

Floating high among the rafter's of a dark, gothic cathedral, Ryz'n witnessed a large, traditional church wedding ceremony playing out hundreds of feet beneath her. Merely a spirit without body or form, she scanned the lovely scene below like a hawk seeking its prey. Yet, not all was clear. She peered as though she were squinting through a clean glass brimming with cloudy water. There, on the other side of the glass, in an aisle seat, in the second pew behind the groom's family, she found her mark. Fearful and trembling, there on a bench sat the only unhappy creature among the large, standing room only congregation. It was a pudgy, pimple-faced teen with limp, lifeless brown hair, a flat chest and a mouthful of metal. Unlike the other, cloudy churchgoers, the pudgy girl's unappealing figure was clear and sharply defined. As Ryz'n observed this hapless creature through the watery medium, she noticed the chubby teen did not waver or fade behind the opaque facade, as did the other forms and figures below her.

Then, in the twinkling of an eye, her apparition swooped down from the rafters, smashed into the slumping blob of a girl and swallowed her prey completely, assuming its body and shape. Now Ryz'n and her prey had become one in the same, one living entity, united in body and spirit, and she saw everyone and everything clearly.

The groom's family in front of her was Nick's family. The bride's family, across the way, was her own. However, no one noticed her. All eyes were on the bride and groom before the altar. Though she could not view his face, the cut of the groom, his hair and posture, told her he had to be Nick, as he had come home from the service a man, full grown. Yet, as with everyone else in the wedding party, his back was to her. The bride's white lace and satin dress was spectacular, but her veil hid her face from Ryz'n's view. Then Ryz'n noticed the bride appeared to be a much larger woman than Ryz'n's five-foot, three-inch frame. This bride was almost as tall as the groom. An ominous notion shivered through Ry's body.

When the pastor asked if there were any objections to the matrimonial union, the bride turned her head to the right, casting an eye upon Ryz'n, the fat girl in the second pew. The bride was that Amazon Donna Dixon! *That lying, adulterous cow with the oversized, Dolly Parton udders is stealing my man!* The pudgy girl rose up from her pew on the balls of her feet to protest. Flushed, Ryz'n grew quite warm and she sweat profusely. She tried to reach out, but her arm was caught, pinned mysteriously to her side, tied down by straps from a catcher's chest protector. She screamed, but her voice likewise caught, trapped in her throat. No one heard her. No one saw her. No one cared, except, except ... *Tommy Tremain? He was the best man!*

Can you believe that for crying out loud?

The former fellow Good Rockin' Tonight (GRT) band member, who first had turned her onto experimenting with blow and then had turned on her backstage in Miami, faced her now from the altar, convulsing with laughter. Two of the groomsmen turned to ridicule her, grinning contemptuously. They were Halo Platters executives Jerry Stiehlmoir and his right hand assistant Leonard "the Varmint" Marmint. Stiehlmoir

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nudged Tommy Tremain, who reached into his pocket and gave something to Nick. It was the ring! Nick took the floozy's left hand in his. The blonde, blue-eyed Amazon smiled smugly, while Nick, with his back to Ryz'n, solemnly repeated the holy vows. From the corner of her mouth, the adulteress sneered at the fat teen in the second pew as Nick placed the ring—*Noooo! Stop!*

“No!”

Ryz'n awoke suddenly with a shout, hot and sweating like a pig. Her left hand caught in the bedspread beneath his left arm and her right arm was pinned beneath her soundly sleeping husband—the *chest protector!* She looked about the stuffy, silent, dark motel room as she recovered her wits. *Pickles!* She extracted her dead arm from under him and rubbed it vigorously to relieve the piercing sensation of pins and needles which had replaced normal feeling. Ryz'n hoped Nick would wake to prove her dream a farce, but he snored on deeply and peacefully. Unlike her spouse, Ry's rest had been short-lived and interrupted for the fifth consecutive night by that same damnable nightmare. Based on her unhappy, recent insomniac experiences, she realized she would not be able to sleep for a while now, even despite her earlier fatigue. The events of the evening had coursed far too much adrenaline through her veins.

That nightmare had plagued her all week, ever since she had confronted the Dixon woman in her lie out in front of the Amazon's San Diego home. Donna initially claimed she had never seen Nick, when, in fact, she had carried on an adulterous relationship with him for a year! She had never told Nick about who he was, never told him about Ryz'n, about his wife, even though she knew. That lyin' piece of ... knew! Instead, the woman had accepted Nick's sincere marriage proposal and she had planned to marry Nicky a few weeks ago until fate had intervened. Ryz'n could have killed the Amazon when she had learned of the wedding plans, but, instead, with the Lord's generous help she had forgiven the adulterous liar to her face. Oddly, at the time, she had found a sense of peace in her merciful grace. Yet, every night since then, Ryz'n had lived this same frightening nightmare.

And, what about that darned Tommy Tremain and those Halo executives as groomsmen? Nick had been her one and only, despite what some of those dirt, gossip rags had claimed about her and GRT's former lead guitarist Tommy Tremain. However, Ryz'n always chose to disregard these unhappy recollections in favor of focusing on her teen memories of her and Nick together.

Ry massaged her numbed right arm some more, hoping to restore normal feeling. Her memories of Nicky prompted her to grin, as she drew her knees together and up under his warm buttocks. Ryz'n gingerly slipped her hand beneath him once more. She had been waiting for this moment for over three years. He was right there. She wanted him, but she would not take him. Frustrated now, she grew restless. Aww! It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair at all! It was frustrating. The more she recalled the old days, the more hungrily she grinned, the more restless she grew.

Ry was sorely tempted to wake him, until she again recalled the way she had forced herself upon him when they had first met earlier in the evening out in front of her

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parents' home. He had not known who she was then and she had embarrassed not only both of them but also her family, who had witnessed the awkward reunion. Again, Ryz'n thought better of waking him. Nevertheless, she could not fall asleep. She was too keyed up now from excessive fatigue and the excitement of her recurring dream.

Careful not to disturb him, Ryz'n extricated her sleeping arm and once more massaged the dead limb strenuously. The sensation of pins and needles pricking her sleeping arm ebbed further. She realized her front side, which had lain next to him beneath the spread, was toasty warm, even rolling in sweat, but her uncovered behind was not. Her clammy backside had perspired, dried and cooled. In the eerie grey light streaming through the blinds from the veranda, Ryz'n checked her watch on the night table and rolled her eyes.

She muttered. "Here we go again—another sleepless night." Ry got out of bed and got a drink of tap water from the vanity alcove sink.

Although it was the middle of June, the notorious, East Coast sultry summer had yet to arrive. The area had enjoyed a refreshing but unusually wet, late spring. Shoot! Some honeysuckle was yet in bloom. Ryz'n loved the scent of honeysuckle. She could smell it now, drawn through the partly open window. The heavy storm system that had passed through yesterday morning had sucked in more fresh, cool air behind it, down from Canada. Ryz'n got up, walked around the bed and turned the heater on low. She had forgotten neither the A/C nor heater was working. She closed the front sash windows, which had been open about six inches. Then she jerked on the blind and drape drawstrings to make sure both closed tightly. She had heard or seen no one on the motel's veranda or down in the parking lot since she and Nick had arrived. Yet, she did not want to take any chance someone could observe her through the blinds. However, Ryz'n did hope that Nick might wake to take in the nude sight of her—the sooner the better. And she wanted to be ready, if he did.

Her restlessness gave way to pacing. She alternately rubbed or shook her right arm to keep it from falling asleep again. Yes, she had not slept well ever since last Friday when she had confronted that lying adulteress and learned that Nicky might be coming home. That was now five sleepless nights ago. Ry was exhausted and edgy, but relieved to have her husband back home with her. Uncomfortably edgy, she considered lighting up one of Nick's Luckys, but she resisted that temptation, too. Ryz'n had avoided smoking cigarettes her whole life, even though it seemed everyone else around her smoked. She was not about to start now.

Nevertheless, she was so edgy she did consider it for a moment. In childhood, an asthmatic condition, which she had since outgrown, had discouraged her from smoking at an early age. Even though she had outgrown her asthma, she still abhorred tobacco smoke, which followed her father everywhere. One of the reasons why she so much disliked playing the club scene with GRT was her aversion to the heavy, second-hand, tobacco smoke that hung in the air. However, her natural enjoyment for performing live had overshadowed her abhorrence of smoke-filled nightclub air. She had sung and played, anyway. Besides, Nicky had asked her to perform with him and they had been

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good together, on stage, as well as off. Moreover, their collaboration had paid off handsomely, too, in more ways than one. She smiled inwardly.

Ryz'n turned on the motel's color television set with the volume on low. Surprisingly, the TV worked! *Must be on the same circuit as the bathroom light? Good! I need something to take my mind off Nicky's wounds and the zillion other thoughts running through my brain.*

The TV sat on a rolling brass stand between a wooden desk set and a bureau of drawers. The tube backed up to the wall opposite of the wall against which the heads of the two double beds stood. The TV screen faced down the aisle separating those two queen-sized double beds.

Ryz'n flipped from channel to channel but received only call stations' test patterns. It was just three a.m. The TV test patterns reminded Ryz'n of those childhood mornings when she and her kid sister Sheena had awakened too early for the cartoons. When Sheena had cried because all that had aired was a test signal, Ryz'n had explained to her kid sister that the tube was still asleep and would wake up in a little while. They would turn down the volume of the signal's dull, annoying monotone and make up and portray their own cartoons until the TV "woke up." She guessed she had been an entertainer even then, despite her natural shyness.

Still edgy, Ryz'n flicked the dial around and anxiously twirled her engagement ring about her finger with her thumb. Finally, she hit upon something. WTTG, the local channel five, was airing "The Late, Late, Late Show," which tonight, or rather this morning, was an old black and white costume drama. She recognized the little actress playing the part of a French queen but could not recall her name. Then she saw Tyrone Power. Ryz'n crossed her arms over her chest to stand back and watch for a minute. Intrigued by the presence of one of her much admired, childhood film stars, Ry angled the tube toward the empty bed, folded her arms beneath her chest and backed up to sit down upon the edge of the bed to watch.

She had always loved Tyrone Power. He and Nick shared the same smooth complexion and dark, almost feminine features, especially the same long, black eyelashes. However, Nick was quite a bit swarthier than the actor. To be honest, Ry believed Nick compared favorably to the drag-racing king character in "American Graffiti," only Nick's hair was jet black, as were his long lashes and arched eyebrows. Moreover, Nick had the same long, angular jaw line, square chin, high cheekbones, Roman nose, full cherry red lips and smooth skin as those actors. When she added into the mix, Nick's two-toned eyes, the left electric blue and the right coal black, and his natural mesomorph figure, she could just about melt inside. And the best part was that he was hers, all hers.

Nick and his renown but estranged Uncle Richard shared that singular, physical two-toned distinction. Aside from them, Ryz'n had never seen such a unique feature. Both had inherited two-toned eyes, akin to some weird Siberian husky. To be sure, those peepers were statistical aberrations. Yet, the startling contrast between her husbands' large, left, coal black and right, electric blue irises had always mesmerized her. Some thought him a freak of nature, an aberrant, especially some of the boys in high school.

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However, most of the girls had not. Certainly, no one could match those two-toned peepers her husband possessed, although his Uncle Richard came close with one dark brown and one grey-blue eye. Oddly, genes on both sides of Nick's family tree evidenced this unusually singular trait. For a great Uncle Nicholas on his mother's side of the family also possessed this peculiar characteristic as well. Complete Heterochromia iridium was the official diagnosis of the condition, which he had described to her back in high school.

Actually, as she watched the flick on the tube, Ryz'n always had thought that Ty Power and Nick easily could have passed for father and son. She figured it was the Irish in them. Nicky's eyebrows arched a little more and were not quite as thick as the actor's was, but they were just as black, just as expressive. Both the classic movie star and her husband shared jet black hair and both were gorgeous in her eyes. Of course, Nicky's gruff, rough as sandpaper baritone was quite distinctive, providing Nick with a natural rhythm and blues singing voice which none of those actors could match. Among his other musical talents, Nick's distinctive baritone had made her and GRT rich.

Unable to sleep now from thinking of her handsome husband, Ryz'n committed to watch the movie. She shoved her clothes to the opposite side of the empty bed. Then she sidled back on the bed, propped herself on a couple of pillows against the hard headboard, and slipped beneath the voluminous red bedspread. As she watched the film, Ryz'n changed her mind and believed that maybe Nick with his full lips and aquiline features probably looked more like the actor, who played the drag-racing king in the recent film "American Graffiti." Except, Ry concluded Nick's face was a bit narrower and more like Powers' in his early years.

Soon, Ryz'n remembered why she did not like these late night showings—the commercials! The advertisements were lengthy and frequent, unduly interrupting the flow of the show. During the long commercial breaks, Ryz'n took to leafing through the Gideon's Bible on the night table beside her, trying to locate the passages about Abigail and David or Bathsheba and David, or even about Esther, whose stories Father Vizconni had so recently discussed with her after mass, outside the sanctuary. He had said Ryz'n would do well to pattern herself after Esther. These biblical women's stories, Ryz'n thought, could apply to her situation with Nick and prove instructive. However, the poor lighting and her unfamiliarity with the Good Book precluded her from locating the proper passages.

Recalling a recent discussion with Father V. about Abigail, Ryz'n had resolved only an hour ago out on the veranda with Nick to forgo the good padre's advice. Instead, she consciously turned from her naturally inclined warm and nurturing Abigail persona into the more seductive and alluring Bathsheba.

"Yeah, right. That worked out well, didn't it?"

She smirked, snickering at herself while her groom snored. Giving up in frustration, she set the good book down and glanced over toward her sleeping husband. "Oooh, I should have studied the Bible more, like you told me to Nicky. Guess I'm just not much of a Bathsheba, never was, never will be. I guess it's just not in me."

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Ryz'n replaced the sacred book on the wooden nightstand between the double beds and began pacing the motel room floor until the movie returned. Once more, the plush carpet soothed the soles of her bare feet. Ryz'n walked to the open coat rack in the closet and hunted until she found what she wanted, a white dress shirt of Nick's. Feeling a bit of a chill, she slipped the shirt around her, luxuriating in its scent as well as its soft roominess. The shirttails hung down to her knees and the sleeves went well past her fingertips. Ryz'n rolled the sleeves up almost to her elbows and then shoved her newly made cuffs above her elbows. She nodded and pulled her hair from under the shirt, spreading her wavy locks over the collar. She left the shirt unbuttoned, just in case he woke, because she recalled how in the past such attire had served her well with him. Ry relaxed a little but still felt so vibrant, so alive. Wasn't it just a few hours ago that she had fallen asleep, however briefly, at her husband's feet on her in-laws hard, old patio, even while revelers made merry during the impromptu block party at her in-laws' house? Now, in the quiet, with her choice of two, soft double beds, she could not sleep a wink. She turned her focus to the old flick on the TV and watched the decadence of the eighteenth century French Court.

Marie Antoinette has not a clue. More commercials! Shoot!

During one commercial-foraging session, Ryz'n retrieved a drink of water at the bathroom sink, which stood in the vanity alcove, just outside the actual bathroom. The opaque lighting from the bathroom, merged with the limited light of the television screen to surprise her, as she caught sight of herself in the light reflected from the alcove vanity mirror. The eight-foot wide by four-foot high mirror ran across the width of the back top of the sink counter from one wall of the alcove to the other. Ryz'n reached to her left and pushed open the bathroom door fully, permitting the light to bathe her and enable her to take a closer look at herself.

Oh my!

She had forgotten about the dark circles beneath her eyes which had resulted from her recent insomnia. The past week had been excruciating for her as she had waited anxiously for Nicky to come home. As a rule, she did not wear make-up, except for some lip-gloss. She had made an exception tonight and covered those sleep circles with concealer, but now the paste had come off, worn off somehow. Ignoring the perfectly symmetrical setting of her almond-shaped, hazel green eyes and overlooking her pitch black, long lashes and broad, sweeping eyebrows, Ryz'n honed in on the temporary lone negative, as she tended to do. Surprising herself, she blurted out, "For cryin' out loud, I look like a bleeping raccoon!"

What must Nick have thought?

He had said nothing, but, back in school, he used to say she did not need to wear make up because she had "the look." When she had asked him what he had meant by that remark, he had said her looks were "so natural, beautifully transparent that [she] need not wear anything else." When Ryz'n had pressed him about his use of "transparent," he had said that her look was "naturally fresh, simultaneously handsome and cute—wholesome but sensual ... all in one face. [Her] beauty needed no cosmetic enhancement." Now, she shook her head in the mirror and sighed with that memory.

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“What a smooth talker, you were Baby! But I believed ya, hung on every word ... and still do, even if you do stutter a bit now.”

He had told her all that at the start of their junior year out on the track behind Pocomoke High, when they first had started working out together, when she was still full figured. Ryz'n had been dating the sandy-haired, blocky Don Leipzig then, while her baby fat had made her the pear-shaped girl with acne and limp hair. Yet that same pudgy, awkward teen still plagued her nightmares. Ryz'n had hungered for such compliments, the kind all the boys more typically paid to her foxy, slim-figured, kid sister Sheena. When Ryz'n had bugged Little Nick further, Nick had indicated she “should stop fishing for compliments.” She smiled faintly at the recollection. She hoped he would recall such things for himself soon.

Of course, all that had occurred before she had learned what a smooth talker he was. With his present stuttering and lack of memory, he sure isn't a smooth talker now. *Oh, My Baby*. That revelation made her want him all the more. Now her eager anticipation made her think that if she could jump his bones just one time, she could expedite his recollection process in a hurry. Yes, she'd turn his head right around in a big hurry, even though such aggressive behavior was totally contrary to the strong warnings given to her by Dr. Mandl, Nick's V.A. psychiatrist, whom she had located in Long Beach last week during her search for Nick.

Peering into the mirror, Ryz'n considered the reflection of her “false” double chin and her “double cheeks,” which fostered her oft-described “wholesome, milk-fed, cheerleader face” and prompted her trademark dimples. Nick had always raved over her three and occasionally four-dimple smiles. He complimented equally her high cheekbones, low, dense hairline, graceful, long angular jawbone and a petite chin, which was neither square nor pointed. All these attributes sculpted what he had termed “the look.” Her cheerleader cheeks, her slight false double chin, her thick arms and her chunky chest were the only places she never really had lost all her baby fat. Nicky had enjoyed pinching her negligible double chin between his thumb and forefinger and teasing her about it, in a loving way, of course. He said she looked something like a cross between the actress, who played Esther in “Ben Hur,” Merle Oberon in her prime and the pert, blond genie on TV. She had told him that was a bit of a stretch. Somehow, such a comparison did not seem plausible to her, although it was in Nick's wistfully creative mind. Nick had claimed that she possessed the wholesome innocence and vivacity of “Jeannie” and the comely exotic Mediterranean charm and beauty of “Esther” (Haya Hayareet) and the full-cheeked glow of Oberon. “And they all had high cheekbones with milk fed cheeks, sweeping dark brows and sexy mouths and you can't top that,” he would grin. Yet, after they were married, Nick had told her that only pieces of those gorgeous women rested in her. Of all the most beautiful women in the world, he had claimed, only Gina Lollobrigida in her prime came closest to resembling Ryz'n in both face and figure. Although with harsher eyes and less of a chest, “Lollo,” he confessed “was but a distant second to her.” Ry had thought that had been a very sweet thing for him to say; however never having seen the Italian superstar, Ryz'n could not truly comprehend her husband's compliment. Yet not too long after that,

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they watched “Trapeze” on “The Late Show” did Ry come to appreciate fully the veracity of his comparison. Yet, that was nearly five years ago. *Now?* Now she had raccoon eyes.

Yes, back then Nick would rave that Ryz’n’s dimpled double cheeks and chin, which lent her that wholesome, girl-next-door appeal, which “never got old and belied her fantastic figure.” Of course, he said that after he had helped her lose her baby fat. Moreover, once she had slimmed down, Ryz’n came to realize that her husband was not the only who had paid her such favors. All of a sudden, everyone started to jump on the compliment band wagon. Ryz’n had learned to appreciate these sincere gestures from others with a subdued courtesy, never quite able to forget her chunky, flat-chested, ugly duckling adolescence. She often overlooked, just as courteously, the lewd and oft times vulgar remarks, she received during her live performances or sometimes on the street. However, there was only one person whose favor she truly sought, whose compliments truly mattered to her, and they were those uttered from her husband’s sweet, cherry lips ... Nick’s deep, soft snore roused her from her idyllic reveries. She chuckled at the irony presented by his current lack of attention to her and her craven availability, standing here clothed only in his unbuttoned shirt, not ten feet from him.

On screen, Marie was calling again. Ryz’n crossed her arms under her chest, gathering his unbuttoned shirt about her. She marveled at how soft and warm his shirt felt against her skin. The smooth, roomy shirt engulfed her gently and, best of all, it smelled of Nick. She could not have been more pleased with her choice of attire than if she were wearing her favorite thigh-high, green satin house jacket. Sighing deeply, Ryz’n returned to her place under the red ribbed bedspread. She still was not sleepy. She lay back with a pillow between her back and the headboard, legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles. Beneath her folded arms, she clutched the spread to her bosom.

On screen, Marie’s love for Tyrone Power was real, as was his for her. Yes, Marie lamented, if only “I didn’t have to be Queen!”

“Yeah, life is real tough, Honey. But somebody’s gotta be Queen and you’re it. But I feel for ya, Baby. I really do. I wouldn’t want that humongous oaf of a King on top of me, either. Ah, more commercials! Pickles!”

Ryz’n got up to use the bathroom and, on the way out, stopped at the vanity mirror for further self-inspection. Her curly smoky brown-grey hair, cut just beneath shoulder-length, was so curly and denser than dense, certainly denser than she would like it to be. Having not combed it out for a few hours, her full waves were beginning to kink up. She marveled at how different her hair was now from the lifeless, limp hair of her pudgy, early teen years. Agitated by her natural curls, she snarled into her reflection and tossed her heavy locks behind her with mild disgust. Unfortunately, Ryz’n had come of age during an era when girls’ fashions favored long, straight hair, parted midway on the head. Fortunately, neither she nor Nick had minded flouting fashion. Still, she had always wanted what was not. Yet, through due diligence, she had managed to achieve a compromise between her desired, fashionably straight hair and her naturally tight, thick curls by nurturing long, bouncy, wavy locks. And even

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though more natural hair styles had gained favor recently, she was happy to stick with her compromise, because her wavy locks always had pleased her husband so.

Ryz'n scanned down her torso in the mirror. She pulled Nick's dress shirt tight about her, crossing the two inner hems around her so that she could make out her figure. The flat-chested, pear-shaped, pudgy teen of yesteryear was no longer. *Thank God.* Svelte now, Ryz'n beamed. Before Nicky's helpful dietary and exercise suggestions at the start of her junior year, she had measured 35½-29-38½. Then, unable to lose weight, she had felt helpless. She had tried many remedies, but all had failed, even the doctor-recommended Desoxyn diet pills. The pills had pumped her up, but she still had failed to lose weight. Meanwhile, Ryz'n had watched her slim-figured, kid sister eat everything in sight and gather the craven attentions of all the neighboring male teens. They used to come around Sheena in droves, as if she were a bitch in heat. Yet, by simply following Little Nick's diet and exercise remedy (one he had invented and used successfully himself at thirteen after he recovered from rheumatic fever), Ryz'n had achieved dramatic results. She had eaten only, fish, fruit, vegetables and eggs and drunken tons of water or light tea, nothing else. Moreover, she had employed a rigorous exercise regimen, supplanted by swimming a few days a week. By the end of their junior year together, Ryz'n had shaved an amazing seven inches off her waist and two more off her hips. She had dropped twenty-eight pounds off her five-foot, three-inch frame and had kept it off, too. Well, most of it anyway, until just recently, that is.

Since Nicky had been away in the service, Ryz'n had joined Madison & Lee University's (M&L's) swimming and diving team. She swam every day, except Sundays. Her swimming along with the pull-ups, push-ups and sit-ups, she included as part of her daily exercise regimen expanded her chest and back muscles (though not in an unsightly manner), while bumping up her bra size a notch with the added muscle tone. Her daily routine also shaved a few more ounces of fat off her hips and waist, as well. And, in the cozy cottage she had purchased down at M&L to share with her sister and her brother-in-law, she had danced routinely with panache and flair the folk dances, her Gran'ma Jessie had taught her and Sheena. She had always loved to dance and once she had escaped her father's house, she was able to dance overtly without restraint, as though she were a youngster again. Physical activities, such as swimming, dancing and surfing, had prompted a renewed though temporary *joie de vivre*. Those joys had enabled her to escape, if only briefly, the daily onerous burden of knowing that her husband was missing and might be dead.

However, the swim and dive season at M&L had ended in April and she had left the cozy cottage to move back home with her parents for the summer. Ryz'n had graduated college in mid-May. Since then, she had strayed off her strict, physical regimen and diet during her prolonged graduation/celebration vacation and her subsequent frantic search for Nick. Her angst over her missing husband had grown to such proportions that Ryz'n had been unable to enjoy the simple pleasures she had derived from her private dancing sessions. She had wanted to find Nick before her band, that is, before Nick's band GRT, attempted a comeback next month. With their discovery of their

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hard-rocking, new guitarist “Double J,” Ryz’n thought the band had a good chance of making it all the way back.

Well, Ryz’n had been successful. She had found Nick, but she had paid a small cost for that gargantuan discovery—too much fast food and too little exercise. In fact, as a lithe former athlete, she had gained over an inch in her waist and a quarter of her old, previously lost, weight back so that she tipped the scales at one hundred and seven and three-quarters pounds! Yet, it did not appear so here as she inspected her reflection in the mirror. As her own seamstress however, Ryz’n knew the statistics did not lie. But from what she saw in the mirror, maybe they at least appeared to fib a bit.

“I must have regained the extra weight as muscle. Yes, that’s what Bryson (her football-playing brother-in-law) says about his weight gain. That has to be it—muscle weight gain. It’s all those pull-ups and sit-ups. That’s what it is.” She nodded her head in concurrence with herself, but deep down she knew she had been lax in both her diet and her exercising.

Incredibly, the movie had not restarted yet or maybe, unwittingly, she had skipped a segment of the film. Looking at the screen’s reflection in the large vanity mirror, Ryz’n could view Bob Peck’s mirrored image on the tube still juggling three rubber balls and advertising that his Chevrolets sold “for the lowest prices in town.” Ryz’n turned to her right to profile herself in the mirror. Curious now, she removed Nick’s dress shirt, folded it carefully in two and laid it gently on the Formica vanity counter top, left of the sink.

Ryz’n smacked her tummy lightly, just above the shrunken scar from her childhood appendectomy.

What was that? A ripple? A tremor?

She leaned more closely towards the mirror and smacked herself again, harder this time. It was so small as to be nearly imperceptible. *A jiggly!* She had not had one in five years and now, and now, with Nick just coming home, of all times, now she was fat, again? Maybe it was just imaginary? “I can’t believe it. I won’t believe it!” Nevertheless, semi-shocked, she sidestepped two-half steps further to her right, away from the mirror, to lengthen her reflection in the glass below her buttocks.

Examining her slim silhouette, she inhaled, and then exhaled part way and further studied her belly judiciously. Ryz’n flattened her left hand straight out and ran it downward over her firm, flat abdomen. She looked upon herself with a business-like, critically astute eye. She harbored no conceit or self-infatuation. Rather, her expression was no different than if she had been examining a row of accounting figures concerning her rental properties, in order to determine the net quarterly profit each had produced. She exhaled and repeated her examination process. “Hmm, no. It’s perfectly flat,” she stated perfunctorily. Then she checked her sharply curved, chunky round buttocks. Ryz’n spanked herself sharply. There were hardly any echoes, no real fat reverberations there either—“tight as a drum, well, hardly any ‘jiggilies’” as Nick had called them. No, her naturally outward, upward-sloping rump was large but very firm and round too, thanks be to God, and also to her mother whom Ryz’n resembled so closely. Yes, her behind was just the way Nick liked it.

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“But *my waist now?*”

Not totally satisfied, she straightened her spine, so that the natural long ‘S’ from her shoulders to her tailbone became plainly evident. She smiled with smug satisfaction, recalling that her father once had thought she had had scoliosis. However, her mother had pooh-poohed the idea, saying that Ryz’n was built exactly as she, which, of course, she was. However, no one in the family tree, aside from Ryz’n, ever had boasted a sub twenty-one inch waist. None had ever been close, not even her glorious kid sister.

“Well, but then neither do I . . . now. Darn it!” Ryz’n admitted dejectedly.

As her own seamstress, Ry was most familiar with her unique dimensions. She knew that, since her recent “muscle weight gain,” her petite waist was closer to twenty-three than it was to twenty-one inches. At the thought of this rude reality, she slumped down, bit her lower lip, and nervously twirled her engagement ring around her finger with her thumb, between her two wedding bands. This was her custom when she became anxious. She had married Nick twice: once in an elopement before a justice of the peace and a couple months later in the Church with a begrudging blessing from her parents. Ryz’n had insisted upon the two gold bands to memorialize each of the lovely ceremonies, for each wedding was separate and special to her for reasons of its own. Before the Church wedding, Ryz’n had placed Nick’s small engagement ring ahead of the first gold band and received the second gold band onto her finger after the diamond ring. There it had stayed ever since. However, on both occasions of her matrimonial bliss, her weight and her waist had been several pounds and nearly two inches fewer. And so, she twirled the engagement ring anxiously.

Always unreasonably and unfathomably insecure in her womanhood, despite her natural good looks, Ry now feared her “bloated” figure might somehow disappoint her long lost husband. She could hardly bear that thought. Had she not told him at dinner that she had saved everything for him *just as it had been?* Yet she had gained almost ten pounds since he had left! Her anxiety at his departure had cost her a few pounds. Still, that was about a ten percent increase in her weight since then. If she were to let him down now, after all, he had done for her . . . It was not just that he had fashioned a new figure for her in high school, because there was so much more to it than that.

Little Nick had also helped make her into a woman, a confident, vivacious, handsome, young woman and a semi-popular Rock’N’Roll performer, to boot. Her self-respect had come largely from him and through his eyes. She had depended on him for everything. It would devastate her to think her body might displease him now. Though, during his long absence, she had toughened, grown independent. Yes, she had hardened and become self-reliant, because her difficult circumstances had required it. But Nick and his wise words always had echoed in her mind and guided her through the hard times. And there were hard times. There were venomous snakes out there, particularly in the jungle that was the professional Rock and Roll music industry. There were vicious, venomous vipers like that Tommy Tremain and, and Jerry Stiehlmoehr!

“Oh! Don’t get yourself started on that rat, now Ry!” Overly stimulated, her wide awake mind was racing away with her.

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Ryz'n smacked her tummy again to watch the faint jiggle dance to her incredulous chagrin once more. The fat had not disappeared simply through mental telepathy, as she had hoped. She should have been more diligent in her eating and training habits recently while Nicky was away. She would have, had she known he would be home now. Briefly, the old insecurities, hidden for the last five years in the recessed corners of her mind, began creeping back in upon her. She would die if he did not approve of her figure. Unconsciously, she again twirled the engagement ring with increased vigor as her anxiety increased. Nick used to brag so heavily upon her slim waist. She must lose this weight! She must get back to twenty-one inches or less! She had to do it for him. She could do it. She had only to return to her old habits and routines. Yet, she knew the extra weight was only a part of it. Her whole sense of self-esteem always had rested so heavily upon his approval of her physical appearance.

She recalled the Junior Prom, before she and Little Nick were a couple and before she had become a GRT band member. Nick and GRT were playing the prom and had taken a break from performing on stage in Pocomoke High's auditorium. Nicky, in his inimitable hot pink tuxedo, had come over to her table. He had asked her to stand up and turn around for him. She did and showed off her snug, hand-tailored gown that she had created for herself. She had made a backless gown of forest green satin with a one and a half inch halter strap. The gown was *trés décolleté*, both front and back. She recalled her gold chain crucifix choker showed very well against her olive skin and showed what she stood for, as well. With the whole table of friends watching and listening, Nicky had declared Ryz'n to be "the loveliest of heaven's angels." He was like that, so korny sometimes in what he said but so sincere in how he said it that his words tugged at your heart. She almost had melted in front of them all right then. Later, at midnight, he had sung her request, "You've Really Gotta Hold on Me." Ryz'n had resolved immediately to extricate herself from the unwanted clutches of her then current beau Don and get together with Nicky. Beaming at the memory now, Ry straightened her shoulders and thrust out her chest. That action, reflected in the mirror, caught her eye brusquely.

Ryz'n had not lost much weight there. If anything, she had gained true muscle fiber in her pecs. That was certain. Unlike many women but very much like her well endowed mother, Ry's bust and arms were about the last places on her body to lose weight and often the first place to gain it. Many of her girlfriends were jealous of Ryz'n in that respect. In fact, the extensive swimming and exercising, especially the pull-ups had expanded her lats and pecs, but not grossly so, not like a man's. Oh no, she would not allow that. She would and occasionally did cut back on her training regimen before she would permit that to happen. Instead, she had developed a healthy but becoming muscle tone that was not manly in any way. Rather, it had firmed her up so there was no sagging, none at all.

Ryz'n recalled the start of their junior year of high school, when she was still pudgy and flat-chested before her boobs had come in; Little Nick had presented her with a pull-up bar, because it had worked wonders for him, when he had recovered from rheumatic fever. She had wanted to crown him with the thing! The very thought of her

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or any other female using such a manly item was ludicrous. However, as with so many of his insane notions, she eventually adopted it ... and darned if the pull-up bar didn't help do the job. She believed the use of that bar in conjunction with her swimming, and the kicking in of her naturally, late-blooming mammary genes, had increased her chest size, enabling her to catch and even overtake her kid sister in that department. Yes, she had to admit she had been a late bloomer. Her junior year in high school had turned the trick for her, had transformed her into a woman.

As Ryz'n pivoted on heel and toe, she noticed her breasts bounced playfully in unison. As her bust stilled, she caught sight of the mirrored reflection of her sleeping husband behind her. With a plaintive tinge of exasperation in her tone, she reached her hands out to him and asked aloud: "Darn it, Nicky! Why don't you wake up, when we are longing here for your tender touch?" Her stare softened. She dropped her hands to the vanity counter top in ironic defeat, consoling herself with the bountiful sight of her full treasure chest reflected in the vanity glass.

Well, they ain't no Double D's like that Amazon, but they ain't too shabby, either and they always used to please ya, Baby.

Sheepishly, she recalled how Nick had always compared her twins to a pair of bulbous, bottle-nosed dolphins soaring synchronously above the sea's surface, with their dorsal fins obscured in mist. Only Nicky could come up with such a peculiar analogy. He had explained that, as a four-year old child, he had watched the movie "Boy on a Dolphin," at a drive-in with his family. That movie title combined with the sight of the show's star, a wet, braless Sophia Loren emerging from the cold Mediterranean, poking through a drenched sheer, cotton dress no less. That early recollection somehow had forged in his childish mind the indelible connection between fat, hump-backed, bottle-nosed dolphins and an adult woman's chest. The link had remained ever entrenched in his brain and, once Ryz'n also had viewed the film in high school on late night TV, too, come to think of it, she had aspired secretly to achieve a figure like that of the celebrated Italian actress. And now, thanks to her mom's genes, Ryz'n had done so, even if she had a shorter frame with which to work.

Geeze! I must be flippin' out to think such crazy stuff! What your mind thinks of when you can't sleep, late at night! Sure could use a couple of sleeping pills or, at least, a half carafe of Chablis!

Now, with confidence in her feminine charms shakily restored, Ryz'n suddenly became overconfident. She shook her head, turned and whispered towards her sleeping groom in her naturally smoky tone, "Nicky, you lucky devil."

Then, thinking unhappily of magnificent mammaries, Ryz'n recalled her nightmare and her rival. "That big-boobed liar! That, that cheap, second-rate Dolly Parton imposter, she had the unmitigated gall to agree to marry my husband. *My husband!* When she knew, *she knew—Ohhh!*" Ryz'n became so incensed that she stamped her left foot on the alcove's linoleum, making a loud slap. She felt her entire body flush and confirmed the reaction by catching her profile in the mirror. She looked as if she were a giant female thermometer, as red mercury spread up through her body and neck to fill her face. Her heart raged like wild fire. About to explode, Ryz'n stomped to the

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spigot, turned the faucet on cold, leaned over the oval sink and plunged both her hands under the streaming faucet to splash her cherub's face liberally with cold water.

Ry lifted her head over the spigot and gasped for air.

"You gotta get hold of yourself Ry. You gotta forget her. You forgave her, remember? Now forget her. And concentrate on Nicky. He's here with you, after all." Breathing heavily, once again she became conscious of her attributes in the mirror and reached for a hand towel and wiped down her face. *I ain't too shabby, either.* She gulped and sighed deeply with relief, as she looked past herself in the mirror to notice him behind her in the reflection.

"I gotta focus on my Sweetie, now, because the band will be startin' up again soon, too soon, and the band is going to need me, too."

Ryz'n performed an about-face. She looked over to her snoring husband. She whispered sultrily that if he knew what he were missing, he would be kicking himself right now in his behind, instead of sleeping on it or what was left of it, anyway. She let him sleep. Ryz'n wondered if Nicky's war injuries made it more difficult for him to breathe, causing him to snore more frequently and more deeply than she had recalled.

Again, she thought about waking her lover and, again, she thought better of it. On that subject, surely she was a double-minded woman. She yet held out faint hope that he might wake on his own. That was the main reason she was traipsing around like an idiot in her birthday suit! Ryz'n wanted to be ready for him to catch her, ready to go, and for her to be ready to catch him, if he woke. She never would have been so brazen before he had left to join the Corps. But he had taught her to loosen up and, since then, she routinely slept in her birthday suit during the warm weather months, if she did not don one of his old baseball inner shirts as sleepwear. During her brief time living with Nick, her natural modesty had always bothered him. Only, Nick had learned that a little wine or a little more beer would loosen her up and thaw her natural frigidity to the point to where there was no stopping her. However, on her recent flight back from the West Coast; Ryz'n had vowed never to be modest with him again, not with that darned Donna Dixon lurking in his recent past. Nevertheless, she reasoned that he had earned a good snore. However, she whispered hoarsely but hopefully once more.

"But you just don't know what you're missin', Nicky—Sweetie. It's a 'Catcha-Twenty-Two-Ah.' After all, how can you know what you can't recall and how can you recall what you don't know?"

That's right Ry, but it's your job to make him recall. Yes, he'll remember, tomorrow.

"I'll make him remember."

Mann! She was giddy. Her giddiness had prompted a bravado she would never have revealed had he been awake. She felt for the short, choker-like, gold-chained crucifix that hung just above the juncture of her collarbone and which she wore around her neck always. She always wore the cross through the night, even though she had broken the chain once in her sleep. Instead of the chain now, her fingers crept slowly downward, where she felt the soft, imperceptibly faint black, V-shaped wisps, which grew down along either side of her sternum. These nearly imperceptible, dark wisps disappeared down into her cleavage. Inherited from her mom's mother and her

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mother's mother, who hailed from the southwest coast of India, these minor, largely concealed, black wisps were merely one comparatively light manifestation upon her body of that otherwise darkly hirsute legacy her grandmother had deemed a curse. Like both her mom and sister, Ry also exhibited other singularly noteworthy, denser, cursed phenomena elsewhere upon their persons. "My 'Indian heritage!' Who would have thought such a trait could have befallen a Ryan?" She murmured aloud wistfully, as if to remind herself of something her body would never allow her to forget. She laughed at the irony of her mixed Irish and Indian ancestry. Of course there were more nationalities involved than just that odd coupling. She also had Greek, Lebanese, Russian, Spanish, Finnish, Pakistani and Lord knows how many other nationalities flowing through her veins, but her olive skin and her darkly hirsute nature emanated solely from her Lebanese, Asian Indian and Pakistani ancestors, or so her Granmother Urmila told her.

Completely goofy now, Ry struck the comical pose she and Sheena employed upon any mention of their family curse, which so embarrassed their mother. Bending her knees outward at a forty-five degree angle, she half squatted with her back ramrod straight and angled her elbows out from either side of her head with her hands pressed together above her head as if in prayer. Then, she comically mimicked tribal female dancers, moving only her shoulders and head in an opposing jerky, rhythmic manner from side to side, then forward and back. Such antics had driven her mother nuts, as she and Sheena would encircle their mom, stealthily planted one foot after another, chanting what they mistakenly believed to be songs of Asian Indian origin, teasing her about their hirsute, Indian heritage. Ceasing abruptly, Ryz'n cried.

"Oh my Saint Brigid, I *am* freakin' out! Flat out, freaking out!"

What was she doing, inspecting herself in the mirror like a botanist with a flower under a microscope, getting all worked up over that California harlot, talking to herself or worse, to a drunk passed out on the bed? Or was that the same difference? And performing her mock ceremonial tribal maiden imitation! My! My! Her insomnia had thrust her mind into overdrive. Ryz'n had to get hold of herself. It was nearly four a.m. for crying out loud! And she had not slept more than two stinkin' hours in a night for four straight nights and this looked as if it would be the fifth! *Pickles!*

The movie was airing again. Ryz'n had forgotten about the costume drama. She had been too busy starring in her own show in the mirror, just as she had when she and Sheena had been kids waiting for the TV to awaken with cartoons. However, now on the tube, Marie Antoinette had a secret rendezvous with the Count—Tyrone Power. Ryz'n glanced back at her legs but she did not bother to check the look of her legs in the motel mirror, for they had always been shapely, even when she had been a chunky teen. As she turned to flip off the bathroom light switch, Ryz'n pivoted on her heels and caught a parting glimpse of her tail feathers in the looking glass. She hesitated before she turned off the bathroom light and giggled self-consciously at the undiluted sight of her unique backside via the reflected light of her rearview mirror.

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“I used to worry about how you’d take my peculiar Indian inheritance Nicky, until I found out it drove you wild.” She sneered broadly at that thought. “Boy! I sure hope it still does. I surely do.” Ryz’n sighed wistfully, not totally convinced that it would now.

She scooped his shirt off the counter, rose up, arching her back and twisted on the ball of her left foot to glance back wanly, unable to resist viewing her peculiar, mirrored reflection. When the time came, she was not sure how her “new” husband would accept her peculiarly unique, oriental heritage. “Well, suppose I can remedy that situation, if need be. The things we do for love.” With an air of resignation, she flipped off the bathroom light, slipped into Nick’s dress shirt and hopped lightly into the empty, double bed to watch the end of her movie.

Count Fersen (Ty Power) was confessing his illicit love for Marie Antoinette. Marie responded to her lover that his admission caused her “heart to stop beating and forced [her] to cry solitary tears.” Marie observed that, strangely, she “had thought the great loves came more happily.” Now she understood. “Perhaps, they come with tears.”

“Ain’t that the truth, Honey,” concurred Ryz’n, as she settled back onto her pillows in the lumpy, empty, double bed. “Almost three and half year’s worth of tears!” Ryz’n noticed a multi-pointed, black and grey, spiked clock on the wall above the TV in the shape of a sundial. It was past four. The film played on. Ryz’n dozed on commercials.

However, she roused from her doldrums when, several years later, Ty Power, as Count Fersen, returned to France from fighting in the American Revolution. Marie met him in a secret rendezvous outside the royal palace.

“We have been parted these many years,” pined Marie in a morose, monotone.

“But the memory of you cannot stand in the path of each passing moment,” replied the Count earnestly, as he took her petite hand in his.

Speaking aloud Ryz’n spoke over the actors’ voices to gaze at her husband sleeping peacefully in the next bed. “Oh, what I wouldn’t give to hear you speak such korny words to me Nicky, what I wouldn’t give ... but you will, Baby. You will.”

As she kindly studied her groom, the adrenaline of Nick’s exciting, long-awaited return, at last had begun to wear off. On the TV, the demise of the Bourbon monarchy droned on irrevocably due to the excesses of the Court of Versailles. Ryz’n became drowsy. She dozed. When the exit music played loudly sometime later after Marie Antoinette had lost her head, Ryz’n woke to find she was drooling on the pillowcase. Half awake, she watched the credits roll quickly across the screen. Somehow, Ryz’n had missed the ending, but, after all, she had seen it before. She consoled herself that they never showed the Queen’s guillotined head fall into the basket, anyway. Dozily, she struggled to the TV set, turned it off, hung up Nick’s shirt and crawled back into the other bed with her husband, where she drifted off to sleep, peacefully this time. She did not bother to glance at the clock, because she was too fatigued to either know or care what time it was.