

~ Chapter 12: Flip Side ~

On a bright afternoon, the first Saturday of June, a large red ant crawled over a missed blade of grass on the otherwise freshly cut green carpet, which was the outfield in Omaha's Rosenblatt Stadium.

"Well, we made it this far," whispered the young center fielder hoarsely. He spoke to the ant beneath him in confidence, as if it were a close friend. Totally oblivious of the young ballplayer, the ant crawled on over the grass between the ballplayer's legs, a couple feet directly below the outfielder's nose. Ignoring the insect's cold shoulder, the ballplayer talked on.

"Just one game away from the national championship. Yeah Buddy! We were almost there," he acknowledged smoothly with a soft sense of distant satisfaction. The ant paid him no heed.

Resigned to defeat now, the outfielder felt the need to explain his team's present dire circumstances to the unsympathetic, red insect. He believed the ant might become interested, once it heard the full story, so he spoke on evenly.

"Ya see partner, we beat the Zorros in the regionals and nobody had done that in years. Yeah Buddy, we stopped their six-year consecutive championship reign. And here we are in the semi-finals of the College World Series, on national television no less. That ain't bad for a school of thirty-three hundred kids, not bad at all." The ant carried on industriously with its business, still ignoring the center fielder, who looked up now towards the infield.

The Texas Longhorn, who had just walked inn a run, reached first base. The University of Texas led the Peppermount Porpoises 13 to 5 in the bottom of the eighth inning, with the bases full of Longhorns. There was only one out. Fans who had hoped to see a Cinderella-like upset of the mighty Texans from the little school by the sea were leaving Rosenblatt Stadium in droves.

The young outfielder remained motionless. He was bent over at the waist, knees slightly bent, with his hands resting on his knees. A blade of grass protruded from between his fake, gold-capped, upper front teeth. The centerfielder was in good defensive position. He glanced down and to his left at his shadow. Like him, the shaded silhouette was ready to play ball. The centerfielder slowly raised his head to follow the manicured, emerald green carpet into the diamond. The air was dry and crisp. Stockyard aromas and car exhausts drifted over the outfield fence to mingle oddly with the smells of popcorn, hot dogs and cigar smoke that filled the old ballpark.

The Peppermount Coach Tom Trahorn had asked for "Time" and stepped out of the third base dugout. The coach began his slow, purposeful approach from the dugout to the mound. The cloudless June sky wore a pale blue cover overhead. The sky failed to deepen into a darker blue the higher one's vision took him or

her into the heavens. It was the kind of a sky that ballplayers liked to call a “high sky.” The centerfielder knew it was the kind of sky in which he could lose a high, fly ball easily, if he weren’t careful, if he lost his concentration.

“Hey, Dix!”

Scotty MacDougal, the right fielder was calling him. Dix slowly turned only his head to the left until Scotty came into view. Like him, Scotty remained bent over at the waist, in a defensively ready stance, even though time was officially out. Crouched slightly, right hand upon his knee, Scotty had turned his head turned to Dix with his glove cupped, around the left side of his face. He used the mitt as a shield, to keep the sound of his voice from drifting into the infield, barking an “outfield whisper.”

“Dix, bet he calls for you now. Shoulda done that back in the fourth, when we were still in the flippin’ game!” Dix said nothing, but raised his chin to acknowledge his concurrence. Then he swiveled his head back to he front to watch the conference on the mound. Sure enough, just as Scotty had predicted, Coach Trahorn raised his right arm, pointed to center field and motioned for Dix.

Dix rose up, spitting the blade of grass out of his mouth. He slid his glove off his hand, placing it under his left arm. Then the sophomore hitched up his knickers, stepped over the ant and deliberately made his way in to the mound.

*Scotty was right. Told Coach in the fourth, when it was still tied, that I was ready. Said he wanted to save me for the finish. Said, if we won, he’d start me tomorrow, too. Trouble is, now, looks like there ain’t gonna be no tomorrow.*

As Dix made his way in toward the mound, his teammate Rudy Garcia ran towards him to take Dix’s place in center. “Go get ‘em, Dix” quipped Rudy in passing. Dix nodded soberly in reply. Much of the sellout crowd in Omaha’s Rosenblatt Stadium, who had hoped to witness another major upset, had already left for the exits. Only the Longhorn faithful remained to celebrate the inevitable. Had he a choice in the matter, Dix probably would have preferred to have been elsewhere, doing something else, like wedding Donna, as they had planned.

The young athlete approached the mound to accept the baseball from his diminutive coach, who confirmed what Dixie had just thought.

“Well, Dix. Looks like you were right, kid. I was hoping we could stay close a little bit longer. Guess I screwed up—waited too long. Not a damned thing I can do about that now.” He looked away, expectorated, and then looked back up to the taller Dixie. “I gambled for the whole shee-bang! Judas Priest! Got a little greedy, I reckon. They snuck up on me, scored too many, too fast.” Coach Trahorn shook his head and clucked his tongue.

“Well, it ain’t over yet, Dix! Get us outta this mess and, who knows? We came back from this far down against LASU! Maybe, we can do it again. Just give me everything ya got, kid!”

“There’s one out, bases full. Don’t matter whether you throw from the stretch or not. Whatever you wanna do. This is their clean-up, comin’ up. Try to keep it down and away from him. Now is the time! Let’s go, kid!” He slammed the

baseball into Dix's mitt and patted Dixie's carved up half-ass, before he trotted back to the dugout. He didn't stick around to watch Dixie's pitching mechanics during warm-ups.

Danny Danielson, the chunky catcher who had waited quietly for the coach to finish, now winked and smacked Dix on the rump also. "Runner on second! So second signal after the second flap. Got it?" Dixie nodded grimly. "Hey, you can do it, Dix. You're the man! Let's go kid!" Then he bopped Dix on the rump once more and half trotted, half waddled back to his position behind the plate.

Dix took his eight warm-ups, four fastballs and four screwballs. With each practice toss, he concentrated on relaxing, not getting ahead of himself, bending his back and following through. He wanted his legs to do the work. He thought he had his 'A' stuff. He could tell by the way his pitches were moving as they broke across the plate. But he could never be sure. The hitters would let him know. They always did. He felt good, relaxed. He should have come in, in the fourth. Dix glanced down at the pitching rubber. There was just enough of a depression in front of the rubber for him to get a good push off.

After completing the eighth and final practice toss permitted to him, Dix walked down the backside of the mound, looking out towards the center field he had just been patrolling. He saw Rudy, his replacement in center, finishing up some quick warm-up tosses of his own with Scotty Mac. Dix checked the breeze. The only breeze that could hurt him was one blowing from left into the first base dugout, which would retard the break on his screw ball. But there was little breeze and what there was of that drifted out from home plate, just right for knocking down his dippy-doodle ball. He glimpsed the centerfield camera.

"Gotta forget about that," he mumbled self consciously.

Dixie realized he had sweat dripping from his brow. Still back of the mound, the hope of the Peppermount Porpoises turned around to face the plate. With the baseball in the glove on his left hand, Dix used his right hand to remove his purple cap with the silver bill and scripted, silver "**P**". He brushed off his dusty, sweat-stained face and brow with the crook of his right elbow and back of his wrist. He brushed his shaggy, long dense, dark mane back over his left ear with his right wrist and forearm. Thus, he unwittingly exposed to the nationwide *Wide World of Sports* audience the fact that the top half of that ear was missing. Dix was not thinking about any national television audience now. He was trying to calculate out how he could get out of this bases loaded, one-out, Longhorn jam.

He leaned over by his right foot, balancing himself upon it, to pick up the rosin bag off the back of the mound, and balanced the bag, then bounced it, first in his palm, then flipping his hand over, on the back of his right, pitching wrist, allowing the smoky rosin to dry his sweat. Thrusting his wrist downward with a jerk, he let the bag plop down on the back of the dirt mound behind him. The base runner at second needled him, ordering him to "Get goin".

*He's right.* So Dix strode up the backside of the mound to assume the rubber with a single-minded purpose. He already knew what he was going to throw the

Longhorn waiting on him at the plate. Like the rest of his teammates, Dixie wore the button-less purple double-knit jersey with “**Jeppermount**” scripted in silver across his chest. The lettering ran diagonally from lower left to upper right. His knee socks were purple, but his knickers like the three parallel silver stripes around the bottom of his short sleeves were silver. His spikes, like all the rest of the team were an untraditional white, in imitation of the world champion Oakland A’s. Naturally, his sanitariums were white.

The Porpoise relief hurler gripped the baseball with his bare right hand in his glove. With his right index and middle fingers together, straddling the inner, left seam of the baseball, Dixie caressed the right seam with his stump of a ring finger. He straddled the rubber and then assumed it by gingerly placing the side of his right foot just in front of the long, white rubber rectangle. He was throwing from the stretch.

The guys started yelling encouragement to him. There were some isolated shouts from both dugouts. With the ball in his right hand, back of his right hand resting above his backside belt, glove hand resting on his left knee, bent over at the waist, Dixie peered grimly in for the sign. He nodded when he got the signal that he was expecting from Danny. The vocal war, unique to baseball, escalated all about him. His teammates in the field as well in the dugout shouted encouragement. The Texas dugout and runners shouted other, less encouraging verbiage at him as the runners extended their respective leads. Even though the bases were jammed, he had chosen to pitch from the stretch. He took his time.

This was it, that singular, unforgettably true, pristine moment when pitcher and batter face off. Dixie focused on Danny’s mitt and ignored the southpaw hitter, who waved his bat menacingly.

“Come on Dix. Come you, come you, come you KEED! Come you now One-One!” From his third sacker, Dix heard:

“You the Man, Dix. Shoot ‘em down Baby, shoot ‘em down, shoot em’ down, shoot ‘em down, KEED!” The runner at first answered:

“”He gwonna take your heed off Pitch. “Come on LEMMEE! Come on Baby! Right Back up the middle. Rock this dude! Tear this sucker’s head off, like someone did his ear.”

“Bring it in there Dixie boy. Bring it in there, KEED!” shouted the shortstop.

Dix blotted out all the noise around him, sinking into a quiet, effortless world all his own. He came set and leisurely checked the runners dancing off second and third, coolly as though it were the most natural thing in the world for him to do. He was nervous, but he refused to show it.

Dix was all business. He checked third again and with the ball buried in his glove made sure he had just the grip he wanted. His injured ring finger was the key to his screw ball or “dippsy-doodle” as he liked to call it. He focused on Danny’s glove, which was thigh high to the batter, looking like a huge bull’s eye in the center of the plate. Dix inhaled deeply, flexed his right knee and rocked

backward as he drew his left foot up next to his right knee. Kicking forward with his left foot, he flung his arm back like a slingshot before the sling is slung.

The back, inner top of his right ring finger joint formed a bicuspid-like surface in which he choked the concave cusped joint into the ball's red, outside seam. Dix came forward with all the coiled power of a mountain lion pouncing from a rocky ledge towards its unsuspecting prey. When Dix let go, that cusped joint was the last piece of his flesh to break contact with the baseball. That release forced the horsehide sphere to spin a little more yet linger a little longer on its tantalizing dance to the plate.

The pitch headed true, right to the catcher's mitt. Dix could sense the batter salivate as the pitched ball approached him slowly, ever slower. Dix's powerful motion camouflaged the true speed of the pitch. How could a pitch be so slow without stopping and reversing direction back to the hand that had released it?

The white-clad batter in the burnt orange batting helmet with **"Texas"** scrawled in the same hue across his white jersey became impatient. When he could wait no longer, the batter shifted his weight and hands forward prematurely. Dix's dipsy-doodle ball took just a little bit longer to arrive at its destination and then dropped off sharply down and away from the left hander just a little bit more than the average screwball. The ball dived down over the outside corner and seemed to hang there just below the batter's knees.

Overanxious, the Longhorn hitter just could not hold back long enough. He lunged forward too soon and, at the last instant, Dix's ball bit even more sharply down and away. It fell as though it had fallen off a table. The batter tried to hold back, dropping the head of the bat down, but he failed. Too far out in front of the pitch, he swung out, over top of the baseball, sending a weak one-hopper full of top spin back at Dixie.

Dix fielded the ball with ease just in front of the mound. He threw with aplomb to Danny covering the plate for one out. The Porpoise catcher then pivoted and fired onto Charley Browne, covering first base to complete the double play. A long, exaggerated breath escaped Dixie. *YES!* He permitted himself a rare display of emotion by making a brief fist with his right hand, but he did not raise it above his waist, merely leaving it to languish down by his side, belt high.

That double play ended the inning. Dix had escaped the sinister looking jam that he had inherited on just one pitch! As he walked toward the Porpoise bench, relieved, but by no means euphoric, Dixie stepped over the third baseline, careful not to tread upon it. His teammates ran by him on their way into the dugout, patting him on the back. "Way ta go Dix, Way ta go KEED!"

The batter had surprised Dix that he had hit his dipsy-doodle ball at all. Most hitters he faced for the first time didn't. Obviously, Texas had scouted him well. But, as Dix knew and that Longhorn hitter had just found out, there's a big difference between a scouting report and the real thing.

As Dix descended the steps down into the dugout, he heard Coach Trahorn.

“Way ta go Dix! Thataway ta smoke ‘em One-One! Way to go, KEED! all right men, this is it!” yelled the banty rooster of a coach. Dix’s teammates crowded in about him to echo the coach’s hearty congratulations. “Time to rattle them bats boys! I over managed us enough today, so I ain’t putting on no automatic take here. But make sure it’s something you’re looking for, and where you’re looking for it, before you go to cutting at it. OK?” The Coach glanced around the semi-circle of young men gathered around him, making eye contact with each player.

“All right,” he said, “Let’s score some runs. Have some fun, men! This is the College World Series! This is what it’s all about. Let’s do it, let’s do it! Hands in now, team.” The team gathered around, engulfing their bantam coach and placed their hands upon his upraised hand. “All right, WIN”, he cried. Then in perfect unison, in a deep baritone, the team shouted: “One-Two-Three: WIN!”

Although they were down an impossible eight runs to what was arguably the best team in college baseball, the Peppermount Porpoises were confident. They had achieved the impossible against the heretofore perennial NCAA Champs, the LASU Zorros, so they felt confident they could do it now against the Longhorns. The team broke their impromptu huddle to take the offensive in their last ups.

*Coach Trahorn is OK. Not many guys would admit they screwed up like that. Then turn around and give you the freedom to trust your own judgment, down so many runs with the national championship on the line.*

The Porpoise batters responded to the Coach’s confident, upbeat style by rallying in the top half of the ninth. They scored a run and had filled the bases with two outs when Dixie came up hitting in the three spot. The team rose as one to assume the top step of the dugout to cheer on their main man. Some wore rally hats, others chewed tobacco, others gum, but they all stood up as one in support of their big gun who had carried them on his back all year long.

Although aluminum bats had been approved for CWS use the previous year, Dixie persisted in swinging real lumber. He couldn’t bring himself to use the “toy” bat. He didn’t like anything about the aluminum bat, not the feel of the rubberized handle, not the sound of the ball coming off the bat, nothing. Besides, the pros used wood and that’s where he intended to play someday.

The switch-hitting Dix was batting lefty now against the right-handed Texas hurler. Dix reasoned that with a seven-run lead, the Longhorns wouldn’t do anything cute. Dix guessed they’d come after him with heat, probably high heat. He knew that he would, if he were pitching. Those Longhorns sure didn’t want to walk him. They’d make him put the pill in play and let them eight other Longhorns grazing in the grass out there help out their stud relief pitcher.

Before he stepped into the box, Dixie looked around to find only boisterous Texas supporters remaining in the stands. The lack of support didn’t faze him. Dix knew what it was like to lack support. Besides, his teammates were cheering him plenty, as he stepped in. He steadied himself to focus on the Texas pitcher.

As he figured, the first pitch was a fastball, but inside and at the knees. Ahead in the count 1 and 0, Dixie didn't think he'd see anything but the fast ball. He wanted one, up and out over the plate, where he could extend his heavily muscled arms for maximum leverage. He stepped out of the batter's box, but there was no need to look down to the third base coach for the sign. This was strictly "hit away" time. Dix stepped back in, standing almost erect, rocking his butt, getting comfortable, resting his bat on his left shoulder, holding the lumber parallel to the ground until the pitcher was ready. He zeroed in on the opposing hurler, looking for the ball, trying not to salivate.

"Come on Dix. Come on Dixie! One time, Double Ace, one time, BABEE!" His teammates exhorted him. The runners danced off their bases as the Longhorn hurler went into his full wind up and kicked. "Get hold of one, Dix. Cold cock him Kid!" With his superior vision, Dixie zeroed in on the "box" just above and to the outside of the pitcher's right shoulder to pick up the release of the ball and its spin. The Longhorn hurler fired a high, hard one nearly letter high and headed it for the center third of the plate, just what Dixie wanted. Dix waited until the pitch looked as if it were by him. Then, he quickly pushed off his left, rear foot, shifted his weight forward and, suddenly at the last split second, flicked his wrists, whipping the bat around powerfully, in an ever so slightly downward arc. He caught the rising heat sweetly right on the barrel of his Louisville Slugger.

CCCCRRRAACCKKK! Sounding like a rifle shot, that crack reverberated through the rafters of the near empty stadium. *Ummm, what a sweet feeling. Mann! I got it all.* He wasn't trying to show up the Texas pitcher, but Dix couldn't help but watch the ball's flight for a second. A low liner, at first it appeared the second baseman, might leap up and snag it, but the ball rose the farther it flew. When the pill reached the Longhorn outfielders, it seemed to kick into overdrive as it started to sail.

Dixie had surprised himself that he had gotten all of that one. Of course, he would not admit that to the sports reporters after the game. No self-respecting ballplayer would ever make such an embarrassing public admission. But this baseball sure got awfully small, awfully fast as it headed over the top row of the right center field bleachers in a big hurry. Four Fish, including Dixie, swam across the plate on his blast to narrow the margin to 13 to 10.

The Longhorn pitcher had challenged Dix with high heat. Obviously, that had been an error in judgment on his part. Unfortunately, Brooks Byron, the Porpoise left fielder, scorched the next Texas offering right at the Longhorn third baseman. The third sacker snagged the shot as he threw his mitt up in front of his face in self-defense. The force of Brooksie's smash smacked the Longhorn infielder's glove back into his forehead, knocking his cap off and onto the infield dirt, but the ball stuck in his glove. Brooks rammed his bat into the turf in disgust. The play had occurred so quickly, Brooks had not even had time to drop his stick.

Just like that! Inning over. Game over. Season over! Still, the Fish had reached the semifinals of the NCAA College World Series (CWS). The Porpoises filed

dutifully out of the dugout to congratulate their opponents from the Lone Star State in front of home plate. Dazed, Dixie made his way through the mandatory post game procession trying to realize what had just happened. The suddenness of the abrupt ending as well as the reality of how close they had come stunned him. The opposing face of each Longhorn, whose hand he shook, appeared unreal, even blank, until one of the Texas coach's seized Dixie's maimed right hand and refused to let go. That got Dixie's attention.

"Glad you didn't get another chance at the plate today, Kid." He pumped Dixie's hand warmly, before the Longhorn head coach took Dixie's paw. "Do all of us a favor Kid, take that offer from the Wonders." He winked. Dixie nodded, but he had no intention of turning pro just yet.

The small school by the sea had beaten their local rival, the big, bad, defending six time consecutive, national champion L. A. State Zorros last week in dramatic, come-from-behind fashion. That victory had clinched the regional championship and propelled the Porpoise's into collegiate baseball's crown jewel CWS. So, the Fish had mixed emotions now about their national semifinal loss.

The loss did hurt. Like Dixie, in the back of each Peppermount player's mind, had lurked the thought they might have been a team of destiny, a team that would defy all the odds to go all the way. The Texas Longhorns had just dashed those hopes to pieces. On the other hand, the Peppermount Porpoises were extremely proud of what they had accomplished. A small school from a little regarded conference showed they could compete with, as well as, beat the big boys. Making the CWS semifinals was no shabby feat.

In the post game locker room, Coach Trahorn gave a little speech in which he took the blame for the loss. He credited the boys for giving him the most satisfying season he had ever experienced. He was proud of them. With most of the team returning next year, there was a genuine upbeat feeling amongst the players. When Coach Trahorn awarded Dixie a game ball, despite the fact the Fish had been hooked by the 'Horns, bedlam broke out. Dixie's teammates pummeled him, barraging him with towels, caps, socks and athletic supporters. They all knew Dix was the main reason they had advanced as far as they had. They also knew that Dix, who had just a couple days before been selected in the twenty-seventh round of the major league draft, had promised his teammates that he would forego the draft to play for Peppermount again next year.

Then the Coach asked for a show of hands. Who wanted to remain overnight in Omaha to watch Texas face South Carolina in the championship game the next day? Or who wanted to head home immediately? To a man, the players followed Dix's lead, as they had come to do for most everything. Dix preferred to leave immediately. He had important, personal business, very personal, to take care of back in Southern California. He was a week late for a wedding—his own.

The team enjoyed the chartered plane ride home. Over the course of the lengthy flight, the sting of the loss began to wear off, as the larger accomplishment of the team's successful season began to sink into their

individual psyches. The team was in high spirits upon landing at LAX. They prevailed upon Dix to lead them over to the Porpoise Pub, just a couple blocks from campus. Dix complied, abandoning his typical, antisocial behavior. The garrulous boys ate some midnight sandwiches, washed down with beer or pop.

The guys loved to rag on Clint Battles, their Hawaiian shortstop who always tried to use his Psych. Major skills to “solve their problems.” Now, in the comfort of the dark and smoke-filled bar, they were ragging on Clint for one incident in particular. It had involved a juvenile delinquent quarrelling with his pugnacious girlfriend beyond the chain-link, outfield fence, during one rain-spotted, dreary practice early last February. Danny Danielson performed as raconteur. The others listened, as the phlegmatic Dix dragged on his last Lucky.

While the team “joned” on Clint for taking a bra-beating from a five-foot high teenage girl, Clint, the self-appointed team psychologist, yet maintained that he had resolved the crisis in a “professional manner.” Dix had heard the story many times and he had been an eyewitness, as well. He could appreciate how the tale (specifically, key parts of the girl’s anatomy) grew with each retelling. Dix pushed off his chair away from the makeshift banquet table in the front corner of the pub. Clint stuck to his same, lame defense amid the jeers and guffaws of his teammates. With the collar of his gabardine sport coat turned up against his deeply tanned neck, Dix squelched his cigarette butt. He flicked it at Danny where the spent nail bounced off Danny’s chin into his half empty beer mug.

“Dixie! You jive turkey! You’re pollutin’ my brew, Mann,” jibed the catcher.

“Aah, won’t hurt ya none Danny. Add it to your chaw. Ain’t no filter on it. The fire’s out. Jes’ don’t swallow the butt sideways, might get stuck in your craw. You be all right. Besides, that’ll teach ya to tell them stories on Clint,” chided Dixie. He staggered back towards the bar a bit unsteadily. Danny picked the floating butt from his mug and fired it wildly at Dixie, missing him widely. “Glad you threw better than that on that double play ball in the eighth—you jive turkey!” Dixie giggled. He grabbed Mildred, the waitress who winked, when he slipped a dollar into her cleavage to replace Danny’s contaminated beer.

Cigarette smoke hung thickly in the dimly lit pub. Several local Porpoise supporters had gathered to celebrate with the team. The cumulative achievement of the team’s unprecedented, successful season appeared to have overcome completely the sting of the Texas loss and was reflected in their revelry. Dixie excused himself as he accidentally jostled into a pool player about to take his shot. Then he weaved between the air hockey and foosball machines.

The players were enjoying themselves and so was Dix, even to the point of enjoying a few laughs with the guys, a luxury Dixie had seldom permitted himself. He was with his boys. He was with his troops. He was relaxed. He felt good. There were no speech problems now. Nevertheless, Dixie longed to be elsewhere. Shortly after midnight now, he felt it was high time he broke free from his compatriots to make an overdue, long distance call. He could use the phone booth at the back of the tavern, near the rest rooms and cigarette machine.

Dix dressed in grey flared corduroy slacks, a purple and silver Porpoise baseball inner shirt, a grey gabardine, sport coat with an upturned collar. He sported his pride and joy, new pair of brown leather Dingo boots. The boots featured a decorative ring over the inside ankle that held the intersecting, three fake, ankle straps together. He looked like a typical college kid enjoying himself.

He purchased a pack of his preferred Lucky Strikes from the vending machine. He broke open the pack to extract a cigarette and light it, before he made the long awaited call to the love of his life. Smoking was a bad habit he had acquired in the Marines. He knew he should quit and he planned to, some day. However, right now, he drew deftly on the unfiltered Lucky.

Dix entered one of those old style, wooden and glass phone booths that stood against the wall between the cigarette machine and the rest rooms. Looking out across the smoke-hazed bar at his teammates, Dix lounged against the right wall of the booth. He watched his buddies through the glass, feeling no pain as he sucked on his nail and dialed long distance. The phone rang twice on the other end before a gravelly female voice answered in a tired whisper.

“Hello?”

Dix spoke softly to avoid startling the party with whom he spoke. She sounded as though she had just waked.

“Hey Baby? How ya doin’?”

“Dix? Just a minute.”

Dix heard the receiver being set down on a hard surface. Then he heard the sound of scratching, as if the phone receiver were sliding somewhere. Then a couple thuds resounded in his ear. *What’s going on?* He knew his fiancé would have had the kids in bed long ago. Once those two boys fell asleep, they slept like dead men. Nothing short of an explosion in their bedroom could have roused them. Dix recalled having to wake them during the night to go to the bathroom, so there were no “accidents.” Dix thought, maybe the younger one was scared, so Donna maybe had let him sleep with her. That was possible. It had happened a couple times when Dix had stayed there. He and Donna had let little Dre into bed between them. He listened as Donna picked up the extension in the kitchen.

“Dix? You still there?”

“Sure Honey, I wouldn’t leave ya hangin’. You know that.” Dixie turned into the phone. What’s wrong? Did Andre have a nightmare?”

“No, Baby. That’s not it.” An unusual edge to her voice alarmed him.

A loud crash far to his left prompted a louder round of shouts from the guys. Dix leaned back, looking to his left. Danny Danielson had just knocked a chair into a table and fallen flat on his back while trying his typical stunt of limboing with a bottle of beer balanced on his forehead. Per usual, he had messed up again. Dixie shook his head and unfolded the accordion wood-framed, glass door behind him, extending it out fully, so that it shut completely. *What a difference!* Now he could hear Donna fine. He returned his attention to the phone.

“Well, what’s going on? You’re not sleeping with another man, are you?” Dix chortled sarcastically.

“Dixie?” Donna asked hesitantly.

“Yes?” Dixie thought of Donna and reached out to caress the top right corner of the pay phone box as though it were she. With his Lucky Strike between his fingers, lazily trailing smoke upwards, Dix ran his fingertips, slowly, carefully around the upper corner and down the side edge of the phone box, as if he were running them over some of her fine curves.

“Look James, I, I’m afraid I have some bad news for you, Honey.” Donna began to sniffle into the phone. “Oh God, Oh God!” she cried. Dix stopped rubbing the phone and cupped his right hand around the bottom, speaker end of the receiver, which he held to his left ear.

“What is it, Donna? What’s wrong?” Now Dix was alarmed.

“Dixie, I don’t know how to tell you this, but ... ”

“BUT WHAT?”

“It’s Big Jim, Honey. He’s come home! He’s alive!”

Silence! Those nine words struck Dixie with tremendous force, just as if he had been hit by a Nolan Ryan fastball. The only difference was the location of the hurt. Dix felt as though his insides had just been kicked out. He felt much the same when he had received a “Dear John” letter from Lieutenant Rose Rosario. She had written him a year ago last Christmas to tell him that she had found the man for her, an officer and a surgeon. Dix reeled.

“Dixie? Dixie, Honey? Are you OK, Baby? Talk to me. JAMES!”

Dix recovered slowly. After several seconds of silence, he slurred his response. “Ah sch-schuss hadma in-in-size kick’doouud.”

“Aw Baby, don’t go to slurrin’ and stutterin’ on me now, not now. Ya been doin’ so good with that lately, Honey.”

“Sssorree Baaa ... beeee!”

“Aw Baby, I’M SO SORRY, SO SORRY! I feel just terrible—for both of us.”

“D-Donna. Ayfelsikkk. Byah.” Dixie felt the blood drain from his face and his stomach turn over.

“No Dix! Don’t hang up, please.” The urgency in her voice was unmistakable.

“Look, ya gotta come down here, Dix. Come down tomorrow, please. PLEASE?”

“Sssorrreeeee, nooo.”

“But Dix you don’t understand. It’s Big Jim. He wants you to come down, too. He knows you, James! He knows who you are!” Those words shot past Dixie’s bow like the sound of big guns.

“Whaaaa?”

“Yeah! He served with you in the “The Outfit,” on the rescue team. You saved his life. He talks like you are some kind of a god or something. He wants to speak with you.”

“D-D-Duzzee knowbouduz?”

“No, I don’t think so. I didn’t tell him. But the kids, you know, they talk about you all the time. I told them to keep quiet. But, but I think he may be figurin’ it out. Big Jim is bad off Dix. He’s paralyzed from the waist down and only has his right arm. His left is gone. He’s like a stranger to me Dixie. Honest to God, he is, Honey. You come down now. We’ll see what happens ... James, are you there?”

“Ye-yeah. Iahtraah t’ cummm, bu-bu-buh yu’nmeerararah dunnn, finsched.”

“Oh James, don’t say that!” Donna scolded him. “Don’t even think it. I don’t know what Big Jim wants. Hell, he don’t even know himself what he wants. He just got in the other day. You come down here and see for yourself before you go making any decisions. I still have that beautiful ring you gave me, Honey. I keep thinking about the night you proposed.” Her voice lilted dreamily. “The very thought of that proposal keeps me going, Baby, honest it does.”

“You wh-wharrin’ sa ringggg n-n-nowww?”

“Well, not right now Baby, I mean—”

“Gottagoooo. Byah, D-D-donn.”

Dix hung up the phone. He wanted to puke. *Act like a man*. He shoved back the phone booth door rudely and exited the booth to order two shooters at the bar. Anxiously, he waited for the drinks and finished his smoke. Then he threw down the pair of shooters in quick succession. He asked for the second beer chaser in a bottle, which he took with him back to campus. Dixie fired up another Lucky, as he meandered his way unsteadily through the beautiful, old, Spanish style architecture of the pristine campus. The black, costal California night sky was clear. Unsteady on his feet, he humped his bottle of Olympia beer across campus.

Dix crossed the spacious, grassy, manicured quad, stepping around the strategically placed palm trees along the concrete sidewalk, which bordered the edge of the grassy common. The jasmine and the roses were in bloom. The sea air mingled quietly with the tropical floral scents. How could the orchids smell so lovely when his world had just turned into crap? He strolled jerkily over the plateau which terminated in a broad bluff at the southwestern end of the quad. The ocean view here was unimpeded. Dixie stopped to sit his carcass down on the crest of the plateau where it overlooked the coastal highway and the Pacific Ocean.

He popped off the bottle cap with his miniature bottle opener that hung from a silver chain beneath his shirt. The long day combined with the alcohol to produce a warm, soothing effect that permeated his entire being, even though his insides still shook from Donna’s news. The young man gazed through the darkness out over the dark sea. Ocean breezes ruffled his thick, long mane. His night vision enabled him to see the white caps clearly, despite the dark of the moon. He could hear the waves, as well, roll in hundreds of feet below him, against the beachfront property of movie star homes on the other side of the Pacific Coast Highway, a couple hundred yards directly below his perch. He could also smell the salty humidity. Fog was creeping in. He slurped on his bottle of beer.

James Dean (Dixie) Todd Strickler liked this place, even better than Hawaii. Of course, he didn't like the smog in the mornings. He didn't like the traffic on the freeways, particularly at rush hour. But those complaints aside, he liked the Los Angeles area. He could play baseball year 'round if he wanted. He could hop on his bike to visit San Diego, Mexico, Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon, the mountains, the desert, San Francisco, Big Sur, all the James Dean haunts, all within hours. He wasn't trapped on some damned island. He was free.

He thought about everything that had happened to him in his two plus years of life. Two years was the sum total of his known existence, since he had come out of a coma over at Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippine Islands. Right now, he was willing to think about anything except Donna Dixon and her kids, despite the fact, they had consumed his thoughts for much of the last year.

When he had first come to, after his second brain surgery, he had awakened with a terrible headache and a lonely, cold hole in his soul. Waiting right there for him like a midwife had been that angel of a nurse Lt. Rosalita Rosario. The cute Filipino had weaned him and nursed him back to health. She had, in fact become his good friend far beyond what Navy regulations permitted for a female officer with an enlisted man. They had become lovers in a metaphysical sense and he had felt her melt that frozen vacuum inside of him. She claimed that he had reminded her of her late husband, who had been killed during the war. Rose had told him she thought she could love Dixie. Now, Dixie compared his present pain to the loss he felt when he had received that "Dear James" letter from her about a year and a half ago. The Corps had transferred him to Kaneohe and the Navy had reassigned her to Seattle. She claimed she had found the "appropriate love" for her there in the person of a naval surgeon, an officer.

Later, Lori Lei, the Honolulu undercover cop, had helped him partially fill the empty loneliness within him. The slim, mixed blood, dirty blonde, Polynesian, was so physical, so active. She pushed him into surfing, scuba diving, mountain climbing and, eventually, into bed. She was so forceful and domineering that Dix hardly had a chance to think about, let alone, feel his personal, internal frozen void. From that aspect, she had been good for him. However, she had preyed too strongly upon Dix's vulnerability. So, when a possible, partial baseball scholarship opportunity on the mainland had come along, Dix had seized it, despite the lack of a guarantee. Shortly thereafter, the hungry, cold vacuum within had returned to devour and freeze him once again from the inside out.

Lori had been angry with him for leaving, although she had tried not to show it, telling him to do "whatever floats your boat". That phrase had prompted him to compose a song, which he played on his USMC bugle mouthpiece only in the privacy of his room, when he was alone and really down. He couldn't read music so he just remembered the words and that was always sufficient to bring the melody back to him. He played it now, using the mouthpiece which he carried everywhere. He blew the intro and then feeling sorry for himself, sang:

*Flip Side*

Out on my own, got no more home.  
Yes, I'm all alone.  
Go where I choose, got nothin' to loose,  
But she's all gone.

She said whatever floats your boat,  
Go it alone. If that turns you on.  
But forget about me. It's no longer we.  
That was her song.

(Chorus)  
Whatever floats your boat!  
Whatever floats your boat!  
Yeah, that's what she said.  
Whatever floats your boat,  
That's all she wrote!  
And then she fled.

So now that I'm free, I'm single you see.  
Yeah, I'm all alone.  
Do what I please, blow with the breeze—

His throat constricted. He couldn't finish the song. He slid the mouthpiece back into his pants pocket and swilled his beer.

As bad as those times had been, this was worse, far worse. With Donna and her two young boys, he had been so much closer to having a family, a real family. He had been almost there. Dixie had hoped he had filled in that hole three times over with the love of Donna and her two boys. He—

“Sir? Excuse me. Please stand up.” It was the campus security night watchman, in his official, grey uniform tie and shirt, replete with a shiny, black billed cap.

Dixie stood while the guard shined a flashlight in Dixie's face, causing him to shield his eyes.

“Oh, Dix! Didn't know it was you, Mann! Didn't know you guys were back already. You really played a helluva game out there today, Boy!” He pumped Dix's hand excitedly and plopped Dixie firmly on the back. “What did you do, knock in seven runs and score two?” Dix nodded. “We're all sorry you lost of course, but everybody around here is super proud of you, Mann, just tickled to death. You put Peppermount on the map today, Dix. And ya did it on the school's Fortieth Anniversary, no less. How 'bout that?” The guard slapped Dixie sharply on the back causing Dixie to step forward a couple inches against his will. The reluctant hero smiled weakly. He had forgotten about the anniversary deal.

“Look Dix, you know you ain't supposed to be out here drinking beer. But what the hell? There's nobody around now with school out and after what you

did today— well, Hell—after what you done this year! Well, just forget about it. You take care, Dix.” He began to move away smiling brightly at the hero of Peppermount, then he stopped. “You’re comin’ back next year, ain’t ya, Dix? Not goin’ pro are ya?” Dix shook his head negatively.

“Good boy!” He reached back to slap Dixie sharply on the back again. “Well, take it easy Dixie and don’t forget to dispose of that bottle properly, OK? Mann, you sure got hold of that last dinger today!”

With his chin on his chest and a faint smile across his lips, Dix nodded shyly again, this time in the affirmative. Then he forced a broad grin for the officer. The cop waved and left Dix alone, as he had found him. Dix wondered if all those stiff slaps qualified as police brutality. No, he reflected, the only brutality he had received had come from his lover and she had served him a low, hard one.

A lonely campus hero, Dix sat back down again, resuming his previous position with his legs dangling over the cliff. He sucked the remaining life out of his brew. The security guard had cheered him up a little. Dixie ignored the voluptuous Donna Dixon for a moment to turn to consider his options.

Maybe he could get back together with Lori Lei? He hadn’t heard from her since Christmas. His thoughts turned to her now. Lori Lei, the Hawaiian police detective. They had enjoyed some strong vibes that were even semi-electric at times. She was a real adventuress who had taught him to surf, snorkel, rock climb, and a few other things as well. She had enjoyed particularly physical competition with men. Lori was kind of flat chested but she had a narrow waist, shapely hips and awesome looking legs. Her dirty blonde hair and light brown, Asian eyes were uncharacteristic of a Polynesian, even a mixed blooded one, but she was truly something special. Her clear features, sultry looks and aggressive demeanor had made her a great undercover hooker, undercover lover, as well..

Yes, he had left her when he had gotten the chance to play Division 1A baseball for free. Between the G.I. Bill and a partial scholarship, Dixie didn’t pay a nickel for his schooling. But would she welcome him back now? Hell, she was probably already onto someone else by now for sure. Or, maybe, he could catch her between beaus? He wondered if he should head back to the islands and play ball over there for the summer. Then he thought he might go play down in Mexico. He heard there was some wild-ass gambling down there. Then there was Vegas. The waves rolled in beneath him and the night covered him like a blanket.

Yeah, maybe he would head up to Vegas. Coach knew a guy up there who was always looking for a good ballplayer. Dixie reasoned he could clean up in the casinos, whenever he wanted. After all he had before, hadn’t he? All he had to do was be careful, not get too greedy. Lose every once in a while, especially the last play of the night. The card counting system Ed “the Rabbi” Rabinowitz had taught Dixie over in Manila had worked like a charm, most of the time anyway. Ed was on his last legs at the time. About to die alone, The Rabbi, as he had come to be called (though Ed had had no sanctioned basis for that title) had wanted to leave a kind of legacy behind, so he had taught Dixie his system. After

brain surgery had left Dix's mind a blank, he had been hungry to learn anything then and his competitive nature drew him to Ed's card-counting tactics. Dixie soaked up Ed's system like a sponge to water. He went on to win enough, along with his monthly VA check, to support himself and Donna, and purchase his new customized Honda cycle, too. Dixie had lost big money only once with Ed's system, because he had gotten a little greedy. He hadn't respected the house.

That was the time those Hawaiian gangster thugs had strong-armed him, kicking the stuffing out of him in a back alley in Honolulu's red light district. After that mishap, Lori Lei had taken him to her martial arts class and suggested he purchase and register his Smith and Wesson. She also suggested an ankle holster for the hand gun. He had heeded her advice in all respects.

The strong, cool westerly breeze off the ocean soothed him. Dixie breathed deeply of the salty sea air. He loved this spot on the cliff, overhanging Route 101. He was just close enough to feel he could touch the waves. He sure as hell could smell their salty humidity and hear them as if he had put a conch shell to his ear. Only an occasional, motorist passing below, shattered the peaceful calm.

Despite staring out at the Pacific and it's awe inspiring white caps, Dixie lost focus of his ocean view, looking inward again to take stock of his present situation. Financially, he was OK. He was not hurting for cash. Discounting that \$7,500 he had thrown away on that showy engagement ring for Donna, he had almost \$16,000 left, not bad for a twenty-two year old college kid on his own. Between the Defense Department, the VA, and his college "stipends" Dixie had collected over eight grand the last couple years. Then he had quintupled his assets gambling in Manila, Hawaii, Vegas and Tijuana. However, he had given almost half of his cash to Donna and her kids. Dixie reckoned he'd keep ten of the 16 Grand in his bank account and pocket the rest with him for the summer.

He was going to enjoy himself this summer. Sure, he'd play up in Vegas until August. Then he'd decide whether he should cruise on down to Mexico for a little R&R or head back to the Islands for a month before the start of the fall term. Of course, a lot of that would depend on Miss Lori Lei. Hell, maybe he would invite her to Vegas. They could cruise down to the Grand Canyon and onto Mexico, maybe Baja. Hell! He had plenty of options. He had cash, a great, new motorcycle and the summer before him. And he had his freedom. He was beholdin' to no one. *NO ONE!* He tossed some pebbles over the cliff, as he lazily kicked the back of his dangling heels against the brow of the bluff.

"Sure I'm beholdin' to no one. Of course! That's 'cause I got no one to be beholdin' to! I got nobody. Period! That's for sure. Or cripe's sakes! No family, no parents, no brothers, sisters, grandparents and, most of all, no wife, no fiancé, not any more. Hell, I ain't even got a girlfriend! But, I still got that damned cold hole inside o' me that I woke up with in Manila. And now, that lousy vacuum is growing deeper and wider by the minute. Sheee-ittt!" Dixie spit angrily over the cliff, only to have the spit blow back on his pant leg. "Shoot! I can't even spit right." then he laughed at himself, as he knocked the spit from his pants.

But Dixie also had that surreal vision of the sensual silhouette girl, who had haunted, tempted, and inspired him since Manila also. He had not thought much about her lately. Donna had kind of pushed that shapely silhouetted vixen into the background. Dixie drained his beer. Then he got up to heave the bottle down the hill. But he remembered the cop had told him to dispose of it properly. He looked around on the ground about him and found his spent bottle cap, which he placed in his pocket. He carried the cap and empty bottle back to his dorm room.

Dix prepared for bed, kneeling beside it to pray, as was his custom. School had been out for almost a month. His roommate, who was not a ballplayer, was long gone, so Dixie was alone: situation normal. He struck another Lucky.

*Damn! I'm smoking way too much lately.*

He pulled out his portable cassette tape recorder, sticking in the one tape recording he owned, containing thirty minutes of *GRT* music on each side.

Dixie turned off the lights as he lay down in bed beside his tape recorder. He pushed "Play" to hear the sax introduction to "The Stalker." Then he heard his voice, Todd Strickler's voice, singing, so Dixie sang along: "She's out on the street, prowlin' all around. That girl's a stalker, searchin' to be found ... " He had just lost the one thing he wanted most: a good woman, a built-in family. Now he listened to himself on the tape player, singing himself to sleep. *How could that be me? I could never do that now, never. Gee! I can't even sing in the locker room.*

Maybe this Big Jim could help him find his past. Dixie squeezed the life out of his cigarette between his thumb and forefinger, before tossing the butt into the wastebasket. Maybe he could help Dixie find the silhouette girl! It had been a while since Dixie had "zoned out" on her. His dreams of Donna had precluded such visionary excursions. The silhouette girl had to be a figment of his imagination like the Doc said, because no girl could look so perfect. Even Donna didn't look that good! The cassette tape played on. He moved it to his headboard.

"Mann, I sure cold cocked that slammer today," he whispered. Dixie chuckled at himself, recalling when a sports reporter had asked him that very question after the game. Dixie had sandbagged the journalist with, "Well, got most of it anyways." Now Dixie admitted to himself out loud. "But I got it all, Baby! Whew! Jes' couldn't let him know that. Might give people the wrong impression like I can't hit it no farther. But jes' between us chickens, Dix, you sure did get all of that one, KEED! Yeah, Coach should have pitched me in the fourth, well ... maybe next year ... What about that silhouette girl, anyway? Don't need no sleepin' pill tonight, Doc.""

He grew silent. The jilted athlete drifted off to sleep before the cassette ran out, clicking off on its own. Dix didn't hear it. He was searching in the mist, by the silver waters, on the riverbank for that shapely girl, framed against the full moon. Maybe her warm love would melt the frozen vacuum in his soul.