

“In the beginning—Ha! In the Big Inning, Nick used to say.” Ry shook her head and laughed. Then she began anew. “In the beginning ...”

In her drug-induced mania, Ryz'n read as if she were with God when He spoke the universe into existence. Unlike God however, she did not rest on the seventh day. No, she kept right on charging. She did linger over Chapter Three where He created the perfect, first human couple, before there was any disease, ugliness and corruption in the world. She saw Nick in Adam. She believed Michelangelo had done both of them a disservice in his rendering of the first man on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. She had studied that masterpiece in art class. But then, she reasoned that it must be hard to do your best work upside-down with stuff dripping in your face. Now, Ry considered that observation for a minute by imagining herself in old Michelangelo's place. Then, she giggled, thinking about her and Nicky before he left for the War and believed she had done some of her best work with him under similar circumstances. The thought of Nick as Adam had revved up her libido, which she was trying to tone down. *Darn it!*

Sweating heavily again, Ry rose from the bed and stripped off her satin robe. Bryson was snoring, so there were no worries there. With the Bible in hand and standing unashamed in all her natural splendor, as God had created both her and Eve, Ry strode to the A/C unit and turned it up to “High.” The cooling air soothed her sweating skin. She threw her arms out to her sides above the cooling unit. With her blood still racing in high gear, Ry luxuriated in the frigid sensation, as the chilled air climbed onto and around her. She danced again the jerking, earthy Igdis dance she had recreated earlier on stage. Silently, she writhed towards the desk. The folk dance of fertility now, warped her mind. Had not the dance originated with the temple priestesses, who worshipped a pantheon of gods in ancient Greece? Ry closed her eyes and imagined Adam and Eve and Nick, perfect as God and she had just created them.

That was no six-pack on Adam. That was a twelve-pack. That was Nicky, the last perfect Adam! That is why Nick has one bright blue peeper and one ebony eye. It's only natural the father of all humanity would have two different colored eyes. And, I see Adam is clean-shaven, but has a long, wavy mane the color of the rainbow. Yes, I can pass for Eve and Nick for Adam. Umm, Nick's built fine enough to father all creation, too. I believe we could and I wish we would, too.

Ryz'n danced slowly before her dark reflection in the mirror, even as she concentrated her attention on reading the book of *Genesis*. From beneath her covers, Sheena moaned that Ry was disturbing her sleep. Ryz'n hurried into the bathroom and shut the door loosely, carting what remained of the pint of bourbon with her. She flung back the shower curtain toward the faucet, pressing the folded, opaque curtain against the side tile wall outside the tub. Ryz'n decided to run herself a bath, a lukewarm bath, because she was starting to sweat again. She would read in the tub without disturbing the others. The pint off bourbon had shrunk, either by spill or by drink, to well less than a half pint by now. She was not yet ready to let go of the one thing that seemed to calm her down, if only a little bit. Perched on the white, cold porcelain she sat upon the

side of the tub and sipped the remaining bourbon, while she watched the running, bath waterfall plummet from the faucet, dancing into the tub. She read the Bible while she waited for the tub to fill, but she couldn't wait.

Ryz'n jumped up, turned on the overhead fan and cracked the door open to allow some cool air in. Then she slipped into the tub with her feet beneath the spigot and her back and head against the concave wall opposite the spout. Ry purred and giggled, as the refreshing water rushed from the faucet over her feet. She reached for the booze that she had set next to the tub on the white and black-squared tile floor. She almost knocked the Bible off the side of the tub into the water. She was starting to lose her coordination. However, she managed to catch the Good Book between the inside tub wall and her right breast and armpit. She cracked up at the thought of nearly drowning the Bible, because she giggled, she had not yet reached the story of the flood. Ryz'n placed the Good Book back up on the outside tub shelf and sipped her bourbon, which had lost some of its burning bite for her by now. The cooling water did help decrease her panting and sweating and slowed down her thought processes a little. Old Grand Dad had not hurt the slowdown any either. She turned off the spigot with less than a half a dozen inches of water in the tub.

Ryz'n leaned back to relax with the bourbon bottle almost totally submerged between her burned thighs and the Bible between her hot little hands. She was inventing *speed* reading. Ha! Get it? *Speed* reading? While she read swiftly, she also comprehended everything. She had the brain of a computer. Ry read the stories of the Fall and Flood with great interest. However, she could not understand how so many of Adam's descendants were allowed to take more than one wife. Polygamy offended her ingrained Roman Catholic sensibilities. The tale of Sodom and Gomorrah convicted her briefly of her own unrighteousness this evening. However, it didn't halt her. She was too juiced. She read on. The tale of Lot with his daughters sickened her. Ryz'n was also filled with reproach at Abraham's cowardly lie in claiming his wife Sarah to be his sister, in order to escape a perceived harm and to satisfy King Abimelech's lust for her. Ry reread the passage to confirm what she had read and learned the truth: that Sarah was both Abraham's wife and his half sister. Such incest only added fuel to her indignation. And, Abraham's faithfulness to God by nearly slaughtering his son Isaac frightened the heck out of her. Esau gave up his birthright for a bowl of soup and got what he deserved, but Jacob and his mother were conniving cowards, for whom she had no sympathy. The passage that really got her was the story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar. That tangled web of greed, deceit, premature death and lust in that passage simply was incredible, surpassing any present day soap opera. The story held her interest so well that she read it several times.

Too bad, there is not a little more descriptive detail on that story! Where's the dirt?

But this was her take on the narrative, she found so captivating. In Chapter 38 of Genesis, Tamar had married Er, Judah's oldest son, whom the Lord slew because he had committed evil in the sight of the Lord. So Judah told his next oldest son Onan to pinch-hit for his late brother Er, go into Tamar and provide her with a legitimate heir to Er. (*And I thought to Er was human and to forgive divine?*) Ry giggled at her wit, but

she read on. Onan went into Tamar and had his fun, but he spilled his seed on the ground to avoid losing his brother's inheritance, to his own offspring out of Tamar, so the Lord slew Onan, too.

Ryz'n knew the Church used this passage as a scriptural cornerstone for the Church's ban of non-sanctioned birth control, in which Nick had never concurred. It had been Little Nick's contention that God had whacked the greedy Onan because Onan had disobeyed God in a greedy attempt to keep his late brother's inheritance for himself. Nick had told her this was a specific case referring to greed and disobedience over inheritance and should not be used, as a general principle, to forbid the practice of birth control. Ryz'n had not been so sure about that. In fact, she did not know what to think on the subject, except that she knew from her Catechism that her body was the temple of the Holy Spirit and, as such, should not be defiled with any intrusive foreign objects, such as prophylactic devices (or microphones?) This, she believed wholly without equivocation. (Of course, Ryz'n discounted the birth control pills she ingested daily, because as Nick had pointed out, she took them not for birth control but for medicinal purposes only to make her life bearable. Ry had learned her junior year of high school, the pill could corral her wildly erratic, female cycles into predictable, orderly, five to six week terms.) Now, Ry wondered if she had not violated that belief tonight with her use of the speed. She started to weep, but the very object of her contrition would not permit her to cry long. She bucked up and threw herself back into her read.

Judah then promised his younger son to Tamar when he came of age to assume the place of her late husbands Onan and Er. Tamar waited dutifully and patiently, just as I have been, thought Ryz'n, smirking to herself. However, when Judah's, younger kid did come of age; Judah renegeed and withheld the young man from Tamar. (*Well, a promise is a promise, but I can understand what Judah did there. After all, that Tamar was poison to men. Any man that messed with her might as well sign his own death warrant. She was the original black widow killer.*) But, to receive her due, Tamar posed as a harlot by the roadside, and lured Judah, her father-in-law, a recent widower, into lying with her. From their union, Tamar conceived a son by her father-in-law and thus maintained the inheritance for her child.

These Bible stories were filled with sex, scheming and temptation. In light of these readings, Ryz'n considered her actions onstage tonight to be of biblical proportions. Why, she fit right in with Eve, Sarai, Tamar and Lot's daughters. Had she not become a temptress, a seductress, to make her husband jealous and make him return to her? Had she not used Tommy Tux to lure Nick back to her? For sure—what she had done truly *was* of biblical proportions! It was mind-boggling. It was—why, it was Homeric!

Ryz'n read by flipping the pages almost as soon as she touched them. With each page divided into two columns, she took in a column at a time. Ry had never read so expeditiously, yet so comprehensively, too. Under the influence of the crystal meth, she fancied herself an intellectual genius. As she speed read, the bathwater cooled her legs and butt. Her concentration was so focused that the sound of the dripping faucet failed to annoy her. Neither did the room's glaring, bright light deter her. Ryz'n found

parallels in all these scheming stories, where one party pretended to be someone else for their own short end gains. It was like Nicky, who claimed to be this “Dixie” character. Could he be playing this charade on purpose? To test her faithfulness? The old Nicky might have pulled such a stunt, but not the “saved” Nicky, even though he would have known all this bible stuff. And this new Nicky? Why, didn’t he walk the walk or even talk the talk. Why couldn’t Nick be more like Joseph with Potiphar’s wife? Why didn’t Nick run from these women, instead of bedding down with them, as he had with Lena?

Joseph’s scheming brothers sold him into slavery. But by the end of the book, despite Joseph’s hardships, God had worked everything out for the good of all, not only Joseph and his family but also for the two nations of Israel and Egypt. Joseph even said as much to his brothers who had betrayed him so viciously. “What you meant for evil, God meant for good.” Suddenly, Ryz’n was convicted again. Maybe that’s what Nicky would say about her actions of late, when and if, he ever came back to his old self. As she contemplated these things in her heart, her metabolism picked up again. Laying the good book aside, she sat up to turn the cool water back on full blast and sipped on Bryson’s pint of whiskey. For kicks, Ry stuck her left big toe up inside the faucet, squirting water all over the bathroom. She laughed. Then an idea struck her.

Suddenly serious, Ryz’n bent her energies to learn to control the water’s spout by the position of her big, left toe inside the faucet aperture. By bracing her left heel against the wall for support and deftly placing her big toe in the spigot opening and maneuvering her toe, she found she could spray could water around where she wanted. She could just as easily cut off the water spray instantly by shoving her toe in the faucet and damming it up completely. She sipped on her bourbon bottle and adjusted her toe, so that a stream of water shot onto her long, extended, tongue, and finally, arced into her mouth. *An automatic chaser!* She giggled and gurgled and began choking. The girl smacked the top of her chest with her left hand and sat up in a V position. Taking a swig of bourbon, Ry flopped back against the bathroom wall with a rude thud. “Ooooooh!” The hurt was slight, considering the enormous sound of the thud of her head against the tile. *I’m invincible!* She laughed hysterically at that prospect. The thud, followed by her laughter, fetched her sister on the run from the bedroom in her shorty, blue see-through nightgown.

“What’s going on? Are you all alright Ryz’n?” Ryz’n nodded but she could not stop laughing. Sheena stepped inside the door.

“Damn it, Ryzanna! I thought you wert hurt. I heard that thud and ... Aren’t you sleepy, *yet?* My gosh! What *did* they give you?” Sheena stopped and stared at her sister’s thighs. “Sweet Mary, Ryzanna! Your thighs! I hadn’t realized they were so bad before.”

“Oh, these little old things?”

Ryz’n spread her legs and stretched back the burned skin with her fingers to disclose the wounds thoroughly. “Aah, they’re nothing a-tall, a-tall. They just tingle a bit, now and then.” She observed in her best Irish brogue. “Umm, feels good!”

“Gee Whiz! That’s terrible!”

Out at Home

“You remember. You were there, when the microphone snapped, crackled and popped?”

“Yeah, just like Rice Krispies! Well, just the same you should get some Neosporin on it. I’ve got some with me.”

“No, it’s OK, between the soap and water and my special miracle medicine here—” She held up the pinto of bourbon and waved it—“I think I be alright.” To demonstrate, Ryz’n once more dripped some of the bourbon over her wounds and reveled in the burning sting the alcohol inflicted upon her inner thighs.

“Well, OK, but you should try and get some sleep—”

“*Sleep!* Ha! Sleep is the last thing I’m lookin’ for. Sleep is for wimps!”

Exasperated, Sheena answered her sister by turning off the spigot, which had deposited well over a foot of water into the tub... The girls had spoken loudly enough over the sound of the running water to disturb Bryson. He came in behind his wife, looking good wearing only his snug, chock-filled, boxer shorts.

“Is everything OK?”

Sheena turned into him and pushed her muscular spouse back out though the doorway to shield him from her sister’s nudity.

Ry set the bourbon bottle down on the side of the tub. She slid down the tub wall, trying to hide her face beneath the bathwater’s surface, as if that would cover her from Bryson’s view. Opening her eyes under water, she saw Sheena shush Bryson and shove him out the door. Beneath the water, Ry heard her sister’s muffled scolding.

“Get out Bryson. Get out. Ryz’n’s in the tub. Go on now. I’ll handle this.”

Bryson obediently followed her advice and backed out. Shutting the door, Sheena turned back to view a submerged Ryz’n. Sheena placed her fists akimbo upon her hips.

“Oh, that’s cute, Ry! Very cute. You act just like a kid!”

Ryz’n giggled and a gaggle of bubbles floated to the surface over her face.

“Damn it, Ry! I’m serious. I’m exhausted and I’m serious.” Examining the liquor bottle on the side of the tub, Sheena screamed. “Good Gosh! You’ve downed over half the pint already. Don’t you think you’ve had enough of that bottle? You’re gonna be sick tomorrow, girl.”

She reached for the bottle, but Ryz’n was too quick for her sister. A coughing Ry broke the water’s surface like a nuclear submarine, splashing water all over her sister again. She snatched the pint bottle away, standing it up in the water between her legs. When Sheena reached for it, Ryz’n splashed her sister with a tidal wave. Sheena jumped back as a cat might from a thrown pail of water.

“Damn it, Ryzanna. That’s not funny! I’m trying to get some sleep!”

Disgustedly, Sheena wiped bathwater from her face and arms, blowing like a spouting whale. However, Ryz’n was totally unconcerned. She intoned rakishly, “Well, it could have been worse.” They caught each other’s eye and read each other’s thoughts, each recalling Ry’s earlier excessive episode on the bed. Sheena flipped Ry off. With that recollection and the bottle held firmly between her legs, the rolling euphoria Ryz’n had been experiencing ever since her toke on the meth, suddenly flashed into internal, warm waves, flooding over her again. With that crystal ice in her

system, it sure didn't take much to set her off. Her guttural moans and groans, alternating with soft purrs, frightened Sheena at first, until the girl understood. Bryson must have heard her too, because, once again, he knocked on the door, asking if everything was all right. Sheena ignored him and bent over her sister, speaking softly.

"OK Ry, OK My Baby. Go ahead and have your fun now. Lord knows, you deserve some. But don't expect me or Bryson to sympathize with you tomorrow, when you're sick as a dog! But if you squeeze too hard on that bottle girl, you'll really have something to moan about." Sheena started to leave.

Who was Sheena to mother me and use Mom's pet name for me?

Pouting, Ry arched her back and pressed her shoulders and the back of her head against the tile wall. Then she scooted her butt backwards against the end tub wall, with the result that her flat abdomen broke the water's surface. As if for the first time, Ryz'n glanced downward and noticed her yet bejeweled navel. She marveled at her earlier skill in making the fake gemstone stick in there for so long,

"Hey Sheena, wait?!" Sheena turned.

"What?"

"Well, look at my belly button." Ryz'n tapped her prized rhinestone, which by now had broken well above the water's surface. "Can you believe it, with all those belly rolls I did tonight and this bath and the stone still sticks in there like glue?" She rolled her belly in long undulations just to prove her point and laughed.

"Yeah! Well it ought to, after you coated the thing in Crazy Glue before you stuck it in there. Whaddaya expect? Good luck with tha—cleaning yourself out, I mean."

"Well, I don't think it will be a problem. I think a little rubbing alcohol should do it or maybe even a little Old Grandad here." She squeezed the bottle between her thighs, keeping the mouth of the bottle above sea level like a periscope.

"Nail polish remover more likely, if you can get it out at all," replied a doubtful Sheena. "Ha! That Crazy Glue is serious stuff!"

"Jealousy does not become you Baby Sister. Ya know, maybe I'll get me a real diamond or, hey! How 'bout an emerald to bring out the green in my eyes?"

"Ryzanna, you are something else. You're a trip. You really are."

Ryz'n replied in quick machine gun bursts as if she had not heard her sister.

"Yeah, I think I'd need to get one the same size and shape as this old rhinestone ear ring though. Remember? We each got a set when we turned thirteen? And you were jealous when I got mine first, because I was older? Remember that? You'd try to steal 'em from me. Ha! You were jealous of me even then, Sheena? Yep! I think this long oval octagon is just the right shape and all them corners and edges gives the gunk something to latch on to, don't you think?"

Sheena shook her head and predicted Ryz'n would be feeling "really lousy" the next day, so she should get some rest while she could. "You're gonna feel like crap tomorrow Ry and look like it too, probably. But you are a trip, tonight. That's for certain. I'll remind you what a trip you were, when you're sick as a dog tomorrow. HA! Good night, Ry."

Out at Home

But mentally now, Ryz'n had left Sheena behind, though her sister had yet to exit. Ry moved her lower half as a mermaid might. Once again, in ecstasy with her imaginary husband, Ry's mermaid waves lapped against the tub walls, in response to her earthy, underwater undulations. Ryz'n saw Sheena as if in a dream. She watched her kid sister wash her hands of Ryz'n, as Pilate washed his hands of the Lord. Sheena shook her head sadly and left. Ryz'n heard Bryson, from the other side of the door, ask what's going on. As Sheena closed the door behind her, Ryz'n heard her sister say:

"It's OK, Bry. It's just a mating call. My sister is just a lonely, make that a very lonely girl, that's all. Come on let's go back to bed, Honey. I'm exhausted."

Half an hour later, Ryz'n felt as a satiated prune might, but her insides were yet vibrating. In her sensual, drug-induced mind, Nicky had fulfilled her in her cold water bath in so many ways, she could not count them. The pint bottle of bourbon had not hurt her any. Water had mixed with bourbon and her thighs were mixed with both and her racing brain was mixed with thoughts of her formerly loving husband as well.

Ry emptied the last of the bourbon down the drain along with the bathwater. She had not drunk nearly as much as Sheena had thought. What she had not spilled accidentally, Ry had used to cleanse and sting her thigh wounds repeatedly. Like her mother, Ry always had to hide her proclivity for pain, for she always had felt guilty embracing the enjoyment of those smarting sensations the normal person naturally, repulsively abhors. Even Nicky had never understood this eccentricity of hers. After she had dried herself off, being careful not to dislodge the rhinestone from its new home, a naughty urge overtook her. The speed was working in overdrive, inside her brain. Here was an excellent chance to practice "Black Betty's" trick that Ry had witnessed at Naughty Nathan's burlesque club. She peeled the wet, limp label off the bourbon bottle, rolling it off lengthwise in one contiguous piece. In lieu of cash bills, she employed the bourbon label as a prop. In the constricted confines of the bathroom, Ry burst into song and dance. Like an amoeba, she imitated the slender, black show-stopper from East Baltimore Street. The close quarters of the bathroom did not deter her. She did not need much room for this much-practiced but unique maneuver. After completing her "Black Betty" bathroom gymnastics, Ry was quite proud of herself. "Wouldn't Nicky like to see that one? Bet that Russian floozy can't come close to anything even remotely like that. What you are missing, Sweetie! Um, um, um!" She applauded herself knowing that "Whoa Black Betty" had nothing on her, either.

Ry's mind yet raced wildly, courtesy of the speed provided her by Tommy Tux. Now she pulled a one-eighty. *Since I finished Genesis, now I think it's a good time for me to Exodus.* She giggled at her silent wit. Suddenly, she became unreasonably paranoid, afraid the reporters would return to pick her apart in the morning. Yet, surprisingly, she felt fresh, ready to go. Although she was still high, she was sensible enough to know she was not ready for the journalists' sharp, accusatory questioning. Well, she would just beat them to the punch. Nevertheless, her paranoia forced Ryz'n to hurry to the bathroom in her own motel room to brush her teeth and comb her dripping, wet hair. Then she packed all her duds. Ry retrieved the Bible from Sheena's bathroom next door and replaced it upon the nightstand between the two beds in her sister's room.

Ryz'n woke up the others rudely, as she tipsily covered herself in her favorite, green satin robe. She joked that she was considering giving them both a promotion, for their actions last night, which she claimed "were above and beyond the call of duty." Then, she disappeared into their bathroom.

"Last night?" Sheena cried indignantly. "It *still is* last night, for cryin' out loud. Ryzanna, I haven't slept a wink! Shoot!" However, Sheena did not stop there.

Ryz'n withstood her sister's verbal barrage and told her and Bryson they had to vacate the motel immediately, before the reporters came back. They woke the rest of the sleeping band members to notify them of their departure plans and that they were all heading for home. Amid grumbles and complaints, all the band members reluctantly followed Ry's ludicrous orders. A half hour later, GRT had vacated the hotel.

Clothed only in her short, short green satin robe with a matching scarf tied tightly under chin, Ryz'n sped up the highway just before dawn in the open Starfire convertible. Sheena hunched by her sister's side. She clutched the excess strap of her safety belt with her left hand and wrapped the other tightly about the vent window bar. When Ryz'n saw her brother-in-law's tail light lagging behind, in her rearview mirror, she laughed.

All lights were green, pre-set to favor those, like them, traveling north and south on this major east coast thoroughfare in the wee hours of the morning. She hit them all cleanly. Everything was go. Her speedometer topped eighty-five, as the cops slept. It wasn't the cops but the reporters, whom she feared. Ryz'n slowed down enough at Landerstown Road to take the right yield, squealing on two wheels. Seconds later, she screeched to an abrupt halt at the main gate of the air force base. Ryz'n knew the airman on guard. She knew most of those on guard duty at this hour, because she passed through here daily on her way to her dawn swim at the base pool. Though today, she was about an hour ahead of her normal schedule. Moreover, her father worked at the base as the recreational facilities manager. Earlier, he had performed the same task as one of the last, appointed, active, air force warrant officers. As a retired serviceman, he now worked as federal civil servant. The sentry recognized her as well and passed the two sisters through. Ryz'n instructed the guard that her brother-in-law was on his way, right behind them and to please let him in too.

Ryz'n drove super slowly through the base, to the base pool, located around the back side of the installation on the far side of the golf course. Bordered by the par-five, thirteenth hole, the pool nestled in seclusion amongst a grove of trees. Ry drove so slowly in fact that had there been any pedestrians, they could have passed her easily. Nevertheless, when they were out of the sentry's hearing, Sheena blasted her sister.

"You almost gave me a heart attack back there, Ryzanna. You won't be driving home, no sir! You almost hit ninety back by Clairton Acres. And you were all over the road. You could have killed the both of us!"

Ryz'n frowned.

"Oh fiddlesticks! That was nothing. I was going much faster in my mind." She tapped her head with her forefinger and laughed impishly.

"Straighter too, no doubt," retorted Sheena.

Out at Home

As Ryz'n vaulted out of the car, Bryson roared up right next to her in Nick's old car. Ryz'n had always thought the navy blue and old gold trim color scheme of the '63 Bonneville was about the handsomest car she had ever seen. Still seated in the opened convertible, Bryson turned towards his sister-in-law to castigate her.

"What in Hell's name was that back there, Ryzanna? You damned near killed me."

"Bryson, Honey." Ryz'n reached down and into the car and over the seat back to caress the back of his head. "You know I love you dearly Bry, but you can be such a worrywart." She grinned like a Cheshire cat and sashayed toward the pool entrance, while she fished in her hand bag for her copy of the pool's gate key. Sheena and Bryson followed along behind her. Sheena called out to ask Ry which piece of luggage contained Ryz'n's swimsuits. Ryz'n used her women's locker room key to open the door. Before Ry disappeared into the locker room, she called back over her shoulder.

"Swimsuits! Where I'm going, I don't need any swimsuits."

Then Ryz'n blew her sister off with a backwards flick of the hand. The pool's ten feet high, green, privacy fence afforded her all the clothing she needed. Eager to swim, Ry jogged out to the pool, dropping her handbag, scarf, and robe along the way. The dawn was yet an hour away. She had begun sweating again and her heart raced. A soft breeze flurried from out of the south, bathing her unclothed body with delectable ruffles of cooling air. The seventy degree, humid, pre-dawn temperature washed deliciously cool over her skin.

Ryz'n was simply flying. The now familiar, warm sensation of euphoria welled within her, unabated. Were she to be caught now, not only would she embarrass herself, but also her father who ran the place. Of course, today she was about an hour ahead of her normal schedule and it was yet dark. To be precise, by the clock overhanging the breezeway, it was ten of five when Ryz'n toed the edge of the Olympic-sized, pool's coping. The inky darkness encompassed her and the water stilled like a sparkling sheet of glass, as she experienced a temporary respite from the gusting pre-dawn breezes. The scent of chlorine from the pool released new levels of dopamine inside her. She salivated for the physical release that the foreboding aroma of chlorine always promised her. She loved to swim. Ry spread her hands to the night sky. She felt alive, wired. Standing by the pool, prepared to dive, gave her a delicious rush. With her senses yet elevated from the drug, Ryz'n bent her legs slightly and dived into the pool in a practiced, athletic manner.

What a cooling sensation, what total and utter liberation to make that nude dive and break the water's surface and slither down into it! She felt her breath bubble out of her nose. Ry had penetrated the inky, primordial ooze. In fact, she was Eve, in the garden. She was the first woman. Afraid to surface and lose contact with such glorious impulses, Ryz'n swam underwater the first length of the pool, streaming air from her exhaling nostrils. Upon surfacing, she felt the water temperature to be slightly warmer than the surface temperature, producing wisps of mist sliding over the pool's surface. She lowered her chin into the water and giggled.

Ryz'n never knew she had so many nerve endings, which all could be titillating at once in such joyous unison. She broke into her unique, individual medley, practice

routine where she alternated her stroke every two laps. Suddenly she heard Sheena screaming at her from poolside and Ryz'n pulled up impatiently to tread water.

"What *is* it, Sheena?"

"Your crucifix! Don't you wanna take it off? That chlorine can't be any too good for that gold, Honey."

Sheena was right for a change. Ryz'n swam over to the side of the pool, took off the necklace and handed it to her sister. "Thanks," she said curtly.

"Sure, no problem, Ry."

"Now try not to bother me any more Sheena. Once I get goin', I don't like to stop."

"I know, I know. That's what Nicky used to say. Ha! Me and Bry will just hang out here by the side of the pool and watch ya, Sweetie."

"Fine!" *Wasn't Sheena just as sweet as pie? After all these years, Sheena's being uncommonly nice. Guess she's finally growing up.*

Ryz'n resumed her exercise. She swam breast, back, butterfly and freestyle. Then she threw in a sidestroke as a kind of rest stroke. The practiced swimmer repeated this medley through the close of night, leaving silent ripples in her wake. Just for fun, she kicked like a mermaid. Although she had not slept all night, she felt as though she had the strength of ten women, perhaps as the perfectly created Eve may have once felt when she first swam in the Garden. Ryz'n swam, as her two guardian angels Sheena and Bryson finally grabbed some, what must have been, uncomfortable shut-eye upon a pair of poolside chaise lounge chairs.

Once she had achieved the smooth rhythm in her stroke, Ryz'n ceased to think about her swimming and let her mind wander as she often did. She could feel the calories burning off, as she settled into a two-lap per stroke routine. Her regimen was so embedded in her psyche from years of practice that she did not need even to count the laps before she switched strokes. Only, in past workouts, her mind always had drifted to thoughts of Nick, of his hoped-for triumphal return to her and of their glorious reunion. Now that their reunion had flopped, she did everything she could to think of anything but Nick. So she considered the crowd's riotous response to her performance last night.

It blew her away to think that she, little Ryzanna Sheeboom, had held that audience in the palm of her hand, just as that little stripper up at Naughty Nathan's had held that drunken audience in the palm of her hand. And Nick had seen it all, the whole thing. But she didn't want to think of him. The physicality of this swim stimulated her as no other swim, as her nude body knifed cleanly through the liquid darkness like a shark. Although the thickness of her worn M&L swimsuits was miniscule, its absence here made all the difference, so freeing, so invigorating—she had not felt like this since, since she had gone skinny-dipping with Nick down at the beaver ponds and, then again, on their honeymoon at that Sam's Cay on St. Johns.

There! I thought of him again, the very person I don't want to think of.

Ryz'n forced herself to think in a different direction. *Ah yes, my physical nature.* Even as a child she had loved to swim, dance, play ball, anything physical. Ryz'n must have gotten that from her mother, who was a physical person, a hugger, just as

Out at Home

Ryz'n was, and from her Grandma Jessie, her father's mom, as well. Ryz'n's mother introduced Sheena and her to ballet when they were toddlers stationed over in Germany. An aged ballerina had opened a school in Stuttgart and Ryz'n's mother saw to it that she and Sheena attended. Then when her dad transferred to Hickam Air Force Base in Hawaii, a couple of dependent Hawaiian wives gave free classes at the base on hula dancing and, once again, Ryz'n's mom made sure her two daughters received that instruction, as well. Even Ryz'n's mother had joined them that time. Ryz'n laughed as she recalled those lessons. But Ry had learned her lessons well. All her instructors had told Ryz'n that she was a natural dancer with an innate sense of rhythm, impeccable timing and an athletic grace. Ry especially had enjoyed the native Tahitian dances she had learned. Upon their return to the States, down at Warner-Robins, Mrs. Ryan enrolled her daughters in tap-dancing lessons. Her Dad even bought them an eight-foot square, two-inch thick plywood board to dance on down in their basement of their rental house. She and Sheena took lessons for three years. Sheena never had cared for it much.

However, the kicker was the flamenco and belly dancing lessons her paternal gypsy grandmother Jessenia had taught her granddaughters. Her grandparents had immigrated to Atlanta by way of New York back in 1931, when Jessie was pregnant with Ryz'n's father. Once a month, Ryz'n's grandparents would make the trip from Atlanta down to Warner-Robins, where Jessenia would visit for a weekend and impart her vast knowledge of the several variations of this basic Middle Eastern folk dance art form. Born into the Greek Orthodox faith in Christian Lebanon, Gran'ma Jessie had been grown up with these folk and fertility dances in her gypsy family. Her family had migrated, along with many other Lebanese Christians in the Twenties and Thirties ever westward through Turkey (home of the Rakkasse), Greece (home of the Igde or Igdismas and Maktrismos or Maktma or Makter) and ultimately to the south of Spain (home of the Flamenco). In her travels, Jessenia learned to dance professionally all those dances and more, even the Egyptian version (Raks Sharki) of the world famous danse du ventre.

A lively storyteller with a thick gypsy accent, Ry's grandmother had regaled her oldest granddaughters with wild tales of her gypsy childhood: of her emigration across the Balkans to Spain; of running away from home as a teenager with her older brother, crossing the Strait of Gibraltar to the Spanish enclave of Ceuta. Chaperoned by her older brother, Jessenia even had earned her living for a while by roving and dancing in the Northern Moroccan Kasbahs of Tangiers, Casablanca, Essaouira, Agadir, Marrakech, Rabat, Fez and Sale. In Marrakech, she had met and fallen in love with Ryz'n's Irish grandfather, a vacationing officer in the Royal Marines, who had been garrisoned at Gibraltar.

The oddly matched May-December couple married, when her grandfather retired from Royal service shortly thereafter, the couple immigrated into America at Gran'ma Jessie's insistence. The old lady was fond of repeating how she had refused to bear the Irishman children, unless they could be born in that great and magical land of legend where the streets were paved with gold. After a couple of Great Depression winters in

New York City, where Ryz'n's father was born, and where they were unable to find any golden streets, the fledgling family moved south, following FDR's example, to a warmer climate in Georgia.

In fact, her grandmother's fantastic stories served as the reward and the inducement for Sheena to practice dancing. Ryz'n had needed no such inducement, though she loved to listen to her grandmother's adventuresome tales. Not to be outdone, Ryz'n's maternal grandmother passed onto her granddaughters the secrets of the Katak, the Indian folk version of the belly dance. Her husband Pasha, Ry's other grandfather, was from the Western Ukraine. He had taught the girls Russian folk dances, such as the Barynya and the Gopak. Ryz'n had loved to dance. She found freedom in dance she experienced only in the arms of her husband or on stage before an enthusiastic live audience or, in this incredibly awesome skinny-dip she was enjoying. Her enthusiasm for her grandparents' native dances warmed their hearts as much as it did hers, because their children (Ry's parents) had never expressed such an interest. And the romantic, often hair-raising adventures both grandmothers told of their early lives were the stuff of which a little girl's fantasies were made. Certainly, they had been the stuff comprising Ryz'n's little girl fantasies. Later, as she aged, Ryz'n wondered just how much truth had been in those tall tales, as each grandmother tried to out do the other in winning their granddaughters' affections.

Ryz'n switched strokes without thinking about it, as she pushed off from the pool wall. And now her joyful mental meandering about her dancing education turned toward the somber, as Ryz'n recalled her thirteenth birthday, celebrated up in the Heights. Her dancing lessons ended abruptly that day during the celebration. It had become a family tradition for the Ryan sisters to dance in celebration of religious holidays, family birthdays and special non religious holidays like the Fourth of July. Her thirteenth birthday festivities in the backyard of their Crest Hill home were no exception. As the oldest grandchild on both sides of the family tree, Ry was the first to become a teenager. Her birthday was truly a special day. She danced joyously in their grassy backyard on a fine June day to the raves of the attending family members. Ryz'n conscientiously ran through all of the variations of the folk dance arts that her grandparents had taught her. She danced fully festooned before all her family members in a Turkish Gypsy belly dancer costume courtesy of Gran'ma Jessie. Ryz'n had saved the Greek version of the Turkish Rakasse until last. She recalled that her Gran'ma Jessie, who had provided the costume as well as the accompanying recorded music, watched her granddaughter proudly. She complimented Ryz'n lavishly on her interpretation of both the dance and the music. Ry noted that the shimmies, belly rolls and lurching, convulsive pelvic thrusts she had used last evening to howling acclaim in *Mr. Rowdy's Loft* were the same ones she had used at her thirteenth birthday party.

However, Ryz'n could never forget the sight of her dad that day, as he rudely and prematurely short-circuited her dance recital. Before all her adoring relatives, he snatched the Greek folk record from the portable phonograph player, scratching it. Then he broke the platter in two, spit on the pieces and threw them to the ground, where he stomped upon them. When Ryz'n protested that she thought she had been

dancing well, he slapped her hard, against her cheek. Then, in front of everyone, he back handed her across the face for good measure. He answered her sternly, "All too well." He ordered her to go to her room to get out of that "harem, whore costume." Humiliated before her entire, extended family, Ryz'n had spent the rest of her birthday in her room while the others celebrated. Sheena sneaked Ryz'n a piece of her own birthday cake later that evening. But that was the end of belly dancing in the Ryan household for both the girls.

That awful experience lingered with Ry until the present day. She had carried it with her into her marriage with Nick. Her dad's actions then had helped to drive a big wedge between the two of them, dividing her from much of her father's love. After that incident, her dad could not bring himself to hug and kiss her unless Ryz'n forced herself upon him, which she was reluctant to do. Even then, his reactions were stiff and perfunctory. Ryz'n learned not to seek her father's affection. She noticed however that he did not treat Sheena likewise, making Ryz'n feel all the lower in her father's eyes. Yet, even as Sheena grew older, he backed away from her, too. However, her dad always maintained a warmer, more spontaneous relationship with his younger daughter than he did with the elder

That birthday night in Ry's room, her mother had tried to explain away her husband's despicable behavior. She said that, as the older child, Ryz'n was just growing up too fast for her dad to accept. Her mom had explained that, on many occasions, as the first-born, Ryz'n actually had proved to be an unsuspecting guinea pig in the art of child-rearing for both her parents. That's why they were able to do a better job with Sheena, who often benefited because she had come second, allowing her parents to overcome, for Sheena's benefit, the mistakes they had first made with Ryz'n. With Ryz'n sobbing and unable to sleep, her mom had confided to her first-born a deep-seated, secret fear: that her dad may have resented Ry a bit because he had not planned to marry her mom. But Ryz'n's appearance had forced him to reconsider. Of course, she assured Ry that now he was most happy that he had married her and fathered both the girls. In fact, he was extremely proud of them, but at the time of her mom's first pregnancy, her dad had felt Ryz'n's conception forced his hand, when he did not want to have his freedom encumbered in any way.

As Ryz'n ran through the whole thing over in her mind with her "medicine" still speeding through her veins, even as she sped through the still pool waters, she could see herself dancing then and understand now how her "vulgar" motions would have upset her dad. *Then*, she did not see them as vulgar. Certainly, her grandmother did not, for she used to practice them professionally. Still, that incident on her birthday had been a negative turning point in her life. Afterwards, not only did her relationship with her dad cool, but Ry began to eat more. She put on weight, became listless, despondent. The doctor prescribed the diet pill Desoxyn and they helped for a while. Then there was the Cal Newberry incident the following winter and Ryz'n's self esteem had plummeted again.

Ryz'n had stopped taking the diet pills. She had enjoyed their effects too much and the pills did not curb her appetite. She merely had wanted to be left alone. She had

turned inward and stopped many of her athletic activities, especially her competitive swimming and diving, because she was overly self-conscious of her changing body. Yet, she still played softball as the chunky catcher. Lacking exercise, she gained even more weight. She did pour herself into her piano lessons, which she had been taking since the age of five. Moreover, to replace her dancing, Ry had picked up the acoustic guitar her parents had given her as a birthday present. Her dogged pursuit of her musical gifts during her self isolation paid dividends when Nick later noticed her abilities and offered her a spot in the band.

Upon entering high school, Ryz'n had roused herself out of her doldrums with a Herculean effort and made the junior varsity cheerleading squad and the girl's softball team. She also participated in a couple of school clubs. She enjoyed a year with a lack of competition from her comely, already fast-maturing kid sister. A year behind Ry, Sheena had to finish junior high school before she could join Ryz'n in senior high. Ryz'n put herself out there in an effort to become popular in her own right and she had been marginally successful.

Yet, it wasn't until Nicky came along and showed an interest in her that Ryz'n began to take enough interest in herself, to pull herself up physically, truly, by the boot straps. She began to work out religiously and devoted herself to a diet of Nick's choosing, one he had employed for himself once. And she lost nearly thirty pounds her junior year. As a senior, she played on the school softball team that won the unofficial state championship. The championship was unofficial because girl's softball had been officially sanctioned merely as a club and not a varsity sport. Nick had even convinced her to play in the school's inaugural powder puff football contest. She smiled inwardly with pride as she recalled he had complimented her as being "a darned fine tailback—for a *white* girl!"

However, even then, now that she thought about it all again for the zillionth time, Nick had come into her life during their junior year like her knight in shining armor only to recede away from her. It took their entire junior year and then some for them to get back together. During his absence, she had seen him still as her knight on a white steed. Yet, now he was repeating the same ebb and fade pattern as he had in high school, though he did not realize it. Ryz'n stopped in mid-stroke and swatted at the water with both hands, breaking the still dawn with a loud clapping sound in the cavernous, empty pool, which woke her sister and brother-in-law.

Aaaaaah! I don't want to think about him, but I always do. I always do. I can't even breathe without thinking about him. Look, now the sun is well up. Let's finish up with a couple dives and get out.

After nearly eighty minutes of continuous swimming, Ryz'n glided close to the pool floor into the deep end, like a dolphin with sonar. She would cap off her regimen with a dive or two, as was her custom. She had swum so hard for so long, nearly twice as long as her normal routine, that Ryz'n had grown unconscious of her unclothed status and very comfortable inside her skin. For inside herself, she was still flying high. Still too early for the pool to open, the pool and surrounding environs were yet deserted.

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Ry exited the pool and climbed with her eyes skyward upon her goal, the top of the broad three-meter diving platform. She threw back her head and squeezed the water from her thick hair. The sun was just barely up now; yet, a cool, humid, post-dawn breeze invigorated her anew. Goose pimples sprouted on her body like plants under time-lapse photography of a spring garden. As she climbed the platform ladder, Ry decided to perform one of her favorite dives, a two and half straight gainer with one and half twists. Standing inside the board's four-foot high, green, canvas cover that hung from the high dive's protective rails, she could make out the thirteenth hole on the golf course scarcely a hundred yards away through the trees. The green was abandoned now at this early hour. "Hmm. I'll have to check out the high dive, the next time I'm putting the thirteenth green." Ryz'n turned her head back to the pool, raised her arms straight out in front of her, lowered them to her sides and calmly took her practice steps forward. Despite her speed high, Ryz'n was amazed by her acute, innate sense of balance, which she had always possessed and which helped her in her dancing and surfing endeavors, as well as her diving efforts. She took a false starting jump, landing and stopping on the bouncing end of the board, reverberating both herself and the taut high board. In a split second, Ry flashed back to that horrible, drunken night at the beaver ponds with Nicky, when she cost Nicky their unborn baby with that ill-fated dive off the manhole tower.

Awakened by the sound of the banging high dive, Sheena screamed now for Ryz'n to come down, claiming she was in no condition to dive and accused Ry of having no shame. Ry quickly shook off her nightmare, laughed and waved off her sister. She surveyed the pool complex. There was not a soul in sight, nor could she spot anyone on the other side of the ten-foot privacy fence. "There's no one here," she shouted triumphantly. Sitting next to her husband, Sheena cupped her hand over Bryson's eyes. Ryz'n laughed again, refocused and repeated her diving preparations for real this time. She took her approach a little more confidently than normal, landed at the edge of the board and threw her body out and up, forward at the neck, while she crossed her left arm over her chest and her right bent behind her. This form allowed her to flip backward towards the board while simultaneously twisting to her right. The dive was second nature to her, a piece of cake. It was her conference championship, winning dive. She counted the gainers and twists in her head as she cleared the board without difficulty. Ry thought she had hit the dive just right, but just before she broke through the water's surface, Ryz'n feared she was a tad short. Overcompensating, she arched her neck more and kicked her feet over, but she was too late. She landed on the right, back crown of her head, catching the brunt of the impact squarely against her noggin.

The clap that resounded from the pool surface was minimal compared to the bomb that exploded within her head. The pain was sickening; all the more so because her senses remained elevated, from the long-lasting effect of the drug in her system. Ry drifted down to the drain at the pool bottom, where her sinuses tightened up due to the twelve foot depth and the pull of the water through the drain. Seated on the bottom steel drain grate, Ryz'n felt the strong suction against her tight flesh and the tug on her Indian heritage. The errant diver shook her head like a boxer down on one knee for a

count of eight. After a few seconds, propelled by her hands and feet, Ry managed to push off the bottom, out of the deep end, pushing lastly with her toes. She worked her feet like fins, swimming underwater across the pool.

When she broke surface in front of the mid-pool ladder, Sheena and Bryson awaited her, arguing loudly with one another. Sheena was ordering Bryson to turn his head and she would take care of her sister. Ryz'n mounted the ladder, but sagged upon the second step under the spin in her head. Mightily, she managed to pull herself up the ladder and out of the pool. As Sheena spun Bryson around to avert his goggling eyes, she thrust a towel at Ry's front, while she lifted the green, satin robe over Ry's bare shoulders.

Sheena walked her across the concrete deck, as trouble started to bubble deep within Ryz'n. The smack to her head had induced nausea. From the way, things were heading Ryz'n wasn't sure which avenue the enemy below would pursue its attack against her. Sheena kept babbling, as Ryz'n clutched her stomach with her left hand and covered her mouth with her right. She had to make a move and she had to make it right now! With her tail tucked between her legs, Ryz'n ran stiff-legged across the patio into the men's locker room, which was the closest facility that could relieve her distress. Sheena shouted her displeasure, as Ry ran out from under her robe, dropping the towel, too, and any modesty she had left.

The men's locker room was her closest refuge. Ry found safe haven there. However, it was a good ten minutes before the demon inside had finished blasting itself loose from her with both barrels. Fortunately, she had the presence of mind to drag a waste paper basket into the stall with her. As she finished, a cool clammy sensation overcame her body, even as a cold sweat drained her. Relieved, Ryz'n showered and gargled right there in the empty men's locker room. Sheena brought Ry a towel, her robe, her scarf, travel case and her gold crucifix and gold chain necklace. When Ryz'n had finished taking care of her personal needs, she followed Sheena to the Starfire and did not argue with her sister about who should drive or how.

It was not yet seven, when they passed the incoming base pool manager at the main gate. Bryson followed them in the Bonnie, as he had earlier. Sheena jabbed Ryz'n in the arm and told her to wave to the lifeguard. Ryz'n followed Sheena's direction halfheartedly, hiding behind her oversized, dark sunglasses and head scarf. Ryz'n had been resting her bare feet upon her travel case. She picked it up and placed it on its side upon the seat beneath her, so that the handle faced frontward. Then she sat upon the case, which enabled her to hang her scarf-clad, throbbing head over the side of the door, just in case. The road breezes renewed her weakened spirits. She spoke to Sheena of how she planned to woo Nicky back after GRT's three-week tour was over. Sheena merely nodded. The Beatles' "Get Back" blared from the car's incessant, custom stereo speakers. Ryz'n told Sheena that is what she needed to do—"to get back with Nicky."