

~ Chapter 35: Post Game Revelry ~

The “Do Drop Inn” was less than ten minutes north of the park on Old Veer Avenue. The joint’s name fit the place aptly. Win or lose, stopping at the tavern for a post game brew had become a pleasant custom for most team members. For Dixie, it was the only pleasant chore he could associate with this team, outside of getting in some good BP. Tonight would be even better because the likeable Robby and Terri, his cute fiancée, would be there, as well.

Sherri sat almost right on top of Dixie as he drove her to the “Do Drop” in the open convertible. Her pungent perfume was almost sickeningly sweet. When he asked her about it, she replied that it was specially scented hair spray and not perfume. She perked up at his notice of the scent and asked if he liked it. He lied that he did. She smiled beatifically and pecked him on the cheek. She confessed that Gary had liked it, too. Then she told him all about her break up with Gary, but her talk went in one ear and out the other. He wondered what the heck he was doing here, anyway. He could be touring the country on his Honda 750. He could travel up north and see Canada. He could take the long way to Vegas and, with his late buddy Ed “the Rabbi” Rabinowitz’s card-counting system, make some cash when he got there, too. That thought loomed before him, kind of like the pot at the end of the rainbow. As he turned into the inn’s parking lot, Sherri tugged with both hands at the crook of his elbow and asked if he were paying attention to her.

“Yes Ma’am,” he replied only half jokingly.

The well-played, low-scoring game had moved along quickly. It was just past ten when they pulled into the popular tavern. Dixie escorted Miss Sweet Sixteen inside the homey pub and bought her the promised root beer, while he enjoyed his usual Miller High Life. Dixie introduced Sherri to the others. And because she hung on his arm, they greeted the teen as one of their own. Conversation like beer flowed freely. They all commiserated with Dixie’s plight on the ball club. He didn’t bother boring them with similar fiascos, which plagued other areas of his life. Robby Neff and Terri told him things about himself that he had not known before. Sherri ate up their school day stories of “Little Nick” with a spoon. Occasionally, when Dix looked the other way, he let her steal a sip or two of his beer. All the players had partially disrobed and were dressed now in their caps, inner shirts, sliding shorts and sandals; the cool, post-game attire of choice.

Dixie noticed Sherri wore her prized birthday presents, her new shoes and new bikini. She had tried to hide the bikini under her clothes, her hot pants and a sleeveless red and white-checked, light cotton blouse. The blouse’s rounded collar lent her a demure air the kid did not possess. The red and white checkers were so small it was difficult to distinguish red from white. She wore a red bow in her dark curly locks, tying a short ponytail behind her. To Dix, it appeared as if the cute Miss Sweet Sixteen had just burst off a 1959 summer calendar and she was having the time of her life.

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Once they were seated and drinking inside the tavern, the more the beer flowed, the louder they all talked and the more combative little Lettie Sintmoyen behaved. Lettie explained that Nick and Ryz'n had become part of the "first couple" tradition at Pocomoke. In the school's second graduating class, she and Lonny had begun the tradition, winning the honor by popular ballot. Their prominent picture in the school yearbook cemented their First Couple status for posterity. Lettie pointed to Stump and MaryBeth, who were voted First Couple in the next class of 1970.

It was easy to see how "Stump" had come by his nickname. The guy was the shortest first baseman Dixie had ever seen but he was also the broadest, too, and quite possibly the best. Despite his lack of height, he had a long reach with his first baseman's mitt and he could jump high or do the splits to snag a wild throw. Stump had the ability to anticipate the destination of a throw, based on how the infielder set up before the player actually let the ball go. This uncanny ability compensated somewhat for his lack of height. Sitting down, the guy's dense breadth made him look as if he were well over six feet tall. However, when he stood up, he appeared to have been chopped off at the knees. His bright blue eyes and swarthy features complimented one another oddly, much as Sherri's similar combination did for her. Dixie liked Stump's neat, broad-trimmed, riverboat gambler's sideburns best. His fiancée MaryBeth was a true blond and had light blue-eyes. A little on the husky side, she looked Scandinavian. Aside from Ryz'n, MaryBeth had one of the sexiest mouths and finest set of dimples, he had ever seen. And if Stump got a little too loud, which rarely occurred, all Mary Beth had to do was lay her hand gently upon his forearm and the tough Stumper would shut right up.

MaryBeth also rarely spoke, but she shyly told Dixie of how he, she and Ryz'n used to work out together before and after school on the high school track. She also said that the first time she had noticed Nick as someone special was down in the Vernier's basement at the sisters' back-to-school party MaryBeth's senior year. Little Nick had just knocked her out with his exuberant performance of Little Stevie Wonder's "Fingertips." MaryBeth spoke very kindly of Little Nick, despite, what others might allege to the contrary. She went on to mention that night of the Vernier's party was also the night Ryz'n knew that she was in love with him.

Ryz'n in love with him? Right!

Then Lettie bellowed that Ryz'n and Nick had received the honor of "First Couple" in their senior year of 1971, as had Ry's sister Sheena and Bryson in '72 and Robby and Terri behind them, in the Class of '73. A bit soused, Lettie looked deep into Dixie's eyes and repeatedly beat her forefinger on the tabletop, when she said in a slightly slurred tone, "Ya see Nick, it's like an unbroken, double-sided chain and the only link missing right now is Ryz'n. If Ry was here, the Pocomoke First Couple chain and the tradition would be unbroken, holding strong and firm."

No one said anything for a minute. Dixie didn't know what to say. Then Sherri, who had kept quiet, piped up brightly: "What about the class of Nineteen-Seventy-Two? I was countin' and I don't see any links for them in here." Everyone shut up. Sherri was right. Sheena and Bryson weren't there either.

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Then Lettie asked who had let Sherri in the place and wasn't it past her bedtime? Sherri bristled, but she calmed down after Dixie defended her. He told them today was Sherri's sweet sixteenth birthday and proposed a toast to her. The gang all toasted Sherri as a peace offering, all except for Lettie who announced peremptorily that she was going to the bathroom. Sherri didn't let Lettie's rudeness detract from her moment. She basked in the toast and Dixie ordered another round for everyone.

A little after eleven, Dixie caught Ryz'n's voice on the wall TV, that hung near the ceiling over the corner of the bar. He slipped away from his group to listen and asked the bar tender to turn up the sound. Dixie caught most of the Eyewitness New Team's interview with Ryz'n, which had been taped earlier that day. When Ryz'n reached both hands above her head to unlatch the storm door window, the hem of her robe rose high but the picture seemed to blip at just the right moment, averting disaster. Her comments, especially her "ex-husband" remark, depressed Dix even further, but Sherri was there to cheer him up. Sensing his distress, the precocious teen sidled up to him and told him not to think about what he had just seen, but to concentrate on the present. She smiled sadly, but batted her lashes at him.

Dixie smiled, too. He noted females, even sweet sixteens, had a knack for sensing mood swings in a guy, even in someone they hardly knew. Without fully realizing what he was doing, Dix kissed the little darling nonchalantly on the mouth. Joyously surprised, Sherri grabbed him around the neck and kissed him back hard. He didn't fight her. Lettie Sintmoyen caught them in the act as she returned from the rest room. She whacked Dixie across the back of the head, knocking his face into Sherri's, effectively breaking up their embrace.

"Ryz'n wouldn't appreciate that," snorted Lettie. "And as a matter of fact Nick, I don't appreciate it either."

Her actions sobered him enough to where she could lead him away, but he wondered what made her think she was entitled to such liberties, as if she were his personal keeper. The diminutive Lettie took him by the hand and dragged Dixie back to their table. Sherri was ticked. The impetuous teen came after the five-foot, ex-cheerleader captain, but Dixie observed Sherri halted abruptly when she saw the determined look in the young school teacher's eyes. Dixie reasoned that Lettie dealt with obnoxious teens all the time as part of her profession. Dixie called for a truce and both ladies honored his wishes. The revelers partied until midnight when the Do Drop Inn closed.

Two of Dixie's teammates, Ronnie Millison and Johnny "Reb" Nickel were already off work for the long holiday weekend. They didn't want the party to end. The ever affable Ronnie asked Dixie about the twins Dixie had mentioned, the ones for whom Dixie had helped install a swimming pool recently. Hadn't Dixie mentioned that they lived just up the road a piece? Dix had eaten only a cheeseburger since lunch. However, he had consumed about five beers. The Miller's had lightened his burdens, sliding him happily back into the High Life. He agreed to take his teammates down there, but warned that although the twins had plenty of big, attractive curves, they weren't the most beautiful pair of female faces he had ever seen. Ronnie fibbed that he

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carried a couple flags in his trunk solely for such women. Reb joked that they wouldn't be the first pair to grace Ronnie's flags. The guys laughed, but the ladies did not. Their stone-faced stares silenced the men's unwanted, coarse humor. Neither Ronny nor Reb was a Pocomoke High grad either. However, from the cold looks on the girls' faces, Dixie did not think it would have mattered even if they had been Warrior alums.

Sherri wanted to go as well. Against her husband's wishes, Lettie vowed to keep Dixie in her sight at all times, on Ry's behalf. Lonny, who, unlike his vacationing school teacher spouse, had to report to work early the next morning. Quite understandably, he wanted to go home to bed. However, the feisty Lettie remained adamant, while Jimmy D and Pocomoke High's "first couples" of 1970 and '73 called it a night. Dixie thanked them for the stories they had shared. He said he hoped someday he could share in their recollections and relive the memories along with them. Of course, Miss Sweet Sixteen was delighted by the turn of events. She did not want her birthday to end.

Dixie called the twins from a pay phone in the tavern. He explained the situation and asked if it would be all right for him to stop by with a few friends. The twins said that they, too, were off for the long, holiday weekend and "no," Dixie had not woken them. They had no plans except to enjoy their new swimming pool, which they happened to be doing when Dixie called. The twins gladly invited Dixie and his friends, so Dixie purchased a case of Miller's just as the pub closed.

Top down, beer in the trunk, Dixie and Sherri led a four-car caravan down the road to the twins' home. The sisters lived just south of Drift Road, the road to the ball park, so the caravan traced back over their earlier route to the tavern, but now they were headed north. Dixie left his ball cap hanging on the rearview mirror, as he and Sherri climbed out of the Bonnie. He told the others that the twins had said to go on around back to the pool. The bikini-clad twins welcomed their late night guests grandly at poolside and the party was on. Kirsta and Karella Kirsche were a pair of fun-loving, good time, party girls. Even so, they did ask their guests not to get too loud to avoid disturbing the neighbors. The German hostesses explained that the only neighbors they had to worry about were the ones near the deep end of the pool. All the other neighbors were on vacation and no one lived behind them. They pointed to an undeveloped wooded ravine, which bordered the twins' back yard. However, with air conditioning cooling the closed-up, lone, inhabited neighboring household, they promised noise would not be much of a problem, unless it was truly excessive.

Dixie made the introductions. Kirsta attracted the tall, lanky, affable and ruddy Ronnie Millison. Her sister preferred the shorter, swarthy, sarcastic, muscular Reb Nickel. Neither guy seemed to mind the twin's choices. They were too busy drooling over the girls' phat figures. The night was nearly as hot and muggy as the day had been. The inviting pool water was still warm from the day's hot sun. Except for Sherri, who was merely high on life, the baseball party was pretty well inebriated by the time they had arrived at the Kirsche home. The Kraut twins were not far behind their guests. Another round of beer from Dixie's case put them all over the edge. The twins

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suddenly found themselves overly warm. They jumped into their new pool and warmly invited all their guests to join them.

Uninhibited by way of the alcohol, Reb stripped down to his jock strap and dived into the water just behind the girls. Chided by Reb for being chicken, Ronnie was just loaded enough to take up his teammate's challenge. He followed his friend's example. Dixie feared his little protégé Sherri was getting an education she had not anticipated. Yet she appeared to be delighted. When the twins asked why the boys had not bared all, Reb countered that they were wearing less than the bikini-clad twins. Kirsta and Karella took up Reb's challenge by removing their tops and thrusting them in their guests' faces. Ronnie fired the bikini top from his face out of the pool, as if he were chucking a fast ball. Meanwhile Reb tied Karella's bikini top about his chest. He was pleasantly surprised to find the top had plenty of sack. The twins and the two ballplayers cavorted unabashedly about the pool, with their bodacious bounties bouncing for all to see. Dixie was certain no one was watching their faces now. When Dixie declined to swim, Sherri remained with him poolside and acted as server, doling out beers all around. Lettie was high, beyond freedom, laughing and shaking her outgrown shag haircut back and forth for no apparent reason. She wanted to jump in as well, but Lonny forbid her, as she did not have a swimsuit. And the larger twins could not help little the diminutive Lettie out with a suit to fit her.

As a diversion, Lettie asked Dixie to entertain them by playing for them as he had when they were in high school. Dixie was too shy. Besides, he said his mouth organ was in the glove compartment of his car and he didn't feel like going after it. Sherri offered to retrieve it. Scarcely before Dixie could speak, Sherri had jumped up, run out to the car and returned with the harmonica. Dixie accepted the instrument from her reluctantly. Since Ryz'n had give him the mouth organ, Dixie had learned, much to his amazement, he could play any tune he could hear in his head, without really understanding, what he was doing or how he did it. In the Corps, he had done pretty well with the bugle, too, before he had been released, but he never had much chance to work with it, aside from the military calls. None of his Corps bunkmates had wanted to hear him practice. Now, Dixie played for them from memory of "The Wolfman Jack Show" some Fats Domino ("I Wanna Walk You Home"), Slim Harpo ("Baby, Scratch My Back" and "Shake Your Hips", which prompted Sherri to perform as those songs titles demanded, Hank Ballard (the "Annie" series), Little Walter's "Juke" and "Wild About You Baby" and Jimmy Reed's "Big Boss Man." These tunes he had heard on late night radio in L.A. when he couldn't sleep, which was often. Moreover, now he could recall them also from listening to his brother's stack of banned race records from when Dix was a little kid.

"Nick, play that froggy song you always used to do as part of 'Show Time.'" Lettie kneeled down at his feet and smiled brightly to encourage him.

"What froggy song?"

"You know that one? Goes like this 'Ain't got no home or no place to roam ... I'm just a lonely frog. UuuuuUuuuUuh. You know?'"

"UuuuuUuuuUuh?" He sang.

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“Yeah, that’s it go on.” She nodded pertly.

Dixie reached back into the empty recesses of his mind and he could see Ramon dancing in their living room, with a neighbor girl from up the street—Kathy Harriman. They were dancing “Queens” style to a 45 rpm record. The song was—it was ... Clarence “Frogman” Henry! Yeah, he recalled the novelty tune, clear as a bell. Dix had it now and he played the old R&B hit from Ramon’s high school years. Of course, Dix could not play the blues harp and sing at the same time, but the call and response, typical of R&B music, allowed him to compensate adequately. He really put himself into the humorous, little ditty and when he imitated the frogman expertly with Dix’s own naturally raspy voice, his private, pool audience went wild.

After the applause died, Lettie had another request, a big one. Lettie said she wished he had a guitar. Dixie said he didn’t play the guitar. However, Lettie and the others all insisted that he did.

From the pool, Karella asked Sherri to fetch her acoustic guitar from her basement den. Dixie laughed. They had to be joking. He had never played a guitar in his life! Lettie insisted that not only that he had played the stringed instrument, but he also was very proficient at it, just as he was with the drums, or any kind of percussion, reed or brass instrument and keyboards, as well, Dixie refused to believe her. He told her she was nuts, but little Lettie was insistent. Ignoring her, Dix sipped a little more of the Miller’s, trying not to laugh and blew for them another Slim Harpo selection, “I’m a King Bee.”

However, when a beaming Sherri returned from the house with the guitar and handed it to him, Dixie got nervous. Kirsta, who was lounging in the pool in Reb’s arms, suggested in her heavy German accent that Dixie might have to tune the strings. Dixie replied that he did not know how to tune a guitar. He looked over their heads and observed the lights extinguish in the house next door.

Sherri asked Dixie to strum the strings to hear if they sounded all right, so he did. Sherri said the ‘G’ and ‘E’ strings were off. Instinctively, he knew she was right. Sherri told him how to adjust the strings with the keys. He suggested since she knew so much about it, maybe she should play, but she declined, respectfully. She wanted to hear “Little Nick Sheeboom.” Dix fiddled around with the keys nervously, through trial and error, until the strings sounded right, which surprised him. Although Dixie was a little high, he was coherent enough to find this guitar experiment both frightening and interesting as heck. Yet, he was loaded enough to throw off his usual shyness to risk making a fool of himself in front of these new friends.

“Great,” said Lettie now go ahead and play something, anything.” Dixie chuckled nervously and looked about him for help. Sherri encouraged him.

“You used to be great Nicky. You could really slam that thing, honest!” She beamed to inspire him. All of them watched him expectantly.

“Yeah, right!”

Dixie rubbed his face with his left hand, stroking either side of his chin between his thumb and forefingers. Beads of sweat broke out under his hairline. They all stopped their little quiet individual, private conversations to see what he would do next. The

four swimmers floated respectfully, quietly down towards the shallow end of the pool, closer to Dixie to see what he would do. Despite their drunkenness, the revelers all seemed to sense this was a seminal moment for Dix. They were wondering if Little Nick could resurrect right here before their eyes and ears. Dixie sat forward on the edge of his lawn chair and cleared his throat, sweat rolling down his cheeks. He fingered the strings on the neck and strummed. Unconsciously, he fingered some basic R&B chords. He had to back off and wipe his sweaty palms on his shorts and sucked on his Miller's to fight the dryness in his throat.

Dix shut his eyes and saw a picture in his mind. A chubby, dark-haired kid with a stylish razor haircut sat on a bed in his pajamas, looking into a vanity mirror. He recognized the bedroom as his parents'. The mirror was his Mom's three-foot square vanity mirror on top of her make-up bureau. He was the boy and the boy was strumming a tune. It was "Jimmy Mack." With his eyes still shut, Dixie started slowly, haltingly, playing and singing the 1967 hit by Martha Reeves and the Vandellas. Without realizing or even understanding it, Dixie became that pudgy kid in the mirror, belting out the song as he had done when he had taught himself to play the guitar during his convalescence from rheumatic fever. He did not think about what he was doing or how. In his mind, he just became that kid, sitting on the bed playing to his reflection in the mirror.

The others joined in with him on the popular oldie, but Dixie did not notice. He played the song through many chord changes and then jumped into "Bend Me, Shape Me." He played every top ten song he could recall from the first half of 1967, songs like "The Beat Goes On," "Can't Take My Eyes Off of You," "I Think We're Alone Now," even "Something Stupid," the father and daughter Sinatra duet. When Sherri asked him to play her namesake by the Four Seasons, he complied and they all sang along with gusto in falsettos, ala Frankie Valli. Even the Kirsche twins chimed in with their heavy kraut accents. Sherri asked him to perform "Close to You" by the Carpenters, but he couldn't find that one in the black hole of his memory. She sang it for him and, sure enough, he could follow along. Surprisingly, it was a piece of cake. Afterwards, Lonny requested Aretha Franklin's all time classic "Respect," because Lonny said he sure could use some, so Dixie gave him "REE-REE-REE-REE, just a little bit, R-E-S-P-E-C-T," picking it out like the original. For the song's sax solo, Dixie took up the harmonica and played. When he had finished, Dixie opened his eyes. He raised his palms and turned them over and back, staring at his hands, disbelieving what they had just done. The music seemed to flow from his memory, down his neck, through his shoulders, then down his arms to his fingertips and his tongue. It was incredible!

Sherri and Lettie applauded enthusiastically. Lonny congratulated him also.

"Nick," he said, "Don't you know you're a musical genius, Mann? Why do you think GRT has won Graphies and gone multi-gold with three different albums? It's because of you Mann! Not because of Ryz'n shakin' her tush! Hey, don't you remember when Robby Schmelling pantsed his kid brother Ricky at my senior prom, just before you were to play up on stage? And Robby hid his little brother's pants, so

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you had to play Ricky's electric guitar, play lead for the band? Don't you remember that?" Dixie shook his head blankly. "Well, you opened with the Guess Who's "No Sugar Tonight" and you picked that thing better than Randy Bachman. I mean you were really Allriiiighttt!" Lettie backhanded her tall husband disrespectfully in his chest.

"How the hell could he remember that Lonny, when I can't even remember it, because it's not true."

"Sure it is, Lettie. What do you mean 'it's not true'? You were there."

"Yeah, I was there. That's what I mean. That's how I know it's not true. First it wasn't the Prom. It was the sophomore's spring dance of our senior year when Robby Schmelling pantsed his kid brother and Nicky stood in for him. Second of all, it wasn't "No Sugar Tonight" either, because that song wasn't even out yet. He played CCR's "Bad Moon Rising" and Nick you were great, just as good as John Fogarty. It was at homecoming in 1970, Lonny, when Nick did the "No Sugar Tonight" number, when we came back for homecoming during our freshman year in college." Lettie glared at her husband triumphantly. She brusquely grabbed another Miller's and roundly announced loudly and proudly that she was not yet too drunk to straighten Lonny out.

"All right Honey, maybe so. But don't ya think you've had enough beer, Lett?"

"No, I don't and I also don't think I should stand around out here when I could be enjoyin' the swimmin' pool, on such a hot night!"

"No, you're not going swimming. It's just not right."

The couple escalated their argument. The other revelers eyed each other, embarrassed for the contentious couple, though the quarreling newlyweds did not seem to be embarrassed for themselves. Make that: Lettie did not seem to be embarrassed. She was too far gone, too care. Lettie dropped her Bermuda shorts and was in the middle of unbuttoning her sleeveless white cotton blouse, when Lonny seized her by the shoulders in attempt to pick her up. The feisty little woman hauled off and slapped him hard across his face. Onlookers would swear later that they could see the steam rise from Lonny's head. His better half attempted to stare him down as she had stared down Sherri earlier. Yet, Lonny took hold of her roughly this time, picking her up and walking her over to the deep end of the pool, where he tossed her, kicking and cursing into the water. She landed awkwardly on her side, parallel to the surface. Little Lettie's impact rocked the water surface with a tidal wave that spilled out, over all sides of the over-filled pool.

Derisively, Lonny told her:

"You wanted to swim, swim. I hope ya drown yourself!" Then he bid a solitary "Good Night" to everyone else and stalked off to his car, which he had left parked on the street in front of the twins' house. Lonny had moved so quickly, that he was out of view before his wife could surface for the second time to spit the chlorine water out of her mouth. Treading water and coughing, the tiny terror tore off her saturated, white blouse with buttons popping up in the air and flung the wet garment out onto the pool's concrete deck, leaving her clothed only in her underwear. Then she asked Sherri to bring the Miller's she had started to drink to her at the edge of the pool.

Sherri smirked and sarcastically confided to Nick that it appeared “another link in the ‘First Couple’ chain had just broken.” Then Sherri calmly removed her blouse and skirt revealing to Dixie what he already knew that, beneath her clothes, she had worn her new birthday red and white polka-dotted bikini she had modeled for him earlier that day. Sherri picked up Lettie’s beer, took a few swigs, and jiggled over to the pool, holding the beer aloft and jumped in to join the rest of them. Thereafter, Dixie played both waiter and entertainer for the pool dwellers, fulfilling requests of both drink and song. He took song requests, finding to his amazement, that he really *was* a human jukebox. If he didn’t know the tune, one of them would sing the song and presto! He had it and could reproduce the melody, adding his own unique bit of frosting. Dix was having a blast. The party became more raucous as the night waxed into the wee hours of the morning, but they managed not to disturb the sleeping neighbors.

Sherri insisted Dixie join them in the pool, but he steadfastly refused, teasing that the chlorine water would ruin the guitar. Finally, looking like a one-cloud rainstorm Sherri climbed out of the pool, floated over to him anxiously, yanked the guitar from his hands, sat on his knee and rained chlorine pool water all over him. The Junior Miss of Clairton Acres wrapped her left arm around the back of his neck and took hold of his chin guiding his mouth to hers. Dixie was just drunk enough to reciprocate her good will. Her hands began to rove, finding their destination. Dixie tapped her sharply on the rear. Surprised, Sherri bit Dixie’s lower lip, drawing blood. She giggled, but Dixie was angry.

“I ought to turn you over my knee and spank hell out of you for that.”

“Go ahead. It’s my birthday. I haven’t had any birthday spanks yet,” she confessed coyly from beneath her long, upturned, black lashes. Lettie encouraged Dixie to smack her hard, to smack some sense into the precocious teen. The others concurred like a drunken Greek chorus. So Dixie did just that. Sherri had already soaked his sliding shorts and the bottom half of his inner shirt anyway. Sitting upon the middle of the lounge chair, stretched out over the side of the lounge, with his feet crossed one over the other, Dixie bent her over his lap. With his lip still trickling blood, Dix began spanking her wet suit and skin with his right hand in a slow, rhythmic fashion. The pool partiers counted off the years in the customary syncopation, while Dixie delivered each blow to her broad butt, in jolly, mock angry fashion.

At first, Sherri pretended Dixie was injuring her, as she kicked and yelled, but when he was halfway home, by year eight, she confessed that she was disappointed that he was not hurting her at all and asked him to spank harder. Dixie pushed her head down with his left hand and complied. However, his increased vigor was not yet hard enough to suit her, prompting her to complain louder. Dixie was reluctant to hit her any harder for fear of really hurting her, but she turned her head to him and loudly called him some foul names in front of the others, claiming he had no hair on his butt, if he did not spank harder—this from Little Miss Sweet Sixteen, no less. Ronnie and Reb yelled at him to “go for it” and Lettie concurred. Laughing, the two ballplayers whirled their jock straps above their heads and jeeringly threw them at him.

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Called out by a sixteen-year old girl in front of his peers and prompted by the alcohol coursing through his veins with blood still dripping from his lip, Dixie smacked the girl for all he was worth from the ages of twelve through fifteen. With each successive smack, she raised her head and feet, arched her back for real, moaning for more. Her loins pressed hot into Dixie's lap, arousing him against his will. Then she relaxed and grinned, repeating through grimacing, clenched teeth.

"That's it, that's it Baby? That's the best you got? That's your best shot?"

Dixie whacked her so hard for sixteen that he toppled the lawn lounge chair, with both of them falling off it and rolling onto the grass. The swimmers laughed robustly. Beneath him, Dixie felt Sherri's body heaving. She lay crosswise under his midsection. Rising to all fours on the grass, he looked down into the girl's eyes. Her eyes were wet like blue violets. A few teardrops lay on her cheeks, but she had one of the biggest smiles he had ever seen across her dimpled face. He was as aroused as all-get-out! And by a sixteen year-old! She raised her knees up to her stomach and wrapped her arms around her shins, below her knees. Miss Sweet Sixteen rocked her lower body back and forth gently in the fetal position. She whispered with a tearful smile.

"Now that was great, Nicky. Best birthday present I ever got! I'll never forget it."

Dixie was perplexed. How could he be aroused by this teenage kid? He couldn't let her know. He had been right. Sherri was "[six]teen going on twenty-five."

"I just wailed the heck out of ya. My hand is still stinging and you say that was the best present you ever got? I don't believe it." He shook his right hand as proof. She unlocked her hands, reached up behind his neck where she interlocked her fingers again, and pulled him to her by the nape of the neck, kissing him as she had a few minutes earlier, licking the drip-drying blood from his lower lip. When she had finished, she asked him, slyly.

"Now, do ya believe me?"

"Oh yeah, I believe ya all right." Then he kissed her. He kissed her hard! From the corner of his eye, Dixie caught sight of Lettie. Obviously, she viewed these shenanigans with a jaundiced eye. She climbed out of the pool, as threatening as the Creature from the Black Lagoon though unconscious of how she looked, to stand over them, literally raining on their parade.

"Think it's time to go, Nick. You had better call it a night. Take this YOUNG GIRL home to her parents!" Whether Lettie had been faking intoxication earlier or was having merely a good time, she seemed well recovered now. She spoke soberly, sensibly, in a tone that school teachers use on occasion to "encourage" their students to do what they should do. Discomfited by the effect of Lettie's wet cotton garb, and trying to ignore her appearance, Dixie picked Sherri up, rising from his knees to stand erect.

"Come on Sherri. We gotta go home now." Sherri didn't fuss.

"Will you carry me to the car, Nicky?" She spoke innocently to him, suddenly as a girl of six, instead of sixteen. Dixie played along.

"If you go put your clothes on now and be a good little girl, I will. Go on take your clothes up to the house and change in the basement, like a good girl."

Out at Home

“Oh, OK Daddy.”

He lowered the birthday girl to the ground. She retrieved her blouse and skirt and strolled toward the house, swinging her hips, looking like anything but a good little girl.

“Can you take me home too, Nick?” Lettie asked from behind him, suddenly soft and tender.

“Whatsamatta Lett, don’t you trust me with Sherri?”

“In your condition, no, I don’t. Besides, I’d like to talk with you about something.”

“All right. Go ahead and change. I’ll wait.”

“Could you loan me one of your baseball shirts? Lonny says you keep extras in your trunk. My shorts are dry, but my blouse is torn and sopped.”

“Sure, I go get ya one. I’ll bring it to the sliding glass door, OK?” Dixie smiled genially. She softened.

“OK.” Unexpectedly, she morphed into a sweet young woman.

The twins directed Lettie to a dry towel hanging over the chaise lounge, which the young woman wrapped around her waist to cover her embarrassment. Wearing the drooping towel, she picked up her shorts off the deck and strode up to the house to change. Sherri was exiting the place, as Lettie arrived. Dixie left for the car. Upon his return, he tossed his three-quarter sleeve, baseball, inner shirt to Sherri who, in turn, walked it up to the house and passed it onto Lettie. After thanking his hostesses, Dixie picked up his harmonica and collected the two girls to depart. Before he left, the twins along with Ronnie and Reb thanked him. All were delighted with the matches Dixie had made for them. On top of the services he had provided Paul and Tasha last night, Dixie thought he could hire out as a professional Cupid or, at the very least, a matchmaker.

Dixie carried Sherri to the car as promised, while Lettie trudged up the grassy hill to the widow’s car, carrying her wet undergarments. His baseball, inner shirttails hung down to Lettie’s knees like an old time nightgown. Sherri asked what she should do with her wet suit. She started to toss it onto the back seat, but Dixie stopped her. He directed her to use all those fancy bows to tie the pieces to the passenger’s outside door handle, so the suit might dry from the road winds on the way. Sherri did so but she purposefully kept the door shut, blocking Lettie’s entry to the vehicle. Too late, Dixie noticed after he sat down that the humid night air had condensed into dew on the vinyl seats. It didn’t matter to him as his sliding shorts were already wet.

“Watch out gals, the seat is wet.”

When Sherri was done, she climbed over the door triumphantly and stuck her nose up at Lettie, who had been wringing out her wet clothes as she waited for Sherri to finish.

“No one is coming between me and my man.” She proclaimed, smiling.

Sherri sat victoriously on her knees sidesaddle, next to Dixie and hugged him to death. Lettie didn’t let that remark pass, unanswered.

“Well that’s fine Sweet Sixteen, but Nick ain’t your man, now is he?” Lettie climbed in, shut the door and dumped her wet things on the floor mat.

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“Well, he is tonight, Baby. It’s my birthday and he sure as heck is *tonight*.”

Lettie smirked and slid down upon the dew-covered vinyl seat.

“Come on now girls, let’s jes’ get Sweet Sixteen home. OK?” Sherri looked into his eyes dreamily.

“Aw, do we have to, Nicky? This night should never end.”

“I’m afraid so, Baby. All good things must come to an end, especially tonight.”

There was an unrelated loud burst of laughter from the pool down the hill. Dixie ignited the engine, stepped on the gas and cruised. They sat three across the front seat of the open Bonneville convertible. The ladies took advantage of the blowing breezes to share Dixie’s comb and dry their hair. Dixie chauffeured them up Old Veer Avenue towards Sherri’s house. Sherri remained on her knees, kind of sidesaddle, leaning towards Dixie with her left arm around his shoulders. Lettie complained loudly when the teen dug her toes into Lettie’s thigh. The girls agreed that the breeze generated by the ride helped dry their locks. The bobbing and weaving of the Bonneville on the rolling country road made the short trip a pleasant task, more like a tree-covered, roller coaster ride. Soon they crossed Route 5A into Sherri’s development where Dixie pulled into Sherri’s concrete driveway behind her old man’s big blue Cadillac. It was after two a.m.

Sherri asked Dixie to walk her to the front door. When Lettie refused to budge from her front door passenger seat, repaying Sherri for her rude behavior earlier, Dixie got out of his side of the car and Sherri followed him, walking across the seat on her bent knees and the tops of her feet. When she peered up at Dixie with starry eyes, he condescended to escort her to her front door. Dixie could tell the teen was in dreamland, walking on air, as she never took her eyes off of his. He felt uncomfortably weird. As they reached the base of her front stoop, Sherri stopped and took hold of his hand and tugged Dixie around so that his back was to Lettie in the Bonneville. Sherri placed her left hand over the back of his right hand and pulled his hand in place over her heart. He felt her heart beating a mile a minute and that was not all he felt.

“Oranges or peaches?” She asked coyly.

Sherri arched her left eyebrow and grinned like a vixen, turning her shoulder slightly from side to side. Dixie swallowed hard. The oversexed teen had flummoxed him well. She pressed his hand into her. “Go ahead, you judge. See, I heard you all through the window, today.” She squeezed her hand over his some more. Dixie obeyed, as he reassessed his earlier appraisal. Sweet Sixteen closed her eyes and purred softly. Dixie was surprised by what he found.

“Well, Sherri, oranges probably, don’t believe peaches.” She opened her eyes and grinned. She whispered, “See you can’t always judge a book by its cover.” Then she dropped his hand and once more rose up on her toes, encircled her arms about his neck and kissed him hard. He returned her enthusiastic efforts. Something about this young girl touched his heart. Something in her striking good looks, her blue eyes contrasted against her dark hair and the sparsely speckled band of freckles across her upturned nose, reminded him of someone. Her looks, and her pert, unaffected yet gushing manner, her aggressive effervescence, were similar to someone else whom he could

not quite get a handle on. This frustrating sense of loss came over him quite often, more and more lately. He wished he was sixteen and Sherri was his girl and all they had to worry about was passing their final exams.

“Sweet Sherri, Sweet Sixteen?” he whispered.

“Yes, Nicky—my man tonight,” she whispered back quietly, following his lead.

“Stay sixteen as long as you can, Baby, cuz one day, it will be gone, just like that!”

Dixie snapped his fingers sharply. “And you’ll wonder where it went.”

“I will,” she promised with the solemn, innocent sincerity only a sweet, sixteen year-old could muster. “I promise.” She wet-kissed him hard again.

“Hey Nick! That’s going too far now.” From the front seat of the convertible, Lettie seemed to be taking her chaperone role a little too seriously, even if she was right on.

However, Dixie broke Sherri’s embrace, pecked her on the forehead, stepped back and playfully swatted her behind. Sherri grinned and playfully mocked a naughty girl face, when suddenly Sherri’s old man flung open the front door. Even from the bottom of the front stoop, where Dixie stood with Sherri, Dixie could see the guy’s black eyes were almost popping from his head. Standing beneath the front porch light, Dixie observed the veins in his neck and forehead were bulging. The young couple climbed the stoop apprehensively. Mr. Scrachi threw open the screen door violently. He yanked his flabbergasted daughter by her right arm, tugging her savagely up the last couple of steps and inside the door behind him, where the old bastard sternly instructed her to go to her room. However, Sherri took only one step further inside. She stopped when her old man turned his attentions to Dixie, who believed the guy must have torn his daughter’s arm from her socket.

Then Mr. Scrachi stepped out over the edge of the porch and down a step to confront Dixie. Leaving one foot on the porch and the other on the first step, Scrachi leaned down almost into Dixie’s face. He used every curse word in the book to undress Dixie, spraying him with saliva in the process. The enraged Scrachi concluded by telling Dixie that if he ever came around his daughter again, he personally would castrate him and stuff Dixie’s own balls down his throat. He glared at Dixie for several seconds. Taking Scrachi’s silence as a cue to reply in his defense, Dixie climbed two steps towards his accuser, but he had hardly begun to speak when Sherri’s irate father pushed the recalcitrant Dix off the stoop. Dixie backpedaled awkwardly down the front steps. Before Dix could regain his balance by grabbing onto the stoop’s guard rail, Scrachi stepped inside the house and slammed the front door shut behind him.

From behind the closed front door, Dixie heard the guy lighting into Sherri. Father and daughter were going at each other with Sherri evidently giving as well as she got. There was a loud smack, followed by a thud. Then, derisively taunting her old man, Sherri yelled at her father, just as she had provoked Dixie earlier into the hard birthday spanking. “Is that the best you got tonight, old man?” Some furniture crashed, probably a lamp, because inside a light went out. Then Dixie heard several loud thwacks and the old man screamed, “Don’t you *ever, ever* talk like that to me again. You hear me, girl?” There were muffled cries, obviously from a hurting Sherri. “Now here’s something to cry for you little tart!” shouted a snide Scrachi. And then there was one

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final, loud *thwack*, which signaled in a deafening silence, which was chilling in its finality.

For a brief lunatic second, Dixie considered going inside and beating the crap out of the guy. However, he thought better of it. His ass would be in jail for certain, if he succumbed to that tempting impulse, and he had enough trouble as it was. The school teachers would never get their bonus now, he reckoned. Ha! “Poor Sherri, her sweet sixteen innocence lasted little more than a day.” As a rudely rebuffed suitor, Dixie retreated to the safety of the widow’s Bonnevillie, where little Lettie was waiting for him anxiously. Dix jumped in the driver’s seat without a word. He turned into the closest driveway, backed up, turned towards the highway and peeled out. Once he was on Route 5A, Dixie floored the accelerator out of anger. Lettie said nothing at first, but after a few minutes, she mentioned quietly that police often laid speed traps on this curving five mile stretch of road where there were no lights or intersections. Dixie slowed a little. However, at this hour, the Bonnevillie was the lone vehicle on the dual lane highway, but ya never knew. Them Smokey’s were sneaky.

Lettie slid over the vinyl, aqua seat closer to Dixie. She held her arms out before her, turning her wrists inside and out, inspecting her overly long shirtsleeves, which extended well past her fingertips.

“Not bad, hunh? How do you like the way your shirt looks on me, Nick?” He knew she was trying to take his mind off his anger with a little comic relief.

Dixie was leaning up against the driver side door with his left arm running along the top of it, his hand clutching the vent window bar, as though he might break it in half. He felt bad for Sherri. He drove with his right arm straight out, his right hand alone atop the steering wheel. He looked over his right shoulder and smirked at Lettie modeling his inner shirt. She put on his baseball cap, which had fallen from the rear view mirror to the floor some time ago, reminding him of Charlie Chaplin’s “Little Tramp.”

“Looks OK, I guess. Think Lonny’s shirt would look better on ya though.” He intended his remark to deflate the temporarily estranged wife and it did.

“Guess I deserved that,” she intoned.

Dixie merely glanced at her, keeping his eyes on the empty road ahead.

“You weren’t as crooked back there as you let on, were ya Lettie?”

“A little acting experience comes in handy, sometimes.” It was her turn to smirk.

They rode in silence up to Woodyard Road and passed through the green-lighted intersection without slowing.

They drove on in silence, past Clairton Shopping Center and the bowling alley until they reached the intersection with Landerstown Road.

“You’ll want to take a left onto Landerstown and then veer right onto Brickney. You don’t realize it, Nick, but if you had turned right back there at the light, instead of left onto Landerstown, you probably could have caught Ryz’n as she was leaving her gig at the “*Klassiks V*” supper club. The club’s just a couple miles down the road, just the other side of Landrews Air Force Base.”

“No thanks, I’ve already caught her act.” He replied caustically.

Out at Home

Lettie looked down at her lap without a word.

They drove through the tiny commercial district of Small Springs, which featured Kyle's lumber yard and on into a residential area. Dixie took Lettie home, driving west, away from the night club. With his mind still on Scrachi's brutality, he almost missed the next turn at Brickney, but she alerted him in time. They drove along peaceful, tree-lined streets of suburban homes through the quiet, sultry Southern Maryland night. Dixie wondered if these quiet homes, they were passing, concealed more Old Man Scrachi's pummeling their rebellious sixteen year-old daughters behind closed doors.

Breaking his silence, Dixie said, "You'll have to tell me where to go from here."

"OK, just stay straight and you'll be OK. You now, that's good advice for anything in life, Nicky, but you're not staying straight with Ry. You need to get back with her and stay straight with her, Nick."

Mildly disgusted, Dixie confessed, "Coming from you Lettie, that really means a lot."

Lettie sighed.

"Look Nicky, I know, I'm no perfect example of what a happily married woman should be. But I'm talking about you and Ryz'n, not me and Lonny."

"Well, let's talk about you first, Lettie. The way I see it you acted like a real b-i-t-c-h towards your husband tonight, in front of everyone too. Maybe he couldn't remember some details about a song, but you had no business laying into him like that in front of the others and going into that pool in your underwear. You had to know why he didn't want you to do that! And smacking him??? Now, what was that all about?"

"Well, Dammit! He was the one who threw me in. And then he left me."

"Yeah, he threw ya in, because he knew you were going to go in anyway, despite his protests. And he left, because he did not want to stick around to watch me, Reb and Ronnie ogle you in your transparent, wet underwear. Like we did, I might add."

"Lonny knows that I get a little bit rough around the edges when I drink."

"Then, why drink in the first place? If it only makes you rotten instead of happy, why do it? Stop and think. It's just a little thing to do." *Oooh! What a hypocrite I am!*

The young woman exchanged defiance for recalcitrance. "I dunno, I dunno. I, I wanna forget is all, I guess. My Dad, God rest his soul, was like that. He drank a lot and it killed him and when he drank, he'd get nasty, like that sadist we just left back there." But Dixie wasn't cutting little Lettie much slack.

"So you gotta follow in his footsteps?"

"It's in my genes. I guess I just can't help it."

"Sure you can. You ain't some kind o' animal. You're a human being. You got a choice and it's the choice that makes ya human. Ya see?" Dixie was relaying some philosophy that his shrink Dr. Mandl had laid on him once which ended with the admonition that we are all responsible for our actions, good or bad.

"Yeah, I see, but ..."

"But what?"

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“I dunno. Nothin’, well nothin’s worked out as I planned.” Exasperated, she pulled off his cap and dropped her hands in her lap.

“Like what? Whaddaya mean?”

“My job, my marriage. I used to be somebody, ya know, back in high school? Mann, I was special—Captain of the Cheerleaders, President of the Student Body, Homecoming Queen. Yeah, I really thought I’d be going places after high school, but it just hasn’t worked out. Guess I was just a big fish in a small pond.” She frowned.

“Yeah, what places?”

“I dunno. I guess I thought I’d marry Lonny and become a teacher and make a difference in people’s lives, have a couple kids and everything would be rosy. You know stupid things like that.”

“Well, that ain’t so stupid and, besides, you’ve done all that, except for the kid’s part. That will come.”

“Yeah, right! A lot you know! And what has it gotten me?”

“Well, I know you’ve got a fine, handsome, intelligent husband, who loves you so much he can’t stand it and you have an important job, teaching high school kids English. That’s important, teaching them how to read and write and to think, to think about life.”

“You put it very nicely. That’s how I used to envision it, but that’s not how I see it now.”

“Why not?”

“Well, take Lonny for example.”

“OK, let’s take him.”

“Well, how do you know he loves me so much he can’t stand it?”

“Because he *told* me. When you sit a season on the bench with another guy, you learn a lot about each other.”

“He told you *that*?” Her face registered shock.

“Yeah.”

“What else did he say?”

“Ain’t that enough? I mean what more do ya need, for cryin’ out loud?” Dixie hesitated. Ashamed, Lettie cast her eyes downward. Dixie relented. “Well ... he said how he always has placed you on a pedestal and still does, even when you try to jump off it, or dive off it, like ya did, tonight.”

“Yeah, I guess I did,” she said penitently, but wistfully.

“What’s the real problem, Lettie? He told me about the miscarriage. Is that it?”

“He told you about *that*, sittin’ on the bench?!?! Shoot! I thought all you guys talked about was what the other pitcher was throwin’ and where the best beaver shots were.”

Dixie cracked up and he began to choke. She was too much. He coughed and throttled down to where he could reply.

“Well, those topics do come up occasionally,” he admitted still laughing.

“Geeze! He told you about *that*?”

“Yeah, he did. He said he thinks you’re afraid to try to have another. The doctor said, maybe you shouldn’t try, not for a while anyway, ‘cause you’re so small and all.”

Out at Home

Lettie began to tear up. Dixie had struck a raw nerve without wanting to.

“Oh, you missed the turn. Here, it’s over there, Nick.” She pointed him in the right direction.

Dixie followed her instructions. She asked him to pull into a corner, gravel area at an intersection on the left side of the road, where a wooden fruit and vegetable stand had been erected in front of some shade trees. Before he could back up, she laid her head upon his lap and wept softly. Dixie stopped the car. She spoke in muffled tones. Dixie placed the car in ‘PARK’ and turned off the engine, as he strained to hear what she was saying through her muffled sobs.

“Lonny’s right,” she sobbed. “He’s so right. I teach these kids, some of whom don’t care and don’t try. And I know I won’t ever have my own kids to teach. You see, I’m a teacher and I can’t even have my own child to teach!” She sobbed and wiped her nose on Dixie’s baggy jersey. “I feel like a failure. Lonny and I always talked about having kids, even back in high school. He wants a child more than I do, if that’s possible. Now we can’t.” Again, she sobbed softly, wetting Dixie’s sliding shorts for the second time that night.

“Gee Lettie, I didn’t know all that. Lonny only said you should wait a while, that’s all. You’re only what twenty-four, twenty-five?” She rolled her head up his thigh to look up at him and nod.

“Well, that’s what the doctor said, but why should it be any different the second time, hunh? Tell me, why should it be?”

“Well, because the doctor should know what he’s saying. That’s why he gets paid the big bucks.” Then the light went on in his mind and his tone turned soft and hopeful.

“Ya know, I had this marine buddy of mine back at Kaneohe. And his wife had a couple of miscarriages also, but the third time was the charm for them. They were a Hispanic-Indian couple, I mean she was Asian-Indian, and kind of small, uh, petite like you, you know? So guess what? They named their first born a girl, after me.”

“They named a girl, Nicholas?”

“No, Dixie, D-I-X-I-E! That’s the name I went by, before I knew who I am. In fact, that’s what I still call myself in my head, not ‘Nick’ like everyone else calls me. Yeah, they named her Dixie Urmila Casteleon. How do you like that? Her initials were D.U.C.” He laughed.

“I like that. I like it a lot.”

Dixie reached across her prone body to pull some Kleenex out of the glove compartment for her. She took the tissue and blew her nose a couple times.

Lettie smiled.

“Feel better?”

“Yeah, I do.” The tiny woman chuckled self-consciously, as she sat back up.

“So whaddaya think?” inquired Dixie, encouraging her to speak her mind.

“Oh that Lonny! He’s always so conservative, making sure we don’t overspend and stuff. I couldn’t figure out why he was spending extra on, well ha!—on condoms, using two at a time.” She bit her lower lip as it began to quiver. “Now, I know. He’s

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afraid for me, I guess, he wants to make sure, ya know, that I obey the doctor's orders and don't have another pregnancy too soon and get hurt again."

"Now there's a man who loves his wife!" Dixie chuckled, trying to make light of the situation. "To make that kind of sacrifice—WOW! Two at a time? Why it's, it's noble—no, why it's Homeric even, that's what it is, Homeric." The English teacher agreed with his reference to the celebrated bard and myth-maker and they laughed together. Dixie turned the engine back on and she directed him down a tree-lined avenue of small brick ramblers and colonials to her house. He pulled up alongside the curb to their lot and parked before the sidewalk of a small brick Cape Cod she had identified as hers. Lettie turned to Dixie.

"Ya know Nicky, we never got around to talking about you and Ry. I don't know what the problem between the two of you is, but I do know some things. I know Ry is just a terrific girl, a truly fine person. You'll never find another better. And she loves you with all her heart and every fiber of her being. I know she does. She loves you—what did you say earlier?—'he loves you so much he can't stand it?' Well, that's how she loves you. And sometimes, when you love someone so much like that, you, well you do things, stupid things you wouldn't do ordinarily, maybe to make them jealous, maybe, to gain their love. Anyway, it's because you love them so much, it makes you a little bit crazy inside, crazy enough to do something stupid that you regret later, like, like ..."

"Like jumping into a pool in your underwear in front of friends to show you don't need to be treated with kid gloves?"

Her jaw dropped in astonishment as she replied. "Oh, you see right through me don't you? You're awful wise for someone so young Nicholas Sheeboom. But yes, like that stunt I pulled tonight or ... or the one she pulled last night."

Oooh that remark struck too close to home. Embarrassed and angry, Dixie turned away from her.

"Look, Nick! It doesn't matter who screwed up last, the important thing is to get back together. You all are the handsomest, most talented, coolest couple I ever knew. You have *so* much going for you." She lifted his chin and turned his eyes to her. "Go to her, Nick. Apologize. Tell her you love her, whatever it takes, and that you never want to be separated from her again. I know Ryz'n. I know she'll be everything you could ever possibly hope a wife could be. I promise you, you'll never be sorry. And steer clear of that teeny bopper baggage you were with tonight, for everyone's sake, especially for hers." Lettie peered hard into his eyes and shook his right shoulder encouragingly.

She was right. He knew she was right. He sighed, and the funny thing was, he did not mind hearing this criticism from her. "Lettie, I've tried, honest I have. She won't return my phone calls. I can't even find out where she's staying. Her mother won't tell me."

"Yes, I believe that. I've tried to reach her, too, and received the same treatment, which is surprising, because she always would take *my* calls. Being a couple years ahead of you two, president of the school and all, Ryz'n always kind of looked up to

me, ya know? Kind of followed my example? But, well hey! You just go over to the Ryans' place right this minute and sit on their doorstep until they open up. You hear me Nicholas Sheeboom?" The little mighty mite glared darts at him. She had regained her moxie. Dixie giggled.

"I bet you *are* a terror in English class."

"Yeah, I guess I am, but only for the recalcitrants," she admonished, shaking her forefinger at him. Then, giggling, she broke up, too. Lights flashed on inside the Sintmoyen home. The front door opened as Lonny stepped out onto the front porch stoop. Dixie flashed his lights twice in greeting and Lettie waved to her husband. She turned to Dixie.

"See what I mean, Lettie? He's waitin' up for you, because he loves you."

"Yes, yes I know. Thank you so much, Nick."

"But *I* didn't do anything. I just repeated what *Lonny* said."

"Unh hunh, well, coming from you, I think it sunk in. Goodnight, Nicky. I'm sorry I didn't help you any."

"Didn't help [me] any?' If it hadn't been for you, I never would have found out I can play the guitar." He winked.

The perky little school teacher smiled and leaned forward to pat his thigh twice. Then she scooped her wet undergarments off the floor mat, as she slid out the passenger side of the convertible. When she shut the door, little Lettie leaned over and whispered, "My, my Little Nick! You sure did grow up! God bless you, Nick, and don't sell Ry short now. You can't do any better than Ryz'n." Dixie nodded once. Then he mildly suggested she tell Lonny that based on Dixie's experience, Lonny need not be so careful. A single condom was good enough to do the job and would likely be more conducive to his enjoyment, as well. Lettie giggled and nodded approvingly. Then she looked down at the door and remarked.

"Ooops! Looks like little Miss Sixteen left her bikini on your door. Another trophy for you, Nick? Hey, don't let Ryz'n see that, please." Lettie's tone was tender. "Oh! And speaking of clothes, I'll make sure Lonny gets your shirt back to you."

"I bet if you hand it to him when you get inside the door, he won't forget."

She giggled playfully and patted the top of the door twice. Then Lettie, the former captain of cheerleaders, pranced up to the house like a pixie in Dix's oversized, inner shirt. Lonny was waiting patiently for her on their front porch. Both of them waved back to him before they went inside. Dixie flashed his headlights in farewell.