

Dixie picked up Ryzanna from his parents' place, taking her to the Ryan's house where they exchanged his bike for her 1961 Starfire. He apologized to her for his earlier rude behavior. Ry accepted his apology gracefully and apologized to him for not being more understanding. She offered to call him by "Dixie," but he refused, stating that he guessed he would have to get used to being who he really was. The girl looked at him with stardust in her eyes and he felt like a heel. Again, he reflected on how different she was from the "rich bitch" Donna had described to him. The early morning sleep circles had evaporated completely now from beneath her eyes. As they climbed into her Starfire and drove off down the avenue, she talked on nervously.

Dixie felt as if he could be falling for her, but he dismissed such thoughts out of hand. The memory of the loss of Donna and her sons was too painfully fresh in his mind. Gee, it had only been five days since he had left them behind in his rear view mirror. However, Dixie could not allow himself to think about that, either. Once more, he steeled himself to return his attention to his new wife, who was sitting gloriously behind the wheel.

Ryz'n lowered the convertible top on the Starfire before she drove him over to their alma mater. As she drove, Ryz'n was explaining that the midnight blue 1963 Pontiac Bonneville convertible, he had seen last night, was, in fact, his. He had bought the car after they had totaled their '67 Pontiac Bonneville convertible in a near fatal accident on the Beltway back in the summer of '71. Ryz'n added that she had let Bryson and Sheena drive the '63 Bonneville around, because they got such a kick out of the old convertible. In fact, she conceded that his in-laws had driven Nick's Bonneville down to the beach already for the weekend. That is why the car was missing from the driveway now. She hoped Nick did not mind.

He had not even known the car belonged to him until last night, so he didn't mind. As they descended the long steep hill, she notified him that the school would appear below just beyond the steep descending curve. "The school in the ditch," she muttered ...

Ryz'n wondered how many times had they made that long, curving descent to the school together. She watched him expectantly, hoping for a flicker of recognition when the school came into view as they rounded the curve. She was disappointed. All Nick did was state the obvious, "It's a nice looking school I guess, but it's at the bottom of a gulley." Ryz'n shook her head in wonderment. He had recognized nothing, nothing that would connect the two of them. Still, he had begun to remember, some things, early things. For that reason, she held out hope that, in time, he would remember her as well. She chose to overlook the advice of Nick's diminutive V.A. psychiatrist, who had warned her and Sheena that some of Nick's memory cells might have been destroyed, before they could have been transferred to some back-up brain cells. In that case, those memories would be lost forever.

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Ry found an empty parking spot in the relatively small, teachers' parking lot, snug against the hill on the north side of the school. Busses were already pulling into the asphalt horseshoe driveway waiting to cart away the exiting students for the final time on this final, half day of school. The U-shaped driveway encircled a small, circular courtyard harboring the flagpole. The American flag fluttered gently in the soft summer breeze. She watched Nick eyeball the facility. It was a modern-looking school, built within the last ten years out of a dark brown-red brick. The west wing of the school was one story high, while the east end where they parked was closer to three stories.

"That's the gym you're looking at," Ryz'n pointed out off handedly. "The two-story part in the center there are classrooms and, on the first floor, those are administrative offices. Straight ahead there, that big off-white and pale blue box resting on those black girders, above all that concrete patio stuff, is the library. You see how the library connects the separated brick buildings together." She smiled as he squinted against the sun overhead, taking it all in.

"Pretty nice for a high school, I mean it looks like a regular campus, sort of. I think I would have liked to have gone to a school like this," he reflected.

*He would have liked to have gone to a school like this? Sheesh!*

Ryz'n, who had raised her hand to her forehead to shield her eyes from the sun's glare, dropped her hand unceremoniously to her side. She could not believe what he had just remarked. She could not believe he could remember rectangles on a linoleum floor but he could not remember the distinctive, huge brick and mortar boxes that comprised the buildings of his high school campus. She just could not believe it. And this knowledge disappointed her. For she knew, if he could not recall their school, he would not recall her, because it was here they had met almost seven years ago.

Disappointed, she walked with him across the courtyard. Nick stared up hard at the flag as they passed beneath it. Ryz'n watched him. That was the flag he had fought for, been shot up for, lost his memory for, but God forgive him now, as he glanced at it with a trace of disdain in his face, as if their flag meant nothing to him.

Pressing forward, Ryz'n pointed out the spot, covered by one of the busses in the driveway, where she had parked once long ago. That was where they had first heard their music over the air waves on the car radio. "The Stalker" had been their first Rock'N'Roll hit. The tune was a bit R&Bish and a little raw, but it had been their first hit together, discounting "The DC Dip" which had sold well locally the previous year before she had joined the band. Nick nodded. He said he always had liked "The Stalker," too. Ryz'n merely shook her head in modified disbelief.

*You should, you nincompoop. You wrote it and performed it probably a thousand times.*

They passed under the library, which sat on one-story high, black iron stilts. They walked through the school's front doors and into the administration office on their left. The secretary told them the annual year-end assembly was taking place in the auditorium at that very moment. Like everyone else, she said she had heard the rumor that Little Nick had returned home. The news had been buzzing all over the school that

morning. And while she was excited to see the young couple, the secretary was unable to restrain her disappointment with Nick's inability to recall her. Nick apologized and begged her pardon, as Ryz'n pulled him away from the tearful clerk.

The couple exited the school to take the short-cut to the multi-purpose room, back under the library and through another courtyard filled with dwarf trees and flowers planted in cement boxes which were surrounded by small stone gardens. They re-entered the brown brick school via some heavy, blue metals doors on the opposite side of the stone garden. Once inside, they crossed the Formica hallway up to the doorway of the auditorium.

Standing just outside the open auditorium double wooden door, looking in at the assembly, they waited patiently for the principal Mr. Morant to finish addressing the students. The seniors were long gone. They left a couple weeks ago according to local custom. The principal was addressing the sophomores and juniors and faculty now, thanking them for their dedicated efforts over the past year and promising them that the next year, the school's tenth, would be the best in school history. It was one of those pep talk speeches that hardly anyone listened to because, not only had they heard it all before, but also because they were counting the minutes until that final bell rang. That was the bell which would signal the start of their summer freedom—the bell which students and faculty alike had been waiting to hear for over nine months.

As the principal spoke, Ryz'n noticed that a murmuring began to rise amongst the seated students. Murmurs rose and swelled, while heads bobbed up and down as if a large ocean wave falling and rising as it made its way towards shore. The principal, although absorbed in his speech, soon became aware of that wave. Surreptitiously, he began to peek around during his delivery, trying to ascertain the source of that groundswell. Glancing to his left, he did a double take, when he observed the Sheebooms waiting in the open double doorway. School was almost out. The students, following the principal's lead, stood and stared at the celebrity couple. Mr. Morant decided to make the best of the situation.

As if he had planned it, the principal announced. "And now, students and faculty, we have a special treat for you. I'm pleased to introduce the two most celebrated students ever to have graduated from Pocomoke High School: Nicholas and Ryzanna Sheeboom. Nick? Ryzanna? Would you step over here please?"

The auditorium of craning heads broke into loud applause that thundered into a standing ovation. She and Nick were stuck. She watched the blood drain out of his face.

Evidently, the sad secretary had been correct. Word of her husband's return had spread like wildfire amongst the student body. Reluctantly, Nick followed Ryzanna's example as she walked up onto the riser to stand behind the principal, at the near corner of the auditorium, close to the stage. Mr. Morant adjusted the standing mike for the shorter Ryz'n, as he asked her to "say a few words."

The principal quieted the assembly with his hands, motioning for the students to sit. They complied as Ryz'n took the mike. She glanced at Nick, who looked like a fish out of water. Nick shuffled back and forth on the backside of the riser behind her, studying

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his shoe tops. Had he known this would happen, he would never have come, thought Ryz'n. She sympathized with him but, like she, he was stuck, too. The riser and podium stood on the auditorium floor in front of the stage near the light, blue-painted, cinder block wall. Ryz'n took the microphone confidently in her left hand, with her bright diamond ring sparkling, like her green-hazel eyes in the auditorium lights. Although only her head and shoulders rose above the lectern, from behind and to her side she felt her husband's gaze rivet upon her backside. She hoped her confident delivery would rub off on him.

Ryz'n and microphones were old friends. She spoke deliberately in her renowned husky, smoke-filled alto, allowing her striking physical presence to grease the wheels of her impromptu speech.

"Hello y'all."

Ryz'n waved and the kids echoed her greeting. She smiled the Miss America Smile, the three-dimple smile, which came so naturally to her and the students cheered louder.

"Well, in case you didn't know, I have some excellent news," she asserted, starting the obvious. The students laughed in agreement, for obviously the rumor of Nick's return had spread quickly among The Heights. Then the audience quieted again as she paused, holding up her hands.

"My husband Nick Sheeboom has returned home from the war. He escaped from the clutches of the NVA and the Viet Cong, along with some other prisoners of war, and it's been a long, rough road, but ... he's ... back!" The girl's voice caught, as the tears swelled beneath the surface. She beat them back. "And I'm so thank, so very thankful for all of your ... your ... prayers which helped to ... to bring about his, his successful return."

Oddly, the packed auditorium went silent. Ryz'n could hear herself breathe. Shortly, someone in the back of the auditorium began to clap awkwardly, then more steadily and others joined in. The applause grew into another standing ovation, as Mr. Morant pushed Nick forward to stand next to Ryz'n. Cries of "Speech, speech, Nick!" filled the air. Behind her Miss America smile, Ryz'n felt so bad for him. He truly looked like a deer caught in an automobile's headlights.

Ryz'n had forgotten how uncomfortable he was with strangers now, remembering only how he once had loved a stage on which to perform. She took him gingerly by the hand and smiled at him reassuringly. Then she nodded, pointing the "mike" in his direction.

Leaning down to the "mike" and looking out over the audience, Dixie said nothing. The microphone whined eerily when he stood too close to it. The students quieted once again. He backed off and moved his mouth but no words came out. Mr. Morant suggested he move closer to the microphone. As he did, he spiked the mike again, which generated a resounding feedback. The high-pitched noise made everyone squint and cover their ears. "Here," said Ryz'n, as she moved the microphone to the appropriate distance from his mouth.

"Now try it, Honey."

Nick licked his lips and with great effort, spoke haltingly.

“Th-th-thank ... you ...” Content with his meager effort and looking relieved that it was over, Nick glanced around only to see the kids expected more, so he self-consciously added. “V-v-veree m-m-m-mmuch.” At that instant, the bell on the wall above his head clanged repeatedly, signaling the dismissal of school for the summer. That was the one for which they all were waiting, Nick muttered loud enough for Ryz’n to hear that he wished the long-ringing bell had rung about thirty seconds earlier. He said he felt like an idiot and, even though, he did not know these people, he figured they knew him. Now they knew he was a babbling fool.

Ryz’n squeezed his arm as she stood on her tiptoes to kiss her returning hero, reassuringly on the cheek. Kids came crowding up onto the riser, almost tipping over the podium. The microphone wailed out of control before Mr. Morant mercifully turned the thing off. The kids wanted autographs. Mr. Morant perfunctorily ordered them off the riser. Still, students thrust pens and notebooks, pads, scraps of paper into the young couple’s faces to obtain their autographs.

Comfortable with this situation, Ryz’n parlayed that three-dimple smile into a calming hand and quickly signed in a manner she had practiced patiently thousands of times before. Nick stood there watching, but the kids wanted his signature as well.

“Go ahead, Baby.” Ryz’n assured him. “It’s all right.”

Nick took the nearest pen offered by a goggle-eyed, freckle-faced, long-haired girl. She wanted him to sign his name in her yearbook. Pushing his tongue out of his mouth, he lowered his head close to the paper of the opened book and carefully and slowly penned each letter. Annoyed by the length of time it took him to sign, the girl walked away delighted with his neat hand, until she had gotten a few steps away. Then she screamed as if she had been stabbed in the back.

“What have ya done? That’s not your name. *Who* is Dixie Strickler? I never heard of him.”

Another autograph seeker complained similarly. The kids were becoming angry. Mr. Morant intervened. He said that was “enough” as only a principal or mother can, while he ushered the kids away from the podium and towards the door.

“School’s out, please enjoy your summer. No more autographs now. Enjoy your summer, kids! Go ahead, off you go!” He shooed the kids off as if they were a flock of geese he had just released to freedom.

Dixie was embarrassed and confused. He wanted to leave but he also didn’t want to run into crowds of overzealous or angry kids outside. So he hung back, jumping down to hide behind the riser, half scrunching in the corner of the auditorium next to the wooden stairs to the stage, as best as he could without appearing too obvious.

At that moment, some faculty members approached the vivacious Ryz’n, who also had descended from the riser. Several of her former teachers engulfed her, greeting her warmly and joyfully congratulating her at her husband’s homecoming.

A reticent Dixie watched all the fuss. He noticed one young, blonde female teacher in particular purposely avoided Ryz’n to seek him out. Dixie shrunk back into the corner of the room to hide by sitting on the wooden steps that led to the auditorium stage. The

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well-tailored but prim young woman located Dixie hiding behind the riser and approached him very gingerly.

“Hello, Nicky. How, how are you?”

Her tone was tender, almost reticent. She approached him gingerly, in measured steps, smiling hopefully. A strikingly petite, young woman, she stood with her hands clasped together before her hips, as if she were trying to hold them down. Dressed in a sky blue pleated skirt with matching colored heels and a white cotton collarless blouse under a bright yellow seersucker blazer, the young woman stood motionless like some angelic vision. Her face was lightly tanned, her aquiline features were soft but well chiseled and her pink lips seemed sculpted by the ancient Greeks. Indeed, her entire being appeared sculpted similar to those of a Greek statue. Her blonde hair was fashioned in a bun, which swept stylishly down over her forehead, sweeping back just above her left eye. She could have appeared on the cover of a professional fashion magazine. This petite, blue-eyed blonde, reminded Dixie of someone he could not place. She was simply stunning. Still not used to people addressing him as “Nicky,” Dixie had come to acknowledge that folks expected him to respond to that moniker readily, so he did.

“OK-K-K, I, I gu-guess.”

He stood up erect but shrugged rather uncomfortably. Her aquiline beauty drew him in, so much so that he could not take his eyes from hers. She didn’t seem to mind. She did not look away. Instead, she seemed riveted upon his eyes as well, repeatedly searching from one eye to the next.

“Guess it was pretty rough on you. I mean your captivity, the escape and everything. I’m sorry Nicky. I’m so, so sorry you had to experience such, such horrors.” Her voice dripped compassion. Her bright blue eyes moistened and her thick lower lip quivered.

Dixie could sense her sincerity, but he merely shrugged again and looked away uncomfortably. She broke her clasped hands and slowly but tenderly reached up with her left hand to fix some of his forelocks, which had blown out of place from riding in the open convertible. He felt extremely uncomfortable as she, with great care, adjusted his windblown hair. Dixie turned and looked at her as though she were an alien. The teacher did not seem to notice. Instead, she caressed his cheek softly with her fingertips, gently massaged his right shoulder fastidiously, and then let her slender left hand slide lazily down over the length of his suit coat-clad arm, feeling around his biceps and triceps. She squeezed his hands tenderly.

The miniature blonde Venus gushed with surprise.

“My God, Nicky. You *are* a man, now. Really, a man, you know, I’ve thought about you ... often, far too often.” Her voice quavered and her eyes trailed off. However, they bounced back to him quickly. “But I’m married again, you know, to a very sweet man this time, one who truly cares for me.”

*Julie Christie!* That’s who she called to his mind, the British film actress from Doctor Zhivago.

Not realizing she had been recognized, the Julie Christie look-alike heaved a sigh of resignation, as though she were trying to convince herself.

“He’s a good man, truly he is, Nicky.”

Dixie did not know quite what to make of this woman. She was supposed to have been his teacher, wasn’t she? He stood tongue-tied before her...

By now, Ryz’n had extricated herself from faculty well-wishers and had hurried purposefully around the riser. “Well, Bon-NIE!!! It’s been a few years now, hasn’t it? I understand you’ve remarried. What? Again! Happily this time, I hope.” The woman stiffened at Ryz’n’s semi-sarcastic tone.

“Yes, Ryzanna, I have. I was just telling Nicholas about it, actually.”

“Un-hunh, yes I’m sure you were. And what’s your name now Bonnie?”

“Prentice. Bonnie Prentice.”

“Well Mrs. Prentice, Nick and I will be up in the teacher’s lounge in a few minutes. I promised Mr. Morant. Maybe we’ll see you up there and we can talk some more.” Ryz’n’s perpetual smile rose and quickly drained from her face. “But, uh Bonnie, don’t feel compelled to stop by on our accounts, that is, if you have more, um, important end-of-school matters to attend to.” Ryz’n smiled once more but wryly. Bonnie Prentice forced a rigid smile of her own as a shallow red hue pierced through to the surface of her tanned cheeks.

Ryz’n’s attitude toward Bonnie just now had shed a revealing light to Dixie on the true history of the threesome’s unusual relationship. The attractive teacher, who truly could have passed for the film star and who had once bid her idol, bid them goodbye.

“Goodbye Nicholas, Ryzanna.” The woman made a point to shake Nick’s hand warmly. After she had moved out of earshot, Ryz’n turned to her husband and addressed him sharply.

“Nicky! Don’t tell me you remembered her! If you tell me, you remembered her and not me, I think, I think, I’ll, I’ll clobber ya a good one.” She held her left fist out with semi-comic malice of forethought. “Well?”

“Well, what?” he replied innocently.

“Well, do you remember her? Remember her and not me?”

“Who?”

“That horny Hollywood look-alike back there, that’s who!” Ryz’n jerked a thumb after the retreating teacher.

“Horny? Who? Oh her. Nah, nevah heard of her. I, I thought she was Julie Christie.” He laughed weakly.

Ryz’n chuckled. “Well, that was certainly the correct response.”

She grinned and studied him for more damning evidence, as he lounged back against the stage. Suddenly, she was on her tiptoes, all over him, kissing him with an unbridled passion, a passion, which she must have bottled up for three years until last night. She had made him share that very same passion with her last night in his parents’ hallway, and, again later, out on the motel veranda, where he had felt her desire right down to his toes.

Dixie was startled. Not everyone had exited the auditorium. However, he was getting that same feeling he had experienced in his parents’ bathroom hall last evening.

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Opening one eye he saw some of the teachers watching and giggling, nudging one another to leave. One by one, they hurried out the door, leaving them alone.

When Ryz'n came up for air, she appeared to be in a trance.

"Nobody kisses like you Nicky. You sure didn't forget how to do that. Thank God. Makes me think maybe you didn't forget some other things, too. Hey Sweetie?" She winked at him.

Dixie inhaled diffidently and swallowed hard. He was thankful the faculty had left. Twice, he began to say something, but he stopped both times. He pushed her away slightly and grasped each one of her arms around the triceps. Her muscles were firm, very firm, like the rest of her, like an athlete's.

"What, Baby? What is it?"

"I want to remember you Ryzanna. Really, I do. And I'm trying hard, real hard. Honest, I am. I want to remember you more than anyone. But it, it's just not comin' yet that's all. But I do wanna rememba ya, if I don't rememba anyone else, I wanna remember you."

Dixie had been looking back and forth away from her as he spoke, but when he had finished the last phrase, he had looked her directly in the eye.

"Then maybe we ..." He stopped.

An encouraged Ryz'n reached up with an open left hand to rub his right cheek ever so slightly. Softly she spoke, "Ya know somethin', Sweetie?"

Dixie shook his head, maintaining her gaze. "No, what?"

"I believe ya."

He chuckled. He had used that response himself on similar circumstances with his past loves.

Ryz'n confessed that particular phrase had become an inside joke between the two of them. He had used that response when they were dating to lighten the serious mood following her past confessions of love for him. Then he would laugh it off, prompting her to laugh as well. But now, though he chuckled, she was not laughing. He found her revelation ironic.

"I really do," she assured him. Her eyes, with her long, dark lashes, suddenly became all doe-like. She was an open flower, so sincere, so vulnerable. He held her fragile psyche in the palm of his shaking hands. He did not care to bear the burden of her vulnerable psyche, for he had his own to rebuild.

She reached up to kiss him again when they heard some loud coughing from the doorway to the auditorium. It was Mr. Morant.

"Say, why don't you two kids come down to my office for a few minutes? Then you can roam the halls; visit the faculty lounge or whatever you like."

Ry nodded willingly. She broke off her embrace from him and followed the principal down the hall and around the corner, leading Dix by the hand. Students were rushing to and from their lockers, trying not to miss the last bus out of Dodge. Safely behind the closed doors of the administrator's office, the trio sat down in comfortable, overstuffed, leather armchairs, upholstered with bold brass buttons. From his seat of power, behind his heavy, dark executive desk, Mr. Morant confided that he had learned

of Dixie's amnesia only recently. He apologized for placing him in an awkward position in the auditorium. He said that perhaps he could make up for his error, by recalling some of the old days and sparking Nick's memory. In fact, he said that he recalled some "episodes" they all had shared together, right there in his office.

Dixie listened only partly to the paternalistic principal who seemed a bit too insincere to be credible. Besides, Dixie had a tough time taking his eyes off Ryz'n to follow the principal's train of thought. He kept thinking again that this girl was truly something special, not at all the selfish, money-grubbing brat whom his ex—Donna had made her out to be. Much like the students who had been ignoring the principal in the auditoriums a few minutes earlier, Dixie was not really following the man's discourse. The principal talked on without saying anything Dixie recognized, though he noticed Ryz'n paid close attention to the man, with her face grinning or grimacing in response to his words. Dixie tried to listen as well, out of politeness.

The man had said something about Mr. Sheeboom, Dixie's dad, having been the president of the P.T.A. Then Mr. Morant spoke about Dixie and the Julie Christie twin, who had been Mrs. Severe then, later Miss Bucksalter, but who now answered to Mrs. Prentice. He assured Dixie that while Nick and the teacher once had been the butt of some malicious gossip, the rumors had all proved false. He concluded by saying that Nick was the most celebrated athlete the school had ever produced. And that he, Mr. Morant that is, held up Nick and Ryz'n as excellent role models, shining examples of what the students could be, if they applied themselves and worked hard. He mentioned that the Spring Book (the spring supplement to the school yearbook, which Nick had originated and first published five years ago) had become an annual staple among the school's publications. He provided them a copy of the current edition "free of charge," as he escorted them to the door to his office that exited to the main hallway. He said they were free to roam about the building and then he bid them a cheery good-bye.

Alone, out in the emptied hall, the couple wondered aloud to each other what had been the purpose of that whole discussion, because it sure hadn't rung any bells for Dixie. They wandered the halls, with Ryz'n pointing out different spots, which she deemed important to their (Nick's) history. She identified their senior year homeroom where he had proposed to her. She also pointed out the music classroom which had served as their homeroom and where she first worked up the courage to talk to him at the start of their junior year. They wandered the halls as she related who taught what and where.

They stopped upstairs in the faculty lounge for a few minutes. One of the teachers who approached them was Lettie Sintmoyen. Lettie and her husband Lonny had graduated two years ahead of Nick and Ryz'n. She mentioned Lonny was an accountant now with the Government and he was still playing baseball in a local amateur league. That remark seemed to pique Dixie's interest, but before he could follow up, other faculty members descended upon them, intruding upon their conversation.

By the faculty's applauding reaction to them, Dixie could see that "Little Nick's" triumphant return was Ryz'n's triumph as well. It was as if she were saying "I told you

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so” to all these doubters. Ryzanna was enjoying herself immensely, but, seeming to sense his uneasiness, she diplomatically maneuvered him out the door, down the stairs and out of the building. They wandered outside on the sidewalk that encompassed the school to the miniature grassy embankment that overlooked the baseball and softball fields. Ryz’n told him some of his and her more famous exploits had occurred on that field: he with baseball, of course, and she and her sister in softball.

Dixie scanned the complex on the green and brown plateau some thirty feet beneath him, down at the bottom of a rolling, two-tiered grassy embankment. The sign on the fence to his left, by the left field foul pole, read 315. There were no other measurement signs in center or right. A small scoreboard stood against the eight-foot high chain-link, outfield fence, atop a small, several feet high grassy rise, which curiously was in the field of play. The fence encircled the field, except for the third base and left field foul lines, where the two-tiered, grassy embankment served as a sufficient, natural barrier to foul balls. The whole field was in the shape of a big diamond with the farthest point away in center field where sat a short, squat softball backstop. The short and stubby, softball backstop stood diagonally opposite from the twenty-foot high baseball backstop, maybe four hundred feet away. Net-less metal soccer goals stood facing each other across the mostly barren, sparsely sod-spotted outfield. The near goal stood in foul territory down the baseball left field line and the facing goal, clear across the field against the right center field, chain-link fence. Beyond that fence, the terrain dropped off into a barren wasteland full of baked dirt and scrub brush. Certainly, it was as desolate as anything he had seen out in the western desert.

There were also two, obviously homemade, baseball dugouts standing in their traditional spots, which Ry observed were not there when they had played. The first base dugout backed up against the chain-link fence, which separated the field from the downward tilting asphalt parking lot. That lot ran parallel to the first base and right field lines. The thick, grassy infield compared favorably to the sparse, green-dotted outfield. Huge barren patches existed in the outfield in front of the soccer goals and around the softball diamond in center field.

Dixie appreciated the sixty-foot distance from home plate to the backstop, which gave the runner on third a more than good chance to score on a wild pitch or passed ball. The engineers of this field seem to have carved out the base of the embankment intentionally to squeeze that extra tall, chain-link backstop in there. Yeah, those sixty feet kept the pitcher and catcher honest. You did not often see that on high school diamonds, even on some college diamonds, too. That was big league stuff. Dixie remarked as much to Ryz’n.

“Yeah, and you took full advantage of it, too. Baby, you don’t know it, but this was your kingdom.” She spread her left hand out toward the field. “And you ruled it royally, too. You were King here.” She beamed up at him.

“No kiddin’? Well, did I get any big league offers.”

“Ha! I said you were a King *here* and that was pretty much the extent of your realm. You had a couple small college coaches lookin’ at you, GW, American and M&L, but

that's about it. You were just a kid, then, don't forget, about a half a foot shorter and forty, fifty pounds lighter."

"What about Maryland?"

"Hmmpf! Coach Jacks? You talked to him. He said you could walk on and he'd take a look at you—the Bozo! But then you gotta remember you were only about five-foot six or seven inches and a hundred thirty-five pounds. Physically, you weren't very impressive to look at, I mean you were cute enough for me all right but, well, for ball playing, you know what I mean. But when you played ball, Mann, you were something else. By the way, you see that softball diamond out in center?"

"Yeah."

"Well. That's just the practice diamond. We played our softball games on the baseball diamond, using softball bases of course. Coach Shaunny didn't appreciate that."

"Coach Shaunny?"

As they spoke, a man wearing black frame glasses and a navy blue baseball cap emerged from the wooden, homemade, third base dugout, carrying a clipboard and some hand tools. Ryz'n spoke up excitedly, tugging on Dixie's arm.

"Speak of the Devil! Look Nick, it's Coach Shaughnessy!" She turned toward the coach, waving energetically. "Hey, Coach, Coach Shaunny! Got a surprise for you." She tugged at Dixie. Come on Nick. It's the Coach." She looked triumphantly at her husband, as if this guy were the only coach in the world.

They walked along the crest of the hill towards the man walking across foul territory towards third base. Hearing them, he performed an about-face, waved and dumped his belongings in the third base dugout. Then he ascended the two-tiered concrete stairs that led up the embankment from the third base line. They met on the concrete landing halfway up the embankment behind the third base line.

"Well, HULLO RYZ'N. Girl, it's great to see you." The coach hugged Ryz'n warmly. "Yes indeed. It truly is great to see you, truly it is." He squeezed her again and backed off.

Ryz'n broke free from his embrace to announce her companion.

"Recognize this character, Coach?"

The smile melted from the coach's round face. He stood back to size up the young man before him. The Coach was all business now. Dixie did not recognize the guy at all. He saw a short man, in his thirties, of medium build, broad shouldered, with shaggy, coarse brown hair. He wore a navy blue baseball cap, which fronted a gold **P**, a short-sleeved sport shirt and grey slacks, standing in plain, black coach's sneakers. The man was probably about five feet eight inches, a hundred fifty to sixty pounds. His forehead and jaw were flat and square but his round face carried a premature five o'clock shadow. Only his broad, heavy brown moustache and black frame glasses made any type of distinguishing impression. Slowly, the coach's eyes narrowed, as he exclaimed.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph! JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH! NICKY! It's YOU. IT IS YOU! Isn't it?"

## *Out at Home*

Dixie nodded slowly.

“Well, that’s wh-what they ta-t-tell me anyway-way.”

“Only Nicky Sheeboom has a voice like a croaking frog! SONOVAGUN!” The coach took Dixie’s hand, pumping it until he thought it would fall off.

“Coach! If Nick were an oil well, you’d be a rich man right now. You’d also be covered in oil.” Ryz’n laughed at her own joke.

They all laughed nervously as the Coach repeatedly clapped him solidly on the back. “By golly, it’s good to see ya boy. I, I ‘bout give up hope for ya, sorry to admit it.” His eyes moistened, but he blinked back the tears behind his thick glass lenses.

“When did ya get back?”

“Last na-n-night.”

Suddenly the Coach exclaimed, “Say, I haven’t eaten yet. If you haven’t, maybe you two could join me. Whaddaya say? Better than talkin’ here on the steps.”

The young couple looked at one another. Ryz’n said she thought the coach’s invitation could be just what the doctor ordered. If anybody could evoke some memories for Nick, she said it would be she or the Coach. She answered brightly.

“Sure Coach. That would be great, just great!”

“Yeah?” He turned to Nick. Okay, Little Nick, I mean Nick?”

“Yeah, su-suure.”

“Well, let’s get outta here then. Where are you parked?”

“In the teacher’s lot, out front,” replied Ryz’n.

“OK, look why don’t you follow me? Where do you wanna eat?”

“Doesn’t matter,” offered Ryz’n. Then, looking at Dixie, she countered. “Well, maybe somewhere quiet, somewhere where the kids don’t hang out. We don’t need another autograph session today, do we Baby?”

“Sure, sure. How ‘bout Riordan’s?” offered the Coach.

“Yes, Riordan’s would be fine. OK, Nicky?”

Dix pushed his lips up and shrugged, nodding slightly. Riordan’s meant nothing to him.

Ry reached into her purse and fished out the car keys. Seizing Nick’s arm, she proffered the keys. “Say Nicky, would you mind meeting me with the car over there?” She pointed around the near corner of the school, “By the shop classrooms. Can you find it OK? You remember where we parked?” Nick waved, signaling that he did.

“O ... K.”

He took the keys and started off. Ryz’n began to speak with the Coach when Dixie turned around. He asked her which key was the one for the ignition.

“The one with the star on it, Baby. I had it made special for the Starfire.”

Dixie nodded and trotted off.

“Say Ryz’n, what’s that all about? The stuttering and the slowness?”

“Oh Coach,” she hooked her arm inside his as they climbed towards the coach’s car parked by the shop rooms. “Nick’s not the same Nicky we used to know. No, not at all. He’s all messed up in his mind. He stutters around strangers and he’s got amnesia, so

here, everyone's a stranger to him but he's starting to recall some things, some early things. Maybe talking over old times will help trigger some memories for him. So far, he's only just today begun to remember some things from when he was a toddler."

"No kiddin'?" The Coach was flabbergasted.

"Yes, it's true. Only just remember Coach, if he doesn't recall what you're telling him, don't be upset by it. It disturbs him when he sees people are disappointed in him, when he can't give them what they expect ... OK, Coach?" The Coach brightened reassuringly.

"Why, sure Ryz'n, I'll see what I can do. Don't make no promises, but I'll step up to the plate and take my hacks." He grinned.

"Oh thanks, Coach. Thanks so much. I knew you would." She squeezed his arm, smiling warmly at him, that three-dimple smile.

The coach collected his hand tools from the dugout. Dixie arrived with the Starfire, just as Ry and the Coach reached the Coach's Driver's Ed. Car at least that is what Dixie read from the sign on the Coach's car door. Ryz'n got in on the passenger side of the Starfire.

"Don't you wanna drive? You know where we're going and it's your car," offered Dixie.

Ryz'n shot him a negatory look, pooh-poohing his suggestion.

"This is *our* car, Sweetie. If you can come across country on a motorbike and find me, I think you can follow the Coach to Riordan's."

"Alright, you're the boss." Ryz'n shook her head emphatically again.

"No Honey, I'm your wife and you're the boss. *You're* the head of this household, this carhold! I know that's an old-fashioned approach for me to take, but we had a few memorable go-rounds over that issue some time ago. And you won, hands down, Baby. I learned my lesson. You don't wanna have to retake the same ground twice, now do you?"

She grinned with her eyebrows arched quizzically.

Dixie scratched his ear as she winked at him, grinning all the while. He gazed at her rather peculiarly.

"Don't know, but I sure like the sound of your argument."

"Well, I don't like to make a practice of voicing it. That's for sure."

As he pulled away from the school following the Coach, Ryz'n turned on the radio. The D.J. announced, "Here's as an oldie but a goody from six years ago today, June Nineteenth, Nineteen-Sixty-Nine." A haunting tenor saxophone followed an equally haunting bass. No sooner had the car radio sounded the first solitary notes than Ryz'n jumped up. "Oh Nicky, it's one of our favorites." She sang along to the car tune streaming from the Starfire's speakers.

What does it take? (What does it take?)

To win your love for me? (To win your love for me?)

How can I make? (How can I make?)

This dream come true for me? (Come true for me?)

## *Out at Home*

Oh, I've just got to know (got to know).

Oooh Baby 'cause I love ya so. Gonna blow for ya."

Ryz'n hummed along to Junior Walker's saxophone solo. Dixie followed the Coach up the steep, curving hill, right along the ridge, and then left at the light and down the long hill that was Stuyvesant Street. Then they climbed alongside the broad, grassy median, which divided the street into two ways. It was a balmy June day. The humidity was still low, but climbing. He noted her street, 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue off to the left. As the sax solo ended and the summer breeze coifed their hair, Ryzanna rejoined with the radio vocals in lusty form. She had a great naturally sexy voice.

"I tried, I tried, I tried in every way I could (in every way I could).

To make you see how much I love you (see how much I love you).

Oooh, I thought you understood (thought you understood).

So you gotta make me see (make me see).

What does it take to win your love for me? Gonna blow again for ya."

While the song faded out, Ryz'n turned down the volume, as she leaned toward Nick.

"Baby, you gotta make me see, what does it take to win your love for me."

Remarkably unpretentious in her sincerity, she batted her long, black eyelashes at him. Dixie had taken his eyes off the road to stare at her. He had listened to the song, but he couldn't be certain that he had heard it before. The plaintive melody and lyrics surely expressed Ryz'n's desires as portrayed by her equally plaintive facial expression. Dixie reasoned that if she were putting on an act, she should be in Hollywood, because she was academy award material. He tore his eyes away from her just in time to avoid rear-ending the Coach and ran the Starfire up over the low concrete curb that enclosed the grassy median near the light at Stuyvesant and 23<sup>rd</sup>. He had narrowly avoided the back end of the Coach's Driver's Ed. Chevy, which had stopped for the red light at 23<sup>rd</sup> Boulevard.

"Jesus, May and Joseph," cried the startled coach through his Chevy's open window. "Did you forget how to drive, too? Boy, I never taught you to drive like that."

"Uh, uh, sorry Ca-Ca-Coach! I, I got d-d-distracted."

"Well, get 'UNTRACTED' and get back on the road. There! The light has changed."

Dixie waved sheepishly and slowly, turned, lowering the convertible off the low curb encompassing the grassy median back onto the divided thoroughfare. Fortunately, the car was undamaged and performed fine.

He apologized to Ryzanna.

"Guess I'm more used to my bike than a real car."

"I'm sorry Nicky. It was all my fault. I, I got too sentimental. I should know better after what happened to us before."

"After what happened to us before?"

Dixie spoke without looking at her, keeping his eyes glued to the road and the Coach's Chevy in front of him, as they both traveled down next to the now-flat grassy median of Stuyvesant. The Crest Hill Shopping Center was across the median on their

left and brick, two-story duplexes, like the Wrights, rolled past them on the right. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t remember. I hope you never do. We were in a terrible accident, Sweetie, just terrible! It was only by the grace of God that we weren’t killed, the both of us. We both got cut up a little and took some stitches: me, on the sides of my hips and you, on your right shoulder and upper arm.”

Dixie instinctively clutched his right shoulder with his left hand. He visualized the scars he had noticed often in the mirror, but without knowing how he had received them.

“That’s right, Baby. You’ve seen the scars, of course. They’re not too bad. Mine seem to be fading out and shrinking up more and more. The emergency room doctors over at Holy Cross sewed us up pretty neatly. My goodness! It still frightens me to think how bad it could have been. But you know, surviving that accident was one of the reasons, I kept thinking you’d come back to me. If God saved us that time ... well, why would He do that if He didn’t intend to have you return home to me safely now?”

She smiled sweetly at him. Then she turned up the volume on the car’s radio. WMOD was playing the Shirelles “Soldier Boy.” She laughed.

Somehow, Dixie had lost contact with the Coach, but Ryz’n assured him it was all right. She directed Dixie up around the corner to the back of the Harlow Heights Shopping Centre where she had him park. She told him all about the shopping centre, which had played such a pivotal role in their lives. She explained that it was here where they had parked on their first wedding night almost five years ago to decide whether or they should go through with their elopement. It was here that he had gotten his haircuts, where he had bought the jewelry, including the engagement ring and wedding bands for her.

From the rear, the shopping centre looked to be in the shape of a big *Y*. Only the stem of the *Y* was half as long as the two branches. A brief, double yellow-lined, service road bisected the stem and allowed vehicles to move from the front to the rear shopping, parking lot. Built back in 1958-59, she said all the stores were made of sand colored brick, as one might see in the southwestern part of the country. Asphalt parking lots lay all around the shops. The lots and shopping centre all tilted down toward and through the stem of the ‘*Y*’. Riordan’s was located at the base of the left branch of the fork in the ‘*Y*’. Ryz’n assured Dixie, they could walk on the sidewalk next to the service road “stem” and reach the restaurant, where the Coach should be waiting.

As they strolled up the slightly inclined sidewalk, they passed a florist across the street to their right and the Esquire Barber Shop on their side of the street to their left. A mini red, white and blue, striped, barber pole was attached to the upper brick wall by the glass door. The barbershop had a front plate glass window that stretched from the ceiling almost to the linoleum floor and bore the name of the establishment.

Ryz’n related that she had waited for him to get his haircut in that shop on more than one occasion. She claimed that watching the comings and goings of the shoppers outside, through the shop’s plate glass windows was one of the advantages for

customers in the Esquire. The other was Mario, who was perhaps the finest barber in the region. The two of them had no more than passed the barbershop when they heard a cry from behind them.

“Neeq! NEEQ!”

Ryz’n and Dixie turned around.

“That’s Mario there, as we speak,” cried Ryz’n. Ryz’n whispered quickly to Dixie that Mario had barbered Nick since he was a toddler, even coming to Nick’s home to cut his hair on Mario’s day off, when Nick had been bedridden for several months with rheumatic fever. Grinning, Ryz’n seized Nick’s arm. “Maybe Mario can unlock some those memories for ya, Sweetie.” Dixie understood, his new bride was doing all she could to bombard him with potential memory-rejuvenating scenarios. Now she whispered hopefully in her smoky tone.

“Look Nick, it’s Mario. You remember Mario, your old barber, don’t you?”

“NEEQ! NEEQ!”

Mario approached them with his hands outstretched. He took Dixie’s right hand in both of his to shake the young man’s hand. He peered into Dixie’s eyes to ensure it really was “Neeq’ sh’BOOM!” Mario was a distinguished looking gentleman with a handsome clean-shaven, face of clear, delicate almost feminine skin. Sixtyish and short of stature, Mario carried the most dignified head of finely combed, coarse, dense silver hair Dixie had ever seen. Silver, but tinged with black, the barber’s thick mane appeared almost to be made of finely thatched silver-blue steel. Combed immaculately straight back, his thick hair appeared as silver-blue blades of grass painted in long full strokes. He wore silver and black framed bifocals over jet black eyes, a light blue barber’s smock, dark gray suit pants and a white collared shirt tied with a silk grey and black, diagonally-stripped tie. His black Gucci loafers were top of the line and, in color, matched his black eyes. Were it not for the barber’s smock, Mario could easily be mistaken for a banker, instead of a barber.

“Ez JOU, Neeq. Eet ez?”

Ryz’n squeezed his arm tightly, prompting Dixie’s reply. It seemed to Dixie all these people said the same thing when they met him, but he replied simply and earnestly.

“I hope so. That’s what they ta-t-tell m-me anyway.”

“Oh Ryzanna, how jou? So buuteeful as evah.” Mario directed his attention to Dixie’s partner. “What does he mean? He joke with us, no?”

“I’m fine Mario and it’s good to see you, too. But no, this is no joke I’m afraid. Nick has amnesia. That’s why he was so long coming home to us. But his memory is coming back to him, slowly.”

“Oh Neeq, so jou no’ memba Mario? I cut jour hair since jou was leetle boy. Jou no’ memba Mario? Oooh Neeq!” The man clucked his tongue in disappointment.

Dixie was ready to brush him off as he had so many others last night, but something caught his attention. There was something familiar about this man. Dixie looked him over, again, slowly, intently studying his face. A scene of an interior of a barbershop flashed before Dixie. He was climbing up in the saddle, the special seat for tikes that

rested across the arms of the barber chair. The barber ... the barber was this man! Dixie sunk deeper into reverie. Then he repeated from memory, in Mario's accent.

"Look straight 'head and no move, Lee'l Neeq. I give jou loll' pop. Asa goo' boy now. Suah, jou doin' good Lee'l Neeq."

It was Dixie talking aloud to himself, recalling his earliest memory of the barber. Broken up, Ryz'n hugged him. Mario, realizing the importance of this seemingly innocuous memory, congratulated Dixie heartily as well. Then, to overcome his emotions, the barber in him surfaced and he admonished 'Neeq.'

"Neeq, see what hopen when jou gone so long? Jou need haircut bad, Neeq. Come in. Come in the shoppe and I feex jou up. I shave dat, dat ding ovah jour mout, too. Hey?"

Ryz'n intervened, explaining she and Nick were overdue for a luncheon appointment in Riordan's. She promised to bring 'Neeq' back for a haircut soon. They left the happy but baffled barber on the sidewalk, staring at them, shaking his head in wonder. Ryz'n turned back, hoping she hadn't hurt the barber's feeling. Dixie faced about as well. They watched as Mario turned back towards the shop and stopped abruptly. Overcome with emotion, the silver-haired barber turned into the brick wall and slumped heavily against the sand-colored brick, steadying himself with his forehead. There, Mario pushed his silver and black bifocals up over his eyebrows to rest upon his forehead, while he dabbed at his eyes with a handkerchief that he had pulled from his pants pocket. Ryz'n seemed to smother a sob as well, but she tugged at him and they walked on and turned the corner, hanging onto Dixie's arm ...

Ryz'n led Nick by the hand to the Coach, whom they found waiting around the corner in front of the restaurant.

"What happened? You run over another curb?" The Coach was only half joking.

"No Coach," replied Ryz'n pertly, "we ran into an old friend back there, Nick's barber Mario."

"Mario? He cuts my hair, too. He's a terrific barber, really. He's from Portugal. Did you know that? Believe it was your dad, Nick, who turned me onto Mario." He clapped his hands, and rubbing them together announced, "Hey, let's eat."

The Coach ushered them through the saloon's double doors where they found a hostess, who spurned the handy, small individual tables to seat them in a booth against the far wall. Ryz'n knew the place, mostly from her childhood days. The pub had been one of her father's favorite haunts. Riordan's was as much a bar as it was a restaurant and its cool, dark forest green interior swallowed them up completely. Once a patron stepped through the foyer, the customer's eyes had to adjust to the pub's darkness. Only then, could the patron notice a long mahogany bar running almost the length of the right side of the building, with individual bar stools made of square green seat backs and short arm rests. A five-foot high black baseboard wall, topped by a planter, bisected the room with an aisle at either end of it to allow traffic to flow between the two halves of the establishment. Booths lined that wall of planters, as well as the other walls on the eatery side of the house. A row of small square tables that could seat four

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people apiece stood between the booths. Behind them, a front large plate glass window bore the name of the establishment, RIORDAN'S, painted in a green semi-circle over a green shamrock. Opened Venetian blinds lowered half way from the ceiling to the floor served to shut out unwanted light. It helped that that the sun had passed overhead already, so there were no direct rays burning through the plate glass. For the height of the day, this place was darn dark.

Ryz'n rarely frequented the joint anymore. The interior setting was too dark for her tastes and her celebrity had taught her to avoid bars and lounges at all costs. Her presence in such establishments only led to trouble. However, this time, having been out of the limelight for about a year, and secluded now in the dark recesses of the restaurant, anonymity, aided by her ever-present, concealing sunglasses, seemed to cloak her, though the heads of a few male patrons turned towards her as she passed.

The threesome reviewed the menus left for them. The baseball boys ordered a couple of cheeseburgers, while she, the softball girl, opted for the soup and salad. (When Ryz'n was with athletes, she enjoyed recalling her own athletic prowess on the softball diamond and becoming just "one of the "boys" so to speak. She had always been half Tom-boy anyway.) As the waitress left with their orders, Ryz'n prompted the Coach.

"Gee, Coach, I don't recall you sporting such long hair, let alone that thick moustache. Nick, you may not remember but Coach was a crew cut guy, right Coach?"

"Yes Ma'am. Now that's a fact," replied the Coach.

"So when did you make the big switch, Coach?"

"Well, it was the summer after you two graduated. Coach Garth had lightened up on the hair restrictions for the football team and after the baseball mutiny your senior year Nick, well, I figured I'd ride with the tide, as far as the hair thing goes, moustache, too." He chuckled. "Figured it would help me communicate better with the players."

"What ma-mutiny?" asked Nick.

"Well of course, you don't remember." He shifted his gaze to Ryz'n. "You remember though, don't ya, Ryzanna? It was your senior year and we were losing badly about halfway through the season, when half the team mutinied."

"Yes Coach, I remember it distinctly. You benched Nick. It was a tough time for us, because we were newly married and just starting to make it big with our music. We had several out-of-town bookings that spring on weekends, which made it almost impossible to be at all your Saturday practices. Nick had to make a choice, a tough one: whether to ride the money trail from our gigs or finish the season out with the team." The waitress brought them their beverages. Ryz'n sucked on her lemon iced tea through a straw.

As the coach stirred his coke, he concurred with what Ryz'n had said.

"Well, the problem, too, was we had no real pitching that year. Then, when we got off to such a poor start after winning state the year before, well the players started thinking about the prom, graduation, summer, where they were going to college, everything but baseball. Mentally, the kids just checked out and wrote the rest of our

season off. Of course, it didn't help any to have the team captain missing half or all of our Saturday morning practices."

He shot a glance of reprimand towards Nick.

Nick agreed, "Yeah, sure, I ca-ca-can understand that Coach. Gu-guess I must have chosen to play ba-ba- ball 'stead of ma-ma-make music or, we wouldn't be sitting here now, talking so fr-friendly like." The Coach smiled.

"Oh yeah, you certainly did," he responded. "Ten kids quit originally and you talked four of them into rejoining the team. We called up a couple of JayVee ballplayers and ran the table, winning the last seven games of the season to post a winning record. And even though we had won the state championship the year before, I always remember that seven-game run your last season as one of the highlights of my coaching career. In fact, that team taught me more about coaching than any team I ever had. As I said, I changed my ways a bit after that year. The hair and moustache were only outer signs of the metamorphosis. And Nick," the coach leaned forward over the table to stare strongly at her husband, "You had a lot to do with it, a lot to do with it. I'm a better Coach now, because of that experience." Coach Shaughnessy winked at Nick.

"Hey, I propose a toast," interjected the Coach. "Here's to Nick Sheeboom's safe return and to a long and happy life with his beautiful bride, Ryzanna."

"Here! Here!" Glasses tinkled before they consummated the toast.

The Coach grinned happily at the young couple across the tabletop from him. Noticing Ryzanna's lovely smile, he added, "Yes sir, Nick. I can see why I had such trouble with you during practice, with you watching Ryzanna play softball and not paying attention to me."

"Well, gee Coach that went both ways you know. Why Nicky and the other guys would start cheering for us girls, it would get us fired up. You all may not have finished first that year, but the softball team did. And I remember one game in particular against Glynn Park that your boys helped us come from behind to win.

"Yes. The guys were all watching from behind the fence in the student parking lot, behind the visitor's bench along first base, lounging on the hoods and trunks of a couple of parked cars—cars the students were supposed to have removed so you could practice there on the parking lot. That was before you got so fancy with those dugouts that block the view now, Coach." From behind her shades, Ryz'n waggled her head in disapproval toward Coach Shaunny. Shaunny rolled his eyes up towards the roof, so Ry went on with her tale.

"Well, Glynn Park was tied with us in the standings. But with the baseball team cheering hard for us, we persevered and that win clinched the league title for us."

"Yeah, I remember," answered the Coach. "That's what I mean. I could have been a hard case about that, but Nicky had taught me to relax a little by then, so I let the boys watch the game. A few weeks earlier and they would have been running sprints up and down the parking lot for committing such treason, which was what had prompted the revolt in the first place." The Coach laughed. Then he murmured, "Bubble Gum."

"Bubble gum?" echoed Nick. "What d-da-do you mean by that?"

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“Hmmm. You and Fitz went and bought out the local G. C. Murphy store of all its bubble gum. You made sure everyone on the bench, including me and the scorekeepers had our mouths stuffed with bubble gum. You said it would change our luck and I guess it did, cuz we started winnin.’”

The waitress delivered their orders. Ryz’n said grace quietly while Dixie bowed his head and joined her. Slightly perturbed, the Coach, watched them both, but said nothing.

“Everything all right, Coach?” asked Ryz’n when she had finished. She knew the Coach was not a believer.

The Coach chomped into his cheeseburger, ignoring her. The sounds of dining replaced conversation until they had consumed the better part of their meals. Coach Shaughnessy was the first to speak.

“You know, first time I remember you Nicky, I mean, the first time you stood out for me was the first day of tryouts your sophomore year. March First came on a Saturday that year, I believe, just as it did this year by the way. Ha! Ain’t that funny? And just like this year that’s the first day we were eligible to practice. Let’s see. That would have been Nineteen-Sixty-Nine. Yes, it was snowin’ and I took you and the other first time tryouts down to the field to throw you some BP while the rest of the players practiced in the gym, out of the weather. Nick, you were the only kid who wore the school’s P.E. athletic jersey reversed, inside out so that, that bright yellow gold side was outside. All the other kids wore the traditional dark blue side out, with the school logo printed on it. But you really stood out in that bright yellow jersey. Gee, you weren’t any bigger than Ryz’n then, maybe a hundred pounds. Maybe!”

Ryz’n felt sheepish, for she knew she was seven or eight pounds more than a hundred.

“Yeah, I was throwing BP to ya in the cold. And the snow was coming down pretty hard and stickin’ to the ground, too. It wasn’t easy to pitch in that stuff, and, as I said, it was cold, so I know it was hard on you to hit. Ha! I will never forget the way you zinged those pitches right back at me, right past my ear. That made an impression. Had it not been for that, and one other stunt you pulled, I might have cut ya and what a mistake that would have been. I could have cut probably the best ballplayer whoever played for me.”

The Coach shook his head.

““What other stunt did he pull, Coach?” asked Ryz’n between bites.

““Oh well, it wasn’t much, but it would not have taken much to cut him on account of his size. Nicky was ‘on the bubble’ as the pros were apt to say and any misstep by him could have sent him packing. His arm was a little weak at the time. He was undersized and he was trying out for the outfield. The day before I posted the final team roster in the locker room, I wanted to test everyone’s fielding and arms one more time. We had an extended fielding drill. When I told Nick (who again was the only player wearing that bright yellow gold jersey) to throw home, he threw it for all he was worth over the cutoff man’s head into the catcher. So, I told him to hit the cutoff man next time. He did the same thing, again, threw it over the cutoff man. So I yelled at him

very loudly to hit the cutoff man, but when he overthrew the cutoff man intentionally for the third time, I got angry.

“I wasn’t going to quit hitting him flies until he hit the cutoff man. The pattern repeated itself a couple more times, before the catcher told me that Nick had heard that I thought his arm was weak, so he, the catcher, figured Nick was doing this on purpose to get my attention. And he turned out to be right. I yelled out to Nick that we all could see he could throw the ball into the plate, now we’d try this one more time and this time ‘HIT THE CUTOFF MAN!’” The Coach laughed and sat back against the booth.

“Well, did he, Coach?” asked Ryz’n, smiling in anticipation.

“Oh yeah, hit him smack between the eyes.” All three of them chuckled.

“Nick,” accused Ryz’n. “You never told me that story.” Nick looked rather oddly at her and she realized her mistake.

The waitress returned to solicit dessert orders, but they all settled for another round of soft drinks. After the server left, the Coach spoke on.

“I suppose the best one with Nicky, the episode I’ll never forget, was in the State Championship game out at Shipley field. That was in your junior year, Nick.”

“That’s the home of the Terps Nicky, up in College Park,” interjected Ryz’n. His puzzled expression exasperated her. “You know the University of Maryland Terrapins? You know the Terps?”

“Oh, OK. Yeah I got it.” Nick promised her. Ryz’n wondered if Nick hadn’t lost more than his memory.

“Go ahead with your story, Coach. I was at that game. Shoot! The whole school and half the Heights were there, too. That little Shipley Field stadium was filled to standing room only.”

“Yeah, it sure was packed, more so than I had ever seen it when I had pitched for the Terps. It was something, for sure. Had that big game feel, ya know?” His audience nodded, so the coach leaned forward and folded his arms in front of him resting his elbows on the table.

“Well, we had been coming from behind all year that season, but it looked as if we had run out of comebacks in the top of the ninth. We had had to replay a playoff game to get there, due to inclimate weather ending a game in a tie, so we had used up, make that more than used up, the only three good arms we had. ‘Zak, our pitcher that day, for the championship game, had given everything he could, but now in extra innings, he couldn’t throw a strike to save his life. There was nobody left to replace him. I had no choice but to pull him, with the game tied and the bases full.

“After taking the ball from his hand, I remember looking around the infield. Nobody would look at me. They all looked down, or up or turned their backs to me. Nobody wanted to take the ball out of my hand. I asked Cary what he thought.”

“Cary Geller was our catcher Nicky and a good friend of ours,” Ryz’n pointed out.

“Yeah, that’s right, Ry. I’ll never forget what Cary said. He said, ‘Well, Little Nick’s the only one lookin’ in here at us and he’s the craziest bastard I ever seen. He probably thinks he can come in here and strike out the side.’” The Coach chuckled to himself. “Ha! And you did better than that, Nicky!”

## *Out at Home*

“I motioned for you and you came bee-boppin’ in, bouncin’ up and down on the balls of your feet with your glove folded over you heart. You were really taking your sweet time, ‘enjoyin’ the moment’ as they say.”

“That was Nicky, Coach, confident as all-get-out, wasn’t he?” Ryz’n giggled with relish.

“More than that! He was cocky! But for the life of me, I didn’t know why. Sure, he had gotten hot at the plate during our stretch run and had been our catalyst, but pitching-wise, he didn’t have much, except his cockiness. All he really had then was a change-up. The problem with that was that he didn’t have a fastball to set it up. Ha! I had thrown him a few innings to close out a couple of blowouts, just to save other guys’ arms, but this was different, radically different.

“I told you, Nick, to keep the ball down and away with your change-up and to follow through with your back to give at least the appearance of throwing a fastball. I told ya, ‘Try to keep it down and get the double play ball and maybe we could get out of this fix.’ Being somewhat ambidextrous and always cocky as heck, you asked what arm I wanted you to use and I said the one with the strikes in it! Ha! Ha! I’ll never forget it.

“Well, you took your sweet time with your warm-ups, too, stalling around. You moved players around out in the field behind you. You called Cary out to the mound for a conference. And you hadn’t even thrown a pitch yet!”

Ryz’n interrupted.

“Yeah, I remember Cary telling me later that, as you were motioning Steinmetz around in center Nick, you had said that you just ‘loved being pitcher and watching the other guys follow your orders.’”

Coach Shaunny laughed in spite of himself. “Yep, that sounds like Little Nick. He always loved a stage.” Ryz’n noted somewhat sadly that the Coach spoke as though Little Nick was gone forever, when he sat right there before them. The Coach sighed and resumed his tale, which he obviously relished telling.

“Well, finally, the umpire threatened to award the batter a ball, if you didn’t pitch. So, your first pitch was wide, belt high and I could see the batter was just salivatin’ at the plate. Then, Little Nick, I mean you Nick, made some comment that made the kid red in the face. He was their clean-up, too, I believe. Anyway, you slipped that change-up down and away and he fell all over himself trying to belt the ball out of the park. Instead, he got out in front and topped it back to you, where you started a triple play!”

Dixie grinned to himself, like the cat that had swallowed the proverbial canary.

“What? What are you grinning at Nick?”

“Nothin’. Nothin’ much. It’s just that I did the same thing in the College World Series a few weeks ago.”

“Yeah? How’d it turn out?” asked the Coach.

“Inning ending double play ball.”

“Yeah, well this was even better, so listen up.

“You went home to first and when the runner from second tried to score, ‘Stump’, he was our first baseman, cut the runner down fifteen feet from the plate, although

'Stump' had to throw over you to do it." The Coach became a little heated in the retelling. "I got on you about that, Nicky. You should have been ..."

"I should have been backing up behind the plate." Nick nodded.

"Yeah, you should have," stated the Coach sternly.

Ryz'n perked up. "Do you remember that, Baby?"

Nick lowered his head, shaking it negatively.

"No, that's just basic baseball stuff. Guess you taught me good Coach, so that it sunk into my subconscious."

Ryz'n's face fell. When Nick asked her what was wrong. She said that for a second she had thought Nick had remembered the event and if he had remembered that point in time, he certainly could have remembered her. Now Nick's face fell. The air grew heavy for a few seconds until the coach started up again.

"Yeah, that's right," added the Coach, trying to change the mood. "Anyway, that play kept the game tied and fired up the team. In our half of the inning, you came up with two out and nobody on and smacked a triple off the fence in right center to become the game-winning run. I'd never seen you hit a ball so far, Nick. Guess you timed it perfectly and got your full one hundred thirty pounds behind it."

He chuckled.

Recovered now, Ryz'n interrupted again.

"You were only about half a foot short of clearing the fence Nick. After the game, you joked that was the story of your life. But you know Sweetie; I never felt you were too short, Nicky, never, and certainly not by half a foot." Nick gently patted the arm she had slipped inside his as he leaned forward on the table to listen to the end of the story. She felt all warm inside. He said he never felt he was too short either, at least not in his two years of existence anyway.

"So Coach, what happened? You have me on third with the score tied in the bottom of the ninth, extra innings, right? Go ahead, ya got me hooked."

"Well, you darn near blew it, Little Nick!" The Coach slammed the table top with the side of his fist. (He was so into his story, thought Ryz'n that he had forgotten to whom he was speaking.) "Anyway, you got antsy, taking a long, running lead. I warned you to watch it. You were strayin' too far off the base, too far, but you wouldn't listen. No, you had to do it your way."

The Coach frowned and shook his head negatively.

"Old South (that was the school we were playing) pulled a pick-off play. They had their third baseman charge the plate, giving you a false sense of security, while they pitched out and brought the shortstop in behind you, as their third-baseman hit the dirt. They had you, Nicky. They had you cold! They caught you flat-footed, Nick. Fortunately, for all of us, you came out of it smelling like a rose, cuz, at bat, Hank Roulette had the good sense to stand his ground in the box, forcing their catcher to throw around him."

"Seems like you always came out smelling like a rose, Baby." Ryz'n smiled glowingly up to him.

## *Out at Home*

“Yeah that’s for sure,” countered the Coach. “Anyway, the throw was high and wide, to the infield side of the bag. The shortstop lunged to make a miraculous play to snag it, while you barely, and I mean barely, got back to the bag safely, just under his diving tag. You turned crimson and asked for time. I got on you big time as you brushed off your uniform. I asked you what in the world were you thinking and you jerked your thumb upwards, saying that ‘Somebody up there likes me, Coach!’ And I said that somebody down here was gonna kick your butt if you didn’t play smarter.” The Coach chuckled to himself some more.

“You were a trip, Nicky. You really were,” he added shaking his head and chuckling.

Ryz’n winked at the coach and flashed her renowned, three-dimple smile at her husband, while he deadpanned: “It is beginning to sound as if I was quite a character.”

“That’s an understatement, Sweetie. You were larger than life!”

Gazing up at him so sweetly, Ryz’n thought she would fall in love with him all over again very easily. Embarrassed, Nick returned his attentions to the coach.

“Well Coach, do we ever win this never ending game or what?”

“Sure, sure. A couple pitches later Hank Roulette swung and missed a curve ball in the dirt, which skipped past the catcher, while you scampered home safely with the game winning run, the championship winner, I should say. You see, Shipley Field, back of the plate, is like our field with a good ways to the backstop.

“Well, I gave you the game ball afterwards during our post-game team meeting, even though I had never awarded a game ball before. And what did you do? You tossed it back in my face, saying it was just a ball, not worth much. I was flabbergasted as was the rest of the team. But then you grinned slyly and said, and I’ll never forget this either. You said, ‘But if everyone’d sign it, including me, the manager and the scorekeepers, then it would really be worth something special. So that’s what we all did.’”

“That’s right Baby, and I still have that ball in my room with all our trophies and your box of military awards and decorations. You almost killed yourself once going back for that baseball, when it was dangling from the sun-visor in the Pontiac. That was when we had that terrible accident on the Beltway. You know, the one I told you about?” Nick nodded.

The threesome finished off their second round of beverages by telling more Little Nick stories. When they parted, for the Coach had some familial obligations at home, Shaunny pointed out correctly that, after the championship win, nobody called you, “Little Nick,” much anymore, at least not to your face. As they left the restaurant and Coach Shaunny got into the school’s Driver’s-Ed Chevy, the Coach suggested Nick should be playing ball somewhere over the summer. He offered to make inquiries for Nick, who was grateful. Dixie said he only hoped it wasn’t too late to catch on with a summer team. The season was already three weeks old. Maybe all the rosters had been set. He mentioned that Mr. Gasch said he had an open roster spot on his team. The Coach told them he would follow up on that offer and check with a couple of other summer league coaches whom he knew, as well. And no matter what, he advised Nick

not to worry, for the coach felt certain that he could come up with something. Shaunny said he would get in touch with Nick at the Sheeboom's house. He had their number. Then he waved and drove away out of the shopping centre parking lot.

Nick and Ryz'n walked around the corner down the root stem of the 'Y' back to their car. Mario called to them from inside the Esquire Barber Shoppe. He wanted to give Nick that haircut now, but when Nick saw several customers awaiting Mario's services, the young vet declined politely, saying he'd take a rain check. Mario shook his head with disapproval.

"Jour fadda no like, Neeq." Nick smiled, waved and walked on. "He's right about that, Baby," added Ryz'n.

After they returned to the car, Ryz'n suggested that she should drive. In that way, her husband could look around, "taking in the sights of the Heights, seeing if anything struck his eye that might rekindle a memory." Once they sat down in the car and she had adjusted the seat and mirrors to suit her, Ryz'n asked.

"Well, Nicky, what did ya think of the coach, and all those stories he told about ya?"

"Oh, I dunno. I mean he's a likeable fellow, the Coach I mean, but it's hard for me to relate to that Little Nick character. He is quite a colorful guy, not much like me at all. I'm sorry. I'm kind of plain and dull, compared to him. I feel bad for you Ryzanna, being stuck with me, now."

"Oh, nonsense! You needn't feel that way. We're together, now, Sweetie. That's all that matters. You'll remember soon enough. You've already begun to remember some things." His head droop in disappointment. "What is it? What's wrong, Baby?"

Nick exhaled deeply as he looked out the window.

"I don't know. I just feel like I'm lettin' everyone down." Sullen now, he looked out away from her. Then he sighed. "Well, guess we should go get the strawberries, hunh?"