

~ After the Party ~

Moments earlier, near the Vernier's redwood back porch deck, Ryzanna Ryan had been conversing with the amiable Don, Sheena (Ryz'n's gorgeous, kid sister) and Bernie Lockes, a tall, dark and handsome JayVee football player. As her eyes wandered over the backyard party, suddenly, Ryz'n spotted Little Nick standing all by his lonesome against the back fence, looking like a descendant of Charlie Chaplin's famous Little Tramp. Only Nick's old-fashioned, baggy, oversized suit was beige in color, not black. Just like Nicky to be off alone like that, she thought. Well, at least he has come back to the party. The chunky, little varsity softball catcher thought, well, I'll get another turn at bat with him now. She started to excuse herself from her group to go talk with Nicky, but just then, Cary Geller and their hostess Vicky Vernier cornered Nick against the back fence. Standing among the shadows of the Vernier's back porch deck, Ryz'n hesitated to watch Nick, as she ignored the conversation among her little party. Instead, she chose to lose herself in her reverie over the dark-haired, waif-like boy with the adorable close-set, two-toned eyes, as he lounged against the Vernier's backyard, chain-link fence.

Ryz'n had met Little Nick in homeroom a year ago, the first day of their sophomore year and was smitten by him. Immediately and without reservations, she had fallen for his inimitable, cocky manner and his two-toned eyes: one black as coal and the other an electric blue. Ryz'n could never comprehend why some, guys—footballers mostly, considered Nicky's eyes, with their long eyelashes and even longer eyebrows to be effeminate. Ryz'n found Nicky's eyes to be intriguing, even dreamy. The same could be said for his full red lips. She wondered often how soft those lips would be to kiss. The more she had admired Nicky from a distance, the more he had attracted her and the more he had ignored her.

Although Ryz'n had always found Nicky a little strange, that is to say, eccentric, she had never considered him truly bad like most of the rest of the high school population. She found all the negative rumors about him hard to believe. If anything, those rumors had intrigued her even more. The idle gossip contradicted the attractive, talented boy she knew. Nick was ever unfailingly polite to her wherever she encountered him at school or in her neighborhood on his paper route, but he was also unfailingly distant, too, always distant. Don was okay, but she felt no heat with Donny. However whenever Nicky was around, she was drawn to him irresistibly like a magnet. She often felt herself blush if their eyes happened to meet. Sometimes she felt like she could just eat him up with a spoon. While other times she had wanted to mother him, like the little boy she felt he really was behind all his false bravado. She had never felt those emotions towards any boy before. She believed instinctively that Little Nick needed someone like her, someone to tone him down a bit and she sure wanted to be that someone. Ryz'n whispered to herself hopefully.

"I could be that someone. I think we'd be good together, I really—"

"Hey, Ry! Didn't you hear what I just said?" Exasperated, her kid sister Sheena raised Ryz'n from her reverie.

“Hunh? What?”

“I said it would be cool if Donny came over tomorrow afternoon, right? And Bernie, too, you know, ‘to study’ a while?”

Sheena, with her long dark hair parted down the middle, and wearing light orange culottes, leaned against the wooden deck’s foundation structure. Sheena proudly hooked her arm inside the arm of the tall, offensive lineman Bernie Lockes. Like Don, Bernie was clad in dungarees, a pair of Brogans and a polo shirt comprised of their school colors, navy blue and old gold. Sheena winked slyly up at her latest, handsome, new beau, as Ryz’n replied.

“Oh, yeah I guess it’d be ok. But isn’t Mom working tomorrow?”

“Yeah, exactly!” Sheena smiled devilishly towards her sister. “Dad, too!”

Bernie grinned. Even Don could not suppress a smile. However, Ryz’n appeared disinterested even though she knew Sheena’s “study” reference was no more than a ruse. Ry returned to her private world with a whispered, “Oh, okay, I guess so” to her sister and her friends. Sheena shook her head, clucking her tongue at her listless sister. She returned to hold center court with the boys, as she always did.

Wasn’t that always the way, thought Ryz’n, with her kid sister always taking the front seat, just like she did in the family car? How embarrassing it was to accompany Sheena to the base pool or sit next to her on the school bus or even to this party right down the street from their home? Ry’s classically beautiful sister with her clear skin and dynamite figure attracted boys like a bitch in heat. However, Ryz’n knew, Sheena would turn her nose up at Little Nick who Sheena abhorred because he was such a shrimp and a “frickin’ weirdo to boot!”

Ryz’n had practically raised her kid sister while their mother had worked as a secretary to pay off the mortgages on the family’s two homes. Now, playing second fiddle to her kid sister on the social scene, caused Ryz’n no little heartburn. It did not help matters that Ryz’n was a good twenty pounds over weight and had patches of facial acne to boot. However, with Nicky in tow, she would not have to worry about being the third wheel while she chauffeured her kid sister (who had yet to obtain her driver’s license) on dates. Nor would she need to concern herself about Sheena trying to steal Nicky from her. Perhaps, Sheena might want to disown her for hanging out with Little Nick, because most people believed the little guy to be such a disreputable kook, but Sheena would not try to steal him from her, that was certain. Moreover, Sheena still believed the false tale that Nicky preferred boys to girls. However, Ryz’n felt that could not be true or she would not receive such strong, erogenous vibes whenever he was near and then there were those rumors about Little Nick and other girls.

That prattle which questioned Nick's manhood had caused Ryz'n some little worry at one time. She and Nicky did not share many classes, but when she had tried to make herself available to him, he had showed no interest in her. He had been too busy with other things, like his Boy's Club sports or his rock band. Activities she had observed reluctantly, which solely involved males, not females. Nicky did exhibit perhaps an occasional feminine mannerism, a hand gesture or a stance, but she had never truly believed him to be homosexual. Then, last spring, Little Mau had dispelled that rumor completely. And now that Maureen was gone, well Ryz'n had made up her mind to snag Nicky. That's all there was to it! And tonight was the night to land this strange, little fish.

Looking over her shoulder now, Ryz'n spied Cary and Vicky leaving Little Nick back in the corner against the fence. Here was her chance, but Sheena intervened again somewhat impetuously.

"Hey RY!!"

"What, what is it *now*, Sis?" Ryz'n was itching to confront Little Nick.

"Where is your mind tonight, Ryzanna?"

"Well, I—"

"Look Sis, it's midnight and Bernie's gonna walk me home. You and Don wanna come along?"

Ryz'n continued to look at Little Nick and responded to her sister somewhat indifferently, "Uh no, I, uh, I need to see somebody first before I leave."

Sheena feigned exasperation for the benefit of the boys and dinged her older sister with a mocking tone. "Who? They've all left. It's gonna rain. Wise up Ry! The party's over. They're turning out the lights for cripe sake!" Sheena's quick glance around overlooked Little Nick back in the dark corner of the yard. "Well, okay, do as you like, but you know Mom and Dad wanted us home by midnight, right?"

Shrugging her shoulders and shaking her head in disbelief at her older sister's disinterested attitude, Sheena looked at Don and Bernie apologetically. However, Ryz'n muttered, "Yeah, okay, I'll be home in a few minutes. "See ya." Ryz'n turned away and hustled over towards the back fence with Don trailing hurriedly right behind her.

"Nick!" Ryz'n called out as she approached him. "Where did you go? We looked all over for you!"

Little Nick spotted Ry and Don coming towards him, but he pretended he didn't see them as he sheepishly turned away from them to lean over the fence. The kid acted as if he were hiding something in his coat.

Ryz'n spoke with genuine concern in her naturally smoky, sultry voice, which caught his attention. As Nick swiveled back to Ry, he appeared to swallow something, as Ry saw his Adam's apple bob deeply. Nick spread his free hand outward in a cavalier manner.

"Hey! Ya know, Ryah," he croaked in his usual bullfrog baritone. "Ya look kind o' cute in that outfit," chirped Nick, smiling more goofily than leeringly, sparkling as best as he could through his inner booze-induced fog.

Ryz'n was wearing a plain, brown A-line skirt, a matching brown sleeveless, collarless, cotton blouse, buttoned completely up the front and a pair of tan Keds.

"You feeling alright, Nicky?" Concern registered plainly in both her tone and manner.

"Feelin' great, Ry, jes' great. I'm jes' flyin'!" He waved his free hand as if it were the flapping wing of a condor. "And you got a super voice there, Ry. You know, kind o' sultry, sexy like. Do you sing?"

"Well, I can sing a little, but ..."

He stared at her with a goofy expression. Since she had spoken to him after Tuesday's homeroom, Nicky seemed to take it for granted that she permitted him to be one of a select few, who addressed her so familiarly. Ryz'n had no idea why Nick thought suddenly he could address her in such a manner, but his informality appealed to her. Except, right now, it did not. Something was not quite right with this picture, thought Ryz'n. On a hunch, she stepped closer to him to find out what it was. She sniffed at him.

"Nicky! You smell like *beer!*" She said disdainfully, turning up her nose. Mildly repulsed, she withdrew a step from him and scolded: "Have you been drinking?"

Nick shook his head slowly in a negative fashion and with wide, innocent eyes replied, "YES." Don laughed aloud. Nick grinned, sensing he might have an instant ally in his rival. He withdrew his hidden beer from behind his back and offered Don a swig. Ryz'n rebuked Little Nick as though she were his mother.

"Where did you get that?" He pulled the can back from Don and offered it to Ryz'n.

"Ah 'pol'gize Rah, laydeez fusst."

He proffered her the beer, but she pushed it aside, scolding him. He was drunk. The little twerp was drunk and had the audacity to offer her a beer, right here in the Vernier's back yard. His drunken, slurred speech irritated her.

"How could you insult the Verniers like this, Nicky? And, after the way Vicky stuck up for you tonight?" Ryz'n sensed she had landed a sharp verbal jab that had snapped his head back.

“It’s only one beer,” he countered, plaintively.

“That’s not the point, Nicholas. It’s the principal of the thing. The Verniers don’t even drink alcohol. They don’t approve of it. And even if they did, they could be arrested for permitting liquor to high school kids on their premises.” She paused for a second to gather her thoughts before she continued with her reprimand, but Nick merely bowed his head in silence.

“And offering Don that beer! Why, he could get kicked off the team for accepting that!”

Justifiably cowed, Little Nick hung his head. In the face of Ryz’n’s righteous indignation, also embarrassed, Don stared at the ground, as well.

“Well, I, I guess youah raiight, Ryah. I ...” Nick shuffled his feet, staring at the ground uncomfortably.

“You mean, you KNOW I’m right.” She was hot!

She was angry, angry with herself for scolding him and displaying such emotion for Nick in front of Don. Moreover, she was angry for potentially alienating Nicky, the boy she longed for. And she was also angry with Nick himself for making her angry and for potentially further damaging *his* reputation.

He lowered the can, too cowed to take another swallow. Without looking up, he slurred that she would make a great mother one day. His uncanny remark defused her. She thought about that.

*Why **do** I feel like mothering Little Nick all the time, anyway?*

The ever affable Frank Farlane sauntered over to them to tell Don that Frank was leaving and Don had better come along now if he wanted a ride home. The other guests had gone. Frank also congratulated Little Nick on his earlier musical performance down in the Vernier’s basement. Don pecked Ryz’n on the cheek and confirmed their study date for early tomorrow afternoon. He hinted to Ryz’n that he did not feel quite right about leaving her alone with Little Nick like this.

“Frank can drop you too, Ryz’n, if you want?”

“What? Uh, No, no thanks, Donny. I only live a few doors away, you know that,” said Ryz’n tenderly. Ryz’n was marveling that the sandy-haired Don had kissed her on her pimpled cheek!

Don retorted, “Yeah, I know it’s just that ...” He turned to shield his action from Nick and jerked a perturbed thumb towards the inebriated goofball.

Ryz’n dismissed him gently. “Oh, it’ll be OK, Donny. I’ll see you tomorrow. Promise.”

She gave him her A-number-one, three-dimple smile. Ryz'n was still marveling that Don had kissed her on her pimpled cheek and in front of Nick, too! It was not that she felt any excitement in his kiss, but the gesture itself showed that he truly cared for her. Apparently, her glowing smile was enough to pacify Don. He said good night and left the midget couple alone. Ryz'n returned Don's wave when he reached the fence gate across the yard. She still marveled at his peck on her cheek.

"Don's a nice guy, Ry, a real nice guy. Maybe you *should* go with him."

Irritated, Ryz'n swiveled her head as well as her attention back around to Nick.

"Is that what you want me to do, Nicky?" She was fishing for something to hold onto. Nick was the one she wanted, always had been since she first met him a year ago. However, Don had just kissed her. Nick never had, but the little guy parried Ryz'n with a question of his own.

"Does it matter to you, what I want?"

That was not what she had wanted to hear. She felt she had extended far too much of herself to him during the scolding, and in front of Don, too. Her anger, she thought, had revealed too much of her feeling for the boy. Although she wanted Nick badly, she preferred that he would want her, at least a little, as well. The reasons she had used against Nick earlier were valid, but they were not the primary reasons she was angry. The real reason was that she did not want his reputation tarnished, any worse than it already was. She liked him far too much to see that happen.

He was bright, gifted and athletic, even if he was a shrimp. She could see him becoming a National Honor Society (NHS) member, if he did not mess up with an incident like this, involving alcohol. For Ryz'n, entering the NHS would be the apex of scholastic achievement at Pocomoke High, one she hoped to earn for herself one day, one she hoped could get both of them into a four-year college, Nicky too. However, she also knew she had neither the brains nor talent possessed by this kid standing before her. He was a musical prodigy who had scored well over 1300 on the PSAT, a score that she knew registered in the top five per cent of their class. She had not come close to that achievement.

"What do *you* think?" She responded, with a touch of anger lingering in her smoky voice.

"I told you what I think," replied Nick in reference to Don.

She dropped her hands and her guard. "Nicky, I just don't understand you."

"Well, that makes two of us, cuz, cuz I don't understand me, either, Ry." He had spoken seriously but then he winked his left, his black, eye at her. "Come on now, I'll walk ya

home or maybe you can walk me?" Nick asked with a twinkle in his eyes. He wore devilment about him like he would a robe. To her, Nick appeared to be like one of the "wee ones, the mischievous little people," about whom her Irish grandfather had told so many yarns to her and Sheena when they themselves were merely wee ones.

Little Nick raised his eyebrows, grinning and lifted his left arm for her assistance.

"Hey?" He nodded her way and waved his head towards his upraised arm. She balked at aiding him. "Come on, Ry. I ain't too turrblee heavee, honess." Smiling, he winked at her again, motioning his head as before. Just as her grin had reassured Don a moment ago, now this leprechaun's grin disarmed her.

Slowly, silently, with a growing sense of anticipation, Ryz'n peered into his laughing close-set, two-toned eyes, the eyes that mesmerized her, as she darted back and forth between the pitch black and electric blue irises. Instead of blushing as before, she felt herself turn out to him and then, just as she took his hand, without warning—SNAP! CRACKLE! POP! *Whoa! What is that?*

A brief current of white hot, static electricity, surged through their fingertips, surprising them both and making them recoil their hands abruptly one from the other. Astonished, the pair each looked at their hands, then at each other and laughed nervously.

"Mus' be curruhnts in the airah, from that stoahm, tha's comin'. Come on, Rah! It'll be alright. Really, really, it will." Then he giggled, "Leas' Ah hope so. Don' think we'll 'lectrocoot each othah. Come on, Ry, please? I, uh, really need youah help, ya know?"

Again, he smiled winningly at her and, unknowingly, she could not help but mirror his lazy smile with her three-dimpled version. It was strange how he seemed so easily to turn on and off a drunken, slurred southern accent, depending on how serious he was. One beer could not cause such linguistic gymnastics. Then, maybe that one beer was just the tip of an alcohol iceberg. Of course, coming from Georgia, she could do the same thing, even better, if she chose, to assume her native Georgian accent, but she did not. She did not want to make light of this moment.

Without further fireworks, Ryz'n braced him up with her right shoulder and wrapped her right arm around his back as they walked across and out of the Vernier's back yard. She noticed he hid his beer beneath his baggy, old-fashioned coat. She could feel his lean body under that old, baggy suit. She slid her hand up from his waist, along his ribs and then back down, resting it on the top of his firm, small, upturned rump, that same rump she had daydreamed about. Unlike his soft, baggy suit, Nick was hard, firm and tightly curved. In fact, contrary to appearances beneath his baggy wardrobe, his body was hard everywhere, slab-muscled without an ounce of fat. He may have been little but he was all solid muscle. Ryz'n was strolling on clouds.

She understood that both of them realized Nick could have gone it alone. However, instinctively she knew both of them also realized they should take advantage of this

situation, which did not come along every day. The other guests had already melted away into the warm, muggy September night. Distant thunder and a dark, cloud-covered sky warned them rain was not far off. Ryz'n and Nick bid their good-byes to the Verniers and thanked their hostesses Vicky and Val, who now were standing on the back porch deck with Cary. The diminutive couple strolled on, halting around the side of the house, unseen, where Nick's three-speed rested. Nick withdrew the beer can he carried, concealed beneath his coat. He offered Ryz'n first, but she declined.

"Aw, come on, Ry. It's only a couple o' sips o' beer. It ain't gonna kill ya."

"Gee, I don't know Nicky. What were we just talking about?"

"You were talkin', I was jes' listen'n." Nick watched her nonplussed reaction. "Mann, I never figured you for such a prude, Ry."

They remained entwined, neither of them wanting to let go of the other. She looked at him for a second, checked around for witnesses and finding none, acquiesced. He held the can for her and she sipped furtively, three or four times. It had taken her a year to get to be with Nick like this. She was not about to blow it now by being a "prude" over a little warm beer. Besides, she was thirsty and she liked beer, though not as much as she liked white wine, and the more she drank, the less there was for him. He sure did not need anymore. As a practicing Roman Catholic, she and her family had no inhibitions against drinking, just against getting drunk. In truth, Ryz'n had little, if any, compunction over sipping the beer, only over where she was drinking it. Her parents had permitted her and Sheena to have a glass of wine or beer on special occasions at home. Nick drank a little more and left a swallow for her. She finished off the can. Then, he raised the can high over his head, tilted his head back and shook out the last drops. Some fell into his mouth and some onto her chest.

"You missed," she observed wryly.

"Well, now, then there, that all depends on what I was aimin' at, now don't it?" he asked slyly. "You're targets are bigger than mine." He grinned like a lecher.

Ryz'n rolled her eyes and shook her head, feigning disgust. Secretly, she was proud, even delighted to know he had appreciated a couple of her finer points, which, only recently, had begun to blossom fully and much too belatedly were overtaking her kid sister in that department. His comment had inspired her. For reasons she did not fully comprehend and without drawing attention to herself, she unhooked the top two buttons on her collarless blouse, mimicking the way the other girls wore their blouses. Ryz'n would not have done that for anyone else except Nick. She surprised herself now that she had done as much even for him. Something about him attracted her, always had. No one else came close to approaching the magnetism that he held for her. She did not know why. She wondered now, if there was anything she would not do for him, but he did not know that and never would, if she could help it.

Nick returned the empty can to his pocket, picked up his bike from the brick wall and turned it around. He walked the bike with one hand on the handle bar, the other still around her shoulders. And she walked him, supporting him as before, though her she did not need to do so.

The wind had kicked up out of the southwest, at maybe a steady fifteen to twenty miles an hour. Storm clouds had gathered overhead, concealing God's heavenly handiwork. The first scattered big, cold drops began to fall. The odd couple walked slowly on down the concrete sidewalk in silence, ruffled only by the breeze. An intermittent, cool raindrop pelted them here and there, as they strolled casually down the walk. They soaked up the electrical magnetism between them, which the raindrops could not quench. The Ryans' house was a few doors away, jut the other side of Allena Larrabee's. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Still, the two of them walked slowly without speaking. Goose bumps raised on their skin. Were the bumps due to the electricity of the approaching storm or to the close, novel, unusually magnetic physical sensation between the two teens, walking arm-in-arm? She did not know. Neither did she care. The unique sensation was sufficient unto itself.

Looking down, for the first time, Nick remarked casually to her upon the small gold crucifix, hanging around her neck, dangling at the end of a fine gold chain. Nick observed aloud that the crucifix bumped rhythmically against her chest as they walked. By his stare, she could tell he also noticed that the just-opened top of her blouse had freed the pendant from its hiding place. Yet, he said nothing about that. This moment was too precious to fill with words. She sensed a peaceful quiet fall over them, even as the storm approached. Even though she strolled arm-in-arm with Peck's Bad Boy of Pocomoke High, Ry had never felt such a simultaneous combination of peace and excitement before. Walking home with Nick like this, just felt right. It made her feel legit, like she was worthy, no longer Sheena's chunky sister, who had failed to make the varsity cheerleader squad or no longer the teen who had been besieged by so many medical problems in the last couple years. All of that was behind her now. She wondered if Nicky felt that same electrical excitement that she felt now, as when they just had shared the same shockingly electric hand-shake. Did he still feel like he was the class weirdo, the, the "Peck's bad boy" of Pocomoke High or no longer even 'Little' Nick, but instead, just Nick. Did he feel like he belonged now, too, because of her, the way she felt accepted just being with him? From the pacific look upon his face, she took it he felt the same as she. They were right for each other. She always knew they would be.

Nearly as tall as Little Nick, Ry walked a bit away from him so she could lean her head down onto Little Nick's shoulder, yet also maintain her arm about his slender waist. How could she have such a sense of anticipation, of excitement, walking like this with Nicky, yet feel so perfectly calm, as well? Nicky was the one she wanted, not Don. She hoped she could make both Nick and Don understand that, without hurting Don's feelings or compromising her pride or her principals for Nick. She was aware of the rumors about Nick and Little Mau, before Mau had moved to Texas with her family. And then, there had been the ribald rumors about Nick and the Widow Ready ...

When the pair of teens reached the Ryan home, Nick propped his bike up next to the Ryans' well lit, black, wrought-iron lamp post, which stood just inside the yard, halfway up the driveway, next to the slate step sidewalk. The rain fell faster and more evenly now. However, the teen couple, engrossed in this moment of innocent wonder, took no notice of the elements, walking even slower, if that were possible, up the sidewalk, to the front stoop and up the half dozen cement steps to the door of her sandy-hued brick rambler. Hanging back, near the top of the stoop, Nick let go of Ryz'n when they reached the porch landing, halfway up the stoop steps. A single light to the right of the door illuminated the front porch sufficiently.

"Come on inside Nicky, at least 'til the storm passes", she implored, as she stood just inside the protection offered by the overhanging front porch roof. However, Nick demurred. Ryz'n felt her face fall. She was disappointed. She watched as Nick struggled to think and speak clearly, in spite of the booze and the elements. He spoke clearly.

"What would your parents think of me, like this, Ry?"

Nick turned his fingertips inwards, placing them on his chest and then motioned outwards with his arms open wide. He was still high; however, she sensed the cold rain was bringing him down fast. Wet with rain herself, Ryz'n knew he had a point, but she was not about to retract her invitation, either. He pointed over the roofs to the left in the direction of Little Mau's former house and intoned,

"It wouldn't be good, now, you know? You know what I mean. You know what they all say." She understood, but understanding did not make his refusal any more palatable.

"Well, I'm stepping in, Nicky." Hoping he would follow her, she stepped inside on the doorstep and held the screen door open for him. The main door was open behind her. She extended him a hand, palm up, beckoning to him. "Come on Nicky; come in out of the rain, please. You're getting drenched." She cooed in her uniquely smoky voice that held a naturally sultry catch. It was raining very hard now and he was receiving a good soaking. The wind had increased again by half. Lightening flashed and a few seconds later thunder bolted, profiling Nicky on the doorframe as she flinched. Yet Nick spoke to her calmly as if he were standing in the middle of a sunny afternoon.

"Ry?" Ryz'n flinched again and turned about to confront her kid sister, who was standing several feet behind her at the entrance to their bedroom hallway.

Sheena stood just outside the living room, on the other side of the combination, console television Hi-Fi set. Her long, dark brown hair draped over her face as she stuck her head out into the living room, while she hid her body in the bedroom hallway. Ryz'n had believed incorrectly that she and Nicky were alone, that her family had retired for the evening.

"*What is it, Sheena?*" Ryz'n asked a bit testily.

“Mom and Dad have gone to bed. They said you should do the same after you lock up. And turn out the lights. I’ll be out of the bathroom in a few minutes.”

“All right, you delivered the message.” Ryz’n rolled her eyes.

“Who’s out there?” Sheena nodded towards the front door.

Ry’s busybody kid sister narrowed her eyelids and craned her neck to look around her sister, as she motioned again with her head towards the front yard, but Ryz’n blocked her sister’s view out the door. Ryz’n was about to answer, but she heard her mother call from the master bedroom and called in a patronizing manner. “Girls? Let’s get to bed now.” Sheena turned her head down the hallway and replied, “OK, Mom. I’m getting ready now.” Then she pivoted back to Ryz’n, “And you had better get ready, too, *Big Sister*.” Then Sheena disappeared to the left, out of Ryz’n’s sight, down the hallway. Unconcerned, Ryz’n turned back around to Little Nick, hoping he was still there.

Soaked but undaunted, Nick waited patiently in the storm. He held his hands out from his hips and shook his head and shoulders in a most exaggerated fashion, as if he were a dog shaking himself dry after an unwanted bath. The rainwater flew off his long shaggy, black mane in all directions. His pompadour had washed away completely. Given his current condition and remembering the rumors about Nick and Mau, Ryz’n reluctantly concurred with Nick’s decision not to come in. She was not at all sure that she could control herself with him now on her folks’ couch. Then the rumors would be floating around about her. Besides, her mother had spoken and that was that. Nick was right. Actually, he was looking out for her best interests and that thought warmed her heart.

As she swiveled her head back to him, Nick ascended the front concrete stoop and removed his suit coat. As he stepped up onto the porch landing with his right foot, just out of the rain, Nick offered her the coat with his right hand, but that was as far as Nick would venture. He said he did not want the suit coat ruined in his ride home. “Keep it for me Ry. Please? ‘Til tomorrah?” Propping the screen door open with her right hand, Ryz’n stepped down onto the porch with her left foot, reached out and took the wet coat from him in her left hand, then folded it across her right arm.

“You know Ry? You look like some kind of an angel standing there like that framed against the inside lights. Like a silhouette, bigger than life.”

Before she could respond at his lovely compliment, Nick stepped back off the landing, back onto the second step, back out into the rain. She stood back in the safety of the doorway, switched the coat to her left arm, still holding the door open for him with her right. It was obvious to him, that she hoped he would change his mind and enter, but he considered such a possible course of action to be imprudent. A response to his sweet compliment caught in her throat. Then, unexpectedly, he changed direction completely and recalled their conversation from the first day of school.

“Say Ry? The other day you said you’d teach me the twisty flips. How ‘bout tomorrah? Can you teach me tomorrah?”

Ryz’n felt her whole countenance brightened and, in response, she watched with delight as Nick’s face illuminated as well.

“Well, sure, I’d love to, Nicky. Why don’t you pick me up around ten?” He glanced down in despair.

“Gee Ry, I’d like to, really I would, but, ya know, I, I, well ya know, I still ain’t got my license yet.”

“Oh! Well that’s no problem, because I’ve got mine. How ‘bout I pick you up, then? Say around ten, OK? We’ll go over to the Base Pool. And bring your suit and a towel.” She beamed encouragingly.

“All Riiight! That, why that, sounds great, just great! I’m really lookin’ forward to it, Ry, really!” His ecstatic countenance told her all she wanted to know.

“Well, all right then! Look, Nicky, you’re getting’ soaked, Baby!”

Ryz’n covered her open mouth with her left hand. What had she said? Ignoring her slip of the tongue, her term of endearment, Nick looked down at his drenched, black, satin shirt, now plastered against his skin. Screwing his eyes up into the rain, he stretched both hands towards the heavens and proclaimed.

“It’s cool. Feels goo-oo-ood,” and rocked ever so slightly on the top step.

Thank goodness, he had not noticed her term of embarrassing endearment. Ryz’n observed the air felt oppressive with so much moisture. She folded her arms, with his wet coat between them, consciously covering her pudgy middle, but, at the same time crossing her arms and placing under her expanding breasts, subconsciously pushing them up a little to catch some air. With his baggy, old, suit coat folded between her arms, Ryz’n leaned sideways against the door jam. She held open the screen door with her right foot both as an invitation and so she could view him without obstruction.

“YOU ARE A NUT!” she exclaimed with a begrudging smile and shake of the head.

Ignoring her, Nick, unexpectedly, became reflective. “Ry?” Suddenly, his voice sounded like that of a little boy, rather than his natural, bullfrog croak.

“What?” she asked with concern.

“Do you think God loves you?”

Where did that one come from? Ryz'n wondered. She answered haltingly, not sure what he was driving at. What kind of a question is that to ask while you're standing in a driving rainstorm after midnight?

"Well, sure . . . I mean, of course, I do. But, why, why do you ask?"

"Do you think He loves me, too? I ain't no Roman Catholic like you, ya know?"

Perplexed, she uncrossed her arms and pushed the screen door open further with her right hand, still holding his coat over her left forearm. He had a point. She hesitated. She looked at him, totally drenched, just standing in the heavy, driving rain, motionless, helpless. His long hair, which earlier he had piled up on top of his head in typical greaser fashion, now hung limply around his face, dripping wet down past his chin and completely covering his brown eye. The right, blue eye alone remained free to question her. Did God love him? He must, because she sure did.

"Yes, Nicky, I do." Her naturally husky voice softened. "I don't see how He could help it."

Little Nick did not smile much, but now he let out a grin so huge, she thought she could count everyone of his gleaming white teeth, not to mention his gold-capped upper front tooth. Now it was her turn to bask in the happiness she had just given to him. In so doing, she mirrored his glowing beam. In his joy, forgetting that he was on the steps, Little Nick bent his head backwards and stuck out his tongue to catch some raindrops, but he slipped. Losing his footing, he fell off the edge of the second step. Sliding back on his heels and with his arms flailing in large backwards windmills, Nick was unable to regain his balance. The Little Tramp slid, haltingly, down one step at a time, Chaplinesque, as if he were in slow motion. Out of control, Nick twisted with the left side of his body to his right. He fell backwards with his right arm swinging wildly back against the black, wrought-iron rail that guarded either side of the cement porch steps and slid down to the bottom of the cement stairs, clutching the end of the railing for support. Miraculously, he landed on his feet, half squatting, upon the slate sidewalk. He was OK. Ryz'n swallowed her heart back to its home and exhaled deeply.

Completely unfazed, Nick remarked rather skeptically, "Gee, hope I can do bettah than that at the pool tomorrah."

Relieved, but exasperated, Ryz'n unconsciously reassumed the role of mother that came so easily to her where Little Nick was concerned. "Please be careful, Nicky. You should come in out of the rain, like any sane person would. You could get seriously hurt or killed, even, riding on the streets in this weather."

The rain pounded Nick relentlessly, but he said he was used to it now. Besides, he said that he had ridden through storms like this before, delivering newspapers on his morning paper route. He ignored her warnings, as well as nature's, when again lightening flashed and thunder pealed, not too far away. For a brief instant, the lightening framed Nick

against a blinding bright, white sky. Suddenly, she observed the frail vulnerability of human nature against the elements in the person of one Nick Sheeboom and the sight became horrifyingly real to Ryz'n. Wet blackness consumed him once more as the light vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Undisturbed, Little Nick pulled out from his pants pocket the rubber bands, which he used to tie his baggy pant legs down. When she asked what he was doing. He explained that he had gotten his pant legs caught in the chain before and it was a real pain to put the chain back on its track. He said it didn't do his suit pants any good either. They "got all smeared with grease," he related. "Oh," said Ryz'n with an understanding nod. The boy looked like he was about to do some serious riding.

"Aw, I be awright, Ry." He spoke casually with his attention focused on his pant legs. "Don't worry about a thing!"

"Oh? How can you be so sure?" asked Ryz'n suspiciously.

"Well! Because," he raised his drowned rat of a head up to address her directly, "because God loves me!" He beamed broadly at her again with the rain pouring over his head, one blue eye peeping between his long, wet locks. "Ya jes' said so yase'f."

She could not believe this kid! He was truly something else! However, he was leaving and she had not received all the assurance from him that she desired. Before he reached his parked bicycle, she stepped out onto the porch but kept his coat under the protective eave and called to him.

"Nicky?" He pivoted around toward to face her.

"Yeah?"

Ryz'n lowered her head as well as her smoky voice, which enhanced more than normally, her natural, sultry intonation.

"That was really, you know, kind of special . . . walking home with you tonight, I mean." Vulnerably wide-eyed and innocent, she had opened herself up before him, waiting expectantly for a reciprocal response.

Nick brightened matter-of-factly and replied, chuckling nervously. "Yeah, well, gee Ry, it was for me, too." But she wanted more. She continued to press him.

"Was it really, Nicky?"

"Yeah, well sure it was. I mean, you betcha it was." He winked his blue eye at her to confirm his sincerity. Nick shook his head and stepped back over the blue slate walk towards his bike.

Ryz'n watched him go, not completely satisfied. She hugged herself and unconsciously squeezed her thighs together, as she rocked gently back and forth caressing his coat up

under her double chin. He reached his bike under the lamp post, turned it around towards home and climbed up on the saddle. Then he stopped.

“Ya know somethin’, Ry?”

He turned around upon his seat, with his strong, square chin hanging back over his left shoulder; his feet on the pedals and his left hand balancing and rocking him gently back and forth off the lamp post, evidently giving no thought to the intermittent lightening.

“No, what?” She waited on the porch still rocking herself, still openly vulnerable.

“Ah think, I mean I, uh, think, you and . . . me, well, that is . . .”

“Yeah? What about you and me, Nicky?” This was it, what she wanted to hear. It was coming.

“Well, you know. I dunno, I mean, well, we might . . .” Nick squirmed like a fish out of water, despite his present soaking. He turned his head as if to study the lamp post, blinking the rainwater out of his eyes. Sensing what he wanted to confess, Ryz’n could not wait for him to finish even though he was the one under water, so she jumped in to save him.

“You mean, you think we might be good together, is that what you mean, Nicky?” He turned to face her again and lit up like the lamp above his head and so did she, as though they were in a chain reaction, like the extra current they had passed them earlier.

“Ya really think so, Ry?”

Now it was Ryz’n’s turn to become reflective. He had turned the tables on her, answering a question with a question again, just as he had done in Vicky’s back yard after Don left. She paused before she answered seriously, in measured tones.

“Yeah, Nicky, yeah I do. Don’t you think so, too?” She waited, anticipating his concurrence.

“Well, I, I think . . .” Her impatience was evident.

“Yes, what do you think, Nicky?” Another bolt of lightening flashed and his time it was followed closely by thunder. “Baby, you better let go of that iron post in this lightening.” This time she did not give her term of speech a second thought, and from his casual lack of reaction, neither did he. However, he ignored her warning.

“Well, I think, I think—” He laughed. “Ya know Ry, I think that I, Well, I BELIEVE YA!” He grinned widely. Ryz’n slumped down with a relieved sigh. She knew she had been had, but she was thrilled, nonetheless, because she believed him, too. Nick shoved off the post, waved and pedaled off.

“Tomorra, Ry! The Twisty Flips!”

He spiraled his right forefinger upwards into the raining downpour and pedaled down her driveway and out into the street with one hand on the handlebars.

Not completely satisfied with that joking response but trying to match his wit as well as his earlier southern twang, she raised her voice and slipped back into her native, central Georgia accent.

“Well, y’all know what Miss Scaahlet says ‘bout tomorra now, doncha?”

“What?” he called over his shoulder.

“Tomorra is anothe day,” she yelled.

With the back of his head to her, he nodded and waved farewell.

* * *

Ryz’n watched from the front stoop, as apparently, without a care in the world, Nick pedaled off down the black and stormy streets he knew so well from all his early morning paper deliveries. Shoot! He even delivered a daily morning paper to her own house, but he never conversed much with her, though he did speak repeatedly with her mother, whom Ryz’n so much resembled in physical appearance as well as in behavior. Ry kept her eye upon Nick until he vanished up around the corner to the right and out of sight. Still holding his coat, she sniffed it. It smelled of rain, beer, pine needles and Old Spice with just a hint of sweat. She liked the scent, Nicky’s scent. The scent roused something deep within her and recalled for her their sweet, slow walk home together.

Ryz’n carried his wet coat inside, removed the empty been can from the pocket and tossed the can into the kitchen wastebasket. Then she returned to the front door, turned off the outside lights, closed the door and locked up. Her kid sister came out of the bathroom and shouted that it was free. The sisters retired to their respective, adjacent rooms and said their prayers. The heads of the two sisters’ beds abutted each other on opposing sides of the thin dry wall, which separated their rooms. Ryz’n lay in the dark of her private, green and yellow world, which she had fashioned in her room, fully out of lace, ribbons and bows, but with her catcher’s gear and bat still visible in the corner. She recalled Don’s surprising goodnight kiss, forcing her to realize she would have to dismiss him now in favor of Nicky. However, she did not want to think about that now. She would think about that tomorrow. Right now, she would rather think about Nicky, about how right it had felt holding him tonight. She thought about the shock of their first touch. Then Sheena, in bed on the opposite side of the paper-thin drywall, separating their rooms, whispered softly through the room-connecting, baseboard transom:

“Ry? Who were you talking with out in the rain, for Pete’s sakes?”

Ryz'n looked lovingly over at Nick's coat, which she had folded neatly over the back of the easy chair in her room.

"Oh, just a NUT, I guess," but she uttered the derogatory term, smiling gently, dreamily, with a warmth in her heart as well as her voice.

"You guess, hunh? Well, what does that make you?"

Indeed, what did that make her?

"Good night, Sheena."

Ryz'n lay on her back, in her pajamas, staring up at the yellow canopy above her bed, fingering the gold crucifix on her chest with her right hand, and the ends of her dense, shoulder length hair in her left, as was her custom. The rain, which had pounded the roof just a short while ago, now was little more than a drizzle. The heavens were silent once more. The storm had passed quickly. Nick lived about a mile away. Ryz'n prayed he had made it home safely.

She knew not whether some or any of those rumors about Nicky were true. Yet, where there was that much smoke, she guessed there probably was a flame or two. Actually, for her, the rumors added a little to his allure. Loose talk did not matter to her. Besides, she could tone him down a bit. The main thing was that she had him now, right? And she was not about to let him go. Ryz'n wondered if Nick felt the same. From the beaming look on his face when he had left, she felt certain he did. And it warmed her heart to think so. She would find out "tomorra" for sure. After all, "tomorra" was another day, now wasn't it?

She drifted off to sleep pondering her kid sister's question as well as what "tomorra" might hold. However, strangely but serenely happy now, Ry no longer felt alone. Neither did she feel second rate. Now, for the first time, Ryz'n had someone, someone of substance, someone with great promise and she was not about to let him go, despite his lack of stature or his oversized, kooky reputation.

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