

~ Chapter 18: Last Leg ~

It was about eleven p. m. on what was fast becoming a dark and nasty night. As the fog worsened, a steady drizzle developed. Dixie was a little more than five hundred miles from his destination, though he did not realize that yet fully. The veteran biker had ridden back carefully out over the winding switchbacks of the Smokies, the same way he had entered. Then he had turned north on highway I-40, following it to I-81, which he took northeastward through the tri-cities into the hills of Southwestern Virginia.

Dixie suddenly realized these had been the very hills Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia had failed to reach, when they were trapped by Grant at the Appomattox Court House. Despite the poor traveling conditions, Dixie's mind wandered. That Moons had been more than a pleasant diversion. She was something else. Moons had narrowed, temporarily anyway, that huge, cold gap in his soul. He thought about the gently admonishing Voice he had felt once again in his heart. It occurred to him that the Voice seemed to reverberate stronger, if he obeyed it, which he had done recently. Conversely, the gentlemanly Voice would tend to melt away when he did not heed its message. That is what had happened with Lori Lei and Donna, after he had come to know them well.

A light rain began to fall, so Dixie pulled off the interstate into a gas station, to fill up and put on his Marine poncho. He first removed his leather jacket because the heavy muggy air precluded the need for it. He stuffed the jacket in his duffle bag. Then he clamped his small sized Porpoise batting helmet tightly on his head over the hood of his poncho. He tied the second poncho over his duffle.

*Virginia!* This is the state of all the presidents: Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe, even Woodrow Wilson, they were all born here. The Old Dominion was a state of history! It was the state of his confederate heroes: Lee, Jackson and Stuart, underdogs all, who had achieved so much in the face of such overwhelming odds. Dixie was ever keen on underdogs and on history, especially U. S. history. To think he was in this place, where so much of it had been made, pumped him up in spite of the weather.

He had about 350 miles left to travel. It was a little after two a. m. The rain intensified, plastering his shades and blurring his vision. He was glad for his helmet. The number of big rigs on this stretch of highway at this hour surprised him. But the rain smelled good. He had been lucky because it had not rained his whole trip. However now, the rain was welcome, refreshingly cleansing.

To ignore the nasty riding conditions, Dixie's let his mind drift. Astride the Honda, he serpentine, climbing over the rain-slicked mountainous interstate highway. He was thinking of the various women in his life and how he would never have met them if the former men in their lives had treated them even

halfway decently. Of course with Rosalita, it was a little different. Her husband had not planned on being killed in the War. Yeah, Rose's situation was a little different. Dixie had just come her way at the right time and happened to remind her of her late husband. Lori Lei had shot her cop boyfriend in the foot, crippling him, after he had failed to heed her repeated warnings to stop abusing her. She got off with a self-defense plea. The police commissioner himself had reinstated her to duty to prove such abuse would not be tolerated on his force. Then Big Jim had virtually abandoned Donna and the kids by volunteering for three tours in Nam and another in Germany, leaving his family behind each time. Even the young Molly Two Moons had experienced some kind of trouble with that Greg character. Although he wasn't certain, Dixie surmised some type of unwanted physical abuse had been involved.

How could some guys be so danged stupid? All these women were great. Dixie merely treated them politely, as he wanted to be treated himself, and they were all over him. By comparison to their prior partners, they all had thought he was the greatest thing in pants.

Dixie wondered about this Rock'N'Roll girl who was supposed to be his wife. Had there been some "nice guy" come into her life, when she was vulnerable and lonely? Like Big Jim had suggested? Maybe this mystery comforter was there now, "being kind" to her? Dixie figured it was none of his business. After all, he did not know her one bit. She didn't owe him a thing, not one thing. Still, he wondered if she didn't have a comforter and it unnerved him a little to think she might, though he couldn't understand why. Then he got mad at himself. He had no right to get upset over something like that, real or imagined. She was nothin' to him. Of course, if she were the silhouette girl ...

Failing to pay attention to the encroaching nasty weather and the dual lane highway, Dixie had sneaked up quickly upon a piggy-backer fuel tanker, while another big semi-truck barreled up behind his Honda. Dixie tried to pass to his left. Yet another tractor-trailer loaded down with new Chevies appeared precipitously out of the black night foggy spray. That tractor-trailer began to pass him. Dixie slipped back into the right lane. The front-running fuel tanker's mud flaps were not making it. Sheets of rainwater were thrown back onto the motorbike rider by the huge tractor-trailer's rapidly revolving tires. Abruptly, the gusting wind had turned nasty! The big, roaring semis seemed to travel in a pack like marauding wolves.

Dixie gasped for breath. Fast approaching Roanoke on the downhill side of the mountain, suddenly the trailing big rig pulled up dangerously close behind Dixie. The irate trucker vented his anger by blowing his air horn long and loud. Dixie realized the following trucker was having trouble braking on the rain slicked road. The three big rigs had him sandwiched between them. It all had happened too quickly. He had had no time to analyze how he had become boxed in, in this manner. These tractor-trailers were hurtling pell-mell down the dangerously wet, sloping mountainside with Dixie stuck in amongst them. He tried bravely to

maintain his edge, while the trucks threw sheets of rainwater onto him from their large tires. And that gusting wind! He could hardly control the bike

The rig behind Dixie came ahead strong while the one in front of him braked hard, as they descended around a subtle curve to the left. Unable to stop, the trucker behind Dixie again pulled on his air horn, while he rode up Dixie's backside. Afraid the trucker would overrun him, Dixie leaned left into the curve against the gusting wind, edging his bike across the dual lane road's center white stripes. The tractor-trailer loaded down with Chevies had passed him by. But without seeing it and without warning, another diesel truck sped up from out of the mist behind Dixie in the passing lane to his left.

*It's a damned trucker's convention!* Sudden, treacherous gusts shook the bike.

A sickening sensation stole into his stomach. He fought the shakes and leaned low over his soaked bedroll and handlebars. All his options seemed blocked. *This might be it.* The handlebars shook violently. *Damn that shifting wind!*

The front tires from the truck in front and to his right showered him with road water. Dixie thought he could reach out and touch the truck. It was that close. He frantically glanced back to his left again searching for an avenue of escape. Instead, the darned trucker's front headlights were right in Dix's eyes. The lights loomed so large and bright that Dixie felt as though they were right on top of him. He faced back around, blinded. He couldn't see didley in the cool rain and truck back spray. He rode by feel but worried the tread on his tires was not up to these dangerous conditions.

Dixie tried to sneak in front of the rig passing to his left and get out in the open and let his Honda fly. However, the trucker passing to Dixie's left accelerated and pulled on his horn, boxing Dixie in and leaving the biker no room to maneuver to his left. Dixie broke into a cold sweat now, gripping the Honda's handlebars until his knuckles were white. He had no choice but to edge back into the right lane again, between the two trucks, as the curve began to bend back to the right. The sickening feeling inched down into the pit of his stomach.

Seeing bright spots before his eyes, Dixie leaned hard to his right. He managed to squeeze back in between the two tractor-trailers in the right lane. The guy behind blasted Dix unmercifully with his air horn, again. That guy couldn't slow up. He was trying, but he couldn't. Dixie could hear the trucker's failing brakes, as they screeched and hissed. Dix had no choice but to swerve off the road, skidding onto the bumpy asphalt and cinder shoulder. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, hoping to blot out the bright headlights stuck in his brain. The violent wind changed direction dramatically. The Honda wobbled through a long puddle. Dixie feared losing his edge. He fought the impulse to apply the brakes. He knew if he did, it would cost him control of the bike and possibly his life.

Instead, he leaned forward with his feet on the rear footrests, laying flat out over the handlebars. Squinting his eyes, the frightened war hero did all he could to hold the wildly gyrating handlebars in place. Somehow he maintained his edge

through the large puddles. His knees squeezed either side of the gas tank while his chin rested on the sleeping bag tethered across the handlebars. He felt sick.

“Help, Lord!” he whispered frantically. “I need Ya. NOW!”

Dixie accelerated through the skid and finally caught a break, as the highway bent back sharply to his right. His sight returned as abruptly as it had been taken from him. He found himself on the inside of the curve now. Dixie leaned strongly into the curve and accelerated. The gusting wind abated. The handlebars quit pulling all over the place. His body jostled as he bumped uncontrollably along the rough right shoulder. The tires caught firm ground and Dix rotated the gas all the way down. He took off like a ruptured duck. Dixie nearly popped a wheelie, as he passed both of the trucks. Like the Road Runner leaving Wiley Coyote behind him in the dust, Dixie left the big rigs receding into the rain and mist behind him.

He veered left, back onto the highway as the interstate straightened and bottomed out, prior to climbing the next slope. Dixie afforded himself the luxury of glancing over his left shoulder at the trucks he had just passed. They were fast fading out of sight in the dense fog and rain ...

*Mann! That was a close one!* “Thanks, Lord. Mann, WHEW! That was just too, too close for comfort.” Dixie permitted himself a long, slow exhale.

Still shaken, he pulled off the interstate at an all night truck stop several miles up the road at the Route 311 exit into Roanoke. He needed a break. A smoke and a bite to eat seemed like a real good idea. His upper torso and the top of his head were dry. They had been protected by his helmet and poncho, but he was soaked to the skin everywhere else, up to his midriff. The rain and water had blown up under his poncho to drench his cords. Even his feet were wet somehow through his recently purchased square-toed, brown, leather Dingos.

Dixie wobbled as he walked into the diner to sit down at a booth in the back next to the window. The middle aged woman who took his order complained about her feet and said he looked “white as a sheet.” Dixie just nodded at her feebly, with his hands shaking and his teeth chattering.

This was one of those Fifties kind of diners you see in the movies, a long and narrow affair. Record selection turners for the juke adorned each table, as well as the counter. The juke box had been spinning Hank Williams, Sr. when Dixie came in. It was playing Hank Williams, Sr. now and it would be playing Hank Williams, Sr. when Dixie left. The counter was long and silver with about a dozen of those round, stainless steel stools with fake, burgundy leather cushions for seats. Fake, red leather cushions adorned the stool tops. They were the kind of stools kids loved to spin around and around. The dirty linoleum floor was far from new, despite the evidence of a recent mopping. A dozen booths with fake, dark red, leather benches and tan Formica table tops lined the walls.

Dixie took his time over his meal, watching through the dark, ceiling-high, rain-splattered window to his left. Across the front window, Dixie read backwards the neon name of “Smoky Joe’s Café”. Looking outside, he noticed

the thunderstorm was dissipating over the interstate below him. His body yet shook involuntarily, as did his hands. His eyes twitched while he unsuccessfully tried to blink away the dogged, bright white truck headlights from behind his optic nerves. To steady those nerves, Dixie enjoyed a Lucky Strike both before and after he ate.

He found that he could hold his after-meal smoke steady without his hand shaking. That was something he had failed to do before he had eaten. It was unusual for him to smoke this much, but that narrow escape had unnerved him. He had not see worth a darn with Niagara Falls in his face and those bright lights in his eyes. And you never could tell how deep those puddles might be.

*Damned handlebars had pulled all over the place! Be best if I let this storm pass, just sit this one out. That wind! Need to get some new tires, Mann!*

Dixie flicked some ashes in the tray under the record selection box and waited out the storm. He began to relax some and his reflections turned to Moons, Donna, and the Voice. Darned strange, the way this inner speech still questioned him about a wife he never knew he had until a couple days ago. Nevertheless, recently, Dixie had reluctantly heeded its mysterious internal warnings and the Voice's reverberations had increased in vigor and frequency. He thought about his trip thus far. Maybe he should get a room, start out in the daylight. His whole purpose in riding at night was to avoid heavy traffic as well as the heat of the day. He had not counted on so many crazy tractor-trailer drivers and heavy rain.

*Why don't those truckers drive during the day and leave the highway to me at night? That wind and hydroplaning can be dangerous stuff! Need some new tires!*

The melody he had not been able to shake from his head throughout his trip came to the front of his mind again, despite the assuming, castigating wail of "Your Cheatin' Heart" blaring from the juke box. The tune in Dixie's head had begun after Donna had offered him her charms under the lemon tree. As he contemplated the mysterious Voice's questioning him about his wife, now some verse came to mind as well. He asked the waitress for a pen, which she provided. Since everyone claimed he was such a great songwriter, he reasoned he should no longer sublimate his natural impulses to compose.

Dixie took a napkin from the dispenser on the table. He opened the tissue up to write upon it. With a Lucky between his lips, he pored over the napkin oblivious to the noises of the diner, including Hank Williams, Sr. , though old Hank must have influenced Dixie a bit. Because, in twenty minutes, Dix had scribbled out, in hieroglyphics that only he could decipher, the lyrics to a country tune entitled "The Voice of Choice." And this is what he wrote:

*Last Leg*

**The Voice Of Choice**

Sometimes deep within,  
I get a funny feelin'  
That starts me to kneelin'  
And keeps me from sin.

I don't know why.  
But the Voice always seems to scare me,  
Though It never speaks unfairly  
It's really kind of shy.

(Chorus)

I've come to learn, this Voice  
Gives me pause to stop and think,  
Nudging me to pull back and to shrink (in awe).  
But It just ain't makin' noise.  
And if I heed Its gentle pleas,  
It gives me rest for my soul  
And e-ven in-ner peace—It's the Voice of Choice!

Was I insane?  
To listen to that question?  
Too ashamed to ever mention,  
That it was always the same?

"What . . . about . . . your wife?"  
Those were the words that were spoken.  
And although my memory's broken,  
They cut me like a knife.

Chorus

Yes, that's what I heard,  
Though I often failed to listen,  
Kept on lovin', kept on missin'  
Losing peace, ignoring those wise words.

Then I learned of her,  
That I had a wife to call my own.  
That I need never be alone  
And I was sure.

Chorus

He sang the tune softly, slowly to himself as he drew lightly on his nail. The catchy tune was simple, but fluid. Something about the song felt right to him. He was pleased with it, even though the song's lyric's hopefully presumed this "new" wife would be the answer to his prayers.

Dixie considered staying overnight, but the silhouette girl beckoned to him. For some reason, he felt compelled to learn her mysterious secret. Moons had reminded him of her. Now, the silhouette girl's sultry image drew him on like a tempting siren. Dixie resolved to find her today. She had been seducing him for over two years—his entire life! Yes. He was going to find out today if this Ryzanna was the dream girl he was seeking. The rain had ceased. Still, he was concerned about the wet roads and the crazy truckers. Suddenly, he recalled some scripture, from the Old Testament, "Joshua," perhaps, which he repeated aloud.

**"Be strong and of good courage for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest . "**

*Damn straight.*

Fortified now by food for body and as well as for soul, he would forge ahead.

Dixie refolded the napkin which bore his song and shoved it into his billfold. He noticed the picture of Donna in her bikini had slipped from its preeminent place in his wallet. He returned the photo to its former, prominent location, where he could view it easily whenever he opened the wallet. He studied the picture for a second or two. There she stood in profile with her gut sucked in, her face turned toward him, hands behind her head, elbows out, posing seductively in her bikini. Dixie shook his head and muttered to himself. "Damn. Hate to leave them big ones." He clucked his tongue, resignedly, as he shook his head from side to side. Then he smashed his cigarette butt into the ashtray on the table. He left a tip and the booth and squished in his boots as he stopped in the rest room on his way out.

It was a little after 4 a.m. Sunup was not far off. The rain was just a sprinkle now. Dixie extracted some Desenex foot powder from his athletic bag and removed his boots. He sprinkled the white powder into his boots and replaced the can in his bag. He tugged on his poncho, stuck the Porpoise batting helmet back on his head, climbed onto his bike and left for the gas station around the corner. Dixie had about half a tank of gas, but he could not make it to DC on that. He could make it on a full tank. This would be his last stop for fuel. He crossed the street to the gas station, where he filled up.

Spurred on by his silhouetted vision, as well as by the prospect of finding himself, the young adventurer was fortified in his heart by the encouraging scripture. The foot powder drying his dogs also helped. Dixie followed I-81 up to New Market. From there, he exited the interstate to head northeast on Route 211. He recognized the names of New Market and Luray as historic Civil War sites. He would like to have stopped to investigate, but that silhouette girl kept drawing him onward. It seemed the closer he came to his destination, the stronger she pulled at him. For some reason, he had an overpowering notion that if he could

reach Maryland, she would not slip away from him into the mist this time. This time, he would be able to grab her and hold on to her for good.

He left Luray and the Shenandoah Valley (Jackson's Valley) to climb the western slope of the Massanutten Mountain. He stopped to remove his poncho on the side of the road upon the mountain's crest, where he crossed over the famous Appalachian Trail and Skyline Drive. Dawn had broken some time before. The early morning, patchy fog did not obscure the glorious greenery of the sunny Blue Ridge foothills or the Virginia farm land below him. Nor did it obscure the sweet, fresh scent of the early morning dew and the abundant, wild honeysuckle. As he biked down the eastern slope of the Massanutten Mountain, Dixie took pleasure in leaning into the wicked switchback turns, which forced him to slow to 15 mph. Rt. 211 had some horrendous hairpin turns as it wove over the Blue Ridge. However, the road's surface had dried and Dixie survived without incident. After a couple hours more of scenic riding, he arrived in Fairfax, Virginia, near the nation's capitol, the District of Columbia. It was close to nine.

He entered a "7-11" convenience store to buy some cigarettes, drink a soda and swallow a do-nut. But mostly, he was looking for a detailed map of the area that would help him find this Crest Hill Heights in Maryland. He came across a "DC and Vicinity – Inside the Beltway" map. In his excitement upon finding the map, he forgot to purchase the Luckies. Dixie looked for Crest Hill in the City Index at the back of the map and found it.

*All right!* His heart fluttered. He hoped there was not more than one Crest Hill Heights in this tiny state. When he looked that town up in the neighborhood map and found 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue, he knew he was home free. The store clerk directed Dixie to the "Beltway," heading east. Dixie was fatigued. It had been a rough night, but it was just a little bit further now. As he rode around the freeway that encircles the Nation's Capitol known as the Beltway, he could not help but wonder if he had not been here before. Drained from his exhausting night adventures, he rode on adrenaline now. When he crossed the Wilson Bridge over the Potomac River into Maryland, Dixie looked up river, past National Airport and Bolling Air Force Base, which stood on opposing banks of the river, to spy briefly the Washington Monument. He had seen the celebrated structure in books and on television but never in person. He tried to recall if he had not seen the memorial before, but, as usual, he drew only a blank. Crossing over the gaps in the drawbridge's steel grate surface suddenly unnerved him.

Focused so much on his failed recollection and the scary effect of riding over the grates, Dixie crossed the Wilson Bridge and messed up. He found that he had missed the exit for St. Bartholomew Road, which he should have taken. Instead, He rode onto the next exit heading west onto Veer Ave (Rte. 5) This was a wide, four-lane, concrete thoroughfare bisected by an equally wide grassy median that shrunk in width the closer he approached the District of Columbia. After not quite a mile, he noticed a couple of car dealerships on a hill, all with high glass-enclosed showrooms and a three-story, tan, bricked garden apartment complex on

his right. There were a couple shopping centers on his left, across the highway. He noted the one that housed a dry cleaners. The Royal George Motor Inn loomed ahead on his right. Dixie turned into the motel lot to study his bearings.

He was at the intersection of Coolbrook Street and Veer Avenue. Facing across the highway and a bit to his right, stood a Gulf station which faced onto Coolbrook. Behind and to the left of the Gulf Station there was a small shopping mall with the dry cleaners he had noted. Caddy-cornered from him, also to his right, across the traffic lighted-intersection, loomed a six story, concrete, professional building. A small asphalt parking lot, bordered by leafy green shade trees surrounded the building. A residential neighborhood lay just beyond the professional building to the west. He recognized nothing.

Dixie studied the map to see how he had missed his turn off the freeway. His eyes followed the route he should have taken on the map. He located St. Bartholomew to Wheeler, Wheeler to Stuyvesant to 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue. Then he saw where Stuyvesant ran parallel to and just a block southeast of Coolbrook, the street intersecting Veer avenue right at the light in front of him.

Dixie was exhausted and he needed to clean up. He decided it might be wise to get a room. It was about a half past nine. The people he wanted to visit were probably out about their daily business anyway. Moreover, if they did not know him, he would need a place to stay. He could lodge in this two-story motel just behind him, The Royal George Motor Inn. He decided to make The Royal George his base of operations. He parked in front of the motel's lobby under the protective drive-thru overhang and went inside to reserve a room.

The place was pretty classy, no "40 Winks." The architecture had a New Orleans creole feel to it. Black wrought iron brocade gates and rails guarded the entrance and around the second story veranda. The exterior was constructed of mortar and whitewashed brick. The lobby featured a plush red and black interior decor, which extended into a fancy, small restaurant and to a lounge, as well.

He paid for the room key to room 222. Dix took all his gear up to the room on the second floor and unpacked. He planned on staying in this place for a while. The room also had red, black and ivory interior with a plush carpet, two queen sized beds, a color TV and the latest in bathroom fixtures, including a little ice dispenser. Overhead, the ivory-hued ceiling sported fashionable textural swirls that looked to him like cake frosting.

*Fancy place. Yeah, real swank!*

A long, wide mirror crossed a vanity alcove, above a long counter on the opposite side of the room from the front door. Both mirror and counter extended halfway across the bedroom's width. Dixie could see himself in that mirror from clear across the room when he stepped inside the front door. Another large mirror hung over the writing desk to right the of the TV. Dixie felt comfortable in the room. He liked it, even if he didn't like seeing his reflection every way he turned.

He humped the double garment bag across the four lane highway that was Veer Avenue to the dry cleaners. He wanted everything pressed and both suits dry-cleaned. He asked the dry cleaner to have his grey silk suit ready by 4 p.m.

Dix returned to the motel, jogged up the flight of concrete steps and strolled down the veranda to his room to crash. He was utterly exhausted, as he had been after each night of his journey. He thanked God for preserving his safety and prayed for His continuous blessing. Then Dixie plopped on the closest bed and slipped into a coma-like sleep. He awoke about six hours later—anxious, for he had awakened, knowing where he was and why he was there. Dixie ran across the highway to the dry cleaners to pick up all his clothes, which were all ready and waiting for him. He paid extra for same day service.

Anxiously, he cleaned his teeth, showered, shaved and dressed. He was thankful for the moustache, for it meant less face to shave or cut. Besides, the 'stache was growing in thick and full, making him appear older and more distinguished. So far, the girls seemed to like it. Dixie climbed into the light grey silk suit he had purchased in Manila and had just reclaimed from the cleaners. He shod his naked feet in soft, pliable, thatched, summer loafers. They were light grey Gucci's which complemented his grey suit well. He also wore a powder blue, form fitting, crew neck, sleeveless shirt, because he thought the powder blue matched well with the grey. Dixie was so nervous. He could not keep his hands from shaking, despite chain-smoking three Lucky Strikes. He decided to have a couple drinks down at the motel lounge to calm his nerves.

Anxiously, he made his way downstairs to the lounge where he stood alone at the bar to order a shooter. The quiet cool of the dim, dark, lounge interior soothed him a little. "Knock on Wood" played softly over the lounge's audio system. He recognized it from the Oldies shows. "Umm, great tune," whispered Dixie to himself. He asked the bartender for a shot of Jim Beam and an Oly for a chaser.

The bartender, who had identified himself initially as "Mack," had never heard of an Oly. He asked Dixie for ID, which Dixie provided. Then the bartender ticked off the brand names of beer that he sold and said he had Miller and Bud on tap. Dixie ordered a Miller High Life as he toed the bar foot rest with his Gucci.

When he downed the bourbon without so much as batting an eye, the bartender remarked that it was somewhat early in the evening to start such heavy drinking. The alcohol warmed Dixie's insides, sliding smoothly down his gullet. He smiled reassuringly at the concerned barkeep, holding up the mug of beer to toast him.

"To your health, Mack!" Dixie winked, downing half the chaser. "Yeah! That's better, much better." He sighed deeply.

"Have a rough day, kid?"

Dixie chuckled involuntarily. "Had a rough life!" He replied with a chuckle.

"I hear that!" concurred Mack, mildly sardonic.

Mack wore his official bartender's garb: a red vest, white shirt, black bow tie and black slacks. His thinning, close cropped, sandy hair was combed to the side. His nose had been broken and patched up more than once. He looked to be in his

forties. Dixie reasoned Mack might have been a boxer or maybe a football player back in the days of the leather helmet. When Mack had fetched Dixie his drinks, Dixie had noticed that Mack had limped noticeably on his right leg.

Mack was eyeing Dixie as well. He looked queerly at Dixie's missing fingers and then at the left side of Dixie's head. He nodded. Dixie chuckled softly to himself. *Me and this Mack character are a couple of real winners.* Perhaps Max had read Dixie's mind, because he asked:

"How'd you lose that ear, kid,, if you don't mind my askin'?"

Dixie felt for his left ear, semi-shocked with disbelief. In his anxiety, he had forgotten to apply it.

"Darn! Forgot my ear. Thanks for telling me, Mack."

Dix gulped down his beer, asking Mack to set him up again and excused himself. He promised he would be right back with his ear. Dixie strode swiftly out of the bar, leaving the barkeep with a strange, bewildered look on his face.

True to his word, Dixie returned to the empty lounge in a couple of minutes. Not only was he wearing his ear, but he also wore the two gold caps on his upper two fake, front teeth, which he had also forgotten to apply earlier. Upon Dixie's return to the lounge, Mack had to notice that Dixie had two complete ears now, but he did not comment upon them, thankfully. Instead, Mack had another boilermaker waiting for Dixie. Aside from the two of them, the bar was empty. Dixie asked Mack if he had ever heard of a band called "*GRT*?"

Mack slung his bar towel over his left shoulder and slid down along the bar a little closer to Dixie. From Mack's affable expression, Dixie recognized that that Mack also sported his own gold front tooth.

"Sure, they used to play here. At least that's what I heard. But that was before my time." The bartender motioned with his head to the back corner. There, a triangular eighteen-inch high riser served as a stage. A postage stamp parquet dance floor lay in front of the stage.

"Yeah, most of the band members are from right around here in Crest Hill or down the road in Woldorn. That band put this place on the map, so to speak. I understand most of the band members went to Pocomoke High School."

"Yeah? Where is that exactly, Mack?"

"Not far, two, three miles maybe. Just cross over Veer and head down Coolbrook until it ends at the shopping center, the Crest Hill Heights Shopping Center. Then jump left and then jog right onto Stuyvesant. Follow it 'til it ends. Turn right onto Wheeler at the light and follow it for a quarter of a mile. From there the signs off Wheeler lead you left, down to the school. It's down at the bottom of a steep hill, kinda in a big ditch. Can't miss it. It's all that's there."

Because Dixie had studied that part of the map thoroughly earlier, he could track along with the bartender's directions.

"Is it a big high school?"

"Anh, I dunno. They got about oh, fifteen-sixteen hundred students, something like that. They're a double "A" school, if that's what ya mean."

“Double ‘A,’ what’s that?”

“You know. That’s the top level for varsity sports in the state.”

Dixie nodded. The first boilermaker had helped, but it had not cured him of his case of nerves. He bolted his second shot of bourbon. Suddenly, he felt loosey-goosey and considered that maybe he should have something to eat, but he wasn’t certain that he could keep any food down, due to his nerves.

“You look like you’ve done that a few times before, kid,” observed Mack referring to Dixie’s drinking.

Dixie grinned. “Couple of times, I guess.” The whiskey burned inside him.

“I guess.” Mack grinned. “Say, you staying here, in the motel, I mean?” The man’s tone was casual but interested. Dixie could tell the barkeep was not trying to be nosey, just friendly, just passing the time until the five o’clock, after work crowd began to arrive.

“Yes sir, up in 222.”

“So ya here on business? Pleasure?”

“Little of both, I guess. Should know better about that this evening.” Dixie caressed his beer mug with both hands. Then he hoisted it and sucked on his High Life before he set the glass back down on the bar. The brew tasted fine, real fine, as good as any Oly. Neither spoke for a minute.

“So that band played there, hunh?” Dixie pointed to a small corner bandstand.

“Well, I guess that’s the spot. Like I said that was before my time here.”

“Umm” acknowledged Dixie as he swallowed some more of the High Life.

“That’s right, you did say that.”

The young vet downed another swig of brew and set the mug down on the highly varnished black bar top. Dixie leaned forward on his elbows and forearms looking at the glasses stacked in a neat pyramid before the mirror behind the bar.

“Ya keep a neat bar, Mack,” observed Dixie with wry approval.

“Thanks, I try. Won’t be so easy, later on.”

“Do a good business, do ya?”

“Tuesday night is ‘Ladies night.’” Mack cocked his brow and smiled.

“I see”, replied Dixie with a grin of his own. “That piece of information could come in handy.” He smiled again. Mack nodded. The bar’s dark cool felt fine.

Dixie sipped his beer lazily. He was in no rush now that the liquor had taken its hold upon him. That soft click that so often accompanied his imbibing had switched on in his brain. He was no longer anxious. His alcoholic remedy was working just fine. However, if he kept drinking like this, he would never get to this girl’s house. *Dang! I’ll never even get back up the stairs to my room!* He had planned to go over to find this Ryzanna girl after six, but he could not wait that long. He would shoot for five instead. *Shoot! Maybe I’ll get lucky and get another free dinner?* The alcohol had helped settle his nerves. It was ten to five now. He pulled out the last Lucky in his pack and lit up. Dixie drank his beer slowly, coolly. Mack saw him fumble with his empty pack and offered to take it off his hands.

“Thanks, Mack.” Dixie tossed the empty cigarette package to Mack, who snagged it easily. “Say, ya got any cigarettes for sale?” Since he had forgotten to buy any at the convenience store, he was empty now.

“Back by the rest rooms and phones. Back there, kid.” He pointed directly across the room to the open alcove, opposite the bar. Dixie started to leave. “Hey, kid! They’re eighty-five a pack. Got enough change? They ain’t no dollar changer in that machine.” Dixie felt in his pants pocket and found he didn’t. Mack read his expression. “Here kid, here’s four quarters for a dollar.” Dixie nodded and pulled a bill from his wallet and looked around a bit disoriented. He was a little lightheaded.

Mack grinned at his woozy behavior and once more pointed to the alcove on the other side of the dark room. Dixie thanked him and walked across the dark, cool, eerily quiet lounge to buy a pack of Luckys. After purchasing the cigarettes, he entered the empty, rest room to relieve himself. He was calm. He felt good. After all the disappointments he had experienced, he told himself not to get his hopes up. Worst case, he would find a team to play ball for and investigate the area. There was a lot of history around here. He also would like to see the Atlantic Ocean. Then he recalled his ace in the hole—*Moons!* He had almost forgotten about her and he had only just seen her last night. That girl was truly something else! Something special! Now he was glad he had given her that address. He washed up.

Between the shooters, the Luckies and the promise of Two Moons on his horizon, Dixie felt confident, no matter what were to happen tonight. He returned to the bar to finish his beer and dropped the barkeep a handsome tip in parting.

“Well Mack: Hope for the best, but be prepared for the worst. That’s my motto.” Dixie strolled to the entrance.

“Hey kid!”

Dixie turned around, pulling the cigarette from his mouth, acknowledging the bartender by raising his chin, as was his custom.

“Hope everything works out for ya tonight.” The barkeep smiled amiably. He seemed sincere. Dixie winked his black eye at the bartender.

“Me too, Mack, but gotta back up plan, if it don’t.” Dixie was feeling no pain.

He waved his James Dean-Jett Rink wave. Dixie saluted Mack with his maimed right hand, from the tip of his head outward and then slid his right hand down parallel to his body and finally out at a right angle to his waist. The wave said that ‘everything is cool, Mann.’ He disappeared through the lounge entrance into the late afternoon, summer sunshine. Yeah, he was feeling good!

*Ya know, that James Dean was one heck of an actor, Boy!*

Nodding to himself, he walked out into the sunlight, out to his bike and put on his wraparound shades, just like James Dean himself might have done. Dixie was hii-igh! With only a donut and two back-to-back boiler-makers between him and the diner over twelve hours ago, Dix was feeling no pain. Out of habit, he pulled two thick rubber bands from his pocket to tie down his flared suit pant legs to

keep them clean during the ride. He giggled as he had a little difficulty pulling the rubber bands up over his shoes and suit pant legs. To maintain his balance he had to enlist the aid of the motel wall for support.

For a split second, Dixie felt as if he had been here before, something which happened to him occasionally. But, like always, the sensation left him as quickly as it had come. His rational mind took over. Dix would have to get gas sooner or later. He would make it later. He had not flipped to his reserve tank yet. Even so, across the highway, he noticed the Gulf Station which he had seen earlier. From what Mack had said about those directions to Pocomoke High, Dixie could follow this Coolbrook down to Stuyvesant. From there, he should be able to find 21<sup>st</sup> Street, er Avenue. That's what he did. He felt good. He felt right. The liquor had really loosened him up but had not dulled his reactions, or so he thought. He wasn't flying yet, just floatin'. He sang a song by The Eagles about James Dean.

*Helluva way to die. Darned gruesome!*

The storm he had run into the previous night in the Blue Ridge must have passed through here earlier in the day while he had slept. The evidence lay in the many puddles he had to dodge on the shaded, sun-dappled street. He skirted the puddles. He did not want to sully his freshly cleaned and pressed, favorite suit. Dixie tooted past the Crest Hill Heights Shopping Center which stood to his right. He noted the presence of a liquor store for his future shopping convenience. This side of the median-divided street was one-way.

To his left, on the opposite side of the street, a row of two-story, brick duplex homes faced into the late afternoon sun. A grassy, fifteen-foot wide, clover-filled median separated his lane from the opposite, one-way lane to his left. The scent of honeysuckle drifted to him from the other side of the road where some late-flowering bushes and a blossoming Magnolia tree grew near a telephone pole. The scent of honeysuckle reminded him of Moons. He smiled at the memory of her, of her electric blue eyes and her pair of white, round moons. Not paying attention to the road, he nipped the edge of a puddle, spraying his right, lower pant leg with some stagnant rainwater, but he hardly noticed. He was feeling too good. He stopped at the traffic light for 23<sup>rd</sup> Boulevard and coolly flicked his cigarette butt into the concrete sewer drain, carved into the curb, beside the road. He surveyed the area, a suburb built sometime after the Second World War.

When he crossed the intersection, he noticed brick, single-family ramblers now lined both sides of the street. Dixie located 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue on the other side of a Baptist church that featured a tall, white steeple. Despite his double shooters, Dixie's heart started pounding again, as he turned right onto 21<sup>st</sup> Avenue. This was her street. And this was probably his hometown. The fact that he had recognized nothing so far could not lower his spirits.

"Yeah buddy! Got a feelin' I'm almost home now, Baby," he whispered. "Damn long way from Manila and Hawaii. But yeah, I'm almost there."