

Back in the Starfire, Ryz'n remained agitated. Dixie noted she was uncharacteristically short-tempered, as she drove him home from their encounter with Lattimore at the Navy Yard. To gain some relief from the late afternoon summer heat, Ryz'n had removed her wraparound skirt, placing it in the front seat between them, but still she wore the cuffed, green shorts with the gold plaid pattern. The traffic jam just outside the Navy Yard didn't help improve her mood any. It was almost 4:30 p.m. The D. C. rush hour had started. Ryz'n said the back-up must be the result of the South Capitol Street Bridge having opened up for some vessel to pass by on the Anacostia River, even though she emphatically claimed that should never happen during rush hour. Dixie sat quietly beside her, ignoring her little tantrum, more interested in taking in the scenes of a hometown he did not know. Boom! She made a U-turn and hopped on the Southwest Freeway, heading, according to the road signs, for the Eleventh Street Bridge. Dixie held onto the foot rest, so he would not lean over too far. Upon reaching the bridge, they found it, too, was jammed heading east. Swearing beneath her breath, Ry pulled over into the far left hand lane, cutting off an oncoming car, and headed directly across the bridge onto Pennsylvania Avenue. Dixie looked at her as if she had suddenly become a maniac, whom he had never met.

"Shoot! We're practically at the dentist's anyway," she proclaimed more to herself than to him. "And we're already in the rush hour mess. We might as well take care of those X-rays now and get it over with!" She acted as if this assertion explained her poor driving habits. She turned left onto shady Minnesota Avenue, parking the car a couple blocks down the street from the dentist. When he got out of the car, he made sure she saw him as he knelt down and kissed the sidewalk. He turned his head towards her and winked.

"Very funny, Nick, very funny." He said no more about her horrendous rush hour driving habits. His actions spoke plenty loud enough.

As they walked back up the west side of the street, Dixie noted to her how strange it was to see so many huge shade trees along the sidewalk. In some cases, the cement sidewalk curved around the trunk of the tree and tree roots burrowing under the walk raised the concrete. Ryz'n hardly acknowledged him, until they reached the dentist's office. If she had something on her mind, she was keeping it to herself. The dentist's office was in the end basement of an old brick row house. They walked down a few steps under a green awning that hung over the door and stepped inside.

There were a couple patients waiting in the receptionist area, but that didn't slow Ryz'n down. She walked past them to a desk at the far end of the green linoleum floor waiting room and identified herself and Nick to the receptionist. With a sense of entitlement that embarrassed him, Ryz'n explained rather snippily that the Marine Corps needed Nick's X-rays for official business. The receptionist, who Dixie later learned was the dentist's wife, listened patiently, but explained the doctor had no time for Dixie today. She did come out from behind her desk to greet Dixie and offer her profoundest well wishes upon his incredible return. Angered, Ryz'n was about to give

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the receptionist a piece of her mind, when the dentist emerged from a doorway to their right. Dixie could not figure what had gotten into his previously pleasant wife.

Dr. Laizure was a tall, bald gentleman with rather large hands, which he was drying upon a white hand towel. He greeted the young couple, listened patiently to Ryz'n's animated story and asked Dixie to return the next morning before eight a.m. when the dentist could render the services required without disturbing his next day patients' schedules. The couple thanked him and left. Back in the car, the radio station reported a traffic accident at the intersection of Veer and Pennsylvania Avenues.

"Oh great", snapped Ryz'n sarcastically. "We're ten minutes from your house and it will probably take over an hour to get there from here. Dinner's at six and I have to go home and clean up first. I'm beginning to smell." She crinkled her nose, sniffed her right armpit and threw a sour expression across her face.

Dixie was surprised by both her remarks and uncouth actions as well as by her negative tone. He sought to calm her.

"Hey, you look and smell just great to me, like lemons." He was referring to her Love's Fresh Lemon cologne.

"Hmmpf! I'll just bet I do, like sour lemons."

Before he could respond, she peeled out and careened down the avenue, with the radio blaring. She led him on a wild ride down side streets and through cobblestone alleys, finally crossing back over Pennsylvania Avenue only to be caught in another traffic mess, which prompted her to take another wild ride over more side streets, until she finally became stuck at the light at Good Hope Road and Alabama Avenue. As they sat in downhill traffic in the late afternoon heat waiting for the light to change, she picked a fight with him.

Figuring her irritable mood stemmed from the traffic situation, Dixie tried to soothe her. He admonished her lightly, encouraging her that there was some progress on the road ahead. She just had to be patient.

"PATIENT! How long do I have to be patient?" However, he was not certain that she was referring to the traffic in front of them.

"You don't love her anymore, isn't that right, Nicky?" She sniped at him in sarcasm.

"Who?" Dixie was taken aback. "What are you talk—"

"WHO?!?! You know damn well WHO! It seems as though my entire life with you Nicholas has always revolved around you and your relationships with other girls. I, I can't believe this is going to happen again, not now, not after this whole amnesia thing. I just can't believe it!"

"Who? What other girl are you talking about?" Dixie was completely flabbergasted.

The traffic had moved ahead of them, but she had not noticed. Her face flushed beneath a tan that, unlike earlier in the motel room that morning, now was surprisingly dark. Moreover, Dixie could feel those gorgeous, hazel-green eyes shooting lasers at him from behind her wrap-around Foster-Grants as they must be turning ever greener. Ryz'n pressed into the seatback, so she could lift her butt to fish something from her left pocket of her short-shorts, while an angry horn honked behind them. So tight were the shorts that, just like last night when she had tried to retrieve his mouth organ,

she had difficulty retrieving the item from her pocket. She had to lean her shoulders back against the seat and stretch her legs out straight under the steering wheel to extract a photograph. More horns honked from behind, but, incensed, Ryz'n ignored them. Finally, with difficulty, she produced the bent photograph and flicked her trump card into his face. The item he feared he had dropped back in the Commandant's outer office had been found.

Dixie recognized it before he reached to pick it up off the floor. It was a small color photo of Donna posing in the powder blue and white bikini. Her 40 inch double D cups were popping out everywhere from under the shrunken halter top. Donna's hands were folded behind her, resting on the curve in her rump. It was that very photo, which Donna had specifically asked him before he left to keep in his wallet for her. Donna was leaning against a volleyball pole on the beach, displaying a three-quarter's view of her profile. She obviously had sucked in her gut while she had stuck out her generous bust, which was poking through that pre-shrunken top. It was quite an impressive photo, one worthy of "Playboy." Dixie had always admired it. Lightly penciled on the white cardboard back of the photo, in Donna's handwriting, was:

40DD—29—39 Don't forget me, Baby!

Caught red-handed with the blonde Venus, an embarrassed and disappointed Dixie tapped the two by three-inch photo against his clenched left hand. He was stalling, trying to come up with a plausible explanation.

"Where did you find this?" he asked rather casually, maybe too casually.

Ryz'n had been watching intently for his reaction. She was about to respond, when a tall, thin black man sporting a broad afro and another shorter, muscular black man with equally broad sideburns approached either side of the Starfire.

"Hey! Why'n't ya git yore fat white ass in gear, bitch? Let's go."

Undaunted, Ryz'n retorted in the same sassy tone "Why'n't you git yore black behind back in yore car and shut yore mouth?"

Both black men jumped forward on either side of the car, but Ryz'n quickly turned around in the seat and stepped on the gas, leaving the two would-be assailants grasping for the muggy breeze and inhaling the Starfire's blue exhaust fumes. Dixie pivoted in his seat to watch in horror as both men fell to the asphalt in the wake of the Starfire's exhaust, while other motorists were laying on their horns behind them. By the time the two men were able to right themselves; the Starfire had escaped across Good Hope Road, just as the long light changed from green back to red. Behind them, the intersection once again choked with heavy crossing traffic, effectively blocking any possible pursuit from their assailants. Dixie felt a pounding headaches coming on.

"Those, those buttheads!" pronounced Ryz'n in utter contempt.

Now Dixie was angry and he couldn't restrain his emotion. He blurted out.

"They were right, you know Ryzanna. They had been waiting there all the while, just like us and when the opportunity presented itself to move forward, you had them blocked in."

Still surly, Ryz'n refused to answer him, as she sped on.

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“Yeah, well Pickles! I was DISTRACTED! Isn’t that what you said earlier today, when you almost rammed the Coach?”

“That was different—”

“Look, no matter how you slice it, those creeps had no right to address me like that or threaten us for that matter.”

“Well, that’s kind of true, but—”

“No buts and that’s the bottom line. You can’t let buttheads intimidate you, Nicholas!”

He was right that she was wrong back there, but he also realized she could not let him know that. And while he did not want any more mishaps caused by her emotional state either, he understood now the true source of her anger and it was not those two guys behind them. Ryz’n kept quiet and drove. She followed Alabama Avenue past Staunton Elementary down to 23rd, where she turned left at the liquor store. Dixie did not want to fight with her over this or even over the photograph. Not now, at least. She became sullen and quiet as they drove over the Sweetland Parkway between the low stony fences, which served as protective barriers on either side of the road. Dixie was thankful for her change in attitude, but he could not believe she was going to let this drop forever. Probably, she had decided it would be better to pick a more opportune time for that battle. And he knew she *was* exhausted. She had complained of her fatigue outright. Her fatigue like her anger seemed to come in fits and starts, but she had been able to control herself, at least up until she had found that 40DD-29-39 mini-pinup picture in his wallet. She moaned morosely, claiming that she felt like Sisyphus, who had been pushing that gigantic rock uphill for eternity, only to have it roll back down on him every time he neared the summit. She muttered that this was not a good time for their first fight, so she calmed herself and changed the subject.

“Look!” She pointed to a one-story brick building across the street on the corner. “That’s where you used to get us liquor, when we were just kids. They never questioned you on it, didn’t even ask you for ID, especially after you sold them liquor at a discount that time. Remember? We exchanged the booze received as payment for that gig up in Emmitsburg? But you don’t remember, do you?”

Dixie shook his head in the negative. Relieved that she had changed the subject, he was glad that she decided not to argue with him any further about Donna, at least not now. He had dropped Donna’s photo somewhere in the car during their wild ride and that was OK. Dixie looked behind them when they turned at the corner to see if those angry motorists might be following, but he did not see them. The tangled traffic had trumped any efforts at their angered pursuit. She read his mind.

“Don’t worry about them, Baby. We won’t see them anymore.” She was right. They drove past the low income housing surrounding the black-inhabited Shipley Terrace shopping center.

It was almost six when the couple arrived at Ryz’n’s home. As she pulled the Starfire up to the curb, her parents scolded her. They were already on their way out the door to go and dine with their in-laws. Tired and irritable, Ryz’n explained she and Dixie had been caught in traffic and that she would just need a few minutes to clean up. Then she

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suggested Dixie do the same. He protested he would have to put on the same shirt so what good would it do for him to clean up, but Ryz'n insisted. If he would wash, she would take care of his shirt. She snatched a towel before dashing into the shower, while Dixie sat down and fiddled with the piano.

Minutes later, Ryz'n scurried through the living room with a shower cap on her head, her body wrapped in a light pink towel. She found him still seated at the piano.

"Come on now, Nicky. Make a move. It's five after already. I'll get you one of Bryson's shirts from the basement. Go ahead and get cleaned up now. What are you gawking at, Sweetie?"

"You! Sweetie."

Suddenly, Ry brightened. It must be love, she thought, when you look great to him, in a towel and a shower cap. With a light heart, she disappeared around the corner and flew down the basement stairs to find him a shirt in her brother-in-law's closet.

He cleaned up in her bathroom as she had requested, where she gave him some aspirin to swallow and melt his headache away. He emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, wet and damp. He said he had found some "Discrete," a woman's deodorant in the medicine cabinet. She was already dressed, coifed and seated demurely, waiting for him on the couch. She clutched a long sleeved, buttoned-down, light blue, cotton shirt. The shirt, still on its hanger, covered her body from neck to knee. Now it was her turn to gawk at him.

Wearing only his grey silk slacks and matching grey Gucci shoes, with his long jet mane freshly combed, Nick appeared to her like a Greek god. There were muscles upon muscles. His deeply tanned abdomen was a washboard. His arms were like oak branches. Even so, he was long and lean. His shoulders had always been broad for his size and his waist was the size of a girl's! All this and more she had observed vaguely by the outside lights creeping through the window last night in their motel room. However, by the light of day, he just blew her away. She was speechless. Nick unceremoniously broke the spell, as he rasped without any hint of self-consciousness.

"That's the shirt, hunh? Well, let's see how it fits." He smiled faintly.

He tugged the shirt from her clutch. Even though she had not forgotten how well proportioned he had always been, his present condition left her dumb. He was one long, lean gridiron slab of muscle. Her mind retreated to their first date when she first had seen him in a swimsuit by the base pool at the start of their junior year. Her heart had leapt up into her throat then, just as it did now. He had been just a few days shy of his sixteenth birthday. Still he had been a physical specimen to behold, a miniature specimen to be sure, a mighty mite, not much bigger than she was now, actually. Still his V-shaped, muscular figure had awed her then, as well. There was something primal in her attraction towards him. Whatever pheromones were, Nicky always had had the ones she craved.

"You know Ryz'n? You really should close your mouth before you swallow a fly." He grinned.

"What?"

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He had caught her staring. Mann, it had been a long time between drinks for her, much, much too long. She was contemplating offering herself to him right now, but they were late.

Pickles!

Nick had slipped into his brother-in-law's shirt.

"Well, it is a little big Nick, but not too bad. Little long in the sleeves, but you can roll them up."

"Well, it's rather loose. I like that. It feels comfortable. Do you think I should trade him the Bonneville for it?" He folded the sleeves up his forearms.

Ryz'n smiled at his dry joke as he stuffed the shirttails inside his slacks. "Uh, I don't think I'd go quite that far, Baby. You look like one of them old riverboat gamblers, Honey" she gushed. "You use to wear your dad's old suits in high school to look like Elvis in the Fifties. You sported a baggy look that hid all those muscles you had, or have, underneath. Just like now, Sweetie." He grinned.

"OK, all ready to go," he proclaimed proudly. Holding his hands wide out to his sides, he smiled affably. Nick extended his hand to help her up off the sofa. Ryz'n rose and surprised him by placing her hands around his neck and kissing him slowly but sensuously. He pulled back to speak.

"I think it's a quarter, no twenty after now, Ry. Hey?" She kissed his cheek and chin in quick succession. "Hey, I thought you were mad at me?" That remark caught her attention and, she resumed her mad just for effect and placing her arms akimbo, she responded sarcastically.

"I am. But we can get into that later," she advised with ominous foreboding and a simpering frown. "But you're right. We should be going. Come on, you drive. Here, here's your coat. Let's make a move, Baby."

Nick graciously accepted his silk suit coat from her and pulled on the jacket, while he followed her out the front door.

He flattered her on her choice of dress: a gold-over-brown sundress, smothered in a floral and fruit motif, with thousands of tiny gold and brown flower blossoms overlaid one upon another. She had chosen it specifically to catch his eye. Golden brown spaghetti straps tied in bows over either shoulder helped support the dress. The snug bodice and her substantial breastworks did the rest. The garment fit her snugly everywhere, except where it flared a bit over her thighs and stopped a several inches above the knees. The bodice was extremely tapered, emphasizing the narrow, longish nature of her waist. The back was open from just beneath her shoulder blades and the chest was squared off, but was sufficiently décolleté to reveal much more than a hint of cleavage. She also wore light brown, open-toed, leather, platform shoes with what must with three-inch, blocked heels. Since he had grown so tall, she needed that extra height, to help negate their disparity in size. Her choice of dress certainly flattered her figure. That's why she had chosen it. Ryz'n had topped off her ensemble by carrying a matching light brown, leather handbag tethered over her shoulder by a long thin strap. The handbag bounced jauntily against her left hip as she walked, making her feel cute but sexy or *sharp*, as Little Nick had always said. Ryz'n had once again pulled her

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smoky brown hair back into the unfashionable ponytail he had observed favorably that morning. A small brown and yellow cloth held the ponytail in place. The obsolete, thick but bouncy, tight pony-tail hurt her head, but, for him tonight, she could bear with it. She dimpled and blew him a kiss in thanks to his compliment. Fatigued and ornery before her shower and change of clothes, Ryz'n now felt refreshed and had gained a second wind.

She led and Nick followed. Ry inhaled deeply of the sweet summer evening air, as Nick strolled behind her, down the sidewalk and across the grass to the street to where they had parked the car. *Life was good.*

"My goodness," she heard him say.

"Come on, Baby. What are you dawdling for? You know we're late."

"I'm just enjoying the awesome scenery. That's all."

"Awesome scenery? Here on 21st Avenue?"

He kibitzed, "Oh yeah, like Diamond Head or the Grand Canyon, you know, something truly unique unto itself."

She stopped at the passenger side to hand him the keys.

"Yeah and what might that be?"

"You!"

"Ha! Me? Yeah me and the Grand Canyon. Sheesh!"

"No, for sure. Following behind you, is a real treat, yessir, a truly scenic treat."

"Oh? How so?"

"Well, your figure. Your shoulders are as broad as your, well, your back end. And although you move light and strong like an athlete, there's something very feminine about you, too. And you're, well, bouncy all over. Never seen all those traits in one woman's gait before."

"Oh, you haven't, hunh? What you really mean is I walk like a Butch and I've got swimmer's shoulders and a fat ass, is that it?" Ryz'n hoped to prod him for some more compliments and her ploy worked beautifully. She loved his free flowing, accurate speech, too. No stutters. It was all coming together.

"No, no, no that's not what I said. You're twisting my words."

"Well, why don't you say what you mean then, Nick?"

"Well ... alright, Ry." He stopped joking and looked at her hard. "I guess what I really means is that you move like a woman, *a real woman*, not some Tomboy or some movie-star wannabe, but in a very unassuming manner. You move as if, well as if, you're 'all over alive,' like, like 'jello on springs,' as they say in the movies."

Ryz'n peered into his sincere eyes. She wanted to jump him right then and there, but she couldn't pull the trigger. She said nothing. They were late. The moment passed. As he opened the car door for her, Ryz'n noted that it was just about twenty-four hours since he had first met her, an anniversary of sorts, but it had seemed like a lifetime. She started to step into the Starfire as he held the door for him, but she stopped short. She reached up to him and caressed him sumptuously, completely uninhibited, right out at her front curb for all to see. Nick took her in his arms, looking over her face and tugged playfully on her ponytail swinging against the faint summer breeze. This

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couldn't be real. He couldn't be real. Was she merely dreaming once more? The old *Coasters* song lyrics came to mind: *Life ain't never been so good to me.*

Her mockingly angry tone had melted and she whispered huskily, with all hint of their earlier skirmish having faded away. "We better get going, Sweetie. Your parents will be upset. Why don't you drive, Baby?" Nick nodded. "OK, whatever you say, *Baby.*" He grinned and reluctantly let loose of her as he held the car door open.

Happy, yet with a lingering sense of sadness, Ryz'n watched her husband skirt around the front of the Starfire to the driver's side. *St. Brigid, please pray Our Lord give me strength. I want him so bad I could die, even more than the first time down at the beaver ponds.* Yet, gone now was the cocky, slightly slew-footed, light bouncy gait she had recalled as his. Now his modest, light stride reflected his humble personality. The shower had refreshed her, at least for the moment, perking her up. How could she be upset with him over anything? When he got behind the wheel, she tapped the dashboard smartly twice, as he had done earlier.

"On James," she urged.

"Yes Miss," replied Nick obediently.

"Miss? You mean Mrs., don't you?"

"No, of course, I should say: *Ma-dame.*"

They both laughed, as he assumed a deep, official, decidedly French accent.