

Dix made Johnny and Trish's apartment on time. Johnny 'So Fine' drove him and a couple of Dixie's former high school classmates Dave Morris and Bernie Lockes down to the polo grounds in Johnny's pride and joy, 1970 Plymouth Road Runner. Located in West Potomac Park, in Southwest DC, the polo grounds were just across Independence Avenue from the south side of the Lincoln Memorial. The Potomac River bordered the southern and western sides of the ball fields. Eastward lay more of the park, followed by the Tidal Basin and, yet further east, the Jefferson Memorial. To Dix's way of thinking, this historic site was an odd place for a football field.

Today the gridiron had evolved into a hundred-yard quagmire, pock-marked with large puddles. The earlier storm had hit hard here. However, the storm would not postpone the match, if Johnny had any say about it and, as club manager, he had plenty to say. The Brother's Furniture team acted as if they wanted to postpone the game, but the referees showed up, so they played.

Early on, Dix surprised the Brothers with his speed when Johnny hit Dix for a couple deep catch and run touchdowns. However, Brothers Furniture responded with a couple scores themselves. Johnny's team maintained the lead only because, Johnny had converted all of their extra point attempts, while their opponents had not. Late in the fourth quarter, Brothers forged ahead on a deep post pattern to Dixie's man. The receiver intentionally pushed off on Dix, shoving him butt down into a huge puddle, just as he made his break to the post, and just before he made his reception. As the ball carrier pivoted sharply to the inside, Dix leapt up to grab his flag. The receiver eluded Dixie's grasp, by swinging his right hand wildly, back and out to the right. The side of his hand caught Dix sharply; creasing his forehead and knocking him back down.

To Dixie's dismay, the refs threw no flags and called no foul. Mud covered not only Dixie's face and behind but also his ego. To make matters worse, the receiver had worn a silver chain bracelet. When he had flailed wildly to elude Dix's grasp, he had whacked Dix across the crown of his forehead, cutting Dix and raising a lump just at his hairline. Mad, Dix and Johnny got even on the ensuing kickoff.

In the huddle, Johnny said they would pull the old Tom Nugent reverse, cross-field lateral, kick return play, just as they had in high school and, hopefully, with identically successful results. Johnny received the kick, ran to his left parallel to the goal line and reversed the ball to Dixie in front of the goal posts. Dix then ran toward and up the right sideline. He stopped at the twenty-yard line, and before the Brothers kick team could nail him, he pivoted to his left, stood up and spiraled an overhand lateral all the way back across the field to Johnny, who stood waiting on the fifteen yard-line all by his lonesome. With the entire defense drawn to Dixie, the swift Johnny "So Fine" caught the ball and ran untouched down the left sideline for the score, right in front of the Brothers' bench. Dixie could not help smiling as he watched Johnny laughing in his opponents' faces as he strutted royally down the sideline and in to the end zone.

Afterwards, Johnny converted the extra point and explained to Dixie that they had connected just as they had in high school with Dixie the receiver throwing a cross-field

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lateral to Johnny the quarterback. Brothers had one more scoring opportunity as time was running out. They would need a touchdown and a two point conversion to tie. However, Dixie leaped high to break up the potential, game-winning toss in his end zone. The beauty of the play for Dixie lay in the timely dispensation of justice. Falling to the turf, after he had broken up the pass, Dix became entangled with the intended receiver in the air and fell, landing on his opponent, who fell, face first, right into a giant puddle near the goal line. This was the same guy who had pushed off on Dixie earlier. A fight nearly broke out when the Brother's wide receiver claimed Dixie had fallen on him intentionally, but the referees quickly stepped in to break up the scuffle.

Cursing and crying foul from a distance, the angry Brothers' player pursued Dixie and Johnny to the parking lot, where Johnny hopped in his Plymouth Road Runner, with its Hurst shifter, and fired up the speedy, muscle bird. He located his eight-track with their unofficial high school song, which they played loudly after all their victories. Steam's "Sha Na Na Na! Hey! Hey! (Kiss Him) Goodbye!" blared over the Road Runner's loudspeakers. Johnny "So Fine" played the victory song loud enough for all to hear, including the Brothers players returning to their cars in the parking lot. Johnny pulled a couple beers out of his cooler, handing out one each to Dixie and Trish, who had showed up earlier with some of the other players' girlfriends.

Dixie pulled out another of Johnny's beers, popped the cap off with his bottle opener, walked over and handed it to the still irate black athlete. The guy was totally flummoxed by this act of kindness and didn't know what to do. Not waiting around to be thanked, Dixie, as if he were the Lone Ranger, jumped into Johnny's Road Runner, with Trish, who was straddling the hump and sitting awkwardly between the two sweaty, muddy ballplayers. Johnny was a little ticked Nick had given his beer to a "nigger," and blatantly told Dixie so. As they pulled out, Dixie raised his bottle in a toast to the confused, black ballplayer.

"Hey Mann! Here's mud in your eye!" Dixie laughed devilishly. (Little Nick had taken over again!)

The guy came after Dixie, but Johnny turned up the volume and baited the guy. He took off just fast enough so the muddy dude couldn't catch them, but slow enough to give the guy hope that he could. That was an adolescent trick, but the black cat fell for it. Johnny leaned out the window, looked back and sang the chorus of the song out the window to the tape, "Na na nah, na na nah, hey, hey-ey, good-bye." Dixie and Trish joined him and they raised their bottles out the window. Johnny lured the guy on down the park service road as if he were trolling bait behind a commercial fishing boat. Incensed, the black guy sprinted after them with the opened beer bottle in his hand and beer spilling all over him. Johnny pulled away out into traffic on Independence Avenue, across from the Lincoln Memorial, where ironically, some twelve years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. had made his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Now the incensed black ballplayer hurled the near empty beer bottle at the Road Runner, but he spiraled the bottle so well, he overshot the Plymouth.

The glass projectile flew far across the street, butt-end first, like a passed football, spiraling on invisible wings and smashed to bits against the pavement on Independence

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Avenue, near the back tire of a stopped U. S. Park Policeman's motorcycle. The cop had been waiting at the traffic light. Immediately, the officer turned his bike across the major thoroughfare to apprehend the lawbreaker. Behind them, the black dude lit out. From inside the Road Runner's opened windows, Johnny, Trish and Dixie all watched the Brothers' football player turn tail and high-step out across the polo grounds.

Once he had waited for the oncoming traffic to clear, the motorcycle cop took off in hot pursuit of the fleeing suspect. The fleeing ballplayer hurtled the three-foot high, wooden slatted, snow fence, hoping he would escape justice if the cop didn't pursue him on his bike over the soggy field. As Dixie watched, he could see the cop was trying to stay off the soft parts of the field, which gave the young runner some lead time. He was a fine athlete, thought Dixie, who marveled at the way the guy had hurdled the short snow fence without breaking stride.

Johnny trundled slowly along Independence Avenue following the chase, music blasting.

"See that Nicky?" He yelled. "Now that's what I been talkin' about."

"What?"

"That jungle bunny there may be a little rusty on his spear-chuckin' abilities to overthrow us like that, but they never forget how to run. Just look at 'im go. Comes natural, like I said before, cuz they been runnin' from cops all they life."

"He sure can motor," opined Trish. "I wonder how you stayed with him all game Nick." She glanced admiringly at Nick seated next to her.

"Aw, will you forget Baby, Nick grew up runnin' from the cops, too." The trio laughed.

Just then, however, the motorcycle cop imitated Steve McQueen in "The Great Escape" by vaulting the flimsy snow fence with his bike. Unfortunately, he knocked down part of the snow fence. However, the cop ran down the guy during a long chase, tearing up parts of the soggy fields in his wake. Johnny watched the chase and capture gleefully, as he might watch a cheetah run down a crippled gazelle on "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom." Finally, the poor guy collapsed to the ground, completely spent. Johnny turned on his emergency blinkers and stopped his Road Runner in the far right lane on Independence Avenue. He was not about to miss this. Even though rush hour had passed, unforgiving motorists jammed up behind Johnny's Road Runner. Angry honks from behind their car induced Johnny to wave traffic around him. He wanted to savor the moment. They watched the park motorcycle cop handcuff the poor bastard and usher him over to a park police phone. Johnny turned off his emergency flashers, rewound his tape and blasted the music loudly enough for the poor boy to hear it. Johnny took off, singing "Sha Na Na Nah, Hey-Hey-ey, Good-bye" all the way down Independence Avenue.

"Ya see, Nicky," he shouted over the blaring music, "That's why we need you, Mann!" Johnny was overjoyed.

"Whaddaya mean?" Johnny turned down the volume on the tape.

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“Well, you not only make the big plays to help us win the game, but you always come up with those little in-betweens that make things so interesting. You always win with, with, how can I say it? With style, yeah, that’s it Mann, with style.”

“What little in-betweens?”

“Hey! You know, the mud puddle, the whole beer thing, the cop, Mann. You are still something else, Nick.”

“Oh, you mean falling in a muddle puddle is your idea of style? Yeah, that’s real classy. As far as the beer goes, I was just tryin’ to extend some, some sportsmanship, to the guy so he wouldn’t clobber me, that’s all. It was too bad the dude screwed up like that.” Dixie chuckled in spite of himself. “Throwing a beer bottle ain’t too swift, but throwing it at a cop? HA! HA! But I didn’t want the guy to get in trouble like that.”

“Yeah, right! Well, that’s a nigger for ya! Give ‘im a little fishin’ line and he’ll hook himself. Shoot! So you didn’t want to get that coon in trouble, hunh? Right! Now tell me a bull’s got teats. What was that toast thing all about, hunh? ‘Here’s mud in your eye?’ That’s what really pissed him off, Mann!”

“Hey, I was only trying to make a joke and bury the hatchet at the same time. I mean, after all, I had mud in my eye earlier and then he got some mud in his eye. Right? I figured we were even. See, it was a joke.”

“Well, he didn’t seem to think it was so funny,” observed Trish. (Trish, who had come to the game with Val Vernier, had swapped her ride home with Dave Morris. Bernie had caught a ride with Cantwell, leaving Dixie alone with Johnny and Trish.)

“Yeah, that’s right Baby. You know Nicky; them jigs got no sense of humor. You know that!”

“Oh really? Like jes’ which ‘jigs’ are you referring to? Richard Pryor maybe, or how ‘bout Bill Cosby?”

“Looook Nick, all Johnny means, is that you’re like poetry out there, Baby.” Trish responded in an attempt to mollify both men. “See, what Johnny is saying is that everything seems to work out for good, when you’re playin’ with us. Like with the way you put that guy in the puddle on the last play of the game, kind of like retribution. The play capped the win and rubbed it in their black faces all at the same time. That’s why it was poetic justice, Nicky. And the beer deal, well, that was just frostin’ on the cake.”

“Yeah, that’s it. Thank ya, Baby. That’s it exactly, ‘poetic justice.’ You should’ve gone down to Tech with me, Nick. Together, we could have really done some things down there, maybe set some NCAA records.”

“I’m more interested in setting myself up in your shower to clean off. I’m a mess. And I got some clothes to wash, too.”

“Hey, are you coming to play cards or do laundry, Nicky?” asked Johnny indignantly.

“Both. I figure I’ll clean up both ways. Ha!”

“Smart ass! Now, I remember why I didn’t want you to go to Tech with me. You always had to be a smart ass, Nicky. We’ll see who cleans up on who, tonight.” Johnny grinned smugly as he looked forward to the road ahead.

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On the way to Johnny's place, Johnny stopped by a liquor store and Dixie bought a couple cases of beer for Johnny's impending poker party. Then Dixie went with Johnny and Trish to their place to clean up. Trish was kind enough to launder his clothes, too, though Johnny claimed she should have been cleaning the mud off the Road Runner's front seats. And Trish cleaned up the bloody crease on Dix's forehead. Just for devilment, Johnny told Trish to "use Mercuricom." But when she balked by asking Dixie what he wanted, Johnny accused Dixie of being "a candy ass" if Dixie couldn't take a little Mercuricom. Trish told Dixie it was not necessary, alibying that "Johnny thinks he's the boss of everybody," however, Dix insisted. Just before she applied the iodine, Johnny walked to Dix, who sat at the dining room table.

"Stings like anything, Mann!" then he laughed deeply. Dixie spoiled Johnny's fun when he refused to wince. Trish repeated her earlier statement: "That Johnny thinks he's the boss of everybody." Then she blew on Dixie's wound, ostensibly, "to take the bite out of the sting." Johnny was not amused.

Dixie had about three days worth of clothes he always carried in the car trunk, which he found suited his vagabond lifestyle, but which also aggravated his mother to distraction. All his clothes needed to be cleaned, including his ball uniform after last night's strenuous efforts. That one slide into second base had done the dirty deed. Otherwise, the uniform would have been good to go. He wore an extra pair of clean sliding shorts, while Trish washed his things. He told her she didn't have to do that, but she insisted. She said she felt bad for him. Everyone had heard about his problems since he had returned home. Moreover, she confessed that she had spied him, unintentionally, stepping into the shower earlier and felt a little guilty about it. She assuaged her conscience by claiming the chance sighting served as belated justice for the first time he had come to her apartment a couple weeks ago, when inadvertently she had given him an eyeful. However, Trish confessed she had bitten her lip to keep from screaming when she had spied his shot-up rear end. Later, she added that she figured doing a load of laundry for him was the least she could do for taking advantage of him that way.

*Now, I'm a charity case all of a sudden! Sheesh!*

That evening, the poker game went about as Dix expected. Aside from Johnny, the other guys weren't very talented poker players and none of them got lucky that night. Beside Dixie and Johnny, there were Bernie Lockes, Stan Steinmetz, R.C. Cantwell and Dave Morris, all former Pocomoke letter winners, mostly for football and baseball, he was told. Dix appreciated that, with so many players, nearly all the cards were out on every hand. He only won four or five pots all evening, but he won the two biggest pots. One was five-card draw and the other, was the newfangled Texas Hold'em, which had given Dixie an advantage because he knew it better than the others did, having played Hold'em out in Vegas. Both of his big pots were close to a hundred dollars a piece, which is a difficult sum to reach when the game is two's and five's, but these guys were wild bettors and there was no limit and every one of them had brought between seventy-five and a hundred dollars with them. Dixie had lost a couple of small

pots intentionally. He folded on most hands and sat out several others, because R. C. Cantwell and Stan Steinmetz always seemed to be naming wild cards when they dealt.

Dixie didn't go for wild cards. They threw off the percentages that he had memorized from his late friend Ed "the Rabbi" Rabinowitz. Besides Cantwell and Steinmetz wanted to play "Baseball" all the time which is full of wild cards and practically all luck. So Dix sat out the "Baseball" hands and they called him "chicken" for not playing. Johnny accused Dix of being too rich to care about dropping what should be small change to him. He claimed Dix was "tighter than a duck's ass," which he grinned and tipped them all with a wink, "was water tight." Dix replied that if he had wanted to play "Old Maid," as he called "Baseball" and the wild card games they seemed to prefer, he would have gone to nursery school and played with the kiddies.

Steinmetz and Cantwell were always goading Dixie about something or other, especially Steinmetz. Something must have happened among the three of them in high school to prompt all their static, but Dix had no idea what it was. He did recall what Dave Morris had said on the Ocean City fishing pier. Dave had said that Dixie had knocked the large, curly-haired Stan off the pier into the surf below. Dixie could see where that might have something to do with Stan's present animosity towards him. As for the other guy, the thin haired, red-headed, grey-eyed R.C., Dix had not a clue. Though they tried hard, the obnoxious pair didn't rattle him too much, except for once.

While he sat out during one of their "Old Maid" hands, Steinmetz folded. Then the curly-haired guy asked Dixie, if Dixie had heard that Yikes was going to press charges. He added that the R.G. County cops were issuing a warrant for Dixie's arrest. Dixie had remained aloof of their verbal jabs all evening, but this piece of news caught his full attention. He had come to play cards for the same reason he had played football, to forget his troubles and hide out from the cops. Now this jerk had found a soft spot in Dixie's armor and he was sticking the knife deeply into it.

"How come you're so privileged to hear this news, Stan? Anybody else heard it?" Dixie looked around for confirmation.

Nobody spoke up. The rest of the card sharps played their hands silently. Johnny and Dave stuck out their lower lips and shook their heads negatively. Bernie said nothing.

"Yeah, I did, this afternoon," offered Cantwell, "before the game tonight."

"That's right, Nick," confirmed Steinmetz trying to suppress a grin. "See, me and R.C. were comin' down Double 'G' Street and we stopped to talk with Allena. She was out in the yard, playin' with Mikey. She told us Matt had decided to press charges, even though she asked him not to do it."

Dixie believed this observation sounded too plausible to be false. He got a sick feeling in his gut and his head began to pound. R.C. confirmed his buddy's remarks. Dixie stared out through the sliding glass patio door behind Johnny. He had been afraid this might happen. Shoot! The cops could charge him with attempted murder, in addition to assault and battery, reckless driving and all the rest. Ramon was right. Dixie's two antagonists seem to take pleasure in his discomfort.

According to R.C. and Stan, Dixie was a wanted man. Supposedly, the cops had a description of the Bonneville, complete with license number. Dixie learned he had

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broken Yikes nose (again, they said he had broken it in high school, as well), the orbital bone around Yikes' left eye and cracked two ribs, in addition to knocking out a tooth. Yikes would miss maybe a couple of months of work. Allena and Mikey were staying with the Larrabees, at least until the hospital released Matt.

This news made up Dixie's mind. He would leave the next day, after helping Bax drop the liner, if the school teachers still wanted his help. Dixie also reminded himself to drop off some cash with Allena before he left. He didn't plan on turning himself into the police. If they arrested him, all right. But he wasn't going to help them any. Although Dixie walked away with over eighty bucks that night, after leaving forty for the house (just to show he was no duck's ass), he felt somehow the whole warrant thing had put him in the hole. This was just one more reason why he should blow town. He debated about whether he should leave right now, but he felt he had to say good-bye to his folks. He'd risk one more night here, but he would leave out early the next day for good.

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Dixie arrived home about quarter after two. He tried to sneak quietly into bed. However, his parents heard him come in. They climbed upstairs to the living room from their temporary bedchamber in the basement in time to intercept him. His parents were glad he was safe, but they said they wanted to have a serious discussion with him the next day. They had heard about their son's run-in with Matt Yikes and the county police had been by earlier with their lights flashing on their squad cars out in front of the house. They had come to the door about the widow's missing, messed up car. Evidently, the widow wanted her car back, again. With all the neighbors watching the officious proceedings, his Dad said that he had never been so embarrassed in his life. He had to get up before dawn to golf with his boss, so he did not have time to discuss the matter now, but they would definitely discuss it tomorrow when he got home from the golf course. His mom and dad retired with this parting shot: "And you can bet there are going to be some changes made around here tomorrow, Nicholas." Since Bill was sleeping in their room, his folks returned to bed in the basement.

However, neither of his parents had mentioned the warrant specifically. That seemed strange to him. Oddly enough, they had mentioned the widow's car, but not the warrant. Concern over the car was upper most in their minds. Yet, Dixie had not said anything to them about his desire to leave the next day either. If he had, no one would get any sleep that night. And he didn't want to screw up his Dad's early morning golf game any more than he already had. Maybe that's why his parents had kept mum about the warrant? He pondered this and other mysteries as he prepared for bed. Probably, his folks just couldn't deal with the whole thing right then. It was too much for them. Or maybe that's what his dad wanted to speak with him about the next day? His folks had left him alone to sleep. That was decent. He didn't know if he would have done the same, had the situation been reversed.

Dixie found some aspirins in the medicine cabinet and finished off the bottle. Then he brushed his teeth and sneaked into his bedroom, hoping to disturb the creaking hardwood floor as little as possible. He did not want to wake up Bill or his

grandmother, who were sleeping in the other two upstairs bedrooms. Exhausted, he stripped off his clothes, pulled down the bedding and slipped between the clean sheets his mother had laundered for him. Dixie adjusted the pillow behind him and lay back in the dark with his hands clasped against the back of his thick hair, between his head and the pillow. He could feel the calluses on his hands and fingers from working the business end of a shovel, as well as swinging a bat and his rebar for BP. Now, he felt some new blisters on his fingertips from playing the guitar last night. He shook his head, marveling at that feat. His heels reached to the end of the kid-sized bed. He looked around the tiny room. It was a little kid's room, filled with little kid's furniture, little kid's trophies and little kid things. Shoot! He lay in a little kid's bed!

The only light in the dark room shone in from the street lamp across the road. The light drew his attention. The lamplight reflected off the room's sole window. The white-painted, wooden, window sill was just a half foot above his body. The parted, sash curtains and the half raised, venetian blinds let him see the light plainly. Strangely, he felt closer to that light than he did to anything in the dark room. With his right hand, he pressed the hem of the nearer sash curtain against the bedroom wall, so he could see just outside the window. There stood a row of large bushes, looming as nocturnal sentinels protecting his little kid room and his little kid memories from all who would corrupt them. Suddenly, he felt the walls of this little room were closing in on him, trying to trap him, to suffocate him. He let the curtain drop and, once more, placed both hands behind his head on the pillow.

He recalled how, as a kid in this very bed, he used to be scared of "the ghosties," which were a myriad of little monsters that looked and behaved like evil Tinker Bells. "Ghosties" could fly and would attack like piranhas and devour him in seconds with their pointed, sharp teeth, if he peeked out from under the bedding or showed any bit of his body outside the covers. Usually, they had hidden under his bed or in the closet, waiting for him to slip up or show himself. If he had to use the bathroom, he would wait until the last second and then burst out of bed and make a beeline for the head. Once he made it out of his room into the hallway, he was safe. For ghosties existed only in his room. Dixie laughed at his recall, how he could remember that but nothing of his wife.

His wife ... Dixie felt an urge to leave her, to leave here, to be safe and run, to run out now away from all his real life ghosties, who were encircling him with increased menacing and complicated entanglements.

Dixie considered his situation. He was doing manual labor in awful heat and humidity for a guy (Larry) who hated his guts, because his brother and the other school teachers needed only Dixie's strong back to dig down in the hell hole. Dix had a teeny bopper who wanted to jump his bones right into jail at the slightest pretext, while her old man wanted to castrate Dixie and stuff his lone ball down his throat. He had a mean bastard of a baseball manager who loved to bury him on the bench and humiliate him in front of his teammates and their supporters in the stands. Another guy's wife had a crush on him. Her husband had already sucker-punched Dix to the ground and now, since Dixie had returned the favor and clobbered the guy, the dude was going to



have Dixie arrested on at least four or five different felony counts. Dix had messed up the widow's car, a lady who had been nothing but kind to him. He had a bigoted buddy who wanted Dixie around only to help him shove a football down some black dudes' throats. He had an oversexed, middle-aged, Cossack female who assumed the two of them were meant for each other. And the Marine Corps wanted to make a hero out of Dixie for something he could not even remember, when all he wanted was to be left alone to find the object of his silhouette vision, which may or may not bear a strong resemblance to his wife—his wife, who, by the way, happened to hate his guts. Oh? Had he forgotten to mention that little tidbit of news previously? Of all those cuts and slices he had listed, the last was the wound that had stabbed him the deepest, the unkindest cut of all. And his parents, of course, were ashamed of him for all of the aforementioned items.

Perhaps, some of those arguments were unimportant. He could not contest that, but just at look at the number of them. Sheesh! He had been home less than three weeks. He had managed to alienate everyone who was supposed to care for him and to encourage those whom he should ignore. For the life of him, he could not comprehend how he had accomplished that dubious feat in so short a time. Yet, if he thought she still had wanted him, still loved him, he would throw all that other crap out the window. He'd stay here, hire Vamia and take his lumps. For her, for the hope of her, he'd chance jail and brave it all. For there was no getting around it, she was something truly special. There was no doubt about that. And it wasn't just her dimples and dynomite figure, either. The girl had quality, real quality, not the phony brand practiced by so many he had encountered. No, she was truly something else. But the walls were closing in around him, even as the frozen void widened in his soul.

He had experienced such feelings of claustrophobia before, but he couldn't place just where or when. Again, Dixie felt that strong urge to run, a basic instinct so primal that he could not deny it. He pulled his hands away from the back of his head and clenched his fist down by his sides. Run is what he would do. He would leave tomorrow, early. Forget about Bax and the school teachers. Forget them all. Yes, he would bid goodbye to his folks first and then leave—the sooner, the better so he could dodge that warrant. The only unanswered question important to him concerned his wife. Should he say goodbye to her on his way out the door? Tell her she was free to do whatever she wanted with whatever fortune they supposedly shared? Or should he just bolt and say nothing?

He figured that maybe he should at least say goodbye to Ryz'n. He figured he owed her that much. Besides, he had promised Ramon. And he would not mind seeing this so-called beach resort penthouse of his one time, at least. But then on the other hand, why should he bother her? It was clear now that she did not want to have anything to do with him. *Maybe I should just take off?* He had wanted to see the northeastern part of the country for quite some time. The Northeast had terrific history and breathtaking natural scenery—mountains, lakes and oceans—or so he had heard. If he could summon the courage, he would go east, first to bid her farewell at the beach, and then north to sightsee. Sure, he could do that much.

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Of course, running meant losing any shot he had at playing ball this summer. HA! What a joke! A shot at playing ball? *Who are you kidding, Mann? With that jerk-for-a-manager, you got no shot anyway! Well, I'll just stop and hit in every batting cage I come to on my travels. That's what I'll do.* Dixie smiled with satisfaction at that idea.

However, he began to have second thoughts about saying goodbye to Ryz'n. Why should he make himself a target for another confrontation? It was obvious she wanted nothing more to do with him. Of course, he had promised Ramon that he would see her once more. Yet, wouldn't it be so much easier on everyone if he slid up on the back of his Honda and slipped out of town silently, without a word to anyone? Had it not been just one short month ago when he had experienced this same dilemma with Donna? A month? Gee! It seemed like a month just shy of a lifetime, his lifetime.

Of course, some huge differences existed between then and now. Donna had been his fiancée and he had been with her for a year. They had known each other pretty well. However, Ryz'n, who was supposed to be his wife, had only been with him a couple days and, even then, all they did was fight. Unlike Donna, Ryz'n did not need him at all. Ry was independently wealthy, talented and awesome. Let those guys down at the beach get a whiff of her act and she would have every male animal in pants on the Delmarva Peninsula drooling at her feet. Still, it worried him, what Ramon had said about her taking drugs to get up for her performances. She hadn't seemed the type, but then maybe he had been wrong about her, wrong in more ways than one. He never would have guessed she would have pulled that stunt the other night at that club, that *Mr. Rowdy's Loft* place, in front of all those people. Then, he never thought she could have moved like that, either. Where did she learn that stuff? Shoot! He hadn't thought any woman could move like that! The mere thought aroused him. Dixie turned toward the window, crossed his left knee over his right and kept one hand resting behind his butt and the other between his ear and the pillow, out of temptation's way. He wouldn't think about that now. Such thoughts could do no one any good now.

*Yeah, a quick, silent exit probably would be better for all concerned.*

Besides, Ryz'n could not possibly be his shapely silhouette vision. She's too short. Certainly, his striking silhouette girl was still out there somewhere, waiting for him to find her. Who knows? Maybe she'll show up tomorrow? Yeah! She may be waiting around the next bend in the road! An electric-smiling, warm-loving female to love his blues away? *I hope so. I sure hope so.* Although, a loner, he never had been lonely much, which seemed odd. He had never known why really. He had been alone—always, inside himself alone, but rarely had he been truly lonely. Seemed as if there always had been some girl, some woman around, whether she was someone, whom he was serious about or just a friend, someone to take his mind off his troubles. Like the day when the Corps had discharged him on a medical, Dix had found Lori Lei waiting for him just down the block. Yeah! Maybe he would find another Lori Lei just up the block tomorrow. Ha! He guessed that consuming women was kind of a weakness in a way, the way some men were drawn to drink, to drugs or even to gambling. But having an affectionate female nearby always had made life easier for him. They always softened the blows of life, thawed the icy void within, if even only partly or

temporarily. Dix seemed to attract the distaff side somehow as a rock star drew groupies, though he never quite knew why. Because he had learned he once had been a rock star, however brief the nova, did not figure into the equation, since he never had known or accepted that fact. Yet, when he stopped to think about it, he did feel like a fish out of water, when he did not have a girl around for very long. He could not explain the mutual gravitation between him and the fairer sex; only that, as an alcoholic was drawn to whiskey, so, too, Dix was drawn to women. For some reason, which he could never fathom, women drew close to him, as well.

He was becoming drowsy. It was enough for him that he had made up his mind to leave this house of horrors and, once he made up his mind, the deal was sealed. *I have to get out of Dodge now before the local Wyatt Earp or Bat Masterson throws my butt in the calaboose.* And then after all, *Ryz'n had left him*—no, make that *run* from him and his uncontrollable two heads. He had not left her. No, she wanted nothing to do with him. That much was certain. Dix thought of what he done to Matt Yikes. He had “to make truck” now, as Tonya had so aptly put it the other night outside *Mr. Rowdy's*. Dix rolled his head onto the heel of his hand and winced at his recent head wound. He lifted Trish's bandage near his hairline and felt the crease in his head that had begun to crust over. He thought of something he had read from the Bible:

***Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him.***

Ha! Maybe this mark would save him. And what was it that Colonel Vernier had told him out in front of Lena's after Dix had clobbered her husband?

“Son, maybe it would be best for everyone if you were to go away somewhere, too.”  
*He's right. Maybe it would. Yeah, he's right. I know he's right.*

Dixie recalled the looks of horror on the faces of Ry's neighbors after he had beaten Matt Yikes to a pulp. They had seen him for what he was, a true, mental defective.

This homeward bound experiment of his had failed miserably. Yes, this pathetic chapter in his life was *definitely closed*. The frozen void in his soul had ripped wide open. It had never been wider. The cold, empty place inside him felt as wide as the Gulf of Mexico now and as icy cold as the Arctic tundra, colder than it had ever felt before, worse even than when the Corps had discharged him for medical reasons. “Plan for the worst and hope for the best. That's my motto.” He reminded himself. Too tired and too loathe to think anymore, Dixie began fading out fast ... “Time to bail,” he whispered. “Time to bail.” For a second straight night, hollow, frozen inside and overwhelmed with exhaustion, Dix fell asleep without the need of a cigarette or an inclination to pray.

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