

Next morning, Dixie rose with a splitting headache. Checking his look in the mirror proved to be a most disheartening experience and it did not help his headache any, either. He adopted an ice pack, aspirin and Pepsis, as his constant companions for the day. The cold pack never left the right side of his face. Bax Suggs dropped by to take him to work installing swimming pools for the school teachers. As confirmation, what the Salvarano boys had told him, Dixie learned that his brother Ramon sold the pools, while the school teachers subcontracted to install them over their summer breaks. Ramon had sold more pools than they could install. Bax and the school teachers, who were just getting out of school for the summer, were behind schedule. Customers were losing patience, waiting for the school teacher to install their pools. The school teachers needed all the help they could muster. Dixie said he would join them later. He wasn't feeling too well, besides he had learned that his grandmother was flying in that morning from Iowa for a short visit. His mother had told Dixie that he was supposed to collect the old lady from National Airport. Evidently, his grandmother was most anxious to meet him. Dixie explained his predicament to Bax, who secured Dixie's promise to come to work that afternoon after Dix met his grandmother. Dixie picked up his grandmother and had her back to the house in time for lunch.

After lunch, Dixie's brother Ramon collected him in Ramon's inimitable, yellow Pinto to take him to work down in Clairton, which was not too far from the Printer's home baseball field. Ramon had sold an in-ground, steel wall, vinyl liner 16' x 32' swimming pool there to a pair of identical twin sisters, a couple of well built Krauts, or so he was told. The Salvarano brothers were there now back-filling the pool. They needed another pair of hands. Nobody seemed to care that his face hurt even worse than it looked. Ramon's callous reply was typical.

"You got ice on it and you're takin' aspirins, right? So what more do you want?"

"How about some time off out of the sun?"

"Anh, thought you were a Marine, a tough guy? If you lay around with your feet up in the AC, you'll think about your face all the time and it'll make ya feel even worse. Besides, you'll make Wauneta feel bad, cuz she won't be able to do help ya any. Out of sight, out of mind. It's better for her. It's better for you. It's better for everybody."

"Better for you, ya mean." Ramon grinned revealing the gap between his front teeth.

"Right. That's just what I mean."

Ramon walked Dixie down through the twins' side yard and around the ruts left by the backhoe, in the otherwise grassy lawn, to the actual job site. He explained briefly how the pool was built and then Ramon handed him a shovel. "Here's your spoon. Treat it right or it will bite," he joked. His brother assured Dixie that shoveling would improve his baseball skills, though he failed to say how. "After last night, at least a little shoveling couldn't hurt any," he joked.

Yeah, he had heard about Dix's marvelous four-K performance last night from the local papers, but not to worry. Ramon had said that, "thanks to Dad," Dixie's dubious efforts had been reported under the name of "Dixie Strickler, the Second Team All-

America,” keeping the Sheeboom name out of the press. The local Southern Maryland papers had lapped up the story, too. So Dix was a goat all over the area. He thanked Ramon for that bit of cheery news. However, his brother explained sarcastically that, “the ‘Sheeboom name’ was safe for the time-being and ‘Nick Sheeboom’ also would be spared from the scrutiny of prying reporters until his memory came back.” For the latter news, Dixie was truly grateful. He wanted nothing more than to remain anonymous. Ramon said Dix could thank their father, as he had persuaded Mr. Gasch to use the name of Strickler, until “Nick was squared away, again.”

“So, you’re on the roster as both Strickler and Sheeboom for the time being. At least that was how the old man had put it to me on the phone this morning.” Hopefully, his teammates would go along with the ruse. But after the way he had played last night, he wouldn’t blame them, if they didn’t.

Then, totally out of context, Ramon also informed Dixie that the school teachers would pay him good money for shoveling dirt: three dollars and fifty cents an hour! Dixie didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at such illogical thinking. Ramon advised the Salvaranos that they should take care to fill in the backhoe ruts as well, when they finished back-filling the pool. Then, Ramon left. Dixie shook his head negatively as he watched “his brother” stride away up the steep, side yard hill.

The new pool looked pretty good, pretty inviting. The water was crystal clear. The liner beneath it featured a bright blue border filled with gold floral designs. The rest of the vinyl was a solid aqua green. The surroundings evoked a fresh aroma that occurred when clean, fresh water met with a vinyl liner. Everything was finished except for back-filling the last couple of feet around the edge of the pool and installing the concrete deck for the diving board.

Dixie worked alongside the Salvarano brothers who already had heard about his run-in with Matt Yikes the previous night. Paul Salvarano soothed Dixie’s ego by telling him that Yikes, who had graduated from Pocomoke High in Paul’s class a year ahead of Nick, had never been too bright but he had always been a hot head. Phil shrewdly observed that was a bad combination of character traits.

“Besides, you had beaten the crap out of Yikes twice back in high school. Nobody could figure out how Little Nick had gotten the better of the big jock star Matt Yikes—once, let alone twice.” Dixie noticed Phil had referred to him reverently in the third person as Little Nick, as if Dixie were a legend.

“Yeah,” agreed Paul, “and I was present the second time when you knocked his butt into the ocean, Nick, and I still don’t know how you did it. It all happened so fast.”

Somehow, that revelation did not make Dixie’s jaw and eye feel any better.

“Guess he owes me another beatin’ just to even the score, hunh?” The brothers chuckled, but Dixie did not care much for his own wit at that point.

Dixie’s hands had been fairly well calloused from swinging a wooden baseball bat and his one-inch thick, thirty-inch long, iron rebar, which he used to strengthen his arms, but shoveling gave him new, fresh, larger blisters on skin he evidently had not used previously. After a while, Dixie’s hands were bleeding so that he had trouble holding onto the shovel. His head was splitting and he felt that both sides of his face

were swollen. His right eye was swollen half shut. He had learned not to complain in the Corps, so he kept digging.

Dix could not figure how he had gotten into this mess. Everybody said he was rich, a millionaire. Yet, here he was beaten to a pulp, digging in the hot sun like a convict on a chain gang. He had a gorgeous wife who was jealous as all-get-out of any woman even looked at him sideways. Yet, he never had a chance to be alone with her. His brother-in-law was tearing around the countryside in the car that, technically, was supposed to belong to Dixie. And he was sleeping in a kid's bed in a kid's room with strangers who treated him as if he were a little kid. People claiming to be his mother and father, grandmother and uncle hovered all about him. He could not fart without one of them asking if he were OK. He was miserable.

Sheesh! A week ago I had no family, no ties. And now I'm up to my ass in relatives.

Paul woke Dixie from his reveries. "Hey Nick, watch what you're doin' there, Dude. We're supposed to be back-fillin' the pool, not fillin' it in." Both of the sweating brothers rose up from their backbreaking work to acknowledge Dixie's response.

"Right, right. Sorry about that."

Dixie leaned over the pool's coping to inspect the damage. Some dirt balls he had deposited inadvertently into the pool had flaked off in the crystal water, with the residual pieces sinking, drifting slowly to the vinyl liner pool bottom. He glanced toward his co-workers, who had spread out around the shallow end.

"Yeah, well don't let it happen again," replied an overly bossy Paul, cracking up.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Nick." Phil stood up, wiping his brow. "He's only kidding. Look at all them other dirt balls in there. They're his."

"Mine? What about you? That big old turd in the middle there is yours baby brother!" Then he shoveled a spoonful of back-fill onto Phil's the back of Phil's legs.

"Hey, that stuff gives me zits, Paul!" Phil cried indignantly, as he bent down for another shovelful himself.

Dixie laughed as he watched the two brothers go at each other, flinging mini shovelfuls of dirt at one another, with the dirt sticking to their sweaty legs and naked torsos. With both hands, he leaned on the business end of his spade.

"Hey, how old are you two guys, again?" He asked innocuously.

"Hallooo!" "Hallooo!"

The twin Krauts had come home from work a little earlier than usual to inspect their new pool. They had come out of their downstairs sliding double doors. The twins introduced themselves to Dixie as "Kirsta" and "Karella Kirsche." Evidently, they already knew the Salvaranos, as they nodded politely to Dixie's buddies. They reminded Dixie a great deal of Donna Dixon—*who didn't? It seemed like lately, everyone did*—in build, coloring, age and demeanor, a couple of true Wagnerian female Valkyrie. However, facially they looked quite a bit different from his former Scandinavian fiancé. Deeply freckled with traces of past acne problems, their mugs could compare favorably with those of ex-prize fighters and perhaps accounted for their unmarried status. While their faces were a little rough on the eyes, reminding him of a couple of pans full of worms, their bodies were out of this world.

Out at Home

Paul introduced Dixie to the twins as Ray's brother, "the famous Little Nick Sheeboom." As soon as they heard that, the pair of identical sisters broke their icy exterior and fell all over Dix. Their hearty welcome ceased when they became appalled by his woeful physical condition, such as his beet red sunburn, black eye, swollen face and his inability to shake their hands because of his bloody blisters. Dix could not help but acknowledge that, since people considered him a strikingly handsome young man, who was half-naked and sans wedding ring, these factors may have contributed to their deep concern for his health and well being. His opinion was confirmed when they remarked about his "beautiful two-toned eyes, the likes of which [they claimed] never to have seen." The twins bade him take a break. They wanted to "fix [him] up."

Dixie learned Kirsta was a registered practical nurse (RPN). Karella was a bookkeeper. On their cement patio, among their darkly stained outdoor wooden furniture, was a chaise lounge with light blue cushions with white piping. They adjusted the chaise lounge so that it lay flat out, under the protective shade of the large table umbrella that matched the Carolina blue chaise lounge cushions, both in color and decoration. They gently pushed Dixie's face down upon the divan, laying him full out flat on his belly. The nurse, yet dressed in her white uniform, retrieved her little black medical bag and straddled the recliner near Dixie's head, while his feet dangled off the other end. Kirsta produced an ice bag which she had Dixie apply to his swollen eye. Then she pulled his hands out in front of his face and tended to his blisters, cleaning them out one by one with Neosporin and bandaging them, first one hand and then the other. She told her sister to get some more ice in a washcloth for Dixie's face.

Karella, the bookkeeper, obeyed her sister and disappeared inside the house. She came back to hand Dixie the ice-filled cloth and told him to apply it to his swollen face. Then Karella, who was wearing a snug, dark blue skirt and a white sleeveless, collarless top, hitched up her short skirt and straddled herself across Dixie's rump to administer aloe vera to his burned back.

The absence of the sound of digging prompted Dixie to turn his head around to the pool. He observed Paul and Phil, who were sprayed with dirt, leaning on their respective shovels, hands folded over the ends of the wooden handles, chins resting on the backs of their hands. The brothers' expressions voiced their thoughts without need for speech. Having stopped working, they had drifted beneath the shade of the house and patio awning where they watched the proceedings, apparently in a trance. Obviously, they were wondering why they could not be as lucky as their old buddy.

To his credit, Dixie protested to his caretakers, but these German girls would not heed his impassioned pleas. They said they would do the same for any hurting creature, which appeared on their doorstep in such terrible, physical condition. Dixie only had to surrender his care to this pair of blonde Amazons. What else could he do?

The nurse had finished with Dixie's fingers. She placed an ice pack in his hand, bidding him hold it to the other side of his face. She raised his chin to apply some type of ointment to the side of Dixie's eye and face. With her left hand under his chin, the medic Valkyrie held Dix's head erect and slid her fanny closer to him, while Dixie plastered his face with the ice pack. Dixie's personal Florence Nightingale had placed

him in a most compromising position. She sat practically right on top of him. Spread-legged on the edge of a lawn chair at the head of the chaise lounge with her nurse's dress rolled up as far as it would go, she worked tenderly over Nick's swollen eye.

It was after six of a hot June day. The Salvaranos sauntered around the shallow end of the pool for a drink from their thermos. Dixie overheard Paul tell Phil they should pack it in for the day. "Oh-oh! Look who's comin'."

Dixie heard Paul but did not heed him. He did not want to look up, as he enjoyed the cool, soothing, massaging hands of the twins. He figured it was probably Ramon, anyway.

Ryz'n bounced sprightly down the grassy hill between the houses, headed for the inviting, glistening pool waters ahead of her. Ramon had told her where Nick was working and that he was without a car. She was more than happy to surprise her spouse at quitting time. She intended to apologize again and hoped to convince him to stay with her down at the *Starlust* motel where she had quartered the band. She came bearing gifts, a six pack of Miller's and a bright, pleasant disposition. Serenely happy and wearing a patriotic, high waist-banded red, white and blue plaid, cuffed, cotton shorts and a red, midriff, peasant blouse, Ry was positively beaming as she descended the grassy hill in search of her husband.

A cheery Ryz'n strode nonchalantly around the corner of the sapling Leyland cedars that buffeted the patio from the side and back yards. She noticed Paul rushing toward her, but when he could not get his words out fast enough, Ryz'n beat him to it.

"Hello fellas. How ya doin'? Where's my man? Isn't he—"

Following their pained gazes, Ryz'n looked around the shrubs, where she observed what they, in mild shock, had been watching. Her countenance must have fallen ten miles. Her husband's face was all but covered by some healthy blonde's loins, while another lusty blonde straddled Nick's butt, absorbed in massaging his back. As Ryz'n surveyed this scene worthy of a brothel, revulsion began to rise within her soul. She tried to recall what the Lord had told her just last night, but her mind was too filled with white heat to do so. She tried to pray aloud, but the words caught in her throat. She attempted to pray silently, but her thoughts froze in her heart. Slowly, a righteous jealous rage began to rise again with her. She felt as though an angry black thunder cloud had burst across her face. Ryz'n was powerless to stem the rising tide of fury within her. When the waters crested the dam in her soul, the best she could manage was to refrain from cursing. Instead, she screamed a primal, guttural, blood-curdling scream, for she was far too incensed to articulate her thoughts.

She watched horrified, as her husband and his two healthy, too helpful, female attendants jumped, but not high enough. Nick attempted to scramble to his feet, but the bookkeeper had fallen onto Nick's oiled back and the blonde smothering his face fell out of the chair onto his head. Her fall over-counteracted the weight of the other woman, so the chaise lounge see-sawed and, when the legs collapsed, teetered down over him. Both twins yet straddled Dixie, who found his head up the nurse's dress, between her