

As he directed the Pontiac out of the Sintmoyens' development, Dixie considered Lettie's advice. He decided to drive over to the Ryans' home right this minute He'd speak to Ryz'n and get it all out in the open. After all, he had seen her interview on TV earlier at the Do Drop. She had been at home then, because he had recognized the front of her folks' house. He hoped Ryz'n hadn't been there all along and Mrs. Ryan had been lying to him about her daughter staying in some motel with the band. That would be rather frightening. He would not be able to trust any of the Ryans. Dixie reached the Ryan place in about ten minutes. The clock was approaching three a.m., but the late hour did not deter him. Still on his beer high, he strode briskly up to the front door, where he rang the bell. It bothered him that he couldn't find Ryz'n's car anywhere; however, he rang the doorbell again. Mr. Ryan answered the door in his bathrobe.

"Hello, Mr. Ryan?"

"Damn right it's Mr. Ryan. Who the hell else do you think it would be?"

"Well, I was hopin' to find Ryz'n here, sir."

"Yeah? Guess I'll have to dash your hopes, because she ain't here. Now go home and get some sleep. For crap sake! Damn pain in the ass and you always were." From the rear of the house, Dixie heard a female voice.

"Who is it, Roy? Who is there?" Roy turned his face away from Dixie toward the bedrooms.

"Uh nobody, go back to bed Rose."

Nobody? Dixie's ire rose to a boil. Mr. Ryan was the second father to give him grief on a front porch in the last hour. Dix had let the first guy of the hook, because Dixie knew he had deserved what the guy had to dish out. However, this case was different. Holding the screen door open, Dixie kicked hard with the bottom of his tennis shoe against the oaken door that Mr. Ryan was trying to shut in his face. Dixie's kick jarred the bottom of the door so hard that two of the three diagonally placed observation glass panes in the upper door cracked and broke, falling to the living room carpet and on the threshold.

Dixie forced his way into the house, grabbed his father-in-law by the lapels of his robe and, whirling him around, threw his butt down upon the couch.

"I'm tired of this CRAP! Now I want to know where my wife is and I want to know RIGHT NOW. Phone number, address, everything! Got it?"

"We gave you that once before and ya screwed it up," replied his father-in-law through clenched teeth.

"So help me POP! If you don't watch it, I'll clean this room with ya. I'm *really* tired of this CRAP!" Mrs. Ryan threw a robe about her as she entered the living room.

"Nicholas? Stop it now, son. Calm down, calm down now, please. Have you gone mad? I'll tell you where she is. I guess I should have told you before, but I was doing what Ry asked me to do. Now let go of your father-in-law, please Nick, before you kill him!" Dixie relaxed his grip. The guy looked apoplectic.

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“Well, where is she then?” Dixie stood up to look down at her as she helped her husband sit up on the couch.

“She’s on her way to Ocean City, honey. They played the Klassiks 5 over in Sunnyside tonight. She was supposed to come home and leave for the beach tomorrow, but she called and said she had the car all packed and that she was leaving tonight. They have dates all weekend down at the beach. She will be staying at the penthouse in the *Surf’s Well*. You know where that is, right? You’ve been there before, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, but I’d like the phone number, just the same.”

“All right, I’ll give it to you, just a minute.”

The middle-aged matron scrambled to a nearby roll-top desk drawer and pulled out an address book. She flicked on the desk lamp, wrote the number down and gave it to him.

“Thanks, and I’d like a schedule of where they are playing and when. Do you have something like that?”

“Yes, yes. Here, here it is, Nicky.” Again, she retrieved a document from the desk drawer, a single page brochure of sorts and handed it to him. Dixie glanced at it. The thing appeared to have a list of dates, times and places for the band’s performances. It was the band’s itinerary. “And look now Nicholas, if they aren’t there when you arrive, there should be a house key up on top of the door frame of the penthouse suite, OK?”

He took the materials and responded to her with a curt “Thank you.”

An irritated Mr. Ryan rose from the couch to return to bed without further word, but Mrs. Ryan lingered behind to empathize with her son-in-law.

“Look Nick, we’re not your enemies, honest we really are not. We want to see you and Ryzanna get back together as much as you do. You do know that, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t. You sure got a funny way of showin’ it. With friends like you, I don’t need enemies. That’s for sure.” Dixie’s glare was harsh. People had told him before that, when he was angry, his look could be deathly frightening to the subject of his ire. Donna had claimed that his black eyebrows furrowed above the two-tone black and blue eyes with his jet-black hair hanging down upon his forehead reminded a person of how a maniac might appear. His mother-in-law clutched her fists to her heart. She must have agreed.

“Oh Nicholas, don’t look at me that way. You’re breaking the spirit inside of me, Honey.” Dixie had been told by Donna, Lori Lei and others that, on the rare occasions when he got angry like this, that the maniacal Jack the Ripper could have appeared kinder and gentler than he did. Dixie extracted a couple twenties from the sole of his tennis shoe and disdainfully flicked the bills to the living room floor, assuring her they would cover the damage of the broken windows. Then he turned to leave, but stopped short of the door, turned around and stepped on the fallen observation panes, crunching them under his feet. Yet he paid the glass no heed.

“If I find out you’re lying to me again, Lady, I swear I’ll come back and tear this whole place apart, so help me I will.”

Then he pivoted on the broken glass and left, slamming the door behind him so hard that he shattered the lone remaining glass pane in the door. Mrs. Ryan opened the door, screaming in pain. She called after him in agony, as she ran out the doorway over broken shards of glass and onto the porch.

“I wasn’t lying, Nicholas. She wasn’t here. They stayed down at the *Starlust* Motel in Woldorn.”

Ignoring her, Dixie jumped in the convertible and fired up the Bonnie.

“Like Hell, she was,” yelled Dixie loud enough to wake the neighbors and shattering the humid, still night air. “I saw her on TV right where you’re standing now, so don’t insult my intelligence with that crock of bull.”

Dixie’s mother-in-law hobbled awkwardly down the steps and the sidewalk, crying and calling after him, trying to explain. However, Dixie would have none of it. Instead, he laid on the horn to drown her out and halt her advance. His ploy achieved both purposes. By this time, however, some neighbors had come out onto their porches to see what was going on. One of them was Matt Yikes, followed by Lena. Dixie had heard they were lodging temporarily with the Larrabees.

Dixie peeled out, but nipped the left rear of Lena’s Dodge Dart Swinger, which was parked against the curb just ahead of Dixie’s Pontiac. The right front bumper of the widow’s Bonneville smashed Yikes’ left rear tail light and tore the bumper off the Dodge, as well. Dixie dragged the bumper a ways, before the back tires finally ran over it. Lights in the Larrabee household indicated they had already been awakened by the noise. Now Dixie saw a large, young man hustle out to the street to investigate. He yelled something foul at Dixie. Dixie recognized him as Yikes, the guy who had jumped him a couple of weeks ago down at Clairton. Smelling blood, Dixie slammed on the brakes just past their driveway. He shoved the Bonnie into reverse and backed it up roughly over the bumper again. Dix angled the car so that the right rear tire went up over the Larrabee’s driveway and into their yard where he stopped with the other tires resting on the street pavement.

Yikes picked up the twisted, bent bumper, lying in the street. Then he charged towards Dixie with the metal under his arm like a knight in a jousting tournament. As Dixie emerged from the convertible to confront his attacker, Yikes thrust the bumper into Dixie’s face. Just then a strange thing occurred. Lights flickered behind Dix’s eyes in quick succession and, just as quickly, the light switch set itself off...

Nick found himself in a dark jungle at night. “Charlie” was approaching with his bayonet fixed to kill. Reacting by rote, according to his training as a Marine scout-sniper, Nick parried the bayonet thrust at him with a quick, abrupt, circular motion of his hands, following by a stiff shot from the heel of his palm up into the enemy’s face.

Charlie’s nose cracked loudly in the quiet, humid night air. Before his foe could recover, Nick waded in with a tremendous open-fisted blow to his foe’s kidney, feeling his enemy’s ribs crack against Nick’s striking hand. The veteran Marine smashed the gook down onto the trunk of a vehicle face-first. Charlie rolled over before Nick could grab him around the neck. So Nick pummeled the gook’s face repeatedly, spraying blood everywhere. With his left hand, Nick grabbed a handful of his unconscious foe’s

hair to pull his head up and back. Then he raised his right half fist to shove the heel of his hand through the Gook's broken nose, intending to drive the bone up into his brain to kill him. The unconscious gook didn't have a chance.

Just before Nick could deliver the killing blow however, a female V.C., who had been pleading, to no avail for Nick to cease, clambered up on top of the vehicle. She screamed in perfect English.

"STOP! STOP! You're killing him, you're killing him."

Clad only in a flimsy night slip, the female gook sat down on her knees on the trunk of the vehicle, placing herself between Nick and the bludgeoned, bloodied head of Nick's attacker. About to shove the Gook's nose up into his brain, Nick pulled his punch just shy of the girl's intervening moon face, the face of—of a Caucasian girl, a blonde, a round eye, somebody, somebody, he knew, somebody ...

He stepped back. *What's happening here?*

The musty, acrid odor of boxwoods filled his nostrils, not the odor of the musty jungles of Viet Nam. Again, the light switch flipped on and off rapidly behind his eyes.

When the white light in his brain ceased flickering this time, Dixie was back on "Double G" street in Crest Hill Heights in the middle of the night, with a bathrobed crowd of aghast faces surrounding him. By now, most of the neighbors were out in their yards. Poor Matt Yikes who had been resting peacefully in the arms of his lovely wife less than five minutes earlier had been beaten senseless.

"Where am I? What is this?" Dixie cried out like one lost in the wilderness.

The Ryans and the Larrabees arrived at the scene, shocked and in horror. Blood was all over the trunk of Dixie's car and person. Allena, too, was plastered with her spouse's blood. She sobbed, as she sat down upon the Dart's hood to lift the head of her battered and bloodied husband into her arms. Dixie looked about at the bystanders with Yikes' blood on his hands. Fear, real fear *of him*, covered their astonished faces. Dixie looked around at the residents of "Double G Street." He held up his blood-plastered hands.

"What did I do?" he cried in anguish. Dixie dropped over the street curb to his knees onto the Larrabees' yard with his toes touching the street behind him. He buried his head in his blood-stained hands. "Oh God, please, please help me, please help me."

"Help *you*? Matt's the one who needs help here!" Only a few feet away, Dixie's disgusted father-in-law growled his dissent in an unforgiving tone. Mr. Larrabee had turned on the outdoor faucet low, so that it scarcely sprouted. Then he brought the sprinkler, which was attached to the end of the garden hose, over to the Pontiac to sprinkle Matt's face gently. He washed the blood off his son-in-law's face and head, rousing Matt enough to where he opened his eyes briefly. At least, the young man was still alive, but then he coughed up some blood, *black* blood and passed out.

To Dixie, the Larrabees and the other neighbors, who had come over to investigate, seemed stunned by what they had witnessed and, not so much by what, but by how. From their whispers, they noted Matt Yikes had a good fifty pounds on Dixie and Dixie had gone through the former star athlete in a matter of seconds, cleanly, efficiently and, most remarkably, coldly, emotionlessly. "That Sheeboom kid is a cold-

blooded killer.” That’s what they were saying. “He’s lost his mind and come back from Nam a freak.” “He’s a mental case, for sure.” A contrite Dixie cried on his knees. Yet his act of contrition was insufficient evidence to dissuade these citizens of his killer’s mentality.

There was discussion among the Larrabees about what to do with their son-in-law. After listening to the comments of the neighbors, Dixie recovered from his self pity long enough to offer his car to take Matt to the hospital, but Allena quickly nixed his offer. Mr. Ryan, Mr. Larrabee and Mr. Martine, from across the street, helped load the still prostrate Matt, now with a towel wrapped around his head, into the back seat of his own car which was yet operational. Dixie tried to apologize to Allena, but in her haste to get her husband into the back seat of the vehicle, she blew him off. Reluctantly, Mr. Martine mentioned that the Larrabees may want to consider calling the police and pressing charges against Nick. However, Allena wanted her father to drive them to the hospital, noting they had no time for the police now. She said they could address all that later. As they began to pull away from the curb, Dixie watched Allena reach forward and tap her Dad on the shoulder. The car stopped and Allena’s back window rolled down. With her husband’s still bleeding head in her lap, the girl twisted herself and leaned her own head out of the window next to Dixie and whispered that he might want to consider “lying low for a while.” Then Mr. Larrabee took off.

Dejected and downhearted, Dixie moped around the street like a lost puppy, while his brain began to explode. He did not know what to think. However, he had enough presence of mind though to kneel in the Larrabee’s yards and use the soft-spraying sprinkler to wash the blood from his person and clothes, as best as he could. Some neighbors suggested he turn himself into the police. Others cursed him. Dixie wondered. Was he not the same Nicholas Sheeboom who had arrived home to a miraculous hero’s welcome just over two weeks ago? The frozen vacuum in his soul just widened a bit more. Dixie saw Mr. Ryan helping his wife hobble back to their house. He asked the other bystanders why she was crippled. He learned that the woman had cut her feet on the broken glass from the door panes he had busted. That news made him feel even more terrible. He pulled himself out of his self-pitying reverie and offered to help his limping mother-in-law back to the house. She smiled wanly and was prepared to let him help her, but her unforgiving husband rejected Dixie, advising wryly that it would be better for everyone, if Dixie just went “back to California.” Val and Vickie’s parents, the religious Colonel Vernier and his wife were also present. Like the other neighbors, they stood in the street in their bathrobes in awe of what they had just witnessed. After Little Nick had treated Val with such gentlemanly chauvinism when he had dated her in high school, the couple had said they had always thought well of him; however, now Colonel Vernier quoted to Dixie solemnly from the book of *Genesis*:

“Then Cain rose up against Abel, his brother, and slew him And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and dwelt in the land of Nod on the east of Eden.”

Out at Home

Then the colonel looked Dixie straight in the eye and said sternly: “Son, maybe it would be best for everyone if you were to go away somewhere, too.”

His words tapped Dix to the quick and stopped him cold. Not only had the Colonel quoted from the Bible, but Dixie seemed to recall hearing that very speech in a movie, a James Dean movie sometime ago. That recollection rendered what the Colonel said to be oddly melodramatic but just as arresting. Dixie apologized to everyone present, stepped into the widow’s car and left, trying to hold back the tears. Where should he go? Not home. Not to his brother’s. With three kids and a dog in that small house, Ramon had no room to spare. Besides, going to Ramon’s would be no better than going home, at least not for something this serious. No, home and Ramon’s place were both out!

Dixie recalled “the Hill” behind their high school where Ryz’n had taken him their second night together, right before their big tiff. He drove over there, parked the car at the dead end of the court and raised the top of the convertible. He ate a handful of aspirin from the glove compartment with the hope of knocking down his headache enough so he could sleep. He thought about what he had told Lettie earlier, about humans having a choice and how it’s the choice that makes you human. And about what his shrink had told him that we are all responsible for our actions. Well, if that was true, then Dixie was the biggest hypocrite whoever lived. Then Dix took his sleeping bag out of the blood-splattered trunk. As he walked towards the hill, past the passenger side of the car, he noticed Sherri’s suit still hanging, tied to the car door handle. Dixie reminded himself to return Sherri’s suit to her or she would have an excuse to come after him. Shoot! That was the least of his problems. He had so many problems that he could count them like sheep to help him fall asleep. However, he needed no help in that department tonight. He bedded down on the upper slope of the hill overlooking the high school football stadium. So exhausted was he, that Dix could not even pray. All the tension, all the physical, mental and emotional burdens of the last few days collapsed upon him like heavy weights, too overwhelming to bear any longer. Dixie fell asleep the instant he laid his head down upon the ground.