

## ~ Return to the Party ~

Hunched over the racer handlebars of his burgundy and silver, three-speed Schwinn, Nick hurtled pell-mell down the steep hill that led into the valley. Onrushing headwinds forced the teen to squint and flattened his jet black pompadour down against his scalp. He was flat out flying! The tails of his opened, baggy, beige suit coat flapped wildly against his behind as he tore down this slice of suburban asphalt. Perspiration, which had built upon his adolescent body during this hot and muggy September night, cooled and dried now beneath his baggy clothes, leaving him deliciously refreshed. The bike could take no more pedaling, so Nick held his feet in coaster position. However, as he approached the base of the steep hill, Nick did not slow down or check for any traffic that might be cruising the Boulevard below him. Instead, to maintain top speed, Nick began pedaling once more just as the ground leveled out, running the STOP sign at the intersection. The three-speed wobbled under his renewed exertions.

Blowing off the blaring horn from a slam-braking, crossing motorist, Nick charged headlong across the nearer of the boulevard's dual lanes and past the grassy median that separated them. As he crossed the second, southbound, lane, car brakes squealed to his right while an angry driver from another car swore loudly. Again Little Nick ignored them. Instead, he charged fearlessly into the upward facing, precipitously, sloping street ahead of him. Having crossed the narrow valley, Nick now had to beat this hill, just once in his brief life. Just one time, he had to make it to the top without suffering the indignity of having to get off and walk his bike to the crest.

Pedaling for all he was worth, Nick worked hard now as he ascended the steep hill, but it took all his concentration because the boilermaker he had just downed outside the Crest Hill Liquors Store made it difficult for him to focus. As the hill writhed beneath him, resisting his efforts, Nick shifted down into second gear with the ease of a well-traveled, bike-riding, paper boy. Halfway to the top, the precipitous hill tugged at his tires, slowing them sharply so he down-shifted once more into first. Nick was huffing now. The sweat that had just dried upon his skin began to bubble to the surface again like hot springs. Sweat dripped down his brow into his eyes leaving a salty sting.

*Onethird more, one-third!*

Again, the hill bit down on his Schwinn like an inexorable bulldog clamping down on Nick's tail. The hill, which was about the longest, steepest of the many hills in The Heights, one of many from which Crest Hill Heights proudly took its name, began to take its toll on the inebriated boy. Bowing to the hill's excessively steep incline, Nick began to weave the Schwinn back and forth across the street, even as he vowed aloud to beat it.

*A quarter, a quarter more. I can do it.*

However, the booze began to undo him. The covert bourbon and beer cocktail he had consumed minutes ago in the alley next to the liquor store had coursed through his body to his brain as fast as he had just descended the other side of Dunstan Street. His desire to beat the hill faded. Starting to laugh, Nick began to wobble on his bike as he weaved slowly back and forth up the big hill. As he inched towards the summit, his feet barely moved no. Almost standing still, Nick knew it was all in vain.

Nick ran out of steam before he gained the summit and, with the world spinning about him, his bike halted and began to roll backwards under him. Topsy, Little Nick clenched both front and rear hand brakes and stood upright in coaster position, locking his bike, stock-still in the middle of the road, balancing there with his goal in sight. For a split second, Nick maintained his balance, frozen straight up and down in coaster position, but then a giggle, which he could not stop, bubbled up through his

esophagus. When the gurgling reached his mouth, he could not hold it back and a deep laugh bubbled out of him in spite of himself. The bike weebled and wobbled. Nick lost his balance and crashed down to the pavement but he made sure he fell upwards into the hill. Laughing uncontrollably now, Little Nick rolled easily onto his back in the middle of the street.

“Beta than a rolla-coasta,” he proclaimed gleefully.

The goofy-looking teen with the slicked back, Elvis duck tails and two-toned eyes chuckled hysterically. A humid haze rose off the sultry, suburban Maryland street and rolled over him, even as he rolled over the macadam in his father’s baggy, old-fashioned, oversized, 1950s, lightweight, beige suit. His three-speed Schwinn lay below him at his wing-tipped, shod feet. Nick wasn’t used to the booze, well the bourbon, at least. Having ceased his strenuous exertions on this muggy evening, sweat now burst from his pores like a busted dike. The covert shooter, which had been his alcoholic libation of choice this evening, was having its way with his nearly sixteen year old brain. A short while ago, Nick had been pitching pennies with himself against the liquor store wall, in the alley over in the Crest Hill Heights shopping center, when an older buddy, had given Nick the booze. Nick’s giggling died down, as he considered penny-pitching against himself to be one of his favorite pastimes. Why because he *never* lost. Ha!—

“Hmmpf!”

He chuckled aloud again to think the alcohol was surfacing his wit. Fortunately, for Nick, at half past eleven, the Heights had rolled up their streets about an hour earlier, so there was no traffic on this little used, uninhabited byway.

*Suppose somebody comes tearing over the crest of that hill? Why, they’d be on top of you and crush your candy ass before they could even see you, Nick Boy!*

“Ah let ‘em g’ahead and crush me. My troubles would be ovah then! Yeshsah ovah! Let ‘em crush me shee, and they’d all be sorr-ee how they treated Li’l Nick Sheeboom. They would all be sorr-ee how they treat poor Nick.”

*Ya know Nick, I believe ya.*

“Right, damn right! And you, and you should, too.”

*I do. Now, let’s haul your candy ass up out o’ here and move off the road before it’s too late.*

With no little effort, Nick righted himself and his bike. Together, they staggered toward the top of the hill, turning left into the asphalt basketball courts on the parking lots of Holy Trinity Church. There, on top of the bluff, Nick parked his bike and took a break from his sweaty toils, extracting one of the two cans of beer that he had concealed in his roomy, suit coat pocket.

About twenty minutes ago, outside the liquor store, Nick had had the good fortune to run into an old friend, just back from combat in Viet Nam. The vet had been kind enough to offer Nick a couple swigs of his bottle of Jim Beam and then gone back in the store and smuggled the beer out to Nick. The soldier had left with his sister on a double date, leaving Nick’s head spinning.

Nick opened the can with the mini can-opener that hung on the chain around his neck and the beer fizzed up and spilled over the can, dribbling down onto his Dad’s old brown over white wing-tips. However, Nick drank with gusto. Here, on top of the west side of the Heights, he relaxed, smoking a

Chesterfield, free from all parental and scholastic supervision. Seated on the edge of a short bluff that faced north, overlooking Dunstan Street, Nick surveyed his world, the only world he had ever known.

Beneath him to the north, directly across Dunstan Street grew a dense stand of woods comprised of locusts, pin oaks and maple trees and filled with poison ivy. The woods concealed an illegal dump, which Nick could smell unfortunately when the wind shifted. Swiveling his head to his left, to the west, Nick observed some low-rent duplexes rearing their shingled roofs just visible above the street's summit, while, craning his neck around behind him to the south, stood the red brick Roman Catholic Church, rectory and school grounds of Holy Trinity. To the east, back to his right down at the bottom of the hill he had just climbed, was Dunstan's intersection with the Boulevard that he had so skillfully traversed. Further right, along the Boulevard, Nick could barely make out the three-story, brick, garden apartments known as Walnut Hill, as he peered around some shade trees that lined the street. A moderate, balmy breeze cooled his left cheek and dried the perspiration on his face. Nick turned to his left, into a gust of wind, and noticed an ominous portent above the rooftops: low-riding, swift-moving, dark clouds pushed by a gusting westerly breeze. The humid haze seemed to lighten the darkness of the grey night by refracting wildly, what little light there was. That eerie iridescence emanated from the street lamps hanging from widely spaced telephone poles. The poles rose like shadowy hangmen below the brief bluff and to either side of him. Here, at the apex of the Heights, Nick sat incongruously, straddling both the affluent and the poorer neighborhoods of his childhood hometown.

Closer to the heavens and closer to the Church atop the hill, and, by his estimation, therefore, closer to God, Nick engaged the Lord in a slurred but one-sided, semi-drunken conversation. He asked why his two cousins had to meet a common deadly fate in the jungles of Southeast Asia. He pleaded mournfully with the Lord not to send him over to Viet Nam to die, when his draft time came. Then, thinking better of his arrogant tone and manner by recalling with Whom he was speaking, the boy acquiesced, fatalistically surrendering to the Almighty as an inevitability. Nick briefly had considered the possibility of incorporating his latest musical composition "Two Cousins Down" into his rock band's present repertoire. However, he had nixed that idea quickly. "Too much of a downer, Mann. Nobody'd wanna dance to that," he had reasoned. Then, he polished off his beer and, after a couple of failed attempts, unsteadily remounted his cycle.

Nick wondered whom he and Todd could get to replace their lead guitar picker who had just quit over some dubious artistic differences, as well as the band's strict rule against using drugs. Nick stopped to steady his bike against a trash can beside the church parking lot. He pulled the lid off the can, but he hesitated to drop his empty beer can inside it.

*Is this OK? Dropping empty beer cans into Church trash cans? Seems kind of sacrilegious, don't it? Ahh, they're Catholics. They're cool. They don't mind drinkin' none.*

Nick dropped his empty into the trash can, shoved the lid on and pushed off with a clear conscience. Riding unsteadily now upon the ridge, Little Nick pedaled, through the church parking lots and up past Holy Trinity Church and School, heading towards Double "G" Street, or "Great Girl" Street, as he had dubbed it. He pedaled away from his parents' home, which was back down across the valley. The steadily droning hum of the bike's generator, powering his headlight, rose above the erratic noises of insects, which inhabited the late summer's night. On the other side of the church grounds now, Nick was entering one of the newer, more affluent neighborhoods in the Heights. Like the other upper middle class sections of the Heights, this one was lined with fifty-foot wide, cookie-cutter, brick ramblers in a variety of colors. Cement sidewalks and concrete driveways bordered the tidy, summer-scorched, now brown, square-shaped yards. This particular section of Crest Hill seemed more spacious than the other areas, because it was newer, having been built only about four years ago. The shade trees, so popular in Southern Maryland, the maples and oaks, as well as the equally popular

evergreens, white pines and magnolias, filled these yards along with azaleas and other popular residential bushes. Some bushes already were overgrown with the encroaching, ever prevalent honeysuckle vine native to the area. Here, the recently planted trees had yet to grow tall enough to dwarf the young homes, making the lots and homes appear larger by contrast to those in the older neighborhoods, like Nick's. Nick reflected that in his own, more established, street, the trees and bushes had grown like weeds, in many cases obscuring the homes. He recalled planting trees in his yard about ten years ago, only to see them tower now over his as well as adjacent homes. Nick knew these streets well. This recently populated section of the Heights was his paper route. Still, it always amused him to contrast this neighborhood with his own, less than a mile away.

Perspiration had dried against his skin during his rest. However now, as he pedaled lazily beneath dimly lit but widely spaced telephone pole lamps, a single bead of sweat, trickled teasingly down along his sternum beneath his loose-fitting, black satin shirt, and rolled over his flat, hard stomach. It tickled. Nick giggled. Swiping at his empty, washboard belly with one hand, Nick scratched himself to relieve the tickle. Almost too nonchalantly, he replaced his right hand on the handlebar, as the front wheel wobbled. Unconcerned, the kid deftly straightened the bike and sniffed. Something was in the air all right. Above his bourbon-beer breath, he smelled rain in the forecast. Glancing skyward, he noticed again the low, dark clouds moving in steadily from the southwest, covering the stars. So what? A little rain would not melt him. Actually, he believed a cool shower right now would be a relief from the oppressively muggy, late summer's night. The air hung more thickly upon him than his dad's baggy coat and the telephone pole street lamps were covered with a light grey haze. Nick wondered where he was headed. He sure was not headed home. The liquor had dulled his memory. His mind wandered. All he knew was that he was following the light from the head lamp splashing on the street ahead of him.

Spawned from his bike's lone headlamp, that beacon served him like a flashlight, jerking about the street in front of him at his slightest tug on the handlebars. Little Nick lived about three-quarters of a mile in the opposite direction from which he was biking on this sultry, Friday night in early September. He had completed his first week of school without a major incident which, in itself, was a minor miracle. In similarly successful fashion, somehow, the kid managed to steer his three-speed, despite the bourbon and beer cocktail swimming in his blood. Who would have thought a couple gulps of bourbon, followed by a couple of beer chasers could make him feel so giddy, so loose? But then he had eaten hardly anything all day.

Little Nick wished his sixteenth birthday had come and gone already. He could have been driving a car now like the rest of the juniors at Pocomoke High, instead of riding this Schwinn. However, his birthday was almost two weeks off. Besides, he knew he could not be drinking and driving an automobile. That little mishap he had experienced a few minutes ago the other side of the church would have been a major disaster, had he been driving his old man's T-Bird, instead of his trusty three-speed. High as he was, Nick shuddered to think of that prospect. His parents had been pretty lenient with him, since they had realized their strict discipline policy had driven Nick's older brother to run off and join the service just after his eighteenth birthday. Yet, even with their reformed policy of leniency, his folks would not tolerate Nick's drinking and driving. He knew that. He knew he was wrong now, even as loaded as he was. But ooh Mann, he sure felt sweet right now, too, like he was flying, gliding. In truth, he was weebing and wobbling but, fortunately, he was not falling down, at least not in the last ten minutes since that mishap on Dunstan Street.

"Say, where am I goin', anyway? Come on Nick, think, Mann!"

He chastised himself. An un-opened can of the High Life, his reserve rations, hiding in his roomy suit coat pocket, slapped reassuringly against the side of his right hip, as Little Nick stood up on the pedals, cycling on uncertainly.

“Hmm, High Life,” he mused. “Know why they call it that now. ‘Cuz I am HI-I-IGHEEE!”

Nick yelled down the empty suburban street to no one as he passed by scattered, parked cars on either side of him. In retaliation to his outburst, a neighboring dog barked loudly off to Nick’s right from behind a closed front storm door. Nick barked back, long and loudly, ending in his own, eerily accurate imitation of the howl of the wild. Musically gifted, Little Nick also possessed an uncanny ability for precise imitation of any kind of sound, even human or, for that matter, canine voices. In fact, he was so precise in his barking just now that the German shepherd behind the closed door went berserk, jumping against the storm door in violent excitement. Riding past the yelping, miscreant pooch, Nick caught a glimpse of a human hand grabbing the dog by its collar and yanking the yelping Rin Tin Tin back, as the front door closed with a slam. Glancing back over his shoulder, Nick laughed and bellowed again loud and long, imagining the trouble that owner must be having, wrestling with the large pet behind the closed door.

Little Nick convulsed too long. Turning his head back around to mind the street ahead of him, too late, he saw it. “Ahhh!” Quickly, the teen pulled his free, right hand out of his suit pocket to seize the handlebar and jerk the bike to the right, but not before, he slammed sideways into the left rear fender of a powder blue 1965 Plymouth Valiant.

“Oh Mann!” He lamented.

Little Nick had reacted quickly enough to use his left forearm and leg as human flesh buffers, to keep the bike from scarring the car. In his semi-inebriated condition, he hardly felt his bruises. Tomorrow he would. Yet, right now, tomorrow held no concern for him. He pushed off the car valiantly, pedaling unevenly. His front tire was out of alignment. He halted to climb off of his saddle, staggering around the bike to stick the front tire between his legs. Pressing the wheel tightly between the insides of his bent knees, he jerked the handlebars sharply to his right, thereby straightening the wheel. This procedure was so familiar to him that he could have done it in his sleep or, even now, after one and a half boilermakers. Again, the can of Miller’s bumped safely, reassuringly, inside his coat pocket against his thigh.

“Yeah, Buddy,” he pondered. “You’re my reserve rations, Baby,” he reminded himself.

Nick remounted, tottered for a second, and rode off. Gratefully, he hit a flat section of asphalt on top of the ridge in front of Cathcart Jr. High, turned left and sat down on his seat to coast a ways. Why did the street appear to diverge wider and wider, only to converge back in upon itself? He sat straight up in his seat and asked aloud. “Now, where--what the heck am I doin’ here, anyway? Don’t gotta delivah no papers ‘til the mohnin’.” He mumbled aloud in hopes that the soliloquy would spur his recall. It did. “Oh yeah, that’s it! Surah, the Vernier’s partee!” He slapped his thigh energetically, overjoyed with his recollection.

Vicky and Val Vernier had invited him to their annual back-to-school party, which they hosted annually the first Friday night after school commenced. The Vernier's party was always the first as well as THE premier back-to-school-party for the upper crust of Pocomoke Senior High society, which consisted chiefly of cheerleaders, football players and their girlfriends. Yet, why had Nick left before and why was he headed back there, now? He was curious and dumbfounded at his lack of recall. Nick knew he was not a "good mixer" and feared he may have done something at the party to force his ouster. He just could not remember.

Despite his natural talent as an entertainer, Little Nick had never been much of a socialite. He was a loner right down to his very bones. Since his brother had run off to join the Air Force when Nicky was six, his parents had raised Nick much like an only child. Nick did things the way he wanted, regardless of what others thought and regardless of the consequences, which often were severe. He could get along all right one-on-one with someone if he liked him or her, but the thing was he liked few. Last spring he had come to find out, he liked girls by way of one short and shapely Maureen Kilpatrick and, even better, she had liked him back. However, cute Little Mo had moved away to Texas with her family in a hurry, amidst some nasty rumors about her and Nick. Nick reflected regrettably that Little Mo had taken after her older brother, a junior then, who was a certified hophead.

Drinking was one thing, but doping was something else, completely taboo in Nick's mind. He drew his line in the sand with grass and would not cross over it. Nick enforced that rule on his band *Good Rockin' Tonight (GRT)* as well, and it had cost him his lead guitar player, not to mention that Ricky had not wanted to play Nick's preferred R&B style music any more, not since he had come back from Woodstock anyway. Maureen had always said Nick was a hypocrite where drugs and alcohol were concerned. Nevertheless, Nick was comfortable with his choice for beer and Chesterfields. Problem was, because he had hung with Little Mo and her older brother, (who had provided the wheels) Nick had acquired falsely their reps as hopheads, as well.

"Anh! Jes' one more thing they like to hang on me. So what!" Nick blew it off and biked on.

Steadying the handlebar with merely his left hand, he pedaled lazily, even though the asphalt street rolled like the sea beneath him. Luckily, the side street suffered little traffic at that late hour. Sweat now trickled down either side of his soft, deeply tanned, whiskerless face. With the back of his right hand, he wiped the sweat from his brow and from his sparse, bovine-like moustache. Then, with the same hand, Nick steadied his can of golden liquid treasure in his suit pocket, while he tried to recall the blurry events from earlier in the evening. Slowly, the memories began bubbling back to the surface of his brain.

"R.C. and Stan—those a-holes!"

He blurted his revelation aloud to an empty street, which held no sympathy for him. His recollection of the party was coming back to him now.

Yeah, maybe Nick wanted to regain his honor from the tongue-lashing he had taken from those two jock jerks earlier. R.C. and Stan had insulted him, jeered him, and derisively laughed at him down in the Vernier's basement recreation room, in front of all the other kids, in front of Ryzanna Ryan, too, and that is what had hurt the worst. "Damn it!" Nick cursed at the thought of Ryzanna, with her shamefully downcast doe eyes, witnessing his tactful retreat. If there was anyone he wanted to impress favorably, it was the cute but chunky Ryz'n, whose nickname rhymed with horizon. Yet sadly, upon reflection, he concluded that he had failed dismally with her. It was all because those losers had called him a "chicken" for not playing football. Football was kingpin at Pocomoke High. All those not associated with the football team in some manner were relegated to the lower castes of Pocomoke society. Yeah, now these jerks had ridiculed not only Nick but, by way of implication, Nick's old man as well, who had forbidden Nick to try out for the team. R.C. and Stan claimed Nick used that as a lame excuse to cover his cowardice for not trying out for the school team. However, Nick had to admit his dad had a point in keeping him off the team. Nick was almost five feet four inches tall and weighed a whopping 117 pounds! People called him "Little" Nick with good reason. His dad felt, probably correctly, that Nick was too small to play high school football and he had refused to permit his son to try out, relegating Nick to the 130 lb. Boys Club tackle team. Nick was no chicken. No, he was a shrimp!

Nick realized that R.C. and Stan were a just a couple of jerks anyway. "Jerksdom" came as natural to those clowns as a sunrise to the morning. They could not help themselves. Nick understood they were jealous of him, jealous of his starting position as the centerfielder on last year's JayVee baseball team for sure and jealous of his musical gifts, too. Nick knew it had been no coincidence that the pair had attacked him tonight right after he had entertained all the kids with his music in the Vernier's basement. He had sung and played on his ever present USMC mouth organ as well as the Vernier's upright piano, while he had performed a variety of classic R&B and Rock'N'Roll hits.

Initially, Nick had been reluctant to perform, but when Vicky had asked him to play his music, he could not deny her. In his book, Vicky ranked right up there with the Virgin Mary. He would have walked barefoot over hot coals, if Vicky Vernier had asked him to attempt such a feat. However, in Nick's mind, performing in front of that crowd, comprised almost exclusively of Pocomoke's jockdom, mainly football players and cheerleaders, was very close to executing such a tortuous stunt. Because of Vicky, uncharacteristically, Nick had backed away from his detractors' insulting challenges earlier without a word. Even though each of those Bozos had at least fifty pounds on him, Nick also had fought each of them once in the last eighteen months already. Thanks to his training in aikido and boxing up to The Boys Club, on neither occasion, did either of them get the better of him, despite his size, or lack of it, and he knew that irked those knuckleheads tremendously, too.

Fistfights were commonplace in the Heights among male teens in settling points of "honor" and, since Nick had become a teenager, he never shied from proving his. In fact, he had proved more than once that he was no "chicken." While he was not afraid of those jerks, he had not wanted to cause a scene in Vicky's basement either. Vicky was so classy and so kind to have invited him, the class weirdo, to her "cool" party. Now Nick reflected that he really should thank her for her hospitality.

Yeah, maybe that was his reason for returning to the party. He simply wanted to thank Vicky Vernier and her kid sister Val for being kind enough to invite him in the first place. After all, he had run out earlier on his amiable, attractive hostesses without speaking to either of them. Yeah, of course that was it. That had to be it. However, even in his inebriated state of mind, Little Nick sensed that was not really it, at all. In the back of his hazy head, despite his boilermaker high, he knew the real reason, the sole reason, for his return to the Vernier's party was the charmingly sweet, cute Ryzanna Ryan. In his heart, he hoped she would still be there and without that Don, hanging around her like a hound dog come a huntin' time, either.

Don was a nice enough guy, even if he was a member of the football team, albeit the JayVee squad. The problem with Don was, well, he was *too* nice, a real straight arrow. Unlike Nick's dark reputation, Don's handle was lily white. Nick, for some reason he could never fathom, was a lightning rod for grist for the Pocomoke rumor mill. The school gossips had spawned several dark reputations for Nick already, some not without at least a semblance of truth, which unfortunately made the out and out lies seem all the more credible. Nick cradled the beer can in his pocket as he plodded along, while a lone oncoming car passed him by. He leaned well to the right. Two accidents were enough for one night. The car skirted by without incident. Yeah, Nick had many reps and they were all bad. His antics seemed to encourage foul rumors at a dizzying pace, the way a Lassie in heat would have encouraged that Rin Tin Tin back there. Nick had to chuckle to think that he could have done all that was attributed to him. He would have had to have been Superman to get around like that. However, some of the rumors, he stupidly had brought upon himself and he knew it. He did not help himself any by proudly refusing to deny them.

For one thing, Nick enjoyed debating with his teachers. He got off on punching their buttons in class, which earned him a certain amount of begrudging respect from his classmates for his courage and wit, but such rebellious behavior had done little to bolster his GPA. Then, too, Nick was different, because he dressed and acted differently. In 1969, when Mick Jagger, Jimi Hendrix, Joe Willie Namath and Muhammad Ali ruled as current pop and sport icons, Little Nick's heroes stemmed from a bygone era, from his brother's time, and included Little Richard, Elvis, Willie Mays, Mickey Mantle, and, of course, James Dean. Nick dressed as they had, groomed himself as they did and tried to emulate each of them for real, often choosing the wrong place and time (like the classroom) for his impersonations, which just as often got him into trouble.

Then, as a white kid in Southern Maryland of 1969, Nick did the unthinkable. He tried to be black, to talk black, to walk black, to play his music, black. Hey! Wasn't the current slogan: "Black is Beautiful?" Already spurned by most of Pocomoke's jock elite for not playing football, Little Nick ate his school lunches at the "colored" table near the auditorium stage and hung out with "colored" kids whenever he could. Such taboo activities moved his white classmates to alienate him even further. Prejudice was a real and present curse in a region, which still maintained separate bars for whites and blacks.

It was all right for his white classmates to prefer Motown to the Beatles or superficially befriend a good, black football player, but real friendship between the races was taboo. The

popular phrase of the day “Black is Beautiful” was not sung in the streets of Crest Hill Heights or in the halls of Pocomoke High, not even softly by the largely outnumbered black students, if they knew what was good for them. The reason there were not more racial problems at Pocomoke was due to the meager number of black students among the almost entirely white student body. Moreover, the football coach, a former player for Bear Bryant’s Crimson tide, had his own crude but effective methods of dealing with discipline problems among the students. Everyone, black and white alike, were well aware of the burned out shopping center just across the District line, less than a mile down the street from school. Frustrated, angry D.C. residents had looted and burned the place to the ground during the race riot after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., a year ago last April. Nevertheless, that sinister and desperately telling event did not preclude Little Nick from trying to be the blackest, white guy in school. And that rubbed many of his white classmates, the bigots, the wrong way. Included among them were a few of Nick’s close, childhood friends.

Sure, the race thing was a part of his alienation from the high school in-crowd. It did not help any either that Nick possessed thick, full red lips, a gravelly baritone, which he used to sing Soul Music, and an upturned derriere, which fostered his swift foot speed, all attributes that encouraged his detractors to assail him with racial epithets. As for the blacks, they tolerated Nick all right enough in a public setting or when he played Motown on his harmonica for them. Yet, like some of their white counterparts, the black kids dropped their cool toleration of him outside the lunchroom. Yet, it seemed funny to Nick (funny strange, not funny-ha-ha) when he met a black kid, one-on-one in a private setting, they got along fine. However, when there were two or more blacks and Nick, the colored kids suddenly acted as if they never heard of him, except in the lunch room when the proctors were watching. However, Nick had reconciled himself to the fact that racial prejudice was commonplace in the Heights and it cut both ways. He made a point not to buck it though, even when the hatred was directed at him.

There were other rumors like Nick’s alleged hophead association with the gothic Little Mo, Kilpatrick. She was a short, shapely teen with the big brown eyes, long lashes, pug nose, stringy brown hair and freckles, who adored Mary Jane. Nick had lived with Mo’s drug rep, as well. Had that been the extent of the Little Mo rumors, maybe that would have been OK, however, there were more. The most vicious rumor about Little Mo and Nick was that Nick allegedly had impregnated Mo, causing her to abort their baby and forcing her family to up and move her to Texas in shame. That rumor had come to life over the past summer, when Mo’s parents, the Kilpatricks, and another neighboring couple had come home early from the Bolling AFB NCO Club for a nightcap. Upon entering the Kilpatrick’s home (which was just down around the corner, off Double ‘G’ Street from Vicky’s), Mo’s parents had heard blaring Rock’N’Roll music and detected a sickeningly, sweet aroma filling the house. Mo’s folks had followed that sickening sweet scent to the basement rec. room sofa, where they found their daughter and Little Nick engrossed under a smoky, green cloud, in a most compromising position. All Hell had broken loose and inside of a couple weeks the Kilpatricks had transferred to Sheppard Air Force Base in North Texas. However, Nick knew nothing of pregnancies or abortions. And the green cloud of smoke that had caused the sickening aroma had not come from him but from Little Mo Kilpatrick, alone.

Moved to anger now by the very recollection of that rumor, Little Nick grabbed both handlebars and popped a wheelie as he blurted angrily out to no one.

“Daa-gone it! What kind of a guy do they think I am, anyway?”

Yet, Nick did not help his cause any, or, in her absence, Maureen’s cause, either. Because whenever someone confronted him on the matter, all he would say is: “Them’s jes’ rumors” and change the subject or, even worse, ignore the questioner all together. His refusal to provide anyone with the satisfaction of a simple “yes’ or “no” response, would anger his inquisitor, as Nick had intended it to do and, of course, further fuel the rumor. Nick felt no matter what he said, people would think the worst anyway, so he let them think what they wanted. The only other information of a personal nature that he might impart concerning Maureen depended on who his interrogator was. If Nick liked and trusted the curious inquisitor, he might confess in a soft voice, with a distant look in his eye that he “cared very, very deeply for Maureen” and he hoped “she’ll be happy down in Texas.” And, with Little Mo in Texas, she could not be hurt by his stonewalling. Slouch-seated now and pedaling along easily, Nick chuckled to himself smugly. *Besides, if the rumor about me and Mo were true, then them other, earlier ones about me preferring boys to girls would have to be false, now wouldn’t they?* He smiled with satisfaction at the simplicity of that irrefutable logic.

Nick realized these strikes against him were all pluses for Don in gaining Ryz’n’s favor over Nick. Although he liked Don personally, Nick did not want Don hanging around Ryzanna Ryan. Don was the antithesis of Nick and so was Ryz’n, for that matter. Nick knew Don and Ryz’n would probably be good together. Yet, Nick was beginning to like the short, stocky girl far too much himself, especially since she had come on to him after the first day of homeroom this year. He had begun to think that maybe they could be good together, like a real couple. Even though they had been classmates for a year, suddenly, after the summer vacation, Nick had begun to notice things about little Ry he had never really seen before. For instance, he had noticed that she had the densest, waviest, bouncy shoulder length, smoky-brown hair the color of hot chocolate surrounding a marshmallow. Her joyful locks contrasted starkly with her broad, sweeping, raven black eyebrows, long black lashes and hazel-green eyes. Even her nickname of “Ryz’n,” which rhymed with horizon and like the horizon, held a distant but natural, attraction for him. Also, he noticed she had the most beautifully formed, sexist mouth with a brightly sincere white-toothed smile out of which uttered the sultriest and huskiest of voices. Begrudgingly, he sensed deep down, he needed someone like her, someone to steady him down, somebody respectable, unlike Little Mo, someone who could prevent him from self-destructing. And with Little Mo gone, Nick was in an awful fix—girl-wise, especially since he was no longer babysitting for the most attentive, young Widow Ready.

Ryz’n was level-headed and responsible. Shoot, she belonged to half the clubs in school, had been his homeroom representative two years running and even co-captained the JayVee cheerleaders last year. Though she had not made the varsity squad this year, everyone knew that old hag of a coach had jobbed Ryz’n out of a spot on the squad. Ryz’n was the girl with the beatific, one-of-a-kind, three-dimple smile. She possessed a soft, easy, kindly manner and then, there was her walk--that scintillating, feline ambulation sensation! Nick thought the natural swish and sway of her hips would have been the envy of all the strippers up on East

Baltimore Street. He assumed so anyway, because he actually had never been to The Block or actually seen a stripper. However, that Ryz'n had the walk of a temptress, for sure. And the best part of it, in Nick's mind, was that she was in no way aware of her sensual strut. No! She was just a good Catholic girl without a clue. Nick was convinced there was not an ounce of guile in her Catholic soul or body. The girl had no idea of the appeal her natural ambulatory movements held for the opposite sex in general or him in particular. If she did, she certainly gave no sign of it. (Her phat kid sister now, that was a bit of a different case all together! That girl was stacked and she knew it.) Sure, Ryz'n was a little chubby right now. She still carried a little baby fat and had some acne, but they were merely temporary conditions, thought Nick. Beneath all that superficial stuff, he detected something truly special, something more like her incredibly attractive, slim-figured kid sister, but more modest. Nick reasoned he could help Ryz'n lose weight, with the same methods he had used after his convalescence from rheumatic fever had ended some seventeen months ago. Besides, he thought that, over the summer, Ryz'n may have dropped a couple of pounds already and her face had cleared up a little, as well. She was improving. Perhaps, more importantly, she had grown, too, grown out in all the right places, that is!. Unlike her kid sister, Ryz'n was a late bloomer. So was he! So what? No, that was not the problem. No, Don was the problem!

Evidently, Don had started to notice Ryz'n's latent features also. How could Nick make time with Ry, when Don was hanging around her, as he had all week? "Ah, forget him!" Nick's angry thoughts slipped out of his mouth as he strained to navigate his three-speed over the familiar but poorly lit, murky, residential streets. Those streets still seemed to keep swaying inexplicably and unpredictably beneath him. Had not Ryz'n all but asked Nick for a date the first day of school? "Damn right!" exclaimed Nick agreeing with himself. "Damn right, she did! That's a fack, Jack!" He pedaled unevenly down 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue, or "Double G Street", as he had dubbed it for, as he knew from his paper route, all the "**G**reat **G**irls" lived there, like Ryz'n and Vicky and their sisters, among others.

Now, why did the street appear to diverge wider and wider, only to converge back in upon itself again? In his alcoholic haze, Nick reasoned he should have left that hard stuff alone earlier and stuck solely to his familiar Miller High Life. By the time, Little Nick had reached the Vernier's brick rambler, it was close to midnight. Nick stood down wobbly on the left pedal as he pulled his right leg back over the bike, hooking his right foot behind his left, and coasted alongside the Vernier's concrete driveway up next to the side of their house. Teetering a bit, he braked and rested his bike against the house's tan brick wall, which, strangely, seemed a bit unsteady to him. Then he took off the rubber bands he kept around his pant legs to keep the cloth from his baggy pants from getting caught up in the chain. He stuffed the rubber bands into his empty baggy, suit coat pocket. Looking around the corner of the house, in his alcohol-induced fog, Nick could see the Friday night had spilled out from the Vernier's basement into their back yard and party thinned out a bit. That back porch light, next to the kitchen door furnished the sole, eerie illumination for the yard. He noticed some of the more amorous couples had sought out the quieter, shadowy nooks on the lot. Nick spotted a vacancy at the far, opposite corner of the Vernier's three and a half-foot high, chain-link, back fence.

*That's the ticket!*

Finding his land legs, Nick plotted his course for that distant harbor and, stiff-backed, with head erect, made his way, as soberly as he could, given his semi-inebriated condition, walked purposefully over the gently downward-sloping yard,. Fortunately, the grassy seas underfoot were calm tonight, though strangely, like the streets earlier, the yard seemed to roll a bit beneath his feet. Wiry, brown zoysia grass, suffering from a summer's worth of dry, scorching Southern Maryland sun, crinkled under Nick's soft-worn, shoe soles,. Wearing invisible blinders, Nick sailed safely into port without interference or mishap. Leaning forward, with his forearms resting on the fence, his back to the party, he fished around for the remaining can of Miller's in his roomy, left suit coat pocket

"Shoo! I made it," he whispered under his breath.

Low flying, grey-black clouds had rolled in above, as the breeze picked up. He sniffed again. Yep. Rain was in the wind. Unexpectedly, Vicky Vernier roused Nick from his personal weather forecast, just as his fingers had seized around the aluminum can of golden liquid treasure, hidden in his suit pocket. Vicky and her beau Cary Geller eased up alongside of him. Nick feared that he had been busted and his hand froze over the can pulled halfway from his pocket.

"Oh, Nick. I'm so glad you came back." Nick smiled sheepishly. Thankfully, Vicky had not spotted the beer. "Look, Nick . . . I, I want to apologize for the behavior of Stan and R.C. earlier. I asked them to leave as soon as I heard about what happened." Standing behind his woman, wearing jeans and a long-collared calico shirt, Cary Geller towered over both of them and added his opinion, weighing in as co-captain of the varsity football team and catcher of the varsity baseball squad. Nick shrugged and lowered his eyes from their gaze.

"Don't give 'em a second thought, Little Nick," assured Cary. "They're just jealous."

Vicky was the class valedictorian and captain of the varsity cheerleaders. Together Cary and Vicky rated high on the Pocomoke couple's social registry. They were not a bad pair of endorsements for Nick to have, provided he could conceal his unopened beer can and his high. Furtively, Nick shoved the can back into his oversized pocket and twisted around, keeping his body between the couple and the beer. Nick nodded his head stiffly in agreement, smiling like the Mona Lisa, but he was more concerned with the safety of his concealed Miller High Life than in socializing.

"Seriously, Nick, you are welcome here any time," Vicky reassured him.

In her white and blue-green shift, the popular, freckle-faced, long-haired brunette with the ever-present broad, cotton hair band and cute, button nose stepped towards Little Nick and took hold of his free hand.

"And if you ever want to perform for my guests Nicky, that's great. But, if not, well that's fine, too. You don't have to, if you don't want to, not for me anyway, or for my sister Val, either."

Nick let go of the warm beer in his pocket, clamped down tightly on her forearm and peered deeply into Vicky's hazel eyes, completely serious.

"You really mean that, Vicky? I can, I can come here and don't have ta sing and play? Just like anyone else?"

Lacking his usual inhibitions due to the alcohol, Little Nick was almost desperate in his tone; desperate for the acceptance he inwardly craved but outwardly always disdained. Such acceptance he felt intuitively that a good girl like Ryz'n could offer him, should they become a couple. Deep down, Nick had feared the reason Vicky might have invited him tonight had been solely to entertain her guests. Learning now that she wanted him to come just for himself was a welcome surprise.

Taken aback initially by his surprisingly emotional but vulnerable sincerity, Vicky looked at Cary, who nodded, and then she inclined her head back to Little Nick. Vicky smiled, warmly gracious, disarming Nick and, with her left free hand, patted Nick's paw, which had seized her arm so firmly.

"Sure I do, Nicky. My parents and Val feel the same way, too. I spoke to them about what happened. You're always a welcome guest here, Nick, always."

Squeezing his hand warmly, Vicky winked at him for emphasis. Dazed, Little Nick released her arm, turning away from her, mumbling a surprised but much relieved "Thank you." Now Nick was glad he had returned to the party, even if he wouldn't meet Ryz'n. As the popular couple drifted away, Nick turned back around to his original mooring and proceeded to open the now warm Miller's with the mini can-opener that hung on the chain around his neck, beneath his black satin shirt. Predictably, the warm, shaken beer overflowed down the front of him, but he ignored the spill.

"How 'bout that Vicky? And Cary, too? They want me, just for me! A 'guest', no less! 'No, make that 'a 'WELCOME guest!'" Nick puffed up his chest. "They're Allriiiighttt! First class, really first class!" Nick whispered to himself. "Shoot, here's to them!" Nick saluted with his can towards the adjoining neighbor's empty back yard and drank. "And double shoot! Here's to me!" He toasted himself in another salute. Then he happily guzzled the warm beer quickly and surreptitiously, occasionally checking over his shoulders for other roving, scouting parties.

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