

~ Return to the Party ~

Hunched over the racer handlebars of his burgundy, three-speed Schwinn, Nick hurtled pell-mell down the steep hill that led into the valley. The teen squinted his eyes against the onrushing headwinds that 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, now cooled and dried now beneath his baggy clothes, leaving him with a deliciously refreshing sensation. The bike could take no more pedaling, so Nick held his feet in coaster position. As he approached the bottom of the 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 he ran the STOP sign at the intersection. His three-speed wobbled wildly under his renewed exertions. He blew off the blaring horn from a crossing motorist and charged headlong across the nearer of the boulevard's dual lanes and past the grassy median between them. As he crossed the second, southbound, lane brakes squealed to his right and someone from another car swore loudly, but again Little Nick ignored them. Instead, he charged headlong into the facing, precipitously upward, sloping street. He had to beat this hill just once. Just one time, he had to make it to the top without suffering the indignity of getting off and walking his bike.

Nick worked hard now as he ascended the steep hill, pedaling for all he was worth, but it took all his concentration because the boilermaker he had just downed outside the Crest Hill Liquors 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 like hot springs. Sweat dripped down his brow into his eyes leaving a salty sting. *One-third 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 hills in The Heights, one of many from which Crest Hill Heights proudly took its name, began to take its toll on the boy. Nick began to weave back and forth, bowing to the hill's steepness, 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 had coursed through his body to his brain as fast as he had just descended the other side of Dunstan Street. His desire to achieve his goal faded as he started to laugh and he began to wobble on his bike as he weaved back and forth slowly up the big hill. As he inched towards the summit, his feet were barely moving now, almost standing still, but he 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 stood upright in coaster position, locking his bike, stock-still in the middle of the road with his goal in sight. For a split second, he maintained his balance, 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. “Betta than a rolla-coasta,” he proclaimed gleefully. The goofy-looking teen with the slicked back, Elvis hairdo and two-toned eyes chuckled uncontrollably on this, hot, muggy early September Friday night. The haze of the sultry suburban Maryland street 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. He wasn’t used to the booze. Having ceased his strenuous exertions, sweat burst from his pores like a busted dike. His covert alcoholic libation had been his beverage of choice this evening, while he had pitched pennies with himself against the liquor store wall, in the alley over behind the Crest Hill Heights shopping center a short while ago. As his giggling died down, Little Nick considered penny-pitching against himself to be one of his favorite pastimes, because he never lost—“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 little 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 sorree how they treated Li’l Nick Sheeboom. They should all be sorree 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 get our 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 to the summit, turning 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 to remove one of the two cans of beer that he had concealed in his roomy, suit coat pocket. Outside the liquor store, Nick had had the good fortune to run into an old friend, just back from Viet Nam, who had been kind enough to smuggle the liquor to him. He popped the can’s top and the beer fizzed up and spilled over, 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 smoked a Chesterfield and relaxed, free from all parental and scholastic supervision. He sat on the edge of a short bluff facing north, overlooking Dunstan Street and surveyed his world, the only world he had ever known.

Facing north, directly across Dunstan Street and below him, grew lush, overgrown woods, filled with poison ivy that concealed an illegal dump. Swiveling his head to his left, to the west, Nick observed some low-rent duplexes rearing their shingled roofs just above the street’s summit, while craning his neck around behind him to the south, stood the red brick Roman Catholic Church and the rectory and school grounds of Holy Trinity. To the east, back to his right down at the bottom of the hill was the intersection with the Boulevard, which he had so skillfully traversed. Along the Boulevard, further right, he could barely make out the three-story brick garden apartments of Walnut Hill through a dense stand of locust and maple trees. A moderate balmy breeze cooled his left cheek and dried the perspiration on his face. Nick turned into the gust of wind, to his left, where he noticed an ominous portent above the rooftops in the dark clouds riding low in the sky, pushed by a westerly breeze. The humid haze seemed to lighten the darkness of the grey night by

refracting wildly, what little light there was. Widely spaced telephone pole street lamps, standing below this brief bluff and to either side of him proved the sources of that eerie iridescence.

At the apex of the Heights, Nick sat incongruously, straddling both the affluent and the poorer neighborhoods. Closer to the heavens and closer to the Church atop the hill, and, by his estimation, 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 his fate 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,” reasoned the young rocker. Then, he finished his beer and, after a couple of failed attempts, remounted his cycle unsteadily. Nick wondered whom he and Todd could get to replace their lead guitar picker who had just quit over some dubious artistic differences. Nick stopped to steady his bike against a trash can beside the church parking lot. He pulled off the lid, but hesitated to drop his empty beer can inside it. *Is this OK? Dropping beer cans in church trash? Seems kind of sacrilegious, don’t it? Ahh, they’re Catholics. They’re cool. They don’t mind drinkin’ none.* He dropped his empty into the can, shoved the lid on and pushed off with a clear conscience. Riding unsteadily now upon the ridge, Little Nick pedaled away from his parent’s home down over the valley, through the church parking lots and up past Holy Trinity Church and School, towards Double “G” Street, or “Great Girl” Street, as he had dubbed it. The low hum of the bike’s generator that powered his headlight was the lone sound that he could distinguish on this quiet night ride; that is, besides the constant hum of night insects. Nick was entering one of the more affluent neighborhoods in the Heights now, on the other side of the church grounds.

Like the other well-to-do sections of the Heights, this one was lined with fifty-foot, cookie-cutter, brick ramblers in a variety of colors. Cement sidewalks and concrete driveways bordered the tidy, summer-scorched, brown-green, 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 bushes, some of which already were overgrown with the encroaching, ever prevalent honeysuckle vine. 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. Nick reflected that in his own, more established neighborhood, those trees and bushes had grown like weeds, in many cases obscuring the homes. Nick knew these streets well. This recently populated neighborhood was his paper route. Still, it always amused him to contrast this neighborhood with his own, barely a mile away.

His perspiration had dried against his skin, as he pedaled lazily down the street beneath the dim light from widely spaced the telephone pole lamps. Sweat, a single bead of sweat, trickled teasingly down along his sternum beneath his loose-fitting, black satin shirt, rolling over his flat, hard stomach. He 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 wildly. Unconcerned, the kid deftly straightened the bike and sniffed. Something was in the air. 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 this muggy late summer's night. The air hung more thickly upon him than his dad's Elvis coat and covered the telephone pole street lamps in 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 splashing on the street ahead of him. That single light, spawned from his bike's lone headlamp, 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. Somehow, the kid managed to steer his three-speed, despite the bourbon and beer cocktail swimming in his blood. Who would have thought one shot 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 this Schwinn. However, his birthday was yet over two weeks off. Besides, he knew he could not be drinking and driving with 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. No, 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. 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 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. ‘Cause I am HI-I-I-GHEEE!”

Nick yelled to no one down the empty suburban street as he passed by parked cars on either side of him. In retaliation, 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. In fact, he was so precise in his barking just now that the German shepherd behind the door went wild, jumping against the storm door in violent excitement. As he rode past, Nick caught a glimpse of a hand grabbing the dog by its collar and yanking the big pooch away yelping, 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, but right now, tomorrow held no concern for him. He pushed off, pedaling unevenly. His front tire was out of alignment. He halted to climb out of his saddle, coming 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 boiler-makers. Again, the can of Miller’s bumped safely, reassuringly inside his 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 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 their younger son 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 Mau had moved away to Texas with her family in a hurry, amidst some nasty rumors about her and Nick.

Nick reflected regrettably that Little Mau had taken after her older brother, 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' Tonite (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. 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 Mau 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. He wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his right hand. 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. It was coming back to him, now.

Yeah, maybe Nick wanted to regain his honor from the tongue-lashing he had taken from those two jerk jocks earlier. R.C. and Stan had insulted him, jeered him, and laughed at him derisively 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 downcast doe eyes as he now sadly recalled, 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, 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, which 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 that was a lame excuse to cover his cowardice for not playing football. 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 150 lb. Boy’s 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. “Jerksom” 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 in the Vernier’s basement with his music. He had sung and played on his ever present USMC mouth organ as well as the Vernier’s upright piano, while he performed a variety of classis R&B and Rock’N’Roll hits. Nick had been reluctant to perform, but when Vicky had asked him to play, he could not deny her. In his book, she was 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 his mind, performing in front of that crowd, comprised almost exclusively of Pocomoke’s jockdom, mainly football players and cheerleaders, was close to recreating such a tortuous stunt.

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. Fistfights were commonplace in the Heights among male teens to settle points of honor and, since he had become a teenager, Nick 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 kind, 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. 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 the amiable, attractive Vernier sisters, his 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.

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 lightening rod for the Pocomoke rumor mill, which had

spawned several dark reputations for him already, some not without at least a semblance of truth, which made the out and out lies 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 Rin Tin Tin. 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 for his GPA. Then, too, Nick was different, because he dressed and acted differently. In 1969, when Mick Jagger, Jimi Hendrix, Joe Willie Namath and Muhammed Ali ruled as current pop 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 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 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 blacks, 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. Of course, everyone, black and white alike, were well aware of the burned out shopping center just across the District line, less than a mile from Pocomoke High. The place had been burned to the ground during the race riots after Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, 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, including a couple of Nick's close, childhood friends.

Sure, the race thing was a part of it, too, part of his alienation from upper Pocomoke High society. It did not help any that he 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 which 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. Yes, like some of their white counterparts, the black kids dropped their cool toleration of him and received him more warmly when he sang and played for them. However, it seemed funny to Nick (funny strange, not funny ha-ha?). Because, if he met a black kid, one-on-one in a private setting, they got along fine, but where 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 with the proctors 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 more rumors like his alleged hophead association with the gothic Little Mau, the short, shapely teen with the big brown eyes, long lashes, pug nose, stringy brown hair and freckles. Nick had lived with that rep, as well. Had that been the extent of the Little Mau rumors, maybe that would have been OK, however, there was more. The most vicious rumor about Little Mau and Nick was that Nick had impregnated Mau, 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 Mau's parents, the Kilpatricks, and another neighboring couple had come home early from the Andrews Officers Club for a nightcap. Upon entering the Kilpatrick's home (which was just down around the corner, off Double 'G' Street), Mau's parents had heard blaring Rock'N'Roll music and detected a sickeningly, sweet aroma filling the house. Mau's folks had followed that scent to the basement rec. room sofa, where they found their daughter and Little Nick under a green cloud of smoke, 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 Mau 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. Nick felt no matter what he said, people would think the worst anyway, so he let them think what they wanted. And with Little Mau in Texas, she could not be hurt by his stonewalling. *Besides*, he chuckled to himself smugly while, slouch-seated now, as he pedaled along easily, *if the rumor about me and Mau were true, then the other, earlier one about me preferring boys to girls would have to be false, now wouldn't it?* He smiled

with satisfaction at that the simplicity of that irrefutable logic. 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.”

These strikes against Nick were all pluses for Don in gaining Ryz’n’s favor over Nick. Nick, although he liked Don personally, 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 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, 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, lashes and emerald green eyes. Even her nickname of “Ryz’n”, which rhymed with horizon and like the horizon, held a distant but natural, attraction for him. Begrudgingly, he sensed deep down, he needed someone like her, someone to steady him down, somebody respectable, unlike Little Mau, someone who could prevent him from self-destructing. And with Little Mau gone, Nick was in an awful fix—girl-wise, especially since he was no longer babysitting for the most attentive Widow Ready anymore.

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 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 her natural swish and sway would have been the envy of all the strippers on East Baltimore Street. He assumed so anyway, because he had never been to East Baltimore Street 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 of aware of her sensual appeal. 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 effect her natural ambulatory movements had upon 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 different case all together!) Sure, Ryz’n was a little chubby right now. She still carried a little baby fat and had some acne—temporary conditions, thought Nick. Beneath all that superficial stuff, he detected something special, something more like her incredibly attractive, slim-figured kid sister. 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 fifteen 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, he thought. She was improving. Perhaps more importantly, she had grown, too, grown out in all the right places. The girl 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 as well. 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 moving 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. He pedaled unevenly down 21st Avenue, or "Double G Street", as he had dubbed it for, as he knew from his paper route, all the "Great Girls" lived there, like Ryz'n and Vicky and their sisters. "Damn right, she did! That's a fack, Jack!"

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 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 being caught up in chain and stuffed them into his baggy, suit coat pocket. Even in his alcohol-induced fog, he could see the Friday night party had thinned out a bit and had spilled out from the Vernier's basement into their back yard. 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.

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, walking purposefully over the gently downward-sloping yard, as soberly as he could, given his semi-inebriated condition. Fortunately, the grassy seas were calm, though strangely, like the streets earlier, the yard seemed to roll a bit beneath his feet. 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. The brown zoysia grass felt wiry beneath his soft-soled shoes and crinkled underfoot from a summer's worth of dry, scorching Southern Maryland sun. "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 him from his personal weather forecast, just as his fingers had seized around the aluminum can of golden liquid treasure, hidden in his pocket. When suddenly she came up alongside of him, in her white

and blue-green shift, 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. 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.

Nick had shoved the can back into his oversized pocket and twisted around furtively, keeping his body between the couple and the beer. Nick nodded his head stiffly in agreement, smiling like the Mona Lisa, but was more concerned with the safety of his can of Miller High Life than in socializing.

“Seriously, Nick, you are welcome here any time,” Vicky reassured him. The popular, freckle-faced, longhaired brunette with the ever-present 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, Nick, or for 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?”

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. Vicky looked at Cary, who nodded, and then she inclined her head back to Little Nick. Taken aback initially at his emotionally surprising but vulnerable sincerity, Vicky smiled graciously, warmly, disarming him, and with her left, free hand patted Nick’s paw that held her arm so firmly.

“Sure I do, Nicky. My parents and my sister 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, she 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 as well.

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 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 Allriiiiighttt! 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 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 scouting parties.