

~ Chapter 18: Sweet Sunday Hitch-Hiking ~

Early the next day, Dixie hitchhiked down the coast, toting his USMC sea bag over his shoulder and wearing light blue flared cords and, a white T-shirt. He tried to carry the bag with the least amount of discomfort to the bug bites covering his sunburned back. He was surprised to be so sunburned from yesterday's outing. The clean, soft, white T-Shirt stretched across his back felt as if it were full of starch, rubbing raw the crusted over bug bites and releasing fresh insect juice to seep from the tiny wounds.

Danged uncomfortable! Danged uncomfortable!

Before long, an early-rising family of Chicanos, migrant workers, picked him up in a tan and white 1959 Oldsmobile 88. The car was on its last legs and did not look like it could break forty. A constant stream of blue-black smoke blew out from the exhaust pipe. Dixie learned the family consisted of a papasita, mamasita and three little ones aged one, three and four. They offered Dixie a seat in back with the kids. He had picked up a little Spanish during his time in the Philippines and his two year stint in Southern California, so he enjoyed conversing with the little ones, who were so innocent. The smiling kids wore no shirts and no pants, only diapers or underwear. Dixie thought their lack of attire appropriate for the hot summer's day. They all had big, dark brown eyes and dirty faces and hands, but they were the happiest little kids. He could see the peace and joy in their big brown eyes and he envied them. The younger two were sharing a banana and the middle child offered Dixie a bite of his share, which he held out to Dixie in his grubby, little hand. Dixie thanked him, telling the boy it was all his. Grinning, with big, shining black eyes, the toddler beamed and, with his stubby brown fingers outstretched, stuffed the remainder into his mouth with the heel of his palm. The driver-father was leaving the coastal highway now to go over to Crisfield, so he dropped Dixie outside of Pocomoke City, where Dixie tried to hitch another ride south.

Dix had to chuckle later when a middle-aged couple driving a late model, air-conditioned Cadillac Coupe de Ville flew past him doing about seventy. When the woman passenger spied Dixie hitching, she rolled up her open window and reached over across her body to make certain her door was locked as they sped past. It was as if she were afraid Dixie might jump onto their speeding Caddy to steal her purse. Dixie analyzed the difference between the migrants and the couple in the Caddy—the difference between Democrats and Republicans, he guessed.

While he walked the road's dirt shoulder waiting for another lift, an unknown tune popped into Dixie's head and he couldn't shake it. He could hear it clear as a ringing bell, with complete instrumentation and vocals. This phenomenon was occurring with increased frequency lately. Before he had known who he was, or was supposed to be, he had usually dismissed these infrequent, melodic mental excursions, as part of his whacked out brain waves. Oh, he had written down a few, but mostly he had ignored such phenomena, as he had associated it with his mental disability. However, now that he knew he was supposed to be a musician, a composer, Dixie had begun to nurture this melodious phenomenon. These last two rides had prompted a song in his head, so

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he took out the harmonica he had taken to carrying, since Ryz'n had given it to him that first night at dinner. He figured the thing out in less than fifteen minutes, which seemed remarkable to him. Soon, he produced the catchy little rocking tune about his present hitch-hiking experience, which he entitled "Thumbn' It Now Again,"

Dixie was in the middle of working out the lyrics when he hitched a ride with a self-proclaimed, itinerant, strawberry blond preacher, named Joel. The preacher was driving a 1970, green and black, Dodge Dart Swinger. Joel had a razor haircut and a fashionable ruddy mustache. He dressed conservatively in a black suit and shirt, replete with a white turned-around collar. Although the preacher was seated behind the wheel, he looked to be a little over six feet tall. His right cheek and neck were pock-marked with acne scars. Joel looked to be in his mid-thirties. He and Dixie discussed the Lord, as they drove. However, after several minutes, the preacher began touching Dixie on the leg with the flat of his hand as he emphasized some spiritual point or other. Dixie was slowly getting an uncomfortable feeling. He didn't want to believe the worst of a preacher. He ignored these touches on his leg, knee and shoulder, which occurred with increasing frequency and duration. One time however, the preacher touched Dixie too long in the wrong spot and Dixie complained loudly. To Dixie's disbelief, Joel told him not to be so "touchy." Dixie said he wouldn't, if Joel wouldn't. Dixie's attempt at humor failed to lighten the mood.

Since they were driving parallel to the not too distant sea, the terrain around them was mostly desolate, filled with scrub pines, sandy dirt, and occasional low dunes. They were driving down the center of a long, narrow peninsula between the Atlantic Ocean on the east and the Chesapeake Bay not too far to the west. A few miles further down the Virginia peninsula, the preacher unexpectedly pulled off the road to the right, behind a roadside billboard. Scrub pines and a dune buffered this secluded spot. When Dixie asked why they were stopping in this desolate spot, Joel said he had to take a leak and suggested Dixie do the same. Dixie declined politely and remained seated in the car. Joel walked over to Dixie's side of the car to do his business, in plain view of Dixie, who ignored him. Suddenly, the preacher was at Dixie's door with an open switchblade in his hand, pressing the tip of the blade against Dixie's throat through the open window.

The preacher sneered. "Sunday school's in session, son."

Now Dixie wasn't packing. His mother had taken his S&W Chief's Special from him the other day and hidden it. Moreover, Dixie had left his stiletto in his boot back home, choosing to wear his Adidas running shoes to the beach. He wasn't feeling any too smart about that decision right now. The preacher opened the door slowly and forced his passenger's head through the open window toward him, by pressing the knife into Dixie's throat. Before Dixie realized what he was doing, instinctively, he shoved the car door sharply into Joel's shins. The jerking motion of the door slamming into the preacher pushed Joel's knife up into the underside of Dixie's chin, cutting him sharply. Dixie felt the warmth of his blood oozing from beneath his chin. Dixie's chin and face muscles were held rigid by the edge of the blade, thus mitigating the depth of the cut.

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Joel fell back from the force of Dixie's shove and Dixie was right on top of him, pinning his attacker's right forearm to the dirt with his left foot. Dixie placed all of his weight on Joel's right wrist. Joel dropped the knife, but he attempted to get up off the ground. Wearing his Adidas shoes instead of his square-toed boots, Dixie felt free to nail this creep and did so by promptly kicking him in the face, as if he were a football placekicker making a field goal. The preacher was fading out quickly, but Dixie didn't want him to pass out just yet. He fell upon the jerk, shook Joel and slapped him, bringing him to.

"Hey, hey! Listen up, preacher man! You listening? Say Amen!" Dixie shook him.

"A-a-a-men," babbled the near senseless man.

"Good! Now here's today's Sunday school lesson: God created Adam and EVE, not Adam and STEVE! I believe that lesson is right up front in the good book. If you ever open it, you can't miss it. You got that?"

When the man did not respond because his eyes were fading to the back of his head, Dixie shook him so that his eyes rolled forward, precluding him from passing out. "HAVE YOU GOT THAT?"

"A-a-men!" he gagged.

"Good, now class is out and so are you!" Dixie stepped back grabbing him by the hair and jerking his head up violently. Quickly, Dixie let go of the preacher's hair and drop-kicked him again in the side of his face. His tennis-shoed toe and instep caught the creep right under the side of the chin, knocking him out, flat on his back. As Dixie stared at his handiwork, disgust for the supine, phony preacher welled up within him.

Nevertheless, Dixie forced himself to rifle the jerk's pockets and removed his car keys. Then Dixie picked up the knife and stabbed it into the trunk of one of the scrub pines breaking the blade in half. He repeated the procedure so that the blade was taken off right down to the nub. Then he angrily threw the broken bits of blade and the knife handle into the brush. It was only then, after the danger had passed, that Dixie's hands began to shake, just as they had in the motel parking lot the other night. Nonetheless, if there was one thing the Corps had taught Dixie, besides obedience and loyalty, it was how to defend himself. He had had trouble with guys like this ever since he could remember, but never had he experienced two such serious similar incidents within a few days of each other.

Looking down, Dixie noticed his white T-shirt was blood-splattered from the cut on his chin, which he felt only now. He removed his shirt to stop the flow of blood from under his chin and tied it around his head and jaw, as if he had a toothache. He figured he looked like Jacob Marley in Dickens' classic story "A Christmas Carol."

Dixie opened the Dodge's trunk and extracted the spare tire. He checked the highway, which was barren in both directions. Then he rolled the spare across the road into some dense coastal underbrush behind another billboard. He hopped in the preacher's car and drove it south down the coastal highway to a town called Nassawadox. Dixie turned off to the right onto a deserted, southward winding, side road that was little more than a lane and followed it for a couple miles, until he turned off the road, stopping down a trail among some bushes and scrub pines. The area was

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deserted, the land mostly barren. Dixie let all the air out of the right front tire. He threw the keys in the trunk and shut the lid. His chin had stopped bleeding, so he put on a light blue, cotton, sleeveless crew neck shirt, which he pulled from his sea bag. He stuck his bloodied shirt into the bag.

Dixie stayed off the main highway, opting to hitch down 178 into Bridgetown, where he found a combination general store/service station. He purchased some band-aids, gauze and antiseptic. In the store's filthy restroom, which seemed more concerned with selling condoms than providing clean service, Dixie cleaned up and bandaged his knife wound with some band aids and gauze he carried for such emergencies. He did his best to wash the blood out of his T-shirt. Then he wrung out the shirt and flapped it until it was as close to dry as he could make it.

Outside the store, Dixie found an old farmer in an even older pick-up who was heading down as far as Suffolk to visit his married daughter for Sunday dinner. The farmer didn't say anything about the bandage beneath Dixie's chin. In fact, he spoke very little and, thankfully, there was no touching either. The old goat drove Dixie uneventfully and slowly. However, uneventfully was the key, as far as Dixie was concerned. He welcomed the boring change of pace. He paid the toll for the farmer as they crossed over and through the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, which the farmer dubbed the eighth man-made wonder of the world. Dixie found it to be as impressive as the Golden Gate Bridge for sure. As he looked over the Bay, it all seemed so peaceful. He hoped once he crossed the Bay he would be safe.

* * *

In Suffolk, Dixie had difficulty finding another ride south, so he stopped in a People's Drug Store for a late lunch and a fountain-made chocolate shake. He learned People's was the only place in town open Sundays. While he waited for his order, he tried to wash some of the bloodstains from his lap with a glass of ice water. He thought about the nerve of that joker posing as a preacher. Dixie was angrier about that Holy Joe act than he was that the jerk had cut him with the switchblade. But Dix thought People's made one heckuva of a chocolate shake. After lunch, he savored his shake and walked the hot, dusty streets of Suffolk looking for another ride south. Suffolk was a typical, sleepy southern town with Highway 13 doubling as Main Street. The architecture featured brick and concrete buildings circa the Twenties with hardly a building more than three stories in height. Most of the glass in the town came by way of store front windows. Dixie searched in vain for that southbound lift. An hour later, he got one, though he came to wish that he hadn't.

As Dixie peered at an acoustic guitar on display in a music store's front window, he murmured to himself, "Hmmm, seventy-four, seventy-five." He had no idea how much a guitar cost, but he had always had a hankering for one. Seventy-five dollars for a guitar in 1975 made some kind of weird pricing sense to him. Then he scolded himself. "It's my wife's birthday. So what am I doin' on foot, stuck in this hick town lookin' at guitars?" He kicked the brick wall beneath the store window with the toe of his Adidas, figuring he should be kicking himself in the rear.

"I gotta get a ride outta here, but the dang streets are rolled up."

Out at Home

He stared at his reflection in the window, wondering what was wrong with him that people in this backwater town wouldn't offer him a lift. He studied his appearance objectively through his wrap-around sunglasses. "I look like any other young guy," he grouched. His dark hair was combed back in a wide duck tail on the sides and down over his neck, running a few inches past his collar. Some of his bangs fell awkwardly across his forehead. "Maybe, it's a little long for these folks?" His new moustache had grown in thick and black to match his wide sideburns. "Maybe I should have shaved a little more?" His shades hid his eyes. "Maybe, I oughtta take 'em off?" But he didn't. He pinched his powder blue, sweat-dampened, crew neck shirt, pulling it out and then let go, watching the fabric snap back snugly against his torso. "They prob'ly don't like sleeveless shirts like this one, least ways not on Sunday." He thought his flared blue cords were OK, except for the blood stains on his right inner thigh, which he had been unable to wash out with the ice water from the drug store counter. Dixie had avoided addressing the awkward-looking bandage under his chin. *That* was probably the deal killer for any potential ride right there, but he couldn't remove the bandage just yet and permit that knife wound to bust wide open once more.

"Maybe, I should go call her again, but all's I ever get is a busy signal. She's gonna be ticked at me for sure for not being there and I can't blame her any, either."

As Dixie explored the benefits of self-recrimination, he heard a car door open and shut behind him; however, Dixie was too engrossed in his problems to pay much attention.

"Well, son, you plannin' on robbin' that stoah?"

Dixie jumped and swallowed hard at the sudden nearness of the voice behind him and to his left. Dixie hoped this was not about the preacher man and his Dodge. He turned slowly around towards the street to face his inquisitor. A couple yards away, a man of the law carefully got out of his "Suffolk Police Department" squad car and leaned back against the door. The peace officer stood about six-foot four and he had to weigh over three hundred pounds. He wore sunglasses and an official police Stetson hat. A black leather belt, supporting a holstered pistol, encircled his waist. The man was an intimidating figure, indeed.

"N-No sir, just tr-trying to see how m-much that gui-gui-guitar ca-costs."

"You play the guee-tar, do ya boy?"

"Na-No sir, but I, I was thinkin' I, I might like ta-ta-to try."

"No five-fingah discount, though? Stoah's closed Sundehs, ya know?"

"N-n-no, no sir, no five finger discount. Na-na-no sir!"

"Uh-hunh. Son, Ah'm gonna hefta ask you ta step away from that sea bag, please. That's riiiiight. Now tuhn back 'round. Put yoah hands 'gainst the glass and spread yoah legs." A sparse number of Sunday afternoon pedestrians stopped to stare.

"Have I d-done something wrong, s-sir?"

Dixie watched the officer place his hand over his holstered pistol, when Dixie noticed him spot the blood-stains on Dixie's cords.

"Just do as I say, son."

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Dixie followed the officer's orders to the letter, as he thought this roust had to be about the Dodge and the preacher man. The creep must have come to, thumbed a ride and complained to the cops. The man was frisking Dixie when he spotted Dixie's *Semper Fidelis* tattoo on Dixie's upper arm, at the point of his left shoulder. When the officer was satisfied Dixie carried no weapons, he asked his suspect to turn back around to face him again.

"Take those glasses off boy," ordered the officer. Dixie removed his shades. "So you was in the Co-ah, hunh, boy?"

"Yes sir."

"So was my kid brotha, ovah at Khe Sanh. They told him to hold the lia-ine. He did. Then an R'ah-Pee-Gee landed di-reckly on his hole. That was earleh in Sixteh-Eight. The gen'ruls and pol'ticians decided to 'bandon the place: 'no stray-tee-gic or tac-tiah-cal valuah,' they said." He hesitated and spoke again rhetorically. "Then why was my brothah and the rest of the Twenteh-sixt' Marine holdin' it in the fuhrst place? Why they even therah in the fuhrst place?"

The large officer shrugged his shoulder and then stared down the street into space. "What a waste," he said more to himself than to Dixie. "What a danged waste." He looked down at the sidewalk and shook his head sadly.

Dixie said nothing. What could he say? However, he relaxed a little. Maybe his Corps connection could help him out of this mess.

"How about it, werah you in that wa-ah, boy?"

Dixie was feeling more confident with the officer's revelation about his brother's Marine Corps service. This break gave him not only greater confidence but also newfound poise, which was reflected in his relaxed speech.

"Yes sir."

"With the Twenteh-sixt' at Khe Sanh, werah ya?"

"Don't believe so sir ... Uh, actually, I don't know where I was, sir. Got shot up a bit and lost my memory, sir."

Dixie opened and closed his right hand revealing his missing digits for the officer.

"Ya don' say? Well, maybe yourah the luckeh one afta all. Ya got away with jes' losin' them fangers and some bad mem'ries."

"Yes sir."

"You got a drivah's license?"

"Yes sir."

"Lemme see it."

The officer held out his hand, motioning impatiently with his cupped fingers for the license. Dixie withdrew his wallet from his back pocket and handed over his license. The big man studied the document thoroughly.

"Califohn-I-A, hunh? Wherah's yoah bike now, boy?"

"Back home, in Crest Hill, Maryland, sir. That's up near D.C., sir. Yes, sir. That's where my folks live."

Then he stuck Dixie's license in his official uniform shirt pocket and pulled the pocket flap down over it. Dixie swallowed hard again. That was not a good sign.

Out at Home

“Then what the hell arah you doin’ all the way down hee-ah in this neck o’ the woods, afoot, and lookin’ in closed stoah windehs on a Sundeht aftanoon?”

“Sir, I am tryin’ to get to a place called Kill Devil Hills, in North Carolina, to see my wife. Today’s her, her ba-ba-birthday, sir.”

Dixie smiled hopefully, as he put his two gold capped teeth and the gap between them on prime display. The officer, still hiding his eyes behind his shades, told Dixie to grab his gear and get into the front seat of the squad car. Dixie felt sitting in front, rather than in back behind the cage, was a good sign. There were times it paid to be a Marine.

However, as the officer joined him in the squad car, the interrogation resumed.

“Looks like ya had a ax’dent theyah undah yoah chin. Shavin’ ax’dent was it, son?”

“Uh, yes sir.”

“Had a close shave, did ya boy?”

Dixie wasn’t sure if this was an honest question or a trap.

“Sir. Yes sir, pretty close.”

“Unh-hunh. Ya know they’s a problem back up the road a ways, t’otha side of the tunnel-bridge? Seems a preachah got hisse’f beat up real ba-ad and had his ca-ah stolen just a few hour ago. Don’t suppose you know anehthin’ about that, do ya, boy?”

Dixie cleared his throat and looked straight ahead. He had replaced his shades over his nose, but he still did not want to look at the officer directly. The deputy hadn’t read him any rights, so Dixie decided to play it cool.

“Could be.”

“COULD BE?” The officer’s indignation bellowed unmistakably in an unsuppressed guffaw.

“Well sir, I mean, I mean, it could be that I might could guess at what might have happened.” Would Dixie’s back pedaling save him?

“Guess hunh? Well, g’ohn and guess yo-ah haid off, boy. Now’s time to come clean son, cuz that blood on yoah pant’s leg theyah is lookin’ mighteh s’picious.” Dixie swallowed hard again.

“Ah’m waitin,” goaded the officer.

“Well, n-n-now, sir, it could be, er, it just could be that a young man was hitch-hikin’ ba-back there.”

“Unh-hunh, hitch-hikin’ is E-legal ‘round hee-ah, boy.”

“Yes sir. Well sir, but it could be this young fella was from out of state and didn’t know that, sir.”

“Umm, could be, I reckon. Lak from Cali-forn-I-A, mebbe?”

“Yes, sir. Could be.” Dixie managed to keep a straight face.

“But jes’ the same, son, you need ta unnahstan’, ign’rance of da law is no X-cuse ‘round these heeah pa-ahts. Now g’ohn.”

“Yes sir, I do. I understand. Well now, it just could be that this young man got picked up by a fella who passed himself off as a preacher, but who was really a pervert.”

“A pah’vuhrt? Ha! Ya don’ say? Hmm.”

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“Yes sir. And could be this pervert preacher tried to molest this young hitch-hiker at the point of a knife? And then, the hitch-hiker defended himself, as best as he could, under the circumstances, that is.”

“Unh hunh, at knaife-point, right undah da chin pa-haps?”

Dixie knew this guy was onto him. But, for some reason, he had a good feelin’ about this. He was growing in confidence with every question he answered.

“Well yes sir, could be, sir.”

“Unh-hunh, well, ah’m still list’nin, son.”

“Well sir, could be this hitch-hiker cold-cocked this pervert, left him along the road and took his car.”

“So the young fellah might have stolen this, uh ‘lleged pah’vuhrt’s motah VEE-hicle, is that it?”

“Oh, no sir, no sir, not at all, sir. Could be the young man just drove the car a few miles down the road and left it, see? So this, uh, pervert couldn’t come after the hitch-hiker before he, uh, the hitch-hiker that is, could catch another ride.”

“Ah see. And wheyah maight you s’pose that VEE-hicle maight be right about now, son?”

“Well sir, I suppose—” Dixie turned to look the officer squarely in the eye—“and this is strictly a supposition on my part now, sir. But I suppose it could be about a mile and a half north of a little town called Bridgetown just off on the west side of Route One-Seventy-Eight. Believe there’s an old dirt road there and the car might be found a couple miles down that road on the right hand side in some bushes. But I’m just speculatin’, you understand, sir?”

“Just spec-U-latin’ it could be they-ah, hunh?”

“Yes sir, it could be. Of course, this is all just hypothetical on my part, you understand, sir.”

“Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Ah unnastan’, boy. It’s all HY-PO-thet’cal. Yes, ah unnastan’ everathin’ jes’ all right, son. ‘Deed Ah do!’” Dixie nodded earnestly, as the officer repeated himself. “‘Deed ah do!’” The officer picked up the squad car’s radio microphone and called into headquarters.

“Come in, Conneh Sue, come in, Ovah?” Connie Sue crackled back.

“Conneh Sue hee-ah, Chief.”

“Conneh Sue, call yoah brothah Cahl up in Ex-moah and tell him he can prob’ly find that missin’ Dodge Swingah a couple mile south of wheyah the victim was found, down a duhrt road off o’ One-Sempteh-Eight ‘bout a mile and a half noath o’ Bridgetown.

“On the west side of the road, sir, in some bushes,” interjected Dixie meekly. The Chief nodded and added.

“And Conneh Sue, tell Cahl to check for that VEE-hicle on a duhrt road to the west side of the old haihway in some booshes. And, ya let me know what he finds out, soon as poss’ble.” Connie Sue parroted back the Chief’s instructions above the crackling of the two-way radio.

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“Duhrt road on the west side of the old highway in some booshes, mile and a half noath of Bridgeton. Will do, Chief. O-vah.”

“Oh? An’ Conneh Sue? Get me the twenteh on that victim, please. O-vah.”

“Alraight Chief. Ten-four.” The Chief clicked off and replaced the radio microphone in its holster.

“Is she a lookah?”

His question took Dixie by surprise.

“Excuse me, sir? Who, sir?”

“This li’l ol’ burthdeh gal o’ youahs.” Dixie grinned widely.

“Oh, yes sir, very much so.”

“Well, that’s good for when yoah young, but looks don’t allays las’ kind o’ lak sweetness in a chewin’ gum. Y’all ‘membra that, heeah?”

The officer produced an opened pack of Juicy Fruit.

“Yes sir,” replied Dixie earnestly.

“Stick o’ gum?”

“Uh, Juicy Fruit! All right!”

“You like Juiceh Froot? Me, too.” He smiled agreeably as he handed Dixie a stick of gum and then he turned serious again. “Now, tell me son, jes’ what ya think a phoneh preachah man maight look like.” Dixie spit out his answer as earnestly as he chewed his gum.

“Well sir, could be he’s over six-foot, medium build, reddish-blond hair, about oh, mid to late thirties, wears a black suit and shirt with a turned around collar.”

“Anehthin’ special ‘bout his face?”

“Well yes sir, come to think of it. I mean, uh, I think that a guy like that might be, er, could be that is, pock-marked about his face and neck. And he sports a big, ruddy moustache”

“Unh-hunh.” The officer grinned slightly as he chomped on his gum. “Eyah colah?”

“Green, probably.”

“PRO’BLY?”

“Well, could be, sir.” The officer grunted.

“And, could also be he calls himself Joel ... sir.”

“Could be he calls hisse’f Joel? Ha! Now if that don’t beat all—jes’ like the prophet! Ha!”

He slapped his thigh and let out a deep belly laugh and shook his head in disbelief. They smacked their Juicy Fruits in harmony and conversed for fifteen to twenty minutes as the Chief made his Sunday afternoon rounds of the quiet town in his official police squad car. The officer explained that although Suffolk billed itself as the largest city in America in terms of square mileage, it was really just a small, sleepy southern hamlet surrounded by farm land within the out-posted city limits. Very rarely did the officer encounter any major trouble on a Sunday. He claimed Dixie was an exception to the rule, but then Dixie knew he always had been the exception to the rule. Shortly, Connie Sue’s voice crackled back over the radio.

“Merle, come in O-vah.”

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“Yeah, Conneh Sue. Whadda ya got? Ovah.”

“We got us a nineteen-sempy green and black Dodge Swingah right wherah you said they'd be, keys in the ignition. Theyah's blood on the passengah seat and doah. Raight front ti-ah was flat and the spaa-ah's missin' outta the trunk. O-vah.”

The officer tilted his chin down and stared over his sunglasses at Dixie in a questioning manner. “Right front ti-ah is flat and da spaa-ah is missin'?”

Dixie made his best hang dog face as he explained. “Well sir, it could be this hitch-hiker did that, you see sir, to buy himself some more time for his escape. Probably, he only let the air out of the tire. Don't believe he damaged it any, sir.”

“Oh? Ya don't b'lieb so, hunh?”

“Oh, no sir, I don't.”

“And da spaa-ah?”

“Oh, well, it could be he rolled the spare out across the highway behind some pines, across from where the whole thing happened, where that billboard is, advertising Winston cigarettes. I mean, that is where a sign could be, sir.” The officer frowned and turned his attention back to the radio microphone he held in his hand.

“Come in Conneh Sue, O-vah.”

“Conneh Sue, hee-ah, Chief.”

“Conneh Sue, what was the CON-dition of that VEE-hicle? And what caused the flat, d'ya know? Ovah.”

“The vee-hicle was fine Merle, only had that blood on the passengah front seat and doah. Cahl said the flat was caused by a slow leak or someone let the air-ah out o' the ti-ah. And the victim is stayin' in the Pen'sula Hospital a few hours for observasion on accoun' of a saverah concussion—Say Merle, how'd you know jes' X-ackly wheyah dat VEE-hicle was anehway? O'vah.” The Chief's tone flashed anger.

“COULD BE ah took a guess, dang-it! And tell Cahl to check 'cross da road behind da Winston sign foah that spaa-ah. And then make sure he knows wherah that victim lives and works. Dat's verah impoatan', Conneh Sue. You heah me now, Ovah?”

“Yes, Chief but why does Cahl need—”

Still, angry, the chief cut her off. “Dammit now, Conneh Sue. Ah'm da Chief in Suffolk an' I ask da questions. Now you jes' do's I say and don' ask aneh questions. We goan' run this outfit like the U.S. Marine Co-ah, ya hee-ah? Ovah.”

“Yessah, yoah the Chief o' Suffolk, but at home Ah'm chief o' the kitchen, Merle. An' you bes' memba which side of da bread yoah butta's on, Honeh, you heeah?”

The Chief rolled his eyes, but his tone of speech softened considerably now, just as quickly as it had flared a moment ago. “Tha's raight Conneh Sue. Tha's a good gu-al, now. But ya know this hee-ah's OH-ficial poh-leece bi'ness, now Honeh. And thank ya so much now fo' all yoah he'p hee-ah and we can look fo' wahd to a fiahn SundeH suppah togethah this ebenin', OK? O-vah and out. Ten-four.”

The officer exhaled deeply, pressed his bear paw of a left hand to his chest under his heart, and then burped. With the other hand, he clicked off and replaced the mike in its holster again and, chomping madly on his Juicy Fruit, pulled over against the curb on

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Main Street, not too far from where he had picked Dixie up. The big man turned in his seat to face towards Dixie, placing his considerable girth between the two of them.

“Now son, it COULD BE that this hitch-hikah was the instrament of the Lo-ahd’s vengeance today on that phoneh preachah man, ‘specially seein’ as it is Sundehe aftah all. The Loh-ad don’ take kindly to pa’vahts doin’ theyah thing, ‘specially He don’ cott’n to it a’tall on Sundehs—an’ neither do Ah, at NO time.

“An’ COULD BE, they’s been PREE-v’os REE-ports ‘round these pahrts of a man matchin’ da ‘scripshun you gave of a preachah, who’s been attackin’ young hitch-hikahs. Now, if I could LO-cate me this ‘lleged hitch-hikah—” The chief turned slightly and Dixie felt the big man from behind his shades cut his eyes at Dixie for emphasis—“COULD BE, I could poss’bly hold him for ‘ssault and batt’ry and prob’ly even gran’ thef’. And, if not, I could leastwise hold him as a mater’al witness. But then it could tuhn out to be the preachah’s word against the hitch-hikah’s. And who’s gonna belieb some stranger, some punk, hippheh hitch-hikah over a local preachah man? So it seems to me that ‘rrestin’ this hee-ah hitch-hikah would serve da res’dents o’ this l’il ol’ metrop’lis no valuah a’tall at the moment. ‘Specially, seein’ as how da hitch-hikah done these verah same res’dents hee-ah ‘bouts a great service. An’ ah doubt ser’ously that preachah will be molestin’ aneh one else round hee-ah. Leas’ ways, not while Ah’m Chief o’ PO-lice in Su’folk.”

He looked out the windshield and spit out the last words in animated fashion, spraying the glass before him. Then he calmly turned back to Dixie and spoke forcefully.

“And it COULD BE, that if you step inside that bus toom’nal right yondah, ya maight catch yoahse’f a bus down the road as fa-ah as ‘Liz’bet Citeh. And it jes’ a sho-ah piece from derah to Kill Debil Hill.” He nodded toward the terminal for Dixie’s benefit. “Bus’ll cost ya, oh, no moah’n ten dollahs, less mos’ lahkley, mebbe jes’ faive. Ya got da faa-ah?” Dixie patted his wallet and responded enthusiastically.

“Oh! Yes sir. I surely do.”

Believing he was home free, Dixie nodded goodbye and opened the door to exit the squad car, but before he could step out of the car, the long arm of the law reached out and the chief seized him forcefully by his tattooed left arm. He yanked Dixie back inside the vehicle, with the door clanging shut beside him. The man took off his glasses and bore into Dixie with his cold, grey-blue eyes.

“Hold on there, boy. Don’t unnnahstan’ me so fast. Now, heah’s yoah license.”

He raised his shirt pocket flap and pulled Dixie’s license from his pocket and returned it to him. “An’ son, ya lissin’ up good what I got ta say now. Hee-ah?” He still had hold of Dixie’s forearm and he squeezed it hard now. The officer had Dixie’s full attention as his steely eyes lost all sense of human emotion and locked onto Dixie’s peepers in laser-like fashion. Suddenly, Dixie realized why Merle here was the Chief of Police in Suffolk.

“Now, if’n Ah ebah catch yoah ass hitchin’ ‘round hee-ah again, ya best b’lieb Ah’m goan’ throw it raight in jail. Ya hee-ah me, boy?”

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“Oh, yes, sir! Loud and clear, sir.” However, the answer failed to loose Dixie from the big man’s secure grip.

“Unh-hunh. Now don’ misunnahstan’ what ah’m sayin’ now boy, ‘cause ah ain’t jes’ whistlin’ Dixie hee-ah, son.”

Dixie swallowed a smile enough to answer the Chief with a straight face.

“Oh, no sir. I know that, sir. An’ ah unnastan’ everathin’ jes’ all raight, sir.”

Dixie grinned and saluted. Then the officer let go of Dixie’s forearm and punched him playfully on his upper left arm, over his tattoo.

“Good boy. Sempah FI-ah.” The chief grinned as he smacked his Juicy Fruit and put his shades back on his nose.

“Sempah Fiah,” retorted Dixie, who raised his left fist and exited from the car hurriedly. Yessir, he reasoned. There are times it really pays to be a Marine. Dixie took off for the bus terminal down the block and he didn’t look back.

* * *

In the dreary Suffolk bus station, Dixie purchased himself a ticket to Elizabeth City and sat down to wait until his bus was called. He tried phoning the Ryan’s again, but now there was no answer. He hoped they hadn’t left to go back home to Crest Hill. Dixie had a couple hours to kill before his bus left around six-fifteen. He was still hopeful of getting to his wife before her birthday ended. He bought a couple of Milky Way bars from the vending machine: one for now and one for later. To take his mind off his latest troubles, Dixie finished the lyrics to the latest tune rattling about in his head. Much to his amazement, as well as to the few passengers waiting with him, he managed to blow it out on the USMC harmonica Ryz’n had given to him. He named the tune “Thumbin’ It Now Again” and accompanied himself on the mouth organ, singing lightly these lyrics, between riffs on the harmonica.

Caught a ride for a mile down that highway.
Got turned out, had to hitch again.
Gotta shine, gotta smile, goin' my way?
Got my thumb out for my next friend.
I'm thumbin' it now again. Yeah!
My feet sure could use a friend. Yeah!

Picked up by a family Chicano.
Sat in back with their three small kids.
They were dirty; we shared a banano.
But they were happy in what they did.
I'm thumbin' it now again. Yeah!
My feet sure could use a friend. Yeah!

Now they dropped me off at the next town
Where I tried to find my way.
Had to hoof it out of downtown,

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Thumb it back out towards the highway,
I'm thumbn' it now again. Yeah!
My feet sure could use a friend. Yeah!

Black Caddy, Fat Mama, Big Daddy—
They passed me at the speed of sound.
Mama saw me, checked her lock and her baggy.
Mann, she left me wearin' a frown.
I'm thumbn' it now again. Yeah!
My feet sure could use a friend. Yeah!

Life on the road sure is funny. I know it.
"Cuz you never know what's in store.
Come along, come with me and we'll go it,
From the east to the western shore.
Yeah, i'm thumbn' it now again.
My feet sure could use a friend. Yeah!

Gotta shine, gotta smile, goin' my way?
Got my thumb out for my next friend.
Yeah, I'm thumbn' it down the highway.
My feet sure could use a friend.
And one, two, three, four-YEEAAH!

A smattering of guarded applause broke forth from the janitor, leaning on his push broom, and a black woman and her child, who awaited the next bus. Dumbfounded, Dixie observed them keenly to assure himself their appreciation was genuine. When they smiled broadly and nodded towards him, he knew their attentions were heartfelt. For the first time since he hit that long tater against Texas, he felt a kind of glow in his frozen heart. To think that something he created could give someone else a little pleasure was a renewed but real sensation that never grew old. Sheepishly, he nodded his head and saluted them with his harmonica, as a thank you. When Dix departed on the Southlands bus, he felt that now, finally, he could sit back, relax and enjoy the ride. He was wrong.

As they cut through the southern edge of the Great Dismal Swamp into North Carolina, the bus broke down with a flat. Worse, a thunderstorm, a bad one, had been brewing. From his time in the Islands, Dixie could sense the sudden drop in barometric pressure and knew what it meant. There were not quite a dozen people on the bus. Because he was the only adult male passenger, Dixie was helping the bus driver change the tire when the storm hit. The other passengers, females and children, took shelter as best they could under oak trees and willows at the edge of the swamp, about ten feet beneath road level. Dixie and Marvin, the bus driver, worked on the flat. The storm hit hard, soaking both of them almost immediately. The rain darted like stinging

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needles against Dixie's skin. The lightning struck so dangerously close, they had to stop and retreat to the safety of some nearby cypress and pines with the rest of the passengers.

Unfortunately, this was no quick, slam-bam-thank-you-ma'am thunder storm, either. The black skies hastened the dusk and raged for well over an hour. The only good to come from the storm was that it temporarily had frightened or washed away the insects which had been eating all of them alive. Once the lightning and thunder had rumbled off to the east, a drenched Dixie and Marvin wearily climbed from the safety of the swamp up to the road finish their task. Unfortunately, the base of the jack had sunk under the weight of the bus into the rain-soaked, quagmire that passed for the shoulder of the road. Dixie lowered the jack as much as he could, so Marvin could get behind the steering wheel and reposition the bus. Once Marvin had pulled the left tire to rest upon the highway, the jack would hold firm on the macadam. With the vehicle now parked in the single lane highway, which essentially was a levee built through the swamp, Marvin stood behind the bus with a flashlight warning approaching cars to move over to the other lane, leaving Dixie to perform the grunt work. Marvin had left the bus lights flashing on and off and claimed he had a "bad back." With some little difficulty, Dixie was able to replace the flat with the spare. Amid the rain water, mud, gravel, black tire rubber marks and grease, Dixie was a certified mess by the time he had finished.

Night had descended over the swamp by now. The other rain-soaked passengers trooped back up the levee onto the bus wearily, as so many drowned rats. Marvin started up and kicked the bus forward. Intermittent pools of standing water on the low-lying single lane highway forced the driver to proceed cautiously through the dark, wet night. Over half an hour later, the bus stopped in Elizabeth City, where Dixie and two other passengers disembarked, a couple hours later than they had expected. Dixie inquired at the terminal desk whether there were any buses heading to the Outer Banks. There were none, not that night anyway. Dixie slumped down onto an old wooden bench and leaned backward against the slatted bench back to decide what he should do.

Anger had been welling within him all day since the incident with the preacher. The officer in Suffolk had checked that anger temporarily, but he had not erased it entirely. Frustrated to despair, Dixie couldn't figure out why so many things were going wrong. Briefly, he considered calling the Ryans again, but why should he? He didn't want to get another no-answer to confirm his suspicions that the family already had left for home. Dixie was determined to get to this place with the crazy sounding name of Kill Devil Hills, even if no one was home. Despite what had happened earlier and despite the deputy's warning, Dixie opted to hitch himself another ride. After all, this was North Carolina, a new state with different laws. If he happened to get picked up by the police, he'd plead ignorance again.

Dixie walked across a short, hump-backed bridge to the eastern outskirts of town, where a young kid in a truck picked him up out of charity. The Good Samaritan carted Dixie to the other side of Coinjock, where the young gentleman turned up a muddy, pot-holed, old farm road. He kindly offered Dixie a bed in his home, but after what had

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happened earlier in the day with the preacher, Dixie trusted no one and just as kindly declined the kind kid's invitation. Dixie began hiking again. Hitching was out of the question. The road was dead quiet. Late Sunday night, in rural North Carolina was not the ideal time and place to be hitchhiking, not for the hitching part anyway. However, hiking certainly was plentiful.

Dixie was tired, sore and still wet from the storm. A glance of the already dark, darkening sky warned him more storms were coming. Surveying his plight, he knew his prospects were pretty dim. He prayed and asked God why He would allow that pervert to pretend he was one of God's chosen. He asked why he and Ryz'n were having so much difficulty getting together. As he walked and talked with the Lord, dark night clouds returned and burst over him, again followed closely by thunder and lightning. Dixie sought cover behind a framework of four by fours supporting a road sign. He recalled an obscure phrase from the Bible: "The rain it raineth both upon the just and unjust fellow." Then he recalled the answering rhyme an old Marine buddy had proffered him when they were drilling out in one of those sudden but ferocious tropical Hawaiian storms. He had said, "Yeah, but it falls more upon the just, because the unjust hath the just's umbrella."