

The dawn sun climbed over the shade trees at the eastern end of the large bowl that housed the Pocomoke football stadium. *On the east of Eden* mused Dixie as he woke from a tossing, fitful slumber. Morning dew covered his sleeping bag. From the height of the sun in the sky, Dix knew it was close to six, if not later, because the sun was just beginning to clear the trees above him to the east. He refused to let himself think about what he had done to Matt Yikes and his in-laws. He had to be at the job site by six-thirty. Lou was counting on him. He focused on that instead. Dixie hustled to the car. On his way to the job, Dix stopped by the Dunkin' Donuts shop on St. Bart's Road. He changed his clothes and filled his water jug in the shop's restroom and washed the dried blood off him as best as he could. He also purchased a handful of donuts and a carton of milk and took them with him to eat on the way. Mann, those donuts were fresh baked. They sure were good. He felt guilty eating them, after what he had done the previous night to Matt Yikes. He resolved to call Allena and see how his victim was doing at lunch and that he would pay for any medical bills, as well as for the damage to Matt's car. Dixie knew he could cover the expenses, but he was less certain that he could cover the ill will he rightfully had incurred.

Dixie arrived at the job site a couple minutes late. He had the presence of mind to untie Sherri's bathing suit, still damp from the morning dew and lay it gently over the Scrachi's back porch railing. The school teachers were already down in the hole and they did not catch his sleight of hand with Sherri's bikini. However, the Suggs boys did, but they said nothing. In fact, nobody was saying anything to anyone. A somber mood hung over the site. Nobody wanted to be here. They all knew they'd have to bust it today—no screwing around.

Dix learned that Baxter, Larry and Lou had agreed with Mr. Scrachi on a four hundred dollar bonus, if they could have Miss Sweet Sixteen swimming the following day, which was the Fourth. Dixie kept his mouth shut and did whatever the school teachers told him to do without dawdling, just as if he were back at Kaneohe, following orders from his platoon guide. They were all exploring virgin territory here with the new pump, the high water table, etc. *Virgin territory? Now that seemed appropriate, considering this was Sherri's place.* None of them had ever installed a sump pump under a pool before. The challenge appealed to Dixie, as it helped him direct his focus off of his many problems.

The pool crew had to dig deeper than usual beneath the hopper to build an oblong concrete box, as a drainage pool for the subsurface water. Digging the hole was a pain, because they needed the pump to keep the hole dry, but they had to be careful not to dump dirt in the pump or hit it when they were digging, which could unplug the thing. Theoretically, the pump could handle the dirt, but nobody wanted to risk testing the theory. Dix toiled in the muck with Lou and Paul building the drain site. Barry and Larry also had to finish digging the short, half-foot wide trench about a foot deep up the corner of the hopper wall and under the steel wall. The trench would hold a two-

inch PVC pipe that would hook to a T-connector at the bottom of the concrete sluice box, which the crew would fill with blue chip to filter the underground spring water.

Once the pool was finished and filled with tap water. The heavy weight of the pool water inside the vinyl liner would keep the high water table from rising. The pump probably would not be needed then. However, if the water table rose beneath the pool hopper, the pump would be connected to the topside end of the PVC pipe and housed above ground and could be activated to suck up the unwanted excess water. Or, if Mr. Scrachi needed to drain beneath the pool for any reason, he simply could turn on the pump to keep the water table from building up underneath the vinyl liner.

While Phil and Danny back-filled the walls from outside, the handsome, congenial Bax tossed an occasional shovelful of dirt against the outer pool wall for show. However, mostly he carried on a nonstop, public relations job with Mrs. Scrachi, explaining to her how the drain and pump worked.

Once the new hole had drained, Lou and Larry made a wooden form for the sump. Then they mixed and poured concrete about four inches thick for the box and dropped some large blue chip into to help filter the water. Lou said he would remove the wood frame as the cement set up, before they dropped the liner. The day felt like another one of those ninety/ninety heavy, wet scorchers, so typical of the region. Dixie had removed his shirt within the first hour and soaked sweat right through his shorts, underwear and socks by the end of the second hour. He did not much care for that sweat-soaked feeling from his clothes.

The crew members were busting their butts, because the school teachers wanted to collect that bonus to recover part of their expenses for all the unplanned labor time already poured into this project. Moreover, they also hoped to enjoy the holiday weekend with their spouses or what would be left of it. However, in this heavy humidity, the grade of cement they used to build the box and the trench probably would not set up quickly enough to drop the liner today.

Nevertheless, part of the crew worked on finishing sanding and troweling the shallow end of the pool and the hopper slope, The rest of them back-filled around the outer pool walls. This twenty by forty footer was the largest in-ground pool the crew had installed. Dixie was one of the back-fillers, near the deep end, close by the trees on the house side of the pool. But Dix was worried. No matter how hard he worked, he couldn't get the pitiful, bloody sight of Matt Yikes' face out of his head. He kept expecting to hear police sirens coming for him any minute. Coughing up black blood, that was bad news, real bad. He hoped the guy was OK. Who was he kidding? He hoped Yikes didn't press charges. If he did, Dix could be in real trouble—no ten days in the brig this time. Nobody here seemed to know what had happened at the Larrabees just a few hours ago. Or, if they did, they weren't talking about it. Yet, with every shovel full of dirt he threw, Dixie half expected to find the cops coming around the side of Sherri's house with a set of handcuffs custom-made especially for him. Lena was his only hope. She had a soft spot for him, maybe she ...

No, he had to think of something else. He noticed that, at least every now and then, he could catch a bit of a breeze atop the dirt mounds. Of course, Sherri had come

outside around ten to sunbathe and spy on Dixie. However, uncharacteristically, she made no overt greeting or gestures towards him, not with her mother out there supervising the situation. Evidently, Sherri had discovered the suit Dixie had left for her on the porch railing, because she was wearing that same cute but fetching bikini she had received yesterday as a birthday gift. "My new birthday suit," she had called it. She also wore large, round shades and a floppy hat that she pulled down far over her face, probably to hide the evidence of last night's beating from her old man. Dixie tried to make eye contact with her a couple of times, but he did not speak to her and neither did she to him. Evidently, her father had gotten through to her last night. Yeah, Dixie could guess at why she was hiding her face all right.

Around noon, her old man came home to inspect the crew's progress. Dix was back-filling not too far away. He hid from Scrachi behind a mound of excavated dirt, as best as he could, but Dix was close enough to hear Bax diagramming for Scrachi the principal of the pump and draining the pool, as he already had for Sherri's mom. Bax advised that, once they had installed the pool and filled it with water, Mr. Scrachi could turn the pump off, because the weight or pressure of the pool water on the liner would prevent the water table from rising. If Mr. Scrachi ever needed to empty the pool for any reason, such as to drain it, he could turn the pump on again. Bax also expounded on how the concrete box, at the bottom of the deep end, needed some time to set up before the crew could finish sanding the hopper and install the liner.

Scrachi asked Bax if a large fan could help expedite setting up the cement. If so, Scrachi had one. Bax turned to Lou who was near by and Lou said it couldn't hurt. They'd give it a try. Lou indicated they might have to keep repositioning the fan though. Scrachi went inside his house and came back with a large oscillating fan. Larry hooked it up to extension cord and took down in the hole and turned it on. Scrachi rubbed his hands together gleefully. Then Bax went on with his exposition.

He told Scrachi the crew could keep back-filling today but they crew would probably have to come back tomorrow to finish the job, especially if those dark rain clouds on the horizon kept heading this way. However, Bax assured the now frowning pool owner that his daughter would be swimming the following afternoon, even if it meant that the crew would have to return later to install the concrete deck, as well as the diving and sliding boards he had purchased. He advised Mr. Scrachi it was only safe for them to back-fill the pool today a little over halfway up the walls until tap water completely filled the pool, lest they buckle the walls from outside. Without water pressure on one side of the walls to offset the weight of a complete, back-fill job on the other side, the steel walls possibly could collapse under the strain. Bax said it was unlikely, but they didn't want to take any unnecessary chances. They couldn't afford any more problems if they wanted Sherri swimming tomorrow.

Mr. Scrachi brightened at Bax's last remark. He had originally promised his daughter she would be swimming by her birthday. He had had to renege on that commitment and swear that the Fourth would have to suffice. He was glad to hear that the crew would meet that goal. Then Scrachi spotted Dixie shoveling fill dirt behind some big dirt mounds and blew a gasket.

“What the hell is that sonovabitch doing here? Get that prick out of here. Get him out now! So help me I’ll kill the bastard!”

Scrachi began gesticulating wildly. He lunged in Dixie’s direction. Bax had to restrain his irate client physically. Bax was cool. He asked Scrachi which member of the crew he meant. Scrachi pointed at Dixie. All the crew stopped to watch this interplay. They looked at Dixie, who shoveled as though nothing was happening.

“That, that dolly-banger! That over-sexed sadist! SHEEBOOM—Ramon’s brother. That’s who!” Bax, a professional, junior high school, counselor, employed his peacemaking skills. He spoke to the irate Scrachi in a tone that was smooth-as-silk.

“Well, hold on now Mr. Scrachi, we need all the help we can get here, if we’re going to meet your deadline. What did he do that’s so terrible?”

“DO? DO?”

Scrachi hobbled over the dirt mounds to the chaise lounge, where he grabbed hold of Sherri’s arm. He yanked his teenage daughter off her soft perch over to the edge of the pool, where they could all see her. He spun Sherri around and then bent her over, pointing at the several welts and black and blue marks on her buttocks. He slipped his fingers under the lower side of her bikini bottom, lifting the suit a couple inches to reveal a large, ugly black, blue, purple, orange, red and yellow bruise. The whole crew guffawed. Danny whistled. Sherri stood by helplessly exposed, awaiting further orders. Her emotions were concealed behind her large, floppy hat and wraparound shades.

“Neither I nor my wife never, have ever beaten our daughter like that—NEVER!” Scrachi screamed as he pointed at Sherri with one hand and then at Dixie on the other side of him with his other hand. “And this, this sonova—I’m gonna kill ‘im.” He went after Dixie again and again Bax restrained him.

“Nicholas,” called Bax loudly enough for everyone to hear, “Come over here.”

Spread out around the pool, the crew members leaned on their shovels and waited to see what would happen next. Even the industrious Lou stood frozen like a statue. The bare, hairy-chested, darkly tanned, sweat-soaked Dixie stuck his spade sharply into the dirt pile before him. Dix had a fleeting notion this might be his curtain call as a pool installer, so he decided to go out and play it cool, just like Paul Newman in “Cool Hand Luke.” He walked smugly down along the base of the dirt piles, around the pool, away from Bax back to a shade tree. He spit in Scrachi’s direction.

Yeah. New day, same old spit.

Bax called to Dix. “Hey Nick, we need you over here to answer some questions.” Dix raised a forefinger, signaling Bax and responded casually. “Yeah, just a sec, Bax.”

He extracted a Lucky and his book of matches from the pocket of his baggy, gold, button-up shirt, hanging overhead from a maple tree branch. He opened the matches, picked out one and stuck it hard against the tree branch. Placing the nail between his lips, he fired up, inhaling deeply and shook out the match fire. Then he flicked the spent match onto the nearest dirt pile. In one smooth motion, he tugged his work shirt off the nearby tree limb, slung the shirt over his right shoulder and picked up his water jug by the handle from amongst the rest of the crew’s jugs at the base of the tree.

While the rest of them watched and waited, Dixie took his time, taking a long drag on his Lucky, trying to figure out how best to navigate the mountainous range of dirt mounds to reach Bax. Since Bax was in a hurry, Dixie decided the shortest route to Bax was the most direct, right over top of the dirt piles that surrounded the excavation site. Finally, he just strode up and over the pile, walking the length of the pool on top of the long, fill-dirt mountain range. As his shoes sunk into the loose, excavated earth overflowed his shoes, trickling in between the soles of his shoes and his white crew socks. As Dixie navigated the mounds, he sucked hard on the Lucky, gaining the tasteful satisfaction he desired. When he stepped down the pile near the shallow end of the pool, more loose dirt seeped uncomfortably over the tops of his shoes as his feet sunk into the side of the last dirt mound. Nevertheless, he ignored the uncomfortable gritty sensation in his shoes and walked easily over to Bax, who yet restrained Scrachi.

While Dixie was making his trek, he noticed Barry also was walking from the opposite side of the pool around the shallow end towards Bax and the customer. Barry reached Sherri's chaise lounge just as Dixie reached Bax and the old man. Sherri had backed up and quietly resumed her reclined position on the lounge. With the nail dangling from his lips, one hand carrying his shirt and the other a water jug, Dixie squared off against his accuser in the noon day sun. Bax got to the point.

"Well, Nicholas? What about this? Is this true? If you did this on company time, I'll have to let you go, you know that don't you?" Bax was covering his butt in front of the customer and Dixie knew it but that was all right with Dixie.

"Well, speak up."

Dixie spoke around his Lucky. "No, Bax. Nothin' happened on company time. Nothin' at all." He threw his shirt over his left shoulder, removed the butt from his mouth with his right hand that had formerly logged his shirt. Then he exhaled blue fumes above their heads and spit to the side onto the base of the dirt mound, near Scrachi's feet. The jerk bristled and Bax tightened his grip.

Mann, no matter how much he tried, it seemed Dixie could not escape confrontations. Of course, he wasn't trying to hard right now. He shifted his stance and his shirt from his shoulder to his left hand, holding both the shirt and the water jug in that same hand. Then he dragged on his cigarette.

"No? What nothing?" asked Bax. "Because something sure happened to this girl." Scrachi seethed, but held his peace.

Dixie shifted his stance as well as his shirt from his shoulder to his left hand, holding both the shirt and the water jug in that same hand. Before he spoke, Dixie took his time and combed the wavy hair off his forehead with a single pass of his right hand. He would not be intimidated. He would not stutter. He was just playin' it cool. He sucked deeply on his nail and exhaled. Then he pushed the unruly hair back off his forehead again like a girl might and combed the hair back with his fingers even though he still held the cigarette between them. He knew his hand actions and his stance often were judged by some to be effeminate and that is why he employed them now. He looked at Sherri. Hiding behind her huge shades, the girl turned away and laid back down on her

lounge, pretending to read a magazine, to the right of Barry, who had sidled up alongside Scrachi by now. Barry stood just at the foot of the chaise lounge.

“Well?” Bax was patient.

When he did speak, Dixie spoke honestly and directly.

“Like I said Bax, it wasn’t on company time,” he admitted. “It happened on my own ... private time, mine and Sherri’s, that is.” Dixie nodded lightly towards Sherri and exhaled in her direction. She looked up at his mention of her name, but her face remained impassive. So different from last night, her silent, aloof manner reminded him of jaded middle-aged woman.

Had Sherri truly lost her sweet teenage innocence so quickly, just over night?

“You sonovabitch!” cried Scrachi. “I should have castrated you when I had the chance last night!” Scrachi was almost as livid as he had been then. Again, the veins bulged in the jerk’s forehead and neck. His black eyes burned like coals.

Bax interceded. “Well Nick, what do you have to say for yourself?” Dixie grinned at Scrachi and inhaled on the Lucky. He held the smoke in his lungs as he spoke.

“Looks like that was an error in judgment on your part, hey Pops?”

Dixie smiled slyly, exhaled above Scrachi’s head and spit once more at his accuser’s feet. He was in no mood to be polite. Too much crap had slid down on him over the last forty-eight hours. He had had enough.

“You go straight to hell, you mother muckin’ bastard.”

“What about it Nick, did you cause those bruises?” Dixie looked at Miss Sweet Sixteen, but she refused to meet his gaze. The girl covered herself by crossing her arms over her breasts, placing one foot over the other and coolly stared down at the magazine she held in her lap. Dixie glanced around at the rest of the crew who were watching with bated breath. Then he turned back to Bax.

“Well Bax, the butt bruises, yeah. I guess so, though I never saw them to be sure, and I never wanted to make them. Guess it was kind of a team effort between me and snookums over there. It was her birthday request that I spank her sixteen times, so I did. She seemed OK when I brought her home, delighted actually.” He sucked on his cigarette and waited for a response. He didn’t have to wait long.

“I never spanked her so hard in all my life, never, you sonova—” Dixie cut off Scrachi’s assertion, speaking loud enough for all to hear.

“Ah! Obviously, another error in judgment on your part, Pops.’ He looked down as he flicked the ashes off his cigarette. “Cuz maybe if you had done that earlier, she wouldn’t enjoy it so much now. Cuz she sure did enjoy it last night, let me tell ya— kept begging me to spank her harder and harder. So I did. And you know what?” He stopped to suck on his nail and tossed his hips to one side, assuming a Ryz’n stance. “Yeah, little Sherri there was so happy, she kissed me. I mean she slipped me the tongue and the whole ball of wax. Know what I mean, Dad?”

“Why you, sonova—”

Dixie blew smoke at his head, cutting him off, as Bax held on tight to Sherri’s irate old man. “Wasn’t finished yet, Dad! Yeah, she was mine for the takin’. Why, I could o’ had her anyway I wanted.” Dixie noticed Sherri’s head bob once, but she remained

seated and silent. "But instead, I kept my hands off and brought her back to you, Daddy, as fresh as she was when she left. I did ya a big favah. And ya didn't even thank me. You do rememba that, don't ya Pops, that ya didn't even thank me?"

By this time, Scrachi was frothing at the mouth, but Barry had slipped past the end of Sherri's lounge chair in time to grab Scrachi by his free arm. It was a good thing, because he almost broke Bax's hold to get at Dixie. Dixie merely smirked and remained cool as can be. He puffed on his Lucky and kept right on talking, as if nothin' had happened.

"... Because then *you* were the one to beat the ever livin' hell out of her face." Dixie raised his voice to make sure everyone could hear. "That wasn't me, asshole! That was you. You're the sadist! You're the sonovabitch! Yeah, I heard ya from out on the front steps, and Sherri too, screamin' inside! But she wouldn't lay down for ya, would she, Dad? She's got guts, Pops! Ya gotta give her that. She can really take it. Yeah, I'll give her that even if you won't! Probably from years of practice, too. G'head Sherri. Show 'em all the guts you got. Show 'em all right here and now what you're hidin'."

Dixie had guessed Sherri's facial camouflages were concealing the beating her old man had given her last night. He was also betting that she would show the same guts she had last night, as well, by revealing her bruises. In fact, he was counting on it.

Sherri hesitated. Then, to his grateful amazement, she followed Dixie's suggestion. She sat up demurely and primly placed her feet over the edge of the chaise lounge onto the grass. Then she sat up ramrod straight, showing off that long, lithe dyn-O-amite figure of hers. With all eyes upon her, she removed her sunglasses slowly with her head bowed. Then, with a flourish, the girl pulled off her straw hat and raised her head. She glanced defiantly at her old man and threw her head back, shaking her curly dark hair out, proudly revealing her ugly wounds. Sherri stuck her chin out and held her head high. A collective sigh arose from the spectating crew. The girl looked as if she had fought the "Thrilla in Manila" and lost. Like Ali, she appeared to have suffered severely from a mean left hook. Her wounds, all on the right side of her face, were horrifyingly ugly. Scrachi ordered his daughter to get in the house and put some ice on her bruises. He cursed her for being out in the sun in the first place. But Dixie had not excused his witness. As she stood up, Dix shouted to her, freezing Sherri in her tracks.

"And Hey Pops! I got another witness who was with me in my car last night and she heard ya beatin' up on Sherri, too. So you best consider that before you go thinkin' 'bout preferrin' any charges and all." Scrachi struggled to loose himself from the grasp of the Suggs boys. He growled through clenched teeth at Dixie, who did not back off, but stood no more than two yards from the guy. Sherri's old man strained to free himself, but he could not escape the tight grips of the Suggs boys on either side of him.

"You scum-suckin' sonovabitch!" He growled, but Dixie pressed his advantage.

"I'm tellin' you, you should thank me Pops that, that's all I let her do, cuz she would have done anything I asked. Know what I mean, Dad? Even now, I'll bet. Why we could do it right over there on the grass, couldn't we Baby? You wouldn't mind a little audience, would ya Sweet Thing?" Dixie winked and looked toward Sherri who looked back rakishly, then winsomely, from behind her ugly, raccoon's dark mask of bruises.

Out at Home

She turned girlishly from side to side, with her hands behind her back, clasping her hat and shades against her thighs. Scrachi was about to come out of himself with anger.

“But instead, I brought her safely home to you, ya see?”

Dixie smiled easily towards Sherri and then he grinned at Scrachi, who glared like Satan back at Dixie. With his feet planted, Dix threw his arms out to either side in a plaintive gesture and turned around seeking the approval of the gaping crew, in effect, resting his case. Scrachi barked at his daughter again, “Get your little butt end back in the house or I’ll—.” However, with the crew looking him, he couldn’t finish his threat. Sherri looked to Dixie to see what she should do. Dix said, “It’s OK Baby, you can go inside now, that is, *if you want to.*”

Sherri sashayed out of there, as she had yesterday when she had brought Dix the Mountain Dew. *Sixteen going on twenty-six! Yeah, she sure is somethin’.*

While all eyes were on Sherri’s strutting exit, Lou, who had been inching easily toward them throughout this whole confrontation, came over to put in his two cents.

“Look Mr. Scrachi. We’re all sorry about your daughter’s behind, and no “butts” intended, but we need all the hands we can get if you want her swimmin’ tomorrow. My guess is when she’s enjoying that cool water tomorrow, she’ll have forgotten all about this little mishap, might be good for her bruises, too.” Scrachi replied to Lou, but he kept frothing at Dixie.

“You can get that pool in swimming shape by tomorrow or not, but you’ll do it without this scum suckin’ bastard. Are we straight on that?” He turned to Lou.

Bax and Lou looked at each other. Dixie knew a four hundred dollar bonus was riding on this deal. Larry yelled loudly from the shallow end for Nick to “take a hike.” He said they did not need the “Prima Dona.” A recalcitrant Lou and Bax reluctantly concurred with their not-so-silent partner. With Barry securely holding Scrachi still, Bax asked Scrachi if he were calm enough for Bax to let go of his arm. The guy nodded and Bax let go, but Barry held onto the creep as a precaution. Dixie took one last drag on his Lucky Strike and turned toward the hole, where he flicked the burning cigarette over the mounds towards Larry.

“Up yours, Larry.”

Larry told Dixie to go suck himself.

Bax placed an arm around Dixie’s shoulder and nodded as if everything was all right. He walked Dixie past Sherri and her mother, who had ventured outside again. Bax patted Dixie on the back. The pair trudged silently around the side of the house to the widow’s car. When they reached the convertible, Bax confided in him.

“Look, Nick. I think we’re gonna need ya tomorrow, if for nothing else than to drop the liner. That’s one damn, big pool, Mann.” He grinned self-consciously. “So, why don’t you go on down to the Patio Center and see if Ramon can use some help today? I’m sure he can. We’ll call ya when we need ya. Probably, we won’t be able to drop the liner today, anyway. That concrete has to set up overnight. Besides, if that sky promises what it’s threatening, it will all be for nothing anyway.”

Dixie glanced upward. Sure enough, storm clouds were moving in from the southwest and the breeze was picking up steam. “After all the crap we’ve had with this pool, ya wouldn’t think we’d need a thunderstorm, too,” complained Baxter.

“Makes no difference to me, Bax. I don’t need the cash anyway. Don’t even know why I’m out here bustin’ my butt in this hellfire weather.” Knowing Bax was in an awkward spot, Dix lightened up. “Is the air *always* this heavy back here?” Bax grunted.

“Yeah, most of the time now unti—well hell, until ever, but you have a knack for making it a little thicker, don’t ya think, Nicky?” Bax smiled in a patronizing manner.

“Yeah, maybe, mebbe I do, Bax, mebbe I do.” Dixie looked down at the ground, before he faced Bax again. “Well, think I’ll head on down to Ramon’s, then. Get me something to eat, first I guess.” Bax patted Dixie on his tanned, sunburned shoulder.

“Hey, don’t pay any attention to Larry now. We can use you. This ain’t the only job we got lined up, ya know? When Chuckles recovers, we’ll have enough help so we can separate you and Larry onto two different crews. And I really appreciate you helping us out, Nick. Hangin’ in there helps out Tommy too, ya know?” He smiled.

“Yeah, guesso. Say, how come only you Suggs boys call Ramon, Tommy?”

“Well, that was the nickname Ramon grew up with on the block, with me and Barry and Danny. But you’ll have to ask him how he came by it, cuz I don’t know for sure.”

“All right, if you need help with the liner, let me know. Just so you know though, I’m thinkin’ about headin’ down to the Eastern shore, down to the beach tomorrow for the weekend.”

“Yeah, well hell! I got news for ya! We all got plans for the holiday weekend. Well, maybe we can drop the liner first thing in the a.m. so’s the little twot can wet her tush and all of us can get outta here and forget this mucked up mess for a few days. OK?”

“OK, Bax.”

Dixie smiled and Bax clapped him on the back before he headed back to the job site. Dixie opened the driver’s door to the widow’s car and set the half empty water jug in the middle of the bench front seat, back against the upraised armrest that doubled as a gap-filler to the double seatback. He tossed his loose work shirt over the jug and the armrest, careful not to knock his Luckys out of the pocket. Then he plopped down on the side edge of the aqua, vinyl, front seat, letting his feet rest on the curb. Dix watched Baxter trudge back down Scrachi’s side hill and turn the corner of the house back to the hole from Hell. He removed his work shoes started dumping out all the dirt that had collected in his shoes from his recent, mound-climbing treks. Suddenly, he glimpsed Sherri out of the corner of his eye, sticking her battered head out of her bedroom window, inexplicably, blowing him kisses and beckoning him to her. Dixie shook his head and waved her off. Then he knocked the dirt off his formerly white crew socks, replaced his heavy work shoes on his feet and swiveled behind the wheel of the luxurious convertible. Ignoring Sherri’s pleas, he pulled his wraparound shades from the glove compartment and placed them on his nose as cool, as “the Man with no Eyes” in “Cool Hand Luke.” Then he fired up the engine, turned into the driveway across the street, backed up and gunned the Bonneville past the Scrachi house, down the avenue and out of the development to head down to Duley’s for some vittles.

Out at Home

As he drove, hiding behind his shades, he wondered what was happening to him. There was the callous way he had acted just now with Scrachi, the stunt he had pulled on Ryz'n with that blonde coming back from the beach the other day, and then clobbering Matt Yikes, as he had last night, which reminded him, by the way, he wanted to give Allena some cash to cover damages. Nevertheless, all these aggressive, confrontational actions were foreign to his nature. He never acted like that, except once, when he got into it with his platoon sergeant and spent ten days in the brig. Dix had been lucky the company commander had liked him and took it easy on his sentence and then had insured that Dixie made Lance Corporal, as a bugler, before the Corps issued him a medical discharge. That move had affected the size of Dixie's entitlements. And what about playing the guitar and harmonica for those people at the pool last night? Where did that performance come from?

No, these recent, unusual actions were not like him at all. However, they did sound a lot like his alter ego, that Little Nick character he had heard so much about and whom he was coming to remember, little by little. He felt as if two different people lived in his one body, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. No, he—Dixie, was more like Dr. Jekyll. He was the good guy who took a chewing out by Coach Mullins and never said a contrary word. He was the chump who went along with Paul and his crazy date scheme with that Tonya, the Cossack, just to help his buddy, when he knew it was wrong. He was the dumb head working for chump change in a hell hole, just to please everyone else. Now those things were more like him—going along to get along.

And what about the despicable way he had treated his in-laws? Dixie had practically choked his father-in-law to death. He did break in their door, cut up his mother-in-law's foot and call her a liar in front of her neighbors. Or how about the act he just pulled on Scrachi? That definitely was not James Dean "Dixie" Todd Strickler, but then he wasn't Dixie Strickler, was he? That solitary, inexorable fact kept striking relentlessly home to him via his foreign actions, which he perpetuated with ever more unflinching regularity. And if he wasn't Dixie Strickler and he could not recognize himself as Nick Sheeboom, then who the heck was he, anyway? Mr. Hyde? No, no, he didn't want to consider that possibility. Maybe he was just the James Dean part of his name—a rebel without a cause? No, he was nobody, that's who he was, nobody.

Dixie turned left off the highway onto the gravel lot in front of Duley's. He got out of the car and checked the sky. Dix reckoned he had time to eat a cheeseburger and some fries before the storm hit. Leaning over the door, Dix picked up his old gold, work shirt that had been lying next to him on the front seat. He put it on and buttoned it up, leaving the straight-hemmed shirt tail, hanging out over his cutoff "Macs" work pants. He was a little sunburned and the sweat had dried on his skin. Dix mused that something felt odd as heck about putting on a shirt over a July sunburned, sweat-dried, back and shoulders, no matter how old, finely worn and light that shirt was.

"Hey! Let's eat, Mann."