

~ Chapter 4: Remembrances ~

Soon after the girls were seated in the spacious first class section of the Boeing 727 jet airliner, they could feel the power of the big bird beneath them, lifting them off the ground. The diminutive Ryan sisters had ample room to stretch their legs amid the tall, cushioned blue seats and the hard plastic, beige décor of the airliner's first class cabin. With an empty seat between them, Ryz'n glanced to her left towards her sister. Sheena's attention was directed through the double-paned, pressurized passenger window.

With her left hand, Ryz'n reached up to channel the overhead, cool air blower full blast down towards her lap. Then she gripped the stainless steel arms of the first class aisle seat tightly and settled into it. Attired in her snug, single-breasted, blue silk skirt-suit, she wiggled her fanny into the firm cushion, bracing for takeoff. Ryz'n could both feel and hear the engine's revv stronger and louder, gently rocking the cabin, as the captain turned the plane down the runway.

With her eyes closed, Ryz'n laid her head straight back against the upright seatback. Her spiked, high heeled shoes lay flat against the blue-carpeted floor. Firm cushions supporting her taut body provided a sense of luxury, relaxing her a little. Even so, she sat customarily erect, shoulder blades and butt pressed hard into the seatback. Her hands and forearms rested upon the arm rests while her fingers wrapped around the ends of those rests. The pronounced natural, inward curve of lower back remained free and clear of any seat cushion contact. The jet gathered momentum as it hurtled down the runway, vibrating all within the cabin.

As she bumped along, Ryz'n reveled in the run. Takeoffs had always been her favorite part of a flight. Yes, takeoffs could be simultaneously exhilarating and soothing, if her imagination was running as well as those loudly whirring jet engines. This evening, everything was hitting fully on all cylinders. After lift-off, Ryz'n laid her head back against the head cushion and closed her eyes briefly.

The big jet airliner propelled her forward through the atmosphere above the renown Virginia horse country and Ryz'n relaxed. Melting into her seat, she drifted back to her first flight with Nick on their second honeymoon, when they had flown to the Caribbean. She recalled how the two of them had estimated their budget down to the penny. She remembered how, when they had finished figuring eighteen months outward, they would have had only four hundred dollars left, after deducting expenses from a year and half's worth of anticipated toil and labor. Ryz'n chuckled as she recalled Nick pulling on his wraparound shades, wearing them on the airplane, even as she did now. When she asked him why? He had said, he needed them to protect him from the glare. When she had asked him, "What glare?" He had said it was, "The glare from our future."

Then, minutes later as if on cue, their future had arrived in the person of one bald, rotund, “Honest Abe” Saperstein of little known Sable Records. Mr. Saperstein had stumbled down the aisle of the plane purposefully to introduce himself to them. He had heard Nick singing and playing the harmonica at the request of the other passengers earlier on the festive holiday flight. He said Nick’s musical gifts had impressed him. That chance meeting turned into a profitable one for all concerned.

Nick had been right on that score, financially, anyway. They had become millionaires practically overnight thanks to the lucrative deal the generous Mr. Saperstein had offered them. The deal had been really more like a partnership. So, when *GRT’s* first two albums both almost went double gold within sixteen months of each other, the royalties had just flowed in. Then, unexpectedly, Mr. Saperstein had sold Sable Records to Halo Platters and a third *GRT* album, full of Nick’s songs, had gone gold, selling well over half a million copies for Halo, even though Nicky was unavailable to promote the album. Finally, over the last year, Ryz’n and Sheena’s album last summer came close to gold, selling over a third of a million copies. All tolled, *GRT* had sold more than three million record albums in a little over four years and that was not counting sales from singles!

Of course, Nick had never enjoyed the fruits of his musical success. She wished he hadn’t been so stubborn about joining the Marine Corps. *Oh, that lottery!* That lottery, she believed, had sparked him into it. Nick had felt his number would be low for certain. The lottery for males, born in 1953, was the first one that did not permit college student deferments, so Nick wouldn’t receive the college exemption that so many had enjoyed before him. Rather than wait for the lottery and be drafted into the Army, Nick had volunteered for the Corps. He thought with his luck his draft lottery number would have been one or seven. Then with such a low number, he would have been drafted for sure. *“Lucky seven!”* He used to say, jokingly, that’s what he predicted he would draw. Everyone tried to talk him out of volunteering for the Corps, but he wouldn’t listen. He never did. He could be downright stubborn that way!

Privately, Nick had confided to Ryz’n that he had seen a “vision” of himself helping other American soldiers, who were clothed in tattered rags, looking gaunt, helpless, and hopeless. He had had this “vision” after watching the 1971 Thanksgiving Day news broadcasts of our American POWs over in North Viet Nam. Nick felt he could and should help them. Ryz’n had told him that he had merely eaten too heavy of a Thanksgiving dinner, but her husband remained resolute in his opinion. She recalled he could be darned irritating that way.

So, the day after Thanksgiving, before heading downtown to the recording studio, and without consulting her, Nick had risen early and visited the Marine recruiting office located up in Stuyvesant Mall. Rather than wait to be drafted into the Army for two years, Nick had volunteered to “be with the best.” She had thought that was a very bad move on his part. *Shoot! Everyone thought Nicky had pulled a real boner.* His father and his best friend Johnny Allein were particularly

vocal in their opposition. Ryz'n, as well, tried her best to dissuade her husband from volunteering, wondering to him aloud if there were something wrong with her that was forcing him away. Happily married men did not volunteer to join the Marines and go off to war. But, he had pooh-poohed her distressful suggestion.

Later they had learned that all Marines, except for those protecting the U. S. Consulate and a few advisors, had been withdrawn already from South Viet Nam eight months earlier. Ryz'n had thought then that maybe the Corps was the best way for him to go, after all. They would knock some sense into him, too! "The Marines were the best there ever was," he'd say and he was "gonna be one of the best." *Shoot!* She knew he was one of the best! He didn't need to be a Marine to prove that, not to her, anyway. She never forgot that cold and dreary New Year's Day when he left for boot camp. "What a way to start the New Year!" he had joked. Ryz'n had laughed with him outwardly, but inwardly, she had wept.

However, when the draft lottery was held a month later on February 2nd, with Nicky nearly halfway through boot camp, Ryz'n learned that Nick's lottery number was 268—268! She could have died or, more accurately, she could have killed him for enlisting. *Lucky 7? Humpf! For sure, you were wrong on that one, Baby!* With the de-escalation of the war and the ongoing peace talks, there was no way the Government would draft someone with a number as high as Nick's. To add salt to her wounds, Ryz'n learned the following year that the Government only drafted 646 people total for all those men born in Nick's birth year of 1953. For sure, none of them saw service in Nam. None of them was number 268!

Irony of ironies, Nick had joined the Marines but would wind up fighting with the Army, anyway. Green Berets and Navy Seals had joined a few Marine Recon Scout Snipers in a clandestine, special inter-service search and rescue operations outfit. The secret unit operated under the authority of the Army Rangers.

Still, after he left for boot camp, Ryz'n had bawled her eyes out over Nick's enlistment. Yet, she never had let him see those tears. She had stuck to him like glue before he left, not wanting to miss a single second with him before his departure. Even so, she could go only so long without becoming incensed with him for having pulled such a stunt, without even so much as consulting her on how she had felt about it. It had taken her a long time to forgive him in her heart for his total disregard of her feelings on the matter. Yet when he had arrived, unannounced on liberty in early April of '72, she had been more than willing to forgive him all.

Surprisingly, Nick had shown up the second week of April at her cottage doorstep down at M&L University. She found him in his Class A greens looking so handsome in his uniform. The Viet Cong had just launched what came to be known as the "Easter Offensive," their last ditch effort to win the War outright against the U.S. before the U.S. withdrew. Nick was supposed to be finishing up with the Marine Infantry Training Regiment (ITR), not standing on her doorstep. Ryz'n had not cared. She had been so glad just to see him.

He had been training near Jacksonville, North Carolina at Camp LeJeune and Camp Geiger for a few weeks after he had completed his basic training at the Corps' Recruit Training Depot at Parris Island, South Carolina. Ryz'n had jumped on him when he walked in the door of their little cottage, down at M&L and stuck to him like white on rice for his entire liberty.

She had not given him much time to think, which was what Ryz'n had thought he had needed. They had driven home from their cottage at M&L to Crest Hill Heights to speak with his family, Father Vizconni and some of Nick's friends, like Johnny Allein. Nick had sought advice. He had a tough decision to make.

It seems that Nick possessed some unique physical abilities, which the Marine Reconnaissance and Scout Snipers found appealing. His hearing was exceptional, as was his vision, 20/15 in his left eye, his dark brown eye, and 20/10 in his right, blue eye. More importantly, at night, he could see better than the average human being. That's not to say his night vision was anywhere close to his normal daylight vision, because it wasn't. His night vision was five to six times worse than his day vision, but even so, at night, he could see two to three times better than most people. Amazingly, his eyes could adjust completely to night time darkness in five to ten minutes.

Nick did have difficulty at night in distinguishing varying hues of red, confusing them with greens. (Ryz'n knew this all too well. With her along for the ride, he had, on more than one occasion run, or nearly run, a red traffic light at night, erroneously believing it to be green. However, Ryz'n figured that distinguishing red from green lights was not a priority in the jungles of Viet Nam.) Further, his training record had been excellent in every respect, tops in his class. He had rated, "Expert" with the M-16 rifle as well as with the Marine Corps service pistol. In short, Nick was exactly what the services were looking for, as they were trying one last time to reinforce a unique, clandestine inter-service, company that operated mostly behind enemy lines. The sole purpose of the unit remained classified—Top Secret.

Much later, however, when Ryz'n learned that Nick had become categorized as an MIA, she had also learned the unit's purpose was to extract as many allied prisoners of war (POWs) as possible from the enemy before the peace talks were concluded. The fewer POW's there were, the fewer bargaining chips for Hanoi at the peace table or thus had gone the Administration's reasoning. Later, it had been explained to her that Nick's unit had persevered, by operating unofficially as "special advisors" on "missions of mercy to those in need," long after August of '72. That date had been the final pull-out deadline for all U. S. combat troops from South Viet Nam. It was only later Ryz'n realized that the "those in need" were not Vietnamese civilians, but American and Vietnamese POWs. However, neither she nor Nick had known the nature of the mission that April and Nick had not been thinking of his decision from the personal and not the political angle. In April of '72, he did not know for sure what his mission would be.

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Initially, Nick's Base Commander had refused to order Nick into the dangerous assignment. One obvious reason was that the green Marine had lacked experience, unlike the veteran Army Rangers and the handful of Navy Seals, which comprised the majority of the unit, some of whom possessed sensory faculties similar to Nick. In addition, there was doubt that Nick could successfully pass six months of the most rigorous training the Corps had to offer in as many weeks in order to meet minimal preparation requirements for the mission. Success was anything but assured and training classes would be disrupted to accommodate Nick. Yet, the Corps was desperate for someone with his unique skills.

Then, perhaps more importantly, Nick's age and youthful appearance conspired against him. When the Base Commander had looked upon his youthful countenance, Nick said the Commander had seen in Nick his own sixteen-year old son. That was the same son who so recently had wrapped the family station wagon around a telephone pole after the junior prom. Thus, Nick's commander had given Nick a week of liberty to go home and think carefully about what he wanted to do. The Base Commander had told Nick one thing about the mission that had stuck with him. The commanding marine had advised the detail would not be a typical seek and destroy operation, rather it would be more like a "mission of mercy," though the exact nature of the operation was classified.

Nick had thought about it. He had decided, but he did not tell anyone about the decision until he left to return to base. Ryz'n knew her husband. They had experienced more trials, tribulations and successes in almost two years together, than most people had faced in ten. She knew what he had decided, without him having to tell her. Knowing this, she had tried to make their last night together a memorable one. Before she left him at the front gates of Camp LeJeune, Nick told her she had more than succeeded. He said he was glad that she had been so devoted to him all week. He assured her that she had helped him tremendously. She could not begin to understand how much. His compliments had filled her completely and were the only positives she could take from his departure. Then she recalled how he had said, with a wink typical of Nicky, that he'd expect the same kind of treatment when he returned home to her. Now, over three years later, she was still waiting to repeat her performance. The faint smile her recollections had brought to mind vanished in the face of that fact.

Before he had shipped out, Ryz'n had asked him why he had decided to volunteer, when he had known the assignment was so dangerous. Nick had said he didn't want to volunteer, truly he did not. He didn't want to kill anyone either, even though he was certain he would have to do so. But each night that week in early April, after they had fallen asleep in one another's arms, Nick had experienced the recurring vision of him helping American P. O. W. s. Those poor devils were existing in rags and living in hellish circumstances. Nick had become convinced this mission of mercy was to rescue those prisoners. To his way of thinking, what else could it have been? And, as usual, he had been right.

Nick had reasoned that the Lord had bestowed certain unique, physical qualities upon him that he could employ to help out fellow Americans, who were barely existing, surviving in a torturous Hell. His decision was simple really: he could either use the gifts God had given him to help those individuals less fortunate than he or he could choose not to do so. Thinking of it like that, Nick had said he had realized he might die if he went, but he couldn't live with himself if he stayed. She remembered his reply word for word: "It's like 'doing unto others, as you would have them to do unto you,' so there's really no decision to make, is there, Sweetie?" Faced with such magnanimous logic, Ryz'n had replied dejectedly that she had guessed not. What else could she have said to make him change his mind? Absolutely nothing—If only she could have foreseen the future.

Nick had kissed her good-bye very gently, like a breath of air on her lips, as he had first kissed her so long ago on their first date at the Base Pool. He had picked up his sea bag and walked into camp in the early dawn of a Carolina spring sunrise. He never looked back. Ryz'n had her ubiquitous movie camera with her and recorded his parting on sixteen mm film. It was the last Ryz'n had seen of Nicky. That had been April 17th, 1972, three years and two months ago. *Three years and two months! Yes indeed, that is a long time between drinks!*

* * *

"Good evening, Ms. Sheeboom. Ms. Mather. It's a pleasure to be serving you this evening." The handsome flight attendant smiled brightly at the Ryan sisters before she added. "Tonight, we're serving a late dinner."

The flight attendant was young, blonde, beautiful and all smiles in her beige suite with a red, white and blue scarf, knotted rakishly to the left side of her neck. Nick would love her, thought Ryz'n.

"We offer a choice of chicken marsala or filet of flounder. Which would you ladies prefer?" She smiled as if she really meant it and waited patiently for their reply.

Sheena opted for the chicken, while Ryz'n typically chose the fish. Before they could be served, Ryz'n sat forward to remove her dark blue, silk suit coat with its deep lapels and stylish, wide, pointed collars. The attendant sought to relieve Ryz'n of the coat, but Ryz'n held onto it. She folded it neatly, lengthwise, shoulder to shoulder. Then, after folding the coat in half, Ryz'n shifted forward further in her seat to stuff the folded end of the jacket carefully into the tightly banded magazine pouch on the seatback in front of her.

"Ms. Sheeboom, I'd be more than happy to hang your coat in the closet or place it in the overhead compartment if you prefer." It was obvious the attendant felt uncomfortable with Ryz'n's choice of storage.

"No, thank you. I like having my things close about me and the luggage rack is too high. I've done this before and it works out very nicely, surprisingly, with no wrinkles." Ryz'n crinkled her nose to display a perfect flight attendant smile of her own. The stewardess surrendered and served the sisters, asking what they

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would like to drink. Both girls chose the Chablis. Sheena was sitting next to the window, Ryz'n on the aisle, with an empty seat in between them. The stewardess served them their meals and the wine and pushed her cart down the aisle of the mostly empty First Class section to the next, unserved passengers. It had looked to Ryz'n as if the flight was not even half filled. There was no one sitting close to her and Sheena in First Class. The sisters whispered their grace, blessing themselves in conclusion, as was their custom. After a few minutes, as they ate, Sheena spoke softly.

“You've been awfully quiet over there, Sis. You OK?”

Sheena was wearing a pair of scarlet satin and wood, clogs and designer dark blue denim hip-hugger jeans, with leather lacing up the front. The jeans were unusually tight in the knees but flared, progressively wider from the knee to the ground. Her off-white top was made of muslin, similar to a peasant's blouse with puffy shoulders and scooped neck at the top. However, unlike a peasant's blouse, the top had long sleeves and the midriff dissolved into a tapered, elastically thatched, fish net which, below the waist, flared out into muslin again over her hips, in a feathered Tinker Bell design. The sleeves fit snugly but oddly, for the inside of each sleeve was hemmed at the wrist, while the outer sleeve, drooped into a ragged cuff, down to a point below her outstretched fingers. Tied about her waist over the fish net section of her blouse, she wore a red canvas belt. The showy belt bore a half dozen, large oval, silver spangles. Like her older sister, Sheena, too, wore a gold chained crucifix about her neck and a yellow-gold hair ribbon. However, Sheena wore the ribbon like an Indian headband, tying her center-parted, long, raven hair close about her head.

Ryz'n, typically, had dressed more conservatively. Hemmed several inches above her knee, the navy, silk mini-skirt, like all her skirts, was high waisted. Ryz'n wore a cream colored, patent leather belt, so wide that she could barely thread it through the skirt's four string belt loops. The belt matched, in color, her billowy, loose fitting cream satin shirt with the wide pointed collar. Earlier she had worn the blouse collar over the equally wide, pointed collar of her suit jacket. The French cuffs of the blouse had protruded fashionably beneath her suit jacket sleeves. Unlike her sister, Ryz'n's center blouse buttons opened modestly at her collarbone. Her gold necklace crucifix, like her sister, lay plainly in sight against her olive-skinned chest, but the larger linked, silver chain holding Nicky's bottle opener disappeared beneath her blouse.

A pair of antiquated, navy spiked heels shod her feet, while a pair of dark nylons adorned her legs. She wore her coffee-hued hair, parted unfashionably high on the right, but tied back in a ponytail, held together by the ever present yellow-gold ribbon. The only make-up worn by either of the girls was pink lip gloss, which matched the color of their long, painted fingernails. Both sisters, out of habit and a desire for privacy, wore their FosterGrants, even in the semi-seclusion of the first class cabin.

“Sure, I am. I’m great, really. I gotta feeling this time, Sheena. This time we’ve got something!” For emphasis, Ryz’n raised her fork to poke it into the cabin air between bites.

“I know. I feel the same,” enthused her sister. “Actually Ry, this is the first time, THE FIRST TIME that I feel we’re on top of the situation. You know? Instead of just shooting in the dark?”

“Yeah, exactly ... Wish Dad felt the same about it.”

“Oh Honey, don’t let him worry you. It’s just that he takes it so personally. He feels that, as our father, he should be able to fix things for us, even if we are full grown. Then, if things fall through, he feels worse than any of us, like he failed at his job, like he had let us down. I think he doesn’t want to expose his heart like that again, I mean, like before when that Dixon lady shot us down. You know?”

“Yes, I know. It’s OK. Once I get Nicky back, it won’t matter. None of it will.”

“Mother was right, Ry. It’s your faith that makes you strong.” Sheena chuckled. “I remember back in high school when Nicky refused to date you and we couldn’t figure out why. All year long, you prayed for him to come around, even while you were dating Don. And, and Nicky was going out with everyone else in sight, including me. I’m sorry Baby. I knew how you felt about him. I shouldn’ta done that. But you forgave me, didn’t ya?”

“Sheena! Whaddaya talkin’? You know I buried that one along time ago and put a fork in it with a sign attached saying ‘No resurrections allowed!’” She laughed and Sheena joined her.

“But I always figured you got even with me, anyway.”

“Oh? How do ya figure that?”

“Well, you remember that Fourth of July down at the beach? When Nicky rescued us? And brought us back to Don’s place?”

“Do I? I think about that night all the time. All the time!” Ryz’n felt a candle light inside of her with the memory.

“Well, you remember when Nicky kissed you at the top of the bedroom stairs?”

“Oh, you bet I do! He kissed me so softly, like a breath of fresh air, just like he did the first time, at the base pool. I remember it often.”

“Yeah? Well, maybe you recall what I was doin’ at that time?”

Ryz’n stopped to think a minute. “Well, as I recall ... you were sick as a dog and vomiting all over the floor by the bed.”

“EXACTLY! I figured it was God’s getting’ even with me for going out with Nicky behind your back like that.”

“Oh Baby, you know God doesn’t operate like that. Of course, He does move in mysterious ways, but no, that was your own fault. Most people get sick when they get to dopin’ and drinkin’ the way you were that night with Bernie. You asked for that, Baby Sister. I’m sorry, but you really did.” Ryz’n shot her sister an “I told you so” look. Chagrined, Sheena agreed.

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“Yeah, I know. So look, tell me again Sis, what these rude kids said on the phone.” Sheena removed her shades, hanging them down inside her blouse and motioned for Ryz’n to do the same. She did.

Ryz’n chuckled. “Well, they sounded like typical baseballers. I dunno. Evidently, they had received a lot of calls for this Strickler kid from a lot of females, claiming to be his girlfriend or sister or something. Guess they had seen him on TV when the announcers had mentioned, like Allena and Matt had said, that the kid had amnesia as a result of wounds from the War, etc. So these girls, well you know how cute Nicky is?”

“Yeah, I know. I know. If I hadn’t been such a jerk, maybe it would have been me and Nicky, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. I know.” They both laughed. “But then you wouldn’t have that hunk of a Bryson, now would you?”

“I’m happy. You know that Sis.”

“Yeah, I know. I know.” They laughed again. The wine helped.

“Anyway, these girls had been calling a lot, I guess. But when I described Nicky’s voice to that last jerk!” Ryz’n’s felt her brows narrow at the thought of him. Then she exhaled acquiescently. “Well, he realized I had described this Strickler guy’s voice correctly. For some reason, he got mad and hung up. I’ll talk to the coach, get it straight.”

“Strickler, hunh? That’s funny. You know, that he’d be using Todd’s name? Wonder if there’s a connection?”

“You know Sis, I wondered that, too. And I thought of something. I mean, maybe I’m reaching, but ...”

“But what?” asked Sheena in her naturally lilting, lyrical voice.

Ryz’n took in a couple of mouthfuls of fish, washing the food down with the Chablis. Sheena waited for Ryz’n to finish by nibbling some of her chicken. The cabin lights seem to shine off Ryz’n’s smooth, cream-colored satin blouse.

“You know that fish isn’t too great, but that Chablis is excellent.” Sheena nodded in agreement. “Anyway, you remember the first album we did? You weren’t on that album, of course Sheena, but there was a group picture of the band on the back. Nicky was sitting down in a chair. I stood behind him, next to Todd. Actually, Todd was leaning on me with his right elbow. The publicist asked him to do that, because we all looked too much like the folks in that painting of the farmer and his wife with the pitchfork. You know, too dour?” Sheena nodded as she kept eating. “Well, they put our names off to the side and around the bottom and top of the photo. However, they put the names on funny, kind of confusing actually. If you didn’t know better, from the positions of the names next to us, you’d think Todd was Nick and that Nick was Todd.”

“I get it. So you’re thinking that Nick, or this Strickler guy, may have seen that album cover, thinking he was Todd, because that’s the name that appeared to go with the picture that looked like him?”

“That’s it, exactly.”

“Well, if that’s the case, why wouldn’t he have gone to Halo Platters to identify himself?”

“Because that album was a Sable release! Halo didn’t pick up our option until the year after, remember?”

“That’s right!” A light of understating flickered on in Sheena’s eyes. “But couldn’t he have contacted Sable and—”

“No Honey! Sable no longer existed. They sold out lock, stock and barrel to Halo. You know that! Old Mr. Saperstein retired from the business with his wife. They packed up and moved out of the country. They only live here, in Florida now during the winter. There’s no way this Strickler could know how to contact him.”

“Oh yeah, I knew that. I knew that.” Again, they chuckled.

“You see, Sheena, what I think happened is this. And it’s what the nurse said.”

“The nurse who helped Nicky so much at Subic Bay? The one you interviewed in Manila?”

“No, Honey. The neurosurgeon’s at Subic Bay told me she had transferred to Kitsap, near Puget Sound. That’s where I spoke to her, at the sub base. She was very helpful, but ...” Ryz’n didn’t care to think how helpful Lt. Rosario had been to Nick. She resumed her explanation without touching on that sensitive subject.

“Well, after Nick recovered from surgery with amnesia over in Subic Bay, he thought he was this Dixon character, because he was found with Dixon’s dog tags on him. They sent him to Pearl or Kaneohe or wherever, where he continued to recuperate and undergo psychotherapy. The doctors and the Navy realize they can’t help him, because he’s not quite right. On top of being amnesic, I remember they said he had spells where he just zoned out, he’d lose it for a few seconds or minutes once in a while, be in another world, ya know? Well you can not be in the service in that kind of a state, never knowing when you might lose it, so they discharged him on medical grounds. Somehow, somehow, he finds out he isn’t this Dixon fellow after all. So he changes his name again to Jim Stark.”

“Yeah, now why would he do that? Where did he pull that from?”

Ryz’n nodded yes as she finished her Chablis. The flight attendant took their plates, asking if the two girls wanted anything else. Ryz’n asked for a bottle of the Chablis to split with her sister. Ry liked her wine. The high flying waitress pulled a bottle of the fermented beverage from the lower rack of her cart tray. She poured a glassful of the wine for each of the two young women and left the bottle with them, at Sheena’s request. Sheena thanked the stewardess sweetly. When the flight attendant left, Ryz’n added in her naturally smoky, throaty tone.

“Well Sheena, knowing Nicky, he probably took the name of the character James Dean played in *Rebel Without a Cause*.

“But if he’s got no memory, how could he do that, I mean, how could he know that Nicky adored James Dean?”

“Don’t know. Maybe he saw the movie since he got hurt and liked it. You know, those bases show old movies and stuff for entertainment all the time.”

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“Could be, I suppose. So you thought while you were looking for a guy named Dixon, he was using the name Stark and while you were looking for a guy name Stark, he saw the record album cover and began using Todd’s name.”

“Yeah, exactly. And that’s why the PI’s in Hawaii and LA were having such a tough time digging up stuff. Or, they’d get so far and then POOF! The trail disappeared on them.”

“Because they were on the wrong trail. Yeah, it makes sense, I guess. It’s almost like Nicky’s been throwing us off the track, on purpose, only without knowing it, if that makes any sense. Only ... ”

“Only what?”

“Well with Nicky’s distinguishing physical marks, I don’t think they’d need a name, just a description or a picture. I mean how many guys are there walkin’ around with half an ear, one brown eye, one blue eye and a couple missing fingers. Oh yeah, let’s not forget his gold-capped, front teeth!”

“I don’t know, Sheena. I don’t know. The pictures the detectives are using to ID Nicky are the two of Nicky in uniform, one in black and white where he’s wearin’ his ‘greens’, and the other photo, in color, in his dress ‘blues.’ They’re three years old. Maybe they, they ... ” Ryz’n choked. “Maybe he looks so different now, so torn up, he’s, uh, uh, uh, huh, huh, un ... recog . . nizable!” She smothered her inclination to bawl outright.

“Oh Sis, I’m sorry, I, I didn’t mean to upset you like this. Maybe Nicky has grown up and looks older. He was just eighteen when he left, remember? Or maybe, maybe they’re just bad detectives or maybe they have too many other cases to solve. Who knows why they haven’t turned up anything yet? You can drive yourself crazy thinking about that. Besides Chris Gasch recognized him on T. V. and so did the Larrabees.” Ryz’n caught hold of herself enough to mumble.

“Yes, I know. Now, I’m sorry. Only, Nicky was so cute, Sheena. Remember?”

“Oh, you bet I do. I had a big crush on him, ‘til we dated. I tried not to like him after that. But he was cute, too cute, with those two-toned peepers, too cute for any guy to have a right to be.”

Ryz’n refilled their wine glasses. “Yeah, too cute for his own good, sometimes, too. That’s for sure.” Ryz’n set her jaw firmly and nodded, agreeing with herself, as she thought about Nick and her ex-best friend Allena Larrabee. Sheena proposed a sanguine toast to Nicky’s return.

“Ry? Here’s to finding Nicky alive and well!” She beamed.

“I’ll drink to that” concurred Ryz’n hopefully. They touched wine glasses over the empty seat between them and drank deeply. After the toast, the young women settled back in their seats to drink in silence for some time, each one thinking her own thoughts. The captain announced over the loudspeaker they were approaching St. Louis, flying at an altitude of 38,000 feet.

After a while, Sheena spoke up. “Hey Ry, Nicky was right.”

“‘Bout what?”

“Well, you remember that first summer down at the Banks? When you and Nicky had that fight and he tore up his underarms with the crutches? And I accused him of coming on to me when we were alone, down the beach? He didn’t defend himself, until the next day when Bryson was about to tear his head off. Remember? He came inside to explain he hadn’t done anything out of line with me down the beach. You remember?”

“Yeah, so what about it?”

“Well, I didn’t admit it then, but Nicky was right. I was the one out of line, not him. You see, I came on to him.” Sheena sighed with embarrassment.

Ryz’n lowered her glass to listen carefully. She wanted to hear this!

“See? I filled my two-piece top with saltwater, cupped the water against me with my arms as best as I could. Then I brought it over to put on his underarms which were all bruised up from his crutches. He was lying there on the sand like a beached whale with his leg in the cast and his crutch beside him. I came up right in his face, pushing myself right in front of him and poured the water over him. Then I kissed him. I really kissed him good, ya know? I, I should never have done that, Sis.” Sheena stared into Ryz’n’s eyes, seeking forgiveness.

“I know Sheena. I know all about it. Ha! Go ahead, drink up! Ha! Ha! Anyway, he told me later, after I ‘bout beat it out of him, too. Ha! But it’s good to hear you say it. Confession is good for the soul, so they say. But why did you do that? That’s what I’d like to know.”

“Because! Because I was so jealous! Nicky was beached. You were playing grab-ass with Bryson in the surf. I thought I’d teach you a lesson. Anyway, Nicky was right. I didn’t realize it ‘til later and this is true the point of the story-- not true confessions. He got me to leave him alone by really ticking me off.”

“Yeah, so how did he do that?”

“Well, you know Nicky. It’s one of his, uh, special qualities, tickin’ people off.” Sheena cocked her eyebrows knowingly. Ryz’n said nothing, merely nodding, but she knew all too well, her husband’s innocent, inimitable capacity for angering folks. “I asked him how he rated me as a kisser.”

“Yeah and what did he say?”

“Well ... He said the one thing that could have caused me to leave him alone. If he had said ‘OK’ or ‘not so hot’, I’d have tried harder to show him I was good. If he had said I was good or great, I’d have wanted to kiss him some more, because he is such a great kisser himself!”

“Unh hunh, I know, I know. Here have some more wine, Little Sister.”

Ryz’n smirked as she poured each of them another glass. Ryz’n liked her wine. It was a weakness. And she was nearly giddy with hope, a bright hope born of trustworthy, eyewitness accounts of her man, and of a light, pale French Chablis. Their giddiness prompted both sisters to behave a little like schoolgirls again.

“Don’t mind if I do.” They each drank before Sheena resumed her story. “So anyway, Nicky knows all this already, although I didn’t realize it then. He says, ‘Pretty damned good, but ... ’”

“But what?”

“That’s what I said, ‘But what?’ ‘But not as good as your sister,’” he said. “OOOH! That really steamed me.” Sheena furrowed her brows and pursed her lips at the memory. “I was so jealous of you all the time, since you had lost your weight. And I had helped him with his crutches. I could have killed him. I jumped off him and left him there, knowing he couldn’t make it back on those crutches, not with his underarms all messed up like they were. I walked away as fast as I could. He called after me. He said ‘Hey Sheena, you gotta great wiggle in your walk, too.’ I turned around, walking backwards in the surf to flip him off. He says ‘But you know what?’ And like a fool, I bit again, do you believe it?” Sheena’s eyes widened. “And I said ‘What?’ He said, ‘But it’s not as good as your sister’s!’ Well, I flipped him both birds and ran away as fast as I could.”

Ryz’n laughed heartily. “That is s-o-o-o Nicky. I can just see it all right before my eyes.” She laughed until tears filled her orbs almost to overflowing. Sheena laughed heartily, too, as she poured a fresh glass of wine for each of them. “Oh Sheena, I miss him. God help me, I miss him so-o-o much. It’s sinful.”

Sheena raised the arm between the seats, back to its vertical resting position. With her half filled wine glass, she slipped into the seat next to her older sister to take Ryz’n’s hand in hers. “I know you do, Baby. I know. Gee, I miss him, too. I know sometimes, when Bryce and I are together at night in the other bedroom down at school ... Well, I, I know you must hear us. It must be very difficult for you. I, I ...” Uncharacteristically, the girl began to weep. The wine was having its effect on her as well.

Now, Ryz’n comforted her baby sister who had moved closer to console Ryz’n. She placed her left arm around Sheena’s shoulders after shifting her wineglass into her right hand. “Shhh, My Baby, Shhh. It’s OK. Most of the time it didn’t bother me, too much. Just makes me think of some of the times me and Nicky had together. Believe me, Baby Sister, you and Bryce are tame, compared to me and Nick.” Ryz’n sighed deeply, as Sheena’s crocodile tears receded. “It’s OK, Baby, it’s OK. We’re gonna find him this time. You’ll see.”

Sheena raised the arm dividers that separated her from Ryz’n, to lay her head on Ryz’n’s soft, full bosom. Ryz’n shoved the seat tray forward several inches. With her left hand, she stroked Sheena’s hair and rubbed her back, as she had done so often when they napped together as kids. She hummed Nicky’s composition of “Dear One.” The sisters had fallen into their familiar roles with Ryz’n as caregiver, Sheena as recipient of that care.

Sheena kicked off her clogs and pulled her bare feet with the brightly painted pink nails into the window seat. Her legs bent together at the knees so her knees hung out over the seat’s front edge. The wine led Sheena into slumber as she slid her head down into Ryz’n’s lap. The flight attendant passed by and removed Sheena’s empty glass along with the empty wine bottle. She reached over Sheena to restore her tray to the seatback in front of her seat. Ryz’n sipped the last of the Chablis from the glass in her right hand, holding her sleeping sister with her left.

She rested her wineglass on the still opened seatback tray-table in front of her. Ryz'n reached up with her left hand to turn off the overhead lights. She redirected the cool air stream away from Sheena's head and just beneath the hem of her suit skirt. The skirt had slipped back up over her nylons when Sheena had laid her head in Ryz'n's lap. Relaxed thoroughly by the wine, Ryz'n whispered to herself as she hurtled through the sky at six hundred miles per hour.

"Oh, Baby. You must be this ballplayer. You must! And he's got to be that Marine, who was shot in the head, whose trail we stumbled upon last winter. It just has to be! We lost you somewhere between the islands and the mainland. But that Mrs. Dixon didn't know you. Oh! I love you so much, Nicky. And I forgive you everything, for that Filipino Navy Lieutenant who nursed you back to health at Subic Bay, and for that Hawaiian girl, she told me about, too. I forgive you, Honey. You didn't know any better. When I find ya, I gotta make ya remember me somehow, make you forget them. Gotta find a way. Lord, please help me find a way. Help me succeed where all the doctors and psychotherapists failed. Help me, Sweet Jesus, please. Help me find him. Mother of God, please pray the Lord in intercession for me." Fingering her crucifix, she gazed out the window at the blue evening sky, bright with sunlight, high above the clouds. Not immune to the white wine herself, Ryz'n leaned back into the curved corner of the blue-cushioned seat. With her sleeping sister's head in her lap, Ryz'n nodded off.

As she slept through the bumpy flight, Ryz'n dreamt of Nicky. She dreamt of their high school days together, of her efforts to find him, of her brief Rock'N'Roll career, of her college days at M&L. However, all of it was mixed up together in a crazy quilt. Two images kept recurring, juxtaposed one against the other. The first was the beautifully sweet, sorrowful image of Nicky leaving her at the Marine camp gates. The other was the ghastly, grisly, horror of the unearthed mass graves with hundreds of rotten corpses and skeletons, trailing dog tags, that her rescue team had uncovered in Laos. There, hard by the Ho Chi Minh Trail, was Nicky's dog tag among them. In between visions, there were reflections of her times with Nicky and times without him, of the band, the attempted rape upon her by a former band member, of her graduation, her diving and swimming victories. Her mind tossed and turned as turbulence buffeted the plane. Above all, she saw a beatific image of the risen Christ hovering in the sky with His arms outspread wide apart, lovingly quoting the scriptures "**all things work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called according to His purpose.**"

The flight attendant woke Sheena and Ryz'n requesting Sheena to retake her seat, and for both of them to fasten their seat belts and return the armrests and seatbacks to their original positions. The attendant must have already retrieved Ryz'n's empty wine glass and restored the seatback tray, because both were gone. The attendant explained the flight was about to undertake a lengthy descent into LAX. It took Ry a few seconds to gather herself, Sheena, as well. As Ryz'n rubbed sleep from her eyes, Sheena lifted her head off Ryz'n's lap to complain.

Remembrances

“Darn, something was sticking me, just under my temple.” She felt around her right temple. “Look Ry, what do you think?” Sheena pulled her long, black hair back behind her right ear to reveal the side of her head. Ryz’n detected an impression of some sort. It took a few seconds before she recognized the mark.

“Oh, you know what? I think that’s an impression of a garter belt snap. You must have laid on it. Surprised, you could sleep on that thing.” Sheena began to restore the seatbacks and arms, as she talked.

“Garter belt? You still wearin’ them nylon stockings? I thought you were using panty hose, like everyone else now?”

“Well, I was for a while, but I dunno, Nicky always preferred these and—

“Gee Ry, whaddaya think, he’s gonna be waitin’ for ya on the tarmac?”

“Well, no, of course not.” Ryz’n fumbled about, embarrassed.

“Ha, yeah I remember he liked ya to wear those nylons and be—”

“OK, Sheena!”

“Ha! What a character! What did he used to say? Huh?” ‘A wife should be—”

“SHEENA!”

“Well, you know what he said all right. He told Bryce that same stuff and damned if I wasn’t doin’ that for a while, too, but I wised up! Now I’m liberated. I just go braless.” She smirked. “That Nicky was kind of wild and crazy. He was always kind of kooky.” Ryz’n sought to defend her husband as well as herself.

“Well, for your information Sheena, I don’t plan on meeting him on the tarmac, but if I did, I sure wouldn’t mind it any. That’s for certain.” Ryz’n nodded affirmatively, but avoided her sister’s stare. Sheena finished adjusting the seats and paused to look at Ryz’n, rather oddly.

“What?” asked Ryz’n. What are you looking at?”

Sheena grinned wolfishly. “You wouldn’t mind it hunh? Bet you’re ready for him, too? Aren’t you? Right now?” Ryz’n turned her head away from her sister and changed the subject and wiped the side of her face.

“I drooled some during that nap. Think I’ll freshen up in the lavatory.”

“No, wait!” Sheena grabbed her sister’s left forearm. “You are, aren’t you? You’re blushing, I know you are.” She reached toward her sister’s leg.

“Sheena really!” Ryz’n slapped hard on the back of her sister’s hand and wrist.

“Ouch! That hurt.” Sheena glared at Ryz’n in astonishment.

Ryz’n met her glare in anger. “Good! It was meant to. Now, I’ll be back in a minute. For goodness sake, Sheena! You act just like a kid sometimes, I swear.”

“Wait! You don’t have to go off all mad. I’m sorry.” Sheena’s suddenly hang-dog look appeared genuine enough.

“Well, all right then. Forget about it.” Ryz’n smiled weakly. “I guess I am kind of wild and crazy, too. Nicky always made me that way.”

“I’ve noticed. You’re just always so straight-laced until you get hooked up with him and it’s the best thing you ever did, Big Sister. Believe me it is, even if you two did have to get married twice to get it right.” Sheena grinned approvingly.

“I think so, though Dad doesn’t. He never really approved of Nick and me.”

“Well, he didn’t approve of you getting pregnant and getting married at seventeen, that’s for sure. He changed his mind about Nicky after a while though, after Father V. married ya in the Church, despite Nicky being such a kook!”

“I dunno about that. I know sometimes I seem so ridiculous, Honey, like so many of Nicky’s wild and crazy ideas. Yet, you know there really is something to them. I mean, right now, despite my formal attire and all, well, I feel free ... Attractive. Sharp. I dunno, very much like a woman. It’s like, empowering or something.” Ryz’n shrugged her shoulders and opened her eyes wide to wipe some matted sleep from them. “Well, I hope you’re satisfied now that I’ve confirmed your suspicions.” She picked up her purse from the middle seatback’s magazine pouch where she had stored it and rose to leave.

“My sister, the women’s libber—who would have thunk it? You’ve always been sexy, Ry. You just never accepted it. EXCEPT, except where Nicky was concerned or if you got a little too high like at those concerts we did. But if you want to make a statement, why don’t you just go braless like the rest of us?”

“Well, Little Sister, I’m not lookin’ to make a statement. Besides, Nicky frowned on that, for one thing. He used to say ‘a girl could defy gravity for only so long.’” Sheena laughed in spite of herself. “And for another thing, I don’t think I should be bouncing up and down in front of other guys, taunting them, maybe causing them to stumble, like we’ve heard Father V. preach many times?”

Ryz’n lowered her chin and arched her eyebrows hoping Sheena would get the message. “And finally,” she rose to stand in the aisle, “I agree with my husband: I don’t want to be hanging down to my knees when I’m forty.” She smirked and started to leave, but she stopped to lean over her seat and whisper.

“Oh, please, keep an eye on my jacket, will ya Sheena?”

“Sure, but it’ll be OK.” Sheena whispered back, mocking her sister’s earnest tone and nodding confidentially. “There’s hardly anybody on the plane and the stewardess is close by.” Ryz’n whispered back.

“Well, I know, but Nicky’s harmonica is in the pocket. You know?”

“Oh yeah, OK. Of course. By all means.” Under her breath, Sheena muttered. “We wouldn’t want anything to happen to that harmonica.”

“What, what did you say?” asked Ryz’n shrewdly in a raised tone.

“Oh, nothing, nothing at all. Go ahead. I’ll keep the harmonica safe for ya.” She forced a smile. Ryz’n had heard what her sister had said, but she decided it wasn’t worth an argument. Incredibly, they were getting along pretty well so far, aside from that one little spat, and Ryz’n did not want to spoil it. She walked down the aisle towards the back of the plane. Aware of her naturally alluring “swish and her sway”, which had inspired one of Nick’s hit musical compositions and one of *GRT*’s hit songs, Ryz’n walked as primly as she possibly could through the close quarters of the tourist class. Like first class, tourist was not even half filled with passengers. *How do they stay in business? Hope they stay afloat until we get to LAX.*

Remembrances

Ryz'n found one of the three lavatories unoccupied. She entered to wash her face with cool water. She also removed the bottle opener and its silver chain from around her neck and washed them off as well as her sternum where Nicky's smooth, flat bottle opener hung. She did this a couple times a day to prevent pimples. Ryz'n dried off with a paper towel and smiled as she noticed part of her hirsute, Indian-Pakistani heritage in the form of tiny, sparse, black wisps of hair running almost the length of her sternum. That particular inheritance had been a constant source of embarrassment for her as a young teenager.

"Ah, but you changed that, too, didn't you Nicky?"

She replaced the chain and bottle opener around her neck and talked to her image in the wash room mirror. "I didn't believe ya at first, Baby. Thought you were just tryin' to make me feel better," She spoke naturally as if her husband were right there with her.

From a vial in her purse, she dripped a spot of honey both at the base and tip of her long tongue, as was her custom after a meal. She did this to clear her breath as well as to provide an energy boost. Nick had always said her lips had dripped of honey and he had been right. She carried on with her previous soliloquy.

"But when I saw what a kick it gave ya, I knew you weren't just bein' nice."

Ryz'n also dabbed on some of the Love's Fresh Lemon Cologne that used to drive her husband wild.

"And I thanked the Lord for providing me with a mate who complements me so well. And I still do. Amen!" She nodded crisply for emphasis.

Ryz'n removed her yellow hair ribbon and began to comb out her thick, long, wavy hair, watching her self in the mirror, with the ribbon clenched between her teeth. She considered her recent dream. That had been some dream she thought, one that she had dreamt many times before. She stared at herself in the vanity mirror above the sink. It had been some day, too.

It had begun with her daily dawn swim in the Atlantic off Kill Devil Hills. Funny, now she was arriving on the West Coast, where she could take a midnight swim in the Pacific to close out her long day if she so chose. She finished combing out her heavily dense locks, which she wore down and in her customary flip. She wanted to look her best for 'Uncle' Bill when they landed.

She tied the ribbon around the back of her head in a manner beneath her hair that produced a neat, tight bow over her crown and left temple. The yellow bow seemed to appear out of nowhere for the rest of the ribbon lay concealed beneath her thick, wavy locks. A casual observer would be hard pressed to learn how the bow stayed in place. Tying the ribbon was a piece of cake, just like brushing her hair. Indeed, it had become merely the final act of her daily hair-combing ritual.

The young woman glanced at her diamond studded, gold Rolex, which she had already set to Pacific Coast Daylights Savings Time. Nick had given her the watch as a Christmas present a week before he had left for basic training. It was 9:10 p. m., 12:10 a. m. on the East Coast. What a day, it had been! She had helped clean up the beach house that morning. Then she had driven herself and

Sheena almost three hundred miles home to Crest Hill Heights. Her world had turned upside down after she had spoken with the Gaschs and the Larrabees. She must be somewhere close to California by now.

Again, she stared deep into the mirror, peering right through her reflected image. She did this not because she was concerned with her appearance, which she took for granted, paying it little mind, but because she wanted to peer into her soul. “What if this *is* another wild goose chase? What if Dad is right?” Ryz’n didn’t think she could bear another disappointment, like the one with that Dixon woman last winter. *God help me. Help me to stay strong, please Lord.* Anxiously, she studied her face in the reflective glass and decided to apply a bit of pink lip gloss. Satisfied, she pinched her cream-fed cheeks. There was a knock on the door. Ryz’n sighed deeply, checked her blouse and skirt in the mirror. She flattened them by sliding her hands downward over them. She turned sideways one last time to check her look, before she opened the door into the small closet.

Sheena, who had been leaning up against the door, fell into her sister.

Looking up from under her thick eyebrows, Sheena assumed the offensive, asking, “Gotta friend in there with ya, Sis? Someone I don’t know about?”

Only slightly embarrassed at being caught talking to herself, Ryz’n replied, “Nope, from the looks of it, just you. And us chickens!”

“Us, hunh? Ri-i-ight. Ya know, Mom and Dad asked me to keep an eye on ya before we left. I thought they were full of it, but you’re giving me cause to doubt ya, Big Sister, with that impression of Hamlet you were performing in there.”

“Don’t let it hassle ya, Little Sister. In that get-up, you’ve got no worries.”

“Now what is that supposed to mean?”

“As a refugee from a Haight-Ashbury time capsule, you should have no problem keepin’ the faith, Baby!” Ryz’n smirked, turned to leave, but stopped.

“Say, I thought you were keeping an eye on Nicky’s blues harp for me?”

Sheena uncrossed her feet, pulled her right hand from under her left elbow and silently wiggled the harmonica before her sister’s face. “Psyyyych!”

“Oh, thanks Sheena. I appreciate it.” Ryz’n snatched the blues harp from her.

“Of course, I left our purses up there, but I saved your mouth organ.”

“You mean Nicky’s or—” Ryz’n stopped herself short.

Sheena burst out laughing. “You’re red as a beet, Ry.”

“I meant mouth, uh ... harmonica! Darn it, Sheena! You know what I meant!!”

Sheena could hardly contain her glee. Exasperated by her faux pas, Ryz’n smashed the underside of her fist in to the outer lavatory wall. “Well, anyway that was obviously a prudent decision on your part, Little Sister. You know, you should treat this harmonica with more respect. After all, it’s made you very rich.” Ryz’n winked, left Sheena to the lavatory and returned to her seat, where she prayed about what she would find upon landing.