

Barbara Maher was as old a friend as Ryz'n had here in the Heights. They had met in their twelfth summers, after Ryz'n had moved with her family to Maryland from Georgia. In fact, there were several girls, good-looking young girls, who lived on Ryz'n's street and who had graduated from Pocomoke High, all within a few years of each other. As a teen who delivered newspapers in the neighborhood, Nicky's first hand knowledge of the pulchritude clucking up and down the avenue had driven him to dub Ry's street "Double G Street: the two G's standing for "Great Girls!" While the Mahers lived just several doors down the block from the Ryans, Barb was not one of those "great girl" beauties. It was not that Barbara was homely. It was only that, by comparison to all the other resident cuties, Barb did not quite measure up to their "great" standards. And Barb never quite got over her lesser caste status, always remaining shy and reserved. Ryz'n had always thought that had Barb lived on some other street in the Heights and replaced her thick, rectangular, black frame glasses with contact lenses, well who knows? However, her conservative nature probably would always have held her back among Pocomoke's in-crowd, social set.

In high school, Barbara usually had bobbed her thick, straight, light brown hair, similar to the flapper's fashion of the Twenties. With her bangs hanging down to the tops of her glasses, the girl never permitted a good look at her face. She had always dressed neatly but primly, usually in princess style dresses or fitted shifts with ring collars and short-sleeved cuffs. She always wore hose and flats. At first impression, she appeared a bit chunky, but closer inspection revealed that, while she was a well-fed, milk-fed girl, her fat cheeks and solid limbs belied a fairly slim waist for her five-foot, seven-inch frame. It was also difficult to discern the color of her slate blue eyes behind those thick, black-framed, coke bottles she used to wear.

When Barbara greeted Nick and Ry at her parent's front door (for she still lived with her folks), her hair was cut in a "Shag" and her glasses were conspicuous by their absence, evidently replaced with contact lenses. Ry had noticed her friend, who was yet single, had also dropped a few pounds, where unlike Ryz'n; Barb had lost her double cheeks. Though pleased with her old friend's outward metamorphosis, Ryz'n was not surprised to find that Barb's quaint personality remained unchanged. Her naturally reserved manner, which endeared the girl to Ryz'n, could prove exasperating to her as well. Of course, this would all be lost on Nick who had never seen her old friend before.

Barb urgently directed the couple through the brick rambler to the back yard porch and down to the concrete patio, where many of the neighborhood Double 'G' girls and their partners were waiting to greet the triumphant couple. The Sheebooms were late, but Ry knew their tardiness would not surprise any of the old crowd.

A bevy of females rushed to Ryz'n and Nick, overwhelming the two of them, while most of the males in their long, pointed collar shirts and bell bottoms hung back, a bit wary of what they were witnessing. The heartfelt hugs and embraces nearly crushed Ryz'n, while Nick stood stiffly shaking hands with people who were merely strangers

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to him. This was clearly a moment of triumph and retribution for Ryz'n. She could not stop grinning if she tried. While she gratefully received heartfelt congratulations, Ry sensed the evening was proceeding unevenly for her amnesiac husband, much as the previous one last night at his parent's home. Here the crowd was much younger, all former classmates of theirs. They introduced themselves to him, stared at him, made over him and, ultimately, digressed into telling tales on him. Unlike the previous evening, there was no booze at the Maher's or, if there were, none was offered to them. So Nick had to take this dynamic outpouring of affection and curiosity like a man.

For her own part, Ryz'n was delighted, even gleeful at the joyful reception. She deemed herself supremely vindicated in her choice to wait for Nick's return. Many of these same "friends" (though not Barb, who had always shared in Ry's hope for Nick's discovery) had predicted Nick would never come home and that Ryz'n should find someone else. Now they fell all over themselves to apologize. Yes, Nick's return had vindicated her faith and her hope. Now she could not refrain from grinning her famous three and occasionally four-dimple smiles all evening. Originally, these friends secretly had envied her scandal-tinged, teen marriage to Nick and her later celebrity. Only after Nick had vanished, had they become thankful that they did not have a partner missing in Viet Nam, no matter how celebrated he was. Yet now, with Nick's triumphant return, they were envious of her once again. Secretly, Ryz'n enjoyed seeing these infidels eat a little Crest Hill Heights crow

As the evening wore on, and the booze from his parent's dinner wore off, Dixie became increasingly and painfully aware of his awkward position in the Maher's backyard. He received no flashbacks, not one. He knew none of these people. Although his previous liquor libation high had evaporated, his speech had begun to slur. He had been stuttering since his father-in-law had interrogated him at the dinner table. Dixie wanted to get out of there. This party was a waste of time. He drifted into a corner of the yard, where, mostly unnoticed after the initial waves of the curious hordes had ebbed, he leaned back up against the chain-link fence to observe the proceedings with a jaundiced eye from afar. His brother-in-law's over-sized shirt itched. Dixie had a good mind to remove it. He absent mindedly watched the revelers in the center of the clover-dotted yard. Feted like a queen, Ryz'n was in the center of everything. He stayed because of her.

Dixie watched her float victoriously radiant among the guests. Her feet seemed scarcely to touch the ground. Her smile lit up the back yard, despite the dark of night that had by now descended upon them. Dixie heard the chirping of crickets and his mind wandered. He saw the flashes of fireflies, a half moon skipping between clouds. He thought about how far he had come in the last week. Who would have thought, a week ago, that this suburban setting in southern Maryland was his home? Dixie could never have imagined it, never in a million years. In fact, it still did not seem possible.

He decided to stay a little longer on Ryz'n's behalf, but he would be darned if he had to keep wearing this itchy shirt. Dixie removed the shirt, while he replaced his suit coat to cover himself. A close inspection of the shirt disclosed some labels or tags inside the back collar as well as sewn into the hem of one of the shirttails. Those

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buggers were the culprits of his discomfit. Dixie was reading the tags and labels studiously when Ryz'n silently stole upon him.

"Hey Baby, what's the matta? Party too boring for ya? Think I forgot ya?" Oozing empathy, she smiled knowingly. "Say, what are ya doin' there anyway?"

"Readin' la-la-labels."

She smiled faintly and reached up to push his black locks off his forehead, as she shoved her pelvis forward, deftly moving her loins into his.

"You wanna go, Sweetie?"

As a little boy refusing to look his mother in the eye, Dixie nodded that he did.

"OK, let's say goodbye then." Her bright, white smile lifted the boredom off his shoulders.

The beautiful brunette slipped her arm inside his, as she escorted him back to the house. He thought that this girl's smile could lift any man's cares away in an instant. The couple bid their good-byes at the back door, walked through the rambler and out the front door to the Starfire with Barbara tagging at their heels. She thanked them for coming and hoped to see them again soon. Dixie didn't share her hopes, revealing as much to Ryz'n as they drove back to the motel.

"Aw Baby, Barb's a good egg, really. She has always been kind of, well, a wallflower. She just does not have much luck with guys. That's cuz she's kind o' korny. I always thought she and your friend Phil would hit it off quite well. They are very much alike, both attractive in their own way, but very quiet, very conservative. Don't you agree?"

"Who is Phil?"

Ryz'n chuckled out loud, but at least he was no longer stuttering. It was easy to talk with her and that thought comforted him.

"Why Honey, he's your good friend from the time you started grade school together. He was over to your house last night with his brother Paul and his kid sister Livvi—the Salvaranos. Can't you even remember last night?"

"I don't know, maybe. I was a little loaded, make that a lot loaded. I've never seen so many people as I have in the last couple days. They're all a blur."

Ryz'n teased, "Suppose you've forgotten who I am, too?"

"You? You're a complete mystery to me."

From a vial in her purse, he watched curiously, as she dripped something at both the base and tip of her long tongue.

"What's that?" he asked, perplexed.

"Just a spot or two of honey dear, which I, I usually take after a meal. It helps clear my breath and gives me a little energy boost, too. Remember last night how you marveled that my lips tasted of honey? Well, you were right, Sweetie. Little Nick had always used to say my lips dripped of honey, too, and you were right then, too, Baby."

He tried to keep a straight face and his eye on the road, too. However, something did not seem right. He didn't recognize the street. He might have turned wrong, but she said nothing about it. Instead, she carried on with her banter.

"Well, that's good. A girl should remain a bit of a mystery to her beau."

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“Her beau, hunh? Mann, where do you come from with talk like that? Beau!”

“Why Baby, I’m from Jo-jah, jes’ lahk Scahlett, doancha know, Honeh?”

“Well, I thought them times and talk was, uh, gone forever, kind o’ like ‘gone with the wind, maybe?’” He joked.

“The times are gone for suah, Honeh. Yes, that’s raight. But even when we’ve been mahrrried fifteh yeahs, you will still be mah beau. And I expect still to be your belle.” She grinned at him.

“Oh Baby, what are you doing? We’re headed in the wrong direction. This will take us over toward the high school.”

He knew she was right. Dixie had indeed turned the wrong way at the light.

“Well, I’ll just make a ‘U-bie’ at the first break in the divider.”

“No, No honey that’s OK. We’ll head over to ‘Cuddlin’ Court,’ like we used to do.” Dixie glanced at her askew.

Cuddlin’ Court? Mann! That’s too corny not to be true.

Dixie followed her directions. In a few minutes, they had parked at the end of a tree-lined cul-de-sac. On either side of the circular court were two story colonials, complete with large shade trees in the front yard. Behind the car was the narrow residential street, which had led them to this spot. Before them was a twenty-four inch high, eighteen-inch wide, semi-circular concrete wall that paralleled the rounded curb of the dead-end court. An eight-foot long, two-foot high concrete bench sat just the other side of the wall. Below the bench stretched a steep, grassy precipice, which overlooked the northeast corner of the Pocomoke High football stadium and track. They climbed out of the car for a closer inspection.

They observed the base of the grassy hill followed the oblong contour of the stadium and bordered the outer chain-link fence that encircled the athletic complex. The hill leveled into a plateau for the field itself but, beyond that, descended into a wooded gully behind the chain-link fence on the south side of the stadium. Upper middle class homes lay behind those trees south of the stadium, but the homes remained largely concealed beneath and behind the shade of dense woods. To their right, the hill descended in a steep precipice, which bordered the school. Atop the hill and off to their right stood yet more shade trees sheltering yet more residential homes. The school campus stretched to the west and the northwest. It was hard to tell from here what lay beyond the school, because the two story brick and concrete classroom building obscured their view.

Ryz’n explained the baseball and softball fields existed on the west side of the school. She also explained why the “hill” below them had been an infamous source of pride among the football players. The football coaches forced the players to run up the length of the severely steep hill, about sixty yards, in full pads, as part of the toughening-up process. The thinking went that when the going got truly tough out on the football field, the players could hearken back to overcoming the challenge presented by the hill, thereby using that experience as positive motivation to overcome their opponents on the field.

“Sounds like a good idea. Sounds like Corps thinking,” observed Dixie.

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“Yeah, well, I don’t know, because the coaches are prohibited from forcing kids to run ‘the hill’ anymore, after one kid nearly died of heat prostration.”

“Yeah, a near tragedy like that tends to put things in better focus, I guess. Of course, it wouldn’t stunt them DI’s too much I don’t figure, that is, unless somebody actually died and then, well then, they’d find a way to cover it up, I’ll bet.”

Dixie had withdrawn a Lucky Strike from its pack. He was about to light up with a match, when Ryz’n intercepted his hand. Placing her hand gently over the back of his right paw, which held the flaming match, she employed an action much as her mom had used with her dad at the dinner table earlier. Ry batted her natural, long, dark lashes and peered up to him softly.

“No Baby, please don’t smoke. Please? The smoke bothers me and it’s not good for you, either. Please?” She intoned so sweetly with her chin down and her black eyebrows arched that Dixie acquiesced to her wish.

“OK.”

She softly blew out the match before it could burn his fingers and Dixie flicked it still smoking to the ground. He stuck the butt behind his left ear. “I don’t want to do anything that would upset you, Ry.” He smiled wanly. Ryz’n said she did not know if he was serious or just kidding, but she thanked him nonetheless.

“You probably don’t remember, but I grew up with a mild asthmatic condition. Although I’ve outgrown it, smoke has always bothered me. Smoke is one reason, I don’t like to go on tour or perform in clubs. Breathing all that second hand smoke, well eventually, my eyes water, my nose stuffs up and my throat gets sore and I start coughing. Then I can’t sing, unless I can get some fresh air. It’s no fun, especially if you are getting paid to sing under such dreadful conditions.”

“And that’s why you quit the band, cuz of smoke?”

“Well, uh, I haven’t exactly quit all together, Baby.” She looked away from him and seemed to fumble for words. “We’re no longer under contract to Halo Platters, that’s true, but we’ve got a little local tour coming up next month, just something to keep our hands in a little. But I can quit after that, if you, if you really want me to, I guess.”

Ryz’n didn’t sound too convincing. He felt she was attempting to hide her true feelings. He caught her peeping out from the corners of her eyes to spy his blank expression. He felt she was searching for some sign of what he thought about her quitting the band. However, Dixie was giving nothing away, so she finished her thought rather softly. “If this new guy works out, they won’t need me anyway.” Dixie said nothing. Ryz’n’s smile disappeared and she changed the subject.

“Hey, let’s walk over there.” She pointed to the crest of the hill. “Oh, you can see the whole school from there Nick, if it isn’t too dark that is.” She pointed past the concrete bench to their right.

“What’s that aroma I smell? It’s not your perfume, cuz that smells like lemon, but this smell is sweet just the same.” Ryz’n sniffed the air.

“Oh, that’s just honeysuckle. The school is surrounded by it. There!”

She pointed further to their right and they walked over to a neighboring bush covered in a vine of withering, yellow-white blossoms.

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“The heat is withering them now. The honeysuckle usually come out in early May and last until it gets too hot. The yellowing blossoms herald the end of the honeysuckle scent until the fall. It also grows as shrub in its own right. This vine here has just taken over this bush, see?”

He nodded.

“Here.” She picked off a blossom and handed it to him, keeping one for her. “Now do what I do?”

Ryz’n placed the butt end of the blossom between her teeth, closed her lips and sucked hard on the yellow-white blossom. “Umm. There’s still a little bit in there. Go ahead. You try it, Sweetie.”

Dixie followed her example and he did taste a little bit of honeysuckle sweetness, which left him wanting for more. He took another blossom and sucked on it, too, extracting the nectar. Ryz’n chuckled.

“You like sucking on that sweet stuff, don’t ya Baby?”

“Sure, don’t you?”

“Yeah, sure do, but sweetness, I guess is in the tongue of the be-sucker. Ha! And you always used to rave about the sweetness you could draw out of me.” An awkward moment of silence passed between them as Dixie felt unsure what do to or say. Then, she resumed speaking as if nothing had happened.

“Really, it’s an insidious vine but it certainly is redeemed by its scent. And I detect the aroma of roses in the air as well. It is June, after all.”

She swayed back and forth, nose to the air, enjoying the late spring fragrances.

Dixie pulled some yellowed, white honeysuckle blossoms to his nose and breathed deeply. He thought he recalled that scent, but nothing specific came to mind.

“Ummm. I love that smell. It reminds me of something but I can’t recall exactly what. I know I didn’t smell this in Hawaii or California or the Philippines, either, but somewhere ...”

“Well, it’s all over around here, Sweetie. The scent has faded a little now. You should smell the early blossoms in May. It’s really quite overpowering. Of course the roses from those houses are pretty fragrant, as well.”

The pair strolled around the bench to gaze upon the football field a hundred of feet and more beneath them.

“Football!”

Ryz’n muttered in disgust, shaking her head negatively. She threw her hands up into the air and let them drop unceremoniously to her sides. “The whole school revolved around that single activity and the football lettermen and their girlfriends, many of whom were cheerleaders, statisticians, or managers for the team. They pretty much ran the school. Pocomoke’s social life revolved around them or, us, I guess I should say.”

“Oh, we were part of the inner circle, hey? A couple of wheels, were we? I guess?”

“Ha!” Wheels! I guess so. Of course, you weren’t so much, but me, I. I was, I suppose.”

“Oh? Let me guess. You were the captain of the cheerleaders, while I just played baseball.” She giggled.

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“Not exactly. Of course, I was co-captain of the JayVee cheerleaders.” She nodded proudly at him. “But I didn’t make varsity. And that hurt.” She winced even now at that memory. “Everyone said I was jobbed. You said so, too!”

Dixie scanned the campus below them and walked a few steps more along the crest of the hill, prompting her to stroll with him.

“Well, were ya? Jobbed, I mean.”

She considered his question thoughtfully for a moment.

“Yeah, I think so. I was as athletic as any of the other girls, probably, even more so. I had the moves.” She threw her hands above her head and swayed her hips back and forth. Then she bust out laughing before she got serious again. “But my weight problem, you know, held me back. I lacked confidence, I guess, and I was always self-conscious about my weight. It’s funny. Right after that, you came up with a diet and exercise plan for me that really worked. I eventually lost nearly thirty pounds. And then when you went to Basic, I lost another five because I couldn’t eat, because I was too lonely and too worried about what would happen to you with the War and all. Mother said I looked like a refugee from a concentration camp. Eventually I gained those five pounds back. But I still use your plan today.” She stopped, pivoted on her toes towards him. “But then I told you that this morning, didn’t I?” Her lilting tone begged him to kiss her, but he pretended not to notice.

“Hmmm. So I’m a little confused. Didn’t you fall out of the ‘in-crowd’ if you were too pudgy to be a varsity cheerleader?” He asked curiously. “Is that how you got together with me, a social outcast, a mere baseballer?” Ryz’n sighed, apparently content to forestall romance and answer his questions.

“No, not exactly. I suppose, you got part of it right though. *You were a social outcast.* HA! And I did try to get together with you, partly for that very reason, I guess. I figured nobody else would want you or want to take you away from me—like Sheena. See, you were just a shrimp then. You were my size. I mean my height only not as beefy as me. And I figured, if you got out of line, I could just whomp ya a good one.” Baring her teeth, she shook a menacing fist at him, looking as if she were the Fightin’ Irish leprechaun.

Dixie laughed and threw up his hands in mock self-defense, while Ryz’n reached around his guard to tap him on the cheek. They chuckled together.

“I bet you would whomp me a good one, too. You are kind o’ pushy, ya know?”

“Oh, I am, am I? Well, I wasn’t always like this. I was pretty reserved like Barb. That’s probably why Barb and I hit it off so well, but your absence toughened me up plenty, taught me to speak up. Besides, you weren’t exactly no pushover back then either, ya know?”

“I was that bad, hunh?”

Ryz’n backed off a bit, nodding her head.

“Well, yeah you were pretty bad, much different from now. Ha! Ha! You used to wear these droopy, baggy clothes circa 1955, the kind with pleated pants with high waists and a little skinny belt. You wore baggy, long sleeve shirts with big collars or short-sleeved snug Ban Lon shirts. They showed off your lean muscular frame

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whenever you took off your dad's baggy suit coats—two, three sizes too big for you. Yeah, you sported two-toned, wing-tipped shoes and wore your hair in a pompadour like Elvis Presley, like from the Fifties when everyone else wore Beatles hairstyles and sandals. You thought you were really cool, really something else, but you wouldn't take it from anybody. I mean nobody. You had learned how to box and some other martial arts stuff as well from the people up at the boy's club. The one we visited today? Yeah, you were a cocky, little rooster. That much is certain. And yet it's strange ... but I, I liked that about you ...”

The girl's husky voice trailed off following her eyes to some distant place, some magical place, Dixie reasoned, where her brazen knight wore baggy clothes, winged-tips and boasted the King's original duck tails.

After a few moments of silence, Dixie became apprehensive. It was obvious she longed for that cocky, pugnacious Elvis miniature but he was nowhere to be found, not in him anyway. Even so, he was curious to know more about himself.

“So what happened? I mean how did you mix in with the ‘in crowd’ if—”

“If I weren't a cheerleader and you didn't play football?” She laughed. “Well, it wasn't easy, let me tell ya. Because, basically, you screwed up, BIG TIME Nicky! You allowed Don Leipzig to hoodwink you into making some sort of a secret pact with that goof to leave me alone. But I knew nothing about that. It let Don move in on me. Funny thing, I didn't even know he was interested in me, but he was and still is, I guess.”

“Oh, that's why he acted like he did last night at dinner?”

Ryz'n had been staring down at the school grounds below them, but she turned back to Nick, all manner of kidding aside. In earnest, she pleaded with him. “Don has always liked me Nicky, even now. I've been out with him a few times, just as friends, I confess. I mean since we heard you were missing. But there's nothing between the two of us. Nothing! That's why it's easy for me to tell you about it.”

Ryz'n waited for his reassurance, which he provided, with a faint smile and an almost imperceptible nod. She did not seem to understand that her past sins or perceived sins meant nothing to him. Then she turned her gaze back to the school.

“There was never anything between Don and me, even though we went together our entire junior year. Sheesh! Now that I look back on it, I realize he was a saint to put up with me. I didn't know then, but you taught me later Nicky, how boys think and well, let's just say, Don came up empty-handed for all his troubles. Ha! He never got past second base. He sure never scored any runs!”

Ryz'n ceased her digression to move on— “Anyway, Don was a guard on the offensive line, so—”

“So you became one of the in-crowd, uh, by virtue of a varsity marriage with Don, so to speak.”

“Yeah, that's right. The football team won, as they always did. Don helped them win and I was with Don. And of course, Sheena was in: always dating the hero of the week. So I was in, too. Over time, as my pounds fell off that year, thanks to your program, I became more confident, more outgoing, and more popular, as I had been in

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junior high before I took on weight and my hair went limp. Yes, I participated in various school clubs and had come to some conclusions about how things should be run; especially, about how our Senior Prom should be handled. So at the end of the year I ran for office: Senior Class President. And guess what? I won!" She clapped her hand sharply together for effect, as if she still could not believe her victory. "Yep! And you helped, by the way. You and your band played the Junior Prom in the auditorium while, between songs, you plugged me for president, along with Ace the Bass (your bass player at the time) for vice-president. Mann, now that all seems like such a long, long time ago."

Again, she fell silent and turned inward.

"So you liked this 'Little Nick' character all that time, even though you were going with someone else?"

Ryz'n chuckled.

"Liked? Oh, Sweetie, I think I loved you from the very first moment I saw you in homeroom of our sophomore year. Of course, it was rather a one-sided, love-hate relationship with you, on my part that is, until the summer before our senior year. Guess you could say our relationship has always run hot and cold. But it got better after we were married. It became downright great after the car accident and you accepted the Lord."

Dixie stared at the girl devouring her person, burning her fine image into his brain. He hesitated, before he spoke what was uppermost on his mind. He sloughed off her reference to him accepting the Lord. Again, it flew over his head.

"Look, Ryzanna."

His use of her full first name arrested her attention. She looked up into his eyes. "I'm still not part of the in-crowd, probably never will be. What your father indicated last night about my dream to play in the Show, well, he's right. It will probably never happen. I have a lot of trouble with my studies. Heck you saw how long it took me to sign my name for those kids today."

"What are you trying to say Nicky?"

"Well, just listen up. I ain't finished saying it yet."

Duly chastised, Ryz'n closed her mouth with her palm, creating a bopping sound. She was ready to listen.

"I'm serious now. I got somewhere around, oh, just shy of twenty thousand dollars to my name. Except for some textbooks and bedding and stuff out at school, all of my belongings are stuffed in a couple bags back at the motel room. I've got no real skills or abilities, nothing, unless you count playing baseball or counting cards in casinos and both of them deals can be kind of streaky. The VA does give me a few hundred each month for my troubles. You see, I ain't no hero. How can you be a hero, if you can't recall what you did that was so heroic? I'm just a BUM! With a capital 'B'! And you may be rich, but I don't care. I don't want your money, see? So if that's what's driving ya, I mean if you're afraid that I come back here so's I can claim my share of your fortune, well you can jes' forget about it. The money's all yours. I don't care about it."

Ryz'n's jaw dropped. Indignant, she fired back angrily.

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“Are you finished now?” He nodded uncertainly.

“All right then!” She’s placed her fists in her side, arms akimbo. “Oh, so the money’s all mine, is it? And how much money do you suppose that would be?” Suddenly, she stalked him like a tiger on the attack.

“I think I just screwed up.”

She jabbed his sternum sharply with her left forefinger.

“Yeah, I think I did screw up!”

“Crap Nicky! YOU DON’T KNOW AND YOU DON’T CARE. HUNH? You know I can’t figure out whether you’re ignorant or just plain apathetic. Which is it?”

“Well ... I guess ... I don’t know and ... and I don’t care, either!” A grin escaped and Ryz’n cracked up, laughing from the waist. She spoke in a puffy British accent.

“Your profound ignorance becomes you, but no more than you’re unassuming apathy.”

“Yeah, whatever, and by the way, my head answers to Dixie, OK? D-I-X-I-E! Not Nick.”

Avoiding an argument over his name, Ryz’n took hold of each of his suit lapels in either hand and tugged him close to her turning her mouth up to his. “And what does your heart answer to, Sweetie? Cuz that’s what I’m interested in?”

Whoop, Mann! This chick was something else.

When she encircled him with her firm arms, he could not resist her charm. They kissed as if it were the first time and the toe tingling recommenced as it had last evening in his parent’s hallway. While the lovers heated up, exploring each other’s mouths with their tongues, some sounds of commotion drifted towards them from the cul-de-sac where they had parked the Starfire.

Dixie surfaced first from their embrace and spoke seriously.

“You realize, I only came back here, back East I mean, for two things.”

“And what might those two things be, Nicky?” Ryz’n asked softly as she gazed up deeply into his two-toned eyes.

Dixie eyed her reprovingly.

“I mean, uh DIXIE.”

“DIXIE? Well, that’s better. Well now, that’s to find out who I am for one and, and ...” Dixie looked hard at the girl. He could not tell her about the silhouette girl. Ryz’n might be the girl in the mist, but what if she was not?

“Well, what’s the other thing, some frozen mystery?” she reached up and softly caressed his neck with her open mouth.

“Yeah, that’s it exactly, a ‘frozen mystery.’ That’s exactly what it is and maybe you’re it.” He nodded towards her approvingly.

He did not have to speak further, as four rowdy teens approached them. Two couples came strolling awkwardly arm-in-arm with rock-n-roll music blaring suddenly from a portable radio they carried. The kids staggered towards him and Ry with much fanfare, waving a mostly full bottle of Southern Comfort and carrying an old army blanket.

“Hey, who is that smoochin’ over there in the dark?” One of them called.

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Dixie responded, “Just us chickens.” The two teen girls giggled as they came forward, but the boys remained quiet.

The red-headed male approached Dixie and Ryz’n with an air of authority as the other three followed close behind him. They stopped about five feet from Dixie and Ryz’n, who remained entangled but with their heads turned toward the intruder. Wearing brown leather slacks, a matching vest and a rawhide headband around his long auburn hair, the shirtless leader defended his turf.

“You go to this school, Mann? I ain’t seen ya ‘round here before.” He turned to his comrades for confirmation. “You seen these two before?” It was a dark night due to thick clouds now covering the half moon, but the red head’s buddies looked over Dix and Ry. The teens shook their heads negatively.

“Maybe you all oughtta scoot on outta here quick like. Let you off easy, seein’ as how I’m in a good mood, a lovin’ mood, not no fightin’ mood.” He reached back to pull a white-blonde in a red halter top and short denim skirt up with him. Then, as if to prove his good intentions, he kissed her with his left hand draped over her shoulders and his right hand dangling the cheap bottle of whiskey down by the lower part of his hip.

“Sure,” agreed Dixie. “That’s no problem.”

Dixie kept one arm around Ryz’n as he pivoted with her and walked her around the teens back towards their car, keeping himself between her and the kids. The brunette, who was with the other guy, called out as Dixie and Ry passed her.

“Hey, HEY! Cory, them’s the two!”

“What two?”

“The two who was at the assembly today, Mann.”

“Hey? Is that right? Hey Mann! Hold up there. Hold up!”

Dixie turned his head around but kept walking away from them. The red headed Cory followed and scrutinized Nick and Ryz’n more carefully. “Dang Lisa, I believe you’re right ... for once. Steve! Turn that thing down, Mann.”

“Ain’t she right, Mister?”

Ry was tugging at Dixie’s lapel. She did not want any trouble, so Dixie kept walking.

The redhead, followed by his cronies, cut off Nick and Ryz’n’s path of retreat. He accosted them in a surly tone.

“Hey Mann, I’m talking to you.”

With a sigh of resignation, Dixie stopped to address his interrogator.

“Yes, you are ca-ca-correct. We were there ta ... day.” Dixie surprised himself with his mostly clear speech, unlike when he usually met strangers.

“Whoa! I am ‘CO-rect!’ Hey! You’re all right, Mann. Yes you are. You’re, uh—”

“Abstract?” proffered Dixie with a grin, stealing a line from James Dean.

“Yeah, that’s it—Abstract, real abstract! Ain’t that right Steve?”

“Yeah Mann, that’s what he is all right.” The girls giggled.

Dixie winked at them as he turned to go.

“Hey Mann, don’t go. Why don’t you stick here with us? Hey, here have a snort.”

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Ryz'n glanced at Dixie with a wifely look that said "no" most definitively.

Dixie put his hand up to decline. The red head persisted.

"Hey, come on Mann. I didn't know who you were back there. Don't hold it against me. Come on now! Take a swig. I'd consider it an honor."

The kid proffered the bottle of Wild Turkey.

Dixie acquiesced. Still holding Ryz'n with one hand, he accepted the kid's peace offering, taking the bottle in the other hand and slugged a long, hard swig. Then he did his best to be cool, without coughing. *Mann! That bug juice is pure rotgut.*

Cory followed Dixie's lead, but coughed a little, too. "Mann, that's some stuff."

"Oh yeah," repeated Dixie hoarsely, "some stuff, all right. Expect it will blind ya, if it don't kill ya first." Then he chuckled. They all chuckled nervously. The kid offered the bottle to Ryz'n, but she shook her head, declining demurely, hiding partially behind her husband. Corey did not push it.

"Well, thanks much. Be seein' ya," offered Dix in parting. He and Ryz'n started to move off.

Then the red head blurted out again. "Hey Nick! Is all that stuff they say about you true?" Dixie turned backwards to respond to the kid.

"Well now, ga-guess that depends on what they say. Just believe the ga-good stuff and forget the rest." Dixie grinned pleasantly.

"Good stuff? Like when you messed up them two ex-cons down in Surratsdale? Heard you was the one give 'em that early outdoor 'lectric chair. Is that right, Mann?"

Dixie did not know how to respond. He looked to Ryz'n for help, but again she shook her head. "Well, I just don't know. I lost my memory in the War. Shoot, I'd never even seen this school before today."

"No spit!" All four kids jumped over towards him. "Are you bullin' us, Mann?"

Ryz'n spoke for the first time.

"No, it's true. He has amnesia, but his memory is starting to come back to him in pieces. Why, he even remembered something as recent as third grade today, didn't you Sweetie?"

"Yeah, I guesso," replied Dixie a little embarrassed at how she advertised the degree of his incompetence.

The one called Lisa asked what was on her mind.

"Are you all gonna be rockin'n'rollin' again? You two were really all ri-i-ight together." The others concurred.

"You're the most famous people to ever come out of this bull crap school," added the redhead.

Ryz'n responded deferentially, as if she knew these kids.

"Well, it's too early to say. The band and I have a couple gigs coming up the next couple weeks, over the Fourth, you know. But that's just mainly to help out some old friends, repay some old favors. You know?"

"Well, where are you all playing?"

Ryz'n stammered, "Well, we're doin' a couple of one-niter's out at the "Fin and Claw" over in Annapolis, and another one down at *Gusti's*, down in Small Springs.

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Week after next, we are playing *Mr. Rowdy's Loft* further down the road in Woldorn. Then, over the Fourth, we're playing over in OC at *The Irish Brogue* Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights and at the *Surf's Well* Patio bar in North OC, the afternoon of the Fourth." She paused to see if they were following all this and they seemed to be hanging on her every word. "Then we're up in Wildwood that Sunday and well, we'll be back here for *The Castille* and the *Bathroom Window* night clubs. Then we finish up in Virginia, first down in Richmond and then over at Virginia Beach." Out of breath, she halted waiting for their reaction, hoping she had satisfied their curiosity.

Dixie was as startled to learn of these plans, as were the kids, who complained they were underage for those clubs. Ryz'n told them that if they could get down to the *Surf's Well* on the Fourth of July, the band would be playing on the beach resort's patio, so the teens would have no problem catching their act.

"Look kids, we really do have to go now, OK?"

"Sure, sure Ryz'n (surprisingly, the kids too spoke as if they had known her all their lives), we don't want to hold you up anymore. We'll be seeing y'all on the Fourth," assured the girl identified as Lisa.

Cory cried out after them, "Hey Nick, you're a bona fide legend around here, Mann. Yes sir, BONA FIDE."

Ryz'n waved good-bye and she walked off arm-in arm with Dixie. The kids turned up the volume on the radio again, prompting Ryz'n to turn around to call after the kids. Steve lowered the volume to hear her. Ryz'n spoke in a heavy whisper. She told them to keep the noise down.

"The neighbors won't bother you all if you keep quiet, but if you get too loud, they'll call the cops, sure. And you won't get what you came here for. Listen now, I know what I'm saying." They thanked her, but Corey also waved her off. By the time Ryz'n and Dixie were backing the Starfire down the street, they could hear the kid's radio blaring over their loud laughter, which floated its way up from below the crown of "the hill."

Ignoring her directions back to the motel, Dix backed the car down the cul-de-sac into the nearest side street. He parked for a minute beneath some leafy maple trees.

"Now Ryzanna, tell me what that was all about back there. I mean, about frying ex-cons? And what's this band stuff? Hope you don't expect me to be playing in no band?"

"Well, first off, Baby my heart answers to 'Ry' from those who know and love me." That was a polite retort to his earlier preference for "Dixie, D-I-X-I-E." He smiled sheepishly, acknowledging that he got it.

"Second, we scheduled those gigs to help out some locals, who first helped us by giving us a shot back in the day. Also we need to work in an extremely talented new guitarist and vocalist who might lead the band if, er, when, I leave. Of course, if you would like to join us playing or singing, I don't think anyone would object. I know I wouldn't, Baby." She batted those naturally curled, long, black eyelashes at him again.

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“Yeah, I thought that was it. OK, I hear what you’re saying, but you can forget about me and the band. No way am I getting up on any stage in front of a bunch of drunks and make a stuttering fool out of myself. No way! If that’s what you thought, you gotta another think comin’!”

“All right, all right, Nicky. I mean Dixie. Nobody’s gonna force ya. Sheesh! You don’t gotta get all huffy about it.” She folded her arms and looked away from him out the front windshield. “Still, it’s a sin and a cryin’ shame, because you are the most talented individual I’ve ever known.”

To take the edge off her harsh reply, Ry leaned over to kiss him.

“Never mind, Sweetie. You’re right. Take us back to the motel, Baby, OK?”

She hooked her left arm inside his right and fluttered those long lashes his way.

“In just a minute. There’s something else, Ry.” Dixie extricated his arm from her as he turned to look at her seriously. “Now tell me, what was that about ‘ex-cons’ and ‘early electric chairs?’” His tone wavered with disbelief.

Ryz’n’s smile melted as she exhaled deeply. Perturbed, she remained silent for a minute, apparently collecting herself.

“Well? Tell me Ry, if it had something to do with me, I need to know. Don’t I?”

“All right, OK!” Ryz’n sighed deeply again and sat back, crossing her arms over her sizable chest. “But I wasn’t with you at the time. Just remember that! It was, it was just before you and I got together for good. You know I wasn’t worried at all when those punks approached you back there. I’ve seen you get out o’ much tougher jams than that, with or without the use of your fists and feet. See, you didn’t need any gun or any stiletto to resolve the situation favorably. Did ya?”

Dixie hung his head. She sought and gained his acknowledgement. Then, he merely stared blankly at her, waiting for her answer to his question. She acquiesced.

“OK! Well, the whole mess with those southern R.G. County rednecks occurred right about this time of year actually, just before the end of the school year.” Her gaze drifted off beyond him and she sniffed the fragrant aroma of the late spring air. “Yes, it was just before the close of school at the end of our junior year. You and I, well we hadn’t started going together yet. No we didn’t start dating until the Fourth of July weekend.” She beamed sweetly at him. “Now there’s a story, I’d like to tell ya.”

However, Dixie cut her off to bring her back to the topic of his interest.

“Later,” he countered. “I want to hear it, but later, after this one, OK?” He lowered his chin and looked up at her like a pleading little boy. “OK?”

“OK, OK! You are really something when you get your mind set on a thing, Nicky. Ha! But then you always were, Baby. Well, to be honest, Nicky, I mean ... *Dixie*; I never knew the full story. I wasn’t an eyewitness, you understand? And you would never discuss the matter with me any more than you did with the two girls, who were with you that night, either ... on your legal counsel’s advice.”

Ryz’n paused to see if he might not require any more details, as if this non-explanation might be sufficient, enabling them to hurry back to his motel room.

However, Dixie was not about to let her off the hook so easily.

“OK, I’m still here. My ears are still working. Go ahead.”

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Ryz'n frowned but she carried on, albeit unwillingly.

"Like I said, I don't know all the details. You had played a ballgame for the Boy's Club down in Accokeek that evening. And you had Terri and Patti with you as your, your personal cheerleaders, I guess. Hmmpf!" Dixie arched his eyebrows with delighted surprise. A bit miffed, Ryz'n continued, "Well, gee, I never did find out what that was all about. You were dating both of them for a few weeks, before you came to your senses and took up with me."

"Together? I mean, I took both of them out on the same date?"

Chagrined, Ryz'n admitted that he had and more than once.

"Wow, I'm gaining more and more respect admiration for myself all the time. No wonder I'm such a legend around here." He laughed while she pushed him hard in the shoulder. "Go on I want to hear the rest of this," he demanded laughingly.

"Yeah, I'll just bet you do!" She shot him a sidelong smirk. "Anyway, you had a date with them after the game, to go moonlight swimming or some darned thing."

"Hold up."

"What now?"

"Did I, er, did we, win the ballgame?" That question surprised Ryz'n.

"I don't know, probably. You usually did. Yeah, come to think of it, I believe you crushed those poor Southern Maryland farm boys into the dirt. Satisfied?"

"Did I pitch?" Dixie couldn't keep a straight face.

She swatted him in the chest with the back of her left hand.

"Yeah, you pitched. You caught and played all the positions all at once, kind of like the King and His Court, only it was the King and the King. OK? Sheesh! Who do you think I was, the scorekeeper?"

"Yeah right, but that does help explain a lot of things."

"Like what?" she asked incredulously.

"Like why I'm a bona fide legend—playing all those positions and dating two girls at once! On moonlight swims, no less!"

He grinned widely at her.

"Oh please," lamented Ryz'n disdainfully. Dixie busted out laughing again. His mirth was infectious and Ryz'n could not help but join him. When they settled down, Dixie prompted her for the rest of the story.

"OK, I don't want to drag this out. Lemme see ..."

Ryz'n collected herself and broke into a serious "Dagnet" type of dialogue, speaking the facts and nothing but the facts in quick, dry monotone and in a false, deep voice.

"You drove the girls in the convertible over to Duley's Bar to pick up some carryout cheeseburgers. You were inside a long time and something happened. When you came out, you ripped out the distributor wires from under the hood of a pickup truck and then you poured oil all over the vinyl seat of the pickup's cab. Two rednecks came charging out of the bar after you. They slid and slipped on the oil-slicked, vinyl seat before they realized what you had done with the distributor wires. You and the girls left them in the dust of the gravel parking lot. When you came back by the bar around

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midnight on your way home (AFTER YOUR DATE!) these two jokers, whose truck you had messed up, were waiting for you in the bar parking lot in a suped-up ‘funny car.’

“They followed you through a thunderstorm. Then either you drove them off the road or they drove themselves off by speeding around a rain-slicked curve. It was difficult to say which. They piled their car into a transformer pole beneath the roadside. The impact of the crash buckled the pole, dropping the transformer on top of their car. The transformer exploded, the car exploded and those two guys exploded—and fried, just like that kid said earlier.” She dropped her deep voiced, comic act. “It was a terrible thing, really, Ni—Dixie. It was in all the papers and on all the local TV news channels as well. It also came out in the news that the dead men had been ex-cons who were real hard cases, always causing trouble down in Southern Maryland.” She had related the story in a dry but quick bang-bang-bang fashion, up until the last couple of sentences when her tone had turned gravely grim. Now she sat in sober silence, seemingly waiting for him to digest the terrible event.

When Dixie had sorted through it in his head, he became upset.

“Shoot girl! You’re saying I killed them. Is that what you’re saying? I killed two human beings? And what happened to me?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing! You got off Scot free, without as much as a scratch on your car. That’s the way it was with you in those days Nicky. You’d always get into these impossible jams and you always walked away, with hardly a scratch.”

Dixie stared straight ahead through the windshield. He thought about the wounds that covered his body, that still pained him when the weather changed suddenly or if he sat too long in a certain position or gave him headaches if he wore his baseball cap a little too tight or was in the sun too long without wearing a cap, how the jagged edge of his testicular sac was always pricking him. He thought about how, if he did too many pull-ups or swung his heavy rebar too many times, the blood rushed so strongly to his head that the bullet and surgical wounds on the back of his head stood up on his scalp and pulsated painfully. Almost under his breath, Dixie repeated her last words softly, “Yeah ‘... always walked away, with hardly a scratch.’”

Ryz’n slid across the leather bucket seats, straddling the seats and the metallic power console between them. She was almost on top of him as she took his maimed right hand in hers and gently rubbed her fingers over his stubs. Dixie seemed not to notice, repetitively muttering her words as he stared straight ahead. Only the flashing light of a passing police car broke his trance. The silent patrol car rolled deliberately on past the two of them, down towards the cul-de-sac.

“Those kids should have listened to me,” whispered Ryz’n. “Time to make a move, Ni-Dixie.”

She flashed the three-dimple grin at her husband. He responded haltingly.

“Did I Ry ... Was I really re-responsible for those ta-two dada-deaths?”

Ryz’n looked deeply into his eyes and tenderly stroked his cheek with her left hand. Softly, she answered, “No. No, Baby I don’t think so, but I wasn’t there. Terri and Patti were in the car with you and they didn’t think so. They told our attorney Mr. Vamia

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that those two guys ran off the street when they couldn't hold the sharp curve on a rain-slicked road. They killed themselves. Terri and Patti couldn't have lied about something like that or they would have been accomplices, after the fact. I know they liked ya a lot, but I don't think they liked ya enough to lie for ya. No, but there's a memory I hope you never recall." The couple stared at one another for a long minute. The atmosphere was heavy, too heavy. Dixie had to do something to lighten it, so he forced a grin.

"You know something, Ry?"

"No, what Baby?"

"I believe ya."

"Oh Nicky, I mean Dixie, that's music to my ears, just like old times."

They both chuckled, as she slipped her left arm inside his right arm again and once more tapped the dashboard, ordering, "Home, James." Dixie pulled the three hundred and thirty horsepower rated V-8 Starfire and its "anti-spin," or "positive-traction," rear end out into the street and headed down to turn right onto Wheeler Road, leaving "the hill," the teens and the police behind them.

Ryz'n pointed out the turns for him, as he drove them back to the motel, where she felt the urge to confess. She apologized for the way she had behaved earlier with the black guys in traffic and how snippy she had been with the pogeey in Lattimore's office. She explained how her recent insomnia and his homecoming had robbed her of her typical celerity and grace. She hoped he would understand that she was very much worn down and behaving abnormally, but all would be righted as soon as things settled down.

"I believe ya," and a reassuring grin were, once more, all he offered in response, but her resonating smile revealed his laconic reply to be more than enough for her.

She told him why. That "I believe ya" line was one Nick had used on her frequently when they were dating in high school. She knew he did not remember such pleasantries, which made it strangely coincidental that he would choose that phrase now. However, she confessed his use of the phrase had thrilled her nonetheless.

Anxiously, Dixie held open the motel room door for his sex-starved wife. He was so nervous and so warm that he began to perspire; despite the cool electric-made breeze, blowing from the room's repaired air conditioner. Obviously, the fuses had been replaced. Once inside, to mask his anxiety, he switched on the television, flipping channels, until he caught the late innings of an Oriole game. He closed the blinds and drapes. Then, despite the slight chill, he set the air conditioner to HI COOL.

Ryz'n had disappeared into the bathroom to freshen up, ostensibly to cover those dark circles, which had resurfaced under her eyes. Dixie had told her she looked fine, but she seemed obsessed with the imperfection. Even so, experience had taught him not to interfere with a woman and her cosmetology.

Dixie's hands were shaking as he removed the contents of his pants pockets onto the nightstand, which stood between the heads of the room's two double beds. He craved a smoke now, but he deferred to her earlier request and replaced the nail in its pack. Dixie laid his suit coat across the bed nearest the bathroom as he stepped out of his

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shoes. The deeply plush carpet refreshed the soles of his bare feet. A lamp shone upon the nightstand. All the lights were working tonight. Yep, the desk clerk had fulfilled his promise. Bare-chested, Dix hung up his brother-in-law's shirt, which he had carried in with him. The only other light, other than the glare from the television, was the one over the mirror in the alcove next to the bathroom. That small foyer served multiple purposes: as a wash area, make-up area and luggage storage area. Right now, he could care less. He was as nervous as cat on a hot tin roof. He could sure use that smoke ...