

The Honda CB750 was much, much more of a bike than she remembered his little scooter to have been. It was bigger, more powerful, and it had all those gears, but, outwardly, she held her concern in check. Dixie got on first and rocked forward removing the kickstand. He turned the bike down the slight incline of the driveway to point it in the right direction, up the street. Mrs. Sheeboom complained that they were not wearing helmets, but her admonition did not deter them. However, to pacify his mother, Dixie pulled out the two baseball helmets he kept in his saddlebags and plopped the smaller one on Ryz'n's head and the other on his own.

"Just for you, Mother." Dixie drew a silly grin across his face.

"Well, well, I ... " His mother backed off. "You two be careful. Those things are dangerous."

"We will, Wauneta. Don't worry," assured a not-so-sure Ryz'n.

Ryz'n also beamed at her mother-in-law to allay the matron's fears, but she nevertheless blessed herself silently and made a mental prayer asking for travel mercies. Ryz'n reckoned that it would be just terrible if she were to kill them after all they had been through, when they were so close to being together, alone, at last. However, in this case, she reasoned the risks were worth the rewards.

Ryz'n climbed onto the cycle, engulfed by his suit coat. She adjusted the rear view mirrors and, with Dixie showing her what to do, he kick-started the bike for her. She pushed his coat sleeves up her arms with little effect. They took off somewhat unsteadily in the light mist. Dixie sat behind his wife and shifted gears, working the clutch and the gas, which he could do in his sleep. Ryz'n, sitting half on the gas tank, half on the seat, helped steer the bike and he let her apply the front brakes, while he covered the back. However, Dixie could take over both brakes, if the need were to arise. She got them going, so Dixie relaxed after shifting up to third and let her drive. His mind wandered as they rode uphill. He was still high enough not to worry about the journey.

Dixie admired her courage. It was obvious to him, she did not know what she was doing. However, she was game enough to try on a foggy night without realizing that he was not so very drunk as he seemed. Perhaps this act of courage didn't rank with Laurie Lei shooting the Pipeline or scaling a volcano at Kilauea Iki, but this girl impressed him nonetheless. *Yep, she certainly is something else, this one.* She even read his mind better than Rose Rosario or Moons had done. Yes, this Ryzanna was special. And here, wearing his oversized, suit coat and the yellow ribbon in her hair, she looked like an adorable kid playing dress-up in her father's clothes. How lucky was he to have run into two beautiful, alluring

women in successive nights? He had gone a lifetime without such an occurrence. But here it had happened, two nights, back to back.

Truth is stranger than fiction. What odds would Vegas give on something like that? Especially with one in the Smokies and the other in Crest Hill Heights, Maryland? Ha!

Grey fog balls hung like inverted cotton candy cones, iridescent, beneath the street lamps. Somehow, the pair managed to knife through the light mist and negotiate the mile long uphill climb over wet streets to The Heights and the motel. They caught a green light perfectly at the Veer Avenue intersection. Mr. Gasch followed slowly, and not to close behind in his green, '73 Ford Maverick.

When they reached the motel, Ryz'n parked the bike with Dixie's help and stored the helmets, the smaller inside the larger, in the soft, brown leather saddlebags. Again, she blessed herself mentally and thanked the Lord for his protective mercies. For what seemed like the millionth time, she thanked Him for Nicky's safe return. The handsome, roly-poly Mr. Gasch patiently helped Dixie up the outside cement stairs to the second floor veranda and then to Dixie's room. The brief ride had taxed Dixie more than he realized and sent his head to spinning when he touched ground. Ryz'n thanked Mr. Gasch as he propped Dixie against the motel wall next to the door of 222. She assured him that she could handle Nick the rest of the way herself. Mr. Gasch bid the couple "good night" and told Nick once more how glad he was to have him home safely. Then he retraced his steps along the veranda, down the stairs, back to his car, parked in the lot below. He yelled up to them through the patchy mist that if Nick wanted to play baseball this summer, that he could play for his team anytime.

Ryz'n thanked Mr. Gasch again, as he reached his car, by calling softly down to him, over the second story railing. She really had not paid much attention to what he had said and she did not think Nick had heard him either. Truth was: Ryz'n did not care. She had her mind on other things, as did her husband.

The diminutive Ryz'n made sure her hulking, wobbly husband remained propped with his back against the wall, while she unlocked the motel room door. His long, coat sleeves made the task difficult for her, as they kept falling over her small hand and fingers, as they had on the bike ride. To compensate, she removed Dixie's suit coat, handed it to him and proceeded with the lock.

Upon receiving the coat, Dixie folded it fastidiously over his forearm. Then he slid down, by herks and jerks, with his back and butt against the wall, coming to rest on the concrete walkway floor. His boot heels caught up immediately beneath him.

"Know sumpin'?" he blurted out, but she did not respond. She was busy, thinking about her next step.

Ryz'n unlocked and pushed open the door to the darkened room. Then she looked back for her husband, whom she had just heard, wondering where he had gone so quickly. Surprised, she turned to see he now crouched on the concrete veranda walkway beneath her. He squatted there seemingly without a care, butt

up against the wall, next to the doorframe and his coat across his lap. His muscular arms were wrapped around his knees, which he had drawn up almost to his chin.

“What are you doing down there, Baby?” she chuckled.

“Starz.” He pointed wildly out under the veranda’s overhanging roof. “Hard to see starz back here, back East.” Like creeping ivy, the mist climbed up over the veranda’s creole style, wrought iron railing, enshrouding them both. Behind the mist, the motel’s parking lights blurred eerily.

Ryz’n knelt beside him with her right knee just off the walkway floor to look out above the iron railing and under the veranda’s overhanging roof.

“Yes. Close to the city like this, it is, but further down the road, in farm country, it’s easier. Although this ground fog doesn’t help any right now. You’re right though, it’s not like out West.” She smiled meekly.

Dixie nodded as he had all night long to all the well wishers.

“But we do have the moon every now and then, Baby. In fact, we have a half moon tonight. See it trying to shimmer through the fog? Just under the roof, right out there.” She pointed due east. “It is kind of blurry, but our moons can be pretty bright on a clear night.” Dixie chuckled with delight, letting his heels slip out from under him, so that he sat down with a thud upon the walkway. His legs stretched out over the concrete.

“Moonz? Yeah, I know ‘bout them, both of ‘em HA! Ain’t no half moonz neither. No sirree, Bob! They’re full and bright, all right. And round, just like potpies! Hungry Man Potpies. HA! Both of ‘em!”

Dixie laughed loudly at the joke she did not get. As she began to rise up, he blurted out again, drunkenly, towards the parking lot below.

“RY-ZEN!” He emphasized each syllable loudly and evenly.

“Yes, Sweetie. I’m right here, Baby.” She kneeled back down beside him.

“RY-ZEN! What kinda name is that? Nevah heard o’ no RY-ZEN before.”

Ryz’n chuckled. “Well, there aren’t many. In fact, I’m the only one I know of.” Dixie nodded in exaggerated triumph. Ryz’n proceeded in a kindly school marm manner. “Now Ryesin, R-Y-E-S-I-N, is the Gaelic form of the Irish ROISIN -- R-O-I-S-I-N, which means Rose. Ha! So in a roundabout way, I’m named after my mom, ‘cept she’s not Irish at all. Only my dad is. But my mom didn’t think the Gaelic Ryesin sounded formal enough for the birth certificate. So she dubbed me Ryzanna, officially that is, while both my folks agreed to nickname me according to the Gaelic, only spelled differently. That’s R-Y-Z-apsotrophe-N. OK, Honey? Now maybe we oughtta slip inside, hunh?”

“Apostrophe-N. Hunh!” Dixie shook his head and muttered below his breath “R-Y-apostrophe-N! Gotta ‘membra that.” He tried but failed to snap his fingers.

Ryz’n had explained the name thing, patiently. Now she nudged him easily and smiled an unassuming smile.

“Let’s go in, Sweetie.” But Nick spoke as if he had not heard her suggestion.

“Ryz’n, R-Y-Z-apostrophe!-N. Hunh ! Ryz’n the Rose, the IRISH rose. Ha! So that makes you my wild Irish rose, hunh? HA-HA! Gee, Ryzanna! You don’t look Irish a-tall, a-tall. Umm, ’cept maybe sometimes in the color of those beautiful, cat eyes of yours. Ya know, you don’ seem so wild ta me, either. ‘Cept when you went after your sistah at dinner tonight. Yeah! But she deserved it.”

It was obvious to Ryz’n that her husband was feeling no pain. She hoped he would prove more serviceable than a melted candle. But at this rate, she wasn’t so sure.

“Well, there are times when Sheena could drive even Father V. to be wild.”

“Is that so?” asked a wide-eyed Dixie in mock sincerity. He was in no hurry to enter the bridal chamber.

“Yes, that is so,” replied Ryz’n politely, playing along. “But you know, there were times when you thought I was pretty ‘wild,’ Baby, ‘a crazy woman,’ you said, ‘a regular, raving lunatic.’”

“Is that so?” repeated Dixie like a parrot. “Do tell.”

“Yes, that is so,” she countered once again. “And I am telling.”

“Oh, no. How so?” Nick was quite the rhyming thespian. He acted as if he were drinking tea at a tea party with his pinky raised politely in the air. Ryz’n thought he needed a cold dose of reality to remind him of the situation at hand.

“Well, Sweetie, those were your words to describe me—IN BED.” Ryz’n smiled sublimely, as she raised her eyebrows. Wide-eyed, Dixie swallowed hard and looked innocently at her.

“That’s right, Sweetie. And it’s been a long, long while since I’ve been wild in bed—not since you left, see?”

Again, Dixie swallowed hard, wide-eyed and nodded ever so humbly that he understood, like a schoolboy being corrected by his teacher.

“Good,” nodded Ryz’n. “Now that we understand each other . . .”

Three years and two months. That’s a lot of water over the dam. A lot of fish under the bridge. But there will be no fish tonight, Sweetie. No, there will be no need for fish tonight.

Ryz’n rose with her shoulder and hip, pushing open the door, which had resettled itself into the jam. With sweet anticipation, she stepped one foot across the threshold. Ryz’n spoke softly and tenderly in her natural, throaty tone.

“Come on Honey, let’s go inside. Come on into me, Sweetie, and we’ll make some memories you won’t ever forget, memories that won’t fade away. I promise you. And who knows, Baby? Maybe, spark some old ones, too.” She winked and nodded hopefully towards the room.

Dixie thought the naturally sultry tone of her voice had lowered half an octave more than usual and her typical, vocal catch had caught a little harder, as well. Her eyes gleamed a wild, emerald green and her moist, pink lips lilted playfully, beckoning to him.

In a way, Ryz’n was grateful for his semi-inebriated state. It would ease the tensions, enabling them to reacquaint with one another more easily. The shaded

light bulb over the door flickered and died. Ryz'n took its passing as a good omen for romance. She broadened both her eyes and open arms, inviting him to come into love her, to love her now.

Dixie looked up to her. He had ceased laughing. He still failed to remember her. For that reason, he felt guilty. He felt guilty because he knew what she expected. Obviously, she knew him, she loved him, and she wanted him. He no longer had any allusions on that score. He had no more concern that she was the 'rich bitch' after whatever fortune he allegedly had (of which, by the way, he had yet to see a dime). He had only just met her, but he liked her fine. He guessed that he might be able to love her and melt that frozen vacuum in the pit of his soul forever. Yes, Dixie thought he could love her, in time. But, now? Right now? This minute?

He did not want her to view his nasty wounds. She didn't know how terribly ugly they were. Moons had seen them by accident when he had climbed, shivering, out of the mountain stream. But Moons had been a temporary condition like chicken pox. He'd never see her again. But this, this was different. He couldn't just spring the harsh, ugly evidence of his atrocities upon this kind, lovely girl whose lemon-sweet aroma glowed about her like a soft light.

Ryz'n watched patiently as her husband tried to rise up on his left foot that was nearest to her, but his smooth-soled Gucci kept slipping out from under him. When he turned his head and cheek to the wall, looking up to her for help, his long, unkempt, black hair hung in his face. Apparently, defeated by gravity, he lifted merely his right arm, extending it across his face towards her. Although only slightly flexed, his long, hard, bicep and tricep bulged before her eyes.

"Help me? Please?" asked Dixie, humbly sincere.

Ryz'n peered in and around his wavy bangs and through the inimitable black and blue windows to his soul.

"It'd be my pleasure, Baby." She moaned audibly sultry, as she reached back and grasped his wrist, still straddling the now darkened threshold.

Her sultry, poised reply astonished her, because the composed sound of her voice did not reflect the speed-racing rate of her heart. She felt as she did just before she opened a live concert. Ryz'n hid her nervous anticipation well. She never had realized it would all have lead to this, when she had first fallen for Nicky, the first time she had seen him in homeroom, opening day of their sophomore year. Then he was merely Little Nick, the pint-sized, gifted, erratic, class weirdo. Yet here they were, together again, after so, so long.

Ryz'n had been employing the "Abigail" approach so far with moderate success, as Father V. had recommended. But now she was contemplating switching to plan "B," or the "Bathsheba" plan, for the nightcap. Her intuition told her the moment was right for such a switch. And how could a priest understand something like this, anyway?

Electricity vaulted through their grasp, as she took hold of his maimed right hand in both of her smaller ones. Ryz'n lowered her center of gravity and leaned

her right hip back against the inside of the doorframe to pull up on him, drawing him up erect. For Nicky, she could do this. For him, she would become a temptress. Hadn't they all, from Sheena to Stiehlmoir, said she was one naturally—in her walk, in her throaty talk, in her easy, fluid manner. They claimed she was too unconscious of her natural instincts. She was inhibited and needed artificial inducements to drop those inhibitions. No, all she needed was Nicky. He was the only magic elixir she required and she would prove it now.

Dixie was beginning to believe her—this girl of dimples who was so cheerfully bright, so ready to help. There was something new about her now, something in the naively, inviting way she had slid her hip down and up against the door frame, with her knees half bent and, then, locked together. There was also something in the way her well toned arms pressed against either side of her substantial bosom, as she drew him up. Certainly, there was something in the way her eyes had gleamed when she spoke to him. This was another side to her that lured him, that tempted him. *Oh yeah!* She was overcoming his guilt and his shame all right. He was fast becoming a believer in this girl. *Maybe I should—go inside and make memories that would not fade away.*

This girl reminded him so much of Rose Rosario in her helpful demeanor and her ability to anticipate his every need. Yet, for Rose, Dixie had held only an unrequited, courtly love, not a physical one. Now he wondered if his feelings for this, this, stranger, this alien bride, should remain courtly. Should he pass over this threshold to romance her so soon? If he did, would he break the logjam in his mind and spark his recall. Would this beauty prove all those shrinks wrong? *Mann, that would be something to tell that Dr. Mandl, really something!* But how would she react to his terrible wounds?

He had told her earlier that evening, when they had first met, that they had “made it” and, in one sense, they had. However, absent his memory of her or until they made new memories to replace the old, they had not made it truly all the way back, not yet. He knew they had both sensed that. Now, mesmerized by her gorgeous grace, and in awe of her overwhelmingly innocent beauty, Dixie stood dumbstruck before his comely bride. His maimed hand electrified in hers. Her grasp fired up his insides. The gaze, from her enticing emerald eyes through those long, dark lashes, was defrosting rapidly the cold vacuum of his soul. Her lovely, full pink lips parted, as she returned his awestruck gaze. She couldn't realize what she was doing to him. The air between them charged like an electric field in the eerie neo darkness. She just couldn't help it anymore than she could help that sultry voice or her mesmerizing walk. It's just the way she is. *The girl just can't help it, Mann.* Without speaking further, Ryz'n had deepened her spell over him.

Softly, silently, gently, Ryz'n tugged on his bad hand to draw him inside. She wondered, how could he be so helpless now, so vulnerable, yet, at the same time appear, so, so virile. His masculine frame seemed to bulge everywhere out of his stylish, form-fitting clothes. She sensed within him a vigorous potency that

belied his helpless, sleepy, vulnerably boyish demeanor. *Those eyes, those eyes!* They drew her on, shining out from his deeply tanned face. A dense patch of ground fog enveloped them. The mist dived around them, darting through the open door into the darkened room like a heat-seeking missile, blurring their profiles and pointing their way.

No, they had not made it all the way home, yet. Ryz'n had seemed to read his mind on that score, too. Despite his motto, Dixie had been disappointed by his failure to recall any shred of his former life. There had been that one moment earlier, when she had been profiled in the front doorway of her home, when, just for an instant, Dixie had experienced a strong sensation of *déjà vu*. Yet, that feeling had passed as quickly as it had come. Then tonight, with each new-old acquaintance he had met, whom he did not know, and with each anecdote they had told on him, which he could not recall, his handicap had been driven painfully home to him. However, he had not been disappointed in her, not at all. No, she had championed him. She had nurtured him all evening, even more lovingly than the gruff Donna ever had.

This ravishing Ryzanna, without being solicitous, had stood by him all night. She had shone upon him like a solitary light in a dark room. Her radiance had warmed him, thawing that frozen void within. Now she drew him on like a bright light draws a moth. Once more, she stood leaning back against the corner of the door frame. Her feet flat on the floor, straddling the thresh hold. Her shapely thighs, uncovered by her cuffed, green shorts, together with her gorgeous lower legs acted in unison to lock straight at the knees and spread apart provocatively. Her left hand, about eye-high, with her fingers wrapped around the door's edge, propped the door ajar. She straddled the doorway, luring him inside like a silent siren in a classical Greek tragedy. Her presence, like her lemon scent, saturated his mind. Her head and backside pressed back against the door frame profiling her natural beauty in the mist and darkness. The dainty, outstretched right hand pulled patiently, invitingly, on his deformed right claw. She called to him softly, seductively, in her instinctively smoky speech, coaxing him to come inside.

Unlike Donna or Moons, this girl's allure was ingenuously but powerfully subtle. All night long, this beautiful young woman had befriended him, nurtured him, even mothered him. Now she had morphed into the mother of all seducers. A chameleon, she had suddenly become a naively bewitching little creature, who drew him onward and upward, and against whom he felt absolutely powerless to resist. *This isn't real. This couldn't be real.* Maybe it was the ominously boding *déjà vu* of the mist which worried him. *What had Jim said?*

"Nobody has a wife that looks like that."

'Nobody?' Well, at least that part was true enough.

"Come on inside, Sweetie." She purred softly. *"Come on into me now, Baby."*

Ryz'n could sense the Bathsheba she never knew she had within her sober self, pouring out from her body, through the very pores of her skin. She could feel it encircling and drawing around him in the mist like an invisible net, ensnaring

him in her web of love and desire. She almost giggled for she couldn't believe she was capable of purposefully exuding such powerful, overt, animal enticement without being high. Ryz'n could never picture herself as a voluptuous, alluring Bathsheba, even though people always claimed she had such qualities. Her natural proclivity was more towards the modestly warmly prim, hospitable Abigail—like the helper girl she had been at dinner tonight. But there was something greater at play here tonight, something greater, like that first time with Nicky down at the beaver ponds in La Placa. It was as if she were weaving a spell about him, a spell against which his strapping virility was powerless to withstand. She had never wanted him more, not even the first time. Until now, Ryz'n had not thought that was possible. The very concept of that inaugural, passionate event now invoked goose bumps to rise on her dark olive skin and her juices flowed within. She almost had him. *Pickles! I only need to play him a little more and then reel him in a little, just inside the door, just like fishin' with Dad and then ...* Her breath caught in her throat at that thought and she began to take long, slow, deep breaths.

Once more, Ryz'n pulled softly on his deformed hand. With the other hand by his side, Dixie pressed his unfolding suit coat into his waist with his wrist and forearm. He pinched his thigh through his snug fitting, silk slacks to make sure he was not dreaming. He shook his head in disbelief as the mist thickened about them. Incredibly, a reasonable facsimile of his unique, recurring vision was alive right there in front of him and about to dissolve in the fog once more right before his eyes! Just as it had so often in his dreams.

No! Not again! This can't be happening to me again! I'm awake. I'm not zonin', not now, am I? No!

He pinched himself again to make certain. And there was Ryz'n reassuring him, cooing huskily once more through the surreal fog. She drew out her words like molasses, pouring her lemon-scented sweetness over him.

"Ya know Honey, it's been a long, long time, Baby. Yes, it has. But we're home now, Sweetie. Well, almost anyway. Yes ... we're almost there." She repeated her litany of hope as much to assure herself as to convince him.

Home? Is that what she had said?

This motel room I rented for nineteen-fifty? This concrete, veranda floor beneath me? And this beautiful, strange girl whom I have never seen before in my life? They were home?

Aw shoot! What is home anyway?

Home was just another four-letter word to Dixie, something he had only come close to achieving with Donna and the boys, but something he had never realized. It was merely a hopeful vision like the silhouette girl that had been snatched away in the twinkling of an eye. *Hope for the best and expect the worst.*

But this lovely vision before him had just promised that they were home. *That she is home, too.* And there was nothing but assurance in her tender tone and in

her warm manner. She exhibited a confidence that was not arrogant, but a confidence that was modest and as sure and certain as the sunrise.

*Damn! If she really is HOME, I can't imagine heaven being any lovelier ...
And she's still here.*

Ryz'n had not evaporated with the mist, not this time. Instead, a soft, golden glow appeared to enshroud her. *Must be the booze!*

Ryz'n lingered over him, patiently waiting, watching. She had had a great deal of practice. Three years and two months amounted to eleven hundred and fifty-six days—and nights. That's how long it had been, since his 1972 Easter leave. She knew because she had lived and counted every one of those days and nights. For eleven hundred and fifty-six days and nights, she had worried. She had feared. She had hoped and she had prayed. And she had remained faithful, despite what that lyin' Tommy Tremain claimed.

Well, I may have had a few lapses when I was under the influence, but I did remain celibate, I know I did! But the point is ...

For eleven hundred and fifty-six days and nights, she had yearned and she had desired for Nick's safe return. And now, he had come home, a little bit chewed up perhaps, in body as well as in mind, maybe. However, she could not have been happier. He was here, right before her, ripe for her taking.

She would make him whole, again. She would restore what was lacking, his verve, his joie de vivre, his confidence, yes, even his memory. And she was going to start right now, using her own special prescription of restorative powers. *My charms have always proven to be successful on you in the past, Nicky. Those psychiatrists can just take a flyin' leap.*

Dixie floundered. His mind raced ahead of his heart. Was this real or was he zoning? And if it were real, did he really want to do this now? He didn't even know this girl, really. *What about my wounds? What will she think?* Dixie swallowed hard. He could almost taste her lips of honey. His reservations of shame and guilt evaporated with the receding mist, as her enticing scent of lemons consumed him.

Now, once more smiling sweetly but concealing her ravenous desire, Ry smiled at him for what must have been the thousandth time. She lovingly tugged at him, yet again. As her anticipation intensified, Ryz'n's breathing increased noticeably and her chest began to heave. Yet, her inviting demeanor and voice remained calm and gentle. Ryz'n coaxed him softly, patiently.

"Come, just a little further, Sweetie. We're almost there. Come in to me ..."
He came.

Almost There portrays the efforts of a lonely, young, M.I.A. widow to locate her amnesiac husband in the wake of the destruction left by the Viet Nam War.

In the first week of June 1975, the multi-talented, handsome Ryzanna Sheeboom, recently graduated from college, stands poised to embark upon her adult life. However, she is unwilling to pursue a career until she has resolved, unequivocally, the mystery of her missing husband Nicholas. Almost two and a half years have passed since the Government officially declared Nick Sheeboom as missing in action at the close of the Vietnam campaign. Standing alone among her family and friends, Ryz'n believes firmly that God has kept her husband alive for her to find. A continent away, unknown to Ryz'n, an amnesiac war veteran attends Peppermount University on a baseball scholarship under the mistaken identity of James "Dixie" Strickler. As Dixie prepares to marry in San Diego, into the only family he has known outside of the Marine Corps, unforeseen circumstances intervene to prevent the marriage, pointing him back east, perhaps to his past.

Almost There chronicles an incredible but pivotal ten days in the lives of this lost, war torn couple when their disparate worlds miraculously converge. Distinctively told from the dual perspectives of each of the main characters, this piece of cross-genre, light fiction will provide the reader with two stories in one suspenseful tale.

About the Author

Dixie Wells is a first time author who lives with a spouse of twenty-eight years and their teenage son in McLean, Virginia. A married daughter Kelly lives with her husband in nearby New Market, Maryland.