

Ry dropped Nick at the ball field and offered to get them all some food. Nick asked her to call his parents and to ask them to bring his baseball gear from his room. She did. They had passed Duley's Bar a few miles back, which made of her think of Duley's mouthwatering, greasy cheeseburgers. Over the park pay phone, she ordered all of them some carryout burgers and fries from Duley's, which was a rough road house a few miles southeast of the park. That was the place where Nick had had trouble with the Buzzbee boys at the end of their junior year in high school. However, Mr. Duley had always liked Nick and through him had come to know Ryz'n. Still, Ryz'n used the park's restroom facilities to put on one of her best strap down bras and replace the alluring, green peasant blouse with a prim and proper top, before she traveled the few miles to Duley's. Duley's was not exactly like a fine family restaurant and neither Barb nor Sheena wanted to ride over there with her. She raised the top on the Starfire and picked up the order by herself via Duley's Drive-thru window.

Ry dutifully brought her husband and the two girls back a cheeseburger and some fries. She learned the manager had penciled Nick in the starting line-up, sight unseen, despite Nick's ten-minute tardy arrival. The game started at seven-thirty-five. Batting practice (BP) had begun at six. The Printers' manager had given Nick a uniform and Nick had rushed to put it on. Nick's dad had brought Nick his baseball gear so, at least, he had spikes. Privately, Nick confided to Ry that he was not ready to play. He advised her that he hadn't swung a bat in anger in almost three weeks. He needed to regain his timing, but the manager Mr. Mullins would not listen to his protests. The guy insisted Nick should play, citing his All-America status as reason enough. Sheena informed her that she and Barb did not want to stick around for the game. Ry told Nick that she would take the girls home and be back for the first pitch at 7:35. She did, just barely, but, much to her dismay, she found Allena Yikes in the stands cheering loudly for Nicky. Evidently, word of Nick's return to the ball field had spread. Several of their old school friends had come to watch him. In the top row of the short, aluminum, third base stands, Ry and Allena got into an intense but low-flying catfight, using sarcastically whispered barbs as ammunition.

Nicky was playing horribly, striking out repeatedly and leaving men in scoring position. He not only looked bad at the plate, but he even misplayed a ball in the outfield, losing the pill in the lights, allowing one runner to score and another to take an extra base. Nick's team, the DC Printers were losing. Though still angry with him, Ryz'n felt bad for husband. She knew how it felt to play poorly in front of your family and friends. And they had all come out tonight to watch their returning hero in action. Nick's reputation, as a second team All-America fresh from the College World Series, had preceded him. Now he looked like a little leaguer in front of everybody. His parents and Coach Shaunny were there to watch his disastrous debut, as well. Nick's teammates and coaches avoided eye contact with him and his opposition jeered him.

Even as she empathized with him, the gods of baseball were humbling her husband before all of them. Those gods decreed: "Thou must practice to succeed." Nicky knew

that maxim, but evidently his obstinate manager did not. From the stands behind the third base bench before the game, Ryz'n had heard her husband almost beg the man not to play him. Nicky knew he was not ready yet, but his pleas had gone unheeded.

In the middle of the fifth, Matt Yikes arrived. He charged up into the seats behind third after his wife, forcibly removing her from the stands. Ryzanna watched the whole scene with a self-satisfied smugness. Yikes escorted his wife to their car and they drove back through the park, up Drift Road and out of sight. About four innings later, Yikes returned alone, but Ryz'n noticed he remained seated in his car in the parking lot behind the stands next to the day baseball field. She wondered why.

The Printers lost nine to four. After K-ing four times, Nick alone had left six runners on base, four in scoring position. Ryz'n watched, as after the game, her husband trailed pathetically off the field after the manager to explain to the skipper that his timing was off. The manager assured Nick that would not be a problem in the future.

As Nick pleaded his case, the manager ignored him. He strode smartly ahead of Nick, down the short, grassy bank between the field and the service road that wound through the park. Ry followed, hurrying to catch up. Suddenly, a giant hand reached out and grabbed Nick from behind by Nick's right shoulder, spinning him part way around. CRRUNCHH! Paralyzed, Ryz'n watched in terror as a painful scowl exploded across Nick's shocked face. The right fist of the redheaded Matt Yikes had driven into Nick's left jawbone with terrific force, staggering him. Ryz'n was close enough to see Nick's eyes lose focus. He blinked and shook his head to keep from losing consciousness. Ryz'n screamed but before she could stir from her paralysis to get to Nick's attacker and before Nick could recover, another right from the large redhead came crashing down from behind Nick into his right eye and temple. His legs wobbled and his knees shook like jello, as the blow dropped him to one knee.

Still paralyzed, Ryz'n had watched the whole thing in horror. Those were a pair of tremendous sucker punches. A couple of the other Printer's players and Mr. Gasch, who were nearby, seized the large curly, red-haired man, who had delivered the crushing blows. The assailant was livid. It was all the other three men could do to hold him. When they turned him, Ryz'n confirmed, indeed that he was Matt Yikes. Ryz'n had wondered why he had come back to the park and kept out of sight. Now she knew.

Still on one knee, Nick shook his head like a prizefighter trying to shake the cobwebs from his brain, and stood to take the mandatory eight-count. Nicky blinked and, for the first time, looked up to view his attacker who addressed Nick ominously.

"You ever come near my wife again and I'LL KILL YA," cried Yikes soberly and deliberately. "So help me God, I'll kill ya!"

Still shaking his head, Nick mumbled in disbelief. "Who *is* that guy?" Nick's father intervened. Mr. Sheeboom called Yikes a coward and ordered him to leave immediately or he would have Yikes arrested for assault and battery. The other three pulled the redhead across the service road to the parking lot to Yikes's vehicle. Ryz'n rushed over to her husband, as he staggered unsteadily to his feet.

"Who the heck was that?" asked Nick, wincing as the pain started to sink in. "THAT," replied Ryz'n, "was Matt Yikes, Lena's husband! She was here earlier, but

he came and took her home. Guess he took care of her and then came back to take care of you.” Despite her empathy for her husband’s present predicament, Ryz’n could not help but smugly add a bit of sting to his smarting condition by tersely stating the facts.

“Well, he did one heckuva job, I tell you that,” replied Nick, spitting blood from a cut he had sustained inside his mouth. He shook the cobwebs loose from his brain and dropped his dislodged dental plate into his right palm. Mr. Sheeboom asked what this was all about. Nick said he wasn’t sure. When Ryz’n loudly cleared her throat, Nick admitted to his dad that he had taken Lena Yikes out to the Coach’s the other night for dinner because her husband was out of town and she was feeling down. However, he added that there was nothing between him and Lena. The evening had been harmless.

“Harmless, hunh? Like a red flag in front of a bull.” Mr. Sheeboom was angry but mostly he was concerned for his son’s well-being. You’re going to have a heck of a black eye, son. Any bones broken?” Nick wiggled his jaw, opened and closed his mouth and turned his head from side to side and up and down.

“No, guess not, but I’m still seein’ stars. Feel both numb and pain at the same time.”

“Well, you always could take a pretty good punch. We can call the police and file charges on that gutless clown,” suggested his dad. “He never gave you a chance, sucker-punching you like that!” Nick staggered a couple feet with Ryz’n’s aid.

“No, no. I guess if I were in his position and didn’t know the facts, I guess I would have done the same thing. I guess, maybe. I dunno.”

“You sure?” His dad seemed to want to pursue the matter with legal action.

“Just, just let it go. Mann!”

With this unprecedented harsh tone, Ryz’n saw Nick speaking as himself and not his father’s son or the son his father thought he had. “It’s been a heckuva couple o’ days. Think I’m ready to just go crash in a bed somewhere.”

“Your mother and I will take you home,” offered Raybo.

“NO!” Ryz’n stamped her foot as if she were a little girl not getting her own way.

“No you won’t! Excuse me, Raybo, for acting like this, but I’ll take my own husband home.” Her father-in-law broke sweet as candy on her, as he could do so easily.

“All right Doll, we’ll follow you back to our house.”

Mr. Sheeboom smiled pleasantly. Ryz’n was somewhat pacified, even though she would prefer to take her husband to a motel. Meanwhile, Mr. Gasch had scraped some ice from the bottom of the team water jug, wrapped it in his handkerchief and given it to Nicky to reduce the swelling of his wounds. On the way home, in spite of her earlier anger, Ryz’n felt sorry for her spouse. She didn’t need to teach Nick a lesson after all. Matt Yikes had done that superbly. Yet, she deemed it prudent not to mention her assessment of the matter to him, at least not just then. In fact, neither of them spoke in the car the whole way home.

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After arriving at her in-laws’ home, Ryz’n found Nick’s paraplegic Uncle Bill had had arrived from L.A. for a visit. Evidently, Bill witnessed the game from his omnipresent wheel chair behind the fence down the left field line. Somehow, Ryz’n had failed to spot him. She had had other things on her mind. The Sheebooms had

placed Bill in their master bedroom with its private half bathroom. Nick's mom and dad had moved to the makeshift, studio couch-bed in the basement. It was late. Nick's mom and dad thought Nicholas should retire to his small bedroom immediately. However, Ryz'n argued he should stay awake for a while, because he might have suffered a concussion. Nick did not argue. Truth be told, he felt downright crummy and everyone knew it. Ryz'n fed him a handful of aspirins and he took a shower. Out of precaution for his head injuries, the family decided to keep Nick up until midnight, while Ryz'n fed him some more aspirins and helped him crawl into bed with Nick's mom also in attendance, behind her. Ryz'n took one look at Nicky and knew he was in no condition for making romance.

"Look Baby, I need to do some things tomorrow, take care of some band business?"

"S OK, Ry. 'S OK." Nick waived her off as he held an ice bag to his eye. "You go home. I understand."

"You do, hunh? Well that's fine, but I don't understand you at all, the way you've behaved since you got back. It's as though you, you don't want me around."

"Oh please, Ryz'n, not now. My head is just splitting. I want you around; sure, I do, but, honestly now, no offense. I don't care who's around and who's not. Just go home now and get a good night's rest so you can do those things you need to do tomorrow."

"Yes, that will be fine Ryzanna," concurred Ryz'n's mother-in-law from behind her. "Nicholas has some things to do himself tomorrow. He's going to pick up his grandmother at the airport in the morning. And Ramon has promised the school teachers that Nick will help them install swimming pools this summer."

Nick moaned loudly and rolled over towards the bedroom wall, burying his face into the kid's bed he was forced to sleep on. His mother was insistent.

"Now Nicholas, this is more of a favor to your brother and Bax and your other school teacher friends. They're behind in their work. They need you. Besides, it might just help you to restore some memories. Your father and I think it's a good idea, if you're feeling up to it, that is."

Nick raised his left hand from the side of his hip and weakly waved them away.

Ryz'n couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him. She leaned over his already swelling face to whisper in his ear. "It's OK Sweetie; we'll get together tomorrow evening." She pecked him on the side of his forehead to reassure him, but his mother snipped loudly from behind Ryz'n.

"Well, it will have to be here then, because I believe Nick's grandmother and uncle would like to dine with Nicholas tomorrow evening. After all, they've come a long way and at some expense for that privilege. They aren't exactly rich, you know."

Ry squeezed Nick's left shoulder tightly with her right hand and told him they would get together tomorrow sometime. Then she kissed him on top of his head, stood up and walked out without another word. As Ry left, she overheard Nick's mom ask him, if there was anything she could do for him. If not, she said she would sleep next door in the middle bedroom if he needed anything during the night. Ryz'n shook her head in disbelief. She left quickly and did not wait to hear her husband's response.

Out at Home

Uncle Bill and Mr. Sheeboom waited in the living room. As Ryz'n made her way across the room to exit by the front door, Nick's Dad arrested her with a shout.

"Where are you going, Doll? I thought you were going to sleep in the middle bedroom, close to Nick?" Ryz'n glanced sideways at her father-in-law who sat in his green recliner across the living room.

"Evidently, your wife has reserved that privilege for herself. Besides, that's not my idea of sleeping 'close' to my husband, Raybo. So I'll sleep alone, as I have for the last three years and three months! Maybe I can get a little bit of rest, if not any piece!"

Ry surprised herself by acting out in front of her in-laws; as she thrust open the screen door so violently that she had to raise her left forearm to protect her face from the door on the rebound. She left without any further goodbyes. As she strode down the sidewalk, Ryz'n heard her father-in-law call through the closed screen door, "Wauneta, Wauneta, what have you done to that sweet child?" Ryz'n jumped in the Starfire and gunned the engine without waiting for her mother-in-law's reply.

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On her way home, Ry rose above her fatigue to dwell upon her situation with Nicky. She longed to tell him that she was that silhouette girl he was seeking so desperately, that she—Ryz'n was the girl of his dreams. Ry was the one and the only one he had drawn from his dreams on the inside covers of his college text book, which she and Sheena had found among his personal belongings out at Peppermount. Ry had known immediately upon viewing it from where and when that scene had come. It had been Ryz'n—she had been dripping wet from her lurid skinny dip down in the beaver ponds that first night when, as teens, they had made love and he had caught her silhouetted in the thick mist against the full moon. That sultry, dark silver, mysterious silhouette of her had won picture of the year in a monthly national photo magazine. He had written their modest hit "Silver Right" about her and that rendezvous.

She could show him the picture, play him the song and tell him that was she in the misty moonlight, but what good would it do? His psychiatrist Dr. Mandl, whom she had discovered out at the V.A. hospital in Long Beach, had informed her it would do more harm than good if she tried to force him to recall. He said, she could tell Nick outright, but absent his memory of her and the event, how would it help? Nick had to remember on his own. Otherwise, if she were to tell him straight out, he might not believe her. She ran the risk that he might even pity her, thinking she had gone to such extremes to make herself his dream girl. Eventually, he might even come to despise her for trying to steal from him the one ray of hope he had to find in his past. *But I am his dream girl for true.* She abhorred this game she played with him trying to seduce him, to ingratiate herself to him, only to get jealous and turn upon him when her seductions backfired in her face. And it boiled her butt that the attentions of other females, no matter how trivial in nature, seemed to impress him. No, she had to break this vicious cycle. If only she could help him remember, somehow without his knowledge, and snap his mind back to attention. An idea began to take shape within her brain. She arrived home; hoping prayer would help her, as it had so often in the past, during his long, long absence.

Before she lay down to sleep, Ryz'n removed her jewelry except for her crucifix necklace and laid her personal adornments on the night stand beside her bed. Then she stripped and knelt down and prayed next to her canopied couch. Without realizing it, Ryz'n had been longing for this time alone with her God. She prayed after the manner of her faith. She prayed an "Our Father" and a "Hail Mary." Then she prayed conversationally, as her reformed Nicky had once taught her after the manner of the fundamentalists. She thanked the Father for His concern, His availability, for His goodness, for His mercy in restoring Nick to her, for His beneficence in allowing GRT to be successful and for the general good health of her family. Above all, she thanked Him for His Son, Whose obedience and suffering unto the point of death had saved her and Nick and everyone from themselves. For this, she was eternally grateful. Her eyes misted when she thought of the pain and shame her Lord had endured in her behalf, for her all wrongs. She had fallen short of the mark too many times. Ryz'n asked forgiveness for her sins this day, for her coarse speech, her speeding, as well as for her angry jealousy and her vindictive, immodest behavior. She noted that she always had more need for forgiveness when Nicky was around, but she could not blame him. Instead, she laid the blame solely upon herself. Penitently, Ryz'n acknowledged sole responsibility for her actions and the Almighty's unique position as the one and only great "I Am" to forgive her sins. She further noted her error in assuming His position by trying to play God with Nicky earlier on the highway among the peanut fields. She understood now that the Lord had worked through Lena and Matt Yikes to straighten Nicky out, to wake him up to reality. The Lord had not required her help to do that. Ryz'n begged the Lord to heal Nick's wounds and to restore his memory, if that was His will, so that she and Nick could live together in holy matrimony, as the Lord had intended. Then, kneeling with her back ramrod straight and sitting upon her heels, she stilled her voice, her mind and her heart to listen and seek the Lord's wise counsel.

She *felt* His voice quote the scriptures as Nicky had once taught her to do: ***Trust in me with all your heart and lean not into your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge me and I will bring it to pass ... I will perfect all that concerns you.*** Ry closed her prayer gratefully, blessed herself, respectfully kissed the crucifix hanging from her neck and vaulted gingerly into her canopied bed, praising the Lord for His holiness and His grace.

Yet, her racing thoughts would not permit her to sleep. She recalled something biblical that Nick had learned and once told her after he had been saved. He had said that she "should cast all her cares upon the Lord for He cares for you." So now, having prayed for Nicky and gained peace on that score, her concerns turned to the band. She lifted these thoughts to her God, as well. The next day she would have to begin to whip the band into shape. At the thought of the band, her mind raced and would not still.

Although GRT had enjoyed some fair jam sessions the past spring, Ry felt they were behind schedule in preparing for their upcoming tour. Double J, the awesomely talented newest GRT member from Baltimore and his recent bride, Necie (Denise) had been staying with GRT's drummer Mickey at Mick's crib in Woldorn. Ry had instructed Mick to practice their stuff with J.J. She hoped Mickey had followed her

advice. Mick was an affable kid, who had been with GRT from the get-go. While he was a steady drummer, he was a real party boy, too. He would do gladly whatever Ry asked when she was around, but when she was not ... Well, Mick's memory tended to slip, and the whim of the moment took over. She hoped Mick and all of them understood the vital need of bringing J.J. up to speed fast. Otherwise, GRT was dead, a grounded meteor, which once had been the brightest comet streaking across the Rock'N'Roll heavens.

Even so, Ry had planned to spend the next ten days cooped up with the band in Woldorn's *Starlust* motel. The owner of the nightclub next door had consented to allow the band to rehearse there during the day free of charge, in exchange for the celebrated GRT playing a date at his club, too. For evening practices, Ry had found a church hall west of La Placa, down off Route 6A, where GRT could rehearse for a nominal fee. She considered all she had to do in the next month to complete this local "tour" successfully.

Then she went over the events of the day, as she often did before she drifted off to sleep, lifting all her concerns to the Lord. Her day had gone from the sublime to the ridiculous. Mostly now, she focused on her husband. She had given her anger over him to God. She hoped Matt Yikes had done so, as well. Moreover, that incident with the blonde in peanut country, well she still could not fathom it. Where had she come from, anyway? Ryz'n could have sworn that road had been deserted, when she had dropped Nicky off alone. Sheena had been right: "you can't win that kind of game with Nicky." And how about that cute little Paulina on the beach today? Ryz'n would give anything if Nicky would give her a be-dimpled little one like that. Yes, anything. She'd give up the band, their fortune, anything. "Oh Lord, please help Nicky and me like You did before and give us another child and I promise to take better care of it this time, better care of me, better care of Nicky, too, and never let him march off to war again."

And what should she do with Nicky over the next couple of weeks or so? That was the question. Tomorrow would tell. Tomorrow she would try to make up with him and try to find a way to be together, despite her professional responsibilities. As her sister Georgian Scarlett O'Hara used to say, "Tomorrow is another day."

Then she begged one final question: "Lord when will I have peace? Or even piece? One begets the other," she reasoned aloud. Sheepishly, she recalled the Lord's answer to her prayer just minutes ago. She hadn't listened. She hadn't really listened to Him at all. She was ashamed of herself. He said He would perfect everything that concerns her and that she should not lean into her own understanding. "You're right Lord. I know You are right. Thank you for being so patient with me." She turned over as she prayed another "Our Father" and fell asleep. Then she dreamt of Nicky. Despite the calamitous day, with her soul freshly cleansed through sincere, personal confession, Ryz'n slept well that night with the confident assurance all would right itself on the morrow.