

Dixie weaved his way out of Donna's development, turning right along Highway 52 for a quarter mile until he reached the Pacific Coast Highway. Before he entered onto the freeway heading south, he pulled his custom-made, dark, prescription glasses out of the left pocket of his brown, leather, motorcycle jacket to protect his eyes. Now he was using the wraparound glasses in place of a windshield for night driving, as the sun had all but set. Moreover, these glasses (unlike the cheap shades he had worn on the beach earlier) were made especially for him, at his request. They actually helped him to see better at night. The experimental dark glasses were something he had picked up on while he was in the Corps, something the Government was trying to develop to enhance night vision for military combatants. While the special prescription glasses did not work well for everyone, Dixie found the glasses sure helped him. With his better than average night vision anyway, the specially made, wraparound, dark glasses helped him see well enough to drive the bike at night without a windshield.

He followed I-5 south to I-8 where he headed east. Wearing his purple and silver Porpoise batting helmet backwards with the "P" above the bill, Dixie was careful to stay around sixty mph. Gas prices were still high from the recent "shortage," so Congress had passed the national 55 mph speed limit law which California police were enforcing strictly. Dixie had heard some of the other sparsely populated western states were not nearly so zealous in enforcing that limit. He thought he would leave California, before he tested that theory severely.

Once he passed El Cajon, he opened up the bike a little to 65. The bike ran smoothly and, as it always did at higher speeds, the hair stood up on his arms under his road weary, brown, leather jacket. His dark mane flapped wildly in the breeze behind him and around his ears. Dixie had to slow down for a few miles when the interstate ran out, turning into Highway 80, then he picked up I-8 again.

He planned to drive nights and sleep days, skipping the sun and heat which could really sap his strength and limit his riding time. He also planned to employ a tactic used by one of his heroes, Stonewall Jackson. The Stonewall Brigade in the Army of Northern Virginia was also known as the "foot cavalry" because of the speed at which they marched. Often they had surprised the enemy by showing up where no one thought they could be, given the time and distance to be traveled. Dixie had read that Stonewall's speed marching secret was to march his men at the double quick for fifty minutes out of every hour. Then the famous general would have his troops fall out by the roadside and sleep for ten minutes, before they repeated the process the next hour. Dix planned to ride for fifty-five minutes on the odd hour and rest by stretching for five minutes. Then he would ride for fifty minutes, resting (or buying gas) for ten minutes on the even hour.

With his reserve tank, Dixie had a little over six gallons to burn. On the highway, the bike got around fifty miles to the gallon so he could travel about four hours, if he could average 70 to 75 mph, before he had to stop for gas. At least, that was the plan. He also carried the extra two-gallon, gas can on his back luggage rack, in case of an emergency. He humped a Rand McNally Road Atlas in his saddlebags, along with anything he might need for overnight. In them, he also carried the fruit and candy Donna had provided for him.

As he sped eastward over I-8, Dixie could not help but think of Donna and the still Voice from within. Leaving her and the kids tore him up inside, but what could he do? That man had survived Hell to come home to his family. Dixie was not going to stand in Big Jim's way. He just could not do it. Dixie wondered what would have happened, if Peppermount had lost to LASU, as everyone, including himself, thought would have occurred. He and Donna would have been on their honeymoon in Mexico when Big Jim had arrived home. Mann! That would have been a real mess—the kid's with Big Jim's family and Donna and him loving each other up, down in Acapulco.

Still, Dixie would have been compelled to step aside. The courts surely would have sided with Jim. Of course, Donna could have filed for divorce from Jim, but Dixie could not have allowed it, not on his account anyway. He would have left just like he was doing now. No matter how he sliced it, even if he did not have this alleged wife looming on the eastern horizon, he would have left. No, Dixie could not rationalize taking Big Jim's family from him. Nope, he could not justify taking the man's wife and kids out from under him, not after Jim had already lost two legs and an arm in the War. Had Big Jim returned home whole, not wanting Donna (as Donna had claimed he had not wanted her before he had left for Nam) well, that would have been different. But that wasn't the case.

Dixie had heeded the still Voice he had felt inside, but now that frigid hole in his soul grew larger and colder than ever, like a giant, gaping freezer burn. Thankfully, Jim had pointed him to this Rock'N'Roll chick, giving Dixie hope, something to take his mind off the loss of Donna. Maybe the "rich bitch back east," as Donna had tagged her, would be able to thaw and fill that hole for good.

Expect the worst, but hope for the best. That's my motto.

Thinking of this Rock'N'Roller, prompted Dixie to play the cassette tape of her which Donna had made for him. His cassette tape player had a slide-out, chrome handle, which he used to tie the player to the bike's left handlebar. The tape player rested over top of the sleeping bag he had tied across the handlebars and over the gas tank. Holding the bars steady with his right hand, he pushed the play button with his left, turning up the volume as far as it would go. He strained against the road noise to listen to her voice, singing the title song, "Lest We Forget." He learned the words to the song. He would learn the words to all the songs, just as he had for the first two *GRT* albums.

The road surface was dry and smooth and there was little traffic. The highway stretched out before him like a ribbon of long black train tracks, with him as the

train engineer. His bike melded with the road. It was as if he, the Honda and the road came together as one mysterious entity. Dixie slipped into a zone, which he often did when he traveled long distances under such ideal conditions.

He did not listen to the radio much. Sometimes he would catch the Wolf Man's TV show out of L.A. late at night. He loved the old tunes, which, of course, were all new to him, and the Wolf Man just knocked him out. The Wolf Man's voice was not too unlike Dixie's own croak. Dixie had no trouble impersonating the famed disc jockey. Solely for his own amusement, Dixie loved to imitate the Wolf Man's commercial for Olympia beer, when no one was around to hear him.

"When you're thirsty, I mean when you're two fist wrapped around the tonsils, squeezing 'em dry kinda thirsty, that's when you go for a NICE ... COLD ... O-LEEEEE!"

Cold? Yeah, well it was cool enough all right. The natural cool of the night desert air intensified at high speeds. Dixie pulled over to the shoulder for his five minute break. He stretched and tossed some imaginary warm-up pitches. He slipped his batting gloves out of his athletic bag and zipped up his leather jacket to fight off the wind-chill. Thus equipped, he hopped back on his bike. Donna had bought him the batting glove because she had complained that the rough calluses on his hands had stunted their lovemaking. However, he had quit using the gloves after he had gone into a brief slump at the start of the season. His hands were as roughly callused now, as ever.

Dixie crossed over the Colorado River, passing through Yuma. He thought he would open her up a little more, testing his speed limit theory. Dixie pushed the speed to 85 mph, although, from some of his Vegas trips, he knew he could push her as high as 150. That's as high as his custom speedometer went. Dixie leaned forward resting his chin in the sleeping bag and placing his feet on the rear footrests. He had not had the handlebars extended so far that he could not perform this biking maneuver comfortably. The hair was standing up on his arms under his jacket big time now and the back of his neck as well. *What a rush!*

Leaning forward also helped cut down on his high protein, bug diet. Dixie was flying. He had stowed his helmet with his gear and now his hair was on fire, just like in the song he had written by that very name. Dix was glad he had taken his fake ear off, so he did not have to worry about losing it. Before long, he felt/heard the engine sucking air, so he flipped the switch to open up the reserve tank. Now Dixie had fifty miles to find an open gas station, unless he used the full, gas can strapped on back. He preferred not to use the can now, if he could help it. Having just passed Dateland, he was presently in the middle of nowhere.

He found a gas station up at the next exit in Sentinel. After Dixie filled up his gas tank, he emptied his bladder tank, which was the usual dual in-out procedure when he stopped for gas. He asked the gas station attendant about speed limit and motorcycle helmet law enforcement in the state, as he headed east. The attendant told him it was pretty much wide open, except on I-10 between Casa Grande and Tucson. The kid suggested Dixie keep it around 65 on that stretch. He also said

he saw motorcyclists without helmets, but he did not know if the police enforced the helmet law. Dixie thanked him for the information and tossed him a Milky Way Bar and chewed on one of his own. He glanced skyward to view the awesome, star-infested, southwestern night sky.

Big Bang! Yeah, right! If the Milky Way Bar had not come about by accident, by random chance, why would a person think the Milky Way had?

Then he recalled the sparse words of the inner Voice: “**What ... about ... your wife?**” That question woke him up. He resolved to move forward and not look back. After all he did not want to turn into a pillar of salt like Lot’s wife.

He jumped back on the interstate. It was two a. m., but Dixie felt good, strong, even though he had been up all day. Normally, he didn’t need much sleep. Since he reached high rapid eye movement (REM) sleep quickly, Dixie could get by on two or three hours of sleep a night, if he had to, but he preferred to sleep five or six. Tonight, in the medium cool, dark, desert air with his adrenaline pumping, his future before him, he felt as if he could ride all night. The candy bar helped.

HOME!

And the thought of that sharp Rock’N’Roller on the album covers combined to form a strange but strong elixir, strong enough to power him through the desert night wind-chill. How he had ached for a home for so long and now—“Well, expect the worst, but hope for the best.” Dixie softly repeated his personal motto, which he had adopted after many disappointments. He figured his next gas stop would be Lordsburg, if he could travel at a 45 to 50 miles per gallon rate. He could manage that mileage if he stayed under 65 mph. If he couldn’t, then he could always use the extra two gallons he carried on the luggage rack.

Thinking of Lordsburg took his mind off the fatiguing wind by reminding him of *Stagecoach*, the 1939 John Ford film, starring John Wayne and Claire Trevor. He had seen it over at Kaneohe. Since he had run the rec. hall projector as one of his assigned duties, Dixie had seen many old movies over there, including all three James Dean films. He focused on those films now as he flew along the interstate, south of Phoenix where I-8 merged with I-10. He slowed down to 65, following the recommendation of the filling station attendant, only to open it back up to 85 after he had passed through Tucson.

Because of the high rate of speed, Dixie was unable to make it to Lordsburg on that tank of gas. He had to stop en route to refuel from his extra gas can. Dawn had just broken. He swung his six-pound rebar for a few minutes and ate some more of Donna’s provisions. He comforted himself with the knowledge that the rising sun would warm him. The eastern horizon was a gorgeous pink, orange and red panorama. He was headed due east, right into the breaking dawn—what an incredibly awesome sight.

Yet, as Dixie rode out again onto the interstate, he thought of Donna some more. He could not help it. Dixie did not blame her at all for holding out on him. Suppose Big Jim had not come home? Suppose Dixie had married Donna? Suppose he had not found out about this Ryzanna Sheeboom, whom he did not

know, for years, or maybe forever? It would have been OK, because he loved Donna. He loved the kids. It would have been all right. He would have been content. You could do a lot worse than Donna Dixon. That was for sure.

He made Lordsburg where he filled up all his gas tanks. Dixie wanted to make the other side of El Paso before he stopped for the day. He was getting tired. He was ready to stop right now, but his goal had been El Paso. As he rode on, the sun rose in the sky, as the temperature rose on the ground. He had to shed his jacket and batting gloves. Dixie had passed through El Paso about 9:30 when he spotted a water tank off to the southwest, just east of Socorro.

He had been in the saddle for over twelve hours and awake for twenty-six. He decided to call it a night. He left the interstate, following an old dirt road down to the tank. The oblong water tank was probably three-quarters of a mile long, about half as wide, and set in a rocky basin. A ten to twenty foot rocky rim protected the northern and eastern edge of the tank, while desert guarded the western bank. But on the southern rim stood a few pinion and juniper trees and maybe a couple cottonwoods. Well, he guessed they were cottonwoods. Dix was not sure. They were shade trees. Weren't all those trees in cowboy movies set in Texas, called cottonwoods? On the north side of the tank, among the rocks, there was a green, metal, trash barrel suspended a foot off the ground by two green, wooden posts.

Some litter lay about the can around what appeared to be an unmarked dirt parking lot, which signaled the unofficial end of the dirt road. Guiding the Honda, Dixie navigated a narrow footpath bordered by outcroppings of rock on his left and the muddy water on his right, as he skirted the east end of the tank. He parked his bike under a few skimpy, shade trees on the south side of the tank. When he dismounted the bike, Dixie felt like he had been on the business end of a jackhammer for a full eight-hour shift. He peed behind one of the trees. Then, he removed his jacket and boots, placing his ankle-holstered Smith & Wesson in his boot near him, for fear of shooting himself in the foot while he slept. After a long swig on his canteen, he bedded down on a patch of dirt in the shade of a juniper. He thanked God for his safe progress and quickly dropped off to sleep.

* * *

About seven hours later, though stiff, sore and sweating, Dixie awakened anxiously to the sound of small arms fire close about him. Face down, he found himself eating dirt. During his daytime sleep he had writhed and wriggled out of his bedroll, as he had followed the shade provided by the juniper above him. Instinctively now, he located the boot with his handgun. He seized the boot as he scrambled across the sun-baked dirt to hide behind the nearest tree.

“Dammit!” Bitten by a burr as he crawled to safety, Dixie tried to pry the burr loose from his hand, while he hid behind the narrow trunk of the tree. He pulled the sticker out of his left hand and tossed it behind him, sucking blood from the wound. Dixie shook like a leaf in the wind as half a dozen shots burrowed into the dirt ground around his bedroll in staccato-like fashion. Dixie was scared. His hands shook. He drew the Smith and Wesson from his booted, ankle holster.

Instinctively, he felt the scars from his war wounds rise up on his scalp at the back of his head. Dixie rested the side of his face against the bark of the juniper, looking to the heavens and releasing a deep sigh of relief that he had not been hit. The smell of the bark seeped into his brain. Dixie closed his eyes and tried to swallow but he had no spit. He had to pee badly and those shots damn near had scared the pee right out of him. He shakily removed the safety on his pistol.

The shots had come from the rock rim atop the north side of the tank maybe a little more than a hundred yards away. The short-barreled pistol wouldn't do him much good at that range. Somehow, he knew the rifle fire was small caliber, probably a .22. That was a good sign. He listened to unexpected laughter and voices carry easily across the open water tank. They were kid voices! Precautious as well as curious, Dix opened his eyes.

"That's enough, Rory. Ya scared the pee out of him!" cackled a boy's voice. A second boy added:

"Yeah, d'ya see him jump? Ha! Ha! He looked like a puppet jerkin' around."

"Yeah and I'm pullin' the strings. HA! HA! HA!" That was a third voice. It must have belonged to the shooter whom they had called "Rory."

Their voices carried clearly over the water in the east end of the tank. He heard them plainly, even though he could not see them. There were three of them, but he had heard only one weapon. However, between a pair of rocks directly across the tank from him, he could see vibrant sunlight glint off what must have been their rifle barrel. *Thank God, they seemed to have only one weapon among them!* One of them shouted, "There he is Rory! Behind the tree!"

Ping! A small branch above Dixie's head fell to the ground about fifteen feet in front and to his right. Dix ducked back behind cover. *Damn! That kid was too close for comfort!* Another voice drifted across the tank, that of a teenage girl.

"There! There, they are Mom. They're shooting at some man over there."

Dixie could not see the girl, but the acoustics afforded by the water tank allowed him to hear her distinctly. The adrenaline rushing through his system heightened his senses sufficiently to overcome his stiffness from last night's long ride. He swore he could hear those kids breathing.

"RORY! What in hell are you doin'?" This was a woman's voice.

"Aw, we was jus' funnin', Ma. We ain't hurt nobody."

"FUNNIN?!? Gimme that damned rifle, Boy!" Dixie stuck his head out from behind the tree cautiously, but in time to see a tow-haired boy reluctantly hand the rifle over to a woman, presumably the boy's mother. The woman angrily snatched the rifle from the kid's hands. She removed the ammunition clip and ejected an unspent cartridge. Then she whacked the boy upside his head smartly with her free hand,, but the kid didn't budge.

"Come with me! All o' ya!" she ordered.

"Where?"

"Around the tank!" She waved the rifle in Dixie's direction. "You're goin' to apologize to this person. All of ya!"

“Aw, Ma.”

“Come on, le’s go!” She prodded the recalcitrant boy with the rifle like a sheriff taking prisoners to jail in an old western movie. The sheriff herded the three outlaws before her, with the deputy, her teenage daughter, trailing behind. They marched single file around the rocky path that rimmed the tank.

Dixie placed his .38 in his right back pocket, as he emerged cautiously out from behind the safety of his tree. He walked down to his bedroll to take a swig out of his canteen, put his boots on over his naked feet and empty, ankle holster. Dixie watched them come in the stifling heat of the late afternoon sun with nary a breeze to salve the baking June sun’s effect upon them. Dixie didn’t know how he was going to react. However, he told himself these were just kids, ten to twelve years old, so he should take it easy, which was his normal *modus operandi* anyway. Drops of sweat rolled down his temple and over his cheeks.

The shooter, who was called “Rory” and his sister who was taller, were both blonde with brown eyes. One of the other kids was heavy with red hair and the other short and slender with brown hair. The girl wore pale blue shorts and a matching top, the boys wore dungarees and white T-shirts. The boys’ hair were all long and shaggy, mop head style, while the girl’s hair was long and straight. The mother was thin, in her mid thirties, with a hint of a pot belly. She wore a green and yellow scarf on her head, with what appeared to be some kind of doodads beneath the scarf to make her hair do what she wanted. Thick glasses obscured her eyes and featured pointy frames that had somehow survived since 1960. The woman looked a lot like the gum-chewing, glasses wearing, scarf sporting, character, Cher invented on her and Sonny’s TV show. Without stopping to introduce herself, the mother prodded and pushed the kids up to within three feet of Dixie, whom she hardly acknowledged. She focused on the sharpshooter.

“My boy’s got sumpin’ to say to you, Mistah.” Her voice was kind of twangy. She prodded the boy in the back with the butt of his rifle. “G’head Rory!” The kid did not budge or speak. “Well, GO AHEAD!” She prodded him again harder.

The freckle-faced kid replied cavalierly, “I’m sorry,” but he appeared to be anything but sorry. His whole manner, was insolent, almost bored, as he stared past Dixie. Dixie thought the kid acted as if he were only sorry that he had been caught. The mother suggested the other two boys apologize as well. Their apologies were more heartfelt. They pawed the dirt with their feet and looked at the ground, too ashamed to look up at their former target. The mother finally looked to Dixie for an appropriate response.

To the latter two, Dixie accepted their apologies and tousled their heads and suggested they refrain from further, similar acts. Then Dixie directed his attention to the shooter.

“Tell me s-son, why da-d-did you d-do something as d-dangerous-s as-s that?”

The kid shrugged his shoulders.

“What dang’rous? I wasn’t tryin’ to hit ya. If I had, you’d be fulla lead raight now. “

“Rory! What the hell do you think you’re saying, Boy?” The mother started to smack the kid but Dixie interrupted holding his open hand up, palm outward.

“That’s OK, Ma’am. Guess your boy must be a pretty fair sh-shot, a real sh-sharpsh-shooter, hey kid?” Dixie bent over to face the kid, placing both hands on slightly bent knees, as if he were playing centerfield.

“Tell me now s-son, why did you d-do it?”

“I ain’t your son. My name’s RORY! And I did it for the fun of it.” The kid crossed his arms over his chest. He was defiant as hell, even arrogant.

“For the fun of it, hunh?” The kid looked Dixie straight in the eye.

“Yeah, wanted to see ya jump, maybe even pee your pants. Yeah, that’s it. Wanted to see how it felt to make someone pee their pants.” He chuckled, smirking, smugly eyeing his groveling buddies with contempt. Dixie raised up straight.

“I see. Well, you damn near su-succeeded. I had to p-pee p-pretty bad, st-still do.” Dixie chuckled to himself. “Wonder what your father will s-say about this?”

“He won’t say nothin’!” The kid’s defiant glare struck an angry chord deep within Dixie. The mother spoke up.

“The boy’s father run off a couple weeks after he’s born. We ain’t seen or heard from him since.” The boy looked up at Dixie defiantly.

“I see, I see. Well, uh, Rory? That’s it, isn’t it, Rory?” The boy stared at his interrogator, without speaking, full of insolence. Dixie held his anger in and approached the kid in a fatherly manner. He placed his arm gently around the boy’s shoulder.

“Well, uh Rory, let’s you and me ta-take a little stroll down to the water for a minute, have a little talk.” The boy shrugged off Dixie’s hand and backed away.

“Well, unless of ca-course you’re afraid of m-me, that is,” offered Dixie.

“I ain’t ascareda nobody,” the kid assured him.

“Well, all right then,” Dixie replaced his arm around the boy’s shoulders and nodded towards the mother, before he headed the recalcitrant toward the tank. Wearing flared blue cords and a T-shirt, Dixie observed the boy closely, as the unlikely pair strolled down to the tank. The others held back, watching curiously.

“I can imagine, it must be ta-tough growing up without a fa-father. See, I don’t know who my old ma-man is, either.” Dixie’s revelation made no dent in the kid who remained defiant. The boy shrugged off Dixie’s hand but said nothing. When they reached the muddy water’s edge, Dixie asked if the water was OK to drink. The kid said it was.

“Well then, let’s ... drink,” suggested Dixie. The sun reflected up off the water at them, causing both man and boy to squint in order to protect their eyes. The water shimmered and breathed like a real, live being. They knelt in the mud, each on one knee, side by side, eyeing each other carefully. They reached down as

one, skimming off the surface water. The unlikely pair bent down, dipping their hands beneath the surface and cupping some water into their mouths.

Without warning, Dixie, in one swift motion, dropped his cupped hand of water and with his left hand, seized the boy roughly around the nape of his neck, forcing his head down into the muddy tank, face first. At the same time, Dixie drew his pistol from his back pocket with his right hand. He pulled the trigger three times in succession, once for the empty chamber and then twice more, firing two quick shots past the boy's ear down into the tank. With one hand Dixie lifted the kid from the water. The boy jumped and jerked beneath Dixie's iron grip, as though he were a jerking puppet with strings tied around the his neck, feet and waist. The kid soiled himself just before Dixie released the pressure around the boy's neck. Close to tears, the would-be sharpshooter threw his wet mop head back, sputtering and gasping, as he fell back against the dirt bank, covering his right ear with his right palm.

The mother and the other kids were shocked. She came running angrily down to the water's edge in her green, deck shoes to assail Dixie, who calmly holstered his pistol inside his boot. When she noticed Dixie was calm, she relaxed somewhat the intensity of her reaction.

"What the hell do you think you're doin' Mistah?" she asked with a sharp nasal twang. "Tryin' to blow his damned eardrums out?"

With the danger past and in control of the situation, Dixie's speech flowed smoothly without stuttering or pauses.

"N-No Ma'am. I believe his ear drums will be just fine, although now Ma-Master Rory here has got his wish. Now he knows exactly how it feels to be so scared that you wet your p-pants."

Observing her son, she noticed Dixie's statement was true.

"Hopefully, he'll remember that feeling before he sh-shoots at s-someone else again." The other kids ran down the bank and caught up to the woman Totally astonished, they stared at the once proud Rory's pants legs. Completely embarrassed and disgraced, Rory scrambled off around the east end of the tank, from whence he had come.

"Look, Ma'am—"

"Riordan, Arletta Riordan's the name! This is my daughter Rachel and this is Terry and Dizzy, friends of Rory's." She spoke confidently.

Dixie nodded to each one in turn. Then he addressed the mother.

"Mi-Mrs. Riordan—"

"MISS Riordan!"

"P-Pardon me, Miss Riordan. I've been sh-shot before, darn near killed as a matter of fact and, while I detest-t firearms as a rule, uh, well, the boy sh-showed no remorse in his apology. To the contrary, you s-saw him. He was outright defiant. I just wanted to give him a sc-scary that might prevent him from repeating his act, maybe from actually hitting s-someone the next time. Better to pee your pants now than kill s-someone or go ta-to jail later, I figure." Before he

continued, Dixie hesitated to insure she was tracking with him, which she was. "It's ta-tough not having a father, I oughtta know. I don't have any folks at all, not that I know of, anyway." Dixie looked away out of embarrassment, before turning his attention back to the concerned mom.

"It's been tough on the boy, without no father and all," she lamented. "On all o' us, for that mattah."

Dixie studied Miss Riordan as she likewise looked him over carefully. Her angry expression had softened some with his personal confession. Her face had relaxed. He felt she had sensed his sincerity. The young matron made peace, by avoiding the subject further.

"Look, uh, Mistah, Sattidies is pizza night at our place, ya know? Now if ya was of a mind ta, you could follah us home and jine us in some carreh-out?" Her Texas twang amused Dixie. Again, he hesitated. He really did not have time for this. She eyed him hopefully. "Maybeh you and Rory can mend fences a bit?" Dixie considered her offer. That last remark persuaded him.

"All right, but I'm buying the pa-p-pizza, OK?"

"You ain't gotta—"

"Anh, anh! Don't forget. I got the p-pistol." He smiled and waved his .38..

"Maybe, but I gotta rifle." She held out Rory's .22 and she chuckled, but agreed, reluctantly to accept Dixie's offer. Had Dixie known he was close to the site of his idol James Dean's 1955 film set for *Giant*, he might not have accepted.

But Dixie followed them, bought the pizza and gave it to the kids. Then he followed the Riordans home to a wooden frame house, in need of a white wash near the railroad tracks, where Rory changed his pants and Dixie cleaned up. After dinner the other two boys went home. Dixie unloaded his bike to take Rory and his sister for rides on his Honda. He showed Rory how to work the bike and let him drive it around, alongside the railroad tracks, with Dixie riding up behind him, his foot on the rear foot brake.

Dixie broke through to the kid, who apologized for the shooting incident sincerely this time, without any prompting from his former target. Dixie returned the favor. It was after eight when Dixie started to leave. However, Arletta Riordan wanted to know if she couldn't have a ride on the bike, too. Dixie looked at the kids, who shrugged their shoulders and rolled their eyes. Their hapless expressions indicated that she was their mom and Dix should please excuse her.

"Sure Mrs. , I mean, MISS Riordan, be glad to. C-Come on and hop on."

"Love ta." She had removed her curlers and the scarf, leaving her near shoulder length hair in a fashionable shag. Miss Riordan had also removed the outdated glasses revealing large soft brown feminine orbs covered with false, long eyelashes.

She don't look half bad, except she's wearin' a little too much makeup. Kinda trashy, but not bad, not bad at all.

"Anythin' special I have ta do?" asked Miss Riordan.

"Hunh? Oh! Just hold on to me. Lean when I lean. Squeeze me twice to stop."

“Why, that’s the best damn offer I had in a coon’s age,” she joked. Dixie laughed. *She’s OK.*

“Might be difficult gettin’ on with that sh-shift you’re wearin’ there. Might wanna change into some s-slacks. Could be embarrassin’ for ya Ma’am, er Miss, if you dress fa-fa-flies up.”

“Em-bar’ssin’? Sounds like fun to me. Cheap thrills. Hell! They’s all so few and far between, I take ‘em anehway I cain git ‘em.” Again, Dixie chuckled.

“OK, hop on board. Any place special you’d like to go, Miss?”

“Wherevah, youah goin’ Huh-neh, Ah’m agoin’, too.” She crawled up behind him. She had a man’s strong jaw and a man’s directness to match.

Dixie laughed as she put her arms about his waist. He thought she was joking, but one look at her had told him she was serious. He knew the look, a hungry, stalking kind of look. He had seen it before. Women seemed to go for him. He did not know why. He used to listen to some of his teammates complain they could never get a date. Dixie never had that problem. Instead, he often was ashamed to have to turn away members of the fairer sex, because he could never cheat on Lori Lei or Donna. They were the only two he had truly wanted to know in the biblical sense. And he could say honestly that he had loved each of them.

Now Miss Riordan was looking at him with that same light of love, or make that lust, in her eyes. In her mid-thirties, she possessed average looks and a slim but average build. Having removed her thick, dated glasses now, she uncovered a lot of make-up and a bony nose that turned a bit sideways. After she had climbed on up behind Dixie, she pushed her modest self firmly into his back. He had no trouble feeling her through his T-shirt. Dixie rode her down highway 20 to the small town of Clint, where he crossed over to the interstate, and headed back to the Socorro exit. He stopped at a filling station to gas up before he took her back home. At her request, he bought her a Dr. Pepper. She gasped as she accepted the pop and told him that was the best ride, of any kind, she had had in some time. “Hell,” she confessed, “it’s the only ride I had in quite a spell.”

Dixie smirked and sympathized. He told her he appreciated that she had a tough job raising two kids without a father. He told her a little about Donna. However, Dixie also said he believed God exists and He sees things. Dixie felt certain Miss Riordan would be rewarded for her trials. It was just his gut feeling. Arletta claimed Dixie was “too good to be true.” She asked him to stay on as long as he liked, but he said he was on a mission to find out who he was. By the time he returned her home, the sun had set completely.

Dixie loaded his bike down, said his good-byes and shook hands amicably with Rory. But before he could ride off, Miss Riordan threw her arms around his neck and kissed him like she was eating a juicy piece of fruit. After she had sucked all the spit out of him, she leaned back, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Just couldn’t REE-sist a little DEE-sert, Huh-NEH! Hope y’all don’t mind.”

Recovering from her ambush, Dixie joked coolly, “Uh, well, the treat’s on me, I reckon, Mi-M-Miss Riordan ...”

“AR-LETTA!”

“All right then, Mi-Miss Arletta!”

“Peaches!” she replied coyly.

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve always been partial to peaches for dee-sert.”

“Well, ma’am, I mean Miss Arletta. I must say you’ve got some very sweet peaches there. Adios!”

He waved to the kids. Then Dixie shoved the Honda into gear and wheeled out of there in a cloud of dust. He couldn’t help but chuckle to himself as he left. For some reason, women, even those who had been total strangers, became amorously friendly once they had ridden behind him on his Honda. *It’s the damndest thing!* He didn’t know if their audacity were due to the mystique of the bike, the thrill of the ride, a sense of mutual trust developed during the ride, or merely the fact that they felt it was warranted because they towered over him when they got off. But for whatever reason, they acted as though they were entitled to seize his head and plant one on him. It never seemed to fail. Of course, they didn’t all go snorkeling for peaches on him like Miss Arletta had just done. But, he couldn’t complain. After all, she was just a lonely, single mom like Donna, doing the best she could. Still, he chuckled roundly at the phenomenon.

Dixie rode out to I-10, where he headed southeast. He left I-10 at the north end of the Davis Mountains to take I-20 towards Fort Worth. The night passed similarly to the previous one. Dixie questioned whether he was doing the right thing by driving at night. At high speeds, the wind-chill was refreshing. The batting gloves protected his hands all right, but his ears and face below his shades became weather beaten.

He had known there were mountains in Arizona and New Mexico, but he never realized there were mountains in Texas. While the nighttime temperature may have been less intense than during the day, the wind-chill factor on his Honda was quite a bit lower. Both he and his bike were getting a work out. The CB750 was a smooth ride, issuing a mild vroom from its four-in-one cylinder. The gyrations he felt from the engine were tight, continuous and low key. He reflected on the Voice inside and Donna. A new, strange tune kept popping into his head, which he could not ignore. *Damn it!* “Arrrgh!” He just swallowed another bug! He turned his head aside to spit out the contents of his mouth. Then he hunkered down behind his sleeping bag for the rest of the ride, peering out over it, as if he were hiding from the enemy. At eighty mph, those darned things stung, let alone tasted like dung.

He stopped for gas in Odessa and again in Fort Worth. The wind chill temperature had raised a good ten degrees once he had escaped the Davis Mountains. The going proved more comfortable. Dixie followed Stonewall Jackson’s lead, exactly as he had planned and the old general’s tactics seemed to be working. He began to look forward to the hourly breaks after he’d go full out

for fifty plus minutes, pushing the bike even beyond 85 mph. However, he had to cut back to 65 once he approached Ft. Worth.

The population was becoming too dense. Although the traffic was sparse at night, along with more towns, came more exits and more Smokeys. Dixie would be lucky to avoid a speeding ticket even at 65 from here on out. He left interstate 20 to pick up I-30, the other side of Dallas. As he gazed at the June Texas night sky, he noted the old song was right: “The stars at night ARE big and bright, deep in the heart of Texas.” The Texas sky overwhelmed Dixie, making him and his Honda feel small indeed, downright miniscule as they rolled as one over the asphalt ribbon that made this high speed journey possible.

Dixie’s goal for the night was Texarkana. He estimated he should be able to cross at least one cotton-pickin’ state in an entire night. *Cotton-pickin’!* Now where did he come up with that phrase? Stuff like this was always happening to him, like when he came up with “dipsy-doodle” as the name for his screw ball. That name had just popped into his head out of nowhere. Why was he the only guy on the team to say “y’all?” or “cold-cock” or “cee’ment” or call a broom a “brum”, a room, a “rum?” No one he knew spoke like that. No one taught him to speak like that, certainly not Rose Rosario. Maybe that’s how they talked back East, back in Maryland. He wondered.

But he’d never find out if he could not cross Texas. However, Dixie did cross the great state of Texas. He did not stop until almost ten o’clock the next morning. This time he chose to bed down in the “40 Winks Motel” in the state border town of Texarkana. He needed to clean up and shave almost as much as he needed to sleep in a soft bed.

Traveling at night had advantages as well as disadvantages. The motel owner was a disagreeable little man of ruddy complexion and graying hair and scraggly beard. He wanted to charge Dixie double, because he had no daily rates, only nightly ones. Dixie argued convincingly that he would be out of his room in time for the owner to rent the same room to another customer that night after Dixie had left. The man reluctantly agreed and Dixie settled in for a good rest.

The only problem was the constant noise around him. The house cleaner walked in on Dixie twice, despite the “Do Not Disturb” sign he had hung on the outside doorknob. Then there were noises from the highway and noises from the numerous guests in the other rooms. He had thought Sunday was supposed to a day of rest. Evidently, forty winks were not all you could get at this motel. Dixie was dog-tired and his body yet vibrated from the long ride.

Incredibly, Dixie had traveled some sixteen hundred miles in a mere two nights. Though he was a young athlete in his prime, the arduous bike trip was beginning to wear on him. While he only had a little over eleven hundred miles left to go, and despite the prospect of sleeping in a real bed, due to the distractions, he needed to pop a couple of Dr. Mandl’s sleeping pills. He got his forty winks and then some. It was a good thing he did so, because, for what lay ahead, he would need all the rest he could get.