

~ Chapter 22: Headed for Home ~

As she opened the screen door Ryz'n yelled, "Oh, hold up, Baby! I'm comin', I'm comin'!"

Ryz'n hustled down the front stoop to join Dixie, who had left the house when she had gone into the kitchen. He was already waiting across the street by his motorcycle. He noticed that she carried a small, dark brown, leather handbag with a long, narrow strap slung over her left shoulder. She had also found a pair of brown leather platform sandals with thick, high soles and heels, which made her a little taller. While he had waited for her, Dixie had tied his flared, silk suit pant legs around his calves with his rubber bands. He mounted the bike, rocking it forward off the kickstand. Then he helped her mount and started the cycle.

"Hold on tight," he yelled over the engine noise. "And lean with me." Nick's normal speech continued to surprise but immensely pleased her.

She yelled over his left shoulder, "And squeeze tight twice to stop. Right?"

Dixie turned back to her, pleasantly surprised.

"Yeah, how did you know that?" he asked over his shoulder.

"We've ridden together before, Baby." She winked at him, grinning from ear to ear, all the while displaying those deep dimples. They donned their dark glasses.

Dixie shook his head in wonderment, but grinned with her nonetheless. They took off with Ryz'n tugging on his arms, indicating the direction in which he should go. As they passed the Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church, just two short blocks from her home, Ryz'n squeezed twice, so Dixie stopped.

"Look Honey! There's Father Vizconni. He married us. He knows you very well, Nick. He helped you out of some jams in high school. Please Nicky, take a minute to say hello to him. He has said many prayers with me for you. Father V. has been as anxious for your return as any of us."

"OK."

Reluctantly, Dixie parked next to the curb, kicking the left stand down and cutting the engine. He helped Ryz'n off the bike and followed her over to the grass-bordered sidewalk between the rectory and the church sanctuary.

"Helloooo! Father Vizconni!" Ryz'n waved heartily catching the priest's attention. "Our prayers have been answered, Father. See! It's Nick, he's come home." She turned to show off Dixie. Then, fairly bursting with excitement, the angelic girl hustled over the concrete walkway to the priest. Evidently, he had been on his way to the sanctuary, when Ryz'n intercepted him. Nick tagged along halfheartedly, half-losing behind her.

Father Vizconni stopped in his tracks, with wild disbelief spreading across his face. Then he cried out.

“NO! Nicholas! Is it really you? Well, I’ll be a monkey’s uncle! Praise God for the miracles He performs!” Ryz’n motioned for Nick to remove his shades, which he did. The priest came over to pump the young man’s hand excitedly. His grin stretched from ear to ear. “It IS you! Son of a gun!”

He pumped Dixie’s hand until Dixie believed his arm would fall off. Suddenly and inexplicably, the happy priest shed his joyful exterior. He assumed a dead solemn countenance and stepped back from Dixie, to challenge him playfully.

“Nick Sheeboom? Well, I’ve heard about you.” They stood on the concrete sidewalk between the hall and the sanctuary in the balm of the June evening. The priest looked sternly at Nick, waiting for a response. Dixie looked to Ryz’n for help, but she just nodded, urging him to reply.

“Well, wh-wh-what have you h-heard, Fa-Father?”

The priest, trying hard to suppress a smile, stepped further back from Nick, assumed a gunfighter’s stance, and replied slowly, evenly.

“I’ve heard you’re a low-down, Yankee liah!”

Dixie did not know what to make of him. Again, he looked at Ryz’n, who knew what the priest was trying to prove, but she also knew what the priest did not. His sincere efforts were lost upon the amnesiac.

“Well, gee I’m so-sorry, Fa-Father. I, uh, don’t know wh-what to ... to s-say.”

“Oh Nick, you forgot?” Disappointment registered in the priest’s tone. “You’re supposed to say: ‘Prove it’ and then we draw, just like when we first met, like from the western movie “Shane.” Surely, you remember that, Nicholas?”

Dixie gave no indication, he recalled the incident or the film.

“Oh, I’ll never forget it,” proclaimed the crestfallen cleric. “It’s still the most unique introduction I’ve ever had to anyone. Your six-shooter was an opened, uh, a ‘loaded’ can of Miller High Life that you ‘shot’ all over me, accidentally of course—right over there, right under the far basket.”

Dixie followed the priest’s pointing finger to the outdoor asphalt basketball court. The cleric smiled in anticipation of Nick’s recall, but all he got in return was another apology and a blank stare from the hapless vet.

Ryz’n explained to Father Vizconni that Nicky’s memory had not come back to him yet, but that it would. It was something she hoped the padre would include in his prayers. The dark, wavy-haired priest promised he would be sure to do just that and suggested they go inside the church to pray that very minute. Dixie was anxious to meet his family. Even so, he followed the two Catholics inside the sanctuary anyway, where the priest led them in prayer before the altar.

The cool, dark sanctuary was like a theatre-in-the-round, surrounded by stained glass windows. To their right, on the west side of the building, the early evening sunlight streamed in at a severe angle, highlighting dust particles floating in the air, yet the rays did not quite reach them. Dixie liked the place. He thought it was a good place to pray.

The priest thanked the Lord for His great compassion and mercy in answering their prayers. Then he prayed for Nick’s memory to return and for a smooth,

joyous reunion for the newly restored couple. Dixie had a hard time praying, but he did ask God to help him recall his family, too.

When they had finished, Ryz'n excused herself and Nicky, explaining to Father Vizconni that Nick had yet to meet his parents and they wanted to do that as quickly as possible. The kind padre indicated he understood. Ryz'n knew that he always did. The cleric walked them back to Dixie's bike and blessed them. The personable priest advised that he looked forward to seeing the young couple at mass before he left in a few weeks for his new assignment in Jamaica.

Back on the bike, the couple reached a "T" intersection at the end of the street that led away from the church grounds. There were brick and siding duplex homes to his left. A makeshift dump and downward sloping woods lay across the street in front of and below them. A steep hill lined with trees and some three-story brick garden apartments loomed down the hill to their right.

"Which way?" he asked over his shoulder.

Ryz'n still found it difficult to comprehend that her handsome husband did not know his way around his own stomping grounds. Why, he had been at this intersection many, many times.

"Well Honey, if you could go straight as the crow flies, you'd head right for it. But you can't go down the hill through the gully and those woods, not on this bike anyway. So, you can go right or left, it doesn't matter."

Dixie turned right onto Dunlop and rode east, down the hill. At the bottom of the hill, she tugged on his left arm steering him onto the tree-lined 23rd Boulevard with its extra wide, grassy median separating the flow of traffic. They followed 23rd for a few blocks to Catoctin Street, where they took a right for two short blocks. She tugged on his left arm again. After he turned onto 25th Street, she squeezed him twice. He stopped.

"OK, Nicky. This is your street, Sweetie. Your house is down the hill in the middle of the block on the left where the hill flattens out. 5011 is the number. See that burgundy and black T-Bird down on the left?" Dixie stood up and looked where she was pointing.

"Yeah?"

"Well, that's your Dad's car, Baby."

Dixie looked back at Ryz'n, who smiled and nodded. Dix began to get nervous. He took a minute to steady himself by perusing the neighborhood. Unlike the flatness of the Ryan's street, this one was hilly and seemed to be an older neighborhood than the Ryan's. There were more, taller trees and larger shrubs here. The plant life had a greening effect that lent a cozy, laid-back atmosphere to the block. Flower beds and boxes were not as frequent as they were in Ryz'n's neighborhood. Smaller, red brick ramblers lined both sides of the narrow macadam street, while parked cars filled cement driveways. Other cars were parked sporadically against the concrete curbs on both sides of the street, prohibiting the flow of two way traffic.

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Dixie looked back at Ryz'n and she smiled to reassure him. He raised his chin in acknowledgement, then, started down the hill. Again, out of habit to avoid disturbing the neighbors, Dixie downshifted into neutral, cutting the engine as he approached his home. Ryz'n tugged on his left arm again, indicating he should pull into the driveway, behind the parked burgundy and black Landau T-Bird. Dixie glided them in behind the Ford.

After Ryz'n hopped off the bike, Nick lowered both kickstands and rocked the bike back upon them before following her.

"This is your home, Nicholas," she instructed him, once again waving her arm towards the brick rambler, much like a television game show hostess.

Dixie keenly studied the two, forty-foot tall, green-leaved, silver maple trees that shaded the front yard on either side of the concrete sidewalk. The walk bisected the grass lawn and ran from the house front stoop to the street curb. Dixie was looking for anything that might spur his recall.

The house was about forty feet long, another red brick rambler, like most of the other homes around there, though it was not as large as the Ryan home. This house had cream-colored shutters, trimmed in dark brown with three brown squares in a vertical pattern spaced evenly on each shutter. The eaves and downspouts were likewise painted brown. A cream-colored wooden facing under the eaves contrasted coolly with the dark brown trim. Dixie spotted a grey window unit air conditioner sticking out of the side of the house past the end of the driveway, but the unit was not running. The windows were open as was the front door, although the front screen door was closed. To the right of the sidewalk, underneath the eaves were three or four recently trimmed bushes. The bushes were tall enough to obscure the windows which were bordered by the false, decorative shutters. To the left of the front stoop, underneath the horizontally long picture window, lay a smooth finished, rose-colored, rectangular, cement block patio. The patio recessed beneath the five-foot wide, overhanging soffit. The back of the small patio, about six by twelve feet, abutted the red brick front wall of the house and, the side of the patio to his right, nestled into the left side of the front stoop. The front of the patio opened to the lawn, while the side to the left was adjacent to the driveway.

In front of the patio, in the form of a half oval, lay a white and pink marble-chip garden, separated from the lawn by scalloped, burgundy-painted, concrete lawn edging. Three short, smoothly finished, grey cement steps led up to a four by three-foot smooth finished cement porch. The porch rose about two feet above the patio. The front door portal was one-half step above the porch. A black welcome mat lay before the front doorstep. The place smelled of spring. Dixie thought maybe, just maybe, it might just smell of home, as well.

Dixie took it all in while Ryz'n led him under the nearest tall maple tree to the sidewalk. Suddenly, he balked and his verbal yips returned, as Mrs. Ryan's spicy meatloaf was doing flips inside his stomach.

"What's that odor?" He sniffed. "Smells like, like peaches."

“Oh Baby, that’s the mimosa across the street. It’s just starting to bloom. See?”

“Oh, yeah, I see. Smells g-good though. Say, should we b-be ... walking across ... the grass la-like this?” he asked respectfully. Dixie thought, maybe they should walk in the street to access the home by way of the front concrete sidewalk, which led up directly from the street to the front porch. His halting speech reflected his mounting anxiety.

Ryz’n shook her head and giggled.

“Your Dad is the only one who does that.” She chortled as if what his dad did, did not matter. They ducked under the low hanging maple branches and strolled up the sidewalk, but Dixie was in no hurry. He was a little scared. His heart was racing. About to meet his parents for the first time, Dixie felt within him a rising, nagging feeling of apprehension that he could not shake. How often had he wondered what his parents might look like!

Dixie followed Ryz’n up the front steps. This house was somewhat smaller than the Ryan’s home and the brick was dark red where the Ryan’s brick was more of a sand color. Moreover, the front steps were maybe not half the height of the Ryans’ front stoop. Ryz’n turned and whispered, “Now take your glasses off and stay behind me, Baby. And maybe, we can surprise them.” She put her forefinger to her lips with a “Shhhh!” Ryz’n shunned the buzzer to knock on the frame of the screen door. Pressing her nose to the upper screen, above the monogrammed aluminum ‘S’ that hung across the lower screen, she spied her father-in-law. He sat in his recliner chair diagonally across the room, reading *The Evening Star*, as was his evening custom. She laughed silently to herself.

This house had a mirror or reverse image floor plan of her home and the two fathers were mirror images in their political leanings. Mr. Sheeboom sat in the same spot in a green, cloth recliner, just as her father sat in his recliner. Both patriarchs sat just to the living room side of the archway which separated the living and dining rooms. Both fathers read *The Evening Star* now, though Ryz’n’s dad used to read *The Washington Post*, when Nicky had delivered it. Her dad had switched to *The Star* after *The Post* had broken the scandalous Watergate story. The big difference between the two patriarchs is that Ryz’n’s dad is a died-in-the-wool Republican while Mr. Sheeboom was a Democrat, but, of course, each claimed to be Independents. *The Star* was a Republican newspaper. Mr. Sheeboom read it, so he could “know how those clowns were thinking,” thereby keeping a step ahead of them. Or so went the logic, as her father-in-law had explained it to Ryz’n previously. The other reason, not acknowledged by her father-in-law, is that the liberal leaning *Washington Post* was a morning newspaper and Mr. Sheeboom was not a morning person.

“Hello, Raybo? Raybo, it’s Ryz’n.”

“Ryzanna?” answered a man’s voice from within.

Ryz’n cupped her hands around her temples and double cheeks and pressed her hands and face against the screen. She strained to peer inside as the dapper, convivial, little man leaned forward in his recliner to climb out of his sunken

evening retreat. He half leaned and half lunged forward in fits and starts as he sought to escape the cavernous, deep-seated chair. Once he managed the feat, he folded the newspaper before him and set it down on the floor beside the chair.

Beckoning Ryz'n with one hand while resting the other on the arm of the chair for support, he cried.

"Well, come on in Doll. Come on in." He raised his voice, turning his head to the left.

"Wauneta, Wauneta! We have company. Your youngest daughter-in-law has come to visit." Then he half kicked, half slid the chair's matching green cloth footrest to one side with his right foot. "I didn't even hear you drive up, Doll."

Ryz'n stepped back, as she opened the screen door, bumping into her husband. She whispered for him to remove his shades and to wait there a minute, quietly. As Ryz'n stepped into the house, she raised a forefinger to Nick, again indicating he should wait on the tiny twelve-foot square, front stoop landing. "Well, I guess I was pretty quiet." The Sheeboom household schedule ran a little behind the Ryans. Ryz'n doubted her in-laws had eaten yet.

Dixie watched Ryz'n enter. He couldn't help but notice a wide, shiny, tin gold mailbox with a black lid attached to the brick and mortar wall to the left of the door. He was searching for one of those patterns or motifs he pictured mentally so often. The psychiatrist claimed they might very well be the keys to unlocking his mind. Above the mailbox, a square, four-sided opaque glass enclosed lamp, capped by a squat, black metal pyramid, was fixed on the brick wall. Ryz'n entered inside and moved to Dixie's left, disappearing from view. Dixie stepped up next to the buzzer to stare inside the home without being seen by those within.

He could see that the front door was opened, back against the living room wall on his right. The door sported a large brass knob. Like the shutters and under siding of overhanging roof, the door was painted a cream color and bore the decorative, brown trim, wood outline of three vertically stacked squares. A singular, round brass and glass spy-eye pierced the door about five feet from the bottom. Just past the door, he could make out a five-tiered, glass and chrome étagère filled with knick-knacks. The étagère stood against the wall to his right and just inside the front door. A sculpted, dark gold carpet covered the floor. Across the room, there was a closed, white door of some kind with a brass knob. To the left of that door stood a lovely upholstered two-cushion, off white couch, bordered in gold and covered with a green and gold leaf design. Above the couch hung the bust portrait of a young, dark, Asian woman with a bowl haircut. She did not smile. She looked worn, beat down. A dark hued wooden lamp stand stood at the far end of the couch, supporting a large, beige, ceramic lamp. The lamp featured a row of an elongated design of gold-tinted diamonds encircling the lamp's mid-riff, as well as the rims of the lamp shade. The walls were painted in a light grey or maybe a pale lavender. (Dixie wasn't too great with some colors.) But the baseboard was trimmed in white. To view more of the room, he

would need to move in front of the door, compromising his hidden presence to those inside. To his chagrin, Dix recognized nothing, not one, darned thing!

Mrs. Sheeboom entered the living room. She stood under the archway to the dining room near her husband, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel. Evidently, she had been preparing, or cleaning up from, dinner. Ryz'n held up her right forefinger to the couple. Before her mother-in-law could speak, Ryz'n announced with a smug smile.

"Ray! Wauneta! Now I've got a special surprise for you all, a really GREAT surprise."

Ryz'n beamed and pushed the screen door out, opening it for her husband. Dixie stepped uncertainly into his childhood home for the first time in more than three years, for the first time ever as far as he was concerned! Once inside, the closeness of the room reminded him strongly of Donna's little bungalow.

Both Mr. and Mrs. Sheeboom's mouths dropped open wide enough to park a limousine and Mrs. Sheeboom placed her hand over her heart.

"Raybo, Wauneta: Nicholas has come home. Nicky, these ... are your folks." Ryz'n stepped back happily to watch the long overdue reunion.

Slowly, Dixie stepped further into the room, stopping next to Ryz'n. His heart was in his throat. For a minute, both parents and son simply stared at one another. Dixie was looking for something in them that he could recognize. He searched their faces, but concluded he did not look entirely like either one, though he could see bits and pieces of himself in each. They were quite a bit older than Ryz'n's parents were, maybe ten to fifteen years older.

His father was a dapper gentleman nearly half a foot shorter than Dixie. He was dressed casually in pressed, blue, well tailored slacks and a pink designer dress shirt opened at the neck with a starched, white collar and white French cuffs folded twice up his forearm. Bushy, black eyebrows with a smattering of renegade grey hairs and black flashing eyes shone above a straight roman nose, full lips and a heavy five o'clock shadow. He was definitely a distinguished looking gentleman. His wavy hair was dark brown, reminding Dixie of Richard Nixon's hairline or perhaps Humphrey Bogart's in Bogie's younger days. Dixie also noticed Mr. Sheeboom's gold wedding band featured a large, large diamond.

Dixie's mom was shorter and stouter than Ryz'n. She wore a pale purple, round collared, short sleeved, cotton blouse that buttoned in front and a black cotton skirt that stopped at her knees. She wore nylon stockings, no shoes. Her hair, more grey than brown, was styled like that of most of the women her age, like that of the TV character Edith Bunker of the award winning television show. Her features were those of a cheery Mrs. Kris Kringle with ruddy cheeks, a pug nose and green-blue eyes. Her thin, arched eyebrows were long and sweeping, and very expressive. A modest, white pearl necklace encircled her neck.

As Dixie studied the pair, so they studied him. Then, as if on silent cue, both parents walked toward their son. First, Mr. Sheeboom extended his hand as he approached his son. Dixie took it, while Mr. Sheeboom, with misty eyes, pulled

his son toward him, hugging him unashamedly, overlooking his maimed stubs. Dixie did not know what to do or say. He was disappointed that he did not recognize either of his parents. Mr. Sheeboom kissed him on the left cheek. Then, Mrs. Sheeboom followed suit, failing to hold back tears, kissing him on the right cheek and hugging him for several seconds, as well. They both fussed over him in a vain effort to prevent their emotion from overcoming them.

The matron pushed back to hold her son at arm's length, searching his face, looking from one eye to the other. Then she smiled weakly, kissed him again and sniffled. His mother proclaimed, "No one has eyes like that, except you Nicky." Her husband concurred. Shocked surprise stifled any overt display of joy.

However, Dixie was not convinced. He smiled self-consciously and backed away unsteadily. He searched their faces again, still hoping to gain the confirmation they had already received. *Nothing!* His heart sank. He never would have picked them out of a lineup as his folks.

"What's wrong, son?" Mr. Sheeboom asked, suddenly solemn. "You don't recognize your mother and me?" Dixie shook his head. "You don't think you belong to us?"

"N-not sh-sure."

"NOT SURE?" Mrs. Sheeboom ordered. "Remove your right shoe and sock!"

Dixie was confused.

"Go ahead and do as your mother tells you," suggested Mr. Sheeboom.

Dixie glanced to Ryz'n who merely raised her eyebrows, nearly smirking, while she batted her long, black eyelashes at him for concurrence. Dixie removed his grey Gucci lightweight loafer, leaving his secret wad of cash in his shoe, which he held in his hand so the cash would not fall out. He wore no sock.

"Now let me see the bottom of your foot," his mother demanded. Dixie was perplexed. "Go ahead, go ahead."

Dixie twisted towards Ryz'n to balance on his left foot, turning up the sole of his right foot to them by resting his right shinbone over his slightly bent left knee. Then Mrs. Sheeboom balanced likewise, steadying herself by placing her right hand on her husband's left shoulder. She turned up the sole of her nylon stocking-covered, right foot for all to see as well.

"There! See that?"

Dixie looked at her foot first and then his. Right in the center of the sole for each of them was a lone reddish brown mole about a half inch in diameter. Dixie studied both feet closely. When he looked up, she pinched his cheek and slapped her breastbone.

"That's right! You come from me, Nicholas!" They all smiled diffidently with chins lowered and eyes looking up at him that asked, "Do you believe us now?"

Dixie answered their silent question, "I-I guesso. I gu-guess, you're r-right."

"I know I'm right. Now give your mother a good kiss." She pulled him toward her. He hugged her tightly and kissed her cheek firmly, but he felt odd, cold. Dixie did what she asked out of obedience, not heartfelt emotion. The bantam

sized, graying matron, overcome with emotion, began to cry quietly, drying her face with the dishtowel she carried. To steady herself, she stabbed at polite conversation.

“My gosh Ray, look how big he’s gotten.”

“I know, we couldn’t believe it either,” agreed Ryz’n. “You would think that, at eighteen, he would have been fully grown, but, obviously, he wasn’t.”

“Well, I’m sure he’s bigger than Ramon,” offered Mr. Sheeboom.

Mrs. Sheeboom sniffled and claimed, “I’ll bet you’re six-foot, aren’t you, Nicholas, just like your Uncle Bill, as tall as anyone in our families.”

Dixie re-shod his foot making sure his bills did not escape. He held up his left hand placing his forefinger and thumb close together, indicating he was just shy of the high water mark height for members on either side of the family tree.

“Almost there.”

“Well, you’re hard as a rock, Son.”

Mr. Sheeboom’s black eyes brimmed wet, but they flashed pride. Nick noticed the gentleman combed his thinning wavy, dark brown hair straight back. His greying sideburns were fashionably wide and long.

“You’re in great shape, Son, great shape,” complimented his father as he patted Dixie on the triceps underneath his silk suit coat. “But then, you always were.”

Ryz’n hooked her left hand inside Dixie’s other upper arm. “He sure is,” she said as she beamed up to him proudly. However, Dixie reasoned with chagrin that she had not seen the other half of him yet. Nor was he looking forward to letting her see his mutilated side, either. He chose not to think about it now.

Mrs. Sheeboom asked him why he had his pant legs tied up like that and why was he not wearing any socks, didn’t his shoes hurt his feet? Dixie replied he managed all right without socks as long as he didn’t have to walk too far. He said he preferred not to wear socks, especially with these soft Gucci’s. He answered that he had forgotten to remove the rubber bands. He wore them sometimes as a precautionary measure to insure his flared pant legs kept from getting dirty and messed up when he rode his bike. “Bike? What bike?” asked his mother with concern in her voice. He pointed to his motorcycle behind the T-Bird in the driveway. They had to bend over to look through the lower portion of the picture window, left uncovered by the overhanging Venetian blinds. They could barely see the Honda between the low hanging maple tree leaves.

“Oh Nick, you know those things are very dangerous,” admonished his mother, as anxiety overshadowed her face. “Are you wearing a helmet? You know state law requires you to wear a helmet around here. You know that, don’t you?”

“N-No, I, I didn’t ... kn-know that, uh, exactly.”

“Well, now you do. Exactly! So you’ll have no excuse if you get a ticket.” She shook her stubby forefinger at him. Dixie nodded OK. The two couples, a generation apart, stood awkwardly, not knowing what to do next.

“Wauneta! Maybe the kids would like to join us for dinner and, Son, you can tell us where you’ve been for the last couple years. OK, Nicholas?”

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They were all a bit nervous. Dixie believed that perhaps tensions would ease and the conversation flow more naturally, if they proceeded with dinner.

“Well, I g-guess, uh ... we, we ...” Dixie stumbled.

“Well, we’re having meatloaf Nicholas and I know you don’t like that Son, but I’ve got some liverwurst and turkey.”

Meatloaf? Again? Jeeze! Ryz’n giggled at the announcement of the entrée.

I’ll make you a sandwich, Nick, and we have plenty of mashed potatoes and beans. Oh! And kosher dill pickles! I know how you like them. So, you go wash up. Go ahead now, both of you. And where are your bags? At the Ryans?”

“N-no, at a mo-motel, ca-ca-close by.”

“Motel? Well, now—“

“Wauneta!” Mr. Sheeboom interrupted. “We can take care of that later. Let the boy eat first and we’ll talk. We can take care of the lodging arrangements later.”

“Well ... OK, sure,” agreed Mrs. Sheeboom. “Now, go along the two of ya. Go ahead.”

His mother shooed the young couple towards the bathroom, as she dabbed the dishtowel at her eyes and shook her head in amazement.

The two young people looked at each other, trying not to giggle too loudly.

“Meatloaf?” repeated Ryz’n.

Ryz’n chuckled and Dixie joined her. *Tuesday must be meatloaf night in Crest Hill Heights.* But, the woman was right. He did like dill pickles and liverwurst. Once again, Ryz’n had to show her husband where to wash up, this time in his own boyhood home. Ryz’n leaned against the bathroom foyer wall, watching him wash his hands as she had done earlier. As Dixie stepped out of the washroom, she asked him if he believed they were his parents now. Alone with her, he spoke calmly and slowly without stuttering.

“Well, gee, it’s kinda like seeing a map of the world, ya know, and havin’ someone tell you the world is round, not flat? Your eyes don’t believe, but inside you know it has to be right.”

“Why, Baby, you spoke perfectly that time. That was terrific! Some times you speak very well.” She took that as a good omen. She felt blessed that he felt comfortable enough to speak so well when they were alone.

Yes, that’s a very good sign.

Embarrassed, Dixie ducked his head and slouched his shoulders as he started to move past her into the main hallway.

She’s startin’ to sound like Donna. Dixie smirked. Ryz’n stepped toward him, pinning him against the linen closet door.

“Oh Sweetie, I didn’t mean to hurt ya. I just, I just ...”

Her wistful, plaintive expression was melting him right down, while, at the same time, raising him right up. The attraction between them was overwhelming. Then Ryz’n lifted off her heels, sensing he wanted her as much as she did him. Cupping her left hand around his neck and pulling him down to her, she took a

chance by kissing him ardently, wetly on the mouth. Dixie responded naturally, as each one emblazoned the other with a passion that Dixie had seldom known.

A zinging sensation began at their lips and permeated their bodies, right down to the tips of their toes. The hair rose up on the back of Dixie's neck and forearms. He felt his body temperature increase to the point of being afire where they touched. Sweat broke out around his forehead. This girl had something that drew him like a powerful magnet. She must feel the same, if her enthusiastic reactions were any indication. Certainly, Dixie could ask for no more.

As he kissed Ryz'n, something beyond the physical stimulation he had experienced with other partners overcame him. It was as if that healthy glow which emanated from her, charged into his being as well, and not just his body but into his very soul. And instantly, for the present anyway, the frozen void, which had plagued him as long as he could remember, melted away, replaced with a sweet, inner golden glow, her golden glow. Physically, all the familiar feelings, and more besides, surfaced. There was something he could not identify that went beyond the chemical reactions he had experienced with Moons or Donna, some magic that was uniquely special to this girl.

With their appetites for each other barely whetted, the pair began to engross themselves in their stand-up lovemaking in earnest, when Mrs. Sheeboom padded down the hallway, catching the couple red-handed.

"Oh!" exclaimed the surprised mom. "I didn't realize ... " Abashed, she looked down to the floor to announce dinner was ready. Then she padded away, in a waddle, as quickly as she had come.

Dixie broke off the kiss to head for the dining room, but his little wife would not let him go. She had placed her left arm around his back under his right arm. For Ryz'n had felt that proverbial "old feeling," that same toe-tingling, hair-raising, heart slamming sensation she had not experienced in over three years. Three years and two months, to be exact! And she felt him next to her, like she used to. She knew what that meant, but she wanted to insure that he had felt all that she had as well. Staring once again deeply into his vulnerably child-like, two-toned eyes, she asked in her husky tone with the inimitable little catch.

"Do you remember me now, Baby? Your wife? And don't give me any double talk about globes and such."

Dixie shrugged, attempting to evade her question as well as her grasp and her look. But she would not budge on either issue. She squeezed him, pinning him ever tighter against the linen closet door. Her strength, like her passion, was undeniable.

"Well?"

Dixie took a deep breath, admitting coolly, with hardly any sign of stuttering:

"I can honestly say, I've never, m-make that NEVER, experienced anything quite like that in m-my la-life." Then, thinking of Moons, he qualified his remark to himself. *At least, not that I can recall when I wasn't standing on the edge of a thirty-five hundred foot high cliff.* But Moons had been merely a physical thing.

This now was different, much different. It was physical, sure, but there was more to it. Face to face, he stared deeply into her emerald orbs, ignoring the faded, faint, sleepless semi-circles beneath them. His arms encircled her slender body. Dixie noticed for the second time how large her irises were. They left little room for the whites of her eyes. Having dropped all sign of his speech impediment, Dixie turned into a regular Cyrano DeBergerac when he sincerely croaked:

“And I’ve never seen eyes as lovely or, or as large as yours ... whose colors change so dramatically as yours do. And ... I’ve never kissed anyone that tastes of honey like you or bears such a fra-fragrance of lemons the way you do. There’s some-something extra special ... here between us, some kind of a shine or ... or a glow, a warm glow. I, I dunno what it is. But it sure is new to m-me.”

Ryz’n looked at him, initially surprised and subdued. However, she was increasingly delighted, even privileged, once she realized the full scope of his statement. She was equally pleased by the near perfection of his elocution, which she felt she had induced. As far as she knew, she had reached him unlike any other, including the little Filipino nurse, the Hawaiian police detective, or that big boobed, blonde liar. *Still, he doesn’t remember ME! I’ll make him remember, no matter what it takes.*

“That’s OK, Sweetie, for now. Just remember, we used to feel like this all the time, you and me, ALL the time. And that’s just for starters. Trust me. And we can feel like that from now on. One day, you’ll remember, too. One day, you will. I promise you, My Love.

“The Lord has promised us in his Psalms that He will perfect all that concerns us and this concerns me VERY much. Your memory of me concerns me a great deal, Baby.” She bobbed her head sprightly for confirmation and stroked his cheek with the backs of her fingers. She held him so tightly, she constricted Dixie’s breathing.

“OK, Ry-Ryzanna. Ya know, I b’lieve ya.”

His apparently innocuous statement caused her to let go of him and jump back. Unbeknown to him, it was a phrase he had used often with her in the past, usually in a serio-comic vein. It had become a private joke between them. Ryz’n wondered if his statement was a coincidence or had he just been pretending not to recall? That would be like the old Nick, playing up a situation like this. The way he stumbled in and out of stuttering so easily gave her pause, but nobody is that good of an actor. Still she was unsure.

Ryz’n buried the right side of her head into his chest, listening to his heart pound, as Moons had done the previous night. Again, Dixie questioned Donna’s prerogative of “the rich bitch” who just wanted Dixie long enough to divorce him, in favor of a huge property settlement. Donna had to have been wrong on that one. Yet, he realized Donna had given him mixed signals, too. She also had foreseen the yellow ribbons Ryz’n had waiting for him. But then, how would this perfect little Miss Breck feel about him when she got a look at his mutilated lower half?

“We better go eat, or finish eating anyway ... Swee-Sweetie.” Dixie had used her term of endearment. He had mimicked her tone also, hoping it would meet with Ryz’n’s favor so the little tigress would let him out of the corner. Once again, she glanced up at him suspiciously. It had been he who had first called her “Sweetie” some five years past. It was not a standard term of endearment among her family. Was he recalling or just being polite?

“Meatloaf? You know? That way?” Dixie motioned with his head out, towards the main hallway.

“Oh, Oh yeah, sure. Meatloaf. How could I, uh, forget?” She grinned unevenly. No, this bumbling, innocent act was too much, even for her Nicky to pull off.

The couple made their way to the dining room where Nick’s parents awaited. Dixie noticed the seating arrangements as well as the grace were different from those at the Ryan’s. At the Ryan’s, Ryz’n had sat next to the kitchen door and served as the go-for during dinner. Here, Mrs. Sheeboom sat to her husband’s left before the kitchen doorway and served everyone. There was no crossing oneself after the “Amen,” either. He noticed even Ryz’n did not cross herself. Then Mr. Sheeboom rose and proposed a toast to Nick upon his safe return.

“We’re overjoyed to have you home Son. WELCOME HOME, NCIHOLAS!” The two women rose and raised their glasses of Beaujolais as well to echo his sentiment. Dixie stood and raised his glass to them. They all drank.

“Thanks. A-m-men.” Dixie had just closed a toast as if it were a prayer, but no one said anything.

As they reseated themselves, Dixie looked around at the room to see if he could recognize anything. The room was only a bit larger than Donna’s dining room. The same sculpted, dark gold carpet that ran throughout the Sheeboom home lay beneath his feet. The blonde dining room furniture was unique. The beige cloth seat cushions of the chairs bore an attractive, gold, fleur-de-lis design. An old silver and gold, plastic tablecloth covered the dining surface.

The ceiling was painted off-white and suspended a unique light fixture that could be raised or lowered from the ceiling via an extendable stitched black cord. The three lamps in the fixture were balanced like the prongs of the peace symbol and shaded by long, cone shaped, metallic gold covers. Those covers reminded Dixie of the three thrusters of an Apollo rocket.

A thirty-inch high blonde buffet stood in the opposite left corner of the room near his father, tucked against the wall behind Ryz’n. The soft lavender-purple walls established an appetizing atmosphere. An off-white, wooden kitchen door swung open between the dining room and kitchen. A handsomely carved, ornate dark brown cuckoo clock perched near the top of the wall behind and to Mr. Sheeboom’s left. Two counterweights, in the form of brown pine cones, counter balanced one another and hung next to two long gold chains.

Similar to the Ryan’s dining room, there were two sash windows, one on the narrow wall behind Mr. Sheeboom and the other on the wall behind Ryz’n, next to the buffet. The windows were clothed with Venetian blinds and white-gold

curtains that matched those in the living room. A closed wooden door, painted off-white, bearing a brass knob loomed in the wall immediately to Dixie's right. As he had done at the Ryans, Dixie wondered what was behind the closed door.

Still, he recalled none of it. Yet hungry, he dug into his food, trying not to feel sorry for himself. Not having quite finished his meal at his in-laws, Dixie was plenty hungry for some more home cooking. Ryz'n had declined to eat. She was no longer hungry and, besides, she did not want to override the taste of honey Dixie had detected upon her tongue.

Shortly after the toast, Mrs. Sheeboom spied Dixie's missing digits as he ate his sandwich. Choking up, she excused herself from the table. She exited through the kitchen out the back door to stand on the one-story high, back, porch landing that overlooked the backyard. Ryz'n had noticed her mother-in-law's distress. Dixie had been too busy digging into his liverwurst sandwich and mashed potatoes to pay much attention. Even though this was his second dinner, it was a helluva a lot more appetizing than meatloaf! He was still hungry. However, when Mrs. Sheeboom failed to return shortly, he did take notice. "Mr. She-b-b-boom?" questioned Dixie of his father.

"Please, Son, call me Dad." Mr. Sheeboom smiled winningly.

"Sure ... Yes sir. Uh, is her ... f-full? I mean her plate (pointing to this mother's place) is f-full ... and ..."

"I'm sure she'll return soon, Nicholas." His tone was kind and reassuring.

Dixie nodded, "Oh, OK."

Somewhat perturbed, Ryz'n whispered, "William Nicholas! I'm surprised at you. Why, your mother is overcome with emotion because of you. You should go out there and give her a hug and a kiss. That's what she needs from you now."

"She does? You mean, right n-now?" *Mann! It sure is hard to finish a meal back here in Maryland.*

"Yes, right NOW!" Ryz'n hissed and flashed her angry, now emerald green, eyes at him. It was the first time he had felt an inkling of her displeasure and he did not like it.

"OK, OK, I'm go-goin', right n-now." *Must be the Irish in her.* Dixie excused himself from the table to console his mother. *But she sure don't look Irish!*

Dixie stepped into the postage stamp of a kitchen around a four-foot square wooden table. He crossed over the dirty white, scuffed, linoleum floor, through the grey and white painted kitchen, out the back porch door. The kitchen floor was marked by a pattern of spaced red, black and grey squares and rectangles. For just a second, he felt as though he may have been there before, but he failed to make the connection. He hesitated, but just as quickly there was nothing, as always. This was darned frustrating for him but, at least, these instances were occurring with increasing frequency. Dixie went out onto the back porch. He found his mother, head down, resting her forearms on and leaning over the top rail of the small, grey second story, back porch. About ten feet high, not more than twelve feet square and made of four-inch wide, grey, wooden planks, the

porch was more like a landing. Brown-painted wooden corner posts supported two brown-painted rails on two sides of the porch. The third side was open to a flight of grey-painted back steps. The steps were built into the back red brick wall of the home on one side. The steps descended a flight, guarded by rails on the backyard side, to a concrete slab which was home to three metal trash cans.

His mother turned to him, dabbing at her nose with a paper napkin. "Aw, William Nicholas, we prayed so hard, for so long. I'm just so happy, so happy you're back. We didn't know if you would ever come home, Son." She flicked her steel blue-grey hair back and brought the scrunched up, ragged tissue to her red nose again. Dixie looked around at the leafy green, tall trees, the wild cherries, maples and locusts that served as a border across the back of the yard. The green of the fifty-foot wide lawn below also struck him. All this green was so different from Southern California. The sun was still hanging just above the swaying green treetops in a clear sky off to his right.

Dixie took a deep breath and then he did something his head told him was wrong, but his heart told him was right. He bent over, turned his mother towards him, hugged her, and kissed her gently on the cheek and proclaimed.

"It's g-good to be ha-home, Mo-Mother."

For Dixie, it seemed as though another man had uttered those words for he had no conviction in speaking them. However, his mother received his words as if they were manna from heaven. She shed tears of joy and hugged him snugly as she dabbed at her nose once more.

Ryz'n had moved to the kitchen door and bent her head low over the tiny wooden kitchen table to look through the kitchen window's lace curtains. She observed mother and son embracing. She shook her head for she knew what Dixie did not—that his mother was not a woman, prone to showing emotion like that. Ryz'n returned to her seat, dabbing at her own eyes, while Dixie escorted his mother back inside to the dining table, where he actually finished his meal this time.

As they dined, Mr. and Mrs. Sheeboom regaled Dixie with questions about his life. They wanted to know everything that had transpired with him from the time he had left them over three years ago to the present. Of course, all those details were impossible for him to provide. Dixie could only detail the last two years, beginning at the Subic Bay Naval Hospital in April of '73 and taking them right up to his arrival at the Ryan's. Mr. Sheeboom also related the details of Dixie's capture and the tragic, near fatal shooting he had suffered. He told of how lucky Dixie had been that a child hat shot up him at him, so the bullet's upward trajectory had traveled through more skull bone than brain tissue. He also described Dixie's good fortune to have the Red Cross visit the Vietnamese village where he was wounded at precisely the time Dixie needed them most. The information stunned Dixie.

Ryz'n also listened with rapt attention. She knew "the good fortune" described by her father-in-law to be answer to prayer. She noticed that over the course of

the conversation, the more her husband spoke, the more his slurring and stuttering subsided, just as they had at her parents' home. She remained silent, merely listening. Ryz'n knew things about Nick that he did not tell about himself, primarily things romantic. Those details he left out. He never mentioned his betrothal to Donna or his love for her two Negro children. Nevertheless, those details were burned into her brain. Mr. Sheeboom was particularly interested in Dixie's athletic feats. He was tickled pink to learn the new, local Washington Wonders expansion, major league baseball franchise had drafted his son. But Mr. Sheeboom approved of his son's decision to earn his degree, before he tried out for the pros. Ryz'n reflected on how much it means to have your dad's approval.

Mrs. Sheeboom carted out some of her celebrated, double-layer, strawberry cake. Ryz'n explained to Dixie that her mother-in-law was famous for her cake. The white, sugar icing of the cake had turned pink from the strawberry juice that she had drained over both layers. The top of each layer was filled with fresh, plump strawberries, so much so that Mrs. Sheeboom had to insert toothpicks around the outer edge of the top layer to keep the strawberries from falling off the white cake.

"It's the end of the strawberry season," she explained. "I hope they're OK."

Dixie tried the unusual dessert and loved it, proclaiming he had never had anything like the cake before. However, his mother corrected him on that score, poking a finger at him for emphasis. As Dixie was finishing off his second piece of the rich cake, the doorbell rang. It was the Sodello's from across the street.

Sitting at the foot of the table, Dixie was the closest to the front door, so he put his fork down and answered the bell. As he rose, the cuckoo clock startled him. He turned just in time to see the little white bird disappear, ducking its beak back behind a closing door. Dixie walked towards the front door and noticed for the first time the handsome, wide, rectangular, teak wood furniture piece that sat beneath the big, front, picture window and served as the home's phonograph-stereo system. Dixie stepped around the cream-colored, leather hassock by the door and opened the screen door with an unsure "Hello."

He greeted a short, balding, man with a hooked, broken nose. He appeared to be in his forties and wore bifocal eyeglasses over youthful blue eyes.

"Nicky! Little Nick! I'll be DAMNED! I thought it was you," he exclaimed loudly. "When I saw you come down the street on that bike—Looky Mae, look!" Speaking in a raspy tone, he turned to a short, stout brunette. Another grandmotherly looking lady and two short, dark haired, blue-eyed teen girls waited on the sidewalk behind him. Didn't I tell ya? HA-HA!" he rasped.

The animated, rotund, little man clapped his hands excitedly. Dixie opened the screen door wide to let them all in. He observed the man's dark brown hair and Elvis sideburns were manicured expertly about his bald pate.

Ryz'n and his parents had come into the living room behind him to greet their guests. Dixie learned the jolly, little man was a long time neighbor from across the street named Dominick Sodello or "Big Nick" to Dixie's "Little Nick." Dixie

now towered over the five-foot five-inch Big Nick, which produced a round of laughter.

In fact, Dixie felt like he had entered Munchkin Land here in Crest Hill Heights. The only person he had encountered larger than himself had been his brother-in-law Bryson, the football player. Dixie invited the Sodellos inside, while Big Nick's younger daughter ran off to spread the word among the neighbors that Little Nick had come home.

Soon, an old-fashioned, block party sprouted in the front yard. It began on the smooth finished, cement block porch, and spread to the patio and the marble-chip garden, as well. Before long, the celebration spilled out into the front yard as the evening waned. Neighbors and friends gathered impromptly in the Sheeboom front yard. By dusk, both cars and pedestrians choked the tiny street in front of the modest, brick home. It was like old home week for everyone except the man of the hour.

The celebration just kind of happened, taking on a life of its own, carrying on well past midnight even though it was just mid-week. Not only immediate neighbors but also former school friends of Nick and Ryz'n somehow learned of Nick's return and dropped by to welcome him home. Thirsty, eager volunteers made several "beer runs." Party snack food appeared as if by magic. With each new-old face that arrived, the same unfortunate model repeated itself for Dixie.

Initial joy and happiness gave way to bewilderment, even embarrassment. Each new-old face would first recognize Dixie as Nick or Little Nick, only to realize sadly that his amnesia precluded him from recalling them. Each former friend or neighbor would retell some humorous incident about Little Nick. Then, when Dixie couldn't recall the story they had just told on him, the tale teller would deflate a little. He or she would rally and console Dixie with a well-intentioned pat on the shoulder or knee. All remarked on how much he had grown.

As the sun went down and a cool evening breeze glided over them, Ryz'n sat wearing her husband's warm, silk, suit coat, enthralled with these tales about her spouse. She alternately sat on her husband's lap or at his feet with her knees drawn up under the coat, so only her head, hands and face were uncovered. Ryz'n had never heard some of these stories from Nick's childhood. Eager to learn more about his early life, she braved the chill without complaint. However, she never let him out of her sight, not for a second. *Shoot!* She never let him out of her touch!

For his part, Dixie sat in the cheap, red and white, thatched, plastic and aluminum, lawn chair on the Sheeboom's six by twelve-foot, pink cement block front patio. Periodically, he leaned back on the two rear feet of the chair to balance himself against the home's front brick wall, beneath the living room picture window. Both the front stoop and patio lay under the protection of the cream colored, overhanging soffit. Neighbors and friends had brought their own lawn chairs and filled the semi-circular, pink and white marble-chip garden that fronted the patio. They sat under the overhanging branches of the green, leaf-

laden, silver maple. Others sat on the front stoop or brought blankets and set them on the grass under the maple tree. The burgundy and black T-Bird sat next to them in the driveway. Some leaned against Mr. Sheeboom's pride and joy, which encouraged him to retrieve more chairs from inside for their comfort and his car's protection.

Mr. Sheeboom made a little speech, describing how grateful the family was for Nick's homecoming. He asked that, because of his son's amnesia, the family would appreciate it if the guests could refrain from mentioning this joyous event to the press. He encouraged all to enjoy themselves and to "please refrain from leaning on the T-Bird."

Dixie listened quietly and patiently to each of the well intentioned tale-tellers. He smiled politely at each successive story, while he slowly got stoned on brewskis. A couple hours past sunset, a precipitous drop in temperature had given rise to a veiled vapor of mist, inducing many of the impromptu partygoers to melt away into the light fog. By midnight, the patchy fog had descended like a blanket over the celebration. The foggy exodus of guests caught the bare-armed Dixie snoring in the lawn chair with Ryz'n seated wearily at his feet, trying to stay warm in his coat. She longed to be alone with her husband.

The Sheebooms bid good night to the delighted revelers who claimed they'd be back "later" to interview the returning hero in more detail. His parents woke Dixie and insisted he assume his old room. However, he protested, claiming he had a motel room for the night. His parents argued that did not matter because he was too inebriated to drive and, besides, the rising ground fog would endanger them on the road. Dixie became downright obstinate. He was not quite as drunk as he let on. He hoped they would realize his sobriety and all would leave him alone, so he could return to the motel without fanfare.

Of course, the two boilermakers and another half dozen beers or so over the last seven hours left him feeling no pain. But then, he had eaten the equivalent of two meals as well. Actually, Dixie had been walking that fine line between maintaining his high and dipping into a hangover low. Initially, he had acted more stoned than he was, as a ruse to end the embarrassment inflicted upon him by this impromptu, homecoming party. His parents argued that he did not even know the name or location of his motel. Dixie extracted his room key from his pocket and dangled it before them. Ryz'n seized the key with her left hand.

"It's room 222, The Royal George Motor Inn. I'll drive him up there," Ryz'n stated officially.

Ryz'n had her own motives for taking him to the motel. She longed to consummate their reunion and not merely to end an unwanted three year hiatus. She also hoped their lovemaking would serve as the incendiary spark that would rekindle his memory. In fact, she was counting on it. Her in-laws' tiny home was not the forum Ryz'n had had in mind for such memory-making activity. She preferred the half empty, local motel. There she would have him all to herself

without possible interruption. The motel was a preferable, perhaps even the perfect venue for her intentions.

When the Sheebooms protested strongly that Ryz'n could not drive his motorcycle, she assured them sweetly but firmly that she could. She reminded them she had driven Nick's scooter many times before. Nick was loaded, they protested. She could not ride him in that condition. Ryz'n assured them she could ride him in any condition and had done so before, without qualification. Half listening, Dixie merely laughed, saying it would not be a problem that he could drive himself, if needed.

As a compromise, Dixie's father offered to drive them up the hill. But Ryz'n nixed that idea, too. Under that scenario, without wheels, she'd be dependent upon others and she had never liked that, unless her dependency rested on Nick.

Mr. Gasch, the gas station owner and retired D. C. police detective, who lived in the next block, just up the street, had not yet left the party. Now, overhearing the discussion, he offered to follow Nick and Ryz'n the mile up the hill to the motel to insure the kids' safety.

Laughing hysterically now, Dixie plopped back down into the lawn chair, almost tipping it over. He laughed hard as he listened to them argue over his safety. *HIS SAFETY!* He had never heard anyone be so concerned about his welfare before. When they asked him what was so funny. He told them.

His wife became a bit miffed. Ryz'n pushed up the silk sleeves of his coat, which she was wearing to stay warm. Then she knelt down, getting right in her husband's face. She asserted in unmistakable terms that they had all been concerned for his welfare over the last three years to the point of distraction, even severe, chronic depression. She reminded him loudly that he had no idea of the number of prayers said or tears shed on his behalf. "And it was those prayers, and not luck or good fortune, that has brought you home safely!"

Dixie mumbled a slurred apology for his lack of sensitivity, feigning helplessness, like a lost, little boy. His helpless look broke her down. She pushed his long, wavy hair back out of his eyes, caressing his face with both of her hands. She sighed rather helplessly herself. Ryz'n was tired from several sleepless nights. She was beat, but she wanted him very, very badly. And she wanted him now.

"Come on, Baby, let's go."

Smiling, she held his room key aloft wiggling it in the misty June night. Ryz'n helped pull him to his feet, supporting him under his left armpit as she walked him to the bike. He could have navigated his own way, but her assistance pleased him. In intentionally slurred tones, Dixie explained how the bike worked. Based on her previous experience with his scooter, she felt confident she could handle it. And based on her previous experience with him, she felt equally assured, she could handle him as well. She knew they were almost there.