

Not three blocks away from the Ryans' home in Crest Hill, Dixie tentatively opened his eyes to discover a light grey-painted ceiling anchoring a large brown, ceiling fan, which rotated almost imperceptibly over his head. Or was it the other way around—the ceiling was turning and the fan was stationary? Or maybe, it was his head that was spinning? He blinked slowly in time with the overhead fan. Where in the Sam Hill was he anyway? He closed his eyes in an effort to remember, but he failed. All he could remember were dreams of Ryz'n, of him and Ryz'n making love in various places: in a courtyard at Pocomoke; on the "Hill;" in a cornfield between cornstalks eight feet high; in a fancy hotel room at the Surf'sWell surrounded by mirrors; and on a tropical beach. The dreams were so real that Dixie was convinced they certainly must have occurred.

He was scared to look at the sheets however, because he was quite certain he had done something during these wild dreams. The last dream had been the old standby with him reaching for the silhouette girl in the mist on a riverbank, but, as always, she had eluded his grasp yet again. That dream usually provoked his juices. Maybe Ryz'n really was the silhouette girl after all, even though she did not seem large enough for that mysterious vision.

Dixie opened his eyes again. Up towards the ceiling to his left, sunlight squirted along the sill from the edge of closed blinds. The blinds covered a wide casement window that ran across a wall. A ticking clock exploded bombshells behind his head with each second that passed. Dixie arched his neck, tucking his head back underneath the nape of his neck, to look at an alarm clock upside down with the crown of his head resting on the bed. His throat was exposed helplessly to any predator that might happen by. His head exploded, thus ending his quick glimpse of the clock.

The hands on the clock had indicated it was almost six! Didn't he have to be at work at eight? Well, he had time. He relaxed only to feel a cannonball fire through his skull from front to back. Dixie returned his head to its original resting place. He had not had a hangover like this since that New Year's Eve celebration with Lori Lei in Honolulu, right after the Corps had officially discharged him. He had sworn to himself then he would never get that schnockered again. Obviously, he was not a man of his word.

Dixie slowly became conscious of a weight in his lap and a rhythmic tickling sensation on the inside of his right thigh. He tucked his chin and lifted his head off the bed to observe what was down below. The detonations inside his brain redoubled. Dixie realized now that he lay diagonally across a double bed. He had glimpsed what appeared to be an auburn head of human hair or so he thought. The opposition fired its retaliatory shot, as another cannon ball burst, this time from the back of his skull to the front. Dixie dropped his head to the pillow. My gosh! This was much worse than Honolulu. Dixie made no other movement.

His arms were yet by his sides, his right palm lay flat out upon the bed, while his left lay surprisingly upon that orange-red hair of that foreign human head resting in his lap. He wiggled his toes just to prove he could make a connection with his lower half. His toes worked; that was a good sign, because he felt only air about his feet and beneath

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his heels. Dixie presumed he was not under any covers and his feet hung over the edge of the bed.

The weight of that head upon his lower abdomen and thigh seemed to increase the pressure on his bladder, the pressure that had awakened him. He needed to use the bathroom SOON! With extreme caution, Dixie rose to his elbows and surveyed his situation. There *was a naked woman* lying on her side between his wide spread legs. She had her arms wrapped around his upper right thigh and her right leg snaked around and beneath his lower left leg, with her right heel on top of his left instep. Who the heck was she? Dixie had not a clue. Her left leg was thrown lazily across his right ankle. His head was pounding viciously, so he lay back down, once again staring at the overhead fan to collect his thoughts. Watching the slowly spinning fan served to calm him. He closed his eyes to concentrate. He feared that he had received a new case of amnesia.

The previous night was one gigantic blank. He remembered the thunderstorm yesterday and entering the segregated bar by accident. He remembered almost getting killed when Paul stepped over his foot on the accelerator. He recalled dressing up and visiting with Paul's family. He remembered meeting some girls and going out to dinner, and Ry's performance, but there was nothing after that. This was embarrassing! Amnesia was one thing, but he prided himself on his short term memory since he had awakened from a coma in Subic Bay over two years ago. However, if he did not get up soon and hit the bathroom, he'd have an even bigger embarrassment on his hands!

Dixie formed a plan of action and attacked. He gently untangled himself from his unknown sleeping partner, slipping first one leg and then another from the grasp of her ubiquitous tentacles. On his stomach now, as gently as possible without disturbing her slumber, Dixie eased out from under her death grip, freeing himself completely. The woman snored, as her mouth opened and she stretched out, rolling onto her back. The interrupted snore was the only change in her slumbering demeanor.

With "Mission Extraction" accomplished, Dixie crawled off the bed, staggered to the bathroom, holding his head as he went. Much to his expectant relief after he did his business, he found some aspirins in the medicine cabinet and downed a handful. Who was that cadaver staring back at him from the mirror on the medicine cabinet door? My gosh! His breath horrified him. Dixie brushed his teeth with his fingers, using the Colgate toothpaste he found on the sink counter. He noticed his gold dental plate was missing. *Dang!* He'd have to find it. The thing was not only brand new, it was pure gold! The adjustments the family dentist had made to that plate made the thing so comfortable that the dentures felt like the real McCoys.

Then Dixie swallowed some Listerine and some Scope mouthwash. He doubled up on his morning cocktail, holding it in his mouth, while he performed the Corp's hygiene drills for bathing in the field. *Semper Fi!* When he was done, he expectorated the mouthwash cocktail into the sink. He lapped from the faucet, like a dog. Back in the bedroom hallway, he heard more snoring but it came from behind him and to his right. Curious, he looked into the other bedroom and observed, what looked to be Paul sleeping with a beautiful young girl.

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*Wasn't that Tasha, Paul's girlfriend? Then who had been lying next to me?*

Dixie returned to the master bedroom. He picked his pants off the bed and his shirt, socks and slacks off the floor. The simple act of bending over had set off more thunderous cannon ball volleys inside his head. To let the volleys subside, slowly, carefully, he eased his butt down on a straight back chair against the wall between the door and the bureau and close to the foot of the bed. Dixie took several deep breaths. He stood up to tug on his shorts, sitting down again to put on his socks. As he pulled his second sock on, he looked up when the woman snorted like a pig. Lying on her back with her left hand on the bed beside her, her legs remained partly crossed below the calves. She lay partly off the bed, but her raw-boned handsomeness struck him.

She was a big woman but not a bad-looking woman by any means, with curves in all the right places. She was neither thin nor fat. Actually, her curvy body was plenty OK. Dixie angled his head so he could view her face more directly. Nope, he had never seen her before in his life. Of that, he was sure. But she looked somewhat old, based on the crow's feet around her eyes and the sag of her breasts. She reminded him of the "Big Nurse" in that Jack Nicholson movie. Dixie finished dressing. He sucked on his tongue to see if his breath had improved. It had, a little. The sure cure was to eat something and brush and gargle again.

Then he remembered his missing gold, dental plate. He could stick his tongue through that large gap between his eyeteeth to his upper lip. *Mann, where was that thing? Sure would hate to lose them gold ones!* That dentist had made him the best, most comfortable plate he had ever had and he did not want to lose it, nor the six hundred dollar golden investment he had made in them. Dix searched around the room to no avail. He checked the bathroom, but no luck. Dixie went back to the bedroom and searched the far side of the bedroom under the casement window. Defeated, he slumped back down in the straight-backed chair. Once more, he glanced at the woman lying out of kilter upon the bed. She had slid over a little, so that she was more centered upon the bed now. However, her left arm from the elbow down still lay out straight over the edge of the bed, defying gravity, because elbows don't bend that way, he reasoned.

She lay spread-eagled on her back now, snoring loudly, with her arms out across the bed and her legs somewhat apart. Her knees hung over the foot of the bed. She was sleeping one off, too. And even though she snored like a trucker, there was a kind of raw yet naturally earthy, feminine grace in her curves. Hmmpf! His teammates on the Printers would pay a week's salary for the view Dixie was enjoying right now. Seemed as if all those guys could talk about was beaver shots! Something caught Dix's eye. Partially obscured betwixt her ruddy legs, Dixie found what he was seeking. He crawled gently onto the bed leaning on his left hand and knee and tugged gently on the plate with his right hand, but something held it fast. He jerked it quickly and the thing let go as he pulled it out from under her leg. The Big Nurse stopped snoring to let out a not so muffled yelp. Dixie grimaced in empathy for her. She opened her eyes dreamily.

"Ummm Nicky. Du jes' ke'p com on, donchu bay-bee?"

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She smiled widely and spoke lazily, her eyes still half-closed. Her accent was decidedly Russian. Dixie laughed. He hoped he had not revealed any state secrets in his sleep. Ha! Dixie tried to step back from the bed. He wanted to inspect his dental plate, which he hoped had not been damaged. However, the Russian raised her legs and locked them around his waist before he could move. Then lazily, she jerked him forward, pulling him off balance, in what seemed to be a much practiced motion. He fell forward into her waiting arms with a thud, which did not seem to bother the hearty mama at all. She tightened her legs about his thighs as if she were a boa constrictor. He held the plate out of harm's way in his right fist. The Cossack moved her arms upward with her hands feeling their way behind him along his lengthy muscular back, as if she were giving him a finger massage. Dixie lifted his head to protest. However, she purred, bringing her arms closer together, pulling him down onto her and squashing his face into the deep valley of her sagging bosom. Fortunately, Dix turned his head at the last minute, so he could keep his nose and mouth free to breathe. She locked onto him like a vise. He had one eye in her chest and the other to the ceiling, imagining that he must look like a hooked, walleye fish. The tighter she squeezed, the more his heads pounded and the more he struggled to wiggle off her hook.

The ruddy-haired woman pulled Dixie's mouth over hers. *Holy Mackerel!* Her breath was worse than his had been, if that were possible. She explored the gap in his upper front plate as if she knew it were there, purring all the while, luxuriating in his gum work. Dixie had to get out of this as diplomatically as possible. After all, if she were Russian, she could be maybe like a spy for Spectre or something—as in “From Russia with Halitosis.” He did not want to ignite the “Cold War” into Armageddon here. Dixie returned her passionate embrace and that seemed to calm her for a second, as he hoped it would. She relapsed.

Dixie pulled himself away slowly. Her eyes were closed. She was breathing slowly, deeply, in rhythm again. “Mission Extraction II” was not as difficult as the first one. Dixie simply eased himself out of her somnolent embrace and off the bed. Then he went to the bathroom for another mouthwash cocktail as he inspected and cleaned his golden dental plate, which he also bathed in mouthwash. He tried his golden dentures out. Something wasn't quite right. He inspected the plate and felt an impediment of some kind. He washed the plate under the faucet between his thumb and forefinger. Geeze! At least the dental plate looked OK now, so he popped the thing back in his mouth and presto! It worked great, smooth as silk, none the worse for wear. Thank goodness.

In the medicine cabinet mirror, Dixie suddenly spied the Big Nurse standing behind him in the doorway. She *must* be a spy, the way she had sneaked up on him. She smiled and glided up right next to his rear end, hugging her sleeping partner from behind, rubbing her loins into his butt. She was tall for a woman, only a couple inches shorter than he was, but she had meat on her bones. The redhead rested her chin on his right shoulder. The Ruuskie nestled the side of her head and cheek into Dixie's neck, like a cat, and like a cat, she purred. “Nicholas, yu best vidhoud kestion.” She kissed his neck with little kisses, grasped his manhood in her large hand and turned him

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around towards her. Dixie, who realized the establishment was running low on mouthwash cocktails, seized the initiative by turning into her, seizing her by the shoulders and kissing the redhead on the forehead and pulling her head down, thus burying her stinking mouth into his shoulder. He hugged her and patted her on the back.

“Well, thank you. I, I aim to please.” He tried to leave, but she held him firm, massaging him with one hand where he least expected or wanted.

“Well, yu shure hidt merk last nihdt, bay-bee.” Her face lit up with a bright smile.

Dixie blushed with embarrassment. “Well, I, I was an expert rifleman in the Corps, Ma’am! Look lady, I really have to go to work. I—”

She nodded but ordered, “But virst I veex yu bigck breackfist. Yu vwait.” Then she softened completely, “OK, Huh-nee?”

Dixie nodded reluctantly with a sickening smile and left the bathroom so she could prepare to meet the day. The woman suggested he retrieve the newspaper from the flat’s outer hallway, outside the front door on the other side of the living room. He did and he read the sports section in the living room, to take his mind off his predicament, while she took care of business. All he wanted was to leave peacefully and get out as quickly as possible. And he prayed that he would *never, ever* recall what might have happened between him and the Cossack last night.

The paper said the Orioles had won again, topping the Red Sox 10-6 at Fenway Park in a slugfest. The Birds had thrown four pitchers and the Red Sox, five. Singleton, May, Duncan and Blair had multi-hit games for the O’s. Baylor had knocked in three with a homer in the seventh, which chased Cleveland who had taken the loss for the Sox. George Allen was holding some open tryouts for the Redskins. With his speed, Dixie figured he could make the team, but he did not want to get his body beat up like that. He had received more than his share of physical punishment. Besides, he did not remember ever playing football, even though everyone said he had been a gridiron star his senior year of high school.

*Amnesia! What **had** happened last night?*

Dixie just could not remember and he was thankful for that small blessing. His sleeping partner emerged from the bedroom wearing a silver and green cotton bathrobe, which came to a couple of inches above her knee. A sash belt tied around her waist, showcased her big curves. She did not exhibit any effects of a hangover, as she glided across the floor and modeled her robe for him. The woman pivoted, turned, and posed. She moved like a professional model.

*Sheesh! All these women like to model for me. Why the heck is that?*

Her antics reminded him of Ryz’n in the motel room that second night he was back here. The wrinkles he had noticed around the Ruskie’s eyes, mouth and forehead had disappeared as if by magic. She looked several years younger. It was a frickin’ miracle.

“Du like?”

“Umm, very impressive, very impressive.” Dixie grimaced. She was big, but she was built and her stomach had remained suitably flat over the years. He could not argue

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that, though her breasts drooped a little, but with melons that size, what would you expect?

“Used a model in Soviet Union, butta ...”

“But what?”

“Haf bay-beee!” She grinned, patted her tummy with one hand and her hip with the other. She smiled, “Butta Nicky wass goot vur yu, Niet?”

Dixie smiled up at her diplomatically, perhaps too diplomatically, for she loosened her belt and sat down on his lap, as her bathrobe fell open. The Cossack dived into him again. She had drunk from the same breakfast cocktail he had downed. Dixie wanted to get out of there, but he felt trapped. Fortunately, the cavalry arrived from a curious direction, the other bedroom.

“Mother! What are you doing? I’m ashamed of you! This is how you act when you tell me how I should act? No way!” It was Natasha.

*Mother? What did she mean by that ‘mother’ stuff?* Certainly, this woman was too young to be Natasha’s mother.

An argument developed between the two women while, behind them, Dixie observed his buddy Paul, toting some clothes, slip his bare butt into the bathroom. As the females’ argument intensified, Dixie stole silently across the apartment, through the dining room. He could see the Bonneville through the sliding glass doors down below the grassy bank in the parking lot, waiting to fly him away from this nightmare. The top to the big car was still down from the previous evening’s escapades. He figured the interior would be covered in dew. Dixie saw his chance. He slid back the glass door and stepped out onto the brief concrete patio. He thought he had made good his getaway, when his sleeping partner came running out the door after him with her short robe, flapping openly in the breeze, revealing all her bona fides. The Big Nurse screamed and grabbed him by either arm. Neighbors turned at the sound of her scream to look out of their neighboring garden apartments, through their sliding glass doors or overhead from over their deck railings. Dixie was embarrassed as hell.

The Russian implored Dixie to come back in and let her fix a good breakfast for him. She explained that she was not some prostitute. “Niet!” I knew how tread man right! “Komm back, haf goodt breackfisd ‘vure yu leaf. See how exc’llend cook I am.” Not wanting to cause a scene, Dixie sighed reluctantly and relented.

Within minutes, the apartment filled with the aroma of frying bacon and grinding coffee. The Russian spared no expense as she put out flapjacks, eggs and plenty of orange juice, because, she said that Dixie had told her last night that he liked orange juice. Paul however received nothing but a stern glare from the elder woman. She told Natasha that she would have to take care of Paul, lest she become a prostitute, herself, which meant the younger couple shared a bowl of cereal. Evidently, Natasha did not know how to cook.

After breakfast, the women followed their men out the sliding glass door, down the grassy incline to the waiting Bonneville convertible. Dixie checked the vinyl seats for dew, but found none. *That’s strange.* He backed the car out of the parking space. His breakfast cook followed him and leaned over the car to kiss him. He thanked her for

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breakfast and she thanked him for last night. “It vass goot tradet—lasd nid wur vis morning.” She said she would never forget it and she hoped he’d come back and see her real soon. She winked coquettishly. Dixie nodded and saluted with his lazy James Dean—Jett Rink wave. However, that impotent parting was not good enough for her. She leaned over the door, with her robe flowing open once more, kissing him passionately and before he could come up for air, she clutched his head to her, burying his face again between the deep cleavage formed by her ruddy, Cossack breasts.

“Vis where yu belongk, Neek’las. Rrrighd herrre fiv Mama.”

By now, Paul, who had made his way to the car, was cracking up in the seat next to him. Natasha, not to be outdone, mimicked her mother with Paul on the passenger side of the Bonnie. Dixie belched after her tight hug and stepped on the gas tearing away from the two women, both with their short bathrobes flapping in the open breeze, like mother like daughter.

“Nothing like the hot breath of the Cossack, hey Nick? Now was I right or what?”

Paul turned and waved in parting to the lovely ladies as Dixie turned out of the apartment parking lot right onto the Boulevard. He sped past the Russians’ place to where Nick could make a left through the median and head back the other way.

Dixie nodded. “But you said she was Natasha’s sister.”

“Anh what’s the difference? Mother, sister, it’s all in the family, right Nick boy?”

“Just glad I can’t remember her name. Glad it wasn’t her grandmother, for cryin’ out loud! Glad I can’t remember a darned thing about last night!”

“You’re kiddin’ me, right?” Paul did a double take. He was clearly upset.

“Fraid not.”

“Aww, that’s bull Mann, pure BULL!”

“Maybe it’ll come to me. What I’d really like to know is why the sun is so high in the sky if it’s supposed to be around seven and there’s no dew on the seats?”

“Have you flipped, Mann? It’s twelve-thirty! Bax and them are gonna skin us alive!”

“Twelve-thirty!?! But when I looked at the alarm clock when I woke up, it said almost ...” Then Dixie remembered he had seen the clock upside down. Almost six upside down was really eleven-thirty, right side up. Mann!

“Hey Nicky, I don’t believe that bull about you not remembering last night. That is pure B.S., Mann!”

Dixie did not argue. He did not feel up to it. He dropped Paul at the Salvarano’s house and said he would be back for him in fifteen minutes to take him to work. Dixie watched as an irate Mrs. Salvarano stepped out onto her concrete front porch, waiting for her wayward elder son with a scowl on her face. Dixie hung around a minute to see what would happen. Paul’s mom let him have a piece of her mind, as he walked up the sidewalk. She kept at him, while she held the front screen door open for him. As Paul walked through the front door, she whacked him across the back of his head to expedite his passage across the threshold. Dixie winced, partly for Paul, but partly for himself, because he knew a similar reception awaited him in just a couple minutes.

He was right. Before he could even get inside the door, Dixie received a double barrel blast as both his mother and visiting grandmother clobbered him on the front

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porch. In addition, two jackhammers began to dig a tunnel inside his head from either end of his brain, hoping to merge in the center. As he stepped into the brick rambler, Dixie saw his Uncle Bill sitting in his wheelchair. Bill was playing solitaire not ten feet from Dixie, at the other end of the long modular combo furniture piece stereo system, which rested beneath the living room picture window.

Bill nodded and grinned. Above the verbal assault from Dixie's mom and grandmom, Bill confessed that he had been on the receiving end of such salvos many times before. He reminded Nicholas that his nephew's unused first name was William for a reason. Bill admitted he usually blew up at his interrogating prosecutors. Even as Dixie's mother and grandmother bombarded him unmercifully, Bill called out encouragement to his nephew from the comparative safety of the other side of the room, complimenting his namesake that he was holding himself in check pretty well. Bill quipped that he admired that kind of self-control in a young man and told Dixie so. Dix noted that Bill's was the only kind word Dix received upon his arrival.

As Dixie prepared for work under a constant maternal, verbal barrage, his headache, which had dissipated somewhat after breakfast, had long since resurfaced. He popped some more aspirin and grabbed a Pepsi. Dix needed those bubbles. His mother reminded him that he had a game that night down at the regional park. He had forgotten about that. She threw his cleaned baseball things at his feet and reminded him twice that she had remembered to wash them for him. He mumbled an apologetic thank you and started to leave the house, but she blocked the door. She would not allow him to go until he had told her where he had been and what he had done the previous evening and explained why he had not come home all night. His grandmother, who had been following them about, loomed back in the bedroom hallway. She concurred loudly with her daughter. Even Bill stopped playing solitaire to hear Dixie's explanation.

"Well Mother, to be perfectly honest, I, I don't really know everything." Bill snickered. Grandma interrupted.

"Oh well, that's a handy excuse. Don't think you can get away with that amnesia stuff with us, Buster! Your present recall is just fine!" She shook her stubby little forefinger at him to emphasize her point. "We all know that!"

"Quiet mother! You don't know that. Let him talk."

"Well, like I said, I don't know much but I think Paul might know. I'm going to ask him on the way to work. All I remember is—" Dixie's eyes wandered from his mother's gaze to the ceiling as he tried to concentrate. "I woke up." Seeing the ceiling reminded him of the ceiling fan he woke to an hour ago and he smiled to himself. "Yes, that's right. I woke up on my back on a bed in this apartment, up in Walnut Hill and, uh ..."

He started to chuckle as he looked past his mother at Bill who was failing to suppress a smirk. Without a word from his uncle, Dixie instinctively knew this must all be déjà vu for Bill. Suddenly Dixie felt a new camaraderie, a deeper kinship, with his uncle. Dixie gathered himself and directed his attention to his mother.

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“I, uh, woke up and got dressed and this woman, this very kind woman, by the way,” Dixie’s beamed all hearts and flowers at his two mothers, “fixed me a terrific breakfast. She’s a great cook, Mom, really. Paul was there, he can tell you. We both ate and then we came home.”

“What woman? Who fixed you breakfast?”

Dixie sighed, “Umm, I, ya know, I, I’m a little murky on the name. Maybe Paul can tell me.”

Dixie fumbled with his hands. By this time, Bill was cracking up silently in the other room, doing everything he could to conceal the mirth spreading over his face, even though he failed to conceal his blatant convulsions.

“YOU DON’T KNOW HER NAME!?!?!” You spend the night in a woman’s apartment. She fixes you breakfast and YOU DON’T EVEN KNOW HER NAME!!!” His mother was shouting. Dixie grabbed the side of his aching head.

“Well now, then, there, I, I know the other one’s name was ... Natasha.”

“The other one! Natasha Slutskaya? You mean you spent the night with her mother? TONYA?” His mom smacked herself in the forehead. “Why that woman is a disgrace to the entire neighborhood. She’s even been blackballed from the PTA, for goodness sake! And she’s from Russia, a Communist, to boot!” Grandma’s jaw dropped far enough to allow small planes to enter. As a staunch Republican, she could not abide Communists.

“Yeah, ‘From Russian with Love,’” replied Dixie wearily.

“My grandson spent the night with the town’s pinko hussy? What a disgrace, *what* a disgrace! Well, I never! What have you got to say for yourself William Nicholas?” His right-wing grandmother was truly incensed.

Dix had reached the end of his rope. He could not laugh anymore. A slow, double pounding assailed his brain. He rubbed both of his temples simultaneously with the thumb and fingers of his left hand.

His mother bullied, “Well, what do you have to say for yourself, William Nicholas? Anything positive at all? Answer your grandmother!”

“Gee, I uh, I dunno. I, I guess I just didn’t stop and think but, I, I guess that all I can say is that ... well, spending the night with a pinko hussy is better than ... than spending the night with a, with a, hinko pussy.” Bill dropped his deck of cards, as he cracked up out loud. Mrs. Sheeboom slapped her vulgar, irreverent son across the mouth. Dixie quit smiling and looked hard at her. Just who did she think she was? He knew she was supposed to be his mother, but he felt no family tie to her, despite the early childhood memories that had begun to flood over him the last couple weeks and the old family movies they had shown him. It had been as if he were watching some kid in a dream. For Dixie, his mother was the Corps and his father, Uncle Sam. He stared hard at her.

She did not have a clue as to how he felt. Her dour tone reflected her indignation.

“Go wash your mouth out with soap and get to work. You’ll be lucky if you’re not fired for Pete’s sake. Pshaw!” Dixie left for his room to change for work. Personally, he would be delighted if he were fired. Again, she reminded him. “And don’t forget

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you've got a ball game tonight. I washed your uniform, even though I don't think it was ever dirty!" That was a back-handed slap at his benching. Dixie knew his family was more embarrassed about that unpleasant fact than he was, because he knew he should be playing. If the manager wanted to play pride games, bench him and lose because of it, then that was the manager's problem. Though he was angry with his mother, Dixie followed all her commandments, except for washing his mouth with soap. Then again, maybe she was right about that. He had no idea where his mouth had been the previous night and he did not want to know either. So he did wash his mouth with soap and water and brushed his teeth, again, this time with a toothbrush.