

COULD BE
(An excerpt from the novel *Out at Home*)

In Suffolk, Dixie had difficulty finding another ride south. He stopped in a *People's Drug Store* for a late lunch and a fountain-made chocolate shake. *People's* seemed to be the only place in town open on Sunday. While he waited for his order, he tried to wash some of the bloodstains from the lap of his blue cords with a glass of ice water. He thought about the nerve of that joker posing as a preacher. He was angrier about that Holy Joe act than he was that the jerk had cut him with the switchblade. But Mann, *People's* made one heckuva of a chocolate shake. After lunch, he walked the hot, dusty streets of Suffolk looking for another ride south.

Suffolk was a typical, sleepy southern town. The architecture featured brick and concrete buildings circa the Twenties with few buildings more than three stories in height. Most of the glass in town came by way of store front windows. Dixie searched in vain for that southbound lift.

An hour passed without luck. Dixie stood out of the searing heat bouncing off the concrete sidewalk in the shade of a brick building peering at an acoustic guitar on display in a music store front window. He murmured at the price tag: "Hmmm, seventy-four, seventy-five." He had no idea how much a guitar should 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. He had to get a ride out of there, but the streets were rolled up on Sunday. The town was dead.

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. "Look like any other young guy," he grouched. His dark hair was combed straight back in a wide duck tail down over his neck a few inches past his collar. "Mebbe, a little long for these folks?" His new moustache had grown in thick and black to match his wide sideburns. "Mebbe, should shave it?" His shades hid his eyes. "Mebbe, I oughtta take 'em off?" But he didn't.

He pinched his powder blue, sleeveless, 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 okay, except for the blood stains on his right inner thigh that he had been unable to wash out. He 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 and permit that knife cut to bust wide open.

"Maybe I oughtta call her again."

But all he ever got was a busy signal. "She's gonna be ticked for sure, me missin' her birthday like this. Can't blame her—her twenty-second, *on* the twenty-second." If she still wanted him, he wouldn't stiff her like the other night, even if he couldn't recall who she was. A car door opened and shut behind him, but he was too engrossed in his problems to pay attention.

"—Well, son, you plannin' on robbin' that stoah?"

Dixie jumped, swallowing hard at the sudden nearness of the voice behind him to his left. He turned slowly around towards the street. A couple yards away, an officer of the law lifted off the fender of his "Suffolk Police Department" squad car and leaned back against the door. The peace officer stood about six-foot four and had to weigh close to three hundred pounds. He wore sunglasses and an official police Stetson hat. A holstered pistol and a Black Jack baton hung from a black leather belt about his waist. Dixie hoped this wasn't about the preacher man and his Dodge.

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

"You play da 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."

"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 dat sea bag, please. Da-aat’s riiiiight. Now tuhn back ‘round. Put yoah hands ‘gainst da glass and spread yoah legs.”

A sparse number of Sunday afternoon pedestrians stopped to stare.

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

The officer noticed the blood on his cords. The cop placed his hand on his pistol.

“Jis’ do as I say, Son.”

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

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

“Yes sir.”

“So was my kid brotha, ovah at Khe Sanh. Dey told him ta hold da liahne. He did. Den an R’ah-Peh-Geh landed di-reckly on his hole. Dat was earleh in Sixteh-Eight. Da gen’ruls and pol’ticians ‘cided ta ‘bandon da place: ‘no *stray-tee-gic* or *tac-tih-cal* valuah,’ dey said.” He hesitated. “Den why was my brothah and da rest of da Twenteh-Sixt’ Marine holdin’ it in da fuhrst place? Why dey even they-ah?”

The large officer shrugged his shoulder, staring down the street.

“What a waste,” he said more to himself than to Dixie. “What a danged waste.”

He looked down at the sidewalk then shook his head.

Dixie said nothing. What could he say? He did relax a little. Maybe his Corps connection could help him out of this mess.

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

Feeling more confident and poised, Dixie replied. “Yes sir.”

“With da Twenteh-Sixt’ at Khe Sanh, mebbe?”

“Don’t believe so sir. Ba-B-Before my time ... Uh, actually, da-d-don’t know where I was, sir. Ga-got shot up a bit and lost my m-m-emory—sir.”

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

“Ya don’ say? Well, maybe yourah da luckeh one afta all. Jes’ lost dem 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 and checked out the contents of his wallet.

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

“B-back home, in Crest Hill, M-Maryland, near D.C.—my fa-f-folks place—sir.”

He handed Dixie back his wallet but stuck Dixie’s license in his uniform shirt pocket and pulled the pocket flap down over it. Dixie swallowed hard again. That was not a good sign.

“Den 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 Sundeht aftanoon?”

“Sir, I’m tryin’ to get to a pa-place called Ki-i-klil Da-Devil Hills, in Na-N-North Carolina. Sa-s-see my wife. Ta-today’s her, her ba-ba-birthday, sir.”

Dixie smiled hopefully. Still hiding his eyes behind his shades, the officer told Dixie to grab his gear and get into the front seat of the squad car. Sitting in front rather than in back behind the cage was a good sign. There were times it paid to be a Marine.

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

“Uh, yes sir.”

“Had a close shave, did ya boy?” The officer rubbed his nose and sniffed.

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

"S-Sir? Yes s-sir, pa-pretty close."

"Unh-hunh. Ya know dey's a problem back up da road a ways, t'otha side of da tunnel-bridge? Seems a preachah got hisse'f beat up real ba-ad and had his ca-ah stolen. Jis' a few hour ago. Don't suppose you know anethin' 'bout dat, do ya boy?"

Looking straight ahead, Dixie cleared his throat. He had replaced his shades over his nose, but he still did not want to look directly at the officer. He hadn't been read his rights, so he'd play it cool.

"Ca-ca-could be—sir."

"COULD BE?"

"Well sir, I ma-m-mean, it ca-ca-could be I ca-could *ga-guess* at what *m-might* have happened."

"Guess hunh? Well, g'ohn and guess yo-ah haid off, boy. Now's time ta come clean Son, cuz dat blood on yoah pant's leg deyah's lookin' mighteh s'spicious."

Dixie swallowed hard again.

"Ah'm waitin."

"Well, n-n-now, sir, it just ca-ca-could be a young man was hitch-hikin',sa-see?"

"Unh-hunh, hitch-hikin' is E-legal 'round hee-ah, boy."

"Ya-Yes sir. But it ca-could ba-be s-sir, this young fella's from out o' st-st-state and da-didn't know that, sir."

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

"Yes, sir. Ca-could be—sir." This guy was onto him for sure.

"But jis' da same, son, you need ta unnahstan', ign'rance of da law is no X-cuse 'round dese heeah pa-ahts. Now g'ohn."

"Yes sir, I da-d-do. I understand. Well now, it just ca-ca-could ba-be that this young man ga-got picked up by a fa-f-fella pa-passed himself off as a pa-preacher, but who was really a pa-pa-p-pervert."

"A pah'vuhrt? Ha! Ya don' say? Fanceh dat."

"Yes sir. And could be this pa-pervert preacher tried to molest this young hi-hitch-hiker at the pa-point of a knife? And the hi-hi-hitch-hiker da-da-defended himself as ba-best as he ca-could, under the cir-ca-ca-cumstances, that is—sir."

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

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

"Well yes sir, ca-could be, sir."

"Unh-hunh, well, ah'm still list'nin, son."

"Well sir, ca-could be this hi-hitch-hiker ca-cold-cocked this pa-p-pervert, left him along the road and took his ca-car."

"So dis young fellah might have stolen dis, uh 'lleged pah'vuhrt's motah VEE-hicle, dat it?"

"Oh, na-no sir, no sir, not at all, sir. Ca-could be the young man just drove the ca-car a few miles da-d-down the road and left it, see? So this, uh, pa-pervert ca-couldn't ca-come after the hi-hitch-hiker ba-before he, uh, the hi-hitch-hiker that is, ca-could ca-catch another ride."

"Ah see. And wheyah maight you s'pose dat VEE-hicle maight be right now, son?"

"Well sir, I sa-suppose—" Dixie turned to look the officer squarely in the eye—"and this is strictly a sup-pa-pa-position on my pa-part now, sir. But I supa-pose it ca-could be about a half mile north of a little town called Ba-Bridgetown just off the west side of Six-Twenty-Two, south of Six-Nineteen? Ma-maybe an old da-dirt road there and the ca-car might be found d-down that road on the right ha-hand side in some ba-bushes. Ba-but I'm just spa-speculatin', you understand, sir?"

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

"Yes sir, it ca-could be. Of ca-course, this is all just hyp-pa-pa-poetical on my pa-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?” The receiver 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 dat missin’ Dodge Swingah hef mile noath of Bridgeto’n west of Six-Twenteh-Two, down a duhrt road south of Six-Nineteen.

“On the west side of da road, sir, in some ba-bushes,” said Dixie. The Chief nodded.

“And Conneh Sue, tell Cahl to check for dat VEE-hicle on a duhrt road west site of da Counteh road in some booshes. ‘N’ let me know what he finds out soon’s poss’ble.”

“Duhrt road, west site of Six-Twenteh-Two in some booshes, hef mile noath of Bridgeto’n. Will do, Chief. O-vah.”

“Oh? An’ Conneh Sue? Get me da twenteh on that victim, plee-ase. O-vah.”

“Alraight Chief. Ten-four.”

The Chief clicked off then replaced the radio microphone in its holster.

“Is she a lookah?”

His question took Dixie by surprise.

“Sa-sir?”

“Dis li’l ol’ burthdeh gal o’ youahs.”

Dixie grinned. “Oh, yes sir, va-very much so.”

“Well, that’s good for when yoah young, but looks don’t allays las’.” The officer produced an opened pack of Juicy Fruit from his shirt pocket. “Kind o’ lak sweetness in chewin’ gum. You ‘membra dat, heeah?”

“Yes sir,” replied Dixie.

“Stick o’ gum?” He pulled a stick part way out of the pack and offered it to Dixie.

“Uh, Ja-J-Juicy Fruit. You bet.”

“You like Juiceh Froot? Me, too.”

He smiled agreeably as Dixie drew out the stick of gum.

“Now, tell me Son, jes’ what ya think a phoneh preachah man maight look like.”

Dixie unraveled the wrapper, stuck the gum in his mouth to smack it in time with the Chief and relaxed. He put the wrapper in his pants pocket.

“Well sir, ca-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 cc-collar.”

“Anehthin’ special ‘bout his face?”

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

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

“Green, pa-p-probably.”

“PRO’BLY?”

“Well, ca-could be. Yes sir.” The officer grunted.

“And, ca-could also be he calls himself ‘Joel’ ... sir.”

“Could be he calls hisse’f ‘Joel?’ Ha! If dat don’t beat all—jes’ like da prophet!”

He slapped his thigh and let out a deep belly laugh, shaking his head in disbelief.

They smacked their Juicy Fruits in harmony and conversed more than half an hour as the Chief made his Sunday afternoon rounds in his official police squad car. The Chief 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 he 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. They were headed back north on the main drag when 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 raight wherah you said dey'd be, keys in da 'nition. Deyah's blood on the passengah seat and doah. Raight front ti-ah's flat and da spaa-ah's missin' outta da trunk. O-vah.”

The officer pulled the cruiser over to the curb and stopped. They were near the main intersection in town, not too far from where Dixie had been picked up. Merle tilted his chin down and stared over his sunglasses at Dixie in a questioning manner.

“Raight front ti-ah's flat and da spaa-ah is missin'?”

Dixie made his best hang dog face.

“Well sir, ca-could be this hi-hitch-hiker did that, you see sir, to ba-buy himself ta-time for his escape. Probably, only let the air out of the t-tire. P-probably no da-damage, sir.”

“Oh? Ya don't b'lieb so, hunh?”

“Oh, no sir—that is, I da-don't *believe* so—Sir.”

“And da spaa-ah?”

“Oh, well, ca-could be he rolled the spare out across the highway b-behind some pines, across from where the whole thing happened, where that ba-billboard is adverta-tising *Winston* ciga-g-grettes. I mean, that is where a s-sign ca-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 CON-dition of dat VEE-hicle? What caused da flat? Ovah.”

“Da vee-hicle was fine Merle, only had dat blood on da passengah front seat and doah. Cahl said da flat was caused by a slow leak or someone let air-ah out o' da ti-ah. Victim's stayin' in da Pen'sula 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.”

“COULD BE ah took a guess, dang-it! And tell Cahl to go back to where da victim was found'n check 'cross da road behind da *Winston* billboahd foah dat spaa-ah. And make sure he knows wherah dat victim live and work. Dat's verah impoatan', Conneh Sue. You heah me now, Ovah?”

“Yes, Chief but why does Cahl need—”

“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, hee-ah? Ovah.”

“Yessah, yoah the Chief o' Suffolk, Merle. But ta home Ah'm chief o' da kitchen. An' you bes' memba which side of da bread yoah butta's on, Honeh. Now *you* heeah?”

The Chief rolled his eyes, but his tone of speech softened as quickly as it had flared a moment ago.

“Da's raight Conneh Sue. Da's a good gu-al, now. But ya know dis 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' waht ta a fiahn Sundeheh suppah togethah dis ebenin', okay? O-vah and out. Ten-four.”

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

“Now son, it COULD BE dis hitch-hikah was da instramen' of da Lo-ahd's vengeance today on dat phoneh preachah man, 'specially seein' as tis Sundeheh aftah all. Da Loh-ad don' take kindly to pa'vahts doin' deyah thing, 'specially He don' cott'n to it a'tall on Sundeheh—an' neither do Ah—at NO time.

“An' COULD BE, dey's been PREE-v'os REE-ports 'round dese pahrts of a man matchin' da 'scripshun you give of a preachah, who's been 'ttackin' young hitch-hikahs. Now, if I could LO-cate me dis 'lleged hitch-hikah—” The chief turned slightly and Dixie felt the big man's glare from behind his shades —“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 den it could tuhn out ta be da preachah's word agin a hitch-hikah's. And who's gonna belieb some stranger, some punk, hippeh hitch-hikah over a local preachah man? So, seems to me dat 'rrestin' dis hee-ah hitch-hikah be mo'

trouble'n it's woath at da moment. 'Specially, seein' as how da hitch-hikah done dese verah same res'dents hee-ah 'bouts a great sahvice. An' ah doubt ser'ously dat preachah will be MO-lestin' aneh one else rount hee-ah. Leas' ways, not while Ah'm Chief o' PO-lice in Su'folk."

The Chief looked out the windshield and spit out the last words in animated fashion, spraying the glass before him. He stepped on the gas and drove slowly around the corner to the right. He pulled over against the curb and calmly turned back to Dixie.

"And, COULD BE, if you step insite dat bus toom'nal raight yondah, ya maight catch yoahse'f a bus down road as fa-ah as 'Liz'bet Citeh. And it jes' a sho-aht piece from derah to Kill Debil Hill." He nodded to the terminal across the sidewalk. "Bus'll cost ya no moah'n ten dollah, less mos' lahkley, mebbe jes' fahve. Ya got da faa-ah?"

Dixie patted his wallet. "Yes sir. I surely do."

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

"Hold on deyah, boy. Don't unnahstan' me so fas'. Now, heah's yoah license."

He raised his shirt pocket flap to pull Dixie's license from his pocket and return it.

"Son, ya lissin' up good what I got ta say now. Hee-ah?"

He squeezed Dixie's forearm hard. He had Dixie's full attention. Merle's steely eyes lost all sense of human emotion, locking onto Dixie's peepers in laser-like fashion. Dixie realized why Merle here was the Chief of Police in Suffolk.

"Now, if'n Ah ebah ketch yoah ass hitchin' 'round hee-ah again, ya best b'lieb Ah'm goan' throw't raight in jail. Ya hee-ah me, boy?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Loud and clear, sir." But his reply failed to loosen him from the big man's grip.

"Unh-hunh. Now don' misunnahstan' what ah'm sayin' heeah boy, 'cause ah ain't jes' whistlin' Dixie hee-ah, son."

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

"Oh, no sir. I know that, sir. An' ah unnastan' everathin' ja-jes' all raight—sir."

Dixie grinned and saluted. Then the officer let go of his 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 replaced his shades on his nose.

"Sempah Fiah," replied Dixie. He saluted again when Merle nodded and got out.

Yessir. There are times it really pays to be a Marine. Dixie stepped onto the sidewalk and headed to the bus terminal. He didn't look back.

~ Could Be ~

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