. Sheeboom?”

“Yes?”

“James is an amazing individual. If he possibly can recall you, I am confident he will do so.” The psychiatrist smiled reassuringly.

“Yes, I pray he will. Thank you for your time, Doctor, and for bending the rules a bit. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye.”

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## *Almost There*

The trio picked up Esther from her nurse's station in the paraplegic ward. The cute, trim nurse escorted all of them through the ward, where Bill proudly introduced the Ryan sisters to some of the patients and the hospital staff. He wanted to show off the girls and provide a pleasant diversion for the bed patients. Ryz'n had visited there previously. She had learned how to overlook the tragedies that played out before her eyes, as their visiting party moved from one misfortunate hospital bed to the next. She had learned how to ignore the foul odors that emanated from the ward and to focus on each patient individually. Ryz'n greeted each man with her dimpled smile, offering them her hand as well as a warm greeting, as if each of these poor souls was her long, lost friend.

From the corner of her eye, Ryz'n could tell Sheena was taken aback by the whole, pitiful scene. However, Ryz'n motioned for Sheena to imitate her as best as she could. Later, Sheena told Ryz'n that when she did greet one of the "boys" warmly, she received, in return, the patient's priceless, overwhelming smile and an unusually warm, glowing feeling seeped into her soul. Though it was no stranger to Ryz'n, Sheena said that warm inner glow was foreign yet most welcome to her.

Some of the "boys" had recognized the Ryan sisters from their Rock'N'Roll album covers or their live performances. They had requested a song. The girls complied, singing two of Ryz'n's first compositions: "Pinch Myself" and "Husband Mine." They had sung without accompaniment, but they sang from the heart. Enthusiastic applause from the ward's patients thanked the girls warmly for their efforts. Uncle Bill thanked them also and remarked that he was doubly proud of "his girls."