

Something was bothering him, but he would not tell her what it was. Although she was concerned, Ryz'n decided not to push it.

"Yeah, OK. Let's get some strawberries. I'll take you by your old schools on the way. See if you remember anything."

Ryz'n pulled out of the parking lot onto 28th Boulevard and then she took a left onto Molson. A block later, they turned left again, down into the long, curb-lined, semi-circular, asphalt driveway of Studdard Junior High School. She drove by the three-story school, slowly letting the sight of the building sink in to his psyche. Studdard was unlike any of the county schools, which were constructed almost entirely of the red clay brick, indigenous to the region. However, built sparsely of brick, Studdard featured walls of bright royal blue metal and plenty of glass windows. It was not often you saw a bright blue schoolhouse.

"Recognize anything, Baby? That's where you spent the seventh through the ninth grades."

"Naw, can't say as I do. You have any stories to tell me?"

"Nope. I didn't go to this school, thank God."

"Why do you say that?" He asked semi-shocked.

"Well, I went to Cathcart. You remember seeing it don't you, just a couple blocks down from my house, when we drove past it this morning?"

"Yeah, sure, but why did you say it like that, like this school here held a contagious disease or something?"

"Oh, well, Studdard was chock full of blocks."

"Blocks?"

"Yeah, you know greasers—grits, as opposed to collegiates. Yeah, there were a lot of discipline problems over here at Studdard, racial problems, too. At least, that is what I heard. That was back when King was shot. The shopping center down the street from our high school was burned down after the assassination."

Although she was going only about five miles an hour in the school driveway, she was paying attention to Nick, when she almost ran over a tall, slender, black man in his mid-thirties, dressed neatly in a sport coat and tie. The man jumped back out of harm's way landing near Nick's door, as Ryz'n jerked the Starfire to a stop.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," cried Ryz'n. "Are you all right, sir?"

Calmly, coolly, the man replied that he was fine. He pushed away from the hood of the car and righted himself, but suggested, in a dignified manner, she might want to watch where she was driving in the future. Ryz'n affirmed that she would. Nicky mumbled under his breath so only she could hear that he could see why there were racial problems here. "Running people over could have that effect," he whispered. Suddenly, the slender black man coolly clamped down upon Nick's arm, which had been resting on top of the door.

"Little Nick! You are Nick Sheeboom, aren't you?"

Nick nodded haltingly.

Berry Fresh Memories

“You don’t remember me? Ken Kerns. Taught you Algebra and Geometry?” Nick stared blankly at him. “Cut you from the basketball team? You don’t remember me? I’m surprised. I was the only black teacher here at the time. Generally, former students remember me. Guess it hurts my vanity a little bit that you don’t.”

“Mr. Kerns? Please don’t be offended,” offered a cheery Ryz’n. “Nicky has amnesia. That’s why we drove by, to see if we couldn’t stir up some old memories.”

“I see. Well, I’m sorry to hear that Nick, but I will keep you in my prayers.” The tall man patted Nick’s forearm gently this time and smiling reassuringly. I thought you had been killed in the War. That’s what I had heard. I’m glad it was just a false rumor.”

“Me too,” piped in Ryz’n.

“Look, I’d like to talk longer, but I’m afraid I have to run. I’m late for an appointment. You, uh, kind of have me blocked in here, Miss.”

“Ok, sure. I’m moving. By the way, Mr. Kerns, I’m Nicky’s wife. Ryzanna’s my name, but I’ll answer to Ryz’n.” She smiled winningly.

“Well, I’m pleased to meet you ma’am. I just hope any future meetings begin, shall we say, uh, less auspiciously?” Mr. Kerns bowed from the neck before he entered his parked car.

“Say, wait a minute,” pleaded Nick. “How di-did-did you recog-cognize me, Mr. Ka-Kerns? I must look da-different from I da-did ten years ago.”

The teacher slipped behind the driver’s wheel and rolled down the driver side window, before he answered.

“I’ve only known one individual who had such penetrating eyes, one so electric blue and the other like ebony. And that person is Little Nick Sheeboom!” The black man smiled sincerely. Then he gently honked his horn, signaling Ryz’n to move for she still blocked him in.

Ryz’n exited the school driveway and followed Molson Street around into 23rd. She pointed out the apartment they had rented when they were first married.

“Matt and Allena Yikes live there now with their three-year old son Mikey.”

Nick merely nodded. She thought he would remember them from the block party last night, but he did not act like he did. They followed 23rd up to the District line where Ryz’n took the next couple of lefts onto a dirt farm road that led a half a mile up to the Stamp house on the hill in the center of about a fifty-acre farm.

Ry was purchasing the last couple of quarts of strawberries at the hilltop’s outdoor market rigged up near the homestead, while the proprietors, Mrs. Stamp and her husband, made over Nick. The old folks were so glad to see him home safely. The couple proclaimed that Nick was still the best paperboy they had ever had. The pair dressed alike: blue denim coveralls, heavy work boots, straw fedoras, and old flannel work shirts even though it was mid June. However, it was clear Mrs. Stamp wore the real pants in the family.

“Now Naecky, they’s from ourah las’ BOOshel of the seasin, but we want y’all to have ‘em,” asserted the old lady. They’s no charge. Just cansidah it, ah kind o’ we’ come home praysunt.”

Nick interjected. “But ga-gee, Mrs. Stamp that da-doesn’t seem fair—”

Out at Home

“Ah, Ah. You lissen me boy!” She stepped toward him, shaking a mean, crooked index finger in his face. “Is it fairah you missin’ half a ear thair and them fangers and yore m’ mree, too? Now you go and git. We had plenteh o’ rain this spring and made out fain off’n ourah berrah crop this yair. And make surah, you say ‘Hey’ to youah folks. Truly, sorreh about yore Pappy, but cain’t say, as it was a shock. Way that man drank wondah he lived as long as he has. Must be pickled.” She shook her head in wonderment.

Nick glanced toward Ryz’n who hid behind her Foster-Grant’s, expressionless, while he mouthed ‘Pappy?’” Ryz’n mouthed back, “Your grandfather.”

“Oh! Oh yeah, my grandfather!” He retorted.

Nick studied the old lady for a minute. He must have decided there was no arguing with this tough old bird. Deep crags lined her ancient, weather-beaten face. And she had a nose the size of Abe Lincoln’s on Mt. Rushmore. No, there was no use in arguing with her. Nick thanked her again profusely for the berries and the two of them beat a dignified retreat in the Starfire.

As they drove back down the dusty dirt farm road, Ry heard pebbles crunching beneath her tires as dust billowed behind them like a parachute from a drag race car. Nick asked Ryz’n what planet that old lady hailed from. He said that he had never heard an accent like that in his life, even though his nickname would have indicated otherwise.

“Wail, she hails from Southun Mur’lyn.” Ryz’n teased Dixie with her southern accent and flirtatious manner. “Whyah doancha know that’s wherah they poah the CEE’ment in front of the HO-tel?” She giggled, prompting her husband to laugh lightly before he replied.

“Your accent is actually a little different, better, more refined, I’d say.”

Ryz’n winked at him.

“Well Honey, ah’m a Jo-jah peach O-rigin’leh, doancha know? I kin tuh’n ohn myah old accent when it suits myah puahpuhs.” She batted her eyelashes in an exaggerated manner. Then they felt a loud thump beneath the front tires, as much as they heard it. And, in quick succession, the thump recurred under the rear tires. Their heads bobbed twice in response.

At Nick’s request, Ryz’n braked the car in the dirt road about halfway from the farmhouse to the asphalt city road. They had driven down in a little vale with water melons growing on either side of the lane. Ryz’n watched Nick as he stood up and looked behind him, maintaining his balance with one hand on the top of the windshield.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Snake.”

“What?!? Where? Let’s go.” Frantically, Ryz’n took her foot off the brake.

“No, wait a minute,” he ordered. “The snake’s slithered off into the field. You just missed it. A big, fat black snake, it was.”

“Look Baby, I don’t like snakes or mice or spiders, any of those creepy crawlies. Let’s go.”

Berry Fresh Memories

“You don’t understand.”

Nick pulled off his sunglasses as he gazed around, as if he were reconnoitering on a training exercise. She knew his excellent eyes would miss nothing.

“I’ve been here before, when I was little. There was a snake then, too. I mean a huge black snake, stretched across the entire width of this road, bigger than that snake.”

He separated his hands one from the other as far as he could, indicating the infinite size of the reptile.

“I asked my dad to stop, but he ran right over it. Thump-ump! Thump-ump!” Nick’s head bobbed as he relived the experience.

“Got him with both axles. Just like we did now.” Nick hesitated a few seconds, as if he were reliving the past. “I recall looking out the rear window. Didn’t bother that snake at all. He didn’t move. Dad said it was already dead. But when we were leaving and passed over that same spot in the road, that big, old black snake was gone. I remember thinking the snake had played possum. I don’t ever recall seeing a larger snake, though I may have in Nam, I just can’t remember.” Nick seemed to come back to himself. He looked about him once more, as he stood with one knee on the seat.

“This is sure a crazy place. I mean the city is on one side and a shopping center and suburbia surround the rest of the place and this farm is right smack dab in the middle of it all. Dixie slid back down into his seat.

“Any other farms around here?”

Ryz’n calmed down. Her pounding heart rate ramped down to its normal level once she realized there was no further harm from the reptile. She answered his question.

“No, not real farms anyway. To the southwest, are some old farmhouses down along the creek, but the owners either sold off most of the acreage or they don’t farm it any more. They’re just wild fields of hay.”

“OK, well let’s roll outta here James,” ordered Nick happily, as he tapped the dashboard a couple times for emphasis and replaced his shades on his nose. She did not flinch from his orders. He was beginning to assume his old self.

Ryz’n took him by his grade school on the way home, because it was close by. They got out of the Starfire and surveyed the long two-story rambling, red brick building, which was Nick’s elementary school. They walked around to the back of the school across the playgrounds over by the ball fields and the leafy green woods behind. They were all alone on the upper playground. Nick noticed some small, dusty mounds in a clearing just inside the tree line. He walked over to one of the mounds and kneeled down on the clumpy grass beside it. A slow broad grin broke across his face, before he smacked himself in the forehead and began to laugh.

His laugh welled up from deep within, causing him to keel over on his side from the force of it. Ryz’n viewed him cautiously at first, but then she could not help from succumbing to his infectious laughter, too. Even so, curiosity grew within her. Shaking his head and rocking with laughter, Nick calmed down long enough to roll on his back and ask her.

“Know what these mounds are?”

Out at Home

She shrugged, “I don’t know Baby—old Indian mounds, burial ground, maybe? Snake graves? Ha!”

Nick cracked up. “Oh, that’s a good one. Filled with Indian relics I suppose, from Pocahontas times, right?” He shook even harder.

“Well, gee Sweetie, I don’t know. Could be anything—maybe old animal graves probably or something. Why don’t you get off that thing?”

His silk suit coat was getting dirty from his rolling on the dirt mound. His laughter seemed out of character considering his mental condition.

“A—an—animal gr-graves?” Nick rolled over on his side, he was laughing so hard.

Ryz’n began to giggle though she didn’t know why. “Alright smart-aleck, what are they, then? You know, you’re getting that nice silk coat all dirty. Baby?”

Nicky took a few minutes before he could control himself sufficiently to speak, while a patient Ryz’n looked on.

“Dinosaur fossils!”

He stuck out his lip in mock seriousness, nodding his head up and down.

“No kiddin’! For real? Dinosaur fossils? Wow! They must have been small dinosaurs, hunh?”

Ryz’n felt as if he might be playing her for a sucker, but she went along with him nevertheless.

“What species do you believe they are?”

Barely keeping a straight face, Nick responded, “Dogasaurus and Cattatannus.”

“Gee Nicky, I never heard of them before. How come people don’t excavate these sites and put the fossils in a museum?”

He could scarcely keep a straight face, as he snapped his fingers and removed his shades.

“Exactly, that’s exactly what I thought and that’s what I did, or tried to do.” He cracked up again.

“You did, when?”

“Second grade. Yep,” he nodded. “I dug up one of these mounds and found a skull. I carried it on a stick into my teacher Mrs. Gardner. Bless her soul. She had a nervous condition, poor thing. Kids made her nervous. Ha-ha-ha! Tough condition for a grade school teacher to have.” Nick shook his head with laughter. “Yeah, she really flipped when she saw that skull I brought her. It stunk to high heaven! My gosh! When I told her it was a fossil, she became irate. She told me it was a dog’s skull and that these mounds are where people come to bury their pets. She screamed at me to ‘get that horrid, sinking thing out of there and to put it back where you found it.’”

Nick shook his head. “I don’t believe Mrs. Gardner lasted out the year. She didn’t come back to teach the next year, I remember that.” He shook his head some more.

“Hey, Baby! You remember that? That takes you up to the third grade! Before you know it, you’ll be up to me!” She beamed brightly, removing her shades as she knelt down to kiss him, easy at first then more passionately. His breath was hot, but sweet as syrup and his tongue, like hers, was deceptively long. She could feel the fires burning in him as much as she could feel them simmering inside of herself. She had an idea.

Berry Fresh Memories

“Hey, Nicky, let’s go back to the motel, Sweetie. I’m certain the cleaning lady is done by now.” Her tone was kindly sweet, almost pleading. Her passion seemed to have rocketed Nick’s reentry into the present. He looked torn. Her feelings for him grew stronger by the minute, but did he feel the same?

“Gee I dunno. Maybe we should wait until I can remember you better, until I can feel right about it.”

He admitted rather sheepishly that, given his present situation, he realized that was a ridiculous sentiment and he knew it. He apologized that it wasn’t that he didn’t want to love her, because he did.

He became sadly quiet. The worry in his eyes convinced her that patience was the best avenue of fulfilling her desires. Yet, something else was there as well, something that looked a little like guilt. This immediately caused Ryz’n to think of the jilted Dixon woman and her blood began to boil in a different direction. Why she could take him right now, right on top of this dusty, dirty, dog burial mound. As she eyed her handsome husband, she thought he might even go for it himself. He was hungry, too, all right. She had seen that look in his eyes before. She knew the look.

Overcoming her anger with sexual passion, Ryz’n glanced around to make sure they were alone. Lowering her tone, she used the sound of her naturally sultry voice to restore her husband’s reason.

“Come on, Sweetie. Let’s go to the motel. It’ll be alright. I promise.”

Ryz’n smiled as sweetly as she could and took him gently by the hand. Rising together, she led him out of the imaginary dinosaur pit around the northeast side of the school, brushing dust off his back, as they sauntered back to the open convertible. As he had all day, Nick held the door for her. It was a kind act, which she both enjoyed and disdained, because his formal manner re-emphasized his inability to recall her.

Even so, Ryz’n shook her head, bemused by his unnecessary chivalry. She remembered Nicky always had been polite but not to this extent. Secretly, his extended courtesy pleased her. Still, she wondered if he wasn’t overdoing it or perhaps this new Nick had become a male chauvinist.

“It’s your hair!” he announced surprisingly, as he shut her door and leaned down toward her.

“What? What did you say?”

“Your hair! I knew there was something different about you. You changed your hair since this morning.”

Wow! Ryz’n thought sarcastically. *He just figured that out. I curled my bangs and tied my ponytail this morning when he left me alone with his mother and he just notices now?*

“Well, yes Nicky, I did,” she grinned. “Do you like it?”

“Very much. I don’t see that style worn much now.”

“Yes, it’s not real popular, but I like it, so I wear it when I’m boppin’ around with the top down. All I need is my poodle skirt to be a Fifties teen queen.”

“Good for you, Mrs. Sheeboom, good for you. I’m glad to see you’re not a slave to fashion.”

Out at Home

“No, I believe in wearing what you like as long as it looks good on you. Then it doesn’t matter what era it’s from.”

“Well, I imagine you can wear just about anything then.”

His suddenly hungry two-toned eyes began to melt her down. She patted the leather seat next to her.

“Come on Baby, hop in the car. We’ll drop the berries off at your Mom’s house. Then we’ll scoot up to the motel and make it like we useta.” She winked while she clicked her tongue.

Nick appeared to stare deep into her soul. She had no doubt he wanted her. She had already observed his mutilated body, so, for her at least, that would not be an impediment to their lovemaking. He conceded dryly, as if he were folding a poker hand.

“Ok Ry, let’s make a move.”

* * *

Arriving at the Sheeboom residence, the pair walked from the front to the back of the house and out onto the back porch before they found Nick’s mom a story below them in the back yard. She was taking the laundry down off the clothesline when Ryz’n arrived with Nick. They announced the strawberries and were about to leave before Wauneta halted them. Nick’s mom came chugging up the open outside wooden back stairs. She told them that Nick’s dad had called several times to remind them that Nick should go down to the Navy Yard right away and “get his identity squared away.” In fact, her husband had stated that he wanted his son to “go down there immediately, if not sooner.”

As Nick looked over the rail into the yard, towards the back of their lot, averting his mother’s stern gaze, he remarked out of the blue: “There was a turtle. It came out of the woods, back there!”

Ryz’n looked but saw neither turtle, nor any woods for that matter. She saw only a few locust trees, a silver maple and a wild cherry tree along the Sheeboom’s back property line, which separated them from the houses on the next block. She wondered if this was another one of those spells, which the psychiatrist had told her came over Nick occasionally.

“Where? What woods?” asked Ryz’n. There are no woods here, just a couple trees.”

“That’s right Nick!” countered his mom joyously. “That’s right. The woods were right where those houses are now. 24th Street there was a dirt road lined with chicken coops and hidden from view by the dense woods.”

“Yes, and I took the box turtle as a pet for a while, until you (Nick pointed towards his mother) said the turtle should live free and not be boxed up. You argued that I would not like to be boxed up and neither did the turtle.”

Ryz’n watched as her mother-in-law interrupted Nick to inform him that she had had an ulterior motive. She had not wanted to have to keep cleaning up the turtle’s messes. The recollection spurred Nick on.

“Yeah! Yeah, that’s right! Well, the thing I recall is that I let the turtle go as you said, but every day about ten or so, it would crawl back out of the woods, heading up

here to the back door, arriving around noon, just in time for lunch. We'd feed it lettuce, carrots, crackers, whatever. I'd play with it for a while. Then the little fellow would head back across the yard and disappear amongst the trees. It was great. He was a pet for a little while each day. Then one day, he just didn't show up anymore."

Ryz'n observed her husband's smiling visage drop into a deep frown, as if he were experiencing the disappointment of the lost turtle for the first time. Her mother-in-law replied.

"Yes, the construction workers started tearing down those woods to build these houses. That's excellent Nicholas that you remember that. So now, you know I'm your Mother." Nick stared hard at her in all seriousness.

"Well I guess so, but in these flashbacks you look different, much younger."

"Yes, well I was. We both were, about twenty years worth! Ha!"

The kitchen phone rang. Ryz'n was standing next to the porch screen door. She looked at Nick and he responded with a blank stare. Because she was closest, and quite possibly because she realized that in his mind he thought her more entitled than he, Ryz'n decided to pick up the phone. She stepped inside the tiny kitchen and answered the ringing phone. It was Raybo. She listened to her father-in-law provide detailed reasons as to why "Nicholas needs to get the matter of his identity cleared up right away." She understood her father-in-law's reasoning, but she failed to understand why Nick had to take care of the matter right away, especially when she had other more urgent matters on her mind for him. However, she did not argue with her father-in-law. When he pretty much ordered his son, through her, to get over to the Navy Yard right now, she dutifully relayed the message through the screen door.

A pained expression overcame Nick's face when he heard the news. His body stiffened and his jaw tightened. It seemed to irk him to be ordered about. Nevertheless, he recovered quickly and offered that it amused him to think anyone could take such an interest in his personal affairs. He said he wanted to be a good son as well as a good husband. However, in this case, he said he would honor his parents' wishes first. Ryz'n dropped the phone to her side in disappointment. Reading her thoughts, Nick explained that, while he had longed for a family for sometime, he had never realized being the dutiful son would be compromising his freedom to such an extent. Ryz'n nodded sympathetically and put the phone to her ear once more.

"All right Raybo, I'll take care of it. I'll take him down to the Commandant's office right now." Her father-in-law countered with his typically friendly but unknowingly patronizing manner.

"Alright now Doll, I'm counting on you to see that this matter is taken care of. You have to think for the two of you until Nick gets back on the ball again. Are you with me on this, Doll?"

"Yes Raybo, I promise. Good-bye."

She hung up the receiver resignedly. Her father-in-law always meant well. But for him, there was only way, one time and one place in which to do something and that was always his way, here and now.

Ryz'n rolled her eyes, but she couldn't be too angry with her father-in-law. She knew how insistent Raybo could be once he got something fixed in his mind that he wanted done. She had been on the receiving end of his orders in the past, but she confessed he always had been a generous man.

"It's OK, Nicky. I'll go home and pick up my notebook that I've kept on you since you went overseas. We can take care of *our* business later, OK?"

She smiled lightly and arched her long, broad sweeping dark eyebrows, hoping to encourage him. Dropping off the strawberries with her mother-in-law had proved to be Ryz'n's undoing and her husband's, as well.

Nick nodded his concurrence. Nick's mom, who had ascended the back porch stairs, followed them as they headed through the house out the front door.

"Now don't forget our dinner tonight, Son." His mother reminded them. "And Ryz'n? Your parents will be here at six, don't forget. And Ray is taking off early to make sure he is here on time. I expect no less from the two of you." The suggestive tone of her motherly voice seemed to veil a secret warning, as only a mother could.

As the couple exited the house, they descended the cement front porch steps. Ryz'n turned and responded dutifully "Yes Wauneta, we'll be here."

"Yes Mrs. Sheeboom," replied Nick in like tone.

"Now hold on a minute." The matron stepped out on the porch. "You come back here Nicholas Sheeboom." Nick glanced at Ryz'n whose nod encouraged him to comply. He ascended the stairs to the second step when his mother stepped forward, cupping his face between her hands.

"Now you listen to me Mister William Nicholas Sheeboom! I'm your mother, NOT *Mrs.* Sheeboom. You call me 'Mom' as you always did. And your father is 'Dad', right?" Her small, blue-grey irises were boring a hole into his. She had his attention.

"Yes ma'am, I mean Mom. But if I forget, I hope you don't get all shook up about it. It's all kind of new to me." She pulled his head toward her, hugging him and kissing his cheek. From out of nowhere, like some kind of magician, the woman quickly produced a used, crumpled Kleenex, dabbing it at her eyes and pushed him away from her.

"OK!" she replied heartily. "Now you go on and do what your father told you to do. Ryz'n?" Halfway done the sidewalk, Ryz'n perked up to listen. "You better drive now since you know the way. It can get tricky down there, if you're not familiar with the city. And you don't want to get lost down *there!* That's for certain! Oh, and thanks so much for the berries, Honey. They'll be on a cake tonight. You can count on that!"

Ryz'n waved and stepped sprightly to her car with her husband entering the from the passenger side. Before she could pull away from the concrete curb down the street, Wauneta called out to them again, trotting down the sidewalk towards the street, waving her Kleenex. Ryz'n stopped the powder blue Starfire in front of the front walk.

Wauneta warned: "Now don't forget, they got Smokys on that Sweetland Parkway—especially where the speed limit drops from fifty to thirty-five, right around the curve past Staunton Road. You be careful now. They're tricky."

Berry Fresh Memories

“OK, *Mom*,” replied Ryz’n smiling. “Thanks for reminding me. We’ll be careful. See ya tonight at six.” Ryz’n broadened her smile and waved toward her mother-in-law as if she were a beauty queen and drove away down the street.

Ry backtracked to her parents’ house first. Nicky’s choice to submit to his parents’ wishes ahead of hers ticked her off a bit. But then she had to admit that she was the one who had promised his Dad. Still, she was frustrated and needed to calm down. If she could only be alone with her husband for a short time ... To avoid taking out her frustration on him, she needed an excuse to avoid him for a few minutes. Ryz’n told Nick that before they went down to the Navy Yard, she wanted to fix her hair in a more formal style, change her clothes, and grab Nick’s military record, which she had maintained in her notebook.

At her house, Ryz’n put on a spring green, wraparound mini-skirt over her shorts, exchanged her shoes for some platform sandals and, from her closet, grabbed a summer yellow, single-breasted, butterfly cotton jacket with a scalloped lapel. Transformed now into the picture of a classy professional woman, Ryz’n ran out the door, notebook in hand, to chauffeur her husband who had waited in the car during her transformation.

When she stopped the Starfire at the corner of Everson and 23rd, Dixie asked her to tell him about the large white building across the street in the parking lot behind the shopping center. “It looks like a big Quonset hut,” he observed.

“Oh, that’s The Club—the Crest Hill Boys Club. They have a regular bingo game in there four nights a week. There’s a gym with basketball hoops and a boxing ring, couple of pool tables, and some carom tables, too. It’s a place for kids, boys that is, to go and stay out of trouble. Do you want to see it? They know you there, Nicky. Mr. Merritt owns the place and he also sponsors the Crest Hill American Legion team. You played for them the first year Crest Hill sponsored a legion team. So do you want to go over there? Maybe, maybe you can remember something?”

She looked hopefully at him, taking his silence for acquiescence. Then she drove them across the grass median-divided boulevard into the old asphalt parking lot, up the hill to the club; hopefully, to revive his recall. There were only a couple of cars parked outside of the building.

The locked front door indicated the place was empty. There were no windows to speak of. They knocked on the front door. There was no response. She knocked again louder. They waited but still there was no response. As they turned to leave, the door cracked open. A smooth, olive-skinned, young Italian looking man with neatly combed dark, wavy, stylishly long hair leaned through the doorway. Ryz’n removed her wrap-around shades to speak with him, but he beat her to it.

“Ryzanna Ryan, I mean, I mean Sheeboom. How are you?” The young man extended his hand for her. She accepted it.

“You don’t remember me,” he stated flatly.

“Ronnie? Is that you, Ronnie? Why sure, it’s you, Ronnie Murano. Oh Ronnie, it’s good to see you again.” She embraced the young man heartily. Ronnie returned a warm embrace and smiled easily.

Out at Home

“Yeah. Long time Ryz’n, too long,” he replied casually.

“Yes, too long. Hey, Ronnie. Guess who I’ve got here.” Ronnie gave Nick the once over, but his eye did not recognize the stranger. He shook his head negatively. “Wait a second ... Nick, is this Little Nick? We heard he was back.”

Ryz’n assured the good-looking, young man with the olive skin and dark wavy hair, this indeed was Nick Sheeboom. Nick hesitated, but shook Ronnie’s hand, as Ryz’n explained her spouse’s predicament. Ronnie was most receptive. His wide grin shone white teeth beneath his dark moustache, overcoming his suave manner.

“Sure you all can come in and visit with Mr. Merritt. Tommy Mack’s inside, too. Actually, Tommy’s kind of involved in a secret sparring session with the Sugar Man, right now. It’s more of a work out, but they wanted to work on a couple of things without a bunch of nosey reporters. You understand? That’s why we locked the door. They’re goin’ six rounds. They only have a couple left. Come on. Step inside.” He held open the heavy metal door with one arm while he ushered them into the dark interior.

The threesome entered the club and walked around inside to the boxing ring. It was quite dark in the club compared to the bright June sun. It took Ryz’n a couple minutes to adjust her vision to the change in light and an equal amount of time to adjust to the gymnasium odor. A small, bespectacled, bald old man in a woven sweater announced “Round Five” in a deep bass voice.

Ryz’n could make out a typical raised boxing ring with two fighters wearing protective headgear: one was white and broad shouldered with thick red-orange hair and freckles; the other was taller. His flesh was chocolate and his “Afro” jutted out from under his headgear. Both fighters wore dark trunks. Silence hung heavy over the gym, broken only by the staccato shuffling sounds of boxing shoes on canvas, the slap of leather, heavy breathing and an occasional grunt from the fighters. They were all business. Intrigued, Ryz’n observed her husband keenly as Nick stepped closer to watch the action. These fighters were good, real good. Ryz’n had never been a boxing aficionado, but she knew good fighting when she saw it. The two fighters sparring in the ring boxed smoothly with a minimum of expended energy. Both moved sharply. Their punches were crisp. Each fighter slipped punches well. The black fighter was quick, very quick. The white boy took more blows but he was smooth nonetheless, an adept counter puncher. Nick seemed to be enthralled with the intensity of the boxing acumen on display before him.

“Time,” shouted the old man with a stop-watch.

“What weight are they?” asked Nick quietly.

“Welterweights,” replied Ronnie. “I tell you what; one of these guys will win the gold in Montreal next year.”

“They’re good. They’re very good,” countered Nick.

After about a minute, the two pugilists started in for another round. Each fighter got in some good shots and each made the other miss badly on occasion. The round ended with a flurry of punches from the black fighter, as he caught his opponent, stumbling and off guard. Sweat flew from the ring. Flicking sweat drops from his eyebrow with his forefinger, Nick admitted he had never before been so close to such fine boxing.

Berry Fresh Memories

“You were pretty sharp today Tommy, but not sharp enough,” laughed the black welterweight, as his corner man removed his protective headgear, revealing an unmarked, handsome young man with a mostly scrunched up Afro.

The other trainer yanked Tommy’s headgear.

“Hey Ray! You’re just dang lucky you were wearing gear. Them powder puff punches you throw couldn’t hurt a baby.” Then, he too laughed. However, it was obvious these two respected one another’s pugilistic skills.

Ronnie chuckled. “Come on Nick. Mr. Merritt’s over here. You remember. He’s the bald headed gentleman with glasses.” The three of them passed under the radar, as they made their way over to the old gentleman, who had manned the stop watch during the sparring session. Ronnie introduced him to the Sheebooms. The elderly little club owner, who looked like Elmer Fudd, welcomed Ry and Nick in a deep, deep bass voice that belied his short stature. Yet oddly, there was nothing comical about the man. Rather, he exuded a dignified, poised manner.

Mr. Merritt confessed that he could hardly believe this was Little Nick standing before him. The old gentleman told a story on Nick. Evidently, once, Nick had shown up late for an evening Legion baseball game, because he had had to work overtime. Nevertheless, Nick had proceeded to step out of his car into the batter’s box to clear the bases with a double of the left field fence, which ultimately won the game for Crest Hill. The elderly gent chuckled at the memory.

Then, with a towel around his neck, tucked inside his terrycloth robe, the carrot-topped Tommy came over to them, still dripping sweat.

“How’d I look today, Mr. Merritt?”

“Good Tommy, real good, son. If you can improve your footwork and your punching speed just a little, you’ll be a very tough man to beat.”

“Ok, Mr. Merritt. I’ll go work on them things right now.” Tommy turned to go when Mr. Merritt stopped him.

“Hold on there, Tommy. Do you remember this young gentleman?” The elderly gent pulled Nick over towards Tommy.”

“No sir, can’t say as I do.”

“This is an old friend of yours, son. This is Nick Sheeboom!”

Tommy stared at Nick, looking him over curiously.

“Can’t be. Too danged big for Little Nick. He was a lightweight, at best.” Ryz’n stepped out from behind Nick and Ronnie.

“Well Tommy Mack, I hope you believe me when I tell you it is Nick, Big Nick now.”

“Ryzanna!” Tommy smiled broadly. He stepped closer to Nick, peering into his eyes. “I’ll be damned! It is you Little Nick. It is.” Tommy clasped Nick, who did not return his sweaty embrace with equal enthusiasm. Ryz’n felt her reticent husband was glad that the sweat-lathered welterweight was wearing his boxing robe. Ryz’n explained Nick’s amnesia to them all, receiving the typical, pitying reactions, which accompanied that sad announcement. It was obvious to Ryz’n that Nick did not recall the club or any of them, so she did not want to prolong her husband’s discomfort. She

Out at Home

mentioned she and Nick had some business to take care of down at the Navy Yard. As they left, Tommy called out to Nick to stop by sometime. They could have a beer and discuss old times, “spur Little Nick’s memory maybe.” Nick nodded as Ronnie Murano escorted them out to their car. On the way out of the building, with his head turned back to Tommy and Mr. Merritt, Nick accidentally bumped into the black fighter, whose party was leaving at the same time. Nick couldn’t resist a comment.

“Sure admire the way you box, Mann. You’re smooth, really sweet.”

The boxer chuckled, “That I am, sweet as sugar, Mann.” then he winked confidently and his black eyes flashed with merriment, beneath thick, sweeping mischievous black brows.

His handler called out to him. “Hey! Come on, Ray. We’ve got things to do, places to be.”

The fighter winked at Ryz’n, bowing gallantly to her and tipped his hand adroitly from the crown of his head. “Miss,” he whispered in parting, as he flashed a broad smile and bobbed lightly up and down on his dancing feet. Then he stepped lightly into a red van with his entourage and left.

“He sure is full of himself,” noted Ryz’n with slight disdain.

“Yeah that’s Ray for ya,” admitted Ronnie. “Well, he probably will be the next Olympic champ and we can say we knew him when.” Ronnie watched admiringly as the boxer’s van backed out over the faded asphalt and stone parking space and drove away.

Ryz’n and Dixie entered the Starfire with Ronnie following behind to hold the door for her.

“What’s his name?” asked Nick.

“Lessoard, Sugar Ray Lessoard.”

“I’ll have to remember that,” agreed Nick. Ronnie waved good-bye, as Ryz’n took her turn to back out and drive away.

“Don’t worry. You won’t have to,” cried Ronnie after them. “He won’t let you forget. Ha!”