

Dixie picked up Paul in the widow's convertible. The pair sped off towards the Clairton Acres job site, only about five hours late. Ha! Both were glad to be out of range of their respective mother's acerbic tongues and quick hands. They stopped off at the K intersection in Clairton to duck into a 7-11 and pick up a half dozen cold sodas for their crew as a peace offering for being so late. Cold drinks—sodas, water, beer—were always welcome commodities at the job site on a hot, muggy day like this one. Back in the Bonnie, Paul chided Dixie for his bedroom antics with Tonya, but Dixie wanted none of it.

“Look Paul, I told ya already. I don't want to know what happened last night. As far as I'm concerned, nothing happened, so let's leave it at that.”

However, Paul would not “leave it at that.” He began to describe some of last night's more lurid events, so Dixie slammed on the breaks. He pulled over onto the wide dirt and stone shoulder of the dual lane highway.

“Get out, Mann! Get out now! My head is killin' me. I feel like crap and I'm in no mood for this bull!”

“OK, OK, just be cool, Dude. My lips are sealed. I promise. I was only joanin' on ya. How would I know what the heck went on between you and Tonya, when I had my own hands full, right? Actually, I gotta thank you Nick, really I do, Mann. Cuz if you hadn't done such a first-rate job of occupying the old lady for me, I never would have got to first base with Natasha, let alone second, third and—well you get the drift, doncha Nicky boy?” Paul circled his right index finger in the traditional home run signal. Then, he jabbed Dixie playfully in his upper arm

“Yeah, I get it fine.”

“Ha! Ha! That's right and you too, Nicky boy. Maybe I ought to call you Nookee Nickee or maybe Nick the Nooker. HA! HA!”

“Look Paul, I'm serious, OK? I don't want to hear nothin' more about it. It never happened. Paul? I mean it!”

“Yeah, sure no problem, mum's the word.” Paul zipped his lips with his thumb and forefinger.

Paul's frowning attempt at sincerity convinced Dixie to allow his friend to remain in the car. They drove south down Route 5A to Clairton Acres, a small ten-year old development of red and tan brick, ranch-style homes in the middle of nowhere, next to some power lines. The job site was just across the highway up on the left of the development's main drag. Dixie's mind wandered as he stopped the convertible in the median, waiting for northbound highway traffic to clear. Whenever he drove in to the Acres, Dixie noted that his old baseball coach, Coach Shaughnessy, lived only a couple blocks away from their present pool installation job.

Paul reminded Nick about the time Nick, along with Allena Larrabee, had pulled the potato-in-the-exhaust-pipe gag on Lena's unsuspecting, troublesome boyfriend Matt Yikes so many years before. Paul claimed that incident, among others like it, combined that same year with Nick's contribution to Pocomoke's state baseball championship,

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and his other athletic exploits in track and wrestling, not to mention his later celebrated Rock'N'Roll prowess, all contributed to cement Little Nick's unique, legendary status at Pocomoke and throughout the county. Dixie merely nodded to placate his friend. As of yet, Dixie could recall none of that. All he knew was that he was over a half day late for work, performing a job no one wanted to do, least of all himself. Nobody liked slinging mud out of an oven-like hole almost eleven feet deep on a hot muggy, Southern Maryland, July day.

Clairton Acres had a high water table, which was a fact that had escaped the observation of Nick's brother Ramon, when he had sold an in-ground swimming pool in that development to Mr. Scrachi. Previously, Ramon had sold above ground pools in Clairton Acres, which his work crews had installed without incident. The high water table was, however, a huge problem for Dixie and the school teachers now on this present, in-ground job. The installation had been going on and off for two weeks and had yet to be completed. Usually this type of job took no more than a week. The problem was that the crew had hit water just over six feet down. They had been slinging muck ever since. A couple days ago, the school teachers had suspended work, pending the receipt of a submersible water pump, which had been shipped from the pool plant in Rochester, New York to Baltimore. Bax was supposed to have picked up the water pump from a Baltimore vendor that morning.

The crew had to dig out the deep end to a depth of nearly eleven feet, two and a half feet deeper than normal, so they could install the sump-pump in a specially made concrete box a couple feet below the normal eight and a half foot pool depth. The school teachers had bypassed Ramon and contracted directly with the customer Sam Scrachi to perform the installation. Ramon was free and clear. He had his money. However, the school teachers were losing money on the pool hand over fist, because the unexpected, exorbitant labor costs were killing them. They had not figured on hitting water. They had priced their installation fees on how long they estimated the work would take them normally, which, in this case, they had estimated to be a week at the most. Thanks to the high water table, the installation already had doubled their original estimate. However, Bax and the boys had an outside chance to recoup some of their losses by earning an unusual, voluntary bonus offered by the customer Sam Scrachi. Mr. Scrachi's daughter was turning sixteen soon. He understood the situation with the water table and was willing to pay a little extra if the school teachers could have his girl swimming by the end of her birthday.

Dixie understood that Sherri Scrachi, the teenage daughter, was the one and only good factor about slinging mud on this job. The cute, bubbly teenager was the reason her old man had purchased the pool in the first place. The attractive teen had a terrifically proportioned, long-waisted, lithe figure. Moreover, the kid liked to sunbathe in the back yard while the crew was working, to show off what nature had done for her. Her short, tight black curls, sensual, light blue eyes and attractive, cutely freckled face had all the crew members mumbling, as they toiled and sweated in the excavation site. Busting your butt down in the mud hole at temperatures sometimes exceeding 130 degrees seemed almost worth it, when you surfaced above the blazing hot, galvanized

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steel walls to spot a nubile Sherri, sunning her tanned curves out on her chaise lounge. Physically, the girl was fifteen going on twenty-five. Mentally, well, Dixie felt the precocious teen might not be fully aware of the effect she had on the working men. In Dixie's mind, her hormones ran way ahead of her intelligence.

As Dixie completed his left hand turn and crossed the northbound lanes of the dual lane highway into Clairton Acres, Paul's thoughts had turned to her, too.

"Hey Mann, you think that Sherri will be laying out today?"

"How should I know?" Dixie was still sore over the argument he had just had with his buddy.

"Well, if she ain't, she'll come out when we get there."

"Yeah? What makes you say that?"

"Aw, come on Mann! Who you think you're kiddin'? All the guys know she's got the hots for ya!"

"Sure, she does. She's just a kid, for cryin' out loud. She's Jailbait with a capital J."

"Right! But she don't move like no kid though. She moves like a woman what's all over alive. You know what I mean? And I seen her watchin' us, watchin' her. She likes it. She knows the score, that chick!"

"Look Mann, I got enough problems without that kind of trouble. You see what happens when her old man gets home from work? He chases her cute little fanny inside but quick."

"I still say she yours for the askin'. She knows who you are, Dude. I've been working there when you weren't around. The only time she comes out in her two-piece is when you show up."

Dixie shook his head in disgust.

"She's ain't even sixteen yet, Paul. Gimme a break!"

Dixie passed a half dozen or so homes, before he pulled up and stopped in between two brick houses on the left, parking in the wrong direction. The further house was the Scrachi's. The ebony and ivory-headed pair got out of the car with cold sodas in hand and ambled across the green, spacious, side yard to the rear of the property. It was darned hot. The air was thick with humidity.

"Mann, you be better off worrying about what you're gonna say to Bax and Lou for bein' late, 'stead of thinkin' 'bout this jail bait stuff."

"Me? Hey, you was drivin' Nicky. I was just along for the ride," Paul said with a dirt-eating grin on his face. "Hey now! Got a fin here that says Sherri will put on her bathing suit when she sees you, that is, if she ain't wearin' one already."

"Well, if she is, I should get a double fever, cuz that blows your whole theory, now don't it."

"You're on." They shook on their bet.

The pair strode down the low, sloping, grassy green side yard to the Scrachi's back yard, ready for the worst their crew chiefs had to offer.

As the two latecomers descended the grassy side yard and turned the corner of the house, the pool site opened up to view. The twenty by forty-foot in-ground was the largest pool they had ever installed. Excavated mounds of dirt, four to six feet high,

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surrounded all but the southwest or shallow end, where the backhoe operator had left some room to exit his diggings. A half dozen ten year-old shade trees lined the northeast end of Scrachi's property, including a gum, two silver maples, an oak, a beech and a weeping willow. The weeping willow grew diagonally across the yard from the point where the boys entered the property with cold drinks in hand.

To Dixie's relief, on the right between the southwest corner of the house and the excavated dirt mounds just ahead of them, Sherri's chaise lounge lay empty. However, his relief proved to be short-lived, because, just then, Sherri poked her cute head out of the kitchen, back door to stand on the back porch, black, iron landing. The near sweet sixteen dressed in a plain, sleeveless, light blue, cotton blouse with the shirt-tail tied above her tan midriff and wearing a pair of bright red, hot pants.

"Hello Nicky!" She waved enthusiastically towards him.

Dixie and Paul pulled up to look at her. The work crew stood up from their resting place beneath the weeping willow across the lot to peer over the excavated piles of dirt that encompassed the pool site.

Dixie answered, "Hello Sherri. And how are you this hot, July day?"

He smiled, but, before she answered, turned to walk away from her around the muck hole towards the crew. Walking next to him, Paul mumbled out of the side of his mouth.

"She never says 'hello' to me, Dude."

On the opposite side of the pool near the northwest corner of the lot, the rest of the work crew moved closer to the stacks of loose dirt to peer between the weeping willow branches, so they could eavesdrop better. However, they weren't concerned enough to venture out from beneath the shade of the maple and weeping willow trees. Danny, the smallest of the three, spoke loudly enough to be heard across the excavation site.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in!"

"Hey! I catch you bums workin' hard again, I see," observed Paul wryly.

Ignoring the banter, Sherri continued to speak with Dixie from the back stoop. As he walked, Dix turned his head sideways to listen, trying to be polite, but he didn't stop walking away from her.

"I'm hot, too, Nicky, just like the day."

She smiled broadly, revealing, like Ryz'n, a dimple on either side of her mouth.

Over his shoulder, Dixie agreed with a smile, "Yeah, it's a hot one, all right." Then he walked on across the yard and around the pool, following Paul.

Paul had been right. Sherri had paid no attention to Paul. Instead, the girl had focused solely on Dixie's naked torso, as he lugged a six-pack of sodas in one hand and his work shirt in the other. She appeared to enjoy watching him. Previously, she had told Dixie that she, like every other kid in the south county, knew of Little Nick's schoolboy athletic feats, not to mention his Rock'N'Roll fame. Dixie shook his head grimly. Evidently, everyone knew of his past, but him. He recalled now, that the unabashed, moonstruck teenager had remarked that she intended to get to know him better and she had had no qualms about telling him so, either. Once, while Dixie was shoveling near her chaise lounge, Sherri had marveled at his "muscular frame and

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tanned, naturally swarthy complexion.” “Swarthy!” He wondered where the kid had come up with that word. She must have searched a long while in the thesaurus for that one. Then she had said, his “broad shoulders, narrow waist and cute butt reminded her of two of the star basketball players at her high school.” Dixie had blown her off with a smile and a laconic “Oh, that’s nice—I guess.” Now, as quickly as she had appeared, Sherri ducked hurriedly back inside her house, while he and Paul walked part way around the pool.

Thank God for small favors!

Danny and Barry Suggs and Paul’s brother Phil, had been resting under the shade of the willow tree. The tanned, wavy-haired Danny, the only one standing, could see Paul and Dixie’s approach over the top of the loose piles of excavated dirt. As the crew came into view, Dixie could see they were wearing the de facto uniform of the day. Shirtless, they all wore shorts, droopy white crew socks and heavy, construction work shoes with sullied, gold cord, shoe laces. Their billowy, button-up, work shirts hung on adjacent tree and bush branches, wafting gently in the meager breeze. Seizing a waving shirt-tail, Barry, the largest, wiped the omnipresent perspiration from his glistening face and body. Danny, also the shortest, youngest and most gregarious of the three Suggs brothers, answered Paul’s quip for all of the crew.

“Sheee—it! Us workin’? What about you? At least we showed up on time this morning. Ain’t our fault if this pool is so f’d up we can’t do anything with it. But what’s your excuse coming in here at—” Danny checked his watch “—Good golly Miss Molly! What is it? One-twenty-five?”

“Well, we was on special assignment this morning, fellas. Ya know how it is.” Paul winked, grinning. “I guarantee we had our hands full, right Nicky? Aw shoot! Don’t ask him, because he ‘CAN’T REMEMBER’! If you believe that load of bull!” Barry and Phil finally rose off their duffs to greet the latecomers.

“Yeah, I’ll just bet you did have your hands full,” Danny smirked, while his bother Barry chuckled. “Phil’s been fillin’ us in a bit.”

Recently, honorably discharged from the Army and Air Force respectively, both Barry and Danny were searching for government jobs to escape pool hole hell. Danny had found a permanent position at the EPA downtown, in southwest D.C. He was to start working there next week. Barry was still looking, but he had some leads also at the EPA. Both brothers had majored in biology and joined the R.O.T.C. They had recently fulfilled their military obligations and were helping their oldest brother Bax, as well as providing for their young families, by installing pools for the summer until they found permanent government work. The two younger Suggs brothers were four to seven years older than Dixie. Each was married with a child. The Suggs’s were a good looking family. Bax, who was in Baltimore picking up the pump, was handsome and husky. Barry, like Danny had wavy hair, but lighter in shade. Barry was the biggest of the three boys. He stood a few inches over six feet. The Suggs boys fit in with the tenor of the crew, all of whom had been pretty good athletes in their scholastic days. They sure were a handsome family.

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“Where were you all night, Paul?” asked Phil Salvarano, who was genuinely concerned about his older brother’s whereabouts. “You didn’t come home. Mom was worried.”

“Well, it’s like this little bro—I, I mean we, me ‘n Nick that is, we were helpin’ a couple damsels in distress.”

“More like undress, ya mean.”

“Well, that too, little brother. Like I said we had our hands full.” Paul grinned like a devil.

Dixie sought to stop this line of questioning, as it could prove to be nothing but embarrassing for him.

“Hey fellas! We come bearing gifts, brought you all some cold sodas. You, too good to accept our generosity?”

“Shoot no! I’ll take one, please,” begged Barry.

“Well, at least you’re good for something, Little Nick,” admitted Danny. I’ll give ya that much. Got a root beer?”

“Sure do, just for you, ‘A and Double-U!’” Dixie tossed him the bottle.

“Thanks buddy. Yes, you are good for something and you’re a poet, too.” He chuckled.

Dixie smiled and handed out the sodas to Danny and the others. Paul and Dixie watched as the other three resumed their choice spots on their backsides under the shade trees, guzzling their cold drinks. Paul and Dixie had left a couple extra sodas for themselves in a cooler in the Bonneville’s trunk for later. After the boys had enjoyed their drinks for a few minutes, Nick was about to ask about their bosses and the stoppage of work. He had bought three remaining sodas as a sort of peace offering for them but they were nowhere around. However, Paul spoke up first.

“Hey! Where’s Chuckles?”

Paul asked quizzically, as he looked around in vain for a part-timer on the crew. The guys giggled and looked at one another sheepishly.

“What? What’d I say? It’s a simple question.”

“He’s at the clinic,” replied Barry very of matter of fact like.

“Yeah, what’s up?” questioned Paul. Phil answered his brother.

“Nothin’s up. It’s more like down.”(Snickers.) “Chuckles is havin’ his vasectomy today, remember? So he can heal up over the long weekend.”

“Yeah, he’s gettin’ a name change, too,” added Danny.

“Oh, really! To what?”

“Chuck-LESS!” Ha! Ha! The rest of the crew guffawed merrily.

Then Barry leaned forward and whispered quickly in a manner that shut all of them up in a hurry.

“Hey! Look who just came out on the stoop.”

Danny and Paul parted the willow branches so they could see. They all turned to observe Sherri sporting a new, white polka-dotted, fire engine red halter-top bikini, as well as a pair of fashionable open-toed block platform shoes, also fire engine red. She

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had a bottle of soda pop in her left hand, as she flirtatiously pirouetted about on the back porch landing and turned towards the crew.

“Hello Nicky!” She yelled and, again, she waved excitedly.

In falsetto, a couple of the crew repeated her greeting loud enough for Dixie to hear, just to rag on him.

When he didn’t respond, Sherri called out again, waved and smiled coquettishly, pivoting to provide all of them her playboy bunny, three-quarters profile. As proof, the lithe-figured teen lifted a green pop bottle even with the top of her head and waved it slightly, before she descended the backstairs.

“Got your favorite here Nicky, a cold Dew, just for you!”

“Another poet,” moaned Danny derisively. “You two are made for each other Nick!”

Paul whispered to Dixie, “You better take it Nick, ‘cause that Dew is costing you a fever.”

Dixie pulled a five-spot out of his wallet and reluctantly handed it over to Paul. He kissed Abe Lincoln hello and laughed. “The hots,” whispered Paul and shook his head sagely.

Paul explained his bet with Nick to the others, who chuckled. They all knew Sherri had “the hots” for Dixie, too, even if Dixie was in denial.

Dix lofted his voice above the dirt hole.

“Sure Sherri. That’s very, uh, thoughtful of you. Let me come around and get it.” Dixie’s own saccharine sweet tone irked him.

“No, no, that’s all right. You just stay right there in the shade while you can, Nicky Sheeboom.” Then she added in a motherly, false scolding, shrill voice, “That nasty old Lou will have you sweating soon enough.” Speaking of Lou, Dixie wondered where their crew chief was, as well as the other two school teacher-foremen Larry and Bax, for that matter. The girl stepped off the last of the half dozen steps and sashayed around the open, southwest end of the excavation site toward him. Dixie noticed she accentuated the natural swing of her hips by placing one high-heeled foot very deliberately in front of the toes of the other. She came on in a sort of heel to toe effect that pleased them all.

In mock sincerity, Big Barry whispered, “She’s been asking for ya all day, Nick.” The others snickered.

“Yeah, she really has ‘the hots’ for you man,” added his brother.

“Anh, she’s just a kid,” observed Dixie.

“But what a kid!” Paul chimed. “Look at that strut. Looks like all woman to me.”

“Whyn’t ya jes’ keep your mind on Natasha, Paul?” countered Dixie derisively.

To a man, the laborers stood up so they could see over the dirt mounds to watch the Junior Miss sashay around the excavation site towards them.

Sherri was a deeply tanned, lithe five feet five inches with an hourglass figure, firm and flat in the belly and curves everywhere else. Her hips and rump curved a little more deeply than the peaches hanging from her tree. She wore her curly, black hair in a ponytail with a red bow and short frizzy bangs, a style not in vogue. However, Dixie

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knew she wore her hair that way because he had mentioned casually the other day that he liked that hairstyle and lamented the dearth of it.

“Jailbait!” piped in Phil. Phil was exactly right on with that remark, thought Dixie.

Big Barry opined that “actually, she reminds me a lot of a teen version of your wife. Very vivacious.”

“My wife?” questioned Danny. “Whoa, I wish.”

“No! Not your wife, Nick’s wife! Only difference is, Sherri there isn’t quite so well endowed as Ryzanna, but then few are.”

Paul opined. “Maybe, but she just ain’t finished growin’ yet, prob’ly. Yeah for sure, she’s still maturin’! She’s got a nice pair of plump peaches there right now, but there’s no tellin’ how she’ll turn out, if she keeps takin’ her vitamins and eatin’ her veg’tables. Might grow a couple o’ nice-sized navel oranges there, or, or maybe even a brace of grapefruit.”

“Brace of grapefruit?” asked Phil incredulously. “Since when was you so poetic?”

“You know, you never have understood me Phil. There’s a gulf between us baby brother and it saddens me to have to mention it, in front of all these people.” Paul’s facetious grin could not hide the pleasure he took in bedeviling his kid brother.

“Har-dee, har-har!” retorted Phil. “Since when did you get X-ray vision such that you can tell what size she is?”

“It’s a knack, baby brother. Some of us have it and some don’t. Obviously you don’t. I guessed our sister Nann, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, you read her size off her bra from the laundry.”

“Tsk. Tsk. Jealousy will get you nowhere, Phil.” Phil merely shook his head in the negative.

“Sherri’s the right size for me,” added Danny. “Yeah I wouldn’t mind pickin’ her peaches and shakin’ her tree.” He began to mimic Steve Miller’s song “The Joker.”

Sherri was taking her sweet time, ambling more slowly, more sensuously, bouncing more heavily, the closer she got. She was putting on quite a show for the hired help. After a judicious study of her, Barry weighed in his observations. “The girl’s at that right size, ya know, where she makes you want to take a little peek just to see how big she really is. Yeah. Oranges, maybe navel oranges ... don’t believe grapefruits.”

“Well, how can you say that Barry? Challenged an incredulous Paul. “You know when I started my senior year, Ry was about, oh, like Sherri there, but by the time I graduated she had transformed herself, losing weight in all the right places and gaining it in all the right ones, too. That girl went from plum pickin’ to the pair of fat pineapples she owns today.” He turned to Dixie “No offense, Nick.”

“None taken, Paul.”

Sherri approached. The guys all knew she was a tease, but they thoroughly enjoyed her all the same. The precocious teen made working in the muggy heat and muck bearable. Barry and Danny had hinted once that the thought of Sherri prancing around the pool site actually helped them overcome their post work exhaustion by tapping into hidden energy reserves later in the evening. They claimed their wives very much appreciated the results of their renewed energies, or so they confessed. Dixie reasoned

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to himself that it was probably just as well their wives remained ignorant of the source of such conjugal enthusiasm from their husbands.

Dix, who happened to be the closest worker to Sherri, stepped towards the young maiden just as she reached him. The vivacious teen brought her quaking, swaying saunter to a halt right in front of him. Sherri had opened the bottle of pop for him already.

“Here ya go, Nicky.” She smiled broadly, as he took the round, green glass bottle from her.

“Thank you, Sherri.” He slurped a long sip. ‘Ummm, love that Dew. Thanks much.’”

“You’re very welcome, Nick. Hope you didn’t mind, but I took a sip out of it. So probably, a little of my saliva slipped into it.” She simpered slyly. “Now you have a little bit of me in you. Hope that’s OK, Nick.” The guys behind him snickered again.

“No, no I don’t mind at all.”

To prove his point, Dixie slugged on the bottle again, dribbling some yellow-green Dew down his cheek. Sherri beamed, displaying her two dimples. Dixie noticed a charming band of freckles which ran across the bridge of her turned-up nose, from one cheek to the other. Then she stepped up next to him, reached up and caught the drip of the lime green drink that had dribbled to the edge of his chin on her fingertip. Sherri eyed him from under her long dark lashes like the coquette she was and slowly licked his Dew off the tip of her forefinger. With his peripheral vision, Dixie spied Phil drop his bottle of Fresca, but he picked it up before too much had spilled out. Dixie had to chuckle at his schoolboy pal. When Sherri frowned at losing his attention, Dixie soberly thanked her again. That brightened her face considerably. Sherri was trying so hard to snag him.

“You’re very welcome again, Cutie. Say, bet you didn’t know today is my birthday, did ya?”

“No, I didn’t know that, Sherri. I thought it was a couple days off. Well, congratulations.”

This was certainly bad news for the school teachers, because no way would they have Sherri swimming today, unless she wanted to swim in mud. Sherri clasped her hands behind her butt and rocked forwards and backwards on her platform shoes, as Ryz’n did. Standing darn near stark naked in front of a half dozen, leering, hot sweaty, young men did not seem to faze her at all.

“Thanks,” she said, proud as punch at what her sixteen years had done for her.

“So how old are you now, Sherri?”

Dixie knew her age but he played dumb, pretending he was not all that much interested.

“Why, Sixteen!” Sherri rocked proudly up and down the balls of her feet, shaking her peaches for him.

“Sixteen? Sweet sixteen!” Dixie whistled. “Well now, that’s, that’s a very special birthday.”

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“Yes, I know. I got my license this morning.” The teen beamed. Dixie sought to humor her. “Got it right it here, too.” She patted herself over her heart. “Wanna see it?” she asked enthusiastically.

“Well, I—”

“Here, let me show ya.” The girl quickly reached inside her bikini halter top and slowly extracted her license, handing the piece of flimsy cardboard over to him for inspection. Startled, Dixie received it rather reluctantly. However, he checked out *her bona fides*. Ht.: 5’5” Wt.: 115 lbs. DOB: 07-02-59. Eyes: Blue. Hair: Drk. Brn.

“Wow! How ‘bout that? Are your eyes really blue?” he joked with a grin, but she bit anyway.

“They most certainly are. Thought you would have noticed that by now Nicky!” She fluttered her lids.

“I was only playin’ with ya, Sherri.”

“Oh, well that’s different.” Mollified, she resumed her pleasant grin.

“Yes, now that’s really something, Sherri,” he opined as he tapped his index fingers against the license. “Yessir. Be careful out there on the road, especially around motor cycles. People never give bikes enough respect. They get too close and before ya know it, there’s a bad accident.”

“OK, I’ll remember that, Nick.”

“Good.” He handed the license back to her carefully. Upon receiving it, she pulled back on the hem of her halter top and shoved the thing ever so slowly back into her hiding place, eying his reaction the whole time.

Dixie was hoping the birthday girl would skedaddle now, but she showed no such inclination. He swigged on the Dew to calm his nerves and to keep from letting her know how much she had just shaken him.

“Got this new suit and these shoes as presents, ya like?”

Sherri pivoted around, modeling them for him, and, by virtue of their proximity, the rest of the crew, as well. *Why is that they always want to model for me?* Her suit was one of the kind that seemed to tie with bows everywhere, on either hip, and between her blossoming, peach-sized breasts. The coquette looked down and fingered the bow holding the two breast cups together before she looked up at Dixie, eying him slowly. She stepped toward him, hooked her left arm in his right, motioned with her head, turned and tugged on his arm. She led him several feet around the dirt mounds away from the others. Dixie glanced back for their help, but they were all guffawing silently, shaking their heads and motioning him to go with her, all except Phil, who stood stock still, seemingly caught in a trance. Sherri halted, evidently when she figured she was out of earshot, though not eyeshot, from the crew. The woman-child twirled her right forefinger around the top bow of her halter top, playing with it.

“How does that old song go, Nicky?” She asked playfully. “‘If you wanna see me do my thing ...’ what? ‘All you gotta do is what?’” The girl began to tug at her chest bowstring.

“No, no, no! Don’t!” Dixie reached up and pushed his hand onto the back of hers pressing her palm up against her chest.

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“Don’t do that, Sherri! Please don’t.” He grinned nervously and threw his hands toward her, palms outward, like a cop stopping traffic.

“Well gee, Nicky, all I was gonna say is ‘pull my string.’ I wasn’t gonna do it! Just say it. Sheesh! But it’s nice to know you think enough of me to stop me ... Sweetie.” The teen placed her free hand over his right hand, pressing his hand tightly against her small cleavage. She batted her naturally long eyelashes at him, pulled his hand gently away from her and then up to her lips. Then she lightly kissed the backs of his fingers. Dixie pulled his hand from her grasp and, grabbing his aching head, massaged his pounding forehead between his fingers. This was all he needed. He could envision himself in a prison lockup with some huge, hairy dude called Bubba for a cellmate.

Behind them, Dixie overheard Paul mutter out of the side of his mouth to his buddies, “Hold onto your thing now Phil and try not to spill any more.” The Suggs boys snickered. Dixie ignored them.

“Well, that’s fine Sherri,” whispered Dixie as nonchalantly as he could. “You, uh, said it, just, just don’t do it, and ... please, please don’t kiss me like that not here in front of these guys, OK?”

“Where, then?” Her sincere eyes darted frantically about searching for a place.

Well, gee Sherri, I, I ...”

“Well, you know, I said if you ever want to—”

“Yeah, yeah, I, I heard ya good. I’ll keep that in mind. Now Sherri, doesn’t’ your boyfriend—what’s his name, Gary?—usually come around about this time?”

Sherri pouted. “Me and him ain’t gettin’ on so well now.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be.”

“Look Sherri, I think you better go now. You’ve got everyone shook up enough around here. Forgive me for saying this, but it really is impolite to tease, ya know?”

“I’m not teasing! No, I’m not,” exclaimed the woman-child indignantly. She was flabbergasted that he would consider her flirtations as anything less than sincere.

“Well, I know, I know for me, it’s OK, but ...” Dixie leaned closer to her and jerked his thumb backwards, hiding his gesture from the crew behind him.

“I mean for them. It’s not fair to them.”

Nick’s response perplexed the girl.

“Who?”

“Them!”

Dixie did not turn around but he pointed his left thumb back towards his crew.

“*Them?* What do *they* have to do with it? I don’t care a whit about *them!*”

Dixie recognized this suddenly serious girl’s maturity level lacked the ability to grasp the morality of the situation, so he tried another tack.

“Look Sherri, you care about Gary, don’t you?” She made a disdainful face that did not deter him. “Ya know? He might be coming over here with a birthday present for ya right now, maybe, and, ya know, get the wrong idea if he came and saw—”

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“Don’t care if he does!” She thrust out her lower lip and placed her hands on her hips akimbo. “Don’t care for any present from him, either. He’s just a kid anyway—not a man like you.”

Oh no! You gotta be kiddin’ me!

Her expression lightened, as did her tone of voice, which turned almost plaintive.

“Tell ya what I would like for my birthday Nicky, is if you would come to our cookout this evening that we’re having right over there. It’s like an outdoor birthday party, just for me.” She pointed to the empty southwest portion of the yard containing the grill and picnic furniture around which Dixie and Paul had walked upon entering the back yard. “That would be the only present I’d want.” The spoiled girl looked up at him hopefully.

“Well, gee, Sherri, I’d like ta. Only, I got a ball game to play tonight over at the Regional Park.”

“Clairton?”

“Yeah, Clairton.”

“What time?”

“Well, the game’s at seven-thirty, but I’m supposed to be there by six.”

“Well, we’re gonna eat at six. Shoot!”

Her brow furrowed as she slung her hips aside and jutted out her lower lip again. Then, snapping her fingers, her countenance brightened.

“I know. I just got my license. I could drive over and watch you play. I’d like that.”

“Hmmpf! Watch me play? Little darlin’, I ain’t doin’ nothing but ridin’ the pine.”

“Well, I don’t mind, if you are.”

“Look Sherri, I’m a married man. You do know that, don’t ya?”

“Yeah, right.” She turned her nose up and behaved as if she had some difficult news to deliver, but, in reality, he surmised that she obviously relished the duty. “You’re wife was on the twelve o’clock news on Channel Nine today. She acted as if she did not even know you, Nick, said you were her ‘ex-husband!’”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“That Mike Concannon was interviewing her about that deal last night, that riot at that club, where all them people got hurt.”

Dixie was stunned. He hadn’t known. *Ex-husband?* That frozen vacuum in the core of his being widened a bit more. When the teen vixen perceived his ignorance of the matter, she plunged the knife in a little deeper.

“Yeah, she, your wife that is, said you’re still an MIA. She said you haven’t come home to her yet, when we all know that ain’t true. Then she choked up and ran into her house.”

“*Her* house? How do ya know that?”

“Because, that’s where she was—on her front porch, like I jes’ tole ya. I seen it before on Eyewitness News. The whole thing is in all the Southern Maryland papers. Larry and Bax had copies of ‘em that they were reading from earlier.”

This revelation hurt him. He didn’t try to hide his disappointment, but Sherri was relentless.

Out at Home

“Nicky? Whaddaya say? Can I come watch ya tonight?” Still overcome with worry, Dixie replied absent mindedly, “Well, OK, I guess, as long as you don’t mind watchin’ my backside warm the bench for a couple hours.

“No, honey, I don’t mind at all.” She simpered pleasantly, even dreamily. “I like watchin’ your backside.”

Dixie bounced back a little.

“Well, maybe I can buy you a beer, uh a root beer that is, afterwards, as a present for your birthday. You know.”

Sherri glowed unashamedly like the sweet sixteen she was. Like Ryz’n, Sherri’s toothy, white smile was infectious. At least he had made somebody happy, because it was quite evident that he sure couldn’t please his wife or his family or even the lousy baseball coach, who had benched him for the duration.

“Oh Nicky, you mean it, really?”

“Sure, why not? It ain’t much of a present but—”

“All riiiiight!” She hugged him lightly with her left arm. Then she patted his rear. “I like watchin’ your behind. It’s really cute, muscular but cute!” She smiled the two-dimple smile. Just then, her mother stuck her head out the back door to holler:

“Sherri Lynne! You get your little butt inside here right this minute! I told you to leave those men alone, didn’t I? They’ve got work to do.”

Dixie glanced over his shoulder at the crew, who looked suspiciously at one another, each mouthing to the other one the same silent, rhetorical question: “We do?”

“Now get in here, girl! Gary called. He’s on his way over with your present.”

“Too bad!” she yelled back, sticking out her tongue. Then she turned back to Dixie and assured him.

“Don’t worry, I can handle Gary. He *is* jealous of you though.” She giggled. “Gotta go, Nicky. Bye-bye.”

With a cupped hand, she wiggled her fingers in a waving motion. Then the teen cutie ambled slowly away with five pairs of male eyes watching her every swish and sway. Dixie disagreed with Sherri’s mother. He didn’t think the girl had such a little butt at all. On the contrary, he would call it broad, roundly broad, and connected perfectly to her slender waist, not unlike Ryz’n’s. Barry was right about that. And Dixie thought Paul was right about Sherri being old beyond her years, physically, anyway. Crap! They all did. As she toddled up the back steps and reached the kitchen door, the birthday girl turned back to Nick, displaying her profile to its best advantage and reminded him loudly:

“That’s a date now, Nicky. I’m countin’ on ya, so don’t chicken out on me, OK?”

Dixie was embarrassed because his co-workers had heard her. He waved and smiled feebly. She answered both his wave and smile enthusiastically, before her mother jerked her inside the back screen door.

The men could hear the mother reaming her daughter for dressing so skimpily in front of the hired help. Through the screen door, they saw the angry woman smack the oversexed teen hard across the kid’s butt end just before the door slammed behind the

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both of them. The men shook their heads and chuckled. That Sherri was something else and she was only sixteen!

As they stared lustfully after her, Paul chastised each of them loudly in a dry, mocking tone.

“What are y’all starin’ at? You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! Ogling a sweet young thing, like that!” The others smirked, but Phil didn’t bite.

“You don’t mean you actually made a date with HER, Nick?” asked Dixie’s boyhood friend Phil. “You’re asking for trouble, Buddy.”

“He’s right, Nick! You better stop and think twice on this one,” advised Barry.

“Now don’t *chicken out on her*,” mocked Paul derisively, throwing Sherri’s words back at him, while the others sniggered.

“Yeah, Barry. I know, I know.” Dixie threw up his hands in despair. “I, I dunno. It’s not really a date, anyway.”

“Ha! HA! He knows, but he don’t know. How’d ya like that? That’s, uh, real clever Nick,” jibed Paul. “HA! At least, this time, you can remember! Of course, it only happened thirty seconds ago, but your short term memory is working OK, or is it?”

“Look, are we supposed to be working or what?”

“Right now, it’s ‘or what,’” replied Danny. “Bax got the wrong sump pump this morning or the one he picked up didn’t work. I dunno. Either way, something was wrong. So Bax went back to Baltimore with Lou and Larry to straighten it out.”

“It took all three of ‘em to pick up a sump pump in Baltimore?” Dixie asked incredulously.

“You know how it is,” quipped Danny. “Bax messed up the first time and Lou went along to make sure he got it right this time.”

“And Larry?”

“Well, you know Larry goes wherever Lou goes. You know that. Besides I don’t think he wanted to stay here and shovel slop.”

“Who does?” asked Barry.

“You got that right,” added his brother.

Dixie asked, “So who’s in charge?”

Danny pointed to Barry.

“So why ain’t we shovelin’, Barry?”

“Well, we were Nick, but, hey, that’s hard work and we took a little break.”

Dixie climbed up on the nearest dirt pile to look down and found the hole filled with muddy water and a dead leaf floating on top, like a corpse.

“Well, the darn thing has filled up again. What happened to that temporary pump that was down there?”

Barry answered. “Ramon picked it up this morning for another job. Since Bax had the new one, he didn’t think we’d need the other one, so he took it.”

Nick glanced at the crew but they just shrugged helplessly.

“Come on Paul. The least we can do is bail her out and shovel a little if they’ve been doin’ it all day.”

Out at Home

“Now, there’s a man for ya,” exclaimed Paul. “Yes sir, what a man!” He grinned falsely. “And he volunteered me, as well. How do ya like that?”

“Come on Paul. It’s the least we can do.”

The pair took off their shoes and socks, setting them on top of the coping at the shallow end of the half-built pool. Then they trudged down the hopper into the nearly three feet of water and mud that covered the deep end of the pool. Danny looked down on them, peering over the edge of a dirt mound. From where Dix stood, Danny looked like he was standing on top of Mount Everest.

“Hey Nick! Now don’t *chicken* on us.” He flapped his arms and “bawked” like a chicken. Danny gleefully mocked Sherri’s words back at Dixie, who could hear wafts of laughter resounding high above him, beyond the mounds of excavated dirt.

Phil tossed them a couple hard plastic pails, each of which had a cord tied around its handle. The two late-comers stood thigh deep in water and worked as a tag team, filling buckets of water, which Phil would pull up by the cords and dump out in the yard.

“Is this how it felt in them rice paddies in Viet Nam, Nick? With mud oozing between your toes and water up to your haunches?”

“I wouldn’t know, Paul.” Dix kept filling the bucket and handing it to Paul, who passed it on up topside to Phil or sometimes to Danny. They worked in rhythm as a team but Paul couldn’t keep quiet. The pair repeated the bailing procedure over and over, as the hopper slowly but inexorably drained.

“Oh that’s right, sure, sure you can’t recall. That’s your patent excuse, ain’t it, Nick?” Dixie said nothing. “Paul called up to Phil awaiting the next bucket full of slop. “He can’t remember nothin’ Phil. Ya know? He didn’t even remember turtle-dovin’ with old Tonya last night?”

“Why don’t you shut-up Paul?” cried Phil wearily.

“Why? Well I’ll tell you why because this man here, this Nick is as true a friend as ever lived. That’s right, Phil. A lot of guys will say they’re you’re friends, but they’re all mouth, but not this guy, boy. Look at him right down here in the muck with me. Why, he could be with that sexy young wife of his. He could have been with her last night, sang a couple songs, been idolized, gone back and made love with her after the show, but not our Nick, Boy! No sir! He chose to forgo all them luxuries and come with me and help me out with Tasha, by pacifyin’ her old lady instead. And just like he’s getting right down in it here with me now, he got right down in it last night with her.”

“Hey Paul. That’s enough OK. I don’t remember what we did and I don’t want to,” countered Dixie. “I told ya that already. And how would you know what we did anyway after the way you’ve been bragging on doin’ Tasha—talk about jail bait. Sheesh! She can’t be more ‘n seventeen.”

“Oh, you remember that though, right? How old Natasha is? Yeah, that’s choice. Hear that Phil? Well, I’ll tell you, Nick old boy, you sure paved the way for me and Tasha, that’s for sure. I dare say, we couldn’t have done it without ya, old boy!”

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“Well, if you were so preoccupied with Tasha, how do you know what I did or didn’t do with Tonya?”

“Well, I’ll tell ya Nicky, it’s like this. Tasha and me took an occasional break from our extracurricular activities, when we changed sides between innings, so to speak. Yeah, we went to do a little spectatin’ over in your half of the double header. And I have to compliment ya, kid, cuz you sure taught me a thing or two, even if you were drunk as a skunk.”

Paul winked. Dixie was stunned. Hadn’t he asked Paul earlier to keep quiet about Tonya?

“Why’n’t ya jes’ let it go, Paul?” called down Phil from above. “He don’t wanna know about it. And I don’t wanna hear it, so whyn’t ya just let it go.”

“Why? I’ll tell ya why.” Paul stopped with the bucket in his hand. “One: I want Nick to know I truly appreciate what he did for me and Tasha last night. I mean, going above and beyond with old Tonya like he did.” Paul turned to Dixie. “I do, Nick. I really do.” Then he looked up to Phil, who was leaning over the side of the hole, staring down at them. “And two: I hope I can drive some sense into this thick head of his and get him out of this muckin’ hole, and back to his wife’s where he belongs.” He turned back to Nick, standing beside him but spoke as if he were still addressing his brother. “He shouldn’t even be down here with me now. He should be with her.”

Dixie answered Paul by taking the empty bucket from his hand, filling the pail with brown liquid and returning it to him quietly. Paul tied the rope around the metal handle and lifted the bucket to Phil, who pulled it up without spilling a drop.

Paul turned to Phil while he waited for the return of the empty and Dixie filled another bucket. Then, with his back to Dixie, Paul questioned him.

“Do you know how old Tonya is, Nick?”

“No, I don’t and I don’t care to know.”

Phil lowered the bucket to Paul.

“Take a guess.”

“I dunno—earlier thirties, I guess, thirty-one maybe.” Paul dipped the return bucket while Dixie took the other return from Phil.

“Phil? You hear that and with Tasha being seventeen, too. He thinks Tonya is thirty-one. Hey Phil, tell Nicky here how old Tonya is.”

“Just drop it, Paul.”

“Sure.” Paul dropped the bucket playfully into the water and grinned.

“That ain’t what I meant Paul and you know it.”

“Are you going to tell him or am I?” Phil waved him off. Paul turned to Dixie and looked him right in the eye.

“She’s thirty-eight, Mann, gonna be thirty-nine next month.”

Dixie was floored and Paul must have noticed the shocked expression on his face.

“Yeah, buddy, that’s right—thirty-nine. You know what her fountain of youth is?”

Dixie shook his head and quit bailing, as did Paul. They stood knee to knee in slop.

“A giant tube of Preparation-H!”

“What?”

Out at Home

“Yeah, that’s right, Buddy. That’s how she gets all the young men. She rubs that greasy stuff into all her wrinkles, see? Stuff is odorless and colorless and it tightens ‘em wrinkles right up and smoothes ‘em right out, too. No kiddin’. She carries the danged stuff around in her purse. Why do you think she went with Tasha to the rest room last night, with Ryz’n hanging around? To make sure Tasha washed her hands? Ha! Heck no! Come on, Nicky, wise up. No, the witch’s Preparation-H was wearing off and her wrinkles were starting to show.”

“Well, I’ll be. No wonder she looked so awful this morning. I just thought it was the normal, morning-after, face drop, the muggly-ugglies. You know, how they always look worse the next morning?” Dixie looked up. “Dang! Did you know about this Phil?”

Phil looked away, too ashamed to face him.

Yet Paul had more for him. “You remember that night at my house when me and Bernie Lockes almost got into it?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, Tasha had dropped Bernie, because she had caught him with Tonya. Yeah, that’s right! Tonya had set Bernie up, just to get rid of him. She knew when Tasha would come home off her shift from *Roy’s*; she made sure Bernie was there when Tasha got home. Ya see, Tonya didn’t much care for Bernie seeing Tasha in the first place, cuz of his part time job, go-go dancin’ down at the Cockpit Club. Bernie really didn’t want to see the old lady, but he sure wanted to see Tasha, so he played along with the old hussy. Bernie’s an OK guy, you know Nick, really he is. He’s just not the brightest star in the sky, if you catch my drift. See, that night out on the curb, I was the one in the wrong, not Bernie. But I knew he wouldn’t clobber me with Tasha sitting there, watching the whole thing, after she was already so mad at him. Anyway, after her mother’s little play act, Tasha dumped Bernie like a hot potato.

“Well, I found out about these shenanigans and others that her old lady perpetrated with other unsuspecting admirers of Tasha and I figure--hey! I needed a buddy, see, someone who can keep the old lady happy, while I get happy with her daughter and that’s where you came in, Nick. The old lady thinks you’re the greatest thing since sliced bread. Why you lookin’ at me like that?”

Paul just wouldn’t let go of it. Dixie got ticked, but he did not want to hit the guy, so he bent down and filled the bucket, drudging up as much muck off the bottom as he could scrape and poured it all over Paul’s thick, golden curls. Paul looked as though Dixie had tarred and feathered him in mud down to his midriff. Above, Phil cracked up and called the other guys over to the pool’s edge for a look. They came over and they all laughed until their sides shook. Paul even admitted that he deserved that dousing and laughed as hard as the others. He climbed out of the pool to wash his hair out with the garden hose. Then he returned and said that, while he appreciated the cooling shower, he hoped Dixie had gotten that orneriness out of his system. Then the pair resumed their bailing operation.

They had done so well after thirty-five minutes that the boys had trouble scraping water up with the buckets. Instead, they were forced to use flat shovels to fill the

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plastic pails with water and then haul out the buckets. After that, the pair began scraping mud onto their shovels and heaving it up out of the hopper up to the shallow end, trying to reach the specified depth. From that point, they repeated the process many times over, slinging the mud over the shallow end's, galvanized steel, pool wall as best as they could. It seemed like much of the mud never escaped the pool, falling and sticking against the steel walls or even falling back onto of them, when the mud stuck too tight to their shovels. Such backlashes splattered the boys and prompted mild cursing. After an hour, the boys were completely mud-splattered, but the two had cleaned out the pool hopper. However, as they took a break to lean against the southeast hopper wall, the pair watched in despair as the spring water just kept seeping into the hopper. They were fighting a losing battle.

"Shoot, that stuff just keeps on comin'," complained Paul. "Mann! We could be doin' this all day!"

Phil yelled across the hole that that's what he and the Suggs boys had figured out earlier. That's why they had quit working on it. When Dixie asked him why they hadn't said anything about that before, Danny hooted that they knew he and Paul would figure it out eventually. Then he laughed and said they were all betting on how long it would take them to get wise. Barry nodded with a broad grin, bobbing his head along with his kid brother. Danny thanked Dixie and Paul for doing such a thorough job and taking over an hour because he had won a couple bucks. Neither Phil nor Barry had thought Nick and Paul would have been that slow on the uptake. (Of course, their minds had been distracted with their romantic interests.) Dixie and Paul climbed out of the hole: hot, wet, sweaty, muddy and disgusted.

Dix finished off his Dew, which by now had grown hot. The guys rested on the grass beneath the shade trees and joked among themselves for a while. Danny joaned on Dixie and jibed that he had spit in Dixie's Dew and now there was a little bit of him in Dixie, too. He batted his eyes at Dixie for effect. The others cracked up. Paul asked Barry to answer Paul's earlier question.

"What question is that?" asked Big Barry.

"You know ... the one about how you can be so sure, little Sherri there ain't gonna grow beyond navel oranges? 'Specially, after I told ya how Ryz'n blossomed so well, so late in high school like she did."

"Dang Paul," cried Phil. "You just got a one-track mind, doncha?"

"Always, little brother, always!" He snorted. "So, Barry? Whaddaya say?"

"Well, in my experience the acorn don't fall far from the tree."

"What the heck does that mean?" Paul asked derisively.

"It means my son that you have to look at the tree, the fruit of the tree, so to speak."

"Now what the heck does that mean, Barry? Fruit of what tree? The orange tree or the peach tree?"

"That's exactly right. That's what I mean. Ya see Paul; it means you should look at the mother. She don't look like much more 'n navel oranges to me, if that, and I haven't seen Nick's mother-in-law, but I'll wager she's pretty well endowed. Is that right?"

Out at Home

“She sure is,” replied Phil enthusiastically. “Where Ryz’n might have pineapples, her mom’s got some honest to goodness melons, like baby water melons.”

“Well then, Nicky here has baby watermelons to look forward to in his old age, I figure. Watch out for the seeds Nick, lest they choke ya. Ha! So there, Paul, I rest my case.”

“But suppose she’s got her grandmother’s genes from her old man?” Paul was dogged in his pursuit of truth. Dixie had to admire him for that, at least.

“Well, ya got a fifty-fifty chance with what you can see. My guess? Peaches, mebbe oranges, anh navel oranges at best, at the very best.”

“But I could be right then, couldn’t I? I mean, if she inherits her old man’s genes?”

Danny cracked up. “Well, if she inherits her old man’s boob genes, I think we’re seriously talking grapes, here.” They all cracked up.

“Raisins,” crooned Phil, who broke himself up with his wit.

Then Dixie imitated Big Barry’s voice and tone to a *T*, as only he could do, by paraphrasing Barry’s earlier remark in a dry, deadpan delivery.

“Raisins, mebbe. Don’t believe grapes.” They all laughed heartily again, but soon they quieted down as the oppressive heat weighed ever heavier upon them. One by one, they dropped off to snooze under the protective leafy shade of Scrachi’s backyard grove of trees.

Paul’s comments about getting Dixie out of the wrong hole had started Dix thinking. For the millionth time, Dixie wondered to himself, why he was even there. He didn’t need the crumbly three-fifty an hour. He sure didn’t need the hard labor. He didn’t need teeny boppers trying to compromise him into jail. As a matter of fact, he did not need any of this crap back here: warming the bench; all the static from his family, not to mention, this whole cold shoulder deal from Ryz’n. The thing was, as much as he didn’t care to admit it: he was really staying only for one reason. That one reason was for her, for his wife, and the outside possibility that she was the stunning, silhouette girl of his visions. Yet, she had blown him off last night and for the last couple of weeks as well. So what had he done?

He had responded by getting so plastered that he went home with some Cossack widow, whom he didn’t even know. Thank God, he could not recollect what he had done with her, though, after what Paul had said, he could imagine. Dix prayed his imagination was far worse than the real deal. Subconsciously, he fingered his gold dental plate and squelched his own thoughts. Glad I didn’t lose them gold ones. A loud, harsh growl, approaching from the shallow end of the pool, disturbed Dixie’s malcontented musings.

“HEY! Thought you foul-ups would have that mess cleaned up by now! Look at it!”

It was Lou. He was back with Bax, Larry and the pump and he was pissed. Lou was the one guy on the crew Dixie really admired. Lou could fix anything and Dix never had seen anyone work as hard as Little Lou. The guy was relentless. Dixie and Paul rose and moved down to the shallow end to greet them. However, concentrating on the mess in the hole, the school teachers ignored them, so Dixie and Paul sat down on the top of the steel wall at the shallow end to watch.

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As the oldest, Barry spoke up for the crew.

“Well, we did Lou, a few times, but the thing keeps filling up. It’s just a waste of time without a pump. We didn’t know you’d be gone so long.”

“Forget it.”

As usual, Lou was all business. He strode brusquely over and around all obstacles in his path, carrying the new pump. He brushed off Barry’s explanation with a wave from the back of his hand.

“Let’s get to it,” remarked Larry the jerk, copying Lou’s lead.

Handing the pump off to one another, Larry and Lou climbed over the shallow end’s steel wall still ignoring Paul and Dixie. They were going to set up the pump. Once Larry had slipped down inside the shallow end, he pivoted and pointed back grandly at the two boys atop the shallow end wall, as if Larry were the grand master in the center ring of the circus. He shouted loudly for all to hear.

“Well, well! Ladies and gentlemen, look what we have here! You two ‘Johnny-Come-Latelies!’ Hey!” He pointed at Paul and Dixie with a long accusatory finger. “You only get paid for the time you work. This ain’t no government job, ya know.”

Although Larry had directed his remarks to Dixie and Paul, they all knew his jibe was also a backhanded slap at the younger Suggs brothers who were openly seeking government employment. Dixie knew Larry could be a genuine pain in the butt. Gee! They all knew that. Danny jumped down into the pool and Paul followed him down inside the mud hole to join Barry. Phil remained on top, in the bucket brigade.

“That ain’t news, Larry,” replied Paul disdainfully.

The husky, tanned Bax had followed behind the other two schoolteachers. However, before he climbed over the shallow end pool wall between Dixie and Paul, he paused to look Dixie in the eye. Reluctantly, Bax pulled some folded up newspapers from his back pockets and handed them over to Dixie.

“Thought you might be interested in these, Nick.”

Lou told Larry to hand Bax the long, orange, heavy duty electric cord. Then he told Bax to stand by to plug it into the Scrachi’s outside electric wall outlet. Bax climbed back out over the steel wall. Trailing the electric cord, and did as he was told. Bax’s apologetic tone and dour expression had informed Dixie this was not pleasant news.

“Thanks, Bax. I guess.”

“Don’t thank me ‘til you’ve read ‘em,” replied his employer in a sour tone.

Dixie sat on the pool coping at the shallow end with his muddy, bare feet dangling up against the hot galvanized steel walls. He studied the rural papers, all three of them, wondering where to begin. It did not take a rocket scientist to figure out that Ryz’n had made front page news in all three. *The Southern Maryland Sentinel*, *The Royal George Independent* and *The Charles County Courier* all featured last night’s riot as their lead story. Dixie studied the front pages of each of the small town journals, shaking his head in disbelief. Evidently, Southern Maryland did not have much in the way of news, if this was all they had to offer. Larry yelled up at Dixie, from down in the hole:

Out at Home

“Hey SHEEBOM! Ya already missed most of the damned day and you’re still goofing off? Read on your own time, not mine! We ain’t payin’ ya to read no newspaper.”

That Larry really got under Dix’s skin! Dixie got along fine with everyone else, but Larry was a real jerk. Dixie had had a platoon sergeant like Larry over at Kaneohe. One day they had gotten into it. Afterwards, Dixie had drawn ten days in the brig, and he been lucky to get only that much time. That was an experience he never forgot. It was one of the reasons that had led to Dixie’s medical discharge. The Corps found it easier to get rid of an amnesiac, malcontent whom nobody knew rather than crack down on a rotten, sadistic NCO with hash marks all up and down his sleeve. Like the pernicious marine sergeant then, Larry now seemed to take every opportunity he could to stick it to Dixie.

Some guys just hate for no reason.

Dixie shifted to his left, reached down into his right pocket and pulled out a pair of quarters and a dime. He flicked the coins lazily toward Larry down in the hole, landing the change about halfway down the hopper.

“Here! That oughtta cover my readin’ time.”

Paul and Danny cracked up, while the others snickered. Larry turned red. He started to trudge out of the mucky hole, but Lou stopped him by grabbing him by the shoulder. He told Larry they did not have time for any B.S.

Dixie read the articles without further intervention. Shoot! They were bumping butts down in the hole anyway. There was no room for him. The articles all read pretty much the same. *The Sentinel* was typical:

LOCAL ROCKERS RAISE ROOF AT ‘LOFT’

Woldorn, July 2nd. State troopers from Woldorn Barracks #17 were called in to quell a riot last night at *Mr. Rowdy’s Loft*, one of Charles County’s more popular nightspots. Nine persons were treated at Physician’s Memorial Hospital in La Placa for minor injuries and later released. The nightclub, which boasts the largest hardwood dance floor in Southern Maryland, sustained damages estimated as high as three thousand dollars.

Eyewitnesses reported the riot occurred during a raucous performance by Southern Maryland’s own celebrated rock band, the internationally renowned Good Rockin’ Tonight (GRT). Tony Williams of Arlington, Virginia, was a customer at *The Loft* last night. Mr. Williams reported the whole fracas started during a provocative number performed by the band’s leader Ryzanna Ryan Sheeboom of Crest Hill Heights, Maryland.

“Yeah, she was something else, all right. She sang and danced with a hand-held microphone, used it as a prop, you know. Mann, she had the place in a trance that tuned into a panic. It was

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eerie as heck. Never saw anything like it. People started pushing and shoving to get close to the stage. Things got out of hand.”

Another customer, Michelle LaGrange of Marston Hall sustained two broken fingers when she was shoved to the floor and stepped on. Ms. LaGrange had a different opinion of the performance.

“She [lead singer Ryzanna Sheeboom] was disgusting. And her sister [Sheena Rowley Mather] up there with her was little better. Those two really surprised me. I always thought they were decent folks. Thought they had some class, I guess some people will do anything for money. I’m not just saying that because I broke these two fingers, but because it’s true. No, I wouldn’t pay to see them perform again. That’s for sure.”

A regular club patron Mickey Magruder of La Placa sustained the most severe injuries, after he followed a table and chair through a second-story, plate glass window. He disagreed with LaGrange.

“Yeah, I dislocated my right shoulder and cracked a couple ribs, but, hey, it was worth it. That Ryz’n is something else! Trance? Yeah, she hypnotized everyone—women and men—it didn’t matter. I ought to know. I was right up there next to the stage, right up front. I saw the whole thing. Mann, that skimpy, skintight outfit she wore, the way she moved around inside of it—Mann, she really got me off. *Playboy* centerfolds got nothin’ on that woman! If her husband don’t come home for her soon, I’ll be calling on her myself. What a foxy lady!”

Willie Hayes, club manager, claimed the initial damage assessment estimated to be around twenty-five hundred dollars but suggested the light of day would afford a more accurate estimate. Mr. Hayes said the number that caused the uproar was a surprise to him. He had watched GRT rehearse for their performance, but he had never seen the celebrated band perform that number or even had heard that particular song before.

“Well, with half a dozen bouncers we thought we had sufficient security to prevent something like this, but I guess we underestimated. I never saw anything like that before, not in a local club, anyway.”

Mr. Hayes indicated the incident had actually started earlier, when the band took a break and two customers had molested two of GRT’s female performers at a front table near the stage. Club security officers broke up a fight that ensued between the intruders and two other individuals who tried to protect the female rockers.

Out at Home

Mr. Hayes related that Loft security escorted the instigators out of the club. “But,” he added, “the stage had been set for fireworks.” The manager said that one of the two individuals, who defended the sister rockers, was the band’s own security officer Bryson Mather, the husband of Sheena Mather, GRT’s bassist and sister to the bandleader.

The other, unidentified customer who assisted Mather, was reported to have been none other than the legendary MIA and former Rock’N’Roll sensation Nick Sheeboom, founder of the band.

When he was asked to confirm this remarkable observation, Mr. Hayes replied, “Well, I can’t be certain. I never knew Sheeboom. But a member of my staff said he knew Little Nick when Nick had performed here when the club first opened five years ago. My man said that the cat involved in the fracas was definitely Sheeboom. He told me, and I quote, ‘no one else had eyes like Little Nick Sheeboom.’”

“Later, at the bar, I spoke with the guy identified as Little Nick and he did have unusual eyes, like I’ve never seen. One was black as coal. The other was bright blue, like an electric neon sign. He was also missing parts of two fingers on his right hand. But when I asked him if he was Little Nick, the guy was non-committal. Then the ruckus began before I could pin him down.”

Efforts to contact *The Loft* staff employee who identified the supposedly missing Nick Sheeboom have failed. However, Sentinel archives confirmed the description given of the ex-bandleader turned MIA.

An interview with Bryson Mather, the band’s security officer, outside his room at the *Starlust* Motel early this morning disclosed that he had been unable to see his sister-in-law’s performance fully because the crowd of customers on the dance floor had obscured his view. Mather did not know the two young men who had accosted his wife and sister-in-law before the riot started.

Mather admitted he had never seen GRT perform or practice the number, which caused the fracas. He classified the affair as an unfortunate incident, which he hoped would not be repeated. Mather confirmed that GRT was no longer under contract to recording industry giant Halo Platters, stating, “We’re on our own now.” Mather would not confirm that Nick Sheeboom had been in the club. Mather, who is Sheeboom’s brother-in-law, did say that there had been many ‘Little Nick’ imposters over the last few years since Sheeboom was classified as an M.I.A two

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years ago. When Mather was questioned if the man he fought beside last night had been Sheeboom, he merely replied, “Possibly. But it was all just a blur.”

Later, Mather blocked journalists’ attempts to interview his wife or his controversial sister-in-law, stating that neither his wife nor his sister-in-law could be disturbed, because they were “sleeping.”

The owner of the club, Mr. Henry Rowdy, who also owns the popular nightclub “*Mr. Rowdy’s* of Georgetown,” declined to comment.

GRT, formed seven years ago under the auspices of the renowned Little Nick Sheeboom of Crest Hill Heights, has produced four record albums, which have sold over ten million copies and garnered twenty-one gold records. Achieving national and international acclaim almost exclusively on the strength of their first three albums, the band has faltered recently, falling on hard times absent their founder. A representative for Halo Platters, the group’s record label, confirmed that the recording giant had allowed the band’s contract to lapse. Without backing from any record label, GRT recently began a series of performance dates in the local Washington, D.C.-Baltimore metropolitan area, as well as on the Eastern Shore. Band members declined to comment on how last night’s activities will affect their scheduled bookings.

A news photo depicted *The Loft’s* shattered second-story, plate glass window as well as a broken table and two chairs surrounded by shattered glass shards, lying in the parking lot below the broken window. Another photo showed state troopers escorting injured customers to an ambulance. A caption below the photos read as follows:

Nine Injured, Extensive Property Damage as State Troopers Quell Riot at Woldorn’s “Loft”

Dixie read over the other articles, while the rest of the crew slaved and sweated in the ninety-three degree sun. The other stories said essentially the same thing. One of the other papers had managed to interview Steve “Bronco” Brakey, *The Loft* bouncer, who claimed he had spoken with Little Nick Sheeboom last night. Brakey noted, however, if the man he had witnessed was Little Nick, he wasn’t so little anymore. He opined the former rocker had grown several inches, gained several pounds and was sporting a dark mustache, since Brakey had seen him last, over four years ago. He also noted Sheeboom is still reputed to be an MIA. Dixie thought maybe Ryz’n had gotten to the guy and bought him off to make him backtrack like that.

Out at Home

Between the hot sun, the news articles and remnants of his hangover, Dixie had developed a whopper of a headache. The aspirins he had taken at the widow's earlier obviously had lost their magical powers. For about a year, Dixie used to get headaches frequently when he was recovering from his brain surgeries, but this was different. He couldn't understand why his wife and in-laws would deny him like that. He didn't believe that a lousy joke about Ryz'n's figure his second night back could have caused all this misery. It was like something out of a bad dream or a horror movie.

"Hey—" Larry started to yell at Dixie but Bax told him to "lay off."

They all knew what Dixie had read, because they had read it themselves earlier. And that knowledge just added fuel to the pain in Dix's brain. Dixie ran his hands through his coarse hair, trying to massage out the throbbing ache, but the hurt remained even after he removed his hands. The sun beat down on his back and the humidity seeped heavily into his very soul. He was sweating like a pig and he needed some aspirin. He asked if anyone had aspirin and got a bunch of smart aleck responses. Paul suggested he ask his girlfriend Miss Sweet Sixteen. Dixie hurt enough that he climbed the Scrachi's back stair and knocked at the door, where he made his request of her. Sherri was only too happy to oblige. Gary, her boyfriend, who had arrived to celebrate the girl's birthday, did not share her enthusiasm. Sherri played Florence Nightingale by giving him the aspirin and a glass of water to wash them down. She reminded Dixie of their date for later that evening. He thanked her for the pills but sloughed off her reminder.

Dix returned to work with the others. The hole was about pumped out. He helped Lou build a concrete sluice box, while Larry and Barry were digging a trench for the return hose up the side of the hopper, underneath the steel walls and out into the yard. It was rough down in the hole, especially with his hangover. About half past three, the full brunt of the day's heat was upon them. The thermometer they had taken down there with them registered 137 degrees per Bax's reading. The galvanized steel pool walls, above the hopper, reflected the sun back and forth across the hole. The pool was laid out from northeast to southwest with the shallow end to the south. The sun's summer southern orbit allowed the hot July rays to stream right onto them, since the southwestern end of the pool was the only section not surrounded by dirt piles.

The largest excavated dirt piles to the north and west blocked the flow of any breeze, which typically flowed from those directions. The ninety per cent humidity and the moisture from the water table beneath them conspired to make working in the "hole" a hellacious nightmare. Those who back-filled from atop the surrounding mounds of dirt fared better than those working below in the hopper, since the topsiders could catch an occasional gentle breeze. They also escaped the sun's glare reflecting off the steel walls, as well. Even so, sweat soaked through all of them. They were as wet as if they had been swimming. The burning sun stoked their bodies as well as their brains.

Phil was cleaning mud off the steel walls with Scrachi's garden hose, when he accidentally sprayed Lou and Dixie. Dixie thanked Phil silently for the cool relief of the wet spray. However, Lou nailed Phil by complaining they were trying to pump water out of the hole, not fill it up again. He removed the hose from Phil's hands by

ordering Phil to level out the shallow end and then sand it. Dixie winked at Phil to show him Lou meant no harm.

At quarter of six, Dixie said he had to go because he had a ballgame. Bax said OK, but Larry didn't like it, not one bit. He griped that Dixie had not even arrived until mid-afternoon. Mr. Scrachi came home about then and came out to inspect their progress. Dixie had picked up the garden hose and gave himself a shower behind the trees and dirt mounds at the far back corner of the Scrachi lot. He watched Bax and Mr. Scrachi over top of the dirt mounds, conversing at the opposite end of the pool. The customer talked with Bax, who nodded his approval and returned to the hopper to speak with Lou and Larry, who were working down in the hole.

Dixie finished drying off in time to eavesdrop on the school teachers' powwow down in the hopper, as he peered at them around a dirt pile. He heard Bax tell the other two:

"Mr. Scrachi would like us to knock off now. They are going to have a cookout for their daughter's birthday and, basically, he would like us to take a hike now."

"I thought he wanted this done so his daughter could swim today? We ain't gonna make it if we knock off now," complained Lou.

"Yeah, I told him. I told him."

"What did he say?" asked Larry.

Bax grimaced.

"He said that we have been fooling around here for two weeks and a couple hours shouldn't make that much of a difference."

"Well, I'll be damned. What the hell can we do about that now?" asked Larry.

"The good news is he said he'd still give us a bonus if we could have his daughter swimming by the Fourth. He knows we didn't figure this high water table into our normal price. He's a reasonable guy."

"Bonus—hunh? How reasonable is he?" asked Lou skeptically.

"Don't know. That remains to be determined. He said he'd talk to us about it first thing in the morning, before he left for work. Meanwhile he said we could go home. Oh, and he said for us to keep Nick away from his daughter or he'll personally cut the kid's balls off." Dixie winced, and stepped back behind the dirt mounds, eavesdropping now out of their sight.

Without seeing him, Dixie could tell Lou was upset. Feisty Lou wanted to finish this pool, get his money and get out. When the scrappy Lou assumed that mindset, he was difficult to reason with, but Lou reasoned a decent bonus might be worth it.

"All right," said Lou with a resigned air. "We'll be here at six-thirty tomorrow morning. We'll really have to bust it tomorrow. OK?"

"What about Nick and the little twit?" complained Larry.

"Bax, he's your neighbor and Ramon's your friend. That makes the kid your responsibility. Scrachi's been pretty decent by us so far. He don't owe us any extra, but we sure could use that extra cash. At least, I know I could use it. You tell that kid to hold his piece and stay away from the twot or he's gone. I know he's a vet with problems, but we ain't runnin' no charity ward here. This is business."

Out at Home

The trio agreed and they told the troops about the bonus deal, but they let Bax speak to Nick in private. Dixie did not let Bax know that, he had already heard their decision. Husky, dark and handsome, Bax spoke quietly with Dixie. Though he was large, Bax had an appealing, soft manner about him and he spoon-fed Dixie the bad news. Dixie took it OK. He understood, but he did not dare tell Bax about his promise to see Sherri later that night. Bax patted Dixie on the shoulder and they parted genially.

As Lou walked past the shallow end on his way to his car, he warned Dixie in a positive manner.

“Nicholas! I’m counting on you now. We need everybody we can get tomorrow.”

“Sure, Lou. I know. We’ll do it. We’ll get it done.”

Dixie smiled reassuringly. He knew Lou truly liked him and rarely said anything negative to him and, just as important, Lou kept Larry off Dixie’s back.

Lou grinned. “All right then, clear outta here. And the rest of you convicts, do the same! Six-thirty tomorrow morning!” He flung his T-shirt out at them, as he might snap a bath towel.