

My Life Through Motorcycles

Edwin Thompson

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Dedication

Thank you Ruben, who handed me my very first taste of two-wheeled freedom in 1970. To Terry and Russ, who were far more than brothers-in-law—they were the brothers I never had. Thank you, Terry, for bringing an eleven-year-old kid to see *Easy Rider*, for convincing my dad to let me race motocross, and for opening the doors to your Suzuki dealership, transforming a childhood dream into a lifelong reality. Thank you, Russ, for driving anywhere at a moment's notice to haul home my "next" bike, and for arranging the unforgettable road trips that fulfilled those childhood "*Easy Rider*" dreams. And mostly, thank you God for your blessing, protection, and these temporal treats.

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INTRODUCTION TO SECTION ONE:

"I knew I shoulda made that left toin in Albakoikie."

—Bugs Bunny

It is a sobering exercise to realize that I can trace the trajectory of my entire life back to a single decision made in the fifth grade. But much like Bugs Bunny taking his famous wrong "toin" at Albuquerque, that was the exact moment I wandered off the map.

Over fifty years of riding should have left me broken, but miraculously, my physical damage is limited to arthritis, ruined knees, and a spine that belongs to an eighty-year-old. I have no use for the weather channel; my lower back serves as a highly accurate, built-in barometer. When a low-pressure system rolls in off the Gulf, my vertebrae lock up with a precision that meteorologists can only dream of.

Since then, I've had many interesting experiences and learned countless lessons—many of them while astride a motorcycle. There are enough stories to fill a book—so I did.

This book is a collection of coming-of-age and aging stories that trace my life from being an eleven-year-old boy in 1970 to a sixty-seven-year-old man in 2026. I've lived life like I rode motorcycles: wide-open and dangerous. My foresight is about as far-reaching as the tip of my nose.

I've always lived for "now," and I was told many times that I was "sacrificing the future on the altar of today." I was always acutely aware of the transactional nature of gravity, speed, and adrenaline—fun ain't free, and the piper is a merciless debt collector. But I've had more fun than any ten law-abiding citizens combined.

If I were lying on my deathbed tomorrow, I'd be grinning from ear to ear—a prediction

I can make with absolute confidence, because that's exactly what I was doing right after my heart attack. There is nothing quite like a sudden cardiovascular rebellion to force a man to pull over and look in the rear-view mirror. I've also found that time spent aboard a motorcycle lends itself to self-reflection.

That said, let me share my first conscious memory of my feelings toward motorcycles. When I was nine, my collie and childhood best friend, King, was struck and killed by a motorcycle. In my grief, I swore an oath to hate bikes for the rest of my life. Obviously, my trajectory underwent a radical course correction. In the decades since, I've owned over fifty different motorcycles—and I have never owned another dog.

In 1969, I was ten years old. I was a nerd. I wore glasses. I liked astronomy. I was a straight-A student and read voraciously. My only bad habits were smoking cigarettes and cursing—but only I knew that.

I grew up on the shores of Lake Pontchartrain in Bucktown—a hard-bitten fishing community that operated under its own laws. It was an insular world tucked inside a New Orleans suburb, which is a bit like a nesting egg of lawlessness. The local kids were famously feral; by nine or ten, most of them were already working on shrimp boats, hauling in catches and pulling the weight of grown men. I was performing a man's labor, too, but for my father's pest control business.

Between going to a private school, my dad's shiny Cadillac, and our Baptist Sunday school routine in a neighborhood of devout Catholics, I might as well have been a space alien dropped onto the scene.

In fifth grade, I attended my first public school: East End Elementary in Bucktown. Those opening days thrust me directly among the local kids. I couldn't have stood out

more if I'd had a flashing light on my head. By day two, I had attracted the attention of most of the girls in the fifth grade—simply because I was new and odd. A showdown with the boys was imminent.

That day came early one September morning in 1969. As I stood on the asphalt kicking pebbles, the playground's undisputed kingpin, Ruben—better known as "The Boog"—sauntered over with his entourage.

Ruben looked like a miniature, switchblade-era greaser: slicked-back dark hair, chiseled features, a blindingly white T-shirt, cuffed jeans, and black leather shoes that looked entirely too clean for a schoolyard. He carried himself with the quiet confidence of a landlord inspecting his property. He stopped a foot away from me, squinted, and delivered his opening decree.

"What's da madder wi-choo, ya too good for us? Whad-ya, some kinda fruit? And if ya ain't, don't even think about messin' with our chicks."

"Yeah," echoed his cohorts.

I knew my response would set the tone for the entire school year, if not my physical survival. I slowly took off my glasses, slid them into my pocket, and balled up my fists. I knew how to fight, and I knew how to brawl dirty if I had to. I looked him dead in the eye and unblinkingly delivered my counter-offer.

"Fuck you, dickhead."

The playground went dead silent. Without my lenses, the surrounding world blurred into a soft-focus watercolor, but my target remained sharp. Ruben scanned the crowd, measuring the weight of the moment, then slowly broke into a grin and extended his hand.

"Ya seem cool. I'm Ruben. What's ya name?"

"Edwin," I replied, relieved.

That was the defining moment that led to a long, adventure-filled friendship with Ruben,

until he was eventually sent to the infamous Louisiana "Farm"—Angola Prison. Ruben is entirely responsible for hooking me on motorcycles.

I got my first motorcycle a few weeks before my eleventh birthday. I got my second a few weeks after, instilling a lifelong philosophy: I should own more than one motorcycle whenever possible.

By twelve, I'd earned my first badge of honor—at least among the crowd I ran with. I went to jail: handcuffs, fingerprints, and lock-up—the whole nine yards. I was "Bad" with a capital B.

My obsession soon morphed into something clinical. By seventh grade, my family had taken to calling me "The Fiend," a moniker I wore with pride. I could identify the angry, high-pitched scream of an approaching Suzuki two-stroke or the throaty, rhythmic thumping of a Honda four-stroke long before the machine actually rounded the corner.

By my early teens, the culture of Bucktown had fully taken hold of me. It was a place that viewed the law as a set of loose guidelines, and those flexible standards followed me like a shadow into adulthood.

From twelve to fifteen, I bounced between public schools and the private Baptist academy I had first attended—a desperate attempt by my parents to halt the downhill slide my friends and I were on. In truth, I never gave in to peer pressure; I was the peer pressure.

In ninth grade, I began racing motocross. My brother-in-law, Terry, had been given a Suzuki dealership as a college graduation gift. For a motorcycle fanatic, it was a dream. But by the end of that year, the public school system "asked" me not to return.

I went back to the Baptist school, where they eventually handed me a diploma as a favor to my father. I did have to score a one

hundred and twenty-four on my History/Bible final exam to pass. I nailed it.

Growing up steeped in New Orleans culture in the 1970s--well, I figured there was a reason they called it "high" school. My extracurricular activities were expensive; let's just say Bernie Madoff would have been a proud role model. Yet, by some miracle of bureaucratic oversight, I held a license to sell securities by the time I was eighteen.

I never actually pursued the stockbroker life, mostly because I had the self-awareness to realize it would inevitably end with me wearing a bright orange jumpsuit in a federal prison. To my Bucktown-bred mind, the concept of "insider trading" made absolutely no sense. If you stumbled across a piece of information to help a friend make a buck, you shared it with them. That wasn't a financial crime; it was basic manners where I came from. Apparently, the Securities and Exchange Commission lacked our local sense of hospitality.

Instead of Wall Street, I tried college, adopting a "Renaissance man" curriculum, allowing me to drift aimlessly from horticulture to interior design before ultimately majoring in self-destruction. I quickly discovered that an 8:00 a.m. lecture is entirely incompatible with a 4:00 a.m. bedtime. I developed a bleeding ulcer and walked away from academia.

When the dust finally settled, I was selling Honda cars, emerging from a prescription Ativan fog, getting married, and settling into the family pest control business.

Through the years, I've found that owning a motorcycle is like having aspirin and nitroglycerin in the medicine cabinet. I may not always need them, but when I do, they are life-saving--one for the daily headaches, the other for when my heart needs a jolt. It was all medicinal.

More than fifty years have slipped by since I first kicked a motorcycle starter, but the memories remain etched in the silver of my mind. Some have begun to tarnish and fade around the edges, like an old daguerreotype where the metal slowly flakes away to reveal a clear, ghostly image beneath.

So, let me take you for a ride down Memory Lane. Bring your helmet. I crash a lot, but I promise the ride won't be boring.



1970 HONDA P50

April 1970: My friend Ruben had a Sears Allstate moped; he was the one who first exposed me to motorcycling. He let me ride it several times, and I was hooked immediately. I had to have one. I started a campaign to convince my father—I begged, I pleaded, and I prayed.

My prayers were answered unexpectedly one afternoon. Shortly before I turned eleven, I came home from school to find a brand-new, shiny, red-and-white Honda P50 parked on the back porch. My dad had bought it for me—but not as a birthday gift.

My father operated on a personal logic of giving that completely ignored the calendar. He gave presents when they made sense, not because a date on a wall dictated that it was my birthday or Christmas. It was a philosophy of deliberate generosity rather than obligated duty—a lesson I've carried with me ever since. Obligations are cheap, but an unexpected, unprovoked gift is unforgettable.

And just like that, I finally had my first taste of absolute freedom—a red-and-white Honda P50.

Because the P50 featured a pedal-start system, the neighborhood kids affectionately christened it "the girls' bike." In the schoolyard economy of Bucktown, those comments were practically currency for a fistfight, especially when paired with the inevitable "four-eyes" jokes. I had been tethered to thick, thick-lens glasses since I was two years old, making me an easy target.

Yet, behind those lenses, I lived in a cinematic dreamworld. I was still nerdy enough to sit in front of the television in my pajamas, wearing a red metal-flake half-helmet, utterly transfixed by *Then Came Bronson*. I spent hours dreaming of a vagabond life on two wheels, traversing the American

landscape and, naturally, crossing paths with beautiful, mysterious women along the way.

From the get-go, riding the P50 taught me lessons, starting with how to fight off the neighborhood bullies who ambushed me for my new machine. I learned several very effective, if not exactly fair, defense techniques from my brawls with the Bucktown Boys.

Most importantly, the P50 taught me to ride with all of my heart and soul. That initial sensation of slicing through the humid air with nothing more than a twist of my right wrist was pure, unadulterated heaven. My brain had always run in fifty directions at once—a chaotic static of noise and impulse—but the moment I twisted that throttle, the world snapped into razor-sharp focus. Motorcycles were like two-wheeled Adderall.

In 1970, there was no such thing as an ADD diagnosis; kids like me were simply labeled "BAD," and handed over to school principals who believed the cure was a heavy wooden paddle or a thick strap of cowhide. But where the school board saw a delinquent, the Honda saw a pilot who just needed a destination.

Astride that little machine, the white noise in my head finally went silent, replaced by the rhythmic, mechanical hum of a 50cc engine. My mind and body had at last found their home.

Ruben and I began riding the levees of Lake Pontchartrain every afternoon and for hours on end on the weekends. We thought we were as tough as any Hell's Angels, and in no time at all, we had the police chasing us, too.

Historically, the levee had been the exclusive domain of local horseback riders. But this was the exact moment the off-road motorcycling craze exploded across America, setting the stage for an inevitable, noisy culture clash. The levee board police soon

found themselves refereeing a bitter turf war. Naturally, the authorities sided with the equestrian crowd. Horseback riding was viewed as clean, wholesome, and traditional—the exact opposite of a pack of screaming, exhaust-belching, mud-slinging teenagers.

It certainly didn't help our legal defense that most of the horse riders were cute, smiling teenage girls, while we looked like miniature refugees from a grease fire.

As tensions grew, the Parish Sheriff's Department deployed its secret weapon: an overzealous patrolman we affectionately called "Freddie the Cop." Freddie patrolled the levees in a massive Ford Galaxie 500 "Sentinel"—a four-wheeled steel tank equipped with old-school bubble-gum lights and a siren that violated every known treaty on noise pollution. When Freddie lit up that siren, the sound didn't just hurt; it vibrated through your skull, rattled your fillings, and shook your very soul.

Freddie had made it his personal crusade to rid the levee of what he called "motorcycle vermin." To survive, we engineered a network of tight, brush-choked dugouts every quarter-mile along the levee, creating sanctuaries where his lumbering "Goliath Galaxie" couldn't hope to squeeze.

My time on the P50 taught me the thrill of playing real-life cops and robbers. Usually, if we gave up early, Freddie would just make us push the bikes home for miles. But if we put up a fight, Freddie's short temper would flare. As our bikes got bigger and faster, Freddie went into full hot-pursuit mode. He would write tickets like crazy; I got my first at eleven. He brought me to jail at twelve. He was a man on a mission. We all used to say that running from Freddie was where we developed the skills and nerve to race—much like the connection between bootleggers and NASCAR.

The levee also served as my laboratory for gravity-defying physics. On that under-powered little Honda, performing a wheelie required a violent combination of body weight and sheer willpower. I would accelerate to ten miles per hour, begin a rhythmic, aggressive bounce on the suspension, and pull back on the handlebars until the front tire lofted into the air. I was the engine, the pivot, and the ballast all at once, searching for that razor-thin sweet spot of balance.

The P50 was never designed for stunting—it looked more like a motorized exercise bike than a stunt machine—but it taught me how to find that delicate, weightless pocket where gravity reluctantly concedes defeat.

A few months after my eleventh birthday, my dad brought home a Honda Cub 50. My sisters didn't ride. My mom didn't ride. The Cub was too small for my dad. So, without rhyme or reason, I now had two motorcycles.

This instilled an important philosophy in me: you don't need a logical reason to own more than one motorcycle. While I struggled mightily with basic algebra at school, my dad bringing home that second bike was a masterclass in multiplication. I suddenly understood the elegant mathematical principle $-(M) \times 2$, where M is the joy of a single motorcycle. Having two bikes was twice as nice—a lesson in arithmetic that I spent the rest of my life aggressively pursuing.

By the time I turned thirty-three, I had worked my way up the multiplication tables to $(M) \times 15$ —a scientific formula for an incredible amount of fun and a very crowded garage.

Beyond the initial rush of the bikes, one incident stands out in my mind to this day. Mother's Day, May 10, 1970: My cousin and I were out on the levee. I was riding my new Cub 50; my cousin was on the P50. We were flying along a worn path through the cut grass of the levee as we approached a pumping

station surrounded by a flood barrier composed of four-foot-high steel panels.

As we rounded the bend near the pumping station, I leaned into a smooth, sweeping left turn to follow the trail. My cousin, however, seemed to lose his steering privileges entirely. He remained locked on a dead-straight, high-speed trajectory aimed directly at the steel flood wall.

I watched in sheer horror, screaming over the engine noise, "What are you doing? Turn! Turn, you fucking idiot!"

Just before impact, he glanced at me, and I can still see the pure, wide-eyed terror frozen on his face. He hit the wall at a blistering fifteen miles per hour.

There was a dull, hollow thud—the distinct, unresonant sound of light Japanese steel crumpling flat against heavy industrial plate. The P50's front forks buckled instantly, transforming the little moped into a spring-loaded catapult.

My cousin was launched into orbit, his limbs flailing like a cartoon character as he traced a clumsy arc through the afternoon sky. The bike followed a microsecond later, flipping end-over-end in hot pursuit. Both of them cleared the four-foot flood wall and vanished into the shell-paved parking lot on the other side.

I slammed on my brakes, skidding sideways through the grass, and scrambled to the barrier. I peered over, bracing myself for a bloodbath, but instead beheld a pure miracle of coincidence.

There, resting perfectly inside a small aluminum flatboat hitched to a pickup truck, were my cousin and the crumpled P50. They had landed squarely in the middle of a boat whose truck was literally idling, ready to pull out onto the road.

I jumped over the wall. The driver got out, walked to the back of his rig, and stared in mute bewilderment at his unexpected

catch. After a long pause, he decided that since the bike and my cousin were already secured in the boat, he might as well just tow them back to my house.

It was a simple act of neighborly decency that has grown more profound to me over the years. He didn't call the police; he didn't demand insurance cards; and he didn't worry about being sued. The world back then was still a place where a stranger would do the right thing simply because it was the right thing to do. It was a kinder, simpler era, long before every clumsy accident became a multimillion-dollar courtroom drama.

That little red-and-white moped taught me two unbreakable rules of survival: first, never let anyone ride your motorcycle, particularly if they can't even handle a bicycle. Second, if you let fear sit in the driver's seat, it will steer you straight into the nearest steel wall—you either master the machine or walk away.

I believe this applies to life as well.

Most of all, the P50 infected me with a lifelong addiction that has spanned more than half a century. They say you never truly get over your first love, and even after five decades and fifty different bikes, my heart still belongs to that pedal-start, girl's bike from Bucktown.



1969 HONDA CUB 50

"One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see." (John 9:25)

There is no way I can tell you about the impact the Cub 50 had on my life without starting nearly a year after I got the bike. The lesson, the impact, and the miracle? The lesson was: the Lord does work in mysterious ways. The impact: my head and body against concrete boulders. The miracle: sight. Here's how it all fits together.

The levee system along Lake Pontchartrain is basically a huge hill built to protect New Orleans from flooding. New Orleans is a city built one to eight feet below sea level and surrounded by water. We all saw how well that worked out in 2005. Between the top of the levee and the lake were large concrete boulders that acted as a breakwater barrier.

One afternoon I was coming up the levee with the assumption that I was on target to jump the embankment and land on the wide trail that ran between the levee and the Old Hammond Highway that paralleled the lake. I assumed wrong—very wrong.

As I flew over the levee, I noticed I was off course from the trail; however, I was in perfect alignment, calculating speed and distance, to land on the boulders in four... three...

Bam! Damn!

Sooner than I expected. It also hurt worse than I had feared. I landed backside-down on the boulders. My helmet split in half. The toxic cocktail of youth and adrenaline kicked in. I felt no pain.

My friends formed a halo of upside-down faces, frozen in shock as they stared at living proof of the invincibility of youth—me, alive.

"Man, really brah, I thought you were dead, dude," they said in unison.

I jumped up—confused, dazed, and as always, amazed to have survived again. I went home. I felt great. I slept well.

The next morning I woke up to my morning ritual of nearly eight years: squeeze prescribed drops into my eyes, ignore the fact that they burned like raw gasoline, put on my thick-lens glasses, and only then attempt to navigate the physical world. I was told that would be my ritual for life; however, one thing had changed overnight.

When I put on my glasses, I couldn't see a thing! I took off my glasses—I had perfect vision. I put the glasses back on—I couldn't see a thing. I ran out of my room in surprise and shock.

"Mom!" I called out as I went running to the kitchen. I told her I could see without my glasses. She gave me something to read. I read it. Mom was confused. She called the eye doctor; they said to come in immediately. We did.

Now the old eye doctor, Dr. Gaines, whom I had been seeing since I was two years old, was as baffled as the rest of us. He asked my mom to leave the room. I became nervous.

Dr. Gaines slid his chair up close to me and looked at the door. He looked at me, highly secretive, then asked, "Have you had any head traumas—you know, hard knocks to the head lately?"

I looked at the door, then at Dr. Gaines. "Just between you and me, I'm not telling anyone else," he assured me.

"Well...", I hesitated. "You promise not to tell my mom?"

"Promise," he said.

"I crashed my bike on the breakwater rocks yesterday," I mumbled.

"And you hit your head?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, I split my helmet in half," I replied.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed. "A blow to the head must have knocked your optical alignment

right back into place—ah heck, son, it's a miracle either way," he proclaimed.

He called my mom into the office. Dr. Gaines explained to her that the best he could reason was, "It's a miracle, just a miracle."

Of course, he couldn't give any guarantees as to how long said miracle might last; however, I never wore glasses again until I was nearly fifty years old, when I returned to college and needed glasses to read. That miracle is still working.

I suppose I learned and experienced more things about life and motorcycling on that Honda Cub through sheer repetition. The hours I spent on that motorcycle on the levee are countless, as are the experiences. Most of the important lessons about riding I gained at the "shell piles."

A few miles down the levee, near the second pumping station, loomed the "shell piles." This was a towering, sixty-foot-high mountain of dredged clam shells, packed tight over the years into a treacherous, chalky playground of steep trails and blind drop-offs—many of them just inches from the water. It was here that I learned how to pitch the little Honda sideways, power-sliding around corners with the throttle pinned wide open.

Riding on a mountain of razor-sharp shells also introduced me to the pure agony of "shell rash." If you went down on that terrain, the shells acted like cheese graters on raw skin, leaving you with a deep, chemical-like burn that felt like gasoline on fire for a week. It was an incredibly effective, highly painful way to learn how not to crash.

One hot afternoon, while we were shooting the breeze at the base of the pile, a Harley trike came roaring into the boat launch, flat-out and carrying entirely too much speed. The driver didn't brake; he aimed straight for the vertical face of the shell

mountain. The bike reached the top of the summit and shot toward the sky.

At its apex, the heavy machine ran out of momentum, pausing momentarily in the air, and began a steep, sickening descent toward the deep canal feeding the lake.

We watched spellbound. All we could say was, "Whoooooa, duuude," as our heads followed his launch, descent, and splashdown.

The driver never let go of the bars. When the authorities finally fished the twisted metal out of the water, we discovered he had actually strapped himself to the frame. He was dead before they dragged him ashore.

The entire event took less than sixty seconds, but the image remains frozen in my memory. It was one of those moments that happens so fast it plays out in slow motion as it etches itself into your mind. I've since learned that when life shifts into slow motion, it's usually because something terrible and memorable is about to happen.

It turned out the rider was high on acid—a deeply damaged Vietnam veteran trying to outrun the ghosts of things he'd seen and done overseas. Back in the seventies people just called men like him "crazy" or "nuts." Today, we use clinical terms like Post-Traumatic Stress, but the labels don't change a thing. It doesn't matter what you call it; it was sad then, and it's sad now.

A small track also ran around the outer perimeter of the shell pile; it contained several jumps and whoop-de-dos. A corner taken too fast or wide around the back side of the pile would land you in the lake. The whole course was tight and slick.

On this treacherous loop wrapping around the base of the mountain, my little step-through Honda Cub possessed a secret weapon: an incredibly low center of gravity. While the other boys fought to wrestle their heavy bikes through the loose terrain, I would tuck my knees into the protective dip of the

plastic leg guards, throwing my weight forward and letting the rear end drift out in a perfect, sweeping arc. I carved those shell-packed corners like I was on steel rails.

My tiny, 2.75-inch Yokohama knobby tire would kick up a fierce, blinding rooster tail of crushed white shells, forcing anyone foolish enough to follow me to back off the throttle.

Meanwhile, I was running wide-open, sliding, jumping, and passing Yamaha DT250s like they were stalled. The tricks I learned about racing at the Shell Piles would serve me well when I began racing motocross years later.

Like any self-respecting young teenager, I eventually decided that my quiet little Cub needed a boost in performance—or at least the acoustic illusion of speed. The obvious solution was an enormous, chrome megaphone exhaust.

An older boy named Fritcher had one that fit, sort of, and he was willing to let it go for five dollars on a highly questionable buy-now-pay-later installment plan.

"I'll take it!" I exclaimed. I had no idea that a costly lesson was in the making.

Armed with a hacksaw and a hammer, I sawed off the Cub's muffler, banged the megaphone on, and secured it with a hose clamp.

Nothing could have prepared me for the racket when I kicked the Cub to life. It was a raucous, roaring racket. I dropped it into gear and headed down the street toward the levee.

The decibel level was so intense that windows rattled and neighbors peeked out in terror, expecting a pack of wild Hell's Angels to ride through. Mothers hurried their daughters indoors, window shades were aggressively pulled down, and pedestrians grimaced as I sputtered past. You could literally hear me coming from a mile away.

While I didn't notice a single ounce of the promised horsepower, I did notice a massive spike in public hostility. In less than an hour, the police arrived to investigate the frantic calls, forcing me to stash the menacing machine in one of our levee hidey-holes.

I decided the megaphone was not worth five dollars and let Fritcher know. He insisted that the megaphone was mine and that I owed him the money. I simply started dodging him, playing a game of cat-and-mouse for about a week to avoid paying the debt.

The game ended abruptly one afternoon when a heavy knock rattled our front door. My dad opened it to find Fritcher backed by a small, menacing crew of neighborhood boys, demanding either my five dollars or my physical destruction.

My dad called me to the porch. My stomach bottomed out when I saw the collection agency waiting for me. I tried to use my father's massive frame as a shield, but he gently yet firmly took me by the shoulders and pushed me right to the front line—forcing me to look my problems dead in the eye.

He asked if I had told Fritcher that I would buy the pipe. I said, "Yes, but—"

"There's no buts," he cut me off.

He then told the boys to go home. They began mumbling threats against me, but my father assured Fritcher that I would be down to his house shortly to settle the matter. The boys left.

After dismissing the boys with a quiet authority that brooked no argument, my dad turned to me for a swift, non-negotiable lecture on the sacred nature of a man's word, the dangers of debt, and the inevitable butt-kickings. He ordered me to dismantle the megaphone, grab five single-dollar bills, and get in the truck.

He drove me to Fritcher's street but parked three houses down. He wanted me to

settle my own accounts—he didn't want the neighborhood kids thinking my daddy was fighting my battles. To me, it felt less like a lesson in character and more like being thrown directly into a den of wolves. I was scared to death.

My father told me to go and settle the matter. I walked up the driveway with a pounding heart, carrying the dented megaphone. I had no idea what to say or what to expect. I rang the doorbell.

Mr. Fritcher answered, confused. I explained how his son had come to my house with the boys and that I was here to settle the issue. Mr. Fritcher, somewhat shocked, went to get his son.

I'll never forget the look of fear on Fritcher's face as his father brought him to the door. The older boy didn't seem so big and bad with his father standing behind him instead of his gang of buddies. He looked at the megaphone in my hand, obviously not knowing what to expect, either.

I delivered my appeal, explaining how I had been misled regarding the performance I would gain from the megaphone. I stated flatly that I was not going to pay him the five dollars. I set the megaphone down and threw his own words back at him: it would be cash or a piece of my hide.

"That's where we stand; pick up your pipe or put up your dukes," I said, taking a stance, ready to fight.

Mr. Fritcher stood back with his arms crossed, highly amused by my bantam-rooster display of bravado. I'm sure he was also aware of the obvious difference between my size and the imposing stature of his son, who was also a boxer. I was ready to throw down.

Fritcher said he didn't want to fight.

I picked up the megaphone and thrust it out toward him. "Then I guess this is yours," I said.

He looked at the megaphone, which I had altered slightly. I had beaten a large dent into it so that the kick-starter could get past the huge cone.

"But you ruined it; I'm not taking this back," Fritcher bemoaned.

I reached into my pocket, pulled out a dollar bill, and stretched out my arm, trying to give it to him. "This is for the damage," I offered.

"I ain't taking no dollar!" he shouted, stepping back as though it were a snake I had thrust toward him.

"Then I guess we best get to it," I said, and slipped the dollar back into my pocket.

Fritcher looked at his dad; his dad shrugged his shoulders and said, "He's given you three choices, son. Pick one."

That minute felt like an eternity. Was I about to have to fight? Was I about to have to pay? I was ready for either one. I felt empowered.

"Aw, give me the dollar and the pipe back," he said defeatedly.

I gave him the dollar. His dad told him, "Put the dollar in your pocket and that pipe in the trash."

Mr. Fritcher shook my hand and thanked me for coming over. He told his son to shake my hand and seal the deal. We shook hands and I left.

As I walked up the block to the truck, it was no walk of shame; it felt more like a victory lap. When I climbed back into the truck, my dad looked at me and said he was proud of my courage. It was a one-dollar investment that yielded a lifetime of dividends on how to face fear head-on.

I'm not sure if Fritcher learned anything from that experience, but to this day, I can tell you exactly what I learned: I learned to never buy something because of guarantees made by the seller. I learned to pay for what I bought, or said I would buy. I learned that

a step-through Honda Cub 50 does not need a megaphone—ever, for any reason.

Most importantly, I learned to face my fears and problems head-on. I learned about the power that comes from confronting what terrifies me, and how powerless fear becomes in the face of courage.

Many lessons in my life have been costly—very costly in a myriad of ways. But the lessons I learned from a one-dollar megaphone transaction, and the dollar I had to pay, have been the best return on an investment I've ever made.

I had to have a refresher course on the lesson of paying your debts years later when I owned a mint-condition Husqvarna—you'll see.

Our truce didn't last long. A few weeks later, my buddy Kevin and I were tear-ass'n down the levee when we passed Fritcher, who was peacefully flying a massive box kite. Just as we sped by, his kite nose-dive directly behind my rear tire. The string tangled instantly in my axle.

I didn't realize I was towing his prized kite behind me until Kevin started pointing and laughing hysterically over the deafening engine noise. By the time I looked back, the kite was a shredded trail of paper and kindling.

Since there was absolutely no logical reason to stop and negotiate with an angry Fritcher, I just pinned the throttle and left him screaming into the wind.

Once again, Fritcher showed up at my door demanding money. This time he was out of luck. I told him I wasn't giving him a dime. For emphasis, I added, "Why don't you go fly a kite!"

He retorted with incriminating evidence: "I wish I would have hit you when I was swooping down to try." Realizing what he had said, he turned and left.

My friend Kevin, along with Ruben, brought to mind one quick lesson—Mama's always right. My mom told me when I was in sixth grade, "Stop hanging out with those two; they're trouble."

Premonition? Both Kevin and Ruben are in prison.

Speaking of being stuck somewhere—some of my fondest memories on the Cub involved riding the shifting sandbars of Lake Pontchartrain. During low tide, stretching, narrow strips of sand, up to a half-mile long, would emerge thirty to fifty feet offshore, separated from the shore by deep troughs of water.

There were several options available for getting onto the sandbars. My favorite was to ride out onto one of the piers jutting over the lake and jump onto the sandbar. This approach was risky. Depending on the softness of the sand, the bike might get stuck a foot deep, which came with an immediate and abrupt stop.

Of course, your body adhered to the laws of physics, which demand that a body in motion stays in motion until acted upon by an outside force—like the sand or the lake.

The smoothest way to get onto the sandbars was to wheelie the bike straight up and walk behind it through the knee-deep water. The rear fender on the Cub had a permanent ducktail curve from such antics. One must remember, though I often forgot, that sandbars are created by a low tide, and tides come back in. I was supposed to do the same before the water rushed back.

On one particular afternoon, I was so engrossed in carving up the sandbars because I completely ignored the incoming tide. By the time I turned around, the sandbar was shrinking rapidly, and the channel back to the shore had risen to waist-deep.

My only option was to pull the front wheel into the air and walk-wheelie the bike

through the deep water. It was a strange sight: the water was lapping over the rear of the seat, and a steady stream of exhaust bubbles rose up between my legs from the submerged tailpipe. If I dropped the front end, the engine would gulp water and die instantly.

Fortunately, the brilliant design of the Honda Cub—with its intake breathing safely through the high mainframe tube—allowed the bike to keep running, delivering me safely back to dry land.

We stopped riding the sandbars after we finally realized the pulling power of soft, wet sand. We understood the danger after several friends had their bikes disappear into the sand sucked under and gone forever.

Several other motorcycles became so stuck that they were impossible to remove. I'm just thankful that I was never one of those boys who had to go home and explain that to my father.

"Hey Dad, you know that motorcycle you bought me? Well, I lost it. Where? In Lake Pontchartrain; it got sucked into the sandbar."

Another place that wasn't good to be stuck was in the middle of the ever-escalating feud between the bikers and horseback riders. Granted, the equestrians were there first, and my sister was one of them, but hey, times change; we were riding horses too—just a different breed.

Unfortunately, the obnoxious noise from our unsilenced bikes did scare the animals; many a rider was taken on a "runaway horse ride." If you've ever had that experience—and I have—then you know it was not fun; it was frightening.

Jumping the embankment always carried the possibility of a horse and rider passing by. One path ran up the incline and had a blind jump at the ridge's crest, landing onto a flat dirt road.

In one unfortunate incident, an airborne motorcyclist collided mid-air with a horse that had reared up in fright. The motorcycle smacked the prancing horse, knocking the riders off both the bike and the horse.

Unbelievably, no one was hurt, not even the horse. His owners sold the horse; he suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome the rest of his life, or as we said back then, "He was freaked forever, dude."

The potential turf war was ultimately defused by the most powerful force in the universe: adolescent hormones. The dirt-bike riders were all teenage boys, while the equestrian crowd consisted almost entirely of teenage girls in tight jeans. The bitter rivalry quickly melted into a series of lakeside romances, proving that a loud exhaust and a horse saddle are actually highly compatible.

To this day, I still have a soft spot for women who ride horses.

My riding experiences on the Cub were not limited to off-road riding; I also got my first taste of riding on paved roads aboard the bike. We had a Ford truck pulling a thirty-two-foot Layton camping trailer, which forever ruined my ability to enjoy primitive camping.

During our family camping trips to Flint Creek Park in Wiggins, Mississippi, I got my first real taste of paved-road riding. The park featured miles of smooth, rolling asphalt hills that were entirely absent in flat-as-a-pancake New Orleans.

I would spend hours riding the roads, pretending to be Peter Fonda in *Easy Rider* on an imaginary chopper. I developed as much of a fondness for riding on paved roads as I had for dirt riding on that Honda Cub.

On camping trips, our family dog—a small mutt named Angel, who could reproduce faster than mice—liked to ride as well. She would sit in my lap as we rode. On one ride, she

saw a squirrel and jumped off after it; I was doing twenty miles per hour—she didn't ride with me anymore.

Wiggins was also the site of another highly educational milestone when I was fourteen. A group of country girls enticed me to try something new to me—weed—and I had the portable cassette player with the long version of Traffic's "The Low Spark of High Heeled Boys"; they had the contraband. It was a highly mutually beneficial trade, and enough said about how that evening ended. But that was another "Ah-ha" moment for my very active brain.

When my parents pulled me out of public school and sent me back to Mid-City Baptist for seventh grade, my commute underwent a highly embarrassing upgrade. Instead of a noisy, diesel-spewing yellow school bus, I was picked up every morning by one of the school's six-door, black limousines. To a kid desperately trying to maintain his reputation as a tough Bucktonian, the sight of that chauffeured limo was social suicide.

My mom used to pick me up from school in the afternoons. I waited for my mom with another student, Frank, who liked motorcycles as well. We got to know each other since we both rode motorcycles. He was my age but a year behind me, so we really never became close friends at that time.

Frank got picked up every afternoon in the "Doc's Yamaha" pickup. Somewhere deep inside, I was jealous.

Oddly enough, three years later Frank and I had become close friends. We shared car rides or rode our motorcycles to school together, for we had both returned to the Baptist academy the same year. The "circle of life" thing was beginning.

In high school, Frank and I ended up going on a motorcycle trip and experiencing one of those memorable summers that old people, like me now, look back on with fondness and smiles

that hide secrets. You can read about that trip in the *Suzuki GT380* story.

Somewhere hidden in the Cub 50 there must be a child-rearing lesson. For instance, my dad, by giving me two motorcycles, taught me that two motorcycles are better than one. In essence, I learned more is better. That turned into a break-the-bank habit through the years.

I would be truly amiss not to share the greatest things about life that I learned on that Cub 50. I learned that freedom as we see it in America, at least back then, always included the open road and blond-haired girls, which are just as enticing as freedom.

By eleven years old, I had learned that one of the greatest feelings in life—blowing effortlessly through the air on a motorcycle—can be immensely enhanced when a beautiful girl is on the back.

I remember the neighborhood dream girl, and my sixth-grade girlfriend, Pam—tall, blonde, and beautiful—sitting on the back of my motorcycle, with her arms wrapped tightly around my waist and her head resting on my shoulder. She whispered, "I'll always remember this moment."

Yeah, me too, I thought.

I'm not sure if she still remembers that moment in the summer of 1970, but I do. I realized that day that the cup of life is closest to being full when you have a motorcycle and a pretty girl. Fifty years later, some things never change.



1972 KAWASAKI G-5 100

"Okay, Houston, we've had a problem here."—Jack Swigert, Apollo 13

The Kawasaki G-5 100 will be remembered as my first real motorcycle—not a scooter or moped, no sir, but a no-excuses, bona fide motorcycle. It was the first one with a tank between my legs, which I soon learned was not always a good thing. The G-5 gave me one hundred reasons why my back hurt then, why it hurts now, and why it will probably hurt forever.

The G-5 was a good-looking motorcycle. Its bright yellow paint, black accents, and fiberglass body panels and fenders were extremely striking. I saw a mint-condition G-5 at the Barber Motorsports Vintage races in October 2009; the design has proven to be timeless.

But back to 1972. I was thirteen years old and had been riding the Honda Cub for two years; it was time for a real motorcycle. When I saw the G-5 on the showroom floor of Cycle Stop, the local New Orleans dealership, I fell hard; I had to have it.

The salesman, Joey, convinced me that the rotary-valve engine was a screamer. He wasn't lying; that little 100cc engine had its carburetor tucked weirdly into the side of the engine case, fed by a spinning metal disk that sucked in air and gas like a tiny, high-rpm jet engine. It was blisteringly quick.

The real thrill was the G-5's acceleration and being able to go above forty miles per hour. Forty miles per hour was the magic number—the tipping point where the Kawasaki ceased to be a bike and became a catalyst for escaping Earth's gravity, if only momentarily.

The G-5 was my gateway drug, fueling a lifelong fetish for speed and adrenaline that I miraculously survived.

The first time I took the Kawasaki down the levee, I just kept glancing down at the gas tank between my legs. I couldn't believe I had a real motorcycle. I developed the habit of petting the tank as I rode—a ritual I still perform on every bike I own that has a tank between my legs.

During that first week, I squeezed the tank with my legs until I almost dented it. But beauty was fading. It didn't take long—perhaps two wheelies gone awry—to replace the fiberglass front fender with a plastic Preston Petty fender. Fiberglass is a binary material; it exists in only two states: perfect or shattered. There is no middle ground.

After several months of riding, the G-5 developed the annoying habit of losing power until it slowly died. The "screamer" engine would just flatline, leaving me drifting without propulsion, waiting for a restart which wouldn't come. I brought the bike back to Cycle Stop. Two days later, it was running again.

I never truly figured out what mojo the mechanic put on the bike, nor did I ever get a clear explanation of what the problem was. But it was back in action, and that's all that mattered to me.

I began to suspect the mechanics weren't fixing the bike so much as performing an exorcism that only lasted forty-eight hours.

By this time, I had returned to public school, but I missed my old friends from the Baptist school. I decided I should ride over to the campus and show off—I mean, show them my bike. The school was in the Mid-City section of New Orleans, miles from my house.

I followed the maze of levees, which intersect most neighborhoods of the city, and was able to avoid all but a couple of miles of actual street riding. At thirteen, with two tickets and one ride to jail for driving without a license, that was a good thing.

Across the street from the three-story school facility was a three-acre lot where a high-rise tower was to be built by Mid-City Baptist Church. The project eventually collapsed in an international scandal involving stolen bonds, leaving the land vacant and lawless. It was a crime scene of global proportions—the perfect, high-stakes stage for the show I was about to put on.

The lot offered me a great place to show off to my friends, who were glued to the third-floor classroom windows watching me do wheelies and jumps. I was always a showman.

A week before, I had torn the right foot peg off the G-5; its two little 10mm bolts were no match for the sky-high landings I endured. I had to ride with my right foot on the engine case that jutted out and housed the carburetor. The lack of a proper foothold didn't slow me down, but I finally had to have the peg welded back on.

My friends still remember the show I put on that day, especially the part where two New Orleans police cars showed up. I left with the police in pursuit. I was able to elude them—after all, I had years of practice on the levee.

That day solidified my reputation all the way through high school as a badass on a motorcycle. I did have to add additional chapters throughout the years to keep that legend polished, shiny, and up to date.

By the time I got back to "my" levee, the G-5 did it again. It began losing power and stopped running. That was a dilemma—I had skipped school, and my plan was to sneak the bike back before my parents returned home. I pushed the G-5 over a mile, at double time, to make the deadline. I was furious at the bike and deeply annoyed with its growing unreliability. I made it home with five minutes to spare.

I killed time on the levee smoking cigarettes until the school bus dropped off

the other kids, then returned home as though I had been to school. As I walked past the G-5, I kicked it, spit on it, and mumbled curse words at it. That was the beginning of my contempt and temper tantrums toward ill-running machinery. It was also the beginning of anger management problems which plague me to this day.

At dinner that evening, my dad asked me, "What did you learn at school today?"

My heart dropped. Dad never asked that question; he often asked what kind of trouble I got into at school. You did not play games with my father because his radar for bullshit was military-grade. He liked to catch you in two lies and double the punishment. I thought fast.

Honesty is the best policy, I thought. Tell the truth.

"Nothing," I said truthfully and boldly.

I waited for his verbal move. One of the two phones on the kitchen wall rang—one, if not both, of which always did during dinner. Dad answered and began a long conversation. Perhaps it was only minutes in reality, but in my mind, which still didn't know what he did or didn't know, time stopped as I waited.

He hung up the phone. "You didn't learn anything today?" he asked, picking up the conversation that I hoped had ended.

Second chance to fess up, my mind screamed. Tell the truth!

I reasoned within my conscience. Have you ever noticed that "conscience" can be broken into two words? "Con" and "science"—or as I see it, the science of conning.

"I did learn that Kawasakis are not as reliable as I thought. I learned that the levees don't all connect in New Orleans; they're broken up."

There, I told the truth—or so I thought.

My dad then launched into an explanation of the history of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the agency that built the levee

system. This sparked a reminder to get his crew out on tractors the next day to mow the embankments his company had a contract with the Corps to cut. He picked up the phone and called one of his men.

I finished eating in mental tranquility. I felt better having listened to my conscience and having told the truth to all of my dad's questions.

"Whew!" I said aloud.

My dad had one of his men bring the G-5 to the shop the next day. Once again, it was ready in two days. No real explanation, but the bike was running again. It was a massive relief to have the shop's assurance that they thought, "The problem is solved."

With the G-5 running again, it was time to test its boundaries somewhere far beyond the city limits of New Orleans. This time, I was bringing the Kawasaki to Uvalde, Texas, where my dad had leased a ten-thousand-acre hunting tract in the Texas Hill Country. I loved hunting, and this would be my first time bringing a motorcycle. I couldn't wait.

My passion for the sport stretched back to when I was seven—the year I received my first gun—the same .410 shotgun my grandfather had given to my dad when he was a boy.

Several times a year, we would go visit my grandparents in Lake Charles, Louisiana. The surrounding countryside was mostly rice fields that were filled with geese; the skies were filled with clouds of blackbirds. These flocks of birds were miles long, literally. They actually darkened the sun when they flew past.

My dad used to take me hunting in the rice fields. He would drive slowly past the flooded acreage, pulling over wherever the waterfowl were thickest. I'd roll down the rear window of the Fleetwood Cadillac, raise my gun, and fire straight into the flock. Sometimes the dog retrieved them; other

times, I had to trudge out into the muck and fetch the birds myself.

Like I've always said—life is tough, always has been. It's no wonder I grew up with a distorted view of what's normal.

With those bizarre hunting roots firmly established, I loaded the yellow Kawasaki and headed west for Texas.

When you drive into Hondo, Texas, a sign proclaims, "This is God's country, please don't drive through it like hell." That tells you everything you need to know about the place. The area really was God's country.

I loved the wide-open isolation of the lease and couldn't wait to explore it on my bike. When we drove up to the ranch outside of Uvalde, the owner—an old man who was the epitome of a cowboy—was rolling a cigarette. I used to stare in wonder at how he could roll a smoke one-handed, lick it, and light it up. Of course, he always struck the match right down the leg of his blue jeans. He was the kind of character you only saw on television back in New Orleans.

My father never had any problem taking my sisters and me out of school for a week or two if we were traveling. He believed that seeing other cultures was far more educational than sitting in a classroom, and he was right. In the late sixties and early seventies, before society became completely homogenized, you could travel a few hundred miles and find yourself in a totally different world.

This was especially true if you were from New Orleans; back then, just driving fifteen miles out of the city limits felt like entering another universe.

When my father and I went hunting in Texas, often twice a year, it gave us the chance to visit the border towns of Mexico—talk about a different world. Whenever we visited Piedras Negras, my father would head over to see his friend, Jesus, for leather

goods. I would immediately disappear with Jesus' son, traversing the back alleys of the town to secure my contraband.

Even as a young kid, I had a knack for entrepreneurship. On one trip alone, I made enough money smuggling switchblades to pay for half of a new motorcycle. I even took prepaid special orders for stilettos, buying up to twenty switchblades each trip. Crossing back over the border, I had so many switchblades stashed in my boots, pants, and pockets that if we had hit a bump, I would have ended up a soprano-singing paraplegic.

To reduce our chances of being searched, my dad always declared that he had bought a single switchblade for our one-armed neighbor, Mac--and yes, Mac actually existed. At the time, federal law allowed people with disabilities to possess a switchblade. It always amazed me that half the time, the border guards actually let us keep the declared knife.

The profit was amazing. I'd buy the blades for two dollars and fifty cents each in Mexico and sell them at school for twenty dollars apiece. I cleared about three to four hundred dollars a trip--a handsome profit, especially in the days when a brand-new motocross bike only cost between six and eight hundred dollars.

I liked Mexico as a young teenager. It was exotic, fun, and fast-paced. We could eat a five-course meal in the best restaurant in town while still dressed in our blood-stained hunting clothes. As long as you had cash, you were welcome.

Yet my father would also take me into the slums and the poverty-ridden edges of the city, where people lived in stick houses with no water or electricity. He exposed me to true third-world conditions.

Seeing and meeting people who desperately longed for a better life for their families left a permanent soft spot in my heart for

those who cross into the country illegally. I had to admire people who would risk jail—and even death—just for a chance at a better life.

This was a time when illegal border crossers were not welcomed with open arms; they were jailed, deported, or allegedly even shot. In the part of Texas where we hunted, there was a bounty on them at one time. The ranch we leased was a main thoroughfare, and the owner made as much money collecting those bounties as he did leasing his land to hunters.

Back to riding the G-5 in Texas.

Without question, one of my most memorable motorcycle rides occurred on a full-moon night in the middle of Southeast Texas. I had hunted all day and stayed out for a sunset hunt, knowing the full moon would light up the landscape for my ride home.

Earlier that day, I had been so bored that I was shooting buzzards out of the sky with my Savage .30-30. Then, suddenly, I saw a red fox darting through the scrub brush.

Oh yeah, I thought, you'll make a pretty mount.

I put him in my crosshairs, pulled the trigger, and he dropped. I went and picked up the fox, placing him on the ledge of the windmill water tank where nothing could steal or eat my prize. That was around noon. The fox lay there until I was ready to return to camp. Aside from a half-dozen buzzards and a couple of rattlesnakes, the fox was my only major take that day.

As the full moon began to rise, I stayed to watch it—being a true aficionado of moonrises and sunrises. When it was finally time to head back to camp, I went to retrieve my prize. I picked him up and gently placed him across the rear section of my gas tank so he could rest in my lap.

After several miles of negotiating the trail by moonlight, the desert felt eerily

still. The landscape was bathed in a bone-white light that made the shadows of the mesquite trees look like ink spills, and the only sound was the steady, high-pitched buzz of the G-5 engine cutting through the heavy silence.

I was lost in the rhythm of the ride when the peace was shattered. I felt a muscular, deliberate twitch in my lap.

Then came the claws—sharp, frantic, and very much alive. They hooked deep into the denim of my jeans, puncturing the skin before raking across the smooth yellow paint of the gas tank with a sickening, metallic screech. The weight shifted from a limp carcass to a struggling predator, its paws scratching and tearing for balance as it woke up in the very middle of my ride.

The fox was alive!

My heart hammered against my ribs with more force than the G-5's piston. I had learned early on that when riding a motorcycle, you shouldn't freak out all at once; you stop first, then you freak out. I kept my composure and brought the bike to a halt.

The fox was still on my tank, scratching away furiously. Up to this point, that G-5 tank had somehow remained completely unscathed through all the abuse I'd thrown at it. Now, all I could think about was this damn fox ruining my bike. I kicked him off. He squirmed on the ground, one eye rolling around to fixate on me.

To say the scene was getting scary in the middle of the desert on a full-moon night is an understatement. I shot him again. He died, again.

This time, I didn't take any chances. I shoved him into a burlap sack and tied it tight enough to suffocate a ghost. The rest of the ride back to camp was dead silent, save for my racing pulse.

To this day, I haven't been able to come up with an explanation that makes sense of how a fox, shot with a .30-30, could lie "dead" for six hours and then come back to life just as a full moon was rising.

The best theory I've settled on—which traces back to my Baptist upbringing—is this: spirits can possess animals. If for no other reason than because there is no other logical reason, I believe that resurrected fox qualifies as a biblical example of an evil, tank-scratching demon. So there.

Yet, when I finally rolled into camp and told the story, my father's immediate response was far more grounded. He figured the fox was probably rabid and told me to throw it away.

"Throw him away? He's getting mounted!" I retorted. "Especially after he scratched up my tank!"

We eventually returned to New Orleans. I didn't have rabies, but I showed off those gas tank scratches as if they were a medal of honor. "Battle scars," I called them.

I had the taxidermist mount the fox with an evil growl, baring his teeth. I still have him, along with a few other mounted critters, stored up in my sister's attic. I threw away all of my motocross trophies nearly twenty years ago, but I kept that fox.

Once we returned home to New Orleans, the G-5 was still running like a clock, so I headed straight back to our old stomping grounds at the boat launch. Our gang was already there, jumping the new dirt and shell mounds left behind by the dredging and construction.

I flew over the levee and sped straight toward the hill I had mastered just days before the G-5 had given out on me a while back. My friends were waving and shouting. I gave them a nod as I tore past, racing toward the hill.

One good thing about my mind on a motorcycle is the absolute focus I maintain. That day, however, my internal telemetry was off; it would have behooved me to focus less on the hill and more on my friends' frantic gesticulations.

I flew up the hill, which stood about fifteen or twenty feet high. It used to have a large flat top, much like a mesa—at least it did the last time I had crested it. Today, there was no top, no mesa. There was only a sheer cliff on the other side.

Add the fifteen to twenty feet of the missing hill to the four feet of altitude my jump added, and there I was, suspended twenty feet high and still climbing.

I remember looking back and seeing the ground below fade away. I caught the familiar look of shock and awe on my friends' faces just as the bike ran out of momentum. I reached that silent, mathematical apex where momentum finally loses its argument with the earth.

For a heartbeat, I hung there in a state of perfect, weightless grace—a split-second truce with physics—before gravity realized I was trespassing and demanded I pay back every inch of altitude I'd stolen.

I can still feel the precise millisecond—that electric tingle—when the bike stopped its ascent and began its downward plunge. Everything shifted into slow motion. This was the era of man landing on the moon, and as my descent began, the words of Apollo 13 astronaut Jack Swigert echoed in my helmet: "Houston, we've had a problem."

Below me, my friends scattered. About ten feet from impact, I separated from the motorcycle like a spent Saturn V rocket, pushing the frame away from me. As it turns out, Galileo's physics about a falling feather and a rock are true; the motorcycle and I made ground contact at the exact same time.

In slow motion, I watched as the fiberglass rear section, seat, side panels, and various other parts of the motorcycle exploded into an airborne collage of color and chrome. I landed squarely on my tailbone—which is connected to the spine, which is connected to nerves, which generate pain swiftly, concisely, and seemingly for life.

How I walked away from that crash, let alone how I walk today, remains a complete mystery to me.

I learned a couple of valuable lessons that afternoon. First, never assume things remain the same; change is inevitable. Second, I learned to pay close attention to the flailing arms and frantic "stop" motions that people make toward you. Those flailing arms weren't a signal to twist the throttle; they were a frantic, low-budget recreation of the robot from *Lost in Space* screaming, "Danger! Danger, Will Robinson!"

I'm also pretty sure I shrunk an inch that day when my body and spine compressed. Gathering my scattered parts and wounded pride, I headed home. Guess what happened on that painfully slow ride? The G-5 began losing power and stopped running—again.

I went ballistic. I threw the bike down the levee, picked it up, and kicked it repeatedly, then repeated the process several times. One upward kick sent that pristine yellow gas tank sailing through the air. I'm not proud of my temper tantrums, but I felt better. Back to Cycle Stop it went. It dawned on me just how aptly named that dealership really was.

Both my dad and I let the dealer know that this was becoming a habit—one that was fast approaching the point of needing a factory representative's intervention. They promised they would take care of it, again. As usual, the bike was up and running within two days.

By the third day, I was already off in search of a new jump, which I easily found

within the ever-changing landscape of the boat launch. New piles of dirt were everywhere, and I was looking for a new challenge.

I found one particular mound that would launch you over a canyon and onto another mound about ten feet higher. In essence, you could leap from the lower ramp, clear the canyon, and land much higher up-absorbing the impact of only about a two-foot drop. It was a beautiful theory, assuming everything stayed together and your power source didn't fail.

After countless successful jumps, I decided to push the envelope. I was flying through the air, but as I revved the engine mid-flight, I heard a terrible grinding and rattling sound, immediately followed by the front end nosediving. It was a catastrophic structural failure at the worst possible moment.

I looked back just in time to see my rear wheel-my primary landing gear-hit the ground below and bounce away without me. No bailing out on this one; impact was in four... three...

Bam!

Once again, it hit sooner than I had calculated. I was learning that I really wasn't good at mathematical calculations.

I gathered up the scattered pieces, jammed the rear wheel back onto the frame without the axle nut, and limped toward home. Guess what? The engine began losing power. I had to push that heavy machine the remaining mile and a half back to the house. And yes, I beat the crap out of the G-5 again.

To this day, I've never understood how that little bike retained its good looks or how the paint stayed so unscathed through all the abuse. I've always been obsessive-compulsive about cleanliness; I would wash or wipe down my bikes after every single ride.

I brushed its wire spokes with the meticulous care of a dental surgeon and treated the yellow panels with a paint polish conditioner that rivaled the finest Beverly Hills beauty creams. My childhood friends knew never to touch the chrome on my Schwinn Apple Krate or leave fingerprints on my motorcycles—Pam being the sole exception.

How that G-5 still retained any semblance of beauty has always escaped me. There was a dent at the rear center of the gas tank, right where the metal met the seat. That dent was left by my crotch smashing into the tank after landing a jump on both wheels simultaneously. The impact completely compressed the front and rear suspension, leaving only my crotch and my spine to absorb the rest of the shock.

For days, my voice was as high as it had been three years earlier, before puberty. The local Catholic priest actually wanted me to try out for the boys' choir, but I was a Baptist.

The G-5 came back from Cycle Stop within its usual, miraculous two-day window. It ran like a clock, but once again, no exact problem or cure was ever explained. My dad flatly let the dealership know that the next time we brought it back, we would be going home with cash. The manager snickered. I snickered as well. That manager just didn't understand that Marines always win the war. And my dad is a Marine.

With the bike running well, it was back to the levees. Ruben and I went to visit one of our riding buddies, Robby, who lived across the canal—an area that felt a bit like the proverbial "wrong side of the tracks," except in reverse. Robby actually lived in a wealthy section of Metairie. He also happened to live right across the street from our classmate, Tommy, and the reputed mob boss, Carlos Marcello.

Whenever we visited Robby, we usually caught a glimpse of the goings-on around the Marcello estate. Once, as the garage doors opened, Marcello's daughter's dog surged out; she panicked and drove her Cadillac straight into the swimming pool.

We didn't dare laugh—at least not until we were safely inside Robby's house. We always speculated about how many bodies were hidden in the trunks of the Cadillacs and Lincolns cruising in and out of the Marcello driveway.

But more fun than watching the Marcellos was going over to Tommy's house and ringing the doorbell, purely in the hopes that his mother would answer. It wasn't because she was particularly good-looking—it definitely wasn't a "Tommy's mom has got it going on" situation. It was simply because we loved to hear her announce our arrival.

Whenever Mrs. Garver answered the door and saw us standing there, she would roll her eyes, turn slightly toward the hallway, and call out with a symphony of utter disdain in her voice: "Tommy, the motorcycle gang is here."

Ruben and I would always do our best Eddie Haskell impressions, put on a show of pure innocence, and flash our finest manners. Mrs. Garver didn't buy it any more than June Cleaver did, and we would imitate her announcement endlessly. To this day, I still use that exact phrase whenever my biker friends come around.

Anyway, that afternoon we had ridden over to see if Robby wanted to bring his brand-new Suzuki TM 125 along on an adventure. Since the G-5 was running beautifully, Ruben and I had decided it was finally time to tackle a real motocross track. Of course, there wasn't a track anywhere nearby. There was, however, the golf course at New Orleans City Park. As a matter of fact, there were two of them.

Robby opted out because it was Saturday, the Sabbath. Even our Jewish and Catholic

friends could go racing on Sunday without feeling like they were sinning, but the Baptists? Not a chance. But that particular religious obstacle comes up a bit later in the AT-3 MX story.

I never cared for golf. I tried it once, wasn't any good at it, and—naturally—I quit. However, I was genuinely looking forward to playing on the greens that afternoon.

We snuck along the levees and up Harrison Avenue, which cuts right through the twin golf courses in City Park. It had rained earlier that day, meaning there weren't many golfers around to spot us. Perfect, I thought. We veered off the asphalt and onto the manicured turf.

Fore! Talk about smooth, fast riding; those fairways made for wonderful, wide-open straightaways. The wet soil offered perfect traction for ripping donuts and power slides. We were tearing it up—literally.

I was especially fond of the velvet smoothness of the putting greens, using them as launchpads to jump directly into the sand traps. Ruben and I played a few wild rounds, though we made sure never to get too close to the eighteenth hole since it sat right by the clubhouse. As it turned out, we were already too close.

A brigade of golf carts suddenly approached us at maximum high speed—which is to say, perhaps ten miles per hour. We dug in our tires, shredded the turf, and began pulling tight circles around the carts like Indians circling a wagon train.

And right on cue, just like an old Western movie, the cavalry showed up with fast horses and flashing lights to save the day—except this time, the cavalry was the New Orleans Police Department.

We took off, tearing across the fairways with the police cars slipping, sliding, and fishtailing right behind us. We veered back onto a putting green and launched ourselves

over a sand trap. One eager police car tried to follow our exact path—at least until it slammed to a halt right in the middle of the sand. It was just like a scene from a movie.

Ruben and I were laughing so hard that the tears blurred our vision. With the police in hot pursuit, we pinned the throttles toward the heavily wooded section of the park. We ducked deep into the tree line where the cruisers couldn't possibly follow, meandering through the brush for several blocks until we found a solid place to hide.

We stayed tucked under the thick canopy of the giant live oak trees for quite a while, waiting for the streets to clear. Even as young kids, Ruben and I were already well-acquainted with two hard truths: the sound of police helicopters, and the old street adage that you can never outrun a Motorola.

We escaped once again and made it home safely. We laughed until we cried; our stomachs actually ached from so much laughter in a single day. I know now that tearing up a public golf course isn't funny—or, at the very least, I've learned how to say that with a straight face as though I mean it.

Oddly enough, the reckless DNA that drove me to outrun the police on the turf that afternoon didn't evaporate as I grew up; it just got a whole lot more expensive. The ghost of that yellow Kawasaki—specifically, my absolute refusal to respect boundaries, laws, or municipal turf—followed me straight into adulthood.

It turns out that when you spend your youth fleeing police cars on a 100cc dirt bike, you develop a dangerous theory that the rules of the road are merely polite suggestions. I carried that theory right into the driver's seat of a British luxury car.

Flashback to 1984: I needed promotional photos for my "Picnics in the Park," a sideline gig that let me make seventy-five dollars an hour partying, while calling it

work. I parked the Bentley under the ancient live oaks, its radiator slats glimmering like swords in the sun. I set up an idyllic picnic with an antique croquet set and took the shots I needed. As always, I did exactly what I wanted.

But it had rained the night before, and when I tried to leave, that two-ton car transformed into a high-end excavating machine. I trench-warred my way toward the street, digging a jagged, muddy canyon into the city's prize-winning turf, the engine roaring as I churned the lawn into a total mess. I didn't care about the grass; I just wanted the road.

The moment I finally reached the pavement, a City Park Police car pulled up with its lights flashing. The officer instantly branded me a snotty, spoiled twenty-something—a feat of profiling that surely came from intensive training at the City Park Police Academy.

Looking from the ruined landscape to my face, he asked with pure disdain if I thought I was special because I had a Bentley.

I rested my chin in my hand, feigning deep contemplation.

"No," I said after a long, calculated pause. "I just think I'm special."

Without a word, he simply pulled out his summons pad.

"Yeah, whatever," was my wise reply.

I accepted the ticket like a bothersome autograph request, wadded it into a tight ball, and flicked it out the window. I tossed that 1984 ticket with the same teenage arrogance I'd used to tear up the golf course on the G-5 back in '72, foolishly believing that if I ignored a problem hard enough, the universe would eventually get tired and fix it for me.

I thought I'd left the law in my rearview mirror for good, but the ghosts of City Park

have a long memory. They waited nearly thirty years to haunt me.

Flash forward to 2010: I was applying for a teaching position at a New Orleans public juvenile detention center—they also call them "schools." I knew something was awry when, right in the middle of the interview, I was asked to follow the building's security officer.

I already knew that I would be the twenty-second teacher hired for that specific class that year, and it was only October. Because it was an emergency hire, I wasn't too concerned about landing the job. I had exactly what they needed: a teaching certificate and a pulse.

He brought me to a small office where a very stern woman began interrogating me about a past I honestly couldn't remember.

"Are you talking about what happened in 1975?" I asked.

She looked over her glasses at me. "No. Why? What happened in 1975? Did you kill somebody?"

When I told her no, she dropped the file onto her desk. "Then that ain't it," she said. "You're going to have to take care of this little problem at the courthouse."

The interview was over.

It turned out the "little problem" was an outstanding warrant from the Bentley debacle—destruction of property and failure to appear in court. Since the case was decades old and the city was post-Katrina, we reached a very New Orleans settlement: I would donate several pieces of art to the city—specifically, portraits of Benjamin Franklin and Ulysses S. Grant printed in pretty green ink.

As we were wrapping up the trade, the clerk beckoned me closer. "You some kind of lucky," she whispered. "You missed a grand theft charge over something worth a hundred thousand dollars by two months. If you'd been

seventeen at the time, you'd be explaining that one to a warden."

"I thought juvenile records were destroyed," I said, trying to peek at her computer screen.

"Sha, yeah right. You forgot where ya at? This is N'Awlins, baby."

"Can I see that--"

"There ain't no record of dat," she said firmly, staring at the screen. "You's a juvenile then."

"But you just said--"

"And there ain't no record of dat neither." She pursed her lips and raised her eyebrows, letting the contradiction hang in the air. I started to protest, but she just rolled her eyes and pointed to the door. "Get outta here and go teach them chil'en somethin'. Like how not ta be a dumbass after sixteen, like you was."

She was still laughing as I headed out, and I could hear her telling the clerk next to her, "Girl, listen to what dat man done."

She was right; the "dumbass" she was looking at in 2010 was the exact same one who had been jumping sand traps on a 100cc Kawasaki. I hadn't learned much since I was thirteen. But back in 1969 or 1972, I didn't have a Bentley, a teaching certificate, or an outstanding warrant—I just had a yellow bike that hated me, a thirst for the kind of trouble only a thirteen-year-old can find, and a complete inability to escape my own history. And that is yet another example of the circle of life.

Back to the 1970s, where I was completely unaware of the courtrooms and classrooms waiting in my future. I returned to thrashing the life out of the G-5—and my joints—on the levee.

Within no time, the G-5 did its "stop running" routine one last time, and I gave it one last beating. I was about to light the bike on fire, but Ruben talked me out of it.

It's something I still don't understand; Ruben always liked a good fire.

The dealer had the bike less than a day before they called. This time, it wasn't fixed. The veil of dealership magic was finally lifted, exposing the cold, calculating gears of retail commerce. The dealer informed me that the problem seemed to be a "defective rotary valve."

"Fine, fix it," I told him.

"Well, ah... the bike is out of warranty," he stammered.

And there it was. The grand revelation of the Cycle Stop business model: they hadn't been curing my bike's demons at all. They had simply been kicking the mechanical can down the road just long enough for the calendar to do its work. They had run out the clock on a thirteen-year-old kid.

"Uh-huh," was my only reply.

Me and dad went to the dealership. Dad didn't ask for a repair; he told them we were going home with cash. The manager snickered—a fatal mistake in judgment. He didn't realize he was looking at a man who had survived the black sands of Iwo Jima and served on the first Marine reconnaissance team to enter the atomic ruins of Hiroshima.

My dad took a slow half-step toward him. My father didn't raise his voice—he didn't have to. He simply leveled a gaze as cold and vacant as a deep-sea trench. It was the look of a man who had seen the world end and wasn't about to be intimidated by a motorcycle salesman in a cheap polyester shirt.

The manager's smugness didn't just fade; it evaporated. The showroom went deathly quiet, the sound of nearby idling bikes smothered by the sudden tension. The arrogance drained from the manager's face, replaced by the stark realization that he was no longer haggling; he was surrendering.

Without a word, he retreated into his office like a kicked cur. When he returned, he wouldn't meet our eyes. The only sound was the rhythmic snap-snap-snap of hundred-dollar bills being counted out against the glass counter—the only apology he was capable of making. He slid the stack toward my dad with a hand that had started to shake, his bravado completely extinguished.

I snickered then, because the manager finally understood what I already knew: Marines always win the war.

We walked out of Cycle Stop with the heavy, satisfying weight of a full refund in my dad's hand. They actually offered to sell me any bike in the shop at cost to make amends, but I decided they could keep their inventory. I had my cash, my pride, and a vow to never step foot in that dealership again.

With that refund in hand and the profit from my last trip to Mexico, it was time to move up to a real motocross bike. I swore right then that I would never own another Kawasaki—a promise I've kept, as my experiences with that G-5 have left me with a bitter taste to this day.

As I mentioned before, I saw a mint-condition G-5 at the Barber Vintage Motorcycle Festival a few years back. Sitting on that seat brought back a sudden flood of memories. I wanted it for the sole purpose of recapturing a very pivotal point in my youth, even if the asking price was three times the original retail cost.

I had a long conversation with the owner, and he just knew he had a sale on the hook. I was incredibly tempted to pay fifteen hundred dollars for a lost piece of my past. However, I generally stick to what I say. I swore back in 1973 that I would never buy another Kawasaki, and I'm sticking to my promise. Sometimes grudges are best forgotten, but not this time.

Yet, as I stared down at that G-5, something deep in my heart and memory surfaced. Standing there at the Barber Motorsports Festival, looking at that pristine G-5, my back gave a familiar, sharp twinge—a permanent souvenir from the physics of 1972. I didn't need a textbook to understand gravity or the geometry of trajectory; I'd learned those lessons twenty feet in the air over the dirt mounds of the Bucktown boat launch, watching my primary landing gear bounce away into the weeds on a G-5.

I leaned in toward that perfect yellow tank and whispered just loud enough for the owner to hear: "Screw you, you piece of crap."

The owner froze, his sales pitch dying on his lips. He looked utterly baffled, searching my face for a joke that wasn't there, but I didn't owe him an explanation. I simply turned and walked away into the crowd with a smile on my face and a deep, quiet satisfaction. I had stood by my word for nearly forty years, and it felt better than that motorcycle ever ran.

The lessons I learned on that screaming yellow Kawasaki were numerous and lifelong. Texas is a land where everything either stings, sticks, or bites. And mechanical gremlins, it turns out, are unionized—they never strike until the day after the warranty expires.

Most of all, it taught me that you reap what you sow. As Wet Willie so clearly put it, "Everything that 'cha do, will come back to you." I learned that lesson in spades: if you crash hard, it's going to hurt for life; if you tear up a golf course, you'll eventually pay for it; and if you treat your equipment with contempt, it'll return the favor. Act like an idiot, and people will treat you like one.

I even believe the G-5 was responsible for me taking up skydiving later in life—after all, I had already experienced the worst-case scenario: falling from the sky without a parachute and hitting the ground.

For all the lessons I learned with the G-5, what I did not learn, then or now, is how in the world that fox came back to life. It still puzzles me to this day. Perhaps the lesson from the fox is simply that many things in life can't be explained—like love, the vast scope of the universe, and most mysterious of all, why I still wish I would have bought that pretty little G-5 at Barber Motorsports Park.



Edwin Thompson- November 1972- Kawasaki G-5 100

1973 YAMAHA AT-3 MX

Having gotten a full refund on the Kawasaki G-5 lemon--no wonder it only came in yellow--and flush with my contraband profits, it was time to move up twenty-five cubic centimeters and step into the realm of a real motocross bike. With cash in hand, I went shopping.

European bikes were well out of my budget--and indeed most people's. The Suzuki TMs had a long waiting list, and I had a short patience. The Yamaha YZs weren't available yet, so I got the next best thing: I bought a Yamaha AT-3 MX.

The local dealer, Mohoff Yamaha, gave me a great deal and threw in a standing invitation to come riding with them. The AT-3 was a real motocross bike--not an enduro, but an honest-to-goodness, "out-of-the-box race bike," or so the ads claimed.

As soon as I got the bike home, I was headed for the levee. I can still feel the rush that I felt the first time the engine came "on the pipe." I was immediately addicted to the bodily sensations of the blinding acceleration.

The bike would shoot forward so fast when it came on the pipe that your arms were pulled in their sockets. The handgrips felt like they were trying to rip from your palms, and the sudden blurring of the passing world looked exactly like the *Star Trek Enterprise* hitting warp speed. I craved more.

As I blazed along the six-inch-wide trail atop the levee, the first thing I noticed was the massive difference in handling that a twenty-one-inch front wheel made. It didn't take me ten minutes to figure out that with that larger wheel, the front end of the bike was already poised three inches higher than the G-5--practically begging to do a wheelie.

After I had gotten used to the bike, I went riding in Enon with the group from the

dealership. Enon was endless miles of trails and logging roads cutting through dairy farms, clear-cut pine forests, power lines, and tung tree orchards. We rode those hilly power-line trails, deep woods, and orchards almost all day long. Only one of those trips stands out in my memory—really just a single, glorious moment in time.

One of the hot-shot show-offs (not me, for once) was blazing past everyone on the downhills, riding dangerously flat-out—and that's not just the pot calling the kettle black. He blew past Ruben and me, flipped us off, and disappeared into a thick screen of pine dust, visible only when he would jump above the cloud.

As we came down the hill, through the clearing dust, we saw the idiot going end-over-end, thrown through the air and landing hard in the high grass. We went to see if he was okay, even though he had just flipped us off. Remember, Ruben and I were good Samaritans and responsible citizens, so we stopped to check—not necessarily to help.

When we killed the engines, we could hear him screaming as he crawled out of the grass. He began vomiting violently. As we approached, we nearly retched from the sheer smell and sight of him. He was completely covered in—well, we couldn't quite tell what it was at first, but the gray paste had a terrifying movement to it.

He had been tossed into the air and landed squarely on top of a dead cow—one that had swollen in the blistering summer heat to the point that a pinprick would have popped it. And damned if a prick didn't pop the cow. This smart aleck had hit the carcass full-on and face-down, causing the beast to detonate. He was standing right inside a maggot-filled ribcage.

Once we saw that he was physically intact, and realized he wasn't in our group, nor did we even know him, we kicked our starters,

flipped him off, and roared away—laughing so hard we nearly peed on ourselves.

Over the next few months, I rode that Yamaha like a madman, wringing every ounce of power out of the machine. Once I found the absolute limits of its powerband, I decided it was time for modifications. Out came the tools: a hacksaw, a drill, and a Dremel tool.

"Reeeee, reeeee," screamed the little Dremel grinder as I prepared for intake surgery, smiling like a mad scientist.

The first thing I did was replace the stock reed valves with a set from a 360 Yamaha, which required a massive amount of meticulous "reeeee-reeeee-ing" on the intake port just to make the larger cage fit.

Next, I re-jetted the carburetor. Then, because the modified engine required far more air, I removed the heavy, restrictive metal air filter housing and fabricated a custom "still-air box" by wrapping thick vinyl around the frame members beneath the seat.

I routed the plastic carburetor boot directly to a massive sock filter suspended inside, sealing the entire chamber with three rolls of heavy-duty duct tape. After endless cycles of trial, tribulation, and spark-plug-fouling error, I finally dialed in the carburetor jetting.

The engine absolutely screamed on top, but it remained sluggish off the starting line. I solved that with a simple sprocket adjustment, swapping in a tiny twelve-tooth countershaft sprocket. Now, the AT-3 came off the line like a rocket. I sacrificed some top-end speed, but it was a beautiful trade for the explosive low- and mid-range performance I gained.

Next, I began stripping the bike down, hack-sawing off every unnecessary bracket and reflector. I had already mangled the stock metal fenders due to a series of misjudged wheelies, replacing them with lightweight plastic.

The bike looked menacing, and it was a certified hole-shot screamer. It would power out of turns with such violence that I had to shift all my weight over the handlebars just to keep the front tire on the dirt.

I tried to gain some ballast, eating enough junk food and cheap pizza to push my scrawny frame up to one hundred and twenty-three pounds, but my hyperactive metabolism refused to cooperate. Some fifty years and two heart attacks later, I still have a fast metabolism.

With all the aggressive weight-reduction drilling and the featherweight frame, the AT-3 was so light and perfectly balanced that it would actually stand upright by itself—provided you found the exact, microscopic sweet spot. Naturally, I began practicing standing on the footpegs at a complete standstill on the non-running bike.

I'm going to brag here: after months of endless, frustrating tipping over, I developed a balance so precise I could walk entirely around the motorcycle without letting it fall. I put easily a hundred hours of practice into this amazing balancing act, and I absolutely nailed it.

I could stand on the left peg, step around the front forks to the right side, glide down the frame to the seat, and return to my starting position. It was a major crowd-pleaser, which was highly convenient, because I only performed this trick when there was a crowd around to watch me—or at least one pretty girl.

As amazing as the balancing act was, nothing could, and still can't, compare to the wheelies I could pull off on the AT-3. Not little slow wheelies, no—these were fifth-gear, fifty-plus miles per hour, near-vertical wheelies. The longest one witnessed was over a mile long, performed only because I was bored.

I would get the bike up to speed, bounce the front end up, and find the sweet spot, which was near vertical. Hovering there, I would lean into the bars and feather the front brake, stopping and starting the front wheel's spin mid-air. I later learned in a physics textbook that the spinning tire was acting as a gyroscopic stabilizer, though that realization did absolutely nothing to improve my GPA or my interest in school.

I became a neighborhood legend for those wheelies. The local girls loved the show, and I lived for their approval. Many of these girls lived down the levee where the lawns got manicured, the houses turned into estates, and the parents actively discouraged their daughters from associating with loud-mouthed hoodlums like me.

Our little "motorcycle gang" was thoroughly detested, mainly because of the echoing, high-decibel racket of up to twelve unsilenced two-strokes bouncing off the levee, shattering the peaceful silence of the neighborhood.

There was one specific stretch of the embankment that allowed me to target my entire high-society audience at once. The grassy bank ran directly past the local country club, separated from the swimming pool and tennis courts by a simple chain-link fence. It was center stage, and I was a natural-born showman.

We all know the old proverb about pride coming before a fall, and when my day of reckoning arrived, it was magnificent. My pride—and my vertebrae—are still feeling the impact.

I came screaming down the levee, making a few loud, low-altitude reconnaissance passes past the pool to draw every eye to the fence. I backed up a block, clicked into gear, and launched the front wheel high. I was a portrait of pure, unadulterated adolescent

style as I wheelied past the loungers at sixty miles per hour.

I was so stoked that once wasn't enough; I turned around and did it again. And again. Back and forth, it was a high-decibel tennis match of one-wheeled vanity. Any sane gambler would have pocketed his chips and gone home, but sanity was never my strong suit, nor did I ever quit—whether I was losing or winning.

As I wheelied toward the country club, my back wheel hopped over a small, hand-sized rock embedded in the dirt—one I often used to help launch the front wheel. This time, it helped launch the rear wheel off the ground instead.

When the rear wheel returned to terra firma, the front of the bike had repositioned itself a hair past the sweet spot; it was coming over backward. I tried desperately to force the front end down. I Squeezed the front brake, locking up the spinning tire and killing the wheel's gyroscopic balance, hoping the sudden shift in physics would slam the front end back to earth.

It worked!

The front end came down fast—so fast that the bike shot out from under me like a launched rocket. At this point, the world went into slow motion. I found myself standing squarely on my boots, surfing down the levee in a perfectly upright position at over fifty miles per hour.

The motorcycle continued straight ahead of me. Because the front end had come down so perfectly true, the machine kept racing right along its path without a rider—without me! There I was, skating upright behind a bike that was pulling away from me with every passing second.

This bizarre game of chase lasted until we were positioned right in front of the country club. Then, suddenly, the smooth symphony of motion shattered into the chaotic cacophony of the crash to come. At the exact same time,

in perfect harmony, the handlebars began violently shaking from left to right just as I started my bodily descent to the earth.

The next step of the dance was also in perfect time: the bike began tumbling end-over-end, pieces flying off with every single impact. Meanwhile, I joined in the tumbling game, flipping through the air like a ragdoll. As my commercial fisherman buddies who watched the spectacle unfold later told me in their thick Bucktown drawl, "Ya looked like ya was a trout outta watah, brah!"

Both the bike and I finally ended our aerobic display and began a high-speed slide down the grassy levee—straight toward the fence, straight toward the swimming pool, and straight toward nearly seventy-five frozen spectators.

We both came to a sudden halt, enveloped in a thick cloud of churned-up grass and dust. As the air cleared, I found myself in an upright, sitting position, legs spread-eagle just inches from the chain-link fence, staring straight at my audience. The crowd's reaction was a beautiful, chaotic mix of horrified gasps and hysterical laughter, culminating in a drippingly sarcastic standing ovation.

Too dazed to feel the immediate sting of embarrassment, I stood up, took a deep, theatrical bow, and limped over to my bike. The handlebars were bent into a pretzel, the forks were completely tweaked, and the front wheel was no longer round—though it was still able to roll with a rhythmic, oval-shaped hop. I pushed the limping machine toward the street alongside the levee.

As I passed the front fence, it was lined with a jeering crowd. "Do it again, Edwin!" the girls shrieked.

I wasn't just served a slice of humble pie that afternoon; I was forced to choke down the entire pan in one sitting.

Many years later, my doctor asked me, "Exactly what did you do to be twenty-five years old and have the spine and discs of a seventy-year-old?"

I told him, "I could do sixty-mile-per-hour wheelies for miles."

With a questioning look, he inquired, "And how did that do this?" He pointed to the X-ray.

"You know how many times I crashed at sixty miles per hour to perfect that trick?" I rhetorically asked.

He grinned, and with a heavy note of sarcasm asked, "Did you have fun?"

Smiling from ear to ear, I replied, "Yes. Yes, I did. I had a blast."

My foolish antics were also inspired by another childhood hero, Evel Knievel. Yep, you guessed it—I tried jumping cars as well. That was a very short-lived endeavor, mainly due to my complete lack of carpentry and geometry skills.

I had recruited one of the neighborhood boys, Daniel, to help me build a ramp, and I had sworn him to absolute secrecy. I figured I would perfect the trick first and then show it to the world. This leads to the ultimate question: Do you know how many people can keep a secret? Two, if one of them is dead.

Unbeknownst to me, within forty-eight hours, Daniel had told everyone in the parish. It seems as though those he had told were better at keeping secrets than Daniel himself. With his help, I built a launchpad out of scrap two-by-fours and quarter-inch plywood—yeah, thin, flexible, quarter-inch cabinet backing.

The next day, we loaded the ramp into the bed of his dad's truck and headed for my secret location to practice the jump. Daniel drove, since neither of us had a driver's license and it was his dad's truck.

We went to a dead-end street where an old man in the neighborhood had several classic

cars parked side-by-side. I say old cars, but I realize now that "old" translates to "highly collectible." Fortunately, the owner was out of town. He also owned the vacant lots covering most of the dead-end block, meaning we were perfectly safe from adult interference. There was absolutely no need to have a "responsible citizen" thrown into the mix.

We unloaded our plywood creation and set up the ramp. Like roaches coming out of the woodwork, the neighborhood kids started appearing. I was beginning to have serious misgivings about the motorcycle stunt I was about to attempt, and for me to have doubts should have been warning enough—but it wasn't. Pride is empowering.

Without so much as a single practice trial, I decided I was going to jump two cars. I calculated my approach speed and trajectory using the absolute best of my D-minus math skills, guessing that a launch speed of roughly thirty miles per hour—or whatever felt like thirty—should do the trick.

To make yet another miraculous, saving grace of God story short: the second my tire hit that flimsy plywood, the ramp began splitting from bottom to top. It became a high-stakes race to the lip: me versus the split.

The cheap paneling held together just long enough to hurl me into the sky before splitting completely in two, followed immediately by the spectacular collapse of the 2x4 framing beneath it. Suddenly, I was airborne.

"Hell and be damned!" I shouted mid-flight. Prophetic words, indeed.

I was flying through the air at a dangerously vertical angle. I threw my weight forward to force the nose down, but my rear wheel clipped the trailing edge of the first car's roof, leaving a massive dent in the

metal. I successfully cleared the gap to the second car, but landed so heavily on the roof panel that the sudden cabin compression blew both the windshield and the rear glass straight out of their gaskets with a loud pop.

My front wheel went over the nose of the hood at a steep downward angle, while the rear wheel decided to take first place, swinging violently upward and over the front. I was catapulted off over the bars as though I had been thrown from a bucking bull.

The bike was only slightly damaged, but I walked away with a nice case of road rash burning across my hands and forearms. Once again, most of the damage was to my pride. Once again, I received applause and vocal approval from the crowd. I never attempted jumping cars or carpentry ever again.

Speaking of jumps, that disastrous stunt brings to mind one particularly memorable day on the levee with my friends. We used to hold contests to see who could launch off the embankment the highest and land the furthest down the slope. We would get a running start on the trail between the lake and the levee, crest the embankment, and catch massive air.

Because of the incline, you came down parallel to the slope; however, at the peak of the launch, you would be hanging nearly ten feet in the air above the flat service road—the very one the police cruised, looking for hoodlums like us. On busy days, the levee was packed with police cruisers, horseback riders, and families picnicking on the grass, so we used a lookout to signal when the coast was clear to jump.

Occasionally, these watchdogs would play practical jokes. Like the time I was cleared for takeoff, only to soar directly over the heads of an unsuspecting family having a picnic lunch.

The worst—or best—practical joke was when we cleared our friend, Donald, to jump.

Donald had just gotten a brand-new Suzuki TM 250, and he was acting so snobby about his new toy that we decided he desperately needed some payback.

We gave him the all-clear to launch. He pinned the throttle toward the levee, hitting the crest at high speed, and then, he was airborne.

Unbeknownst to Donald, we had intentionally timed his flight to coincide with Freddie the Cop's approaching patrol car. But as usual, our mathematical calculations were wrong—very wrong. Freddie was driving much faster than we anticipated.

Donald landed squarely on top of the police cruiser, completely caving in the metal roof. Yet somehow, against all laws of probability, he rode out a perfect landing onto the levee slope below and instantly fled into the streets.

Freddie slammed to a halt, bolted out of the car waving his gun around, and cursed us at the top of his lungs as we scattered for our motorcycles. We took off in three different directions: some sped down the old highway along the lake, many of us ducked into our secret hidey-holes in the thick brush, while others took straight to the neighborhood streets. Not a single one of us got caught.

It was just another reason why Freddie continued his years-long crusade to rid the levee of "biker vermin."

By this time, I decided to focus all my energy on convincing my dad to let me race. I'd been racing the Levee Gang for nearly a year already. I was fourteen. I was growing old. It was time to go real racing.

My sister's boyfriend, and future husband, Terry, helped convince my dad that motocross was perfectly safe; after all, I had years of riding experience. My dad finally gave in. Off to the races we went, and the entire family came along—once.

We went to a motocross track in Slidell, Louisiana. It was the next and nearest race on the schedule. That track was notorious for two extremes: if it had rained lately, it was a total mud-soup; if it hadn't, it was bone-dry, slick, and choked with dust.

Slidell was well known for catastrophic multi-bike pileups that came from riding through a Sahara-like, zero-visibility dust storm. It hadn't rained in weeks, and my mom was deeply worried.

"I don't know how you're going to see anything in that dust," she said.

My reply was simple and honest: "I plan to get the holeshot and stay in first place."

Wishful thinking.

At the gate drop of the first moto, I shot out of the hole—and promptly missed third gear, twice. I was still ahead of a few, but behind many. Pinned in the throttle, I raced toward the first turn, totally blinded by a suffocating cloud of dust kicked up by over forty bikes.

I only remember hitting something, then going over something else. Finally, something hit me, followed by something—or somethings—going over me.

When the dust cleared, I was left with a bike that bore a remarkable similarity to the way it looked after the wheelie fiasco in front of the country club.

"No worries," Terry encouraged as we dragged the wreckage back to the pits. "Straighten things out, get ready for the next moto, and try again."

"I can't win a trophy if I only ride one moto," I proclaimed. "I'm going home with a trophy!"

Terry immediately started straightening out the bike while I ran over to the sign-up shack to register for the 175cc class. It was completely full. Refusing to give up, I tried to register for the 250cc class. It was full, too.

"Then put me in the open class!" I demanded.

"You can't ride a 125cc in the Open Class! You crazy?" asked the man at the sign-up desk.

"Then why is it called the Open Class?" I questioned.

"Guess you got a point," he muttered. He shrugged his shoulders and handed me the paperwork. "It's your body and bike, kid," he added.

We got the bike ready. They called for the open class to line up.

First Moto: I optimistically looked down the starting line past all the older guys shaking their heads, snickering, or just staring slack-jawed at the wide-eyed teenager on a 125.

What? Only twenty or so riders? And most of 'em are old-like, thirty. My odds just went up, I mumbled.

The gate dropped, I shot out of the hole, and somehow found myself in third place. If there had been another ten feet to the first turn, I would have been dead last. I was already completely wide open, while most of those massive bikes next to me still had another gear or two to go.

The track was tight and didn't have many long straightaways. Within half a lap, I realized I could blow the doors off the big bikes in the turns, easily picking up any positions I lost on the fast straights.

The final section of the track leading to the finish consisted of three tight turns, a switchback, and then a long straightaway—with the finish line sitting right in the middle of it.

On the final lap, I exited that last turn in third place, but the two big bikes I had blown past in the corners were right on my tail. They powered past me just before the finish line, dropping me to fifth.

Still, I was psyched. I rode past the trophy table and stared at the shiny hardware. I was absolutely determined that one of those Open Class trophies was going home with me.

Second Moto: I finished in third place. One of the riders who had finished ahead of me in the first moto crashed out and had a DNF. Several of the older guys started to grumble and protest to the track officials, but I think the officials just wanted to see how this insanity was going to turn out. They let me race again.

Third Moto: I finished third again. Somehow, the math worked out to an overall fourth-place finish, which meant only one thing—I was going home with a trophy!

Oh yes! Victory is sweet, I thought—no, wait, I said that out loud.

By this time, several of the guys I had beaten had filed a formal protest. All of the riders from every single class were crowded around the trophy table, waiting for the verdict. Finally, the officials made their ruling: "Open Class" meant Open Class.

They added insult to injury when they told the men who protested, "Go home, cry, and lick your wounds. The boy beat you fair and square on a 125cc." The official's loud laughter while delivering his decree only rubbed salt into their wounds.

Yet, my mom, dad, and older sister didn't see me accept that first trophy. They had actually packed up and left before I even lined up for the first Open Class moto. The brutal crashes and mounting injuries they witnessed earlier that morning had painted a terrifying picture in their heads—a vision of an eventual disaster they simply didn't want to witness. They never attended another race.

I learned some important lessons that day. I learned that perseverance pays, that quitters truly never win, and that real motocross tracks were a whole lot more

physically demanding than the levee. I was completely exhausted. That night, I set the shiny trophy on my dresser, right where I could stare at it until I finally fell asleep.

I actually showed some natural talent for racing to go along with my youthful invincibility. And so my racing career had begun—with one little hitch. Okay, one huge hitch: I could only race once, perhaps twice a month.

You see, I was raised a Southern Baptist, and I still am. My father made a massive concession just allowing me to race on Sundays. Back then, you simply didn't do that as a Baptist; it was sinful, plain and simple. Most of the racetracks throughout the Deep South couldn't start practice until after noon, solely so they wouldn't disturb morning church services with the noise.

At that time, there was either a Baptist or a Pentecostal church every mile or less in rural areas. They had the territory sewn up, much like New Orleans has Catholic churches on nearly every corner.

I was always jealous of my friends; they could race every single Sunday. They were Catholics, and the Catholics got to go to Mass on Saturday evening, completely freeing up their Sundays without the yoke of sin. Even my Jewish friends were able to race on Sundays, since their Sabbath fell on Saturday.

I argued until I was blue in the face that the Sabbath was actually Saturday, meaning the Baptists were technically going to church on the wrong day. My argument, no matter how well-versed, was to no avail.

I never changed my father's mind, nor did I convince the Southern Baptist Convention. Through years of argumentation, I now know the truth as to why Protestants meet on Sundays: it is the day of Jesus' resurrection.

I decided I would just have to win every single time I raced. For the most part, I was always in the top three. I also had a knack for going very fast in the mud and rain. When I raced in the rain, I usually won.

I had years of practice on the levee, where I had learned that speed enabled you to float right above the mud. I had always figured it didn't matter if you crashed in the muck; the ground was soft, so crashing didn't hurt nearly as much.

No matter what talents I may have possessed for racing, it was a moot point. Not being able to race every Sunday made it impossible to accumulate enough points to place in regional championships, let alone ever secure a sponsor. But it's true that real life is stranger than fiction: I got a sponsor anyway.

A year later, Terry received a Suzuki dealership as a college graduation present—a move meant to prepare him to take over his family's Ford dealership down the road. I continued to ride the Yamaha until Terry's dealership opened, proving once and for all that the Lord truly does work in mysterious ways.

I learned many things on that Yamaha. I learned about being a good sportsman—which is to say, just win. I learned that there are no excuses for losing. I learned that I didn't know the first thing about science, physics, or math.

But most of all, I learned that none of it mattered, because I could pull off some very impressive wheelies.

I also learned a very strange lesson in anatomy from owning that AT-3. Once, while I was making Swiss cheese out of every part on the bike by drilling holes in everything to lighten the load, a sliver of steel became embedded in my eye. By the next morning, my eye was completely bloodshot and turning rusty.

Off to the eye doctor we went. When Dr. Gaines, my eye doctor since I was two years old, looked at the piece of steel embedded in my eye, he shook his head.

"It will have to be drilled out," he said.

Yeah--drilled out.

They deadened my eye and prepared the tray. Dr. Gaines, who was getting up in age at this point, started toward me. My head was locked in a vise, literally, to keep me from moving. As he moved closer, I noticed his hand was visibly shaking.

The closer that drill came to my face, the more I began to shake in pure fear. Right before impact with my eye, he stopped, set the drill down, and said, "I better get a younger doctor to do this."

Whew, I thought, very relieved.

A younger doctor completed the drilling operation. I can still remember the high-pitched hum of the tool, the cold drop of numbing fluid, and the bizarre, wet resistance as the steel bit made contact.

It didn't feel like surgery; it felt exactly like pushing a wooden toothpick through the firm, fleshy skin of a cocktail olive, followed by a tiny, scraping release as the rust ring finally broke free. I never picked up a power tool without goggles again.

One valuable lesson I almost learned from the AT-3, but didn't, was when to hold 'em, and when to fold 'em. I still push a good thing to the point where it becomes a bad thing, because I'm a show-off. Oh well, "C'est la vie."

The Yamaha AT-3 MX was a great bike, and it's one that I wish I still owned. But it had to go--Terry had a Suzuki dealership. Roger DeCoster and Joel Robert had Suzukis. It seemed only natural that I should have one, too.

Within the year, I was riding Suzukis and tearing up the local tracks, as well as sneaking off to tracks in Florida and Alabama

whenever my parents went out of town. Not to mention, I was riding a Suzuki GT380 triple by the time I was sixteen

But Suzukis those are other stories to be told.



1973 YAMAHA RD250 STREET BIKE

The Yamaha RD 250 was not my bike; it belonged to my father, who had briefly surrendered to the great, noisy motorcycle craze of the 1970s. With gas prices suddenly skyrocketing from thirty-eight cents a gallon to a staggering fifty-five cents, his purchase was disguised as a sensible financial strategy for his daily commute.

A seventeen-cent jump doesn't sound like much today, but imagine waking up tomorrow to find your fuel bill has suddenly doubled, and you'll understand the panic of 1973. Thank goodness we used that crisis as a turning point to ensure we would never be an oil-dependent nation in the future—that future, of course, being right now.

One hot Saturday, my dad loaded up the trucks and took Ruben and me to Enon to go riding. Enon, with its endless, punishing miles of sugar-sand fire roads and clay power-line cuts, was a landscape designed to destroy street bikes. The RD 250, with its low-slung pipes and street tires, was utterly helpless.

My father fell on his rear end more times than we could count, the heavy street bike sliding out from under him at every turn. Ruben and I would kill our engines at the top of the ridges, sitting on our dirt bikes in the shade, waiting as he slowly, painfully slithered his way up the deep sand roads. He finally threw in the towel, and we all headed home.

Despite my lack of a driver's license and the absolute fear of God my father had instilled in my soul regarding street riding, I managed to sneak the RD out around the neighborhood a few times. I can still recall the mechanical shock of that engine; it was a pure, unadulterated screamer.

Unlike my dirt bikes, which wasted their energy throwing roost and chewing up soil,

the RD's street tires bit the pavement instantly. When that two-stroke twin came on the pipe, it was quick--viciously quick--transforming our quiet suburban streets into a blur of gray asphalt.

My father's riding days ended in a single, horrific second. On his way home from work one afternoon, he witnessed a motorcyclist ahead of him get cleanly beheaded after slamming flat-out into the back of a semi-tractor trailer. The absolute fragility of human life on two wheels was laid bare right in front of him.

My dad, a combat Marine, was shaken to his very core; he rode the RD home, parked it in the garage, and placed an ad in the *Times-Picayune* classifieds that very night. It sold a few days later.

I suppose I did realize a few things connected to the RD while it was around. I realized I liked the feel of a street bike--an actual street bike. The RD expanded my interest in motorcycles far beyond dirt bikes.

Looking back, I realize the RD 250 wasn't really about gas prices at all. It was a quiet, awkward effort by a disciplined father to build a bridge to his wild, rebellious teenage son through the only language I understood: motorcycles. I appreciate that effort now more than I can say.

He wasn't always a man of rules; he'd had his own brand of two-wheeled madness as a kid, tearing through the countryside with his buddy, Ed Buyer, on an old 1930s Indian, fleeing the law after they had accidentally blown up a local gas station.

But that legendary escape is another story entirely--one I'm currently saving for a screenplay about my father's wilder days.

I should have learned from the beheaded biker that motorcycles and stupidity don't mix; they're a deadly combination. As is evident from the stories to come, that was

one lesson I didn't learn until decades later.



1975 SUZUKI GT380

"Kind of young, kind of now, Charlie. Kind of free, kind of wow! Charlie." -1970s Revlon commercial jingle for Charlie perfume

Sixteen years old-young, free, and astride a Suzuki GT380-pure, unadulterated wow. The bike was a direct perk of my brother-in-law Terry owning a local Suzuki franchise. For a teenage motorcycle fanatic, having a dealership in the family was like holding the keys to the kingdom.

My father had actually purchased the GT380 for himself, but after only a couple of tentative rides, he decided for the second and final time that street riding was a death sentence. The memory of that beheaded rider he'd witnessed during his RD 250 days was burned too deeply into his mind. I was just thankful his sudden safety crusade didn't extend to grounding my flying privileges as well.

The Suzuki GT380 was a three-cylinder, two-stroke rocket ship that pulled genuine G-forces and served as a perfect catalyst for my ongoing wheelie obsession. More importantly, it was my first legal, licensed foray onto the public asphalt.

The only fatal flaw in the GT's design was its pathological hatred of water. It despised moisture even more than our family cat, Margie, and shared her habit of simply passing out cold whenever things got wet. If you washed the bike too aggressively or rode through a sudden Louisiana downpour, the ignition system would suffer a nervous breakdown and die on the spot.

My fondest memory of this bike happened on a crisp, cool, clear September morning. I was headed to school on the GT380 and had taken I-10. The normal pattern to school was to take the exit past the building and loop back, avoiding a heavily congested

intersection. The campus itself sat right along the edge of the interstate.

As I passed, I saw everyone arriving at school. I thought about how much I disliked school and what a beautiful morning it was to experience a nice freeway ride.

"Screw school," I said.

I already possessed a propensity for skipping school—or for being really late and blaming it on my old car breaking down. I rode past the exit to school. A smile immediately stretched across my face. It was an experience I would repeat many times in adult life, riding counter-flow past commuters on their way to work while I was on my way to play.

Five miles past the school exit, the concrete sprawl of the New Orleans suburbs abruptly surrenders to the wild wetlands. There, Interstate 10 transforms into a twelve-mile-long elevated bridge suspended over the primordial swamp between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, slicing directly through the Bonnet Carré Spillway.

Twenty miles up the road, I veered onto the newly opened Interstate 55, which forked north into the dark, magnificent canopy of the then-beautiful Manchac Swamp.

I will never forget the overwhelming wave of pure, unfiltered freedom that washed over me that morning—the sweet, rebellious rush of saying a hard no to the classroom and an easy yes to my own passion. I was finally living the open-road highway dream I had held tight since seeing *Easy Rider*. That morning was the absolute fulfillment of a childhood fantasy, wrapped in a crisp, crystal-blue September sky.

It is a moment I would gladly pay to relive over and over again—if only our modern scientists would stop wasting their funding trying to save the planet and prioritize perfecting time travel instead.

When I finally rolled back to school hours late, I felt so relaxed, so free, and so utterly empowered that I walked straight into the principal's office and told Mrs. Driscoll the absolute truth. I offered no excuses because I feared no consequences.

She had known me my entire life, and I think she recognized the quiet, glowing victory of a dream fulfilled. She simply cracked a wry grin, handed me an excused tardy slip, and told me to get to class.

At the final bell, I celebrated my immunity by treating the parking lot to a screaming, tire-smoking burnout, followed by the longest, most vertical wheelie I had ever performed on that triple. Ah, the feeling of invincibility provided by youth.

That ride on a beautiful September morning cemented a feeling and an attitude within me that I have carried throughout my life. It also traces my habit of placing pleasure before work right down to its roots. In a sense, I suppose that ride is responsible for my lack of retirement funds today. Yet, the memory of that morning is still far more important to me than money.

The GT380 is also responsible for my fondness for riding in cold weather. South Louisiana cold is a different type of cold. It can come with north winds off Lake Pontchartrain, mixed with one hundred percent humidity. It's a cold that seeps into your bones, almost to the marrow. I like riding in that type of cold; it makes you feel alive, or at least as though you are so nearly frozen that you won't age.

In the winter, I would take my girlfriend, Lisa, riding on Sunday afternoons. We would go cruising Lakeshore Drive—a popular, eight-mile-long cruising spot since it was built. Every time we came to a stop, the scent of Charlie perfume would waft forward, filling my senses—a scent that for many years would be synonymous with young women and fun.

Lisa would beg to go home because she was so cold. Several times, she caught a ride back with friends in their warm car. I would just ride on with a smile that was literally frozen on my face.

During tenth grade, I started sharing car rides to school with Frank. On nice days, we would ride our motorcycles. Frank usually rode a Yamaha DT-250 enduro, which was a demo bike. Frank's dad, known as "Doc," owned a Harley-Davidson and Yamaha dealership. Between the two of us, we basically had free bikes, free service, and free parts. Life is tough, always has been.

Spring came, and the weather warmed up. Frank and I decided that when school ended, we would ride our bikes to Pensacola, Florida. Surprisingly, our parents agreed. The end of May rolled around, and we decided to begin our excursion during the second week of June.

Lisa's mom and dad were flabbergasted that my parents would let me go on such a trip. Lisa's mom told me, "You're lucky I'm not your mother, because I wouldn't even let you have a motorcycle."

I always considered her my second mother. I continued to call her every Mother's Day until her passing. But she was right—I am lucky she wasn't my mother, because if she had been, I would have missed out on a lifetime of motorcycling experiences.

Doc, Frank's dad, was a grizzled, wise old road warrior. Before we departed, he ordered us to wear long-sleeved shirts, slather ourselves in sunscreen, and avoid riding directly into the violent June thunderstorms that patrol the Gulf Coast.

Frank and I snickered at the mere thought of wearing long sleeves in the suffocating summer heat. Sunscreen? I had never even seen a bottle of it.

Doc just grinned, shook his head, and said, "Okay, boys. But when you're lying

awake at night, unable to sleep because you feel like thousands of invisible bugs are crawling under your skin, just remember I warned you."

We laughed off the hyperbole, but Doc fixed us with a dead-serious look. "I'm telling you, it'll feel like you're going through heroin withdrawal," he said. "You'll swear things are burrowing into your flesh."

In the infinite, arrogant wisdom of sixteen-year-olds, we just rolled our eyes. Adults—what could they possibly know?

We left early the next morning, and things were going great. We made it out of Louisiana and rode up the Mississippi Gulf Coast, through Pass Christian and Biloxi. Noting the number of new disco clubs along the coast, we decided that on our way home we would stay a night or two in Biloxi to "disco down."

At that time, the drinking age was eighteen, and we looked every bit of it. Besides, in the South, no one checked IDs if you looked like you were at least fourteen—and that's not a joke.

After a huge seafood lunch, we throttled back onto I-10 and pointed our front tires toward Alabama.

To understand the cultural physics of this moment, you have to remember the context: it was the summer of 1975, we were teenagers with shoulder-length hair, and we were riding loud Japanese motorcycles. By then, I had watched *Easy Rider* at least fifteen times, but I foolishly assumed that the deep, violent hatred for our breed had surely passed.

After all, we were cruising down a major federal interstate, not meandering down backroads or through small, hostile, redneck-infested towns. Surely we wouldn't encounter that kind of backward prejudice.

Having spent time in small towns throughout the South in my youth, visiting relatives and on hunting trips with my dad, I

knew what to expect. Chalk one up for pure, adolescent naiveté.

Frank and I rode through Mobile, through the tunnel, and along Mobile Bay. As we cruised along the bay, I pointed to a sign that heralded the battleship USS Alabama. Frank shook his head in agreement; silently, we made plans to visit.

We cruised past a tiny, old woman who was straining to see over the massive steering wheel of a land-yacht Buick—the kind of chrome-plated tank that dominated the decade. I offered her a polite nod of my helmet as I passed and merged back into the right-hand lane.

What I failed to recognize in that split second was her reaction: her eyes had narrowed into tiny slits, and her mouth had tightened into a thin, bloodless line of pure disgust.

Suddenly, she roared into the passing lane, pulled directly alongside us, and began steering her massive car into our lane.

Frank was riding closest to her, and as she squeezed him, he was forced closer to me. I drifted onto the narrow shoulder, desperately trying not to go onto the grass buffer separating the road from the deep waters of Mobile Bay.

In a flash of pure self-preservation, Frank swung his boot out and delivered a heavy kick to her passenger door, which sent his bike into a terrifying wobble and the old woman into a homicidal rage.

She yanked the wheel toward us again as Frank continued to physically joust with the two-ton steel beast, raising the question of who was actually the insane one in this high-speed, roadside duel.

I slowed to a near stop. The woman jerked the car wheel toward Frank, who locked up his brakes just as her car entered the right lane. We stopped. She drove on.

We stopped for a smoke break to contemplate the situation—and our sunburns. I asked Frank, "Did that just happen?" He just stared back at me, shaking his head in disbelief.

We survived Mobile and had gotten past Spanish Fort when very large, dark, bruised-looking clouds began looming on the horizon. As we got closer, they grew even larger and more menacing.

One of the things I like about motorcycling is that you smell the earth around you—both good and bad. You can also smell rain. I smelled rain, a lot of rain. I also began to think about Margie, our family cat, and the Suzuki's perfect imitation of her when it got wet.

A few miles outside of Malbis, Alabama, the heavens opened up. To say it began raining is an understatement. To say it was a torrential downpour is an understatement. Had it rained like that during Noah's forty-day boat ride, it would have only needed twenty days of Malbis rain to get the same amount of water.

Within five miles, Margie—I mean the Suzuki—stuttered, choked on the moisture, and passed out cold.

Standing on the rain-swept shoulder, we realized our five minutes of planning had been criminally deficient: we had no tools, no dry gear, and no tow rope. Since necessity is the mother of invention, we unbuckled our leather belts, looped them together, and tied my front handlebars to Frank's rear luggage rack.

We had barely a foot of clearance between our fenders as Frank began slowly, very slowly, and dangerously towing me along the shoulder toward Malbis.

The torrential, stinging rain did nothing to soothe our weeping sunburns. The drops felt like a swarm of bees drilling into our bare necks and arms, escalating into an agony

that felt like being aggressively assaulted by a gang of sadistic acupuncturists.

As we crawled along, passing drivers slowed down—not to offer us a lift or a dry truck bed, but to lay on their horns and offer us encouragement and Southern hospitality with their middle fingers.

We made it to the Malbis exit. My spirits were uplifted when I saw a large gas station—the kind so common back then, with a huge roof covering the pump area. It had garage bays full of tools, which we would need, because we hadn't thought about bringing tools either.

We finally coasted into the large, old-school service station, pulling under the dry sanctuary of the massive tin roof covering the pumps.

A weathered old man emerged from a work bay, wiping his hands on a filthy red shop rag. He looked us over unapprovingly, nodded at me, and asked, "You broke down?"

I wanted to say something smart-aleck, but decided "Yes, sir," was the smarter move.

"Do you mind if we stay under the overhang to work on the bike and wait out the storm?" I asked.

He looked at the puddle forming under my Suzuki, spat a stream of tobacco juice onto the concrete, and said, "Sure. Do whatever you need to do—just do it somewhere else."

I stared at him in utter disbelief. "Really?" I asked, praying his dry delivery was just some twisted local joke.

The old man didn't blink. "Yeah, really. Get them motorsickles off my property. Why don't you boys go down the road and wait out the rain in the barber shop chair."

Two thoughts instantly hit me: first, he actually used the word motorsickles, and second, *Easy Rider* was not a movie; it was a documentary.

Just as we resigned ourselves to the downpour and reached for our helmets, two

elderly women who had been filling up a massive, late-sixties Cadillac with towering rear tailfins called out to us.

"You boys don't pay that grumpy old bastard no mind," the driver shouted. "Follow us to our house. You can use my late husband's tools and dry off in the garage."

The old man at the gas station just shook his head, hissed, and walked off. We hooked the belt-tow back together and trailed the women and their luxury yacht through the rain.

They pulled under the porte-cochère of what had to be the largest antebellum mansion in the county—a stunning relic of white pillars and wrap-around porches.

I felt like I had stepped straight into an episode of *The Waltons*—specifically the one with the eccentric, wealthy Baldwin sisters who lived in a historic estate and quietly brewed moonshine.

We pushed the bikes—okay, I pushed my bike into the garage while Frank rode his. After working on the Suzuki, we were invited inside the house.

The sisters, both widowed and in their late seventies, were the undisputed pillars of Malbis high society. They dried every single stitch of our soaked clothing—since we hadn't possessed the foresight to pack waterproof gear—fed us plates of warm food, and chatted with us as if we were their own grandsons.

As we sat in their cozy kitchen, the sister who owned the estate sighed and confessed she had spent her entire life secretly wanting to ride a motorcycle. Her sister playfully nudged her shoulder and teased, "Oh, sister, you were always the wild child of our family."

Frank and I exchanged a delighted grin.

Once the storm cleared and the dried-out Suzuki fired back to life, I grabbed my helmet, looked to our host, and asked, "So,

you've always wanted to ride a motorcycle, huh?"

She smiled and nodded. I patted the black vinyl seat of the GT380. "Opportunity knocks—sometimes only once." I stretched my helmet out toward her.

We strapped our helmets onto those two brave old women and took them for a two-wheeled tour of the town, their white hair peeking out from under our visors as they waved like royalty to their stunned neighbors. The look of absolute, jaw-dropped horror on the locals' faces remains one of my favorite memories.

The wild sister leaned over my shoulder and said, "Let me buy you boys a tank of gas before y'all go. Go back to the fill'n station where we met y'all."

I told her that I didn't think that was a good idea.

She replied, "Don't you worry about that ole' coot—if he says anything, I'll buy his station tonight and close it down by noon tomorrow."

I couldn't resist. We pulled into the gas station.

The attendant didn't know what to do; he looked at the man who had run us off. The man nodded and threw up his hands. The attendant filled up our bikes and wouldn't take any money.

We brought the women back home; they gave us a hug and some sandwiches to go. We left Malbis. I wasn't sure who wore the biggest grins—Frank and I, or the women.

Those women were the epitome of Southern hospitality. Their Alabama accents and spirits of adventure made me wonder what kind of girls they had been when they were our age.

I told Frank, "I like the women of Alabama."

If only I had known what was soon to come that would forever heighten that feeling—or

how, in the decades to come, I would say that again several times.

We rolled into Pensacola around six that evening, thoroughly battered. Though we had planned to rough it and camp, our raw, throbbing skin begged for mercy; I eagerly accepted Frank's offer to pay for a motel room.

As we began to unpack, a terrifying sensation crept over my forearms—it felt exactly as though thousands of microscopic parasites were burrowing and crawling just beneath my skin. Doc's warning echoed in my head with the force of a hammer. The relentless wind whipping against our sunburned arm hairs all day had created a phantom itch so intense it felt like a severe drug withdrawal.

Deciding that if my brain was going to create imaginary bugs, I was going to drown them in real poison, Frank and I poured ourselves several heavy, throat-burning shots of whiskey before heading down to the hotel restaurant.

On our way across the courtyard, we passed the hotel pool where three stunning, tanned blonde girls—about our age, though the leader looked slightly older—were packing up their towels. Frank and I immediately slowed our pace, staring like two starved wolves at these bikini-clad sirens. To our shock, they didn't roll their eyes; they actually smiled and waved.

"Are those your motorcycles out front?" the oldest one asked in a thick, honey-slow Alabama drawl.

"Sure are," I replied, trying to sound like a seasoned road warrior.

Frank, emboldened by the whiskey, leaned in. "You girls want a ride?"

The youngest one gasped and said she did, but the oldest quickly hushed her. "We gotta go get ready, y'all. We're going to the concert tonight."

As they turned to walk away, the young one looked back over her shoulder and yelled, "But you can ride us tomorrow! We're in room 119!"

The oldest girl gave her a sharp shove. "Hush up, you wild thing!"

Frank and I looked at each other with identical devilish grins. Simultaneously, we said, "Nah, can't be happening, huh?"

Frank called out to the girls, "Where y'all from?"

In unison they slowly drawled, "Montgomery, we're sisters."

Frank and I looked at each other, and in unison we said, "Alabama? Montgomery, Alabama? Sisters? Oh, yeah."

We went into the restaurant, and I asked the waitress what there was to do on this fine Friday night. She told us the hottest thing in town was the Bee Gees concert. Frank and I looked at each other, smiled, and nodded.

We went to the auditorium and bought tickets. This was right before the Saturday Night Fever album and movie catapulted the Bee Gees into the stratosphere of stardom for their second ride. I had always liked their music, but wasn't a fan per se.

Working our way through the crowded arena, we spotted the Montgomery sisters standing right against the barrier, practically on the stage. The moment we approached, they pulled us into their circle as if we were long-lost boyfriends—it was the mid-seventies, after all, and the social rules were wonderfully loose.

The heavy, sweet scent of Charlie perfume clung to them like the air in a humid greenhouse full of freshly blooming Southern magnolias.

The oldest sister, Joy, was hopelessly in love with Barry Gibb's flowing hair and falsetto, her entire focus locked on catching the singer's eye. While she screamed at the

stage, her younger sisters wrapped their arms around Frank and me, planting warm, whiskey-scented kisses on our sunburned cheeks.

I leaned over the roaring concert noise and shouted into Frank's ear, "Sisters? From Alabama? This is freaky, man."

Frank grinned, his eyes glazed with adolescent triumph. "No, dude, this is cool."

Joy never got to go backstage. After the concert, we all went back to the hotel, drank, and partied—way too much. The sisters refused to let Frank and me return to our room. They insisted we stay with them. There was only one king-sized bed.

Like I've said, "Life is tough, always has been."

Frank and I decided Alabama sucked, but the women and girls from Alabama were great.

At some unrecallable point the next day—or perhaps the day after—Frank and I headed back to Biloxi. After all, the most definitive plan we had made for our trip was to "disco down" in Biloxi. I was tempted to go up through Georgia and Tennessee, then down through Mississippi to avoid driving through Alabama again, but we braved it out and made it to Biloxi.

Frank and I stayed at the Ramada Inn, about ten miles from the center of the action in Biloxi. We started out partying at The Fiesta and went to several discos that night. Incredibly, all I can recall was the ride back to our hotel.

After a blurry night of heavy drinking in the Biloxi disco scene, Frank and I managed to locate our motorcycles after an exhaustive search of our memories and the help of a highly amused bouncer who probably should have had us arrested on the spot.

We swung our legs over the seats, pulled the bikes off their side stands, and immediately fell over in a heap onto the pavement on the right. We repeated this clumsy sequence several times, our

coordination completely dissolved by rum and cheap beer.

By our fourth attempt, a few laughing onlookers had to physically hold our bikes upright until we let out the clutches. Miraculously, the moment the tires started rolling, our muscle memory took over, and we became perfectly steady.

Instinct warned us that if we ever stopped our momentum—for a red light, a stop sign, or a police car—we would crash instantly. To keep our forward motion alive, we completely ignored the traffic signals, hopping the curbs and riding the wide concrete sidewalks that ran in front of the historic, oceanfront mansions along the beach.

Amazingly—or more precisely, miraculously—we made it back to the hotel unscathed. Perhaps the cool night air was sobering.

Personally, I've always given credit to my guardian angel for saving me from demise during my many foolish endeavors.

The next morning, as we staggered into the lobby, the desk clerk looked at us with deep concern and announced that some vandals must have backed into our machines. "Your motorcycles are lying flat on their sides in the parking lot," he said.

We just shook our muddy heads; we remembered the absolute truth, which was that we had simply lacked the coordination to put them onto their side-stands the night before, so we had gently laid them down on the asphalt and walked away.

We sobered up, slept off our hangovers, and hit the road.

The following afternoon, we crossed back into New Orleans feeling like conquering warriors—every bit as worldly and weathered as Odysseus returning from his epic voyage. We felt older, wiser, and infinitely more mature than our sixteen years.

In reality, we were just a pair of incredibly lucky idiots who had somehow

survived a reckless, unplanned plunge into the Deep South.

Another permanent memory.

More importantly, he had served in counterintelligence. That specific detail was the ultimate tactical hurdle I had to overcome when planning my grand escape.

On a freezing November morning in 1975, I staged my breakout. I left the driveway in my beat-up car, drove a few blocks away, and hid it in a nearby apartment complex parking lot. I walked stealthily back to our house, grabbed my pre-packed gear, and quietly pushed the Suzuki down the driveway before firing it up.

My destination was Atlanta, Georgia, where my sister and brother-in-law were attending a conference. That was the entire sum of my strategic planning. Clearly, I had learned absolutely nothing about preparation from my Florida trip.

I spent the ride nearly freezing to death, shivering violently on the highway with nothing but a thin windbreaker, no gloves, and no heavy coat to block the biting wind. Every time I stopped at a gas station to thaw my frozen hands, I would call my girlfriend, charging the collect calls directly back to my parents' home phone—a convenient feature of the era.

By my fifth call, the operator grew suspicious of the mounting charges and dialed our house to secure authorization. Standing in the freezing phone booth, I heard my father's voice crackle through the receiver: "Sure, no problem. Put it through."

My stomach sank. I was made.

The old counterintelligence officer had my exact coordinates, and he knew I was running out of daylight and warmth. I couldn't go any further. I limped off the next exit in Spanish Fort, Alabama, found a cheap motel, and slipped the clerk a small bribe to secure a ground-floor room.

I registered under a fake name—another thing you could do without question or identification back then—parked the Suzuki directly inside the room next to the bed, and waited for his next move. Deciding my Atlanta campaign was a logistical failure, I headed back to New Orleans the next morning.

When I finally walked through our back door, my dad looked up from his newspaper, grinned, and asked, "Did you have a nice ride?"

I just nodded, completely defeated.

"Welcome home, son," he added softly.

"Thanks, Dad," I mumbled, turning to walk to my bedroom.

But he called me back, a glint of genuine professional curiosity in his eyes. "I have just one question. What did you do with the bike last night?" he asked.

I smiled. "I hid it inside the motel room. I knew you'd track my coordinates from the collect calls."

My dad pulled a small slip of paper from his pocket and read off the names of three local motels in Spanish Fort. "Which one was it?" he asked.

When I told him, his grin widened. "Good thinking, son. I drove out there last night and located you, but I couldn't find the bike anywhere, and the front desks were already locked up. Smart move. If I'd found that Suzuki, I was going to load it into the truck and leave you to walk home."

We both laughed. I went to bed.

Not another word was ever said, except for the times we still laugh about the cat-and-mouse game we played that November. The sad part is my parents' truck broke down on the way home, and they had to get a ride with a trucker. Again, another time, another world.

I think in retrospect my dad was more proud that I had outfoxed him than he was mad. He knew I was mature enough to take care

of myself in the world, having handled New York City by myself at fourteen.

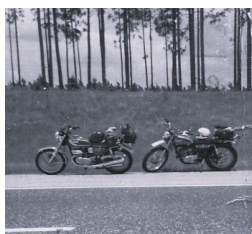
I witnessed Tiffany's being robbed, three muggings, an accidental subway ride into Harlem, a woman's fat ass in my face as we slowly ascended to the top of the Statue of Liberty, and a miscalculated, sixty-block walk at street level. But New York is another story unrelated to motorcycling, so we won't talk about it.

Looking back, that three-cylinder Suzuki seems to carry an impossible weight of memory and atmosphere. Perhaps it's because those years were so electrically charged, or because sixteen is the exact age where the world first offers you a taste of wild, uncurbed freedom.

It was a transitional era, both for the country and for me. That bike taught me how to take care of myself, while simultaneously convincing me that I should never actually grow up.

More than fifty years have passed, but the memories are instantly resurrected by a single, distinct scent. Whenever the sharp, sweet aroma of Charlie perfume drifts past, I am instantly sixteen again, leaning into the cold wind on Lakeshore Drive, with a pretty girl holding on tight.

"Kind of young, kind of now, kind of free, kind of wow!



1974 SUZUKI TM 100

One hundred cc of pure, unadulterated superstar—that's exactly what it felt like. That is my lasting memory of the Suzuki TM 100. The TM was a little mechanical jewel, a semi-ready race bike straight out of the wooden crate, and mine was heavily tricked out.

Let me start with the highlight of my time with this motorcycle as proof for such boasting. Just outside of New Orleans, on the river batture in the town of Waggaman, was a legendary motocross track that hosted an AMA National race each year. The track was incredibly fast and brutally tough, built on a foundation of rich silt that had washed down the Mississippi River all the way from Minnesota to Louisiana, churned into a perfect, dark loam.

To describe that soil in a single word: traction. The track had endless, hooks-in-your-tires traction.

On the Saturday before the AMA National, the local support races were held. The big factory teams would often cart their up-and-coming "unknown" prodigies around the circuit to test them against the local talent and ensure they hadn't missed any diamonds in the rough. The track organizers added a pro class to each category, and naturally, I signed up.

I finished my two motos with a first and a third, securing the overall second-place trophy. But in that first moto—the one I won—I didn't just win; I won by a mile. To put it bluntly: I absolutely smoked the factory's hand-picked future stars on my home dirt.

Because my brother-in-law was the new Suzuki dealer in town, I got to meet a lot of people and had a pit pass to Sunday's National races. A team manager for a factory talked to me about my racing aspirations. Unfortunately, the short end of that story is

that I was still underage and needed parental consent to play.

But my dad stood like a fortress on the Southern Baptist rule of honoring the Sabbath—even if "the Sabbath" was technically Saturday and we were arguing about Sunday. He limited my racing to once a month, or twice if the calendar blessed us with a five-Sunday month. That rigid schedule blew any chance of factory development or sponsorship clean out the window.

Oh well—as I always say: Life is tough. Always has been.

The next day at the National, Ruben and I were roaming the pro pits when I spotted one of my childhood heroes, the reigning National Champion Gary Jones, relaxing in a lawn chair. I walked up, wide-eyed, and asked him for an autograph. He didn't just refuse; he sneered at us and barked, "Why don't you kids go away?"

That was absolutely the wrong answer to give to a couple of feral Bucktown teenagers. We immediately rounded up our entire levee gang and marched to the far back of the track—a remote, jungle-thick swamp section where regular spectators never bothered to go. We set up an ambush and proceeded to systematically torture Mr. Jones on every single lap.

On his first pass, we lined the fence in perfect unison, shooting him a wall of middle fingers. On his second lap, we leaped out of the thick brush screaming "Boo!" right as he leaned into the corner. On the third lap, one of our guys hid behind a willow tree and doused him with a bucket of muddy canal water.

Near the final lap, we decided to deliver our masterpiece. We lined up right on the apex of a high-speed, blind turn, with half our bodies spilling onto the track.

As Jones drifted into the corner carrying major speed, he was greeted by the sight of

half a dozen teenage asses mooning him in perfect harmony. The shock completely broke his concentration; he washed out his front end, dropped the bike in the loam, and got passed by his rival.

As he was desperately kicking his machine back to life, we all screamed, "Next time give us an autograph, you asshole!" and vanished into the swamp. Rumor around the pits was that our targeted campaign cost him the podium.

The circle of life with Mr. Jones is interesting; my TM 400 DeCoster replica had front forks made by—and signed by—Mr. Jones. I got my autograph after all, decades later.

At that same Waggaman National, my sister nearly became part of the track itself. Just as the starting gate dropped, she attempted to sprint across the course and twisted her ankle in a deep, muddy rut. Terry had to physically drag her off the track just as the massive pack of pro riders thundered toward her.

For decades after, whenever a family member or friend suffered an injury, we would always drawl with dry, phonetic sarcasm: "It was a racin' assident."

That legendary saying had entered our family vocabulary earlier that year when Myrna spotted a local Black kid limping through the pits. When she asked him what had happened to his leg, he fixed her with a blank stare and muttered in a thick New Orleans accent: "Racin' assident." Then he just kept walking. It's funny how a split-second exchange can become a lifelong family creed.

Now that I have established the credentials of my talent and provided documented proof of my juvenile delinquency, it is time to refocus on the TM 100. The remaining stories of this machine must be told in a descending—or perhaps condescending

—order, because I owned this bike during the absolute pivot point of my life.

During that era, I lived to ride. I hauled the TM 100 everywhere on a heavy steel bumper rack bolted to the back of my 1965 Mercury Comet. If you are old enough to remember when cars were made of actual American steel thick enough to support the weight of a motorcycle on the rear bumper, you're showing your age.

I had been condemned to summer school that year for failing ninth-grade English—a beautiful irony, considering I became an English teacher later in life. I used my daily academic exile as a cover, sneaking away the second class let out to spend the hot afternoons burning fuel at the vacant-lot dirt tracks scattered across the developing suburbs.

I was also a full-out fiend for motocross. I refused to wear anything but Suzuki and motorcycle-related T-shirts to the private school that I was forced to return to after my public school dismissal. The principal finally gave up and just didn't seem to notice anymore.

Of course, I also knew—and abused—the fact that my even being at the school was a favor to my father. I was fifteen, so I was able to drive myself to friends' houses to hang out, talk, and work on our bikes.

In August of '74, I was hanging out in my friend Glover's garage with our buddy Willis, working on our bikes.

Suddenly, a strange sensation washed over me, and my brain locked into a deep, hypnotic, thousand-yard stare. Willis and Glover asked me what was wrong, but my vocal cords had ceased to function. They turned to see what had paralyzed me.

Walking up the concrete driveway was the absolute end of my singular motocross focus: my first real girlfriend and my future wife.

"Who is that?" I whispered.

"Lisa," they grunted in unison, the bitter stain of childhood rejection dripping from their voices.

"I'm going to marry her," I stated, my voice as flat and certain as gravity.

They both burst out laughing, shaking their heads in pity. "Not a chance in hell, man," Willis sneered.

"Let me clear something up for you, Edwin," Glover interjected, and in perfect, synchronized harmony, they both declared: "That's Saint Lisa. You ain't marrying her."

I just smiled my slow, arrogant smile. "I always win."

Lisa came and talked with us. I still remember the scent of her Charlie perfume wafting through the thick, humid summer air. When she left, I looked at Glover and Willis with a sly grin on my face and told them again, "I always win. I'm going to marry her." And so I did.

However, before that happened, Lisa and I began dating on Friday, September 13, 1974. Within a year, my focus—or lack thereof—on motocross had become literally dangerous. But that's covered in the RM 125 story—back to the TM 100.

That TM was really trick. It was one of the very first motocross bikes in our area to feature a custom-modified swingarm, moving the shock mounts forward to mimic the leading-edge long-travel suspension of the factory works bikes. Wow! And with a pair of Koni shocks bolted on? Double wow!

I had shaved, drilled, and filed away every non-essential ounce of metal from that bantamweight frame until it was practically feather-light. It didn't just handle; it was fast as well.

My mechanic—that's right, my mechanic, remember, Terry owned a Suzuki dealership—had blueprinted, ported, and polished the engine. To top it off, all that power was anchored to

the dirt through a set of aggressive, Swedish-made Trelleborg tires.

Visually, the machine was a work of art—a perfect, scaled-down replica of Roger DeCoster's world-championship factory Suzuki. It featured crisp white fenders, a custom-sealed still-air intake box, the iconic bold "S" on the fuel tank, strategically placed Champion Spark Plug decals, and bright yellow number plates emblazoned with a bold, black number six.

I had the sprocket ratios geared specifically to rocket off the line. My disastrous debut in Slidell had taught me that reaching the first turn ahead of the pack wasn't just a strategic advantage; it was an absolute prerequisite for survival.

I practiced starting gate launches on that TM endlessly. And then I practiced them some more.

I eventually perfected the art of the holeshot on that little Suzuki, using our manicured front lawn as my private starting grid. My dedication to the launch was so intense that when I came home from school one afternoon, I found a massive pile of topsoil dumped on our driveway—five cubic yards of dirt my dad had ordered to fill the deep, parallel trenches I had systematically dug into his grass.

On race days, while my competitors were out fatiguing themselves and risking pre-race crashes on practice laps, I spent my practice sessions launching off the start line and navigating the first turn over and over again. I would walk the track once to burn a layout into my memory, satisfying my preparation with a mental photograph of the dirt, even if my teenage brain took that picture with a blurry, high-vibration shutter speed.

My machine was dialed in, and my body was in peak physical condition. Ruben and I trained like professional athletes during the

week, running miles on the levee under the Louisiana sun. Naturally, we integrated the brutal, high-intensity Torsten Hallman physical exercises we read about in Motocross Action Magazine directly into our routine.

Motocross Action was my absolute second Bible—remembering, of course, my strict Baptist upbringing meant there could only ever be one true, uppercase Bible.

I sneaked away to race every chance I got. Fortunately, my parents' bridal shop business frequently dragged them away to buying markets in Dallas and New York, leaving me unattended with a driver's license and a car key.

I began traveling to distant, out-of-parish tracks on my own, sleeping curled up in the back seat of my Comet on Saturday nights just to hear the starting gate drop the next morning.

It was during this high-stakes summer that I developed a highly calculated, deeply arrogant habit: if I wasn't running in the top three during a moto, I would simply pull off the track and ride back to the pits. I refused to exhaust myself for the privilege of losing.

Since my dad's Sunday restrictions made it impossible to accumulate enough points for a state championship anyway, I saw no logical reason to eat blinding dust, take the risk of a squirrely rider crashing into me, or put wear on my expensive engine just to finish fifth. If I couldn't win, I checked out.

This was a direct extension of my childhood philosophy: I would try a sport once or twice, and if I didn't possess an immediate, natural talent for it, I abandoned it forever. Football, baseball, basketball—I tried them all, failed to dominate instantly, and walked away. I have always despised team sports; the collective mediocrity of them irritates me to my core.

Speaking of irritating things, because I couldn't race every weekend, Terry had to start helping sponsor other riders. Now, that became a thorn in my side! Especially a guy who happened to be dating my third cousin, who had moved from California. I had been attracted to her since fifth grade—remember, I said third cousin.

To make matters worse, just about every time I did race, I kept seeing my sixth-grade girlfriend, Pam, who was now "such a fox" that people walked around filming her. Pam had begun dating older guys by ninth grade. It galled me to see her with her boyfriend, who was a good racer in the 250cc class.

Alright, back to my winning, not losing; however, I didn't like the way that part of the circle of life was developing.

For one memorable sneak-away race, Glover, Willis, and I decided to go to a new track at the State Fairgrounds in Baton Rouge. We left at the crack of dawn that Sunday morning. We planned to get all of the mileage out of being on our own, which included stopping at a restaurant to have breakfast and a roadside grocery to buy beer for after the race—they sell alcohol on Sundays in much of Louisiana.

On one of our unauthorized, early-morning road trips to that new track in Baton Rouge, Willis, Glover, and I stopped for breakfast at the Airline Motors Restaurant near LaPlace. We walked in directly behind two well-dressed, elderly couples.

The busy hostess ushered all of us into the dining room at the same time, seating the seniors at a table for four and sliding the three of us into the adjacent booth. When our waitress came to take our orders, I watched her hands closely and noticed a critical administrative error: she hadn't opened a separate ticket for our booth; she was writing our orders directly on the bottom of the older couples' bill.

I delivered a sharp kick to Willis and Glover's shins under the table, signaling them to play along. Taking advantage of the clerical loophole, I ordered an absolute king's feast of eggs, bacon, pancakes, and grits. Glover and Willis took the hint and did the same.

The second the food landed, we inhaled it. Glover, true to his nervous nature, was practically shaking in panic at the prospect of committing a crime, while Willis casually excused himself to the restroom.

As the waitress busied herself pouring fresh coffee for our elderly neighbors, I slid out of the booth, smiled warmly at them, and said, "We're just going to run out to the car; we'll be right back."

They gave me a polite, vacant nod that said, Why on earth are you telling me this? You can easily calculate how that breakfast ended. It was dishonest, it was illegal, and it was entirely wrong—but we laughed like maniacs for the next thirty miles.

We got to the track and raced. Glover crashed, Willis' bike broke down, and I got a third-place trophy and a busted lip from the rocks being chunked at me from knobby tires. I removed the trophy plaque that had the date and track name on it and placed the trophy behind my other trophies, on the remote chance that my parents might actually notice.

I have always been fairly sharp at covering my tracks; growing up under my father required that I develop such talents. Do recall, they were not supportive, nor enthusiastic, about my racing endeavors after having witnessed my first motocross race on the Yamaha AT3 MX.

One of the greatest experiences on the TM was the high I got when I rode with perfect precision. I can still feel the oneness I had with that bike, especially in a left-hand, high-berm turn. I could take those like I were riding on rails.

The feeling of being a wheel length ahead of forty other riders when racing toward a first turn that was only wide enough for three bikes—and me being the one that had the right groove—still makes me smile.

I think the one experience that gave me the highest of highs on the TM was in the summer of '74. I was at the pinnacle of my being a fearless, focused youth. One race stands out in my mind as a reminder of perfection, precision, and pride. It was at the Slidell track, where I had first raced motocross.

One hot afternoon in Slidell, I touched the absolute peak of my fearless, razor-sharp youth. In the first moto, I pulled a massive holeshot, checked out, and began pulling away from the field of bikes with terrifying speed.

By the fourth lap, Doc was standing directly against the haybales, stretching his arm and leg into a wide spread with wild, exaggerated "slow down" gestures to let me know I had lapped almost the entire pack up to the third-place rider. But I was in full, manic "Fiend" mode; I didn't want to cruise, I wanted to humiliate them.

I hit the next jump carrying entirely too much speed and momentum, launching so high and far that I bypassed the landing zone and plummeted straight into the soft loam of the succeeding corner. I went down hard.

Panic-stricken, I scrambled to my feet, hoisted the hot TM, and kicked the starter like a madman. The engine fired but was heavily loaded up with raw fuel, sputtering and coughing as the riders I had just lapped began to stream past me. The cylinder finally cleared its throat with a loud, smoky scream, and I surged back onto the track to salvage the victory.

Remembering my friends' warnings from the boat launch—when I had tried to launch the G-5 into orbit—I finally took Doc's advice,

swallowed my pride, and slowed down. I still won the moto by a long shot, but I realized that once again, my complete lack of moderation had nearly ruined me. My showing off had set in motion the quiet fulfillment of the old proverb: pride always comes before a fall.

In that same race, Glover crashed and broke his collarbone—again.

The medical logistics that followed were a comedy of errors: the ambulance dispatched to bring him to the hospital broke down on the side of the road. They sent a second ambulance to rescue him, but it got into a wreck en route. With the small town officially out of emergency vehicles, my sister ended up loading a groaning Glover into her own car and driving him to the emergency room.

The lesson? When you're in a small town and a medical emergency hits, bypass the sirens and just drive your own car to the hospital.

Still, that intoxicating sensation of total, absolute focus is an experience that has anchored my perspective for decades. It is the reason I spend my time as a teacher encouraging kids to recognize and seize the raw, magnificent power of their youth. I try to warn them that the feeling of invincibility is fleeting, and that absolutely nobody is impressed by your accomplishments when you're old.

My belief in the limitless ability of youth was the ultimate lesson of the TM 100, though I probably should have been less enthusiastic about that theory a few years later when I joined a rock band filled with teenage female musicians. But that particular circus is another book entirely—and one that will never be written.

I also received an important lesson in chemistry during the TM tenure: namely, the volatile danger of mixing testosterone and

estrogen. It is truly remarkable how the combination of those two chemicals can alter a young mind and utterly destroy a racer's focus.

Within less than a year of meeting Lisa, my precision on the track began to dissolve. I found myself riding with far less discipline, pulling off the track more often, and finishing behind third place more and more.

The TM 100 carried me through the most formidable, chaotic transition of my life. I fell in love, experimented with drugs and alcohol, and began molding the hard, stubborn opinions I still carry today.

I learned how to win, I learned how to survive my losses, and I learned that youth is a powerful engine. In the decades since, I have also learned how quickly that engine runs out of fuel.

It seems the only place I can still recapture that spark is deep within the fading recesses of my own mind. And the memories of my time with that little TM are fond memories indeed.



SPONSOR: 1976 SUZUKI RM 125, TM 250, TM 400

Toward the end of 1975, Terry and I decided it was time to graduate me from the 100cc class into the fierce, crowded 125cc class. The timing was perfect: Suzuki had just released the revolutionary RM 125, and Terry needed to showcase its capabilities to potential buyers.

What an exquisite piece of machinery that "shop bike" was—tricked out to the absolute nth degree. The only constant headache we battled was the bike's highly temperamental carburetor. It was so finely tuned, so close to the ragged edge of performance, that we had to re-jet the brass according to track and weather conditions.

Besides the new RM, Terry possessed a TM 250 that I raced a few times; for grins and giggles, he even strapped my scrawny frame onto the undisputed beast of the era: the infamous TM 400.

After that brief, terrifying ride, I wasn't grinning or giggling; I was deathly ashen and paralyzed by fear. Me on a TM 400 was a singular, never-to-be-repeated error in judgment.

The RM 125, however, was slick, predictable, and blindingly fast. That was a blessing, because the starting grids in the 125 class were overflowing. Motocross was peaking in America—often requiring three separate classes just to fit all the 125 riders.

I quickly figured out that it was smarter to register for the Expert class; it was less crowded, the riders were far more predictable, and, ironically, it was a hell of a lot safer than navigating the amateur demolition derby.

The most memorable race on the RM 125 was another "sneak-away" race when my parents were out of town. This time "The Three Musketeers," as Glover, Willis, and I had

become known, went racing in Florida. Just so you know, we paid for our own meals on that trip.

Florida was a whole new track experience for us. The track was sandy, fast, and crowded. I really found a groove, and I was flying on the RM. I did more than my usual one or two practice laps, but I still focused on practicing my start, because this track had an uphill run into a blind first turn.

I was always one who liked to fly, and with the increased suspension on the RM, the larger jumps at the track provided a platform to become so airborne you could literally—and I mean literally—jump over slower riders.

Whatever, my mind mumbled.

I was told by track officials not to do it again or I would be banned. Several times during practice, the RM loaded up, and I would sit trackside gurgling and sputtering until it cleared up. Since this was a sneak-away trip, I didn't have my mechanic, Darrel, with me, nor did I have any spare jets. I figured the best way to ride was wide open.

The first moto was called, and I lined up with a prime spot at the starting gate. As I scanned the line of forty-five riders, the competitor directly to my right extended his hand and said, "Good luck, man."

Employing my favorite psychological warfare tactic, I looked at his hand, looked him in the eye, and arrogantly replied, "Save it. You're going to need it."

We are all familiar with the biblical warning about pride preceding a fall—it's a running theme in this memoir—and at that moment, I set the gears of cosmic karma into violent motion.

The starter held up the two-minute board. Forty-five riders locked their eyes on the steep, uphill start, pinning their throttles and blanketing the starting line in a dense, suffocating fog of blue two-stroke exhaust.

The board flipped to one minute. Engines shrieked in unison. The starter turned the card sideways—the air vibrating with the high-pitched, screaming agony of forty-five engines held back on the brink of release.

The gate dropped. Clutches snapped out. Forty-four motorcycles leaped forward like a single mechanical wave. And I sat dead at a standstill, on a heavily loaded-up, gurgling machine.

You already know the violent, short-fused relationship I had with poorly running machinery. I began screaming a litany of foul-mouthed, unchristian threats to the RM, followed by a series of desperate petitions to God.

Suddenly, the cylinder cleared its throat, the engine screamed, and I launched off the line like a rocket. I was mad as a hornet—or more accurately, just plain clinically insane with rage.

By the time I crested the hill, the first turn was a horrific, tangled pile of crumpled bikes and limping riders.

"Beautiful!" I yelled over the engine roar, letting out a sinister laugh as I carved through the carnage.

I had instant, terrifying focus for the first time in a year. I began passing survivors as if they were riding MX bicycles, using other riders for traction in the turns. I hit the first massive jump carrying so much velocity that I sailed cleanly over three riders at once, my tires hovering level with their helmets.

I completely discarded the track official's warning from practice and surrendered to the physical limits of the RM's long-travel suspension. I was fully living up to my childhood nickname: "The Fiend."

After lap two, I was in about eighth place. Soon, many of the slower riders were being lapped.

By lap six, I had third place in sight, as well as track officials starting to motion for me to slow down. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed another official headed trackside holding a rolled red flag—I could have sworn it had my name on it.

There was no stopping me now. I was in full crazy mode. I was landing so hard that I bent both rear shocks, which only increased the impact with each ensuing jump, not to mention the bike started handling somewhat like a Husqvarna doing the "Husky Hop."

As I made the last lap and approached the largest jump, I thought, Hit it balls-to-the-wall.

I did. I jumped over the top of two riders at once. Third place was less than twenty feet away and in my crosshairs.

As I descended, a slow, lapped rider drifted directly into my landing zone. I came down hard, my front tire slamming squarely onto his seat and rear fender.

A spectacular, catastrophic pileup unfolded, with four more riders tumbling into a massive, screaming heap of hot exhaust pipes and spinning wheels. When the movement stopped, I found my right hand woven tightly between the steel spokes of another rider's front wheel, blood spurting violently from a deep, jagged tear between my ring and pinky fingers.

Two of the other riders, including the one who caused my crash—certainly it wasn't my fault—were on the ground moaning and tightly holding various parts of their bodies.

I mounted the RM with the intent to continue. I felt no pain.

Yanking my hand free, I dragged the RM out of the wreckage, and as I began kick-starting the bike, I noticed that it felt squishy. About the fifth kick, it broke in half at the frame between the tank and seat. It now sported a wheelbase nearly a foot longer. I

threw it down and began one of my infamous tirades.

Too dazed and furious to feel the pain, I marched over to the dazed rider who had blocked my landing and began hitting him with my helmet until the track officials tackled me. They gave us thirty minutes to pack up our broken machine and get the hell out of the state of Florida before they called the sheriff.

Willis and Glover helped carry the broken RM back to the truck. There, a neighboring racer saw me dripping blood and informed me that Eastman 910—better known as Super Glue—had been used for battlefield triage in Vietnam. He poured raw, foaming hydrogen peroxide directly into the gash, squeezed my split hand back together, and sealed the meat with a thick line of glue.

It worked flawlessly, leaving me with a raised, white scar that still serves as a physical reminder of the cost of my own arrogance and stupidity.

We left Florida. When we got back to Louisiana, I went straight to my sister's house. I had to show Terry his bike and explain what had happened. I hadn't told them that I had gone to Florida.

The regional Suzuki factory rep, always looking for an excuse to come to New Orleans, wanted to come take a look at the RM. He hadn't heard of one being so thrashed and figured it might be worth looking at. After Terry treated him to a great seafood lunch, he said Suzuki would take the RM back for being "defective." They gave Terry a new one.

In the interim, Terry decided I should race his TM 250, another shop bike, while we waited for Suzuki to replace the RM. The TM 250 was stone stock and had more power than I was accustomed to, but I've always been a willing guinea pig for a new thrill—just ask my doctors.

Off to the races we went.

The first thing I noticed as I practiced starting on the 250 was that I had to sit on top of the gas tank to keep from flipping over backward; that and a bit of clutch slipping seemed to be fairly effective.

The 250 was a challenge. When exiting a corner, the front of the 250 was reaching for the sky while the bike was still at an angle. I had to use my leg—opposite the lean—to counterbalance the desire of the bike to fall over. It was quite a show.

Within two laps, I had a small, yet very amused crowd awaiting my arrival. I was five-foot-six and weighed one hundred and twenty pounds, soaking wet. I had to use what little weight I had to fight the 250.

I've always been told that I have a very unusual riding style; I employ a lot of body English. I've heard the same thing about my drumming techniques. Both look as though I'm moving more than necessary. I'm sure that's true.

I found jumping the 250 akin to using a quarter horse as a jumper—too clunky and heavy—and the TM had a near-useless suspension. The way I launched bikes caused a rebound upon landing on the 250 akin to a pogo stick. That was confusing.

I managed to finish fourth—something I was satisfied with, considering the situation.

Seeing that the 250 wasn't my forte, Terry suggested we find out what the TM 400 Cyclone was all about.

Say what? I thought. Did he just say 400?

In retrospect, I am convinced Terry was seeking corporate payback for what I had done to his brand-new RM 125 in Florida. The TM 400 had a legendary reputation as the most lethal, unpredictable motorcycle ever manufactured—and for good reason. I won't bore you by rehashing old magazine reviews; I will simply say that I completed two terrifying laps before my arms turned to jelly.

There was absolutely no way my one hundred and twenty-pound body could control a forty-horsepower, light-switch powerband on a machine that weighed twice as much as I did. I lived for a rush, but I wasn't ready to meet my maker.

To this day, I firmly believe the Japanese engineers dropped the TM 400 bomb onto the American dirt-bike market as a highly calculated, slow-rolling act of retaliation for Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Thankfully, a replacement RM 125 arrived from the factory shortly after. By then, Terry had hired a new head mechanic named Herman, who proceeded to massage the new machine into a masterpiece.

Herman was a mechanical genius; he could make a Suzuki two-stroke sing, but he was also a highly unstable, gun-toting madman. I've always appreciated firearms, but not when they're strapped to a lunatic.

According to local legend, if anyone—be it a sweet grandmother or a state trooper—dared cut Herman off in New Orleans traffic, he would pull alongside their window at sixty miles per hour and point a heavy revolver dead at their face. At local bike nights, he would allegedly stroll into the parking lot and start firing his pistols into the night sky like an oil-greased Yosemite Sam. Herman believed he was merely exercising his constitutional rights, carrying a pair of matching six-shooters on his hips almost everywhere he went.

Being around him taught me that open carry was entirely legal—a lesson that would simmer in my brain for decades. In my later years, I developed the exact same provocative habit of open carrying in public, specifically designed to draw out the local police and a crowd just to force a conversation about the Second Amendment. It's a loud, high-stakes game I certainly wouldn't play these days, but back then, Herman was my model.

With Herman's magic touch, the RM was crisp, dangerous, and ready to dominate. But right as the machine peaked, my focus on motocross had become blurred by that volatile chemical reaction of adolescent testosterone and estrogen. My brain had ceased to process anything but Lisa.

My final motocross race at Waggaman stands as a textbook warning of how quickly a beautiful girl can orchestrate a man's ruin. History is littered with the wreckage: Samson and Delilah, Lancelot and Guinevere, Antony and Cleopatra—and now, Edwin and Lisa. Seemingly overnight, my focus drifted from highly aggressive to physically hazardous.

During the morning practice laps, I realized something had gone soft inside my skull and my spine—the exact biological coordinates where a racer stores his courage. It felt as though I had been chemically castrated in my sleep.

The Waggaman track featured a deceptive, medium-sized uphill jump that launched you directly onto the blind crest of an eighty-foot downhill, immediately followed by a matching eighty-foot uphill. When you reached that high crest, you were staring across what felt like an endless canyon. The mere fact that I was actively analyzing the scenery proved that my racing mind had gone adrift.

Worse than that, a cold, unfamiliar sensation settled in my gut: I was terrified of the downhill. Me—The Fiend—afraid of gravity. It was a terrible omen, and a detail you'll want to remember for the later chapters of this book.

During the first lap of the first moto, as I approached the jump before the crest, my fears materialized. I lost all focus and flipped the bike. I was spat off the rear end. The bike continued to the crest, and then continued over the crest, and then continued downhill for about ten feet. The crowd loved it.

The next lap, I noticed a larger crowd had gathered, and they were pointing at me. They seemed excited to see me. I had no focus. None.

I repeated my previous performance, only this time the bike went a little farther downhill. I got on the bike again. I also got applause. Funny how people are endlessly amused by other people's screw-ups. I guess it makes them feel better about themselves.

On my final lap, my brain was completely consumed by the previous crashes, playing them on an endless, looping reel. As I approached the crest, I noticed the spectator fence was packed with people waving, pointing, and cheering me on—thoroughly entertained by my sudden, spectacular incompetence.

My survival instinct screamed at me to roll off the gas, to regain my focus, but my right wrist had surrendered to some reckless, suicidal outside force. I pinned the throttle, hitting the jump carrying more velocity than I had all day.

"What are you doing?" my brain shrieked.

Instantly, the track shifted into a silent, slow-motion crawl. I knew from hard experience that when the clock slowed down, a catastrophic wreck was already in progress.

The RM soared into the sky, sailing cleanly past the safety of the crest and launching into the open air directly over that eighty-foot canyon. I was floating at an altitude that guaranteed my eventual meeting with the ground would be delivered at an exponential, bone-shattering rate.

Get off! Get off right now! my mind yelled as I stared across the void with glazed, wide-set eyes.

In mid-air, I pushed the bike away from me and let go of the bars. I slid to a stop on the dirt crest, watching helplessly as the RM sailed through the air like a spent rocket. It executed a flawless imitation of my old

country-club disaster, landing parallel to the downhill slope on both tires before losing its balance and cartwheeling end-over-end, shedding expensive factory parts with every heavy bounce.

Terry walked over and stood above me, staring down as if I were a bizarre stranger he had never seen before in his life. He let out a long, slow breath and asked, "Really?"

My reply was instantaneous: "I quit."

That spectacular crash was the quiet, definitive end of my professional motocross aspirations. Terry wisely handed the opportunity to race the shop bikes to other, more focused riders. I surrendered completely to my new obsession, spending every waking second with Lisa. My focus shifted to music, tight double-knit pants, and silky polyester shirts.

Rumors circulated through the halls of my private high school that I was running Ponzi schemes, systematically conning the wealthy kids out of their allowance money. They were all baseless rumors, of course. I was entirely innocent. I have always suspected there was a quiet, coordinated conspiracy against my reputation, but like all of my accusers, I've never been able to prove a thing.

Oddly, or naturally, I had an interest in stocks and bonds during high school. I took the course for the SEC test. I passed. Arguably, I was the youngest person at that time to have passed the test. Thankfully, I had the sense to never sell stocks and bonds. I realized that with my "Bucktown principles," I would most likely end up in federal prison—probably because of outlandish and false accusations against my character by conspirators.

I did learn a few lessons on the shop bikes that have stuck with me throughout life. I'd have to say that the most important one is that dreams, aspirations, and

abilities change, whether you want them to or not. I learned that the old adage, "The best-laid plans of mice and men go awry," is true.

Now, as a teacher, I find myself having to bite my tongue when young students say they're going to become professional athletes, especially those unable to play sports because of their D-minus average. Yeah, I was too.

I realize the dream doesn't happen for most, but it does happen for some, so I encourage them to follow their dream, as impossible as it may be. I also advise that they have a contingency plan.

If my wild years on those shop bikes taught me anything—a truth I later confirmed as an employer watching my own staff—it is that human beings are willing to take infinitely higher risks when they're playing with someone else's property or money.

Those wild rides also gave me a deep understanding of psychological time dilation. When a disaster is unfolding and the world appears to shift into slow motion, it isn't physics that has slowed down; it is your brain.

At the moment of impending impact, the survival mind begins taking in and processing environmental details at such a massive, rapid rate that, relatively speaking, the universe seems to grind to a halt.

In reality, your brain is firing at an accelerated rate. I imagine it feels like stepping outside the hatch of the International Space Station—you feel as though you are floating in a tranquil, motionless void, while in reality, you are hurtling through orbit at seventeen thousand miles per hour. It's all about relative surroundings and mental intake.

And now you know exactly why I never became a rocket scientist.

A lesson that I have never learned, though it was taught to me again during my time on

the shop bikes, is moderation. I have always been full-on or completely off. I wish I had the ability to do things in moderation. I always go full bore, which seems to shorten the lifespan—or enjoyment—of whatever it is that consumes me, including love and health.

The one important thing that I learned—and thirty years later remedied—was that a stock Suzuki TM 400 sucks. Contrary to the advertisements of the day, it is not as close to Roger DeCoster's factory Suzuki as a mere mortal can get.

I got as close as one can get by purchasing a signed DeCoster replica that sat in my house as art. I never rode it. The DeCoster replica was too pretty to ride; or perhaps, deep in my soul, I did learn a very important lesson from the shop bikes, and that was to never, ever ride another Suzuki TM 400, be it stock or not.



OSSA 250 TRIALS MICK ANDREWS REPLICA

After I had stopped racing motocross—Whoa! Stop. Did I just write that? Motocross? Take two: After I stopped racing Moto-Cross and began itching to play in the dirt again, I realized there was one discipline I hadn't yet tasted: trials.

I had always admired the surgical precision and finesse of trials riders. It seemed like a true gentleman's motorsport; it was slow, calculated, and back then, you didn't even have to wear a helmet.

I decided I had to find one. Keep in mind, this was long before the internet or eBay, and finding a trials machine around New Orleans was like searching for a snowplow in the French Quarter. In South Louisiana, the term "trials bike" was almost universally mispronounced as "trail bike."

Our swampy, flat-as-a-pancake terrain was not exactly a hotbed for the sport; we had absolutely no natural elevation, save for the man-made levees. The only "rocks" we had to negotiate were mountains of sharp oyster shells and dredged gravel—and the breakwater boulders, which we covered in the Cub story.

There was even a legendary piece of local folklore about a trials event held just outside the city, where a rider paused midway over a fallen log, only to discover the "log" was actually an eight-foot alligator. For some odd reason, trials just never caught on in South Louisiana.

But none of those geographical limitations mattered; I wanted one anyway. I had always thought the legendary Mick Andrews possessed the ultimate trials style, so I embarked on a quiet quest to locate a Mick Andrews Replica Ossa. Amazingly, I actually found one—right inside the city limits of New Orleans.

By this point, I was three years removed from my hundred-hour balancing obsession on the AT3, and the only available arena to test

my new toy was a two-acre vacant lot just down the street from Lisa's house.

The lot was anchored by a massive electrical substation and surrounded on all sides by three-foot-deep, mud-filled drainage ditches. It wasn't the Scottish Six Days Trials, but it would have to do.

My first day on the Ossa was a harsh lesson in steering geometry and low-speed physics. The bike featured an extreme, lock-to-lock steering angle designed for tight turns, which meant that if you weren't careful, the front wheel would knife under instantly.

It spat me over the handlebars three times before I finally respected the physics of the machine, learning that a trials bike can turn—and turn over on top of you—in the blink of an eye.

I grew bored with conquering three-foot drainage ditches within a matter of days; there was simply no challenge in it. Fortunately, I quickly discovered that while first and second gear were designed for tractor-like torque, they were also built for effortlessly lofting the front wheel off the dirt.

"Oh yeah—wheelies!" I yelled to the empty lot. I was in absolute heaven: I had finally found a motorcycle engineered specifically to be ridden on one tire.

Unlike the terrifying, high-velocity, sixty-mile-per-hour wheelies I used to perform on the levee with the Yamaha AT3, the Ossa allowed me to play at a walking pace. If things went sideways—which they frequently did—I could simply step off the back of the machine and walk away. No harm, no foul.

There was no catastrophic high-speed crash, no expensive broken parts, and no trips to the hospital. It was as if the bike had been engineered to be thrashed.

So there I was, on the border of Orleans and Jefferson parishes, directly adjacent to

one of New Orleans' busiest commuter thoroughfares—meaning I had a massive, built-in audience—pretending to be Mick Andrews.

Of course, the only actual resemblance between our riding styles was the traditional plaid trials cap I wore proudly on my head.

I had found a new outlet for my obsessive-compulsive nature, practicing low-speed wheelies for hours, several days a week, until I became incredibly proficient.

I eventually perfected the rare art of the circular wheelie. I would plant my left foot directly on the rear fender, loft the front wheel until the Ossa and I were hovering in a near-vertical plane, and balance on the rear tire. Initially, we would just tip over sideways, but during one near-crash,

I instinctively feathered the clutch and leaned hard in the opposite direction of the falling weight as a counterbalance—and thus discovered how to steer the bike in a mid-pivot. That single revelation allowed me to execute tight, slow, 360-degree turns while standing on the fender.

I became a major attraction during the afternoon rush-hour commute. Drivers would lay on their horns—some in pure approval, and others shouting, "Show-off!" out their windows with deep resentment—whatever, they looked.

After six months of spinning in circles, I grew tired of my one-trick pony. With my father's strict Sunday church rules limiting my freedom, traveling to distant out-of-state trials meets was out of the question. I placed a classified ad in the paper.

Over the next few weeks, I spent hours delivering spelling lessons to confused callers. "No, sir," I would sigh into the receiver. "It's not a trail bike. It's a T-R-I-A-L-S bike. Trials. The 'I' comes before the 'A.'"

It got old incredibly fast. I felt like I should be drawing a salary from the American

Trials Association for public relations, but they didn't share my vision.

A steady stream of curious lookers showed up at the house, though none of them could comprehend why I wouldn't let them take it for a spin. They would stare at the lack of a proper seat and ask, "Can I try it out?"

I have delivered a flat, unblinking "Nope" to every test-ride request since I was thirteen years old—a rule I still aggressively enforce today. I never let anyone test-drive my bikes. Instead, I offer a simple gentleman's contract: pay me my price, and if the bike isn't exactly as I described it, I will hand you a full refund.

I eventually sold the Ossa, though it would merely be the first of several trials machines I owned over the decades. Indeed, some of my absolute favorite memories on two wheels would occur twenty years later aboard a Suzuki RL 250. But the Ossa gave me my first genuine appreciation for the art of balance.

I can't claim that I learned any grand, life-altering moral lessons while spinning in slow circles in a vacant lot, except that the New Orleans Police Department is entirely serious when they pull you over and explain that state law requires a helmet. I was handed several expensive citations to prove it.

I also developed a sudden, practical understanding of signs that read Private Property, discovering that regional utility companies have always been notoriously touchy about teenagers executing circus stunts around high-voltage electrical substations—even long before the paranoia of 9/11.

Looking back, I suppose the real education was learning to cultivate a healthy, self-preserving respect for authority figures, especially those wearing badges and carrying loaded sidearms.

I discovered that a polite smile and a respectful attitude went a long way toward keeping me out of a squad car. Above all, the Ossa taught me how to ride for the sheer, childlike joy of it again. I had fun almost every single afternoon for six months.

My hours spent playing in that vacant lot simply reinforced a philosophy I had always believed in: *carpe diem*—which, in my personal translation, has always meant, "do wheelies today."



1977 YAMAHA MX 100

Against all academic odds, I actually made it through high school—with a quiet nod of gratitude to Mrs. Driscoll—and headed off to college.

In August of 1977, I unpacked my bags at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, about fifty miles north of the New Orleans parish line. SLU was a classic "suitcase college," meaning the campus completely emptied out on the weekends. But from Sunday evening until Friday afternoon, I was "free at last, free at last."

My new dorm was located a mere twenty minutes from a real, outdoor motocross track. I was driving my second Mercury Comet, complete with a heavy steel bumper and a rear bumper rack.

It felt like an absolute sin to have a setup like that without a motorcycle strapped to the back.

Of course, nearly two years earlier at Waggaman, I had lost my nerve to race. I was deeply bitter about that retreat. I wasn't about to accept being a coward, afraid of being run over by forty roaring machines. I needed to conquer that fear, and I had a plan.

I figured the 100cc class was the perfect place to transition back into the saddle—besides, I still stood at five-foot-six and weighed a scrawny one hundred and twenty pounds, which was the ideal physical envelope for a small-bore bike. Eager to test Yamaha's revolutionary new monoshock rear suspension, I bought a brand-new MX 100 and hauled it to Hammond.

As you know by now, my foresight rarely extended beyond a ten-minute horizon. This lack of planning created an immediate logistical crisis: where to store a dirt bike on a state college campus.

I lived in an on-campus dorm with a roommate who had been a close friend in high school. After contemplating this storage dilemma for roughly thirty seconds, I simply wheeled the Yamaha through the side door, pushed it down the linoleum hallway, into the room, and parked it directly next to our bunk beds.

I neglected to ask my roommate for his permission, mostly because his opinion didn't particularly matter and I knew he wouldn't complain anyway.

The MX 100 sat inside our room, undetected, for almost the entire semester. The weekly hush money I paid our dormitory PA was a bargain; for a few extra dollars, he miraculously lost his senses of sight, smell, and hearing whenever he stepped anywhere near our door.

To fit my riding schedule, I needed to restructure my academic life. In my infinite freshman wisdom, I had scheduled eight a.m. classes every day of the week, which became a disaster within the first six days. Creeping back to the dorms from a party at four a.m. makes an early-morning lecture nearly impossible.

I quickly discovered it was far easier to just stay awake, drink massive amounts of dining-hall coffee, or, more conveniently, drop the classes entirely before the deadline.

This freed up my afternoons for training at the track, and within a few weeks, my old confidence had returned. Once again, I was flying around the course, learning every single line of the track—both good and bad. It was time to go racing again.

At my first race, I ran into an old acquaintance named Buddy. His family owned a highly successful, worldwide company that manufactured Louisiana crawfish and crab boil mixes—the best on the market, in my opinion—

and Buddy was every bit as fiery and spicy as his family's recipe.

Rumor had it that Buddy had a penchant for competing while fueled by a highly volatile cocktail of alcohol, marijuana, and wild psilocybin mushrooms harvested from local cow pastures.

Whether the chemical rumors were true or not, the man was blisteringly fast, carrying a precise, fearless line around the track. He was also about to become highly motivational for me.

My return to the starting gate was an embarrassing flop. During the first moto, I rode timidly, fell back through the field, and ultimately pulled off the track before the checkered flag even waved. Disgusted with myself, I headed to the pits, packed my gear, and decided to go home.

Buddy had other ideas. He walked over, snatched my Comet keys, and threatened to fling them deep into the thick weeds bordering the track. He proceeded to unleash a torrent of high-decibel abuse, loudly humiliating me in front of the entire pit area for being a coward.

He stormed off, only to return five minutes later with a registration slip; he had gone ahead and signed me up for the upcoming 175cc class—which was lining up at that moment.

When I began to complain, Buddy grabbed my helmet, stepped directly into my personal space, and gave me a flat, terrifying ultimatum: either strap the helmet on and grow some balls, or he would beat me to within an inch of my life and castrate me right there on the grass, reasoning that I "wasn't using those parts anyway." Of course, his threats were laced with a lot more verbal spice.

I stared at him, looking for a bluff. His gorgeous girlfriend, Beth—whom I harbored a

massive, secret crush on--stared at me with wide, serious eyes.

"You know he means it, Edwin," she said quietly.

I looked at the heavy stick he was holding, and I nodded. Buddy thrust my helmet toward me. I put it on.

I lined up to race in the 175cc class. As I found a place at the starting gate, Buddy told me if I wasn't first into the turn, he would hit me with the big stick he was carrying, and then beat the crap out of me right there in the first turn.

You may think Buddy was a blowhard. I knew he meant every word he said. Buddy was crazy.

The starter was out. The gate dropped.

All I remember was that I was in third place and the first turn was approaching fast. Buddy was standing at the turn, waving his big stick. The other bikes began to back off for the approaching turn.

I dialed the throttle on.

I calculated my physical options in a split second: if I backed off, a chemical-crazed madman was going to assault me with a thick stick, which would undoubtedly hurt. If I stayed wide open, I would likely overshoot the corner and crash spectacularly, which would also undoubtedly hurt. I smelled imminent pain either way.

In what seemed like a millisecond, I slammed on my brakes--hard--and slammed the shifter down, going from fifth gear and third place straight into first gear and first place. It was as though I had pulled the parachute on a Top Fuel dragster.

I threw the little Yamaha into the berm, leaned it over hard left, and dialed on the throttle. I snatched the lead and absolutely refused to surrender it.

By the end of the long back straightaway, the larger-displacement 175cc bikes would temporarily pass me on raw horsepower, only

for me to blow right back past them in the tight "S" curves that followed.

On every lap, I saw Buddy standing in the corner, calmly having a smoke and giving me a lazy thumbs-up.

I won the race.

By the time I returned to the pit area, Buddy was already out on the track leading the 250 moto—which he won handily. He then went out and won the Open class immediately after.

Buddy was pulling effortless, one-handed wheelies down the straightaways and executing perfect cross-ups on every single jump.

He had incredible speed and natural style, but he didn't do it to show off; he did it simply because it was fun. He just happened to win in the process. Buddy taught me that you can actually have fun and win at the same time—a lesson I've carried with me throughout my life.

As I stood trackside watching him dominate the Open class, Buddy blew past. The spectator standing next to me shook his head and muttered, "That boy is flying!"

I laughed quietly to myself and thought: If you only knew how true that is—allegedly.

That afternoon, Buddy taught me a profound, real-world lesson: humans don't actually lose their natural talents; they simply choose to stop using them out of convenience or fear.

More importantly, I learned that deep-seated fear can be absolutely conquered when confronted by sheer determination and the immediate threat of physical violence.

You can throw out modern psychology textbooks; the threat of imminent pain is the greatest motivational tool ever conceived. It always has been, and it always will be.

By December, the semester ended, I flunked out of university, and I sold the Yamaha—setting in motion a lifelong psychological tic I still repeat to this day: whenever I

get anxious about what tomorrow might bring, I sell my motorcycle today.

I spent the next two years drifting through a series of failed college attempts, ultimately landing in a hospital bed with bleeding ulcers—a direct result of a non-stop diet of partying and existential worry.

I don't remember ever racing motocross again after that afternoon, but I will never forget that race. It was my absolute finale.

Noah Webster's Dictionary defines a "finale" using these exact words: "a performance, or a public event, especially when particularly dramatic or exciting."

I think that perfectly describes my final motocross appearance. It was dramatic, exciting, and quite a performance. It was a true finale—a beautiful, high-speed last dance with a lost love.



1977 SUZUKI RM 125

This is the motorcycle I am posing with in a photograph I call Mr. Motocross, standing proudly behind a glittering wall of my childhood trophies.

The terrifying truth is: I don't remember buying this bike. I don't remember riding it. I don't remember selling it. In fact, I don't remember much of anything about this entire chapter of my life.

When I look closely at my face in that fading photograph, I can see it in my eyes—the flat, vacant stare of a kid living at the absolute peak of the clinical Ativan fog my doctors had prescribed to keep me from unraveling. Judging by the length of my hair and the wild beard, the year was roughly 1979.

I was supposed to have learned some profound, life-altering lessons during my tenure with that forgotten RM. Chief among them was the warning not to party my own body into an early grave, and the painful, highly inconvenient reality of a bleeding stomach.

But let's be honest: I suffered a major heart attack at forty-nine, so I suppose I actually learned nothing at all.

I did, however, learn that a broiled soft-shell crab is a culinary tragedy. Because of my severe ulcers, I was sentenced to a bleak, grease-free diet of broiled food for nearly a year. Even worse, I was stripped of alcohol and caffeine—which, to a native New Orleanian, is a punishment akin to physical exile.

For a man raised in this city, waking up without a few dark, steaming cups of Community Coffee with chicory is a form of inhumane, Spartan-like torture.

I also discovered that being forced into sobriety because my stomach lining was physically dissolving, rather than because I had made a conscious moral choice, was

infuriating. Today, I choose not to drink by my own volition—a much more satisfying victory.

But the most vital, lasting lesson of that hollow era was a solemn vow I made to myself: I swore I would never let my life descend to a point, whether by my own reckless hand or by the chemical design of a doctor's prescription, where I lived so deep in a fog that I couldn't even remember the machine parked in my own garage.



What is it About Wheelies?

Since the first moment I learned to balance on two wheels, I have been hopelessly consumed by the urge to "pop a wheelie." I was proficient at it on my childhood bicycles, I turned it into a high-speed art form on the Yamaha AT-3 MX, and I spent months using the Ossa to defy gravity at a walking pace.

To me, a wheelie is the ultimate physical expression of a flirtatious attitude toward danger. It brings you to the absolute edge of control, both literally and figuratively. One split-second error, one fraction of an inch too far past the balance point, and gravity will demand immediate, painful repayment.

It is the motorsport equivalent of tightwire walking: you are either in a state of flawless, weightless grace, or you are not. And if you are not, you are going to fall, and it is going to hurt for a very long time.

For fifty years, sensible people have told me that I have a dangerous habit of pushing past the edge in nearly everything I do. But none of those critics have ever been able to answer my most basic counter-question: how on earth do you know exactly where the limit is until you've physically crossed over it?

My brother-in-law Russ possessed a Yamaha IT-175 that he foolishly allowed me to ride- once. Before I had even completed a single, low-speed pass up the asphalt, I snapped the throttle to loft the front tire. I found that elusive edge immediately, flipping the IT right in the middle of the public street.

I used to love the rush of a perfect wheelie. When executed with precision, it stands as the absolute epitome of coordination, balance, and raw, calculated bravery-or, let's cut the high-minded talk-it's just a spectacular, highly addictive shot of adrenaline.

To me, wheelies have always been a lot like the famous New Orleans Hurricane cocktail. It's a sweet, deceptively smooth mixture of different ingredients that blend together to deliver an incredible, floating high. But the moment you lose respect for the mixture and push it one glass too far, you will find yourself flat on your back, desperately regretting you ever tasted the potion.

A wheelie operates on the exact same chemical equation.



INTRODUCTION TO SECTION TWO: 1980-1989

By twenty-two, I had the world by the tail. I was off and running. Business was flush, I had a great apartment, a brand-new sports car parked outside, and I was married to Lisa, my childhood sweetheart. On paper—and in my own arrogant mind—I was absolutely untouchable.

It is terrifying how quickly a life can be dismantled inside of ten years, and that decade happened to be the 1980s. If you partook of its toxic, glittering pleasures and lived to tell the tale, take a quiet moment to reminisce and thank God you survived the decade at all.

It was during this turbulent stretch that my brother-in-law Terry vanished from my life, teaching me a harsh, cold lesson in impermanence: never get too attached to people or things, because they all eventually slip through your fingers.

Terry had been the architect of my early motorcycling life. He was the one who lobbied my father to let me race; he provided the shop bikes, the mechanical backing, and the endless support. He was also the one who introduced me to the drums—though I try not to hold that curse against him.

Worst of all, he and my sister were the ones who smuggled an eleven-year-old kid into an R-rated theater to watch *Easy Rider*, igniting a lifelong rebellion that still dictates my trajectory today.

By twenty-four, I had achieved a material goal I'd nursed since I was six years old: I finally bought a Bentley. Sitting behind that wheel was everything I had ever dreamed, exceeding every expectation I had held. Unfortunately, it ruined me for the rest of my life; every car I've owned since has felt like mere transportation.

Purely by accident, that car morphed into a highly lucrative luxury transport business.

Soon, my phone number became the private hotline for visiting rock stars, high-profile politicians, and Hollywood executives looking for a taste of laissez les bons temps rouler in New Orleans.

The Bentley era is another book entirely—one that will never be written, because the lucre it generated was built strictly on ironclad discretion. But that era also taught me what a catastrophic disaster too much free time and expendable cash can be when mixed with terminal irresponsibility and unchecked stupidity. I was running wide open, blindly racing toward a massive, metaphorical brick wall.

By twenty-seven, the bill came due: my first marriage was in ruins, and the Bentley was gone, both casualties of my own flat-out excess. I quickly rushed into a second marriage, and we relocated to Los Angeles, where I took a soul-crushing job in the film industry as a "pre-production assistant"—which is a polite Hollywood term for begging wealthy investors to fund movie projects. The environment was intensely stressful and cutthroat, and I absolutely loathed it.

We retreated back to Louisiana, where I returned to the family pest control business and began playing drums in an all-girl alternative rock band. Can you smell the smoke yet? Can you hear the screech of tires?

My behavior toward my second wife and my infant daughter during those chaotic years falls squarely into the category of a brain-dead, self-absorbed asshole. Period.

By the time I turned thirty, both my wife and daughter were completely gone. The second decade of my life on two wheels was a turbulent, ugly storm of self-indulgence and zero accountability.

I was clicking through the gears and running wide open toward the next disaster, forgetting that the faster you ride, the

harder you hit the ground. And believe me—I
crashed hard. Again.



1974 HUSQVARNA WR450

The Husky 450 was the first motorcycle I kept inside my house. I had owned a custom Schwinn Apple Krate that lived in my bedroom back in the fifth grade, but since we are talking about combustion engines and gasoline, let's get back to the Husqvarna.

When I bought the machine, Lisa and I had been living in an apartment complex for nearly a year, so the Husky slept at Terry and Myrna's house, comfortably sequestered in their garage.

The apartment management ultimately decided not to renew our lease, politely stating that they considered me "a danger within communal living." They weren't wrong. But serving me an eviction notice on Christmas Eve felt incredibly cold.

My retaliatory decision to crash their corporate Christmas party and express my grievances did nothing to help my cause. It got ugly, but I'm over it now.

In 1982, Lisa and I moved back to Bucktown. We leased a brand-new, ultra-modern condo steps away from the Lake Pontchartrain levee, where I had grown up riding motorcycles. It was two blocks from my parents' house, where I was raised.

Lisa still lives in Bucktown. I don't. Go figure.

Lisa still makes money off of the pest control business. I don't. Go figure.

Lisa's house is paid for. I don't have a house. Go figure.

Lisa wouldn't let me keep the Husky in the living room. Not that she was against art—she agreed it deserved to live indoors—but just not in the living room. She didn't give in to my reasoning that the Husky was every bit as much of fine art as were the Boehm porcelain sculptures and Waterford crystal. She didn't see it that way.

I had to keep the Husky in the upstairs spare bedroom closet—reason number two hundred and fifty-two why my back hurts all the time.

The Husqvarna was a masterpiece of Swedish design, possessing the elegant, sweeping curves of a beautiful Nordic blonde. It was flawless. It was fine art. I will never forget my brief, volatile dance with that Swedish beauty.

During our short time together, I got to experience the legendary "Husky Hop"—which bore absolutely no resemblance to the cheerful, upbeat tune by Danny and the Juniors.

By 1984, I had owned the bike for several years but had only ridden it three times. Deciding it was a sin to let it languish in a dark closet, I loaded it up and headed to the Bonnet Carré Spillway.

The spillway serves as a massive flood-control basin, designed by the U.S. Corps of Engineers to divert the swollen Mississippi River safely into Lake Pontchartrain. In the process, the current inadvertently deposits millions of tons of rich American topsoil—all the way from Minnesota down to Louisiana—creating a wild, unpredictable landscape of deep sand dunes, heavy loam, and whatever debris was swept downriver. You literally never knew what might wash up in the sand.

Bizarre aquatic surprises aside, the spillway offered an unmatched, rugged off-road playground. The Husqvarna was in absolute heaven in that tacky, damp river loam, which provided the ultimate traction for the big 450's massive, tractor-like torque. Every single ounce of that violent Swedish horsepower bit the earth and propelled us forward.

The rear tire threw up spectacular, towering rooster tails of black dirt. I rode for hours, spinning the rear tire and actively craning my neck backward to admire

the sweeping arcs of soil I was launching behind me. I suppose I have always been easily amused. Simple minds, simple amusements.

Our first real dance occurred when I was blazing flat-out through a series of deep, consecutive whoop-de-dos. Suddenly, the rear suspension revolted, and the bike began its infamous, violent hop-swapping uncontrollably from side to side in a terrifying oscillation.

It felt like an eternity before the rear tire finally tracked straight again, my brain slipping once more into that familiar, adrenaline-warped slow-motion crawl. Miraculously, I rode it out.

Stoked by the sheer survival of it, I immediately decided it was time to do wheelies. Normally, a powerhouse like the Husqvarna is a wheelie-freak's absolute dream, but I didn't attempt to show off with long, lazy rides on the rear tire.

I've always believed you can't truly master a wheelie until you have physically crossed over the tipping point. And while I possessed a natural talent for finding that boundary—usually by flipping my bikes into the dirt within the first five minutes—I couldn't bring myself to risk it with the Husqvarna.

The machine was simply too flawless to ruin. The elegant proportions, the brilliant shine of its alloy fenders, and that stunning, iconic fuel tank with its polished chrome panels and painted accents were far too beautiful to risk scratching. It was the very first motorcycle I ever owned where I suffered a genuine internal conflict about whether I should ride it at all or simply leave it safely inside the spare closet as a sculpture.

Ultimately, my unsound logic won the argument. I rode the beast.

I rode for hours on end, fueled by my own youth and the supercharged energy of the 1980s. I rode until my muscles locked up in deep, agonizing cramps, pushing myself to the absolute physical limit of endurance.

When I finally killed the engine to rest deep within the cool silence of the spillway woods, I experienced a bizarre, highly impressionistic encounter with the natural world. Looking down at the forest floor, I spotted a long, orderly line of bugs—a strange, peaceful congregation of entirely different insect species—amicably waiting their turn to march through a dark, thick liquid oozing from the gills of a massive yellow mushroom.

It was a fascinating, almost hallucinogenic spectacle. I sat on a log and watched this tiny, quiet procession for ten minutes, though I had the self-preserving instinct not to join the queue.

The quiet coolness of the woods offered a rare, sobering sanctuary to contemplate my own trajectory. Sitting there, I saw with terrifying clarity exactly where my fast-paced life was heading, and what a shallow, exhausting masquerade my daily existence had become.

I scribbled down my thoughts on a scrap of paper—words that, by some miracle of timing, would be transformed into a song a decade later. But that fleeting creative joy did nothing to slow the chaotic momentum of my life, and a reckless life always extracts a brutal education.

The education I received during my final year with the Husqvarna consisted of brutal, cold, and entirely unvarnished looks into the mirror. I had allowed a host of self-destructive, expensive habits to spiral out of control, a descent that naturally dragged a shady roster of undesirable characters directly into my orbit.

I was forced to learn the hard way that a "fair and equal measure," as Solomon warns in the *Book of Proverbs*, is the only sustainable way to run an enterprise. I discovered that if you actually intend to draw a profit from a business venture, it is incredibly foolish to consume your own inventory for personal pleasure. I also learned that you should pay your debts on time.

I was supposed to have absorbed that particular lesson as an eleven-year-old kid during the Fritcher megaphone debacle, but apparently, the message hadn't stuck. My own arrogance had left me deeply indebted to a class of creditors who didn't send polite warning letters; they simply materialized on your front porch to collect what was theirs.

The "gentleman" who knocked on my door offered what he considered an extremely generous and immediate grace period for repayment: "Now."

Lacking that kind of cash on hand, and having no desire to engage in a violent, high-stakes physical altercation with the "gentleman," I listened quietly as he offered a creative compromise.

"How's about I just take a little stroll through your pretty house, pick out what's fair, and we'll call it even?" he proposed with a cold, transaction-like grin.

It took a fraction of a second to calculate that this was my final and only exit ramp.

"Sure. Come on in," I said, opening the door wide.

He toured the downstairs rooms, casually inspecting our expensive Waterford crystal and Boehm porcelain, but found nothing that suited his specific tastes.

"What have you got upstairs I might like?" he asked, his boots already heavy on the wooden steps.

"Nothing, really," I lied. I already knew the exact coordinates of my doom.

He walked straight into the guest bedroom, scanned the walls, and yanked open the closet door. The gorgeous Husqvarna was sitting right there; she didn't even try to hide-bitch.

He pointed into the dark closet, his face lighting up with a greedy, genuine smile. "Oh yeah. Now that is exactly what I'm talking about. I want that."

I stared at the polished chrome of the tank and let out a quiet, defeated breath. "I knew you would."

And just like that, the Swedish beauty had a new owner.

The true tragedy of this story isn't that I lost a rare, beautiful machine to my own staggering stupidity; the tragedy is that the idiot completely destroyed it within two weeks. He spent his afternoons trying to ride wheelies up and down his asphalt street, flipping the high-torque machine onto the pavement on almost every attempt.

His circus act ended permanently when the driverless 450 slammed flat-out into a parked car, folding the front forks like paper and crushing that gorgeous, mirror-finish fuel tank.

If you've ever wondered how so many classic, hand-crafted motorcycles vanished from the earth, there is your textbook answer.

During this time, I learned once again that God is merciful. The old, unyielding adage of live by the sword, die by the sword was the defining theme of this dark era of my life—and the violent, undignified destruction of the Husqvarna was its perfect punctuation.

They were incredibly tough lessons, delivered without mercy. But as for my brief, wild dance with that gorgeous Swedish beauty? Man, could she move. And she sure was beautiful.

I miss her.

YAMAHA 650 SECA TURBO

After my first marriage was finalized in 1986, I relocated to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. My new girlfriend—and imminent second wife—lived there, and my sister conveniently owned a branch office in the city and could use my help.

But my path to Baton Rouge was paved with the exact same stubborn arrogance that had defined my youth. Much like the moment I saw Lisa walking up the driveway as a teenager and declared I would marry her, history repeated itself with wife number two.

My brother-in-law Russ and I were sitting in my car when she approached. I asked him who she was.

"Don't even bother," Russ warned. "You'll be wasting your time."

I looked at him and smiled my old, familiar smile. "Yeah, that's exactly what Glover and Willis once said."

I married her. In the decades since, I have wisely retired from making such absolute declarations about approaching women—after saying it one more time.

I moved into a stylish, albeit small Baton Rouge condo. I did not like Baton Rouge; I never have. For generations, we New Orleanians have held a deep-seated, cultural disdain for Baton Rouge, and tit-for-tat, the locals there return the hostility with interest.

Because of my disdain for Baton Rouge, I largely self-isolated within the walls of my condo compound, venturing out only for a few hours of nightly business and midnight rides on a borrowed Yamaha Seca Turbo. The Seca belonged to Ruben.

Recognizing that I was temporarily without a motorcycle, he handed me the keys to his turbocharged machine on an indefinite, almost forgotten basis, allowing me to keep possession of it for as long as I needed to.

Now that's a friend--someone who will give you their motorcycle when you're without. A true example of the saying: He would give you the shirt off his back.

I had ridden the Seca many times in New Orleans. It was a rocket! When you found a place to "launch" into turbo mode, the anticipation of that turbo about to kick in was thrilling in itself; when the turbo did kick in--bam! Your eyeballs were sucked into the back of your head as fast as the tach and speedometer needles flew to the right.

The Yamaha was the epitome of 1980s design philosophy, sporting sharp, angular lines. It was eye-catching and comfortable.

My girlfriend enjoyed riding with me. We avoided the awful traffic of Baton Rouge by riding late at night. Night riding was also more pleasant than riding during the ninety-five-degree, one-hundred-percent-humidity-filled days, which we normally spent in the pool or napping.

My penchant for riding on full moon nights is arguably a result of my romantic spirit, or proof that I am literally a lunatic. Either way, I love full moon nights, especially when I'm in love. And I was in love.

We would ride up Highland Road, which follows the serpentine twists of the Mississippi River. We'd blast through the flat, straight roads that cut through sugarcane fields. We rode for hours, sometimes until the sun would begin to rise. Of course many times we'd find a beautiful place to stop, lay back, stare at the stars, share romance, and dream or talk about moving to California.

During these rides, my girlfriend developed a particular penchant for enjoying the cool night breezes by standing on the rear pegs, shirt opened, breasts in the breeze, and striking a pose very similar to the Rolls-Royce mascot, The Spirit of Ecstasy

-very befitting for the halcyon days we were living.

On one of our late-night, starlit halts, we shared a bottle of champagne. I was sitting astride the Yamaha when she decided to join me, climbing onto the tank to sit directly in front of me, facing me. The unique, flat profile of the Seca's tank and seat allowed for highly intimate, face-to-face conversations.

A highly superior ergonomic design, I noted silently.

We sipped our champagne, talked, and laughed. Soon, we had talked ourselves into firing up the engine and traveling slowly down the empty sugarcane road while remaining locked in that exact position.

Call it reckless, call it stupid, or chalk it up to the arrogant, bulletproof mindset of youth. Call it whatever you want, but for nearly forty years, I have called it unforgettable, exciting, and fun.

The fun lasted for nine months until my girlfriend finally turned eighteen, and we decided it was time to chase our dreams to California. I traveled to Los Angeles, secured an apartment, landed a job raising investment capital for B-movies, and returned to Baton Rouge to pack our things.

One afternoon, we came home to find the Seca secured to our carport's steel support column with a massive iron chain. The property management company had apparently gotten wind of our departure.

The management team and I had been locked in a cold war since the day I signed the lease. Our disputes ranged from my habit of practicing the drums in the middle of the night, to their complete failure to maintain the lawns and my patio garden to my exacting standards, to their glacial speed in addressing repairs. Consequently, I had withheld several hundred dollars from my

final rent check. In retaliation, they were holding the Yamaha hostage.

A typed ransom note was taped to the tank, informing me that the Seca would remain chained until they received their cash.

I inspected the heavy links, which were secured by a padlock the size of my fist, and noticed a critical engineering oversight in how they had wrapped the bike. The chain was looped directly around the right rear shock absorber and the carport post.

I walked inside, grabbed a socket wrench, unbolted the lower shock mount, slipped the chain cleanly off, and bolted the shock back into place. I left their heavy iron links and locked padlock lying uselessly on the concrete, accompanied by a brief note of my own: "Nice try."

I signed it, "Houdini."

I returned the Seca to Ruben, we packed up our truck, and we headed west.

My brief exile in Baton Rouge left me with a profound appreciation for the rare value of true friendship; had Ruben not been the type of friend who would so willingly share his motorcycle when I had none, then I would've never experienced the motorcycling fun I had in Baton Rouge.

Decades later, I still wonder how manufacturers select the names for their machines. While I have absolutely no desire to ever throw a leg over a Honda Valkyrie, researching the etymology of the word Seca brought a smile to my face. The name originates from the Latin verb *secare*, which translates to "to reap, to harvest."

I find that incredibly fitting, for my time with that silver Seca was a true harvest—a rich gathering of unforgettable memories and beautiful, moonlit nights.

The Seca didn't provide the deep life lessons that many of the other motorcycles I've owned offered. But decades later, it has left an indelible impression; more important

than any lessons learned, the Seca brought to complete fruition the dreams of an eleven-year-old kid riding a Honda Cub 50—dreams of a beautiful woman and a motorcycle.

Sweet dreams indeed.



Easy Rider Lied

I can't begin to explain how much the movie *Easy Rider* influenced my life during my formative years. Let's just say it was about as stupid as having been sucked into smoking in fourth grade by the television cigarette ads of the sixties. I'm just a person who is easily duped by Hollywood.

I can't tell you how naive I felt after I watched the anniversary DVD with Dennis Hopper's commentaries about making the movie. How disappointing it was to learn that the movie was a piecemeal fluke, thrown together by a bunch of stoned Hollywood kids. Nonetheless, I still watch the movie at least every six months and dream of riding the open roads and hangin' with hippies.

Once I actually acquired a chopper of my own, it took less than five miles for hard physical reality to deliver a brutal blow straight to my kidneys. I quickly calculated that you aren't going anywhere on a rigid, hard-tailed frame carrying a tiny, two-gallon peanut tank—at least not when your spine already belongs to an eighty-year-old.

I had been completely conned by a Hollywood illusion. I was foolish, willingly blind, and believed precisely what I wanted to believe. In the end, the only piece of absolute, unvarnished truth in that entire film was the terrifying, redneck-infested danger of riding a motorcycle through the deep South in the late sixties and early seventies.

I was duped by ninety minutes of celluloid fantasy. It's probably why I ended up working in Los Angeles in the film industry in my late twenties. Since I was duped by a dream, I figured I may as well be selling it to others.

I did, however, glean one fascinating truth from those DVD commentaries. The legendary, chrome-plated machines I had

lusted after my entire life—the very symbols of white, counterculture rebellion—were actually designed and built by two brilliant black custom builders, Cliff Vaughs and Ben Hardy.

The historical irony is stunning: at that moment in American history, custom choppers were ridden almost exclusively by white outlaws, yet the entire global aesthetic of the chopper craze was fathered by the creative vision of two Black men.

I find that intersection absolutely beautiful. From that day forward, for as long as I remain in the classroom, I have made it a personal rule during Black History Month to feature Vaughs and Hardy as two of the creators I most admire—forcing my eighth-graders to research and write their reports on the real architects of the chopper craze.



INTRODUCTION TO SECTION THREE: 1990-1999

By 1990, my second marriage had collapsed—yet another casualty of my own selfishness and greed. My wife packed her bags, and I handed over sole custody of our daughter, subsequently drowning my guilt in a deep pool of self-indulgence. I was entirely blind, unable to see through the heavy fog of my own immediate desires.

First and foremost, I wanted to play music, so that's exactly what I did. I joined a band and eventually began dating the bass player, Tabitha. She possessed the exact qualities that had always drawn me to women: intelligence, sharp creativity, youth, and beauty. Within two years, we were married.

Tabitha and I were living incredibly large for little people. We had a fleet of motorcycles, fast sports cars, expensive Paso Fino horses, and a family pest control business that practically ran itself. My parents had relocated to Baton Rouge, leaving me in absolute, unchecked control of the corporate checkbook—which, historically speaking, is never a good thing.

My office manager, Mona, and my accountant, Vickie, were the only reasons the entire operation stayed glued together. Vickie is affectionately known as my "Conscience." She has successfully kept me out of federal prison for decades by the simple strategy of never, under any circumstances, allowing me to prepare my own tax returns.

For a few years, Tab and I had an absolute blast, but that kind of fun always extracts a steep price. By 1995, deep cracks began splitting the seams of our marriage. Tabitha packed her bags and left me once, but being a natural-born salesman, I managed to pitch her on a comeback. In truth, I begged her to return.

Begging, high-pressure sales—it's all the same psychological game, right?

We settled in Old Metairie, a beautiful, leafy enclave in New Orleans, before chasing a quiet life in the countryside north of the lake in July of 1996. By December, Tabitha was gone for good.

I found myself entirely alone in the country, nestled in the quiet serenity of Tantala Ranch. It was just me and my menagerie, which included Paso Fino horses, a loud peacock, feral cats, ducks, transient dogs, and a visiting pig. Tabitha learned to ride a motorcycle with great expertise—in about fifteen minutes. She also allowed me to indulge my motorcycle passion to the max. Business was good. The times were fun. It couldn't last.

My nearest neighbor, Jimmy, and I were both single and shared a love for the outdoors. He was a Vietnam veteran Marine, which meant he possessed the discipline to show up to work and make wise financial decisions.

I, on the other hand, had endless free time, pockets full of expendable cash, and for the first time in my life, absolutely no one to answer to—except God. And believe me, I have.

For a long time, I wondered how on earth I had landed in such a compromised emotional and financial state. My Conscience, Vickie, eventually cleared up the mystery with a brutal, mathematical audit.

"Hmm, let's see," she sighed, clicking her pen. "Married once, divorced: split your heart and your assets. Married twice, divorced: split your heart and your assets. Married three times, divorced: split your heart and your assets. Plus, you're an impulsive spendthrift who acts with complete financial stupidity. Any questions?"

"No," I muttered.

Within months of Tabitha's final departure, the isolation of the country triggered what I can only describe as creative diarrhea. I wrote and produced a children's audiobook called Buster's Farm, based entirely on the bizarre antics of my barnyard menagerie, and began writing songs at a manic, prolific pace—some of them quite good, the rest not bad.

This burst of songwriting naturally birthed another incredibly expensive habit: booking professional recording studios to lay down demos.

It was during this time that I learned the true meaning of the phrase everybody's a critic. The moment you share your art, suddenly everyone materializes to explain how they would have done it better or how you should have done it.

I quickly realized that most critics are incapable of producing anything of value other than criticism itself. If you possess a creative spark, you must physically create; otherwise, you're just a useless dreamer.

I had learned that lesson the hard way in Los Angeles back in 1985. I had strolled into a high-end art gallery in Beverly Hills and spent twenty minutes boasting to the director about my brilliant paintings and sculptures. She listened patiently, then asked to see my portfolio. I had to confess I didn't have one.

She immediately signaled security and told me to leave the premises and never return. But as I was being escorted toward the double glass doors, she paused, placed a kind hand on my shoulder, and gave me a priceless piece of advice.

"Look around you, young man," she said. "I sell art, not dreams of art. Stop being a dreamer. Go home and create."

I have done exactly that ever since. Having time to create is both a blessing and curse. During this decade I had time. I had

plenty of time. Besides time I had a little extra money. I've never been able to justify making money without making time to spend it. And spend it I did.

Motorcycles, music, writing, and fun were the order of the day, nearly every day. Some days were spent just watching the sun make its way across the sky. I indulged my motorcycling and artistic desires until "my cup runneth over."



THE 1972 HARLEY-DAVIDSON HARD-TAIL CHOPPER

If I had to isolate a single cultural catalyst that burrowed deep into my pre-teen imagination—spawning endless mental scenarios, distorting my ambitions, and thoroughly misguiding my adult life—it would be the movie *Easy Rider*. For anyone who has ever lusted after the highway, that should be enough said.

When I was a twelve-year-old boy trapped in a wooden pew, bored out of my mind by a Baptist sermon, I would daydream about roaring up to the church doors on a wild, raked-out chopper. One day, I promised myself, I will own a chopper. I repeated that private oath for nearly twenty-two years; when I finally acquired one, I rode it to church—the same church affiliated with the Baptist high school I had graduated from.

In November of 1991, at Baton Rouge Harley-Davidson, they finally wheeled my completed machine out into the freezing autumn sunlight. It was a gleaming, candy-apple-red beauty—its long girder forks reflecting the crisp blue sky; the chrome shined with a cold, bluish brilliance. A small crowd of onlookers gathered on the pavement.

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"The thing doesn't even have gauges or a tachometer," one guy muttered, juggling plastic shopping bags stuffed with expensive Harley-branded coffee mugs and leather trinkets. "How are you supposed to know when to shift?"

Feeling like John Glenn about to be bolted into the cockpit of *Friendship 7*, I looked down at the massive engine. "Well, the way I figure it, when you have a piston the size of an oil can pounding directly at your crotch, you're going to know when to shift."

"Yeah? Well, good luck, man," he replied, shaking his head. "That thing belongs in a museum, not on Interstate 10."

His warning would echo through my skull within the hour.

"Nouveau boutique bikers," I hissed to Tabitha.

Tabitha had grown to hate the Harley scene of the time. We had spent a half hour waiting to be waited on to pick up my bike, while the staff sold coffee mugs and clothes. Besides, Tab rode a 1974 BSA 650 Lightning and white leathers; nothing black, and nothing with a bar and shield design emblazoned upon it.

After paying my bill of over three thousand dollars—for what I had expected to be a six hundred dollar service—we fired up the classic bikes and headed towards I-10, sort of like Billy and Captain America. Okay, nothing like Billy and Captain America.

As we headed towards New Orleans, I realized that building highways on top of swampland is a losing battle—settlement wins. I also learned that the roads are actually rougher and bumpier than they seem in a car.

As we headed toward New Orleans, I realized that building highways on top of swampland is a losing battle—settlement wins. I also learned that the roads are actually rougher and bumpier than they seem in a car.

Within forty miles of highway, I realized that my purist insistence on a rigid, hard-tail frame with an eight-foot wheelbase was nothing more than an expensive posture. By sixty miles, I recognized it was a catastrophic mistake.

The straight pipes and fishtail tips had quickly deteriorated from a badass rumble

into a deafening, skull-splitting headache. The "springer" front end was brutally well-named; every microscopic crease in the asphalt sent the forks into a perpetual, dizzying bounce.

But damn, did I look cool. And the chopper had undeniable attitude.

About fifty miles out, I decided I should run it up to highway speed. The fact that I was being aggressively passed by everything on the road—except for a guy riding a cross-country bicycle rig—was a strong indicator that I was hovering dangerously close to the forty-mile-per-hour minimum limit. But how would I know for sure? I didn't have a speedometer.

As I attempted to match the pace of traffic, every single one of those mechanical flaws intensified. The bike's rail-thin steel frame—even with the custom gussets we'd welded on to reinforce the steering neck and rear tail section—did absolutely nothing to stop the chassis from twisting. I continued to carry the speed anyway—I'm stupid like that.

Then I hit a massive freeway expansion joint that was just shy of an earthquake fault line. First, the springer forks began jumping violently, and then a subtle, high-frequency shimmy started traveling from the steering neck backward through the frame. I instinctively backed off the throttle—a fatal error.

I desperately dialed the power back on, but by then, the chassis had descended into a full-on, violent death-wobble.

Cold terror flooded my chest—a raw, paralyzing panic unlike anything I had ever experienced in all my years on a motorcycle. The fear continued through my body as the wobble continued through the frame; together, the two forces were a recipe for complete disaster. It probably wasn't more than a mile, but it felt like ten before the

flexing, springing, and shaking finally subsided.

When I was finally able to drop our speed, I felt safe again—or at least as safe as a condemned convict sitting in an electric chair when a main fuse blows in the middle of his execution.

During the rest of the journey home, I discovered that the six-foot-long front brake cable was good for exactly one pull. The steel housing stretched so aggressively that by the second squeeze, the tiny drum brake became completely ornamental. Throughout my entire ownership of that chopper, the front brake required constant, daily adjustment.

But damn, did it look clean.

As we rolled on, I felt as though I were being slowly, systematically sandblasted by the stream of road grit thrown directly into my face by the fenderless front tire. It was a brutal, physical education in the practical function of a front fender; I should have built a replica of the front-fendered Billy Bike instead of Captain America.

The entire way home, the customer's parting shot at the dealership echoed inside my helmet: "That thing belongs in a museum, not on Interstate 10."

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I muttered to myself.

I kept our pace slow—so slow that we were overtaken by a station wagon full of stoners. Tabitha later told me that the guy on the bicycle actually appeared in her mirrors, which was a view I couldn't verify since I didn't have any mirrors either. But I looked cool, and I had attitude.

Somewhere deep in my gut, however, my attitude was undergoing a sharp, painful adjustment. We finished the journey at a quiet, frozen forty miles per hour.

We finally rolled into our driveway, and I pushed the bike through the narrow side door of the garage. The chopper was so razor-thin I didn't even have to open the main bay doors

—besides, I didn't want any heat to escape the garage; I was semi-frozen.

When I swung my leg off the seat, my body immediately executed a slow-motion demonstration of the evolution of man—from *Homo habilis* to *Homo erectus*. I took my first steps completely bent over at the waist, slowly forcing my spine to straighten inch by agonizing inch until I was finally standing upright. What was left of my lumbar discs had been used as human shock absorbers for eighty miles of concrete.

Holding my sides as I tried to stretch, I finally understood the agonizing truth of Jack Nicholson's line in *Easy Rider* when they pull up to the diner: "I think I'll order some kidneys. I think I left mine on the road."

Tabitha stood there looking at me with a smirk on her face, holding back laughter. I looked up at her and said, "Go ahead, say whatever you're thinking."

She did. "Well babe, you got your chopper—another dream fulfilled. Are you happy?"

She went ahead and laughed as well. I sat down and looked at the gleaming bike. All I could say was, "What have I done?"

Why did I do this?

Tabitha headed upstairs as she answered my self-questioning. "You got your chopper and blew over ten thousand bucks." She giggled a little, stopped and turned to me, "Didn't you work in the film industry?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Why you built it still puzzles me. You should know Hollywood sells fantasies and lies to fools." She shook her head and rhetorically asked, "How many times have you watched *Easy Rider*?"

Over fifty times, I mumbled to myself.

She laughed and headed upstairs. "You brainwashed yourself," she called out as she disappeared upstairs.

I decided right then and there that the chopper's highway days were officially over. I owned a massive, sensible BMW R100 equipped with hard bags and a giant touring fairing for actual travel; no, sir, this rattling red sculpture was strictly a local street cruiser, restricted to the short, paved run from our driveway to the New Orleans lakefront.

But to understand how I ended up shivering and shaking on Interstate 10, we have to look back at the fourteen-month prelude of obsession and bad decisions that led to that Baton Rouge pickup. I'll try to unpack the toxic mix of adolescent desire, Hollywood fantasy, sheer stubbornness, and raw foolishness into some kind of chronological order—if only to trace the expensive, winding path my money took.

They say a fool and his money are soon parted, but in the case of this chopper, the parting was a slow, agonizing fourteen-month bleed.

In July of 1990, I was killing time at a performance motorcycle shop—a small, hole-in-the-wall that had specialized in Triumphs, BSAs, and vintage drag bikes for decades. As I stared longingly at an old Bonneville, I shook my head. "I really want a chopper. I should have bought that rigid-frame custom when I was living out in Los Angeles."

The shop manager looked up. "You want a chopper? I actually know a guy who's desperate to get rid of one. It's parked right across the street." He pointed toward a weathered tattoo parlor.

I should have paid closer attention to the parts counterman, who immediately grimaced, exchanged a dark look with the manager, and walked into the back room.

In retrospect, I recognize his silent departure as a clear warning: Oh, man, you can't do this to this guy. I want no part of this slaughter.

The manager made a quick phone call and informed me the owner was just finishing up a tattoo. I drank a Coke, basking in the illusion of my own good luck, and watched a couple walk out of the parlor. I headed across the street.

I'm sure not every tattoo parlor in the nineties was a biological hazard, but this particular establishment was the stereotypical, dark, seedy den that you instinctively assumed harbored hepatitis and every other blood-borne pathogen known to medical science. It was filthy, and I should have turned around immediately.

The owner led me to the back and unveiled the machine. At first glance, it looked decent enough. I figured a fresh coat of candy paint, a custom seat, a sissy bar, and some elbow grease would finally secure my lifelong dream.

There were two things to consider at this point. First, while it looked decent at first glance, I should have taken a second glance. Second, while this bike would eventually fulfill my dream, it wouldn't do so until it had given me nearly two years of nightmares.

The tattooist explained that he had seized the chopper from a customer who ran up a two-thousand-dollar tab on body art and couldn't pay his bill. He admitted he knew absolutely nothing about motorcycles, but swore it was a solid runner.

"I'll have it running for you by tomorrow," he promised.

My chopper-crazed brain completely failed to process the obvious warning sign: if a seller promises a vehicle will be "running tomorrow," it means the machine is a heavy, non-functioning paperweight today.

I went home and returned the next day. The bike was running, and he had wiped the dust off. I paid him the money and headed home. I was so stoked about being on my chopper that

I really didn't notice what an awful-handling, rough-riding beast it was.

Once I got home, I decided that with such a high-profile ride—one that was in no way legal—I should get a motorcycle endorsement and a Louisiana driver's license. I was still driving around on my California license.

Piece of cake, I thought, and headed to the DMV.

After forever, it was my turn. I told the clerk what my intentions were. She took my California license and began typing on the computer, pulling up my profile. I didn't like the way she kept glancing at the armed State Trooper across the room. She took a deep breath and motioned for me to come closer.

As I leaned in, she turned the computer screen slightly in my direction. I saw my picture—not a bad shot for a driver's license photo.

"Is that you?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am," I beamed.

"Uh-huh. So you thought you would just waltz in here and get a new Louisiana license?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said again.

Her tone became very serious, and she leaned closer to me. "Well, here's what I'm supposed to do. Call that trooper over there to arrest you. Then we're supposed to send your butt back to California—"

"What?" I interrupted.

"Are you unaware that you have three outstanding warrants in Los Angeles?"

"Really?" I said, shocked. "I had no idea."

I told her about the outstanding tickets and the missed court dates, explaining how they told me not to worry about it once. She laughed and told me a "how it works" story.

"But they told me not to worry about it," I repeated.

"Yeah, so they could keep doubling the fines and penalties. But they want to talk about it now. And you better be finding some big cash--this one's gonna cost you," she said, grinning.

As my heart sank, she told me, "I'm going to do you a favor." She leaned closer to me. "Get out of here and pay the fines, then bring me back a receipt. Now, shoo."

She waved her hand at me as though shooing a fly. I left. Actually, I hauled ass.

I went home and called the California DMV. They were very pleasant and helpful. They said if I would send them a cashier's check for about thirty-six hundred dollars, they would cancel the warrants and clear my license. I had no choice. I sent the money.

This bike had already cost me thousands of dollars, and I hadn't even put twenty miles on it. I didn't dare ride until I got that situation cleared up; I had learned in grammar school, middle school, and high school that I do not like jail.

With my record cleared and my new license in hand, I finally hit the road. I rode the chopper for about a week before the engine began emitting a series of ominous, metallic rattles. Worse than that, the bike's geometry was actively changing. The long springer front end seemed to be slowly stretching farther out, and the handlebars were riding lower to the ground.

I finally parked the machine and took a long, hard look at the frame neck. To my horror, the thick steel tube directly beneath the steering head was cracked almost entirely in two. The weld was actively splitting under the leverage of the long forks; the front end was literally one good pothole away from snapping off at forty miles per hour and sending me face-first into the concrete. My dream chopper was a structural death trap.

I realized my hands were forced: it was time to initiate the "minor restoration" I

had originally estimated would cost a thousand, maybe fifteen hundred dollars. I grabbed my wrenches and began stripping the bike down to the bare frame.

I hauled the bare frame and fuel tank to the only auto body craftsman I trusted—a man who had previously executed several flawless paint and metal restorations on vintage British sports cars I'd owned. His work was immaculate, and his professional opinion was gospel.

By the time we finished mapping out the custom metalwork and the specific depth of paint I wanted, he estimated the bill would land in the neighborhood of fifteen hundred dollars. He made it clear, however, that he would only take the job if I allowed him to weld heavy steel gussets to reinforce the steering neck and the central frame components; his inspection had revealed stress fractures spreading through the rear of the rigid frame as well. I quickly agreed.

Next, I brought the motor to the Harley-Davidson dealership in Baton Rouge. I trusted the ownership implicitly; the owner had actually been my grade-school principal and a close family friend back when I was a kid attending the private Baptist academy. I had never quite reconciled his transition from a strict Christian educator to a Harley-Davidson dealer—especially when we first crossed paths again in 1977.

Back then, he operated a tiny shop in Hammond, long before the Motor Company transformed their dealerships into shiny, suburban lifestyle boutiques. It was that strange, circular irony of life showing up again.

The service department promised to tear into the Ironhead motor to diagnose the sporadic, metallic clatter echoing from the crankcase. Understandably, they refused to give me an immediate estimate, though the

service manager dryly observed, "Whatever that noise is, it can't be good—or cheap."

A week later, the phone rang. I knew the diagnostic report was going to be a disaster the second the manager opened with: "Edwin, you must be in exceptionally good with God."

"Why?" I asked, a cold, heavy weight settling in my stomach.

"It's a good thing that frame cracked and kept you off the road," the service manager stated flatly.

A good thing? I thought, my heart sinking. How is a broken frame the good news?

"Because that motor was a ticking time bomb," he replied. "I don't know how you made it home, but the bottom end was seconds away from seizing solid and tearing itself apart like a hand grenade."

"What?" was all I could muster from my mouth.

"I don't know what kind of backyard idiot worked on this motor," he said, "but they completely left out several critical shims and spacers and managed to install the main thrust washer backward. The entire rotating assembly was moving freely inside the cases. The crank is completely ruined, and the rest of the engine is totally fried."

"And?" I prompted, desperately searching for some hidden shred of good news in his silence.

There wasn't any.

"You need a complete, ground-up rebuild," the manager continued with cold, professional indifference. "It'll run you about twenty-five hundred dollars if I can salvage some of the top-end parts. If not, you're looking at well over three grand just to make it a rolling motorcycle again."

Numb didn't even begin to describe the sensation; if you replaced the "N" with a "D," you'd have a much more accurate picture of my mental state. My naive estimate of what it would take to turn this nightmare into my

dream chopper was becoming as woefully underestimated as a federal infrastructure project.

"Do it," I said softly.

A month later, the frame and sheet metal returned from the paint shop. It was finished in a stunning candy-apple red with ghost flames beneath a flawless clear coat. My spirits lifted, but the joy was fleeting. When the rebuilt engine arrived, the bill sailed past the three thousand-dollar mark.

When I laid the newly polished cases next to the rest of the bike's original parts, it became painfully apparent that every other piece of chrome on the machine—from the laced wheels to the springer forks—now looked like garbage. Against the brilliant new paint and pristine engine cases, every dinged nut, rusted bolt, and pitted bracket was an eyesore. Everything would have to be replated or replaced.

Tabitha stood in the garage, looking at the dismantled pieces scattered across the floor, then looked up at me. "Well?" she asked.

I let out a long, exhausted sigh. "I'm in too deep now. I have to finish it right."

She turned and walked toward the stairs, her closed-mouth laugh echoing through the space. "When you're drowning, you're supposed to swim toward the top," she called out, her voice trailing off as she disappeared up the steps. "Not keep swimming toward the bottom and going deeper."

After another year of assembly and a massive, unexpected wiring bill at the dealership to hide the electrical harness inside the frame, the bike was finally complete.

My actual riding time on the chopper was more pain than pleasure, limited mostly to late-night bar runs after band rehearsals. The fully restored Ironhead Sportster was remarkably dependable; you could absolutely

depend on the fact that almost every time you kicked it, it wouldn't start, and if it did fire, it wouldn't run properly.

As you know by now, I have always possessed a hair-trigger temper and a zero-tolerance policy for misbehaving machinery. Very few things on this earth can trigger my rage like a motorcycle that refuses to start.

The chopper became the ultimate catalyst for my legendary public tantrums, usually unfolding on the pavement outside the restaurant where Tabitha worked or in front of the bars we were trying to leave at two a.m. I could never bring myself to physically strike the bike—it was simply too beautiful to deface.

The custom seat was a handmade masterpiece of white Connolly leather and genuine python skin tipped with sterling silver fringe, for which I had traveled all the way to Jackson, Mississippi, just to source the perfect hide.

Instead, I would rip my helmet off and beat it mercilessly against the concrete until the fiberglass shell looked like it had survived multiple plane crashes, screaming a newly invented vocabulary of profanity into the night sky.

To enhance the bike's late-night theatrical appeal, I had tuned the carburetor so that a precise sequence of rapid throttle blips would shoot a violent stream of orange fire from the fishtail exhausts. It was incredibly cool—until the freezing night I decided to show off at a red light while my right leg was draped directly behind the front pipe.

I noticed Tabitha staring down at my leg from her bike, her face contorted in pure panic. I looked down to discover that my heavy, synthetic snowsuit—which I was utilizing as a makeshift cold-weather riding suit—was actively ablaze.

I remained completely calm, refusing to panic and drop the beautiful custom paint

onto the asphalt. I carefully kicked down the stand, dismounted, and patted the flames out.

I blame the near-cremation on my lifelong habit of being incredibly cheap when it comes to riding apparel; while I will happily pay top dollar for a beautifully tailored suit, spending money on regular utility clothing has always galled me.

Around this time, Tabitha's younger sister, Amber, was staying with us while attending summer school at the exact same middle school I had attended--and thoroughly loathed--as a kid. One morning, she asked if I would ride her to class on the chopper.

A magnificent idea, I thought, realizing I had never carried a passenger on the rigid frame before.

We saddled up and headed out. Halfway there, I nearly lost her. We hit a standard expansion joint at speed, and because the frame possessed absolutely no rear suspension, the upward impact vaulted Amber off her tiny, four-inch-wide passenger pad. She got serious air and nearly bounced sideways into the traffic, but she managed to cling to my waist, and we roared into the school driveway intact.

Rolling up on a loud, custom chopper to the exact concrete curb where the yellow school bus used to deposit my miserable teenage self was a surreal, borderline religious experience. It triggered a dizzying collision of bitter childhood memories and adult vanity, much like my ride to the Baptist church had.

I learned many things from the chopper, namely that Easy Rider was a fantasy film. I learned that front fenders are good. Long, raked springers are bad. I learned temper tantrums do not start motorcycles, but they do attract the attention of the police and people in white coats carrying jackets that button up the back.

The ultimate, most expensive lesson the chopper taught me was a simple rule of modern consumerism: never build a custom machine yourself. Instead, wait for some other prideful fool to invest years of his life and thousands of dollars into a complete, ground-up restoration because he was "too deep in" to quit. Then, buy it from him when he's forced to sell it at a massive, agonizing loss.

Exactly like I did.

I listed the chopper for sale a year after completing it. The only buyer who showed even a sliver of interest was a Louisiana State Trooper. Everyone else preferred luxuries like speedometers, rear suspension, and functional brakes—all the small details that make it legal to ride.

The trooper explained that as an officer of the law, he didn't have to worry about the various illegalities of the build.

"I've wanted a chopper since the first time I saw *Easy Rider*," he said, his eyes glazing over with that familiar, dangerous daydream. He didn't notice me wincing, or Tabitha stepping away, shaking her head and laughing under her breath.

After he left with the bike, I asked Tab, "I wonder how many people in the world have been afflicted by the chopper bug because of *Easy Rider*?"

She shrugged her shoulders, put her hand on my shoulder, and said, "Don't know, babe, but I know it's true that a fool is born every minute. I just wonder how often they actually get to meet each other like you two just did."

As we walked toward the house, she asked me, "Are you happy?"

I looked up the block just as the trooper turned the corner and the chopper disappeared from sight.

"Yeah, I'm happy now," I sighed.

1973 BSA LIGHTNING

I bought the BSA as a birthday gift for Tab. Yeah, it's tough when your wife wants a BSA, plays bass guitar, and didn't want a diamond ring for an engagement ring. But enough about lucky me—this is about motorcycles and the lessons they've taught me.

This will be a short story—half of a story. The BSA was hers; however, in a community property state, half of it was mine. So, half a story it will be.

I have always admired British design—simple, classic, uncluttered. I used to sit inside my Bentley just to admire the design and craftsmanship.

Tab's birthday was approaching and she wanted a motorcycle; more specifically, she wanted a BSA. I had always wanted a Triumph Bonneville, but Tab wanted a BSA. After failing to persuade her that she really wanted a Triumph, I got her a BSA.

The bike handled just like I had always heard Triumphs and BSAs do—it handled great. The BSA had good lines; they were not those of a Bonneville, but good lines nonetheless. It had a big seat, good ergonomics, and it sounded good with its tulip pipe mufflers.

The BSA was a fun bike to ride on the backroads north of New Orleans. It liked twisty, forty-five-mile-per-hour turns; it didn't perform as well on the highway. We had taken her BSA and my BMW to Wiggins, Mississippi on a camping trip. Yeah, "that campground." It was a two-hour ride from New Orleans.

A pouring rain began halfway there. The old BMW with its Windjammer fairing did great. Tab was miserable. We made it to the campground; it was crowded and noisy. We left the next morning. We made it home. We didn't ride the BSA on the highway again.

At speeds above sixty miles per hour, things would start becoming loose-nuts, bolts, screws, and wiring connections. It was a better bet that you would break down on a road trip rather than not. We simply stopped trying, and stuck mainly to blasts around town with the BSA and my chopper.

Tabitha—as did all of my wives—looked like a supermodel, or actress, literally. All were mistaken many times for other people of fame. The fun from that wears off fast.

Tab was highly intelligent and talented. Many people accused Tab of having an attitude; they believed she had to prove she could do anything they could, only better. Which, usually, she could. This was especially true when it came to playing the bass guitar. She took a lot of crap from male musicians. When Tab played bass, she would tear it up, leaving all the people who thought a girl can't play bass speechless.

This attitude followed to her motorcycling. As with everything she attempted, Tabitha succeeded in learning how to ride a motorcycle within minutes—literally. She had a natural talent for motorcycling, and just about everything else. At one point we were going to build a vintage BSA road racer and let her race it—on the pest control's dollar; I mean with the company's sponsorship. That didn't happen.

But back to her supposed attitude. One thing you didn't want to do was to insult or be rude to Tab while she was driving. She wasn't as bad as Herman the mechanic from the Shop Bikes story—only because she didn't pack two guns, only one. If you pissed her off while she was driving, there was going to be a showdown.

Early one morning we were returning home from our favorite neighborhood tavern in Lakeview. It was about 2:30 a.m.—a time in New Orleans where statistically over half of

the drivers on the road are likely to be intoxicated. No argument from me.

The route along Metairie Road narrows as it passes by the magnificent Metairie Cemetery's monumental tombs and crypts. We bury our dead above ground in New Orleans; some dead people make quite a show of it. At the cemetery, the road narrows from two lanes to one, right before an even more narrow bridge that crosses the now infamous 17th Street Canal. New Orleans is known for its bad, rude drivers.

At the last red light, one such individual had pulled up so close to Tab they nearly hit her. Tab told them something about it before the light turned green.

As we pulled away, Tab was ahead of me. The car pulled alongside of her. They began exchanging words. I noticed she was trying to reach inside of her jacket to get her gun; thankfully, she could not get it out.

Tab pulled close to the car's passenger door and kicked the door so hard it dented. The back-shock from her kick nearly moved her bike off the road. I would have blown my horn, but the chopper didn't have one of those either.

I watched prayerfully as Tab and the car jostled toward the converging lanes. Tab won, turned right at the light, and sped home. I caught up with her as she pulled into our driveway. I was livid. I was angry at her for taking such a risk, and I had plenty to say.

She ended my speech by reminding me that I wasn't her father, and I wasn't going to be able to take her driver's license away. She stamped the conversation closed with the imperative decree of, "So just shut up about it."

What could I do? She was right and she looked hot.

She had a great riding outfit: black cowboy boots, great-fitting jeans, and a

white leather jacket with a cool BSA patch on the back.

One incident that is deeply etched in my mind, and still makes me cringe, was what happened as we prepared to go for a midnight ride to Parlay's—our favorite hangout—after band practice late one night. We wheeled the bikes out of the garage and somehow an argument ensued, probably fueled by the fact that we were both half drunk, or more.

For whatever reason, I held Tabitha's arm; she pulled away hard. Her elbow and forearm smashed through an aquarium that was on the table outside.

When Tabitha pulled her arm from the tank, she was bleeding profusely. She said it was okay. As she bent her arm to look at the elbow area, I could see bone; she couldn't. I put a tourniquet on her arm, put her in the car, and we rushed to the hospital.

It takes a turn for the worst at the hospital—that "circle of life" thing again.

Tabitha's arm required many stitches; let me reiterate—she required many stitches. The doctors thought she would require surgery, and plastic surgery to follow. The surgeon on duty came into the room.

When he walked in, my heart dropped. He looked at Tab and me with a don't I know you look. He did.

Since Tab was a bit pissy, she threw some gas onto the fire by reassuring the doctor that he did indeed know us.

"We're the pest control company that told you we didn't want your business," she loudly told him.

Boom! Just drop the bomb babe, I thought.

He just nodded and sewed Tab's arm back together—very polite, very professional. A hush fell over the room.

Let me explain why. At that time, New Orleans was suffering from a pestilence of biblical proportions: Formosan termites. To save you the entomology lesson, I will give a

synopsis: Formosan termites can consume a foot of two-by-four in less than a month. Key word—consume. You're left with a papier-mâché replica of the wood you once had.

They cause power outages, create aerial colonies, and sub-colonies; in short, they can do substantial structural damage to your home before you know they're there. I've found them over forty stories high in an office building. All they ate were one hundred thousand dollars of negotiable bonds from within a wall safe!

Back to the emergency room silence scenario. The doctor had bought a condo in a refurbished warehouse district—in the epicenter of the epidemic. Our company had the termite contract, and had fought the problems in that building for a year. When the contract renewal came up, I witnessed my father, for the first time in my life, tell someone that he didn't want their business.

Go ahead, guess who that "someone" was.

Yep—the doctor.

What relevance is this story? Well, it happened when we had the BSA. It happened in front of the BSA. And if I'm not mistaken, it happened because of the BSA.

More importantly, I learned to be thankful that night. As we left, I told the doctor, "Thank goodness you didn't tell us that you didn't want our business."

"I wouldn't have, nor could I have," he replied.

The experience beat a vital truth into me: America still has one of the best healthcare systems in the world. I also walked away with a very healthy respect—or more accurately, a severe paranoia—for glass.

What other takeaway did I come away with during my tenure with the BSA? Hmm... let me think.

For one, it dawned on me how cool it is to have a beautiful wife who rides her own bike.

The brutal reality, however, was that I vowed never to ride "bitch" with her again. I was forced to take the back seat once when my Harley broke down; she wouldn't let me drive her bike. "Either that or walk," she offered. I took the ride.

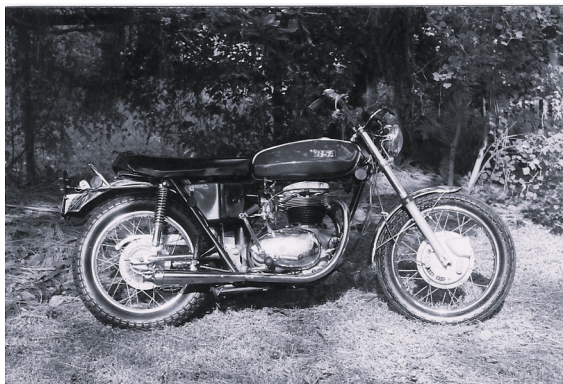
I remembered she once had driven off and left me with a six-mile walk home. It's not that she was cruel—she just had no tolerance for the ignorant games I played.

The situation also drilled home that playing roulette with cars is a losing proposition; doing that is akin to a permanent game of Rock, Paper, Scissors. The motorcycle always loses.

Beyond that, I discovered how to remain focused on the road while riding behind Tab. Did I mention how good she looked on that BSA?

I did?

Okay, we're through.



A COVEY OF CUB 50'S

Imagine you're one of the late-night crew closing up the village coffee shop. It's one a.m. You look up and see a gang of brightly colored Honda scooters enter the empty parking lot--their yellow and blue colors accented with glowing, white, plastic leg guards.

They stop. They line up. They take off. They're racing! They begin looping around the parking lot, quickly forming a line. They use the sloped parking spaces as a banked turn; sparks trail behind their dragging kickstands. In near silence, they speed toward the coffee shop.

You remember a video that featured "scooter gangs" from England. You become nervous, wondering if they're "New Age Mods" low on caffeine. You reach above the table you were clearing and turn the sign around to "Closed."

Suddenly--ZOOM! A blue scooter flies past the window.

ZOOM! ZOOM! A yellow and red scooter buzz past the window.

Brrr... , a white scooter putters by.

You notice the driver is sporting a huge smile. Relieved, you realize "you meet the nicest people on a Honda"--and they're just that group of crazies that live in the neighborhood, play loud music, and frequent the coffee shop--a lot..

"Good customers," you think.

"Better tipplers," you remember aloud.

You turn the sign back to "Open."

The mini-road race in the empty parking lot continues for an hour. You finish closing up, feeling like the kid who had to rake leaves while the other kids played ball. -
END DREAM SEQUENCE.

I can't remember who said it, but I firmly believe in the statement, "How many motorcycles are enough? Just one more."

At one wonderful point in my life, somewhere in my early thirties, the only thing that stopped the insane momentum of my purchasing motorcycles was a lack of space in a fifteen-hundred-square-foot basement. It was a lack of room-and money.

Among the collection was a covey of Cub 50s that were red, white, and blue—I see the irony and the Japanese humor—and there was a yellow one too. All had fresh tune-ups and tires. They were the "any time is fun time" bikes.

Tab and I were playing a lot of music at the time, jamming every weekend until midnight or so. Many times after practice, four of us would go riding through the beautiful Live Oak-lined streets of our neighborhood, Old Metairie.

We would wind our way through the neighborhood, exiting onto Metairie Road, which cuts through the heart of Old Metairie's great specialty shops. The neighborhood streets were virtually deserted after 1 a.m.—perfect for riding and scooter racing.

The parking lot for the coffee shop, post office, several restaurants, and boutiques was larger than most. It was slightly bowl-shaped, with large covered drains in the basin to drain the rainwater.

I would usually play-race with Tab. Most of the other guests were new or novice riders; they were just getting used to riding, and enjoying every minute of the new experience.

It was a great feeling to expose so many people to the joy of motorcycling. The Honda Cub is the perfect bike to ride for your first time motorcycling—it could offer a guarantee that riding one will put a smile on your face.

Many times I would hear laughter, yelping, and hooting emanating from behind me as we rode through the neighborhood—the vocal

expression of excitement from those experiencing driving a motorcycle for the first time.

Eventually, Tab and the others would stop and wait for me to finish playing. Many times they would just go back to the house. I would stay for hours, pushing my Cub to its limits. As I had discovered twenty-five years earlier while riding a Cub 50 in the dirt, you can push a Honda Cub to extreme cornering speeds—as long as the tires are gripping.

The Cubs weren't just late-night fun; they were great for family BBQs and such. My father-in-law at the time was the epitome of the manly-man biker—he refused to ride a Cub 50 with his daughters.

"I ain't rid'n no girl's bike. No real man would ride those things," he would say.

"Takes a real man to ride one of these things—one that's sure of himself," I would retort, as I rode off.

Never have understood his attitude. Fun is fun; it's not measured out in cc's—although it is medicine. Honda Cubs are fun, inexpensive, and virtually maintenance-free motorcycles. I've always said that if I live to be really old, a Honda Cub will probably be my last bike.

And as of this edit, I am sixty-seven and own a 2021 Honda Cub—having recently sold my 2020 that I put twelve thousand miles on in a single year.

It seems I've learned a lesson from every motorcycle I've owned; however, these little Cubs could in no way offer lessons of life like my first Cub did—but they did offer a few important ones.

I realized I had become too focused on business. At the time, frivolous lawsuits were flying at me two at a time.

The takeaway was simple: it's healthy to smile until your mouth hurts. It relieves tension and reminds you that, many times, simple pleasures truly are the best.

I was forced to concede that business and responsibility will age you fast—and worse, the only rewards are monetary. The brutal reality is that having fun never grows old, and I believe those who have fun never grow old.

The situation drilled a deeper truth into me: whenever I get on a motorcycle, the troubles of the world don't ride with me. They can't exist within the world I retreat to when I'm aboard a machine. The troubles stayed behind at eleven, and they stay behind still.

Hope that remains true.

Not to go off the Emerson edge—well, actually, I will go off on an Emersonian rant. It's my book. So here I go.

No matter the size, make, or model, a motorcycle has always been a refuge for me. It's the only place where the world and life make sense. Motorcycling is as close to being transcendental as it gets for me—a place where mind, body, and machine are one.

Motorcycling gives me the earthly utopia that the transcendentalists sought.

With that said, perhaps Emerson and Thoreau should have bought some Honda Cubs to help spread their gospel of transcendentalism. I bet more people would have understood their message if they would have taken them riding on a Honda Cub 50.

Because, you know—you meet the nicest people on a Honda.



1973 BMW R/100: THE COP BIKE

I wanted a big cruiser bike, but I didn't want a Harley-Davidson. I knew BMW had an excellent reputation, and I like older BMWs. I began looking for an airhead cruiser—in the age before eBay. After much searching and patience, one suddenly appeared in the paper for sale.

The bike belonged to a meticulous engineer who worked for NASA. He lived on the edge of the swamp near French Settlement, an hour from New Orleans. Normally, this wouldn't be a problem. It was then.

My back was out. When my back went out, it left me semi-paralyzed—barely able to walk twenty feet before having to stop. It also had an annoying habit of dropping me without warning; if I was standing when it took a notion to go out, I would just collapse. Numerous times I had to be carried to my bed.

I called and explained my situation. The man selling the BMW was an atypical realist.

"No problem," he said.

"So you'll hold the bike for a few days?" I asked.

"No. I have three people coming out tomorrow. If you want it, come get it now. I'll hold it 'til 7 p.m."

Off to French Settlement we go. I eased into the passenger seat, biting an imaginary bullet for the pain. Tab drove. I brought my helmet.

As we wound around the swamp's edge, on a road that twenty years later I would ride again on the Yamaha V-Star and 650XS cafe' bike, we finally arrived at the man's house. I thought the police were there; it turned out to be the BMW parked out front. It looked like a cop's bike. I liked it already.

I limped over to the BMW. The man came out. As he went through the meticulously kept maintenance records I looked the bike over. It looked like a police motorcycle from

bygone days. It was classic, very classic. It was cool. Have I mention it looked like a cop's bike?

It was painted black and white. A huge Windjammer fairing with a tall windshield was mounted up front. The fairing's sides wrapped around and had glove boxes on each side.

The BMW had beautifully sculptured white fiberglass luggage mounted on the sides; thin chrome rails wrapped around their sides. It had a spring mounted solo seat and a large multi-railed luggage-rack mounted on the rear fender. The windshield was bigger than the one on my MG.

The Beemer was big and heavy. I was young and stupid. I bought the bike on the spot. He said he would hold it for a week if I wanted. I guess he figured perhaps by then I would have evolved from walking like a Cro-Magnon man to walking upright.

"Nah, that's alright, I'll ride it home," I said, as though I had just received some miraculous healing at the Pool of Bethesda.

I swore I heard the words, "Get on the bike and ride." It may have just been the radio playing the song by The Troggs that says, "Get on your pony and ride," but I'm not sure.

Tab, being Tab, gave me that smirk I loved, shook her head, and handed me my helmet.

"I'll be right behind you," she said, "just in case you fall off. At least I'll be expecting it," she added, laughing.

"I'll be alright," I told her.

"No. You'll never be all right," she sarcastically added.

I ate another 7.5 Vicodin, and with the help of two men, I saddled up.

"How you gonna take off?" a man asked.

"Simple. You two steady me upright until I take off. I've done this before--when I had to get back to a hotel in Biloxi when I was a

teenager." I somehow felt more encouraged by my own words; the men seemed more confused.

They steadied me upright. I took off. I rode home—I don't know how. I rode into my front yard. I stopped. I fell over. I lay there unable to move.

The neighbors and Tab got the bike upright, put me on a blanket, and brought me inside. For two days, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, smiling. It wasn't from the pain pills—I was smiling because I had gotten the BMW I wanted. I was happy.

Days later, I was finally able to ride. The situation drilled home a direct truth: riding a motorcycle that looks like a police bike is a lot safer—especially one with a European quick-flashing headlight.

I quickly noticed that the "few performance modifications" the previous owner had made, whatever they were, worked. In first gear, under acceleration, the front wheel would momentarily leave the ground. It was an incredibly confusing sensation, being completely enveloped within that massive Windjammer fairing. The big Beemer had plenty of oomph. It rode like a Cadillac and had about as much storage.

An added benefit of the big fairing was that I could smoke while I rode. Now my deadly habit could come riding with me too!

I began using the motorcycle to make my inspections around town. Normally, I don't ride a motorcycle in New Orleans—at least not past the area I live in—but everyone saw this bike coming. It looked like—oh, you know.

Of course, looking like a cop bike had some interesting incidents connected to it. One I still laugh about involved a woman who had cut me off, pulling right in front of me. When I hit the dual air horns, she took immediate notice and slowed down so much that I was forced to pass her.

As I was passing, she was shyly looking away. I pulled alongside her and threw my

left hand in the air, as if to say, "Duh. Heads up!"

She nodded.

I happened to be stopping for gas. As I pulled into the station, she followed me in. Curious, I approached her car.

She was already pulling her license out and said, "I am so sorry, officer—I didn't see you."

I told her I wasn't a policeman. It was amazing: she immediately went into a foul-mouthed assault on me and motorcycles. I couldn't help but tell her that even though I wasn't a cop, I could still make a citizen's arrest.

She left the parking lot in such a huff she was literally burning rubber as she shot into the street—right in front of an actual police car. It was so close that the officer locked up his brakes and hit the lights. Swift and fair justice had been served.

I got my gas and waved to her as I left.

One of the most embarrassing things ever to happen to me on a motorcycle happened on that BMW. I was making a slow U-turn in a neighborhood when—as is common in New Orleans—someone pulled out right in front of me. I hit the brakes while still mid-lean and dropped the bike. Of course, they kept going.

I tried all of the tricks I knew to pick up a heavy bike, all to no avail. Reasons number six hundred and twenty-two and six hundred and twenty-three why my back hurts today.

I had noticed two young men enter the house across the street, so I went over and knocked on their door. When a man answered, I introduced myself and explained my dilemma. I felt like a little kid when I asked, "Could y'all help me pick up my bike?"

We all laughed about it as we hoisted the German beast back upright. I thanked them, dusted off my pride, and continued on my way. It's still embarrassing.

From then on, I called the bike by its proper German title: "Dicke fette Frau"—or "Big Fat Woman."

Spring came. Tab and I decided we should go camping. She decided we should go primitive camping. I grew up camping in a thirty-foot Layton travel trailer; I wasn't much into anything that started with the word "primitive"—except art and music.

Primitive camping Tab wanted, primitive camping it was.

We decided to go to Wiggins: me astride the behemoth Beemer, Tab on the BSA. About twenty miles out, monsoon-like rains began. I was fine on the BMW. Tab was being pelted with rain needles. We stopped under an overpass until the rain returned to a usual downpour.

We made it to the campgrounds in twice the time it should have taken, arriving just in time to pitch the tent and set up camp.

Around sunset, the "Kumbaya crowd" in nearby campsites started with guitar serenades. They serenaded everyone well into the night. The next day, the place was full of noisy kids, obnoxious adults, mud, and mosquitoes. I was longing for the serenity of suburbia.

We packed up and returned to the quiet of our home. The old BMW did great on the highway—more than can be said for the BSA. I rode the BMW my normal length of time—until boredom set in—about nine months. I liked the big BMW; it was funky.

It had a great worn patina, meaning I didn't have to worry about scratches or treating it like a garage queen. Just get on and ride the heck out of the thing.

I decided I needed something smaller, more sporty. I needed the BMW R65LS cafe bike that I saw in the paper for sale. I went and looked at it. I bought it.

That numbered the days of the R100. After a month, I put the R100 up for sale and sold

it to the first person who came to look at it—and I made a profit to boot!

I miss the days when I used to be able to make a little profit on a used bike. With eBay, you can find anything and have it delivered to your door; however, these days shipping costs eat up any chance for a resale profit.

My time with the R100 "Cop Bike" taught me a few lessons.

Number one: no matter how much a motorcycle looks like a police bike, it's not—even when others think it is.

Lesson two is somewhat connected to lesson one: just because everyone thinks it's a cop's bike, don't use that misconception to your advantage while riding in traffic.

I found out it's not advisable to think that you can park wherever you want to because the bike looked like a cop's bike. That attitude is best reserved for driving a Bentley—where you can park any place you want to, because it's a Bentley.

Other realizations didn't truly sink in until 2010, while on my trip to Canada with my Softail. That trip made me wish I would have done marathon motorcycle rides to places like Yosemite when I was younger. Not one to regret much, I do regret not having taken those trips when I was more able-bodied.

The toll of abuse has now gotten to where a couple of hours on a motorcycle is like the Tin Man sleeping in the rain for a week. I get so stove-up I can't move.

Who knows—I may still make that trip one day. Hey, you have to hold on to some dream.

With that said, the ultimate takeaway from the BMW R100 is that I should have taken my own advice through the years: "Live for today." In the case of the big BMW, I didn't. I hesitated. I waited. I lost out on the window that offered me time, money, and something neither of those can replace—the

physical ability to make a cross-country trip.

As the old adage says, "He who hesitates loses." Like I told the kindly old woman in Malbis, Alabama in 1975, "Opportunity knocks, sometimes only once." I should have opened the door when it did.

Yep, I could've taken the BMW across the country. Wrapped behind that big Windjammer fairing, I could have smoked and ridden across the plains—just like my childhood hero from when I was in fourth grade: The Marlboro Man.



A COUPLE OF 1973 BMW R/65'

I don't remember how I ended up with this pair of old airheads. They were in pretty good shape and had the classic BMW styling that I like. I suppose, as Dr. John once said, "I must'a been in the right place."

About the only story to tell about these bikes was the trip that Tab and I made to DeSoto State Park in Ft. Payne, Alabama. DeSoto Park is on the less crowded side of Lookout Mountain; it has all of the scenery and about a fourth of the people as the Tennessee side. Of course, overcrowding wasn't usually a problem—Tab and I had to take vacations in November or December, the off-season of our business.

This trip was in November. It was cold. We left New Orleans with the bikes on a trailer; the temperature was hovering around forty-something degrees. By the time we got to Mississippi a light rain began falling, and continued to fall, as did the temperature as we headed north.

By the time we arrived at our cabin, we had two ice sculptures on the trailer that resembled vintage BMW's. It looked as though these old bikes were discovered along with the fully intact, frozen woolly mammoth—the one with buttercups still in its mouth.

I attempted to unload the bikes but the tie-down latches were frozen solid. I tried to pull in the clutch on my bike; it was frozen solid too.

"You realize how insane this is," Tab stated. She hadn't posed a question.

"No problem. We'll give them a bath in hot water in the morning," I cheerfully quipped.

Okay, her voice trailing off as she headed inside.

We went to bed and awoke the next morning to a winter wonderland. It had snowed during the night. I started running hot water. Tabitha is having doubts about going for a ride and having married me.

It took about twenty-five gallons of hot water, but I finally thawed out the cables, brakes, and throttles on the bikes. The streets had shed most of their snow by then. It was time to ride through the beautiful, snow-dusted, ice-encrusted mountains of Alabama.

As we rode toward our lunch destination, I realized that my propensity for not purchasing proper riding attire was taking its toll, especially on Tab. She kept slowing down to the point that I had to wait for her.

Every time I looked back in my mirrors, her visor was a sheet of frost, hiding eyes that I knew were glaring right through my skull. Her entire posture had stiffened into a rigid, trembling statue of sheer resentment—each downshift a violent, mechanical exclamation point to her silent fury.

My legs were freezing, but my upper body was comfortable.

Years earlier, I had found a coat at a thrift store—a place I swore I would never set foot in, but Tab turned me on to the cool stuff hiding within. The coat, which I still own, is nicknamed "Nanook of the North." It's warm.

Nanook must weigh ten pounds; it's some weird animal hide, lined, and has "buttons" that could easily be ripped off, placed in your palms, and be a pretty good defense against a bear attack. The buttons are like huge claws. I think Admiral Byrd wore the coat to Antarctica.

Over twenty years ago I paid fifteen dollars for it—and I still own and wear that coat on my winter rides today. The coat is considered "unacceptable motorcycle riding gear" amongst most people I have ridden with; they're embarrassed to be around me when I wear it. What can I say? I'm a man who's not afraid to take a fashion risk. Like I said, it's a warm coat.

Meanwhile, while I was toasty, Tab was freezing. I persuaded her to try and make it to our lunch destination. She agreed. We took off with me in the lead; she wanted to follow so that she could, "see where the black ice is, when I go careening off the road."

We continued. I looked back and didn't see Tab. I slowed to allow time for her to make the turn. She never came into view. I turned around and went back to find her.

As I came around a turn, there she was—standing in the road, waiting. She wasn't sporting that smirk I adored. She didn't seem injured, nor did she appear to have fallen. I still got the sinking feeling there was trouble—at least for me. I stopped.

"Where's your bike?" I asked, puzzled.

She pointed to a snowbank on the left side of the road, right in the turn. Like a scene from a cartoon, there was a hole in the snowbank—a perfect silhouette of a motorcycle and its rider. It looked exactly like Wile E. Coyote had just plowed through the drift at sixty miles an hour, leaving a flawless, bike-shaped outline in the powder.

"The bike's buried in the snowbank," she dryly announced.

Not a single muscle in her face moved; she just stared through me with a blank, unblinking glare that made the Alabama winter feel like a tropical vacation. My look of puzzlement must have prompted her explanation without my asking.

"I couldn't feel my hands and arms. I swear I'm getting frostbite," she coldly stated.

I knew I was.

We pulled the bike out and got it running again. As I turned the bike toward our destination, she looked at me and simply asked, "You're kidding, right?"

I started to plead my case: "I—"

"I'm going home, to Louisiana. If you want to stay, ride your bike home. I'm leaving within the hour," she firmly stated.

I knew she would leave me.

We rode back to the cabin and loaded up. We went back to New Orleans. It was a quiet ride home; the warm heater of the truck helped thaw the arctic air coming from Tabitha.

I can't remember anything else connected to the BMWs. I can't remember another ride. I can't remember selling the bikes. But after that ride, everything would have been overshadowed anyway.

What did I learn from these BMWs? Proper riding gear is essential—not really, I still haven't learned that. I did learn that "Nanook of the North" is a great coat. But let me think; certainly there was something bigger to be learned from these bikes...

Okay, I know. Don't bring your wife on a trip like that? Wait till the snow melts to ride? Have an enclosed trailer during winter? Nah, nothing I learned really comes to mind.

Oh wait! I did learn that I really like the styling, handling, and feel of the older airhead BMWs, and that I wanted another one day. That day came years after Tabitha had left. You can read about those BMWs later.

But from these BMWs, I more clearly understand the saying, "It's classic." Never mind the frostbite, the near-lethal hypothermia, or the slow collapse of a marriage—the trip to Alabama was a classic, very memorable disaster. Somehow, every motorcycle story I have out of Alabama turns out exactly that way: memorable and classic.

1982 BMW R65LS

Not much to say about the BMW R65LS. I wanted it. I bought it. I didn't particularly like it. I sold it. Pretty much true in some sense with every motorcycle I've owned: I wanted it, I bought it, I sold it.

The LS just didn't fit. The front fairing—whew! What a tragedy of design. If the designers would have curved the fairing's bottom corners, it would have appealed to me a lot more. I used to park it at angles in the garage that didn't accentuate the lines of the fairing.

But it was a cool, stylish café bike. As a kid reading *Cycle World* magazine, I was semi-attracted to the Bohemian biker style of the early café crowd.

Tab and I rode to our favorite coffee shop many times per week—a short ride through the neighborhood. The LS seemed a natural bike for the occasion. The LS handled the demanding journey of six blocks—straight up a twenty-mile-per-hour street, a ninety-degree right turn, proceed one hundred feet, a ninety-degree left turn—very well, except that it felt like it wanted to turn over from going so slow.

The ride hurt my wrists, but it got me prepared for owning Ducatis. With the exception of the fairing, I liked the LS.

I have always been attracted to airheads—motorcycles, not women. Well alright, several of those as well.

But the LS was just not comfortable in town, nor was it designed to be.

The LS looked good clad in silver. The seat and rear cowl created a mental mimicry of the always beautiful BMW R90S that I have always admired. However, after only a few rides, the bike started becoming eye candy only.

About this time, I was beginning to learn that just because a motorcycle is not ridden

doesn't stop the maintenance costs. The motorcycles in my basement were becoming painfully plentiful.

Since I hunted as a child, I'm familiar with the concept that when the herd gets too thick, you need to thin 'em out. I believe it to be the right thing to do.

I went down to the basement and reviewed each member of my motorcycle herd. The BMW R65LS was the weakest. It was limping along on flawed aesthetics and cramped ergonomics, consuming resources it hadn't earned. In a herd this thick, compassion is a liability.

It had to be put down. I sold it.

The one lesson I learned from the LS was that bikes with handlebars—or rather, handles—mounted anywhere below one inch above the triple clamp are not designed to go slow. By nature and design, they are not comfortable below sixty miles per hour, ninety in the Ducati's case. And they don't like slow, sharp corners.

Another thing I learned owning the LS was that it's great to own a motorcycle for every mood. I wish I was rich, but I just didn't have the time to work and accumulate money. It took four days a week as it was to spend and enjoy what I had.

But when it comes to bikes, more is always better. If I would have had a lot of money, I would have kept every bike I've owned. But such is not my life, so it was a short stay for the BMW LS—but then again, I have a short attention span.

In summary, what I really learned from the BMW was that I wanted a Ducati. I became alert for a Ducati. As fate would have it, one was lurking just around the corner.



1982 Montesa Cota 200 Trials Bike

"The most fun you can have going slow..." so said *Cycle World* magazine in 1982 about the Montesa Cota 200. Having enjoyed my Ossa trials bike years earlier, I had to agree. I figured I could have fun with the little Spanish gem right here in Metairie.

I have always liked the looks of a trials bike—so unique—and as an added bonus, this Montesa had wavy cooling fins. This is a good place for you to go, "oooooh." Its red paint and body panels were not as stylish as the Ossa Mick Andrews replica, though.

The last time I owned a trials bike, I only had a couple of dead-flat acres and a three-foot-deep ditch to play on; but now, I had the nearly twenty-foot-high railroad hill half a block down my dead-end street.

"Certainly this will be more challenging," I said aloud to Tab.

"Oh, I'm sure," she said, as she walked away shaking her head—again.

So I put on my gardening gloves, a driving cap that I used when I drove the MG, and my cowboy boots that I rode horses with, and headed down the street. Tab is refusing to come watch me play just because of my riding gear. Well, I have never been a man afraid to take a fashion risk—much to the chagrin of my wives.

The first thing I noticed about the Montesa was its lack of power in comparison to the Ossa. Although it was called a "200," it actually had a 175cc engine. I suppose that was some clever Spanish marketing technique. It did not instigate wheelies anywhere near as easily as the Ossa—or my Yamaha 125 AT3, for that matter. Nonetheless, I continued out of my yard and toward the railroad tracks.

The second thing I realized was that those gray rocks the railroads use to build track foundations are not as tightly packed as I

thought, and they had a jolt equal to a rock twice their size.

The third thing I noticed, about halfway up the track hill, was that it was steeper than it looked. I decided it was best to change my course to an angle. It was not.

I immediately found myself sliding sideways down the hill to the street. "Well, now I know," I mumbled, and took another stab at it going up at an angle.

Things were going fine; my ascent was steady, and I reached the top, only to find myself facing miles of railroad ties that, for the record, measure eight feet wide, and are six inches long, nine inches wide, and seven inches thick; and they are crowned with a piece of steel track about six inches tall—"Surprise!"

I tried to loft the front wheel to go over the track rail; the rear wheel found no traction in the loose rocks. I had to turn and ride the outer line of railroad ties until I could figure out a line. Every single strike against those rigid wooden beams sent a violent, jackhammer shockwave straight up the forks, through my wrists, and directly into my skull.

My vision blurred into a vibrating haze, and I could hear my molars slamming together like a pair of castanets—I think I rattled several teeth completely loose within a single minute of riding the ties. I finally headed back down the hill.

I scouted a spot to make another attempt to the summit and cleared away some of the loose rocks to gain traction. Got it now.

My second attempt was a smooth, angled ascent to the track bed top. I was able to get traction and loft the front wheel over the steel track. As the rear wheel made its way over the steel track faster than I can think, I was at a dead stop—straight up and down.

I couldn't move the bike at all. I looked down to see that the front and rear wheels were solidly wedged between the track rails, tires nearly compressed to the rims. I got off and the bike just stood there, straight up. I pulled on the bars; it wouldn't move, or rather, it couldn't move.

As it turns out mathematically, the fifty-one-inch wheelbase and the fifty-six-inch track width, combined with the total length from the front of the front wheel to the rear of the rear wheel, is an exact, very compressed fit for a Montesa Cota. I wrestled with the bike for a minute to no avail.

And then, I heard a train horn—which meant I had about the time it takes a slow-moving train to travel five or six blocks before it arrived around the curve.

Scenes of Looney Tunes cartoons of the hero trying to save the tied-up woman on the tracks keep playing a loop in my head as I yanked and pulled on the Cota. I started consoling myself of the impending doom with the thought of how this episode would be a new, and extremely spectacular, ending to one of my bikes.

If that train hits that bike, I already know exactly what Tab will say—she won't ask if I'm okay, she'll just stand over the smoking wreckage, cross her arms, and deadpan, "Well, at least you saved money on proper riding gear."

The train was reaching the Metairie Road crossing; I knew this because it really starts laying on the horn at that crossing, because New Orleanians are notoriously stupid when it comes to gambling their lives and cars with trains. I have proof on many occasions.

I was getting a tad panicky. We have all heard about the adrenaline-filled heroes that lift a car off of a trapped baby. The sound of that train horn somehow must activate a

nerve in the ear that runs to the adrenaline gland.

Thinking quickly at this point, I let the air out of the rear tire—all ten pounds of it—and yanked. The tracks released their grip on the little Cota.

Without time to bother about mounting the bike and riding down the track hill, I simply pushed the bike so that it would slide down the hill. It did just that for a few feet, caught on something... and then decided to start rolling down the hill, end over end over end.

It was a magnificent, catastrophic ballet of flying metal, loose rocks, and shattering plastic—the little Cota performing a series of increasingly violent, unsolicited gymnastic flips down the steep embankment before executing a final, spectacular belly-flop right onto the pavement below. I wasn't shocked; through the years, I had become quite accustomed to this sight.

The train was in sight. I slid down the hill on my dumb ass.

As the train passed, the engineer waved to me—oblivious to what was about to be a long, detailed, mountains-of-paper report to the railroad about running over a motorcycle.

Or perhaps it could have actually been a short report that simply stated the facts: "Dumbass got his bike stuck on the tracks while trespassing and playing where he had no business." All they would have to do for repairs would be to wipe a little red paint off the front of the engine.

There were several takeaways from my time with the Cota. I discovered that trials bikes are no fun in the city—but didn't I supposedly figure that one out with the Ossa? Guess not. It also became blindingly obvious that railroad tracks do not make a suitable trials course.

Finally, I realized that riding in circles around my yard popping wheelies gets old

fast, and is a lot more fun on a little Honda SL70.

I sold the Montesa, or perhaps it went in the trade for the Ducati Pantah. I honestly cannot remember. As a matter of fact, the little Montesa was somehow overlooked while writing this book. I did not write this story until a re-read five years later in 2022 when I saw it mentioned that I had a Montesa in another story.

I think it was omitted and forgotten because the incident was some sort of trauma. I suppose I chose to forget this trauma, like so many others in my life.



1982 DUCATI 500SL PANTAH

Horse-trading—just the term conjures up the idea of someone getting the raw end of a deal. It carries the connotation that someone is hiding the truth in order to pawn off something to an unsuspecting or naive fool.

I've done honest-to-goodness horse-trading before. I learned a valuable lesson from it. I also learned what the term "foundering" means in horse talk. But this is a story about the horse-trading of motorcycles.

One afternoon, while at my favorite coffee shop, I ran into an old acquaintance. We knew each other from racing motorcycles years earlier. Turns out he had a small motorcycle repair shop. He was skilled with offbeat, off-brand motorcycles—the ones that most shops won't work on. At one time, it was as though he spoke the motorcycles' native tongues, like the "motorcycle whisperer."

Not really. He was a sneaky, self-inflated character. He had the calculating grin of a counterfeit watch salesman and a habit of looking at your possessions like he was mentally tagging them for an estate sale.

Every compliment out of his mouth felt like a setup, delivered with a slippery charm that made you want to check your pockets the second he walked out of the room. Remember, I admitted that I knew that.

In conversation, I told him about how recently, in order to snag a Montesa trials bike, I had bought a "take all or none" package of bikes. The package included an MZ 250 and a vintage BSA road-racer rolling chassis along with the fairing and cowl. In essence, a basket-case BSA. I mentioned how I was considering building the BSA for Tabitha. He said he would like to take a look at it. He followed me back to my house.

At the time, the basement was full of motorcycles, ranging from the Harley chopper, a few Honda Cub 50s, dirt bikes of all sorts

and sizes, and Tab's BSA—all told, nearly fifteen motorcycles were lined up neatly on the black-and-white, checkered-flag-patterned floor.

My "friend" dug through the pieces of the BSA basket case and promptly explained that most of the pieces didn't match, and about the only good parts were the rolling chassis and the fairing. He was quite convincing that the project wasn't worth the effort and money. He suggested that perhaps we could do some "horse-trading."

He told me he had a Ducati Pantah at his shop that he wasn't interested in keeping. He said he bought it, rode it once, and didn't like it. What kind of nut does that? You would think, being in the pest control business, I could smell a rat.

But instead, I said, "A Ducati, huh? I was just thinking I needed a Ducati." I told him I would stop by his shop the next day. He seemed happy.

I should have realized something was amiss—for who's happy at the prospect of parting company with a red Ducati? Posing the question to him, as Ruben had done to me on the playground three decades earlier, came to mind. I wanted to ask him, "What-ya, some kinda fruit?"

When I walked into his shop, "I saw her standing there. My heart went boom." There sat the Pantah—red, shiny, sleek, and looking like it was doing one hundred miles per hour standing still. He started it. The V-twin purred with an Italian accent. The Ducati was Gina Lollobrigida on two wheels.

I was in love. All I could think was, "I had to have her—but I'm married."

I didn't think anything about the fact that immediately after turning off the bike, he quickly wiped some areas down. Nor did I think anything when he removed a rag that was stuffed below the tank-and-seat area. He said

he must have forgotten it when he changed the oil.

He decided a fair trade for the Pantah would be the three bikes: the Montesa, the basket-case BSA, and the MZ 250. I had paid six hundred dollars for all three. My mind did some math; it seemed like I was getting a way better deal. He didn't know what I had paid for the bikes, and I didn't know what he paid for the Pantah. It just seemed the scales were tipped in my favor.

We shook hands and made a deal. I told him I had my truck and we could load it up now. He explained how he had to deliver another bike, and would throw the Pantah on his motorcycle trailer and meet me at my house later that evening. He said he would be there before dark. I left.

Later that evening, right before dark, he showed up. We unloaded the Pantah, exchanged cash and titles, along with the usual bills of sale that include the "as is" clause and "no warranty or guarantee." We loaded up his new bikes. He drove away smiling.

Tabitha came downstairs and saw me staring at the Pantah, smiling. She looked the bike over and asked me, "What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing, it starts right up and sounds great," I beamed.

"So did that thing," she said, as she rolled her eyes toward the chopper.

"Did you ride it?"

"Nah, I didn't want to ride it uptown—not on those streets," I reasoned. It made sense. Certain New Orleans streets look like Baghdad after a bombing; they have potholes that can swallow a Hummer. I headed for my helmet.

Tabitha reminded me that we were already late for dinner at her mom's. My ride would have to wait.

The next day, I finally got through with my morning appointments and rushed home to ride the Pantah. I wheeled it out of the garage and into the sun, admiring its shiny

red paint as I strapped on my helmet. I threw a leg over, hit the start button, waited about ten seconds, and headed up the street.

I had gone less than a mile when I felt my crotch feeling warm and wet. I stopped and noticed my pants were drenched in oil, as was half of the bike from the tank back. I felt that strange dropping sensation in my chest again. I slowly drove home.

By the time I got home, oil was dripping off the bike. The area just below the seat was soaked. I pulled off the seat and noticed it seemed to be coming from the breather.

"Perhaps it's just loose," I prayed aloud.

I fiddled around until I had exhausted my knowledge of Ducatis—about three minutes—and went for the phone book. I called the Ducati shop in Baton Rouge. Remember, this was during the NIE—No Internet Era.

I explained the situation to the mechanic. He said, "It sounds like a blown main seal. How much did you say you got invested in it?"

When I told him about seven hundred dollars, he advised me to get rid of it.

"Why? How much is it to fix?" I nervously asked.

"At least twice as much as you got in it now." He went on about what else could be wrong.

I hung up with the feeling he was wrong. I started calling Ducati shops all over the country. I kept getting the same response: "Sounds like a blown main seal."

This is where my obsessive-compulsiveness kicked in. I kept calling Ducati shops. I knew someone, somewhere, would tell me what I wanted to hear: "No problem, man, just..."

I called Ducati shops all over America for hours, back when long distance was still charged by the minute. Finally, I decided this would be the last call. I called some shop in Massachusetts.

The mechanic said the same thing, but then he asked, "He told you he had just changed the oil?"

"Yes," I replied.

"And he owns his own little shop?"

"Yes."

The mechanic chuckled. He told me, "Try this. Drain the oil, and put a big bucket under it. See how much oil comes out."

"What?" I asked, confused.

"I knew a mechanic that got interrupted during an oil change, and he put twice the amount of oil in the bike that he should have. You just might be lucky. Let me know," he added.

Faster than a speeding Ducati, I had the tools and a big oil pan. As I made the last spin on the oil plug, it shot out into the pan. Oil started coming out at a rate that would have made a Texan shout, "Gusher!"

Oil drained and drained. When it finally stopped, way too many quarts of oil had come out.

I put the proper amount of oil in. I started it and went for a ride. Not a drop of oil anywhere.

I went home and called the "friend" that had sold me the Ducati. I just had to rub it in. I realized all the little signs of him trying to con me that didn't register--thankfully, this time.

When I called, I could hear the trepidation in his voice. In a voice dripping sarcasm like a man who had just struck oil on a dead lease, I told him the bike was spectacular, that I'd been riding all afternoon, and that if he ever found himself burdened with another Italian masterpiece, he should call me immediately for some more horse-trading.

"So... the Pantah's running great, huh?" he asked, his voice cracking slightly as the reality of his own stupidity began to sink

"Oh yeah," I purred, entirely unable to contain the absolute triumph bleeding through the receiver. "I'm just incredibly grateful you took the time to put fresh fluids in it. You saved me a fortune—all I have to do is ride."

"Uh-huh," he murmured.

I figured it was time for the knockout punch. I told him, "Just so you'll know—the Pantah doesn't take five quarts of oil."

He stammered for words. That was reward enough for me. I hung up.

That weekend, I loaded the Pantah and Tabitha's BSA onto the trailer and we drove across Lake Pontchartrain to go riding on the twisty country roads. The Ducati was a thrill. One section of road had a long sweeping turn, followed by a tight right, then a sweeping left turn. It was so much fun that I kept running through the section while Tabitha sat by the roadside. She was used to my compulsions—like playing a song I like over and over, perhaps twenty or thirty times.

I kept getting faster and smoother with each pass, testing the limits. As I entered the left-and-right section, I realized I was going too fast; all I could do was keep the power on, lean lower, and pray louder.

That was my first knee-dragger. I wasn't wearing leathers or cups—just blue jeans.

When I came out of the turn, I pulled in where Tabitha was waiting. I was laughing and whooping like a madman, entirely high on my own survival. Tabitha didn't join in the celebration. She just stood there, arms locked tight across her chest, staring down at my knee.

That's when I felt my second warm, wet sensation from the Ducati. Blood was running down my leg. Tab wore an expression that perfectly blended clinical disgust with an absolute lack of surprise—a look that said

she had already calculated the hospital copay before I even rolled to a stop.

I found the bike to be useless in town. The streets of New Orleans, combined with clip-on bars, left my wrists, neck, and back hurting so bad that I was worthless for a day after riding in town.

Over the next few months, I had several more thrill rides on the country roads. The downside was that a lot of gravel and logging trucks use those back roads; timber and gravel pits are a main source of income for that area. This added more than a few surprises in the turns—once, I was completely sideways in a turn from loose gravel.

I decided the Ducati would kill me—because let's face it, you don't own a Ducati or a Ferrari to putter along like an old woman going to church. They're designed for speed. Knowing I wouldn't ride it slow, and there were no tracks anywhere nearby that offered track days, I sold it.

I learned several things from the Ducati—foremost, that horse-trading is a gamble. I happened to win that one, knowing full well that it could have turned out to be a financial disaster like the chopper had been. I learned to be more cautious when getting involved with used bikes, especially exotic ones.

What I really learned from my time with the Ducati was that the Italians have a corner on the market for all things painted red that go fast and handle well. I understand now that it's not just the women and food that make Italian men notoriously virile; it may be their mistresses as well—fast Italian bikes and cars.

For once, I had let pragmatic, sensible thought prevail over my desires—like selling the Ducati because I knew it would hurt me one day. I hated to sell it; I wanted to keep it, if only for the aesthetic pleasure it gave me, but I was glad I sold it.

Which makes me wonder, "What kind of man
is happy to part company with a red Ducati?"
He must be "fruit or someth'n..."



1976 SUZUKI RM 250

The RM 250 came in a package deal that included an MZ 250 and a Honda SL 70. I never rode the Suzuki RM; it just sat there, looking poised, ready to race. My back at the time was so whacked-out I didn't dare ride a motocross bike.

The Suzuki RM 250 and the MZ were the beginning of my owning motorcycles purely for aesthetic pleasure. The Suzuki had style. The MZ was ugly and weird.

The MZ was like something you would see at a carnival sideshow, or driving slow to gawk at a car wreck—you had to look. It was so ugly it made some people squeamish.

There are no real stories connected to the RM 250. I did learn something—I realized how I spend money uselessly on motorcycles. I also learned that I don't mind.

I thought about making the RM look like a DeCoster bike, but I didn't like the new RM. I still longed for the style of the TM Suzukis from the early 1970s—I sold it.

I rather enjoyed having a Suzuki racer in the house just to admire; it planted the desire to one day own a first-class DeCoster replica. Yep, the RM took me sailing into dangerous waters—owning bikes just to admire.

A motorcycle just to look at. That ain't right.



MZ250 ENDURO: THE BEARDED LADY

An MZ 250—perhaps you've never heard of an MZ. If not, let me clarify. MZ stands for Motorradwerk Zschopau, which translates to "nowhere near as cool as a CZ." Which, come to think of it, I've never owned a CZ.

I still regret not having bought the two radial-finned CZs that were still crated and left abandoned in the old CZ shop; I could have had both for five hundred dollars. But this is about an MZ.

MZ is headquartered in Zschopau, Germany. So now it's all clear to you, right? You're thinking, "Darn! How did I miss out on owning such a fine piece of German-made equipment?"

As it turns out, MZ actually is a fine piece of German engineering. Can you think of something they make that isn't?

MZ won the International Six Days Trial seven times, won thirteen Grand Prix races, and had one hundred and five finishes standing on the rostrum between 1955 and 1976. In the 1960s, their two-stroke engines were so powerful that the Japanese copied them. Much of the technology of the championship-winning motocross bikes from Japan in the 1970s was purportedly "borrowed" from MZ.

I suppose MZs were kind of like the goofy-looking nerd from junior high that went on to be a billionaire through tech stocks. As successful as you may be, you're still ugly.

There is a plethora of adjectives that can describe an MZ. A few that come to mind are: ugly, unattractive, unappealing, hideous, unlovely, unsightly, horrible, frightful, awful, ghastly, vile, revolting, repellent, repulsive, and repugnant. It was an offensive mismatch of blocky, utilitarian Soviet-era stamped steel and plastic that looked less like a motorcycle and more like a poorly engineered industrial water pump.

It was so aggressively hideous—devoid of a single graceful line—that it made some people physically squeamish just standing downwind of it in the garage.

I came about the MZ as part of the package deal I made with a man moving overseas. I remember thinking that the MZ was so weird-looking that I had to find a hole for it in the dirt bike line-up in my basement. I stuffed the MZ between the Suzuki RM 250 and a Honda SL70.

The MZ was a great conversation piece, most of which started with, "It sure is ugly!"

"Yep." I would reply.

About the only lesson I learned from the MZ is there's no cure for ugly.

The MZ's presence in the motorcycle line-up was like having the bearded lady at a circus sideshow living in my basement, and not paying rent—and that's a fine analogy of the MZ. I'll stop here.



HONDA SL70

The SL70—what a good-looking little bike. I've always liked the looks of the Honda SL350. The SL70 looked as though a 350 had been put through a shrinking machine, like the one on Disney's "It's a Small World" ride.

The SL was part of the package that included the RM 250 and the MZ. The little SL70—and I mean little—was cool to have in the basement. It was another one of those little Hondas that are a blast to ride, much like the Cubs.

I used to ride the SL around my yard in Old Metairie. We had a double lot, so there was plenty of room to play on the SL. I used to take the SL screaming around the yard, which was a constant left-hand turn—sort of like NASCAR on grass and two wheels.

The really fun part of playing on the SL was its ability to wheelie out of turns while it was still leaned over. You could do cross-ups and leg stretches; you could put on one heck of a show that looked as though it were happening faster, and was more dangerous and daring, than it actually was. It looked somewhat like me racing the RM 250 shop bike.

The SL was fun. I didn't own the SL very long. Someone who had come to one of the band practice-and-party nights made me an offer that doubled my money. I sold it.

If I still had the SL today, I would get a tenfold return on what I paid for the little bike.

There is not a lot to say about the SL70 that the world hasn't already mentioned. I did learn something from the SL—a simple lesson, a lesson that I keep telling myself to remember, particularly in life post-Katrina.

The lesson from the SL70? Smiling feels good. Smiling is good for the mind, body, and soul. And no matter what, we should take the

advice of Wet Willie, and keep on smilin'
through the rain—and wear good rain gear,
which one day I will own.



1972 HONDA CB350: PINKY

It was 1997; I was living at Tantela Ranch. I was bikeless, having unloaded toys to purchase the house, which was meant for rental purposes but became a permanent residence after Tabitha left. I needed a bike—any bike.

The horses weren't fulfilling my need for self-propelled fun. I needed horsepower encased in a piston-clad corral. I bought a 1972 Honda CB350 for one hundred dollars from my genuinely insane Uncle Bobby.

I have to say, buying this motorcycle was the best thing I've ever done with a hundred-dollar bill. Yep, even better than that.

The CB350 was a great-running, bulletproof old Honda that still wore a faded candy-purple-and-pink paint job from the early 1970s. Jimmy started calling the bike Pinky. The name stuck. Pinky had some good trials tires on it; other than that, it was a street model CB, down-swept exhaust and all.

I took Pinky for morning rides through the country roads around my house. Pinky and I explored every road in a sixty-mile radius, including logging and fire roads. The first time I took Pinky through the trail at Tantela, I was surprised at how well it scooted through the woods. It was a little heavy—say a hundred pounds or so too heavy—but it held its own keeping up with Jimmy's four-wheeler.

I suppose this is where I'm supposed to boast about my riding abilities—you know, like how Roger DeCoster could beat anyone even if he was riding a moped—but I won't. 'Cause I just did.

Jimmy and I rode up and down the trail, meandered through the woods, and realized two things: we needed more trails, a lot more trails. The underbrush of wild privets was easy to clear if you had napalm; I didn't. I had a machete.

The next day, I began clearing trails with my machete. Within hours, I was amazed at the headway I had made, plus I was having fun pretending to be slaying bad knights and dragons with my "sword." An added benefit was the great exercise I was getting—exercise that helped with drumming, strength-wise, but not the quality of my playing.

Over the course of several years, we had cut several miles of trails through the woods. Jimmy has not stopped to this day. Today, the woods of Tantela look like a state park—just better maintained. Pinky took the trails amazingly well.

The trails were a typical blend of topography that borders any south Louisiana river, and the Little Tchefuncte River runs through Tantela. Depending on the amount of rainfall, the river's depth ranges from a few feet deep and twenty feet wide to twenty feet deep and a half-mile wide during the monsoons. To say the least, it provides for a variety of trail terrain.

The trails have uphill, downhill, whoop-de-dos, sand pits, quagmires that would please a pig, smooth pine needle trails, and cypress-root-laden sections that will rattle fillings out of your teeth. Pinky took it all.

I thrashed Pinky to within an inch of its life for several years on the trails, day in and day out, and all the while riding thousands of miles on the country roads—a true testament to the durability of the old Hondas, and why the European brands of the same era all but vanished.

The Honda required little to no maintenance. The only maintenance I performed were oil changes and tightening and oiling the chain. I once put in some new spark plugs, only because I felt she deserved them. With all of the jumping and thrashing, not once did I find a drop of oil from the engine or front forks.

I also had an unexpected and interesting circle-of-life event with Pinky. I had gone over to neighbor Willie's one afternoon to enjoy conversation and cold beer. As we sat talking, Willie mentioned a friend of his was going to stop by. Willie suddenly had an epiphany.

"Neighbor Ed, you might know this guy. He's from Bucktown too—not the part you're from, but Bucktown. Yeah, you might know him," Willie announced.

"What's his name?" I inquired.

"Fritcher, everyone just calls him Fritcher," Willie said.

"Fritcher? Grew up by the country club?" I asked with a note of astonishment in my voice.

"His parents' house is by there, yeah. You know him?"

"Oh yeah. I know him," I said.

I shared how I knew Fritcher through the five-dollar megaphone and kite capers—the ones I shared in the Honda Cub 50 story. A few minutes later, Fritcher pulled up. He was as surprised as I was by the chance encounter.

We both laughed about the stories and caught up on life. I couldn't resist asking him if he had any megaphones that would fit on Pinky. He said he was out of that business.

I learned that as you get older, "catching up on life" is less amusing and generally sadder than rehashing humorous stories from the past. Sort of how it's better to watch a rerun of a *Mr. Ed* episode than it is to watch some of the new television shows.

But back to Pinky. I have many memories of Pinky.

The most amazing thing about Pinky was what happened when we parted ways: I sold her for three times what I had paid.

Wouldn't the world be idyllic if everything in life offered such fun,

reliability, and cost efficiency as Pinky did? And wouldn't it be great if everything gave back a threefold return after all the fun, like Pinky did? And if life was like that, wouldn't we be living in some alien utopia as opposed to this dystopia?

Pinky was proof that motorcycling is about fun. Once I'm in the saddle of a motorcycle, it really doesn't matter what the bike beneath me looks like, what brand it is, or the size of the engine; none of that matters. What does matter is how big of a grin I get across my face when I ride it.

Pinky always provided me with a grin that stretched from ear to ear—that's what a great bike is, fun. And Pinky was fun.

Like I said, buying Pinky is the best thing I've ever done with a hundred-dollar bill.



1974 SUZUKI RL250 TRIALS

Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Christmas Day, 1998. My Uncle Bobby, the one I had bought "Pinky" from, had called for Christmas. He asked me how the "ole girl was holding up." After a few minutes of chit-chat, he proposed a challenge.

"I know you know your motorcycles, but I have one that I bet even you don't know what kind it is and what it's for; and if you guess right, you can have it," he stated.

I was all ears. He continued.

"It's a 1974 Suzuki dirt bike, but not like any you've had. It's got a tiny little seat, a really weird riding position, it's geared so low th--"

"RL 250 trials bike!" I shouted, as though I had just won bingo, but only better. "When can I pick it up?" I beamed.

In semi-shock, he mumbled, "After lunch I--"

"I have tie-downs in my truck," I added.

I ate dinner. I hadn't swallowed my last piece of pie before I had my coat and truck keys in hand. "Let's go get my trials bike," I said to my dad.

Later that afternoon, I brought the RL to Tantela and started playing with it immediately. Bobby had told me, "The bike will always start on one, maybe two kicks." For several years, that turned out to be pleasantly true. No matter what I did to it--and I did use/abuse it--funny how adding the prefix "ab" to the word "use" clarifies how I used the RL.

The first thing I did was ride the RL to the rear of my property where it meets Neighbor Jimmy's property. Jimmy's property has a long alley of live oak trees--a great place to do wheelies. So you know I did.

I played wheelie king for hours, repeatedly flipping the RL, trying to find the sweet spot. I see doing wheelies as equal to walking on a tightwire; it's either

perfectly balanced and amazing, or it's unbalanced—which, at times, is more amazing to watch. It's a balancing act, and having an audience is like performing at the circus.

The neighbors, Willie and Karen, are Jimmy's relatives and my friends; their houses also bordered the oak alley. They all came out with the kids and refreshments to watch "Neighbor Ed" wheelie and crash, over and over again, until it was boring—for them.

I finally wanted to stay on the bike for a while, so I took the RL down the trail that led to the river on "Neighbor Al's" property. I rode to the river, which is a shallow creek until it rains, and began riding along the sandy beaches and into the river. What a blast!

I had only owned the RL several hours and I already loved it. To be honest, I've wanted an RL since Terry had the Suzuki shop. Having owned the Ossa and Montesa years earlier without a proper place to ride a trials bike was a letdown, but the RL and Tantela Ranch were a match made in heaven. Great riding!

I finally stopped to rest and admire the bike. As I ran my hands along the beautiful, sculptured aluminum tank, decades of time fell away. I felt as though I was in a surreal dream of being fifteen years old again, except with the freedom of being thirty-nine.

I admired the RL's lines from every angle. I was happy. It was mine.

If you've ever seen an RL, you know what I mean when I say that the bike is beautiful. It's like a lissome gymnast—skinny but full of power. It's small, agile, and able to perform unbelievable maneuvers. It's as thin and as cool as Twiggy was.

To me, the RL's gas tank is a classic, like a Sportster's peanut tank. The tank was in beautiful shape—except for the long, one-inch-deep crease and dent running down the entire left side of it.

That mishap took place the day the original owner had bought the bike. As he was loading it into his pickup truck, it fell over; the tank smashed against the truck bed's top rail, leaving a perfect imprint in the RL's tank. That would have killed me.

As I sat and admired the bike, I thought, "Enough ogling—I needed to ride."

There were plenty of places to ride; Jimmy and I had cleared miles of trails through the woods. The woods of Tantela were a mix of hardwoods on high ground, crisscrossed with sloughs and ravines as deep as thirty feet.

The ground had pockets of loamy soil, sandy soil, and a mix of clay. Cypress swamps in the low areas held water, and downed trees offered Mick Andrews-like trials obstacles. The only thing I didn't have was big rocks; Louisiana is shy on those.

I began getting really in tune with the RL. When I made new sections I would ride them for hours, until I mastered them. A trials bike is like a thoroughbred horse, the rider and the horse seem to meld into one. The RL gave me the delusion that my body had eighteen horsepower and two wheels. It could effortlessly go anywhere.

During the time I owned the RL several people that orbit in my "circle of life" that I often refer to, came through my life again. The circle of life connected to the RL went round and round, like flat-track racing, or a dog chasing its tail. The first circle of life connection was Cousin Bobby.

Second connection—well, you'll need a little backstory to fully appreciate this circle, or better, this "serpentine of life."

My first middle school girlfriend in fifth and sixth grade was Pam. I've mentioned her in earlier stories. She was tall. She had long blondish hair. She was pretty. By high school she was, to use the vernacular of the day, a "stone-cold fox!"

Every Tuesday night, the local CZ shop would show Super 8 movies from the previous Sunday's motocross race; the opening film montage was always someone following Pam around the races and filming her. Pam and I have seemingly run into each other about every ten years.

Somewhere around 1984, I ran into Pam at a wedding I was doing with the Bentley. She and I enjoyed the reception together. Oddly enough, the bride of the wedding was the first girl I ever kissed—a mutual neighborhood friend of Pam and me.

At the reception, Pam and I danced and drank. We caught up on life. She had a one-year-old daughter, was divorced, and living at her parents' house. We danced and drank some more. Of course, she noticed my frequent need to go to the bathroom, which was my excuse in those days to sneak off and hang out with the Devil. We quit dancing and just drank. She asked about the devil in my pocket. Renewed with fresh energy, we drank some more.

The reception ended. She needed a ride home. I said, "Okay."

She lived forty-five minutes away, on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Once we crossed the twenty-six-mile-long Causeway Bridge, we stopped at a club by the lake. We spent several more hours talking, and drinking, and hanging out with the devil.

Our encounter ended a day or so later when her parents were contacted by my wife. They concluded that Pam and I had "run off together." We hadn't; we had gotten lost in a fog of memories. We just couldn't remember where we were supposed to be.

So back to winter 1999, Tantela Ranch, and the circle. I was at Neighbor Willie's house. We were all hanging out talking when Karen, Willie's wife, told me the new guy working for Willie—the one who went by the name "Jimmy Dude"—had told a bartender he was

trying to get a date with about his boss's insane neighbor. "You," Karen clarified.

In conversation, the bartender became curious about the insane neighbor on the motorcycle that had an affinity for wheelies. The next time Jimmy Dude came in, she asked if the neighbor's name was Edwin. Well, sure enough, it was. And sure enough, the bartender's name was Pam.

All I remember asking Karen was, "Pam? Pam?"

"Yeah, that's it," Karen affirmed.

"Well, tell Jimmy Dude that Pam's mine!" We all laughed.

I called the bar-and-restaurant that she worked at the next night. We set up a date.

"Pam," I thought as I drove to pick her up, "after all of these years, what a small world." Small indeed, and getting smaller.

Pam and I attended the *OffBeat Magazine* Music Awards show on Tuesday, February 1, 2000. The French Quarter is used to rowdy, insane, and lascivious behavior. The House of Blues is a wild nightclub in a wild place. Given that, who would have believed that Pam and I were asked to leave?

Pam and I began hanging out during the ensuing months. She wasn't busy. I wasn't busy. She had free time. I had free time. I had expendable cash—a win-win situation for all.

The fun lasted until Pam got a job. She ended up working with a person from my childhood whose family were friends with my family from Mid-City Baptist School and Church; she also happened to be a cousin of Pam's.

Our mutual friend connects by marriage to another person from my twenties that worked with me, but that circle of life becomes way too deep—it's another story.

Strangely enough, that same group of people comes orbiting through my life again, through tragedy, later in this book.

Anyway, Pam got a job. I was left alone. I had no one to play with. I wasn't lonely long.

Pam's daughter, Jasmine—the baby in 1984—was now nineteen years old. She was gorgeous. She was crazy like a fox, and looked exactly like her momma when she was that age.

I met her at their family's store on the parade route during Mardi Gras 2000. Jasmine didn't work. She had free time. I had free time. I had expendable cash—another win-win situation.

How lucky can one man be?

We began hanging out. We had a lot in common. She liked a good party. I liked a good party. She liked excellent cuisine. I liked excellent cuisine. She liked to spend my money. I liked to spend my money. Plus, we liked—no, we loved—the fact that it bothered everyone that we were hanging out.

Having met and worked around celebrities, I have experienced first-and-second-hand the natural charisma of celebrity. Jasmine has as much charisma as any celebrity I have ever met. When she walked into a room—any room—she owned it.

Jasmine also had a bad habit of getting arrested. I developed the bad habit of posting her bails. Jasmine had her twentieth birthday party at my house. Jasmine and I went out for my forty-third birthday.

That party went nonstop for two days, and covered three states. It started with a five-course dinner at a great New Orleans restaurant, then went to after-dinner cocktails in the lobby of The Le Pavillon Hotel—with me playing their grand piano while Jasmine sprawled across the top, sipping champagne, and looking like a celebrity. From there, we crashed a highbrow sorority ball in the hotel's grand ballroom, until we were drawing so much attention we had to leave.

The party took to the road and picked up Jasmine's gorgeous friend. The party finally

crashed in Memphis, Tennessee, a day or so later--how was I to know that Jasmine and friend weren't supposed to leave the state of Louisiana? Either way, we had such a blast that I haven't celebrated my birthday since; you can't do better than perfect, so why try.

But my, how I digress. Pam married Jimmy Dude. Jasmine went on to--well, let's just say I learned that old adages come from truth; for example, the one that says, "play with fire and you'll get burned." Like I said, the circle of life with Pam is more serpentine than circular. The RL brought Pam on her cyclical orbit through my life again.

Back to riding the RL.

One warm summer day, I decided a refreshing loop through the river was in order to cool off. Jimmy kept daring me to try a complete river crossing. Sounded like fun to me.

I began my crossing. Things were going great. I plonked through the water slowly, looking for logs and snakes while trying to judge the depth of the water, a very tricky task in the Tchefuncte. Suddenly, very suddenly, the water went from the bottom of the skid plate deep to near the bottom of the tank deep.

I tried in vain to loft the front wheel, but the weight of the water weighed down the bike. I kept in motion, heading toward the other side. Amazingly, the RL crawled up the riverbank on the opposite side. As I sat there laughing, the poor, wet RL began gurgling. I kept the throttle open.

For several minutes, the RL engine sat gurgling, and then, it died. As the engine died, it made a sneezing sound, spitting water out somewhere below the seat. I tried to start it. One kick: dead. Two kicks: varoom!

The RL fired up and ran smoothly.

I wheeled my way back across the river--very reminiscent of getting the Honda Cub

back to shore from the sandbars—reaching the shore like the conquering hero I was.

Days turned into months, and months into years; the RL just kept providing fun. About the only thing I did was put gas in it and change the plug once, because much like Pinky, it just deserved a new spark plug.

I had to change the rear shocks; they had both bent from thrashing through the woods. The RL provided more grins and giggles than almost any bike I have ever owned—probably more than any two bikes combined.

Several times, the RL got the last laugh. One of those times happened as I raced up the trail headed toward a ninety-degree left turn at the top of a fifteen-foot-high ravine, with a small creek at the bottom.

The ravine was loaded with cypress knees, snakes, and the assorted flora, fauna, and wildlife that inhabit such places. To say the least, it was not a place you want to play, let alone land and be wounded, lying immobile in a hostile land.

I was rapidly approaching the turn. I hit the rear brake—or at least tried to hit the brake pedal—and I missed. When you push it to the edge and screw up, you go over the edge; and in this case, I literally was headed "over the edge."

As I sped toward the edge and a low-hanging branch, I ducked so I wouldn't smack my head. As the RL shot off the ledge and above the ravine, I reached out and grabbed the branch with both hands.

As I hung, swinging in a wide arc above the ravine, I watched from my aerial perch as the RL landed in the creek with a deep, "plah" sound; it was buried up to its axles in sand. I used the momentum of my swinging to propel myself back to the ravine top behind me. I felt like Indiana Jones.

Once again, all I could do was let out a loud whoop and laugh until my eyes watered.

The laughter stopped after an hour of using the winch on Jimmy's four-wheeler to pull the RL out of the sand and snake pit. At times, we were losing the battle. The RL kept getting stuck deeper. We persevered. We won. Once free, the RL started on the first kick. Amazing.

When I rode the RL, I noticed things happened fast. Riding it reminded me of riding my Paso Fino horse, Buster; he too has a short wheelbase and makes fast, precise movements. Of course, mentioning Buster reminds me of one of my favorite things to do before leaving or returning to the barn on the RL—chasing Buster around the field. He enjoyed the game as much as I did.

Buster and I have always enjoyed chasing each other around: me on a motorcycle, he on his hooves. That's one of the reasons I had to start using a motorcycle; otherwise, in a game of chase, Buster always won. I needed to even the odds.

One evening in early 2000, Buster and I had just finished off our second bottle of champagne. We were celebrating what looked like a home-run hit at the National Association of Television Program Executives convention earlier that month. A company wanted to do distribution on my children's story, "Buster's Farm"—only later did we find out they didn't want to produce the animation, but we didn't know that yet.

We thought we were on the road to fame and fortune.

Anyway, Buster and I were chasing each other around when he became confused and thought we were playing soccer, which we used to do. As I chased Buster, suddenly he turned and headed straight for me!

Buster has always gotten a little rowdy when he drinks champagne—Buster is now reformed and no longer drinks alcohol. As he headed toward me, I hit the brakes. I stopped. He stopped.

I started yelling, "No."

Buster snorted.

I turned around to put the bike up; he charged, head down. I gassed it.

All of a sudden, I felt the impact. Buster had head-butted the back end of the RL, pushing the rear wheel off the ground while the bike was on a sideways pivot. The rear wheel landed solidly on the ground. My hand slipped off the clutch. The bike stopped.

Thanks to the physics fact that a body in motion continues in motion, I flew off the bike as though I had been ejected.

Buster realized he had gone too far, much like the time when he had opened all of the paddocks at the stables when he lived in New Orleans.

On that infamous adventure, Buster took all of the horses at the barn for a walk up a main boulevard in New Orleans—it made the news. Buster ran back into his stall. I put the RL in its stall, thus ending our little game.

I learned an important lesson that day: I learned not to play games on a motorcycle with a horse that can't remember the rules, or one that can no longer hold his alcohol.

I owned the Suzuki RL longer than I've owned any bike—nearly fourteen years. I sold it after it sat in Russ's garage for three years. "A waste of fun," I thought. I put it on eBay.

Within a day, a man bought it and drove into Birmingham from Tennessee to pick up the bike, all in the same day. When he saw it, he was elated to find an RL that was usable and cheap. He asked me if there were any tricks to starting it.

"Yes," I told him. "If it doesn't start every time within two kicks, then it's dead—throw it away."

He laughed and asked me, "I guess the carb will need cleaning at least?"

I poured a little pre-mix gas in the tank, opened the petcock, shook the bike, flipped the choke on, kicked the bike over, and in one kick—after three years of sitting—rode off and did one final wheelie, albeit a very small one.

When I pulled back in, the man was standing there smiling. I handed him the bike and said, "I wasn't kidding. Enjoy it."

I miss the RL and Tantela Ranch. Rarely do I miss one without thoughts of the other. If I ever moved back, Tantela wouldn't be the same without the Suzuki RL. They went together, "like carrots and peas," to quote Forrest Gump. Yes, I quote him a lot. I feel as though Forrest Gump is one of this era's great philosophers.

There were many lessons garnered during my time with the RL. Of all the lessons, I think the one that stands out most vividly is this: I really haven't learned a thing concerning my major stumbling blocks in life. The kind of stumbling blocks that when you approach them again, you're supposed to remember what you learned before. I'm a slow learner.

For me and motorcycles? I learned zip. I still did wheelies to the point of crashing. I still hurt from crashing.

Me and beautiful women? I learned zip. I may as well just give them my money and save myself the pain. Between the two, I instantly possess a single-digit IQ.

What I did discover was that Suzuki RL 250s are indestructible—which in reality, due to their rarity, obviously isn't true. I realized more fully that trials bikes are a kick in the butt, especially if they have challenging terrain.

You know my main takeaway from my time with the RL? I recognized that getting what you want, albeit belated, is always a good thing. I found out that the women I have cyclical relationships with are great to hang out with, albeit belated.

I confirmed that having a date who is half your age for any birthday above forty is an absolute triumph.

Once again, as usual, I learned how much enjoyment motorcycles have provided, and continue to provide me. The RL 250 reminded me that adrenaline rushes completely overpower fear and sensibility. I came to terms with the fact that I like motorcycles, women, a good party, and adrenaline rushes.

I finally admitted that my mind is no safe haven for sanity nor sensibility. And for the protection that has been provided to me, I find the continuous need to say, Thank you, God. It sure has been fun!



2000 HARLEY-DAVIDSON 883 SPORTSTER

Tuesday, October 19, 1999: There I was, months before the new millennium. I had completed my six termite inspections, which took five hours, reaping a net return of over six hundred dollars. I had finished a great Vietnamese lunch. I was miserable.

I felt completely exhausted by business. My mind was muddled by the sugarplum fairy dreams of the wealth and success surely coming my way from a few creative ventures that were gaining attention. I was sure that the ten thousand dollars it had cost me to rent a booth for two days at the upcoming Television Producers Association Convention in January 2000 would return a reward of riches. At least that was my sense of peace for a possible escape from my miserable job—that paid extremely well, especially considering I only worked Tuesday through Thursdays, most weeks.

As I made my way home, the traffic message board proclaimed the Greater New Orleans Bridge over the Mississippi River was backed up. "Expect an hour delay," it warned. I had no desire to sit in a snarled mess for an hour, so I took the next exit and decided to pass time looking at Harleys.

After the experience I had with the chopper, I really had no interest in owning a Harley; but I had no patience for traffic, and besides, there was free coffee.

When I walked into the dealership, the first thing that caught my eye was an orange Sportster jammed in the front display window—this was before the Harley mega-shops were the mandatory *de rigueur* of design. The sun gleamed off the Sportster's chrome pipes; the spoked wheels sparkled as I moved past. I got some coffee and looked around a while, unimpressed with the mammoth touring bikes.

I truly had no inclination to tour the country on a motorcycle—not after the trip to

Florida through Alabama in 1976, no sir. Besides, I'm five-foot-six tall and weigh one hundred and thirty pounds. I had already experienced the shame of dropping my BMW R100 touring bike and having to get help to pick it up. And anyway, who wants to bother traveling the country on a bike? What kind of fun is that?

I kept meandering through the shop, sipping coffee. Like a bug to a light, I kept finding myself staring at the orange Sportster Low Rider.

A salesman approached. "Sit on it, it looks like it would fit you perfect," he suggested.

"Nah, I'm not a fan of Harleys," I said.

"Why not?" he asked. "You must have owned an AMF model."

I looked at him and grinned, took a sip of coffee, and nodded my head. "I understand, I had one that I finally gave away."

He patted the solo seat on the Sportster and added, "This ain't no AMF; those days are gone. AMF in Harley slang today means, adios M-F'er."

I laughed, handed him my coffee, and swung a leg over the saddle. Damned if the bike didn't fit me just right. I ran my hands along the lines of the legendary peanut tank. I started having flashbacks to fifth grade, sitting in the chair in front of the TV, wearing my helmet, and watching weekly episodes of *Then Came Bronson*. I snapped back and jumped off the bike.

We talked a bit. He said, "Think about it, I can make you a sweet deal."

"I will," I said noncommittally.

He returned to his desk. I got another cup of coffee and looked at my watch. Traffic must be clearing by now, I thought.

I also reasoned that what might help boost my deflated entrepreneurial spirit was a new toy. To me, money alone has never been a sufficient reward for labor. No. I need toys.

More specifically, I need two-wheeled machinery to make it worth my time and effort.

And what the heck, who knew what disasters lay ahead at the stroke of midnight on January 1, 2000. We had already been warned the banking systems were going to crash. Bank crashes didn't concern me; I didn't have any money in a bank, or anywhere else for that matter.

I returned to the Sportster and stood admiring its low-slung lines. The salesman came up and handed me his card. He tapped the card. "The figure on the back is what you can take it home for. Nothing down. We do the financing. Sign three papers and take it home. Think about it."

He walked off. I looked at the number, looked at the bike, looked back at the salesman. There, I thought about it.

"How long would it take to get it ready?" I called out.

"It is ready," he said. "Are you?"

"Yep," I said, grinning from ear to ear.

I did have one question for him. I was confused as to why I had to pay over three hundred dollars extra for spoked wheels. After he explained about the new cast wheels, and that spokes were an option, I realized that I had been riding motorcycles so long that spoke wheels had gone from the only option to a luxury option.

Within the hour, I had bought a new helmet, signed the papers, and put on my work crawl suit. It was a crisp October afternoon. I didn't have a jacket. I headed home.

By the time I got to the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway, I was impressed with the bike. It was as far as I had ever ridden on a Harley without it breaking down. I had trepidations about getting onto the causeway—a twenty-six-mile-long bridge with no shoulder. It was also getting cold. I headed onto the bridge.

Driving across the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway gives you time to think; it's a straight twenty-six-mile run. For several miles in the middle of the bridge, you can't see land. I was enjoying the mellow sounds of the V-twin. I thought about how, thankfully, I don't suffer from buyer's remorse. I also realized that I had no idea how I was going to get my truck home the next day.

When you're impulsive—or as I like to think of it, possess the ability to make choices quickly—you don't think about the little details. You see the big picture, like, Give me the bike now.

I made it across the lake. I was cold. I took I-12 to the exit that put me on the country roads that made up the last leg of my seventy-five-mile journey. I finally pulled into my driveway. I had made it home on a Harley! A monumental day.

I was shivering and my teeth were chattering. I parked the bike, went inside, and poured myself some anti-freeze. I went back out to take in the view. The setting sun cast a warm, mellow glow over the orange paint and chrome; the engine ticked rhythmically as it cooled. I was happy.

I appreciated the machine, finished my anti-freeze, and pushed the bike inside my house and parked it in front of an Art Deco, burlled maple armoire. I stood back and admired the bike under the dimmed spotlights. The bike and the piece of furniture looked timeless together. To me, motorcycles are "ridable art."

At sunrise the next morning, I took off on my sixty-mile loop through the countryside. The route runs through a section of Louisiana known as "Little Kentucky" for the abundance of horse farms in the area. Very pretty country; the winter ryegrass was a brilliant, emerald green.

For weeks, I enjoyed early morning, midday, and afternoon rides on my Sportster.

I was amazed at how smooth, even with the low suspension, the bike rode. Suspension versus a hardtail suddenly made sense. I also liked the belt drive over a chain.

The 883 turned out to be another "stand-up bike." One that could fulfill my desire to stand on the pegs, hold the handgrips gently, and blow through the air with nothing in my sight except flying above the earth. I loved to lean forward and watch the front spokes sparkle as the spool hub turned... yes, I know, another mental clip and scene embedded in my brain from *Easy Rider*. Not to mention, I paid extra for those glittering spokes.

Motorcycling in a standing position has, as closely as possible, fulfilled a recurring dream of mine. Since I've had a conscious memory, I've had dreams where I just spread my arms slightly, float weightlessly a foot or more off the ground, and begin effortlessly flying through the air.

When I saw the sculpture installment, "The Chase," in front of the Barber Vintage Motorsports Museum, it instantly became my favorite artwork. The piece embodies both my dream and fondness for a standing-while-riding position. But again, I wander off-topic.

Spring arrived in South Louisiana. Covington, a small town ten miles up the road, began their annual spring-and-summer Friday night block parties. The town would close off three blocks and let cool cars and motorcycles park.

Restaurants and bars would have counters built out from their front windows to serve passing people. The art and antique stores would stay open, and outdoor bands played to happy, like-minded people who enjoyed the finer things in life—like cool transportation, great food, art, music, and alcohol.

As I sat on my bike, parked next to a couple of huge Harleys, one of the bike

owners walked up. He was your stereotypical "biker trash," with scraggly hair, tattoos, a wife-beater shirt, and he weighed nearly as much as his motorcycle. His wife was bigger, and uglier. Dare I say, he was a pig on a Hog.

He looked over at me and said, "That's real gentleman-like, you watching your wife's little bike while she's gone. Where's your bike?" he asked.

The bunch of them laughed and clanked their beer bottles together. The pig asked, "Why didn't you buy a real Harley?"

Feeling brave and empowered—mainly because the police officer I had been talking to was in earshot and had moved within five feet of our conversation—I retorted, "'Cause I didn't need to buy the biggest, most powerful Harley on the planet; they're reserved for fat-assed fools with pig-ass wives to haul around."

He stepped in closer. Thank God, so did the cop.

The officer and I decided it was time for me to go home. I strapped on my helmet and started my bike. I was pleased to find the 883's acceleration was faster than a four-hundred-pound biker.

I went home and decided next month I would ride the Buell to the party. But you haven't heard about the Buell yet.

I enjoyed the Sportster until October 2001. After 9/11, I began to panic. My business suffered its first noticeable hit in income—ever. I feared things might become worse. I started selling off my financed toys at fire-sale prices. It didn't take a week to find someone to buy the Sportster. The man that called told me they would pick it up the next day.

When I answered the knock on my door, I was stunned to see a petite, beautiful woman in her late thirties; unfortunately, the man accompanying her was her husband. He was buying the bike for her.

As she sat on the machine, she asked me, "You must be going through a divorce to be selling the bike so cheap. Was this your wife's bike?"

Chagrined and silent, I just shook my head. "No," was all I said.

I exchanged the title and paperwork for cash and bid them adieu.

As they drove away, I thought how utterly ridiculous the Harley culture had become. Sportsters were once ridden by kings of rock and roll. Sportsters had torn up flat tracks, dragstrips, and road-racing tracks—ridden by men with nerves of steel and courage.

Now, they're relegated by some to a sort of second-class citizenship within the motorcycle world, being thought of, and labeled, as a girl's bike. I'm just glad that Harley engineers and designers haven't taken away the sculpted peanut tank, and haven't started running the frame rails in a downward-swooping fashion like a girl's bicycle. I've never labeled any motorcycle as a girl's bike nor a man's bike. I learned to overlook ignorant comments and comparisons like that when I was eleven—on the Honda P50.

I find that twisting a throttle and blowing effortlessly through the air—no matter what the machine—can only be called fun. The Sportster is an enjoyable ride—for a man or a woman. Kind of like the Slinky toy ad used to say, "Slinky, a Slinky, a toy for girls and boys"—just like a Sportster.



Would You Ride A Trike?

As we watched the parade of bikes at Thunder Beach, someone asked me if I would ever ride a trike. I didn't have to think about it.

"Absolutely," I said, "and with a big smile on my face."

I have often pondered the day that I will not, or cannot, ride a two-wheeled motorcycle. I would have no trouble replacing two wheels with three. I can't say I would go the Can-Am route; I prefer one wheel out front on a machine—to say the least, I would have to buy a used Harley trike.

I imagine riding a trike to be as fulfilling as riding a conventional motorcycle. In essence, I see it as the same experience. Let's face it: you're blowing in the wind and not enclosed within a vehicle, then you're blown' in the wind.

When you are sitting on a machine you feel the world that you're passing through in its full glory. You catch the intoxicating fragrance of jasmine wafting on the breeze, feel the temperature fluctuations as you drop inside the shade of the tree canopies. You hear the deep exhaust and every mile vibrates through your body

And so far, I haven't found anything else as good as that—whether it has two wheels or three.

Epilogue

The first thirty years of my motorcycling journey was filled with excitement, fun, and insanity. I matured-supposedly-as I aged; but my time aboard these motorcycles offer lifelong lessons and memories.

The motorcycles I have owned were as varied as the adventures they took me on. It was a road full of serendipitous encounters.

In those years I had my first motorcycle, girlfriend, and first kiss. And following, at a staccato tempo, I raced through three marriages, nearly thirty motorcycles, and who knows how much money and brain cells-but I had fun.

I lived fully. And I do not regret the consequences; for remember, I went in fully aware that "fun ain't free."The smile on my face tells me it was worth the cost.

So, come back for another ride, and explore the next book of my motorcycling adventures-see you in "The Second Thirty Years."



