

COULD BE

(An excerpt from the novel *Long Way Back: Out at Home*)

In Suffolk, Dixie had difficulty finding another ride south, so he stopped in a People's Drug Store for a late lunch and a fountain-made chocolate shake. While he waited for his order, he tried to wash some of the bloodstains from his lap with a glass of ice water. He thought about the nerve of that joker posing as a preacher. Dixie was angrier about that Holy Joe act than he was that the jerk had cut him with the switchblade. But Dix thought People's made one heckuva of a chocolate shake. After lunch, he savored his shake and walked the hot, dusty streets of Suffolk looking for another ride south. Suffolk was a typical, sleepy southern town with Highway 13 doubling as Main Street. The architecture featured brick and concrete buildings circa the Twenties with hardly a building more than three stories in height. Most of the glass in the town came by way of store front windows. Dixie searched in vain for that southbound lift. An hour later, he got one, though he came to wish that he hadn't.

As Dixie peered at an acoustic guitar on display in a music store's front window, he murmured to himself, "Hmmm, seventy-four, seventy-five." He had no idea how much a guitar cost, but he had always had a hankering for one. Seventy-five dollars for a guitar in 1975 made some kind of weird pricing sense to him. Then he scolded himself. "It's my wife's birthday. So what am I doin' on foot, stuck in this hick town lookin' at guitars?" He kicked the brick wall beneath the store window with the toe of his Adidas, figuring he should be kicking himself in the rear.

"I gotta get a ride outta here."

He stared at his reflection in the window, wondering what was wrong with him that people in this backwater town wouldn't offer him a lift. He studied his appearance objectively through his wrap-around sunglasses. "I look like any other young guy," he grouched. His dark hair was combed back in a wide duck tail on the sides and down over his neck, running a few inches past his collar. Some of his bangs fell awkwardly across his forehead. "Maybe, it's a little long for these folks?" His new moustache had grown in thick and black to match his wide sideburns. "Maybe I should have shaved a little more?" His shades hid his eyes. "Maybe, I oughtta take 'em off?" But he didn't. He pinched his powder blue, sweat-dampened, crew neck shirt, pulling it out and then let go, watching the fabric snap back snugly against his torso. "They prob'ly don't like sleeveless shirts like this one, least ways not on Sunday." He thought his flared blue cords were OK, except for the blood stains on his right inner thigh, which he had been unable to wash out with the ice water from the drug store counter. Dixie had avoided addressing the awkward-looking bandage under his chin. *That* was probably the deal killer for any potential ride right there, but he couldn't remove the bandage just yet and permit that knife wound to bust wide open once more.

"Maybe, I should go call her again, but all's I ever get is a busy signal. She's gonna be ticked at me for sure for not being there and I can't blame her any, either."

As Dixie explored the benefits of self-recrimination, a Suffolk Police Department squad car pulled up behind him, however Dixie was too engrossed in his problems to pay much attention.

"Well, son, ya plannin' on robbin' that stoah?"

Dixie jumped and swallowed hard at the sudden nearness of the voice behind him and to his left. Dixie hoped this was not about the preacher man and his Dodge. He turned slowly around towards the street to face his inquisitor. A couple yards away, a man of the law carefully got out of his squad car and leaned back against the door. The peace officer stood about six-foot four and he had to weigh over three hundred pounds. He wore sunglasses and an official police Stetson hat. A black leather belt, supporting a holstered pistol, encircled his waist. The man was an intimidating figure, indeed.

"N-No sir, just tr-trying to see how m-much that gui-gui-guitar ca-costs."

"You play the guee-tar, do ya boy?"

"Na-No sir, but I, I was thinkin' I, I might like ta-ta-to try."

"No five-fingah discount, though? Stoah's closed Sundehs, ya know?"

“N-n-no, no sir, no five finger discount. Na-na-no sir!”

“Uh-hunh. Son, Ah’m gonna hefta ask you ta step away from that sea bag, please. That’s riiiiight. Now tuhn back ‘round. Put yoah hands ‘gainst the glass and spread yoah legs.” A sparse number of Sunday afternoon pedestrians stopped to stare.

“Have I d-done something wrong, s-sir?”

Dixie watched the officer place his hand over his holstered pistol, when Dixie noticed him spot the blood-stains on Dixie’s cords.

“Just do as I say, son.”

Dixie followed the officer’s orders to the letter, as he thought this roust had to be about the Dodge and the preacher man. The creep must have come to, thumbed a ride and complained to the cops. The man was frisking Dixie when he spotted Dixie’s *Semper Fidelis* tattoo on Dixie’s upper arm, at the point of his left shoulder. When the officer was satisfied Dixie carried no weapons, he asked his suspect to turn back around to face him again.

“Take those glasses off boy,” ordered the officer. Dixie removed his shades. “So you was in the Co-ah, hunh, boy?”

“Yes sir.”

“So was my kid brotha, ovah at Khe Sanh. They told him to hold the lia-ine. He did. Then an R’ah-Pee-Gee landed di-reckly on his hole. That was earleh in Sixteh-Eight. The gen’ruls and pol’ticians decided to ‘bandon the place: ‘no stray-tee-gic or tac-tiah-cal valuah,’ they said.” He hesitated and spoke again rhetorically. “Then why was my brothah and the rest of the Twenteh-sixt’ Marine holdin’ it in the fuhrst place? Why we even therah in the fuhrst place?”

The large officer shrugged his shoulder and then stared down the street into space. “What a waste,” he said more to himself than to Dixie. “What a danged waste.” He looked down at the sidewalk and shook his head sadly.

Dixie said nothing. What could he say? However, he relaxed a little. Maybe his Corps connection could help him out of this mess.

“How about it, werah you in that wa-ah, boy?”

Dixie was feeling more confident with the officer’s revelation about his brother’s Marine Corps service. This break gave him not only greater confidence but also new-found poise, which was reflected in his relaxed speech.

“Yes sir.”

“With the Twenteh-sixt’ at Khe Sanh, werah ya?”

“Don’t believe so sir ... Uh, actually, I don’t know where I was, sir. Got shot up a bit and lost my memory, sir.”

Dixie opened and closed his right hand revealing his missing digits for the officer.

“Ya don’ say? Well, maybe yourah the luckeh one afta all. Ya got away with jes’ losin’ them fangers and some bad mem’ries.”

“Yes sir.”

“You got a drivah’s license?”

”Yes sir.”

“Lemme see it.”

The officer held out his hand, motioning impatiently with his cupped fingers for the license. Dixie withdrew his wallet from his back pocket and handed over his license. The big man studied the document thoroughly.

“Califohn-I-A, hunh? Wherah’s yoah bike now, boy?”

“Back home, in Crest Hill, Maryland, sir. That’s up near D.C., sir. Yes, sir. That’s where my folks live.”

Then he stuck Dixie’s license in his official uniform shirt pocket and pulled the pocket flap down over it. Dixie swallowed hard again. That was not a good sign.

“Then what the hell arah you doin’ all the way down hee-ah in this neck o’ the woods, afoot, and lookin’ in closed stoah windehs on a Sundeh aftanoon?”

“Sir, I am tryin’ to get to a place called Kill Devil Hills, in North Carolina, to see my wife. Today’s her, her ba-ba-birthday, sir.”

Dixie smiled hopefully, as he put his two gold capped teeth and the gap between them on prime display. The officer, still hiding his eyes behind his shades, told Dixie to grab his gear and get into the front seat of the squad car. Dixie felt sitting in front, rather than in back behind the cage, was a good sign. There were times it paid to be a Marine.

However, as the officer joined him in the squad car, the interrogation resumed.

“Looks like ya had a ax’dent theyah undah yoah chin. Shavin’ ax’dent was it, son?”

“Uh, yes sir.”

“Had a close shave, did ya boy?”

Dixie wasn’t sure if this was an honest question or a trap.

“Sir. Yes sir, pretty close.”

“Unh-hunh. Ya know they’s a problem back up the road a ways, t’otha side of the tunnel-bridge? Seems a preachah got hisse’f beat up real ba-ad and had his ca-ah stolen just a few hour ago. Don’t suppose you know anehthin’ about that, do ya, boy?”

Dixie cleared his throat and looked straight ahead. He had replaced his shades over his nose, but he still did not want to look at the officer directly. The deputy hadn’t read him any rights, so Dixie decided to play it cool.

“Could be.”

“COULD BE?” The officer’s indignation bellowed unmistakably in an unsuppressed guffaw.

“Well sir, I mean, I mean, it could be that I might could guess at what might have happened.” Would Dixie’s back pedaling save him?

“Guess hunh? Well, g’ohn and guess yo-ah haid off, boy. Now’s time to come clean son, cuz that blood on yoah pant’s leg theyah is lookin’ mighteh s’picious.” Dixie swallowed hard again.

“Ah’m waitin,” goaded the officer.

“Well, n-n-now, sir, it could be, er, it just could be that a young man was hitch-hikin’ ba-back there.”

“Unh-hunh, hitch-hikin’ is E-legal ‘round hee-ah, boy.”

“Yes sir. Well sir, but it could be this young fella was from out of state and didn’t know that, sir.”

“Umm, could be, I reckon. Lak from Cali-forn-I-A, mebbe?”

“Yes, sir. Could be.” Dixie managed to keep a straight face.

“But jes’ the same, son, you need ta unnahstan’, ign’rance of da law is no X-cuse ‘round these heeah pa-ahts. Now g’ohn.”

“Yes sir, I do. I understand. Well now, it just could be that this young man got picked up by a fella who passed himself off as a preacher, but who was really a pervert.”

“A pah’vuhrt? Ha! Ya don’ say? Hmm.”

“Yes sir. And could be this pervert preacher tried to molest this young hitch-hiker at the point of a knife? And then, the hitch-hiker defended himself, as best as he could, under the circumstances, that is.”

“Unh hunh, at knaife-point, right undah da chin pa-haps?”

Dixie knew this guy was onto him. But, for some reason, he had a good feelin’ about this. He was growing in confidence with every question he answered.

“Well yes sir, could be, sir.”

“Unh-hunh, well, ah’m still list’nin, son.”

“Well sir, could be this hitch-hiker cold-cocked this pervert, left him along the road and took his car.”

“So the young fellah might have stolen this, uh ‘lleged pah’vuhrt’s motah VEE-hicle, is that it?”

“Oh, no sir, no sir, not at all, sir. Could be the young man just drove the car a few miles down the road and left it, see? So this, uh, pervert couldn’t come after the hitch-hiker before he, uh, the hitch-hiker that is, could catch another ride.”

“Ah see. And where maight you s’pose that VEE-hicle maight be right about now, son?”

“Well sir, I suppose—” Dixie turned to look the officer squarely in the eye—“and this is strictly a supposition on my part now, sir. But I suppose it could be about a mile and a half north of a little town called Bridgetown just off on the west side of Route One-Seventy-Eight. Believe there’s an old dirt road

there and the car might be found a couple miles down that road on the right hand side in some bushes. But I'm just speculatin', you understand, sir?"

"Just spec-U-latin' it could be they-ah, hunh?"

"Yes sir, it could be. Of course, this is all just hypothetical on my part, you understand, sir."

"Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Ah unnastan', boy. It's all HY-PO-thet'cal. Yes, ah unnastan' everathin' jes' all right, son. 'Deed Ah do!" Dixie nodded earnestly, as the officer repeated himself. "'Deed ah do!" The officer picked up the squad car's radio microphone and called into headquarters.

"Come in, Conneh Sue, come in, Ovah?" Connie Sue crackled back.

"Conneh Sue hee-ah, Chief."

"Conneh Sue, call yoah brothah Cahl up in Ex-moah and tell him he can prob'ly find that missin' Dodge Swingah a couple mile south of wheyah the victim was found, down a duhrt road off o' One-Sempte-Eight 'bout a mile and a half noath o' Bridgetown.

"On the west side of the road, sir, in some bushes," interjected Dixie meekly. The Chief nodded and added.

"And Conneh Sue, tell Cahl to check for that VEE-hicle on a duhrt road to the west side of the old haihway in some booshes. And, ya let me know what he finds out, soon as poss'ble." Connie Sue parroted back the Chief's instructions above the crackling of the two-way radio.

"Duhrt road on the west side of the old highway in some booshes, mile and a half noath of Bridgeton. Will do, Chief. O-vah."

"Oh? An' Conneh Sue? Get me the twenteh on that victim, please. O-vah."

"Alraight Chief. Ten-four." The Chief clicked off and replaced the radio microphone in its holster. His next question surprised Dixie.

"Is she a lookah?"

"Excuse me, sir? Who, sir?"

"This li'l ol' burthdeh gal o' youahs." Dixie grinned widely.

"Oh, yes sir, very much so."

"Well, that's good for when yoah young, but looks don't allays las' kind o' lak sweetness in a chewin' gum. Y'all 'membra that, heeah?"

The officer produced an opened pack of Juicy Fruit.

"Yes sir," replied Dixie earnestly.

"Stick o' gum?"

"Uh, Juicy Fruit! All right!"

"You like Juiceh Froot? Me, too." He smiled agreeably as he handed Dixie a stick of gum and then he turned serious again. "Now, tell me son, jes' what ya think a phoneh preachah man maight look like." Dixie spit out his answer as earnestly as he chewed his gum.

"Well sir, could be he's over six-foot, medium build, reddish-blond hair, about oh, mid to late thirties, wears a black suit and shirt with a turned around collar."

"Anehthin' special 'bout his face?"

"Well yes sir, come to think of it. I mean, uh, I think that a guy like that might be, er, could be that is, pock-marked about his face and neck. And he sports a big, ruddy moustache"

"Unh-hunh." The officer grinned slightly as he chomped on his gum. "Eyah colah?"

"Green, probably."

"PRO'BLY?"

"Well, could be, sir." The officer grunted.

"And, could also be he calls himself Joel ... sir."

"Could be he calls hisse'f Joel? Now if that don't beat all—jes' like the prophet! Ha!"

He slapped his thigh and let out a deep belly laugh and shook his head in disbelief. They smacked their Juicy Fruits in harmony and conversed for fifteen to twenty minutes as the Chief made his Sunday afternoon rounds of the quiet town in his official police squad car. The officer explained that although Suffolk billed itself as the largest city in America in terms of square mileage, it was really just a small, sleepy southern hamlet surrounded by farm land within the out-posted city limits. Very rarely did the

officer encounter any major trouble on a Sunday. He claimed Dixie was an exception to the rule, but then Dixie knew he always had been the exception to the rule. Shortly, Connie Sue's voice crackled back over the radio.

"Merle, come in O-vah."

"Yeah, Conneh Sue. Whadda ya got? Ovah."

"We got us a nineteen-sempy green and black Dodge Swingah right wherah you said'id be, keys in the ignition. Theyah's blood on the passengah seat and doah. Raight front ti-ah was flat and the spaa-ah's missin' outta the trunk. O-vah."

The officer tilted his chin down and stared over his sunglasses at Dixie in a questioning manner. "Right front ti-ah is flat and da spaa-ah is missin'?"

Dixie made his best hang dog face as he explained. "Well sir, it could be this hitch-hiker did that, you see sir, to buy himself some more time for his escape. Probably, he only let the air out of the tire. Don't believe he damaged it any, sir."

"Oh? Ya don't b'lieb so, hunh?"

"Oh, no sir, I don't."

"And da spaa-ah?"

"Oh, well, it could be he rolled the spare out across the highway behind some pines, across from where the whole thing happened, where that billboard is, advertising Winston cigarettes. I mean, that is where a sign could be, sir." The officer frowned and turned his attention back to the radio microphone he held in his hand.

"Come in Conneh Sue, O-vah."

"Conneh Sue, hee-ah, Chief."

"Conneh Sue, what was the CON-dition of that VEE-hicle? And what caused the flat, d'ya know? Ovah."

"The vee-hicle was fine Merle, only had that blood on the passengah front seat and doah. Cahl said the flat was caused by a slow leak or someone let the air-ah out o' the ti-ah. And the victim is stayin' in the Peninsula Hospital a few hours for obsavation on accoun' of a saverah concussion—Say Merle, how'd you know jes' X-ackly wheyah dat VEE-hicle was anehway? O'vah." The Chief's tone flashed anger.

"COULD BE ah took a guess, dang-it! And tell Cahl to check 'cross da road behind da Winston sign foah that spaa-ah. And then make sure he knows wherah that victim lives and works. Dat's verah impoatan', Conneh Sue. You heah me now, Ovah?"

"Yes, Chief but why does Cahl need—"

Still, angry, the chief cut her off. "Dammit now, Conneh Sue. Ah'm da Chief in Suffolk an' I ask da questions. Now you jes' do's I say and don' ask aneh questions. We goan' run this outfit like the U.S. Marine Co-ah, ya hee-ah? Ovah."

"Yessah, yoah the Chief o' Suffolk, but at home Ah'm chief o' the kitchen, Merle. An' you bes' memba which side of da bread yoah butta's on, Honeh, you heeah?"

The Chief' rolled his eyes, but his tone of speech softened considerably now, just as quickly as it had flared a moment ago. "Tha's raight Conneh Sue. Tha's a good gu-al, now. But ya know this hee-ah's OH-ficial poh-leece bi'ness, now Honeh. And thank ya so much now fo' all yoah he'p hee-ah and we can look fo' wahd to a fiahn SundeH suppah togethah this ebenin', OK?. O-vah and out. Ten-four."

The officer exhaled deeply, pressed his bear paw of a left hand to his heart, and then burped. With the other hand, he clicked off and replaced the mike in its holster again and, chomping madly on his Juicy Fruit, pulled over against the curb on Main Street, not too far from where he had picked Dixie up. The big man turned in his seat to face towards Dixie, placing his considerable girth between the two of them.

"Now son, it COULD BE that this hitch-hikah was the instrament of the Lo-ahd's vengeance today on that phoneh preachah man, 'specially seein' as it is SundeH aftah all. The Loh-ad don' take kindly to pa'vahts doin' theyah thing, 'specially He don' cott'n to it a'tall on SundeHs—an' neither do Ah, at NO time.

“An’ COULD BE, they’s been PREE-v’os REE-ports ‘round these pahrts of a man matchin’ da ‘scripshun you gave of a preachah, who’s been attackin’ young hitch-hikahs. Now, if I could LO-cate me this ‘lleged hitch-hikah—” The chief turned slightly and Dixie felt the big man from behind his shades cut his eyes at Dixie for emphasis—“COULD BE, I could poss’bly hold him for ‘ssault and batt’ry and prob’ly even gran’ thef’. And, if not, I could leastwise hold him as a mater’al witness. But then it could tuhn out to be the preachah’s word against the hitch-hikah’s. And who’s gonna belieb some stranger, some punk, hippeh hitch-hikah over a local preachah man? So it seems to me that ‘rrestin’ this hee-ah hitch-hikah would serve da res’dents o’ this l’il ol’ metrop’lis no valuah a’tall at the moment. ‘Specially, seein’ as how da hitch-hikah done these verah same res’dents hee-ah ‘bouts a great service. An’ ah doubt ser’ously that preachah will be molestin’ aneh one else round hee-ah. Leas’ ways, not while Ah’m Chief o’ PO-lice in Su’folk.”

He looked out the windshield and spit out the last words in animated fashion, spraying the glass before him. Then he calmly turned back to Dixie and spoke forcefully.

“And it COULD BE, that if you step inside that bus toom’nal right yondah, ya maight catch yoahse’f a bus down the road as fa-ah as ‘Liz’bet Citeh. And it jes’ a sho-ah piece from derah to Kill Debil Hill.” He nodded toward the terminal for Dixie’s benefit. “Bus’ll cost ya, oh, no moah’n ten dollahs, less mos’ lahkley, mebbe jes’ faive. Ya got da faa-ah?” Dixie patted his wallet and responded enthusiastically.

“Oh! Yes sir. I surely do.”

Believing he was home free, Dixie noadded goodbye and opened the door to exit the squad car, but before he could step out of the car, the long arm of the law reached out and the chief seized him forcefully by his tattooed left arm. He yanked Dixie back inside the vehicle, with the door clanging shut beside him. The man took off his glasses and bore into Dixie with his cold, grey-blue eyes.

“Hold on, boy, not so fast now. Now, heah’s yoah license.”

He raised his shirt pocket flap and pulled Dixie’s license from his pocket and returned it to him. “An’ son, ya lissin’ up good what I got ta say now. Hee-ah?” He still had hold of Dixie’s forearm and he squeezed it hard now. The officer had Dixie’s full attention as his steely eyes lost all sense of human emotion and locked onto Dixie’s pepers in laser-like fashion. Suddenly, Dixie realized why Merle here was the Chief of Police in Suffolk.

“Now, if’n Ah ebah catch yoah ass hitchin’ ‘round hee-ah again, yoah best b’lieb Ah’m goan’ throw it raight in jail. Yoah hee-ah me, boy?”

“Oh, yes, sir! Loud and clear, sir.” However, the answer failed to loose Dixie from the big man’s secure grip.

“Unh-hunh. Now don’ misunnahstan’ what ah’m sayin’ now boy, ‘cause ah ain’t jes’ whistlin’ Dixie hee-ah, son.”

Dixie swallowed a smile enough to answer the Cheif with a straight face.

“Oh, no sir. I know that, sir. An’ ah unnastan’ everathin’ jes’ all raight, sir.”

Dixie grinned and saluted. Then the officer let go of Dixie’s forearm and punched him playfully on his upper left arm, over his tattoo.

“Good boy. Sempah FI-ah.” The chief grinned as he smacked his Juicy Fruit and put his shades back on his nose.

“Sempah Fiah,” retorted Dixie, who raised his left fist and exited from the car hurriedly. Yessir, he reasoned. There are times it really pays to be a Marine. Dixie took off for the bus terminal down the block and he didn’t look back.