

~ Chapter 13: Lost and Found in La Jolla ~

Morning fog felt its way over the scenic seaside campus as it seemed to have done each morning since Dixie had arrived. Clad in his new pair of Dingo's, navy blue cords, a white T-shirt and his beat up brown leather biking jacket, Dixie sat on the campus chapel's front, white marble step, ready to ride. He gallantly ignored his desire for a smoke. Those Lucky's had sunk their hooks into him. He had been smoking far too many of them lately. The excuse he used now for not lighting up was the fact there were no containers around to hold his butts. He couldn't just mash them on the pristine, white chapel steps. That was what he told himself, but he knew the real reason was he did not want the Coach to catch him smoking when he exited from the nine a. m. service with his family.

Dixie had attended Lutheran services in the chapel behind him, maybe half a dozen times over the course of the spring semester. He had not really understood what was going on during the services, but he had listened intently. The amnesiac wanted to know who he was and hoped God would help him. Dixie had found the music weak at best, but the people were very kind, very friendly. He had not made the services himself this morning, because he would have been late and he had nothing to wear. He had packed all his churchgoing clothes into his garment bag for his forthcoming journey.

Dixie had come to believe in God during an Alcoholic's Anonymous (AA) meeting he had attended with a Marine buddy back in Honolulu. Dixie had no problem with alcohol himself, but his fellow Marine did. At the AA meeting, Dixie had listened soberly to their twelve-step process to recovery, which included belief and trust in a higher power, something outside of and superior to oneself. The message had forced Dixie to stop and think. Dixie had believed. He had trusted. He just did not know Who God is or how to find out. He had studied the theory of evolution in Biology, but he could not buy into it.

The theory sounded okay on paper, but Dixie had seen the vastness of the oceans, the heavens and such a variety of plant, fish and animal life in his journeys. He just couldn't buy that every living thing on earth today had all come about millions of years ago when lightening struck some gas molecules in a puddle somewhere out in the universe. Dixie did not consider himself very bright, but he was not stupid enough to fall for that.

Something or Someone with some intelligence just had to be the Creator. Because all of creation that he had seen seemed to fit together too well, more by design than by chance. Dixie had no problem with a Higher Being, a God, creating everything. However, the thing that had stumped him about the existence of God was, where did the Creator come from? Who or What had created Him? That was a real stumper. The concept of an eternal being eluded

him. He reasoned that if Someone could create all that he surveyed, then, that Someone was smart enough to, to what? Create Himself? Now that was stupid, too. It made no sense. He was stymied.

Nevertheless, he opted to believe in the Creator theory, partly because even if he were wrong, he reasoned it would make no difference. However, if he went along with the random chance theory of evolution and were wrong, and there was a God, a Dispenser of eternal justice, Dixie could wind up, screwed for eternity. Mostly though, Dixie had an innate sense that God existed and God was watching him. Besides, there was the Voice he occasionally felt, not heard but actually felt, well up from within his chest. That was some kind of strange. It was downright weird, not to mention more than a little disconcerting as well.

Dixie contemplated these thoughts as he sat in the fog on the marble, chapel steps until the services concluded. Peppermount's second team All-American and CWS hero rose to allow the congregation members an exit pathway while he waited for the Coach. When the Coach emerged from the chapel with his family, Dixie reminded him that he had agreed to let Dix store some of his belongings in the Coach's office over the summer. The Coach remembered and advised his family to go onto the car without him. He would join them shortly. Dix greeted the Coach's wife and kids, who congratulated him on an outstanding playoff run.

Coach Trahorn and Dixie walked across the dew-covered, fog-shrouded quad over to the athletic field house. Dix had left three boxes of his stuff sitting outside the main door to the building. Tiny Coach Trahorn, dressed in a grey cotton suit and matching tie, toted one box of books, while Dixie humped the other two boxes: one of books, one of bedding, towels, etc.

They stored the boxes in the coach's office closet. Coach Trahorn took this opportunity to verify that Dixie was going to play for Clyde Wryde again down in La Jolla. Dixie said he did not know for sure. He was also considering heading to Las Vegas, instead. He asked the Coach to recommend some coaches up there. The Coach checked the rolodex on his old metal desk and wrote down a couple names, phone numbers and Vegas addresses for his best ballplayer. He reminded Dixie it got pretty hot up in Vegas, even if they did play at night. Dix promised he would play ball somewhere that summer. Coach Trahorn joked that after the display Dix had made the day before on national TV, Dix should not have any trouble making a team, even though most summer leagues had started already.

The dark, trim, peppery coach became serious, asking Dix about any marriage plans in his star ballplayer's future, specifically, those concerning the blonde bombshell in La Jolla. He pointed out that the University tolerated marriages better among seniors, rather than underclassmen. Therefore, Dix might want to consider holding off for another year, at least. Dix muttered that would not be a problem. He turned in his dorm room key as well as his combination lock for the locker room to Coach Trahorn. Then, the coach verified that Dix was planning to come back the following year. Dix said he was, "Absolutely." Coach Trahorn

reminded Dixie how close they had come this year by holding his right thumb and forefinger about a half inch apart.

“We were almost there, Dix. But with you and most of the other guys back next year, believe we can go all the way.”

“Ya know somethin’, Coach?”

“What’s that Dix?”

Dixie deadpanned, “I believe ya.”

Dixie grinned broadly, as the coach slapped him on the shoulder and chuckled. They parted, wishing each other a great summer. Dixie found his isolated, loaded down Honda in the nearby empty student parking lot. He double-checked his bike to insure it was ready for the trip. He had all the belongings he needed, packed, ready to go, as was his modified, suped up black Honda CB750K5.

Dixie had bought the bike early, last February, over the semester break, with some of his gambling winnings over New Year’s. The previous fall, Donna had let him use Big Jim’s ’69 Honda 750/4, which he had enjoyed, but Dix had wanted a bike of his own. He bought the ’75 Honda CB 750K for almost four grand. Then he had paid nearly that amount again to have the bike customized. The cycle was a touring bike with some “pop.” Well, he had most of the “pop” added. He basically took the touring version of the 750 and had it made into a sport racing model, maintaining the best of its touring features. Dixie had actually exceeded 150 mph out in the desert returning from one of several Las Vegas gambling runs. That stunt had inspired him to write down one of the many song melodies that continually popped into his head, but which he almost invariably ignored. That time he had embraced the tune, calling it “Hair On Fire.”

Dixie’s bike was black with sliver handlebars and fenders and came with a one-down, four-up gear shift. He had bought the 750 from the dealer with a five-gallon gas tank and a 1.1-gallon reserve tank that he could access at the flip of a switch. He also had the bike modified to his tastes, complete with safety bars and crash bar footrests for comfort on long rides. He had front and rear disc brakes and a nine-inch wide luggage rack installed that extended well out over the back wheel and tail light.

Dix had found a shop down in San Pedro which made the modifications he had wanted. They had suped up the engine to seventy horses (more than the ‘F’ racing model) funneling four overhead carburetors into a single exhaust. They had also replaced the handlebars with a longer, extended pair, near chopper-like (but not so long that he couldn’t lean forward in racing mode without a modicum of comfort). The San Pedro biker’s shop had installed a custom made steel frame, leather backed, thirty six-inch high sissy bar over the back wheel and front part of the back luggage rack, of which he was particularly proud. Dixie also added a set of soft, brown leather saddlebags, though a lot of so called ‘true’ bikers looked down on the bags. Dixie felt the saddlebags made him a real, modern cowboy. But, what he did not add, and by journey’s end, wished that he had

added, was a windshield. He would never eat so many bugs in his life, as he would on his upcoming travels. “A high protein diet” is what came to call it.

Dix had loaded his bike down pretty well. Except for the three boxes stored in the Coach’s closet, all his worldly possessions would ride with him on his bike. He carried most of his cloth belongings in a standard USMC issue sea bag. However, included in that bag also were: three (wooden) baseball bats, an expandable pull up bar and a thirty-inch 5/4” rebar. (He had wrapped the rebar in a rag to prevent the rust from staining his clothes and by sticking the butt end into a piece of Styrofoam. That would prevent the ragged steel end from tearing a hole into surrounding materials). He sat the bag with the handle side containing the bats etc. up against the sissy bar. Dix used the end of the rebar and bat handle protruding from the top of the bag as anchors to help tie the bag to the backstop. Dixie hung an opaque, plastic garment bag from the top of the sissy bar, wedging it between the bar and the duffle bag.

The heavy garment bag contained two suits and his three Marine uniforms, the greens, tans and the dress blues. The uniforms meant something special to him. He did not trust leaving them at school, not even in the Coach’s office.

Up front, locked in the faring, Dix stored important papers related to the bike: his registration, owner’s manual, service records, including the itemized bill of all the customizations he had ordered. He also kept a cheap pair of sunglasses and a small flashlight for emergencies in the space that was the motorcycle equivalent of an automobile glove compartment.

When he traveled any long distance over desolate areas, as he was about to do now, Dixie tied a round two-gallon gas can atop the nine-inch wide luggage rack, and to the backside of the sissy bar. The can’s funnel clamped into place on top of the can. Dixie had slid the handles to an athletic bag down over the top of the sissy bar, so that it rested sideways on top of the gas can. The bag contained the rest of his baseball equipment, including: a couple pairs of spikes, sanitary hose, inner hose baseball pants and inner shirts, jock straps, cups, two batting helmets, and a pair of Converse All Stars. There was also a pair of Nike tennis shoes given to him by the school athletic department, a pair of low top Adidas running shoes, as well as a few baseballs.

Dixie also toted a standard issue USMC sleeping bag, blanket and a two-gallon canteen of water, all of which he tied around and across the chopper style handlebars. The canteen rested partly on top of the sleeping bag, partly on top of the gas tank. When he leaned forward and down, that arrangement also served as a sort of homemade windshield, which proved to be helpful, but not helpful enough to prevent the high protein diet he would experience. After all, he had to be able to see the road. He amazed even himself that he could get all this junk on his bike without any of it falling off. But then he recalled that he had ridden with both Donna and her two kids seated behind him on their outings to the beach.

By 1975, Dixie knew almost all states had adopted some form of motorcycle helmet laws. The Federal Department of Transportation had tied the provision of

federal funding for state safety programs and highway construction to the mandatory wearing of motorcycle helmets. Dixie hated motorcycle helmets. He did whatever he could to avoid them. He did carry three Peppermount baseball batting helmets, two in his athletic bag and one, from which he had removed the bill, he would wear, if he were forced to do so. Otherwise, he stored that helmet in the soft, brown leather saddlebags he carried over the back of the seat.

Because the state of California was big on riders wearing helmets, he usually wore a batting helmet backwards around town in his in-state travels. Out on the highway, he wore the helmet that was a eighth size too small for him from which he had shaved off the bill. That was to make sure the helmet wouldn't fly off at extended, high speeds, though it could cause him headaches. Dixie kept a smaller batting helmet for any female companions he might carry. However, when he rode out of state, Dix did not wear a helmet much. If he were caught without a helmet, Dix would plead ignorance of local law and then pull out his batting helmet. Thus far, Dix had received only one ticket, which he had paid promptly.

Dixie carried other forms of protection as well. He feared and detested side arms, as one might who lived daily with the amnesic effects and nasty wounds from receiving a bullet in the back of the head. Nevertheless, he holstered a short barreled .38 caliber Smith and Wesson, five-shot revolver. He stored the holster inside his left boot, above his left inside ankle, under his flared corduroy pant leg. He typically filled four of the chambers, leaving the one next to the hammer empty. Moreover, sheathed inside his right boot, he strapped a six-inch stiletto just above his right ankle.

Dixie was not looking for trouble. To the contrary, he was a quiet, unassuming young man. However, he would not get the stuffing kicked out of him again, as had occurred in a deserted alley behind an illegal Honolulu gambling house. Also, Dixie was carrying six thousand dollars on his person, which had to last him through the summer. He intended to protect both himself and his property.

A little before noon on this second Sunday in June, Dixie placed his batting helmet backwards on his head, over his long, wavy, black mane and set some cheap sunglasses on his nose. A joy that springs only from total freedom partly filled his heart. Partly, because his newly lost love filled the rest. He climbed on his modified chopper and jumped onto the Pacific Coast Highway (Route 1) before he assumed the interstate at the start of I-10 to head east. Dixie had decided to go to Vegas. He had decided to have nothing to do with Donna Dixon. However, as he passed the turnoff for USC, over the Harbor Freeway, Dix caught a fleeting vision of the silhouette girl. Now, he reasoned, if Donna's husband could help lead him to that vision of loveliness ... The sign for the Santa Ana Freeway appeared, when, without being conscious of what he was doing, Dix took that exit southeast. If this Big Jim could shed some light on who Dix really was, then Dixie reasoned maybe he could find that girl and maybe himself, too.

As he followed I-5 south, the smog burned off. With his long hair, flying in the breeze, trailing behind him, Dix felt as though he owned the road. That's what

came of gliding a suped up CB750 at high speeds down the coastal highway. When he approached Capistrano Beach, where the deep, dark blue of the Pacific Ocean came into view, Camp Pendleton loomed ahead of him.

Semper Fi! Once a Marine, always a Marine!

Even though Dixie could remember nothing about his service experience, except the last few months when the Corps had taught him to bugle, Dix felt like a Marine. He wore that red, gold, and black tattoo, at the apex of his left arm. *Semper Fidelis* was scripted on the two streamers above the red and gold globe and blue anchor, which comprise the emblem of the United States Marine Corps. He knew how to break down his rifle, how to clean it, how to fire it. How to fire it? *Hell, I was rated "Expert."* He knew the close order drill, how to march precisely. He could blow "Taps" or "Reveille" or any other damned bugle call in the manual. He knew field hygiene, how to handle a pugil stick, pack his equipment, fix a bayonet and perform the manual of arms. He knew a rifle from a gun. He knew what was for pleasure and what was for fun. He knew so much. Yet, he could not recall boot camp, ITR, combat or how he came to be injured. The Corps had bequeathed an unwanted Christmas present upon him back in '73. They had kicked him out into the world alone on a "medical." Yet, as a former Lance Corporal, Dix still felt a kinship with the Corps. He didn't know why.

Dixie had passed by Pendleton nearly a dozen times a month during the past fall semester, usually on Big Jim's Honda. He had traveled back and forth to visit Donna and the kids, though not so much recently, because his baseball schedule had prevented it. Each time he passed the Camp, he wondered if he should stop to visit, to ask if anyone knew him. Always, he had thought better of it, figuring maybe the MP's would locate his medical file and call the white coats down on him. Dix had always thought that not stopping was probably a wise decision on his part, so he kept right on past the famous camp now, as he always did.

He rode along next to the deep blue Pacific, free as a bird. The bike rumbled smoothly, powerfully beneath him. He had not yet come close to letting all those horses run. Typically, the hairs on his arm and back of his neck stood up when he rode fast out on the highway. He exited I-5, just south of La Jolla at Highway 52 following it less than half a mile before he turned left into Donna's development on Regents Road. Dixie took this first left onto Pennant Way. As a ballplayer, Dixie had always liked that street name. Next he followed the first right into San Hacienda Court and Donna Dixon's house. He kick shifted into neutral, cutting the engine to appease the neighbors, gliding noiselessly up to Donna's home.

Technically, Donna's development was in something called East Clairrette. Yet, when people asked him where his girlfriend lived, he had always said, if he replied at all, that she lived in La Jolla. La Jolla was just the other side, coast side, of I-5 and the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe railroad tracks. Everyone knew La Jolla, while most had never seemed to have heard of East Clairrette.

When he stopped in front of the small, one-story, two-bedroom white stucco house, Dixie planned to stay only long enough to see if Donna's husband could

help Dix find out who he was. Before he walked up to the front door, the young man removed his batting helmet and cheap sunglasses. Suddenly, conscious of his appearance, he clamped on his false ear and then, quickly, from his pocket, he snapped on his fake, gold caps over his two upper dentures. *What a mess I am.* Actually, he was shocked that Donna or any woman for that matter could love him and his stuttering, amnesic, carved up carcass.

He looked over the tiny, two-bedroom, white, stucco bungalow with the red tiled roof that he had come to think of as home. Well, he sure could not think like that anymore. From the street he spotted the cracked window in the boy's bedroom. He had promised Donna he'd replace it, but she had said she would take care of it. He guessed she had forgotten. Dixie reminded himself that Donna had a lot on her mind, raising her kids and running her own business, as well as her household and all by herself, too.

He spotted Andre's big wheel in the driveway and pulled it into the yard, out of the way of Donna's Chevelle station wagon. Dixie rang the door bell. He was nervous as hell. How many times had he rung this bell in the past with high expectations, expectations for acceptance, love, joy, even pleasure? And had them all, everyone, fulfilled beyond his dreams? But now, he seriously considered making an about face, when the door opened.

Little Andre let him in. Both boys jumped all over Dixie, wrestling and hugging him at the same time, as he entered, grinning from ear to ear.

"Hey Dixie, we saw you on TV yesterday! You were great!! You really creamed that ball," enthused the nine-year old Little Jim.

"Yeah, Dixie, ya really whammed it!" added kid brother Dre. The six-year old smacked his hands together for emphasis, so hard that his head shook. Dixie beamed at the two grinning youths and knelt down to look them in their eyes. "Well, I got a little lucky, ya know? He just happened to throw it where I was lookin'." Andre laughed and took advantage of Dixie's stooped stance to climb up onto his broad shoulders. Dixie laughed.

"Ya 'cold-cocked it,' Dix. Isn't that what you always say?" asked Donna, smiling broadly as she strode toward him between the hutch and the back of the sofa. She greeted him with a warm, long, close hug. Dixie stood up to receive her but he could not return her enthusiasm. His arms hung stiff at his sides. His grin dissolved into a frown as she hugged him. With Andre riding upon his broad shoulders, Dixie stood stiffly with his hands in his pockets, looking past her, cold to her touch. She dressed in dungarees and a plain, front-buttoned, pink cotton blouse. She wore her hair in thin, curving front bangs and a pony-tail. As always, she looked remarkably well. His fiancée whispered negatively upon his coldness toward her, while Big Jim's wheel chair hummed his way in from the bedroom hallway on the other side of the cramped living room.

In Big Jim, Dixie saw half a huge black man in a motorized wheel chair with a left arm that was amputated just below the shoulder. He looked to be in his early thirties with a broad nose, a receding hairline encroaching on his tall "afro" and a

full thick, black beard. Big Jim's greeting made those of his family seem small by comparison.

Initially, he simply stared at Dixie, mouth agape, studying the young man from head to foot with a concentrated stare. All eyes waited to see what the paraplegic would do next.

"Son'bitch! You old son'bitch," he whispered under his breath in disbelief, shaking his head in awe. Then, the excited, disabled vet appeared to jump in his chair and almost screamed, "YOU OL' SON'BITCH! DAMN IT! COME HERE, NICKY BOY!"

Dixie looked at the paraplegic uncertainly. Donna led Dix by his left hand over to her husband with Andre hanging onto Dix's shoulders and Little Jim holding onto Dix's bad right hand. Little Jim let go and Big Jim took hold of Dix's right hand with the only good hand he had. Dix felt Jim's powerful grip, as he pumped and squeezed his old comrade's mangled paw. Big Jim pulled Nick (and by default Andre) down to him, where Jim could hug his old buddy and former comrade-in-arms, as he whispered into Dixie's ear.

"God bless you, Mann. I thought you was dead, I thought ... " His whisper trailed off, as tears moistened his eyes. "It's OK, Mann", he sniffled. "We did it, Nick, we survived, Baby! We SURVIVED! We did it!" Big Jim raised his hand in a fist as though he were pulling on something. "I 'hung on' just like you said, Mann. Yeah, it's OK, now. It's OK." Then he took hold of Dixie's still outstretched hand. Big Jim seemed to be trying to convince himself more than Dixie. He held onto Dix tightly with his lone hand.

Then Big Jim spoke softly into Dixie's ear:

"Hang on Mann! You hang on in there, Big Jim. That bombshell of a wife and your kids are waitin' for ya. You hang on in there, Big Jim. Ya heah me, boy? You got some livin' to do. YOU HANG ON!" Big Jim withdrew his head from Dix's ear to look him in the eye. He spoke in a normal tone, but tears brimmed in his eyes. "Remember that, Nicky? Them was the last words you ever spoke to me, before that mortar hit. And I been hearing 'em reverberate in my brain ever since, even in the coma. Remember when you told me that? 'Hang on, Mann?'"

Dixie backed away so he could look the man in the his moistened eyes. Solemnly, he let little Andre slide down off his right shoulder to the blue shag carpeted floor. Both kids backed off instinctively, allowing the grown men a minute between themselves. Dixie looked right through Big Jim. He felt nothing. There was no recognition whatsoever. Dixie shook his head negatively, simply whispering "No." Big Jim peered hard into Dixie's eyes, looking for even the smallest sign of recognition, but Dix gave none. Dixie's face was blank. Obviously, they were both disappointed. Big Jim sniffled.

"Well, it'll come back to ya, Mann. Just give it some time. Hell! It did for me, ya know. I lost my memory for a while, too." He let go of Dixie's hand. Dixie nodded, but, based on his experience, he did not share the big man's optimism. Then Big Jim called to his wife, "Get us a couple beers will ya, Donna?" He

dismissed her like he would a strange waitress. The healthy blonde exited to the kitchen to play waitress. Big Jim asked, "And what else Nick? You hungry? Had lunch?" Again, Dixie shook his head negatively. He wanted to ask why Big Jim called him Nick, but he did not get much of an opportunity to talk. Big Jim yelled into the kitchen, "Hey Donna, fix Nicky something to eat." Then to Dixie, he asked, "What would you like? Think we got some hamburger meat left over from last night. What would—"

"Li-ver-wurst is O-K." Dixie was nervous. He spoke slowly with concentrated effort. He did not want his sorry speech to betray him in front of Big Jim.

"Sure, liverwurst. Hey Donna! Hey!" Mrs. Dixon returned with the requested two bottles of Olympia, which she handed out to her husband and his guest. "Hey Donn, Nicky wants a liverwurst sandwich. You think you could—"

"Sure, I'll get you one Dix, er, Nick."

Big Jim asked, "What do you want on it Nicky Boy?"

In a motherly tone, Donna answered, "I know how he likes it, Jim. I'll take care of it." She left for the kitchen. Big Jim did a double take and furrowed his brow. Dixie heard the refrigerator door open and shut. He sipped on his brew calmly.

"Oh yeah, that's right. She told me how ya'd come down and visit. Take the kids to the zoo and stuff. Damn nice of ya, Nick! Damn nice thing to do, when you didn't even remember me. Well, you was always kind hearted, Nicky.

"One Gook, one bullet! Remember that? Hey! You didn't want 'em to suffer. And they didn't! Ha! Ha! You'd nail 'em boy. "Poof! Poof! With that silencer?" The big man's smile waned, as he watched Nick sip on his beer politely without comment, without acknowledgement. The boys sat on the couch against the wall, oddly quiet. "Yeah Mann, well. She told me how she run into ya over at Kaneohe, 'bout how ya was shot in the head and all. You running into her like that. That was a helluva coincidence, a helluva of coincidence!"

"OK, come and get it," called the woman of the house from the tiny dining room where she had set a place for Dixie to eat his liverwurst sandwich.

Big Jim permitted Dixie to push his motorized wheel chair into the dining room with the boys tagging along behind. The place looked exactly as Dixie had remembered it. There was the light brown, oval dinette set and the kitchen counter that separated the kitchen from the dinette area, leaving just enough room between the end of the counter and the refrigerator to swing open the double doors of that appliance. Dixie moved around the counter behind Donna to wash his hands in the kitchen sink, as though he had done it many times before, which he had. He felt Big Jim watching him curiously as Dixie comfortably made his way around the Dixon kitchen. Dixie tried not to notice Donna's beaming face as she followed his every move, but Big Jim noticed.

"Gee, Donna. Don't remember you grinning like that when I come home the other day," remarked Big Jim matter of factly.

"Well, I, I was in shock that's all, Jim," replied Donna finally taking her eyes off their guest to look at her husband.

“I see, but having Nicky in your kitchen don’t shock ya none, hunh?” Donna looked away without replying. Likewise, Dixie remained silent as he sat down at the dining room table to eat his sandwich. Then Donna asked if Dixie needed anything else, but he did not.

In silence, Big Jim watched Nick eat and drink. The kids were asking Dixie to play whiffle ball with them when he finished. He was about to agree when Big Jim nixed the idea, saying Nick and him had business to take care of after lunch. Big Jim’s tone sounded ominous. Big Jim noticed Dixie’s missing finger joints as he ate his sandwich with both hands, although he had said nothing about it when the two had shaken hands.

“Know how you lost them fingers, Nick?” With a mouthful of liverwurst, Dixie shook his head negatively. “Ambush!” Jim became excited and his coal black eyes lit up.

“We was reconning this village, see? Them gooks were supposed to have intelligence regarding the location of some American POW’s. The village was supposed to be friendly—SUPPOSED TO BE—what a crock o’ crap! You was on point, like you always was, unless you wasn’t covering our asses, when these “friendlies” opened up with R. P. G’s. You didn’t have a chance, Mann. You threw your hand up in front of your face and turned your head instinctively. That’s how you got them scars on your neck face, too, and lost an ear ... Although, I’ll be damned! Looks like that ear grew back.” Jim studied Dix’s ear with interest.

Dix swallowed his mouthful of sandwich. Then he set the sandwich down on the plate, to pull his ear off. As he chewed and swallowed, he handed the fake ear to Big Jim, who marveled at how real the fake appeared and felt. The kids marveled, too, as they always did. They wanted to see and handle it again. Big Jim spoke to his wife, “Donna, did you see this? Really something isn’t it?”

“Ummm, yes, it is.” She smiled weakly. Donna’s blasé response seemed to irritate her husband. “Like another beer, Dixie?,” she asked pleasantly.

“Ple-e-ease.”

“I think I’d like one too, Donna,” said Big Jim a bit testily. He returned Dixie’s ear, which Dixie reattached as before. When Mrs. Dixon served the beers, she stumbled a bit because she couldn’t take her eyes off her fiancé. Big Jim made an announcement.

“Donna, think you oughtta take the kids out to the zoo or somethin’. Nick and I got some serious things to discuss.” The kids yelled for joy. There was only one San Diego Zoo. They scampered into the bathroom to take care of business before they left. Big Jim asked, “Have we got enough beer?”

Donna was miffed at her dismissal and her actions reflected her displeasure. She rolled her hands into fists and dug them into the sides of her broad hips. Donna bit her lip, before she admitted there was a case of Olympia in the garage.

“Well great, bring it in and put it in the refrigerator,” ordered her husband impenitently. Donna was about to yell at him, when Dixie rose abruptly, still

swallowing his sandwich. He rested his hands on Donna's right shoulder to calm her, as he pivoted toward her and away from her husband.

"I'll g-g-get it." He made eye contact with her and the red in Donna's face faded like mercury dropping in a newly cold thermometer during a sudden storm. Dixie took a swig of beer and went out the side door and down the steps into the garage, but he was unable to find the beer. Donna came out with the car keys. She had left the Olympia in the back of the Chevelle station wagon. When she opened the trunk for Dixie, the lid flipped up blocking their view of the dining room door. Donna took advantage of the brief opportunity to push him toward the driver's side of the tailgate and wrap her arms around her fiancé. She kissed him passionately. The suddenness of her embrace caught Dixie off guard. He responded involuntarily, before he gripped her forearms firmly, removing them from his neck. He whispered harshly.

"s o-o-o-v-a-h tw-tweenus, D-D-Donn.'S O-O 'sdun!"

"No, Dixie don't say that." She whispered softly but quickly. Her eyes darted furtively to the kitchen door and back. "Don't even think it. We can work something out. I know we can." Her pleading countenance did not dissuade him.

Dixie pulled her arms down in front of him, squeezing her forearms in his strong, athletic hands until he hurt her. As she grimaced, Dixie glared into her eyes to repeat his earlier conclusion. "O-O-O-DUN!"

Big Jim had rolled himself to the dining room-garage door. "You all need a one-armed man to help ya with that beer?"

Dixie picked up the case and shut the wagon door. "I g-g-got it." He pushed past Mrs. Dixon, as he remarked, "Hope you en-en ... uh, lahk sa z-z-zoo."

* * *

Mrs. Dixon and her two boys departed for the afternoon, leaving the two men to talk and drink, and drink and talk. That day, Dixie learned much about his tour in Nam, before Big Jim passed out in his wheelchair in a drunken stupor. Shortly later, Donna returned with a Colonel Sanders Kentucky fried chicken dinner. Dixie knew it was the boys' favorite food. Donna liked it, too. Partly because the traditional, ready-made meal also made things easy for her on Sundays.

Dixie had put Big Jim to bed. Donna asked if Dixie had emptied the big man's urine bag first. When he said he had not, because he did not know that he should have, Donna cursed him. She disappeared into the master bedroom to check the bag's contents. As she feared, with all the beer her husband had consumed, the bag was full, even ready to overflow.

She came back into the dining room to ask Dixie's help, as the boys chowed down without waiting for their mother. It was after seven and they were hungry. With great difficulty, the half-drunken Dixie and the over taxed Donna worked together to place the snoring Big Jim into his chair and wheel him into the bathroom, where Donna emptied the bag into the toilet. The pungent odor of the big man's beer-laced urine nearly overpowered them. She emptied the bag, re-inserted his catheter, which had fallen out, washed her hands and then helped her

semi-drunken lover carry her even drunker, paralyzed husband back to bed. The whole process took some little time and would have been comic, were it not so pathetic. Big Jim still had both his legs and he was a big load. By the time the pair of ex-lovers had cleaned up and returned to the kitchen, the kids had finished eating and were watching Walt Disney on the tube.

Donna threw up her hands at the mess the boys had left on the dining room table. She was about to lay into them, when Dixie intervened, as he had earlier. He knew Donna's temper. He had been on the receiving end of it more than he cared to remember. He offered to clean up the mess. Donna railed at him, claiming he could hardly stand up himself, but he managed to clean off the table nonetheless. Evidently, it amused her to watch him do so with his groggy, overly exaggerated, but patient fastidiousness. When he had finished, she set the table for the two of them. She liked Colonel Sanders, too. She remarked that his slogan about his chicken being "finger lickin' good" was true, in her case anyway. She and Dixie ate together in silence.

Walt Disney concluded. The boys, Andre and Little Jim, asked for Dixie to put them to bed. He told them to get ready, so they did. They always minded Dixie well. Getting a meal in Dixie helped sober him up a little. He took the kids into their bedroom to pray. They knelt beside the lower bunk, one boy on either side of him. The boys' mother stood in the doorway, surreptitiously. She had watched this scene before, enjoying it many times. It warmed her insides to see the virile, handsome, war hero, get down on both knees to pray with her fatherless, formerly fatherless, children. This was just one of the many little things that had so endeared Dixie to her, that caused her to love him in a way, she had never imagined possible. He had given her hope.

The three boys prayed together.

"N-Now I lay me d-down to sleep ... I pr-pray the Lord m-my soul to k-keep ... If I should d-die before I wake, I pr-pray the Lord ... m-my soul to t-take. God b-bless Andre and Little Jim and M-Mommy and Da-Daddy! A ... men."

It was a simple prayer that Dixie had taught the boys. He had no idea where he had learned it, but it had seemed appropriate.

"And God bless Dixie!" piped up Andre whose broad nose, dark skin and facial structure imitated his father perfectly. The six-year old smiled broadly revealing a gap where his upper front two teeth should have been. Dixie removed his gold covered upper dental plate to mimic the boy's smile, causing both boys and their mother to giggle.

Little Jim asked, "Dixie, are you gonna stay with us, like you said you was and marry Momma, like you said?" Dixie looked to Donna, wondering if the boy's mother had put him up to posing that question. Dixie understood that the kids probably remembered him better than they did their own father. Donna read Dixie's mind and met his questioning gaze, by shrugging her shoulders and shaking her head. Dixie sighed, taking a boy in each of his arms. He reinserted his dental plate with the fake gold caps.

“You know Little J-Jim, I su-su-sure would like to d-do j-j-just that. Be-Believe me, I would. Be-Because I love your ma-mother and I la-love you and Andre.” Dixie slowed his speech to keep from stuttering. The kids were used to his difficulties, saying nothing about them and waiting patiently for him to finish. “I don’t ... know if there ... is anything else that ... could ... ma-make m-me happier than to st-stay with you all ... But ... I, I can’t do it. N-Not n-now. N-Not with your D-D-Dad coming home. See, you won’t ne-ne-ne-eed me, ne-neither will your mo-mo-mother You have Big Jim n-now. He is your true father ... No man ... c-can take better ... c-care of you all than, than he ca-can.”

“But we don’t know him like we know you, Dix. And he can’t play ball with us like you do,” countered Little Jim.

“You will you will ... g-get to know him, Little J-Jim. You’re g-going to g-get to know him very well. And you know him n-now ... even though you do-don’t realize it. You know ... why?” The boy shook his head. “Be-Because he is inside of you, b-both of you. He helped your ma-ma-mommy to make you. If it weren’t fo-for ... Big Jim, neither of you would b-be alive. You’ll see. Now, hop-p-p in b-bed.” Little Jim climbed into the lower bunk.

Dixie picked up Andre and threw him playfully onto the top bunk. He tucked the boy in as he kissed the youngster on the forehead. Andre threw his arms around Dixie’s neck, hugging him tightly. Dixie patted him on the head and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. Then, he treated Andre’s older brother in the lower bunk in like manner.

Andre asked, “Dix? Where will you go?”

“Dunno for sure ... Guess I’ll head up to Vegas to play b-ball. Think some of them ca-casinos sponsor teams. I’ll ca-catch on. And try to f-find my ... f-folks, maybe f-find out who my own da-da-dad ... mom are.”

Little Jim replied, “He still can’t play ball with us like you can.”

“Well, he can’t run ... b-but he gets around real well ... in that ch-chair. And he’s got a pow-pow-powerful g-grip Nearly made m-me cry today, when we ... sh-shook hands.”

“Did he really Dixie?” asked Andre, wide eyed.

“You b-bet he did. You b-boys had be-better jump ... when he says to j-jump. If, if he gets ... hold of you with that pow-powerful right hand ... Wheweee!” Dixie shook his head in an exaggerated fashion. “He can put a hurt, hurtin’ on ya in a hu-hurry! N-Now that’s enough ta-talkin’! Time ... to get you ... some rest You all st-still have to, to get up for sc-school in the ... m-mornin’.”

Little Jim asked, “Will you take us to school tomorrow Dix, on your cycle?”

“May-be, if y’all g-go right to, to s-sleep ... N-Now, that’s it. G-g—goo’ n-night, fellas!” Donna called out softly, “G’night boys” and left the room.

Dixie backed out, switching off the overhead light, and closing the door without pulling it all the way shut. He walked into the kitchen to help himself to another beer out of the refrigerator. Then he slid open the glass doors to sit out on the patio. Donna finished cleaning up from dinner, snatched a beer for herself

and followed her fiancé outside. She sat down in the chaise lounge facing her lover. Dixie was sitting on a patio chair, which doubled as a waiting chair for Donna's clients during the day. He was enjoying the sweet summer night air and the soft scent of the lemon tree. The tree grew at the back of the Dixon's small lot, next to their cinderblock back wall that separated their yard from an alley. Beyond the alley was a park filled with trees and beyond that the railroad tracks.

Neither spoke for a while. In the twilight, Dixie observed the heavens trying to discern some of the constellations he had learned about in astronomy class. From experience, Dixie knew this was Donna's favorite time of day, just after she had put the kids to bed and cleaned up the kitchen. She could finally give it a rest, relaxing with a glass of wine or, in this case, a beer out on her patio. She had explained to him how at such times she had felt such a peaceful sense of relief, a release that she felt at no other time, except after Dixie had just made love to her. Many of their more notorious love scenes had started right out here on the patio. That thought made Dixie uncomfortable right now, out here with Mrs. Dixon and with Mr. Dixon asleep inside, just a few feet away.

"That was a helluva a speech, you just made to those kids in there, Dix. Yep, one helluva speech!" Donna spoke without looking at him, as she untied her pony tail, shook out her hair and let down her long blonde locks.

Dixie eyed her studiously for a few seconds, while he sipped on his Oly, disdaining to reply. She wore blue dungarees and a short sleeved, pink shirt that buttoned up the front and sported a round, scalloped, dainty collar. She had tied the shirt-tail at her midriff, baring her abdomen. Now Donna tried to draw him into conversation. She turned toward him, unbuttoning her shirt front down to the knot of the tied tails. She spread out, revealing a lacey, pink half-brazier.

"Are you growing a moustache, Baby, or did you just forget to shave today?" Dixie ignored her, returning his attention to the heavens. Once again, they drank their brews in silence. Finally, Dix got up.

"Where you goin', Honey?" asked Donna urgently.

"Get my s-s-saddle ... b-bags and b-bedroll Sleep under ... la-la-lemon tree ta-ta-tonight."

Donna rose to catch him as he entered the house. She took hold of his forearm from behind him. Dixie stopped without turning around to her. Mrs. Dixon pleaded:

"Look Baby, please, don't stiff me like this. Please don't! Big Jim! Well, I don't know how long he can stay here. I mean I can't nursemaid him twenty-four hours a day. Darn it!" Still holding him by the arm, Donna leaned forward to try to gain his attention by looking him in the eye, "Dammit, Dix! He's worse than a kid to watch and take care of. You saw what happened tonight with his pee bag and that's just the tip of the iceberg. The kids were right. Big Jim can't do for them, what you could—or for me either, Baby, for that matter. He never did." She eyed him coyly, hopefully.

Dix ignored her and broke free of her grip to move into the house. She caught hold of him by the arm again, wheeling him around to face her this time.

“Really Honey! He can’t do for me what you can and he never has, even before. You must know that. But then I don’t think anyone else could either ...”

She eyed him plaintively for a few seconds before she threw her arms around his neck, kissing him ardently. Dixie tried to hold back, but the cumulated effect of a day’s worth of beer on his brain, combined with his terrific love for her, overcame his reason. He gave in to return her passion. Their embrace lengthened as her hands began to roam. Because of the baseball season, they hadn’t been together since he had proposed to her during Spring Break three months ago. She placed his hands upon her where she wanted them, but the young man balked.

“No D-Donna, ca-can’t, ’s wrong.”

“How would you know?” she asked indignantly.

“’cause ... it, it feels wrong. I s-sorry, D-Donna. N-not that I don’t want ... ’s been a while, bu-bu-but ...”

The earthy blonde’s would-be lover slipped out of her grasp to retrieve his things from the Honda, parked out front. Curiously, she let him leave without incident. When Dixie returned to the back yard, she had disappeared. He heard the shower running in the bathroom. Dixie shrugged and spread his sleeping bag over the crabgrass, under the lemon tree, against the corner of the back yard’s seven-foot high cinder block wall. Dix waited for the bathroom light to go out, before he took advantage of that facility.

After he had gone inside to prepare himself for bed, Dixie returned to his sleeping bag beneath the lemon tree. As he approached the bag, it came alive. He opened his bedroll to find Donna, smothered in her usual lilac perfume and little else but the ultra sheer, bright blue, full-length negligee he had bought her last Christmas. (That baby had set him back a couple bills, but it had been worth every penny as far as he was concerned.)

She lay, half reclined on her side with her left elbow propping her up. Her right leg lay straight out with her toes pointed at him. Her left leg lay on the ground, bent seductively at the knee, with the flat of her left foot up against the unbent right knee. “Boo! Hello, Sweetie,” she teased.

The sheer, blue mesh garment was woven from an exquisite French make with long, flowing sleeves which gathered at the wrist. The nightwear featured little delicate, cuffs that extended beyond the wrist in the form of ephemeral tulip-like petals. The same tulip-like feature applied to the upturned collar. A pair of long deeply cut but narrow lapels stemmed from the collar down to the navel, where a single blue strand of satin ribbon tied the whole delicate affair together. Donna had tied the blue satin ribbon belt neatly in a bow and just tight enough. The ribbon belt was tied neither too tight to cause the material to bunch and overlay itself nor so slack as to lose the definition of what lay beneath it. Blue was her color and she wore it magnificently. *Especially when it’s darn near invisible.* Dixie’s heart flip-flopped.

Donna's combed, honey-blond hair, still wet from the shower, set off her angular Scandinavian face. Two long, golden curved hair strands led his gaze naturally downward. She whispered to him in an artificially husky octave.

"Come on, Baby. I know you want to. Maybe more than me, though I doubt that. Come now, like you always do." She smiled playfully and extended her right arm with open palm in a generous invitation, expecting his surrender.

Dixie shrunk to his knees, as if her natural, bright, blonde and blue beauty held a spell over him, drawing him to her like a powerful blonde-blue magnet. He had never known a woman like her. Now Donna's dark blue eyes sparkled like the Pacific Ocean in the sunlight. And her large white teeth rose and fell like the ocean's white caps between her drawn, lipstick-red lips. Those lips, she had enhanced just for this occasion. Freckles were evident beneath her deep tan as they lay across her ever so slightly upturned nose. He reached to embrace her, as she sat up to kiss him. He was about to cave, but as they kissed, a sudden sick feeling overcame him. So potent was the sickening sensation in the pit of his stomach that he gagged. Dixie feared he might vomit.

"What's the matter, Honey? What's wrong?" Donna asked, full of concern.

"I, I feel ... si-si-sick. C-can't do it Donn. Just ... can't. Sor-soreee, Ba-beee."

Exasperated, Dixie's fiancé rose to her knees. She threw back the flanks of the negligee behind her in contempt. Her long hands lay flat against her thick thighs, holding back the flanks of the dressing gown. Indignant and incensed, Donna ignored the potential stare of any nosey neighbors.

"Are you saying, I make you sick to your stomach all of a sudden, James?"

Dixie was quiet. He dared not look at her. Donna regained her cool and slouched back down upon her elbow, as before. She tugged lightly on the lone restraining ribbon and threw back the gown, leaving little to his imagination. She tilted her head away from his stare but she eyed him seductively. Dixie tried to avoid staring at her.

"You a ba-beautte, Donn' ... a-and you know it, ta-ta-too. I d-dunno ... what the pro-problem is ... Buh's time for ba-ba-bed and you in ma-my spa-'pot-t. So ... p-pease, g-go s-s-seep with your husband and la-la-leave m-me in pa-peace."

Incensed by his rejection, Donna replied flippantly in a voice loud enough for any neighbors to hear.

"Well, I'm s-so D-DAMNED so-so-sorry that I'm in YOUR D-DAMNED SPA-'POT-T!" She mimicked his impediment, articulating each consonant unduly, and drew up on her knees, glaring at him in disgust. Then, suddenly, her tone melted. "Dixie, Sweetie," she pleaded. "You're throwing it all away Baby, just throwin' it all away, Honey. We could have it so good together Dix, the kids and us, just like we talked about." Now Dixie became angry.

"D-Damn it, Donna! That was ... wh-when we thought Big Ja-Jim was ... d-d-dead. He ain't. It's, it's O—O ... done! D-Don't you g-get it?"

Strongly perturbed, Donna rose to her feet now, towering over Dixie who slumped on his knees beneath her with his head bowed

“Look at me!” She demanded. “LOOK AT ME”!

As, Dixie slowly turned his head upward, her scent stole over him, seizing his nostrils. Her feet were spread slightly wider than her shoulders. She stood akimbo with her fists smashed into either side of her inward curving waist, pulling the blue mesh garment snugly up against her torso and breaking the fragilely tied ribbon belt. For a split second, she reminded him somewhat humorously of the Jolly Green Giant on all those vegetable cans in grocery stores. However, as his gaze trailed further up her body, he met her angry stare and all sense of humor evaporated. Under the lemon tree, in the dark of her back yard, Donna looked more like the Angry Blue Amazon. Her steely, blue-eyed stare beat down over her pair of heaving titan torpedoes and stabbed him straight in the soul. Her lilac perfume lapped over Dixie like the waves upon the seashore. She appeared larger than life, a true Amazon, like the silhouette girl in his vision.

“Well, I sure ain’t gettin’ it now,” she replied in disgust, “But we’ll see how things work out! In the meantime, MISTER JAMES DEAN STRICKLER, YOU CAN JUST KISS MY BIG BEE-HIND

Donna provided him that very opportunity by pivoting sharply upon her heels and swinging her broad backside toward him, while she bend over to pick up her bathrobe. She did not bother to put the robe on or to close the negligee what had fallen open. Instead, she straightened and folded the robe over her left arm. Then she sashayed brazenly across her small backyard into the little stucco house with the bright blue negligee flowing out behind her. She lengthened her stride but neither quickened nor slowed from her normal pace as she crossed the lawn, leaving Dixie to contemplate the full extent of his loss. He watched closely as his fiancée slammed the sliding glass doors shut behind her sizable, shapely self and disappeared into the darkness of the sleeping home.

Thankfully, Dixie’s nausea subsided. As he lay himself down to pray and then to sleep, he could not help but think of Donna. She had made certain of that. Between her omnipresent lilac scent that saturated his sleeping bag and the lingering vision of the beautiful display she had just made of herself, which had saturated his mind, Donna had seen to it that Dixie would spend a fitful night. He did. His thoughts wandered, but they always returned to her rough-hewn beauty. However, if he dwelled lustily on his former fiancé, the guilty, sickening sensation in the pit of his stomach returned to silence such lewd thoughts.

For some strange reason, he recalled a bible story from the Old Testament. In his loneliness and his wanderings, Dixie often had found a Gideon’s Bible handy. He discovered many of the stories in that old book fascinated him. They intrigued him much more than what happened to be broadcast at the moment on the rec. hall, dorm or motel room television set, where he happened to be lodging. The

tale that occurred to him now, the one that caused his nausea, was the tale where God, through the prophet Nathan in the presence of the royal court, had revealed King David's guilt in committing adultery with Bathsheba. David had compounded that crime by orchestrating the murder of Bathsheba's innocent, faithful husband Uriah the Hittite to cover up for David's adultery.

Suddenly, Dixie saw himself as David, Big Jim as Uriah and the earthy, voluptuous Donna as Bathsheba. Instead of Nathan, the boys, Little Jim and Andre, were denouncing Dixie, as they caught him in the act with their mother under the lemon tree. The boys appeared to him as wraith-like figures inhabiting a single, oversized, hooded robe. Andre stood upon his brother's shoulders. Dixie could make out only the whites of their eyes, peering out from the dark recesses of their shared, single hood that draped over Andre's head. However, both boys pointed at Dixie with extraordinarily long, outstretched accusatory, skeletal fingers, which emerged from under the droopy sleeves of their baggy robe.

Sick again, Dixie rolled over on his side to retch a dry heave. The shakes overcame him, but he regained his poise and his stomach before it was too late. He managed to keep Colonel Sanders down where he belonged. Dixie panted, breaking out in a cold sweat. He asked God for peace and promised he would abstain from relations with Donna. The insomniac sought repose, but it was elusive. He lay awake for hours, both hearing and feeling the nearby passage of the rumbling two a.m. freight. Eventually, sleep came to him, as it usually did, when he gave up seeking it so diligently.