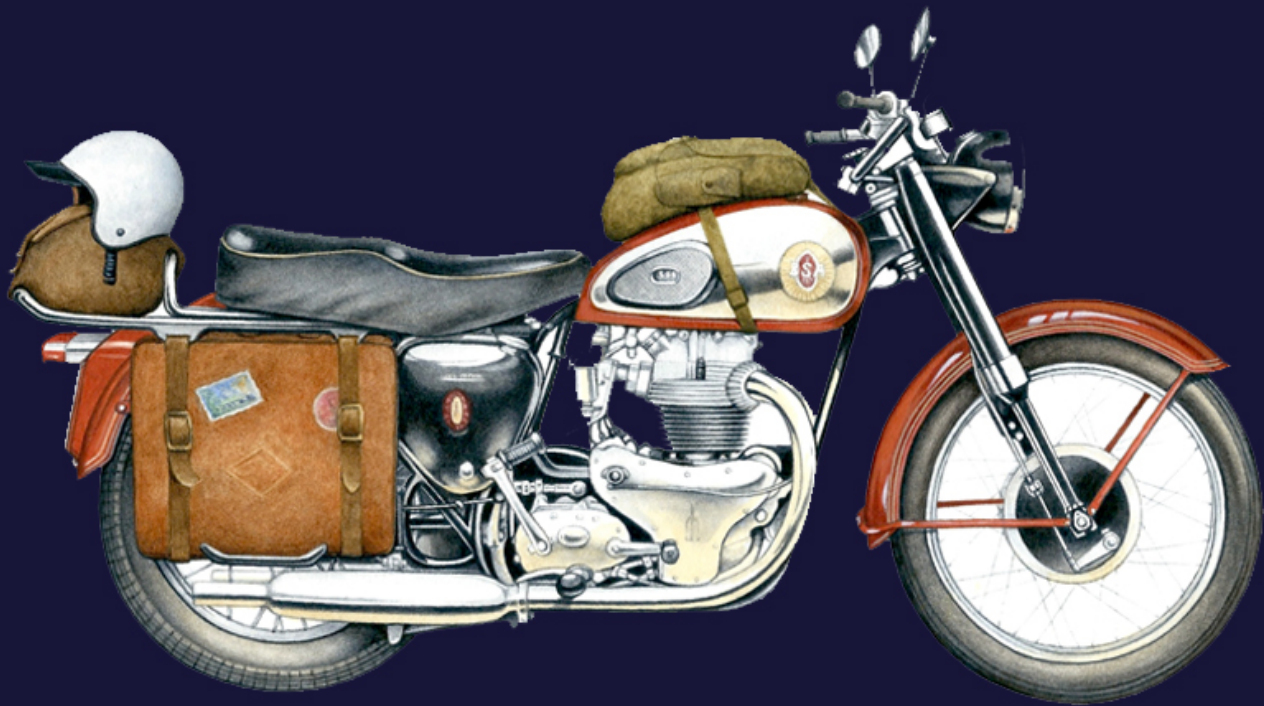


# RIDING SOPHIA

LOVE, LOSS, MOTORCYCLES, PARTICLE  
ACCELERATORS, DRUGS, MURDER,  
AND QUITE A BIT OF SEX



BILL BABCOCK



## RIDING SOPHIA

by

Bill Babcock

## SEVEN BOXES AND A BUCKET

I was working in my laboratory when Lenny Rosenthal barged in and changed my life.

I didn't want to look up at Lenny. I was at a critical step in building a delicate microammeter I intended to install inside the dome of my Van de Graaff Electrostatic Generator. But when Lenny burst through the door, I had to stop working. If Lenny approached my bench things would break. He has two superpowers. One is superhuman clumsiness.

"Monroe. Monroe. Hey, Monroe."

I rolled my chair back from the bench. "Lenny, I'm busy. What do you want?"

"Harold's brother is selling his motorcycle," said Lenny, reaching toward the fragile microammeter like a toddler stretching for a pan on a stove.

I slapped his hand away and said, "What motorcycle, and why would I care?"

“Girls! You kidding man? Girls. He crashed it last year and broke his fucking leg. When he tried to fix it, the dumbass kept taking it apart. It’s in a bunch of boxes, so no one’s gonna buy it. You could buy it. You can put it together. We’d have a motorcycle. Girls love guys with motorcycles. Get the bike and we’ll get chicks.”

I followed that logic train with ease—standard Lenny.

He saw the complex vacuum guide tube I was building for my linear accelerator and reached for it. I pushed him away from the bench and pointed to an old dining room chair in a corner. “If you want to talk to me, *sit*, and don’t touch anything.

“I don’t know how to ride a motorcycle, and girls love good-looking guys with motorcycles, not just any guys with motorcycles. Besides, I’m saving my money for a better oscilloscope, and my dad and mom would never let me buy a motorcycle.”

“What! Are you fucking kidding? Your dad would get a boner if you told him you wanted a motorcycle. At least, he’d think you weren’t queer.”

Actually, it was too late for that. My father gave up his concerns about my sexual preferences after finding my stash of *Playboy* magazines, with the best pages stuck together like wrinkled, multi-ply cardboard. He confronted me in my bedroom with his huge hand curled around my stash of titty magazines. His reaction was typical: “What are you thinking, knucklehead? Hiding these in your desk drawer! What happens when your mom looks in there? She’ll hit the fricken roof. I’m not going to take these, but jeez, Monroe, you’re a smart guy. Find a better place to hide them.” He tossed them on my bed.

Even if my father no longer feared I might be queer, he certainly would like to see me do something manly. At sixteen, I was six foot two and weighed 260 pounds—most of which was

fat. I was fat enough that I had to put baby powder on the inside of my thighs or I'd get a rash from my legs rubbing together.

I don't play sports of any kind. I don't know if it would have made a difference, but no one realized I couldn't see more than ten feet until I was thirteen, when a visit to the optometrist gifted me with a set of Coke-bottle glasses.

Before the glasses, any baseball thrown or hit my way didn't appear until it was about ten feet away, zooming at high speed out of the blurred world. If I was lucky, I could slap it away to keep from being injured—catching it was out of the question. And in the outfield, where I was usually relegated, there were all kinds of interesting things in the grass. I would be studying them intently when the ball bounced by and everyone started screaming at me. An agonizingly long period of fat-boy running, followed by fumbling to recover the slippery ball and a weak throw aimed at no particular person always doomed me to the bench. Then from the bench to home, and home to my bedroom and my laboratory, where I felt comfortable and in charge.

My lab is in the attic of the Sanborne household, one of two rooms crowded under the eaves. I cleaned out the junk and claimed one room as my bedroom and the other as a laboratory. The scent of mouse, mold, and mothballs lingered. The rooms were reachable only by a pull-down ladder. I couldn't claim all the space—there were still boxes of seasonal clothes, folding cots, unused furniture, and Christmas stuff. But half of each room had a sharply slanted ceiling. I stacked the junk along the low wall of my lab, which made the room appear long and skinny, and maintained the mothball smell. My bed was under the slant on the bedroom side. It took a few nocturnal near-concussions to train me to roll to the edge before sitting up.

My workbench was two doors with the hardware stripped off, supported by two-by-four legs at each end and a kneehole desk in the middle. On one end stood a three-foot-tall, homemade Van De Graaff electrostatic generator, topped with a fourteen-inch aluminum globe. I spun the globe myself on a wood lathe at school over hand-formed wooden bucks. It took me eight tries and two nasty lacerations on my hands to get it right.

The rest of the bench was covered with variable AC/DC power supplies, audio- and RF-signal generators, a converted surplus radar scope, and parts cabinets filled with electronic components. I hung salvaged fluorescent fixtures from the ceiling. They buzzed constantly, so I had an old, five-tube radio tuned to WMEX to drown the buzz with rock'n'roll and Arnie Woo-Woo Ginsburg.

The walls were covered with conversions and handy formulas. Whenever I looked up a formula or a conversion constant I wrote it on the wall in grease pencil. I was running out of space. I should have written smaller, but I wanted to be able to see them from anywhere at the bench.

I made up for the isolation of my room and my lab by conducting an active sex life—in my head. I'd imagine myself in an ornate hotel room in the heart of Paris, having wild, passionate sex with a beautiful brunette, who had startling gray-blue eyes, and those tiny wrinkles that French women get around their lips even when they're young. I've heard they're caused by speaking French, but Lenny says it's blowjobs. He's convinced that French women spend a lot of time with a dick in their mouth.

*Playboy* was not just for erotic stimulation, it also inspired my room decor: trashbin-salvage bachelor pad. The bachelor pad fantasy was supposed to make girls interested in me. It wasn't entirely clear how they would ever see the room in the first place.

My lab wasn't some fantasy, though. There were lots of things in there that could kill you. Since the age of eleven, I'd worked various jobs to buy my equipment. I liked working. It shoved me into the bigger world and led me to think there should be more to my life than my lab and my room.

That was why, as soon as Lenny mentioned the motorcycle, my scalp tightened. I dreamed of motorcycles. I had four copies of *Cycle* magazine and two of Bob Braverman's *Cycle Guide* that I paged through so much the bindings had split. I pictured myself riding majestically along the New England coast, always with some jazzy song playing—something like Brubeck's *Take Five*. I wanted a motorcycle a lot more than I wanted a better oscilloscope. The Tektronix 518D scope I had my eye on at Gordon Scott's used electronics and appliance repair store was 125 bucks. I thought I could get Gordon down to a hundred. But it wasn't a motorcycle. It wasn't going to set me free.

I couldn't let Lenny know how much I wanted that motorcycle, because Lenny—being Lenny—would go uncontrollably bugfuck and drive me insane. Lenny's other superpower is being a master manipulator of male humans. He can't even talk to females unless they're relatives, but if he doesn't lose focus and let his mouth run, he can make guys do stuff. I was present when he'd gotten two bullies, who were preparing to pants him, to beat the crap out of each other. I didn't want Lenny's powers focused on me.

Still, I let Lenny talk me into going over to Harold's house to look at the motorcycle. If nothing else, it'd be fun to watch the hand gestures. Howie Barth called it Lenny's Jewish Hula.

"Fuck, Monroe, don't be such a pussy. Geez, there's no harm in taking a fucking look." Shoulder shrug plus arms spread, palms up. "Great project for you, huh?" Right hand transition to OK sign. "You need to get out of the house anyway." Hand flick. "You'd learn a lot, and you'll have a fantastic motorcycle." Points to head, transition to ta-da reveal gesture. "This is the best way." Finger pointed up. "The only way." Finger closes into fist. "You'll know every nut and bolt." Hands spreading to close-in magic reveal. "Chances like this don't come every day, pal." Upraised finger. "We don't go now, someone takes your bike—sure as shit." One-handed grabbing motion. "Pennies on the dollar, buddy." Grabbing hand opens, tossing imaginary pennies. "We have to go." Thumb over the shoulder. "Now."

Mesmerizing.

We went on our bicycles, since Harold lived deep in the unexplored regions of Brighton, several miles from my house. There could be tough kids on the way—speed was called for. We stayed off the sidewalks and away from the parks. Lenny wildly spun the pedals on his slow-but-cool Schwinn Stingray. The low gearing propelled him at a dangerously exposed jogging speed. Any kid with good sneakers could run him down and pull him from the metalflake-blue banana seat. I scouted ahead on the faster-but-sadly-lame girl's bike I'd inherited from a female cousin. My dad and I welded a piece of waterpipe across the skirt swoop and painted the bike rattlecan-red with a white stripe. Now it looked like a girl's bike with a waterpipe welded onto it.

For the first half of the expedition, we were safe in Brookline. Certainly the shady streets of fancy, single-family houses posed no threat. Neither did the seedier streets of old, two-story



wooden duplexes like the one my family lived in, nor the four-story brick apartments full of ancient retirees and immigrant families. People in Brookline, even the kids, kept to themselves. People in Allston and Brighton called Brookline Jewville, since a lot of our neighbors were Jewish. For me, that was just great—Jewish kids rarely beat you up without reason. Even Jewish jocks are more likely to insult you or make fun of you than to punch you or shove your books out of your hands. The tough kids didn't come to Jewville. It wasn't like there were border guards. It just wasn't their turf.

We entered Indian Country when we crossed Beacon Street. I went on full alert, searching ahead for packs of kids to avoid. We rode as far from the parks as we could and mostly stuck to the commercial streets, with little delis, sub shops, the new Leaning Tower of Pizza restaurant, second-hand joints, a greasy radiator repair company. There were a lot more people on the streets. Lots of tough kids, and they liked to shove outsiders around. Especially big, fat, slow, chicken guys like me. Our high-speed bicycle strategy worked, we reached Harold's apartment without incident.

Turned out Harold's brother is named Bernie, and Bernie looked at us with total scorn. He turned to his brother and said, "What the fuck, Harold? Fucking kids on bicycles?"

Lenny leaned on his apehanger handlebars and said, "What, you expecting a limo?"

"You guys got money to buy my motorcycle? I'm not goin' down to the basement unless you guys show some cash. If you're wasting my time I'm going to kick your asses."

Bernie didn't look like much of an ass kicker, but you never know with these skinny, bug-eyed, older kids. But Lenny was unconcerned—he was deep into master manipulator mode. "You

got lots of people interested? We got money. We're not stupid enough to flash it. We rode from Brookline to look at your bike. You don't want to sell it, say so."

Bernie still looked grumpy, but he led us down the stinky, sticky concrete back stairs to the basement. He pulled a key ring from his pocket, unlocked a storage cage, swung back the wooden gate and pulled a string to turn on a bare bulb. In the middle of the oil-stained concrete floor were seven forlorn grocery boxes crammed with random parts, a bare frame, and one galvanized bucket stuffed with bolts, nuts, and small parts. Everything smelled strongly of mouse piss.

"You need mechanical skills to work on a powerful bike like this," Bernie huffed. "It's precision equipment."

If Bernie was skeptical of my mechanical skills, he was not alone. Looking at those boxes I felt skeptical myself. This was a long, long way from being a motorcycle.

"What are you asking for it?" I said.

"Well, I paid three-fifty."

"Yeah, I know, but it wasn't crashed, and it wasn't in seven boxes and a bucket. Is it all there? How do I know you haven't lost stuff?"

"I numbered every piece with masking tape and wrote the numbers in this parts manual. It's all there," he said.

Lenny pulled me aside and whispered, "How much do you want to pay for this thing?"

I said, "I'm not sure I want to buy it. I got fifty with me, and forty-two more at home. It's going to need parts and stuff to fix it."

We turned back from our conference just as Bernie said, "Okay, two hundred."

My dad told me once that the first guy to name a price loses the negotiation. You always go towards the other guy's number. But when Bernie said, "Two hundred," the deal seemed to slide off into impossibility. I felt a mixture of loss and relief.

Lenny sneered, "You're out of your fricken mind, we'll give you twenty-five bucks for it. Nobody is going to buy it, you're lucky we want to haul it off."

My first thought was: *when did this become "we?"* My second was, judging from his red face, Bernie was going to carry out his threat and kick our asses right here in the basement. Instead, he said something stunning. "I won't go lower than a hundred."

Lenny gave a nasty laugh and said, "Thirty-five."

My stomach was in knots, and I almost blurted out "Fifty," but Bernie beat me to it.

Lenny turned to me and said, "What do you think?"

I gave him a blank look.

Lenny said, "You got a title?"

"Sure," Bernie said, "but it costs seven dollars to transfer it."

Lenny said, "Okay, forty-five. And we'll pay for the title transfer."

Without opening my mouth, I was forty-five bucks poorer, and the owner of a 650cc 1958 BSA A10 Golden Flash in seven boxes and a bucket.

I'd been Lennied.

We went upstairs to the apartment. Bernie got the title and registration from his room. Harold gave us glasses of lime Kool-Aid, apparently a traditional libation for deal closing. Lenny examined the title, looking knowledgeable and worldly. I knew he was faking it.

“Sometimes people sell cars they owe money on. Some sucker buys the car, but the title can’t be transferred. This one is okay, it’s clear,” he pronounced.

I peeled forty-five bucks from my folded wad of bills, leaving a lonely fiver. Bernie signed and I gave him his money.

“You guys have three days to get the stuff moved. My sister got divorced. They sold the house, but she got the furniture and it’s all going in the cage. That’s why I had to sell my bike. Three days, and then I push it out the door.”

As we rode back to my house with the title signed over to me, Lenny battered me with questions. But I was stunned silent. I had the machine of my dreams, an escape from my geeky life. I wouldn’t spend my nights working in my lab in my underwear, cursing when drops of hot solder splattered on my fat, white, naked thighs. Instead I’d be cruising downtown Boston, looking cool, on a powerful beast of a motorcycle that I rode with absolute mastery.

But first, I’d have to convince my mom.

## SOFT SHOULDERS

“You did *what*? How *dare* you buy a motorcycle without asking us?” my Dad roared.

Dad is a big guy. On the rare occasions that he gets mad, it’s quite intimidating.

I looked down at the floor and said, “There wasn’t time to ask. Lenny and I went just to look at it, but the guy was desperate to sell the bike. I remembered what you told me about the first guy to name a price loses the negotiation, and he did. We got him from two hundred down to forty-five bucks, and I just couldn’t walk away from it. I figured it would be a good project for us to do together.”

I saw my dad puff up a little when I mentioned his advice about negotiation. I didn’t bother to tell him how I had frozen at the stick, and that Lenny had done the brilliant negotiation. The dad-and-son project was pure manipulation, recommended by Lenny.

Dad frowned and said, “Well, that’s a good price—but I’m not going to have time to help you until way after Christmas. Things are crazy at work, and your mom and I have a list of projects we haven’t been able to tackle in the house. If you’re looking for a project to do with me, you could help me paint the bathrooms.”

In other words, Dad had blessed my motorcycle project, but I was on my own, and my punishment was painting bathrooms.

My mom had been leaning against the kitchen table with a grimace on her face. She doesn't like Dad to yell. But now she stepped away from the table and shook her finger at my dad. "Albert! You're a big damned help!"

She spun on me with her eyes narrowed, and pointed at my chest. "Monroe, you are not going to have a motorcycle. Our friends from high school, June and Bob Coviello, had a motorcycle and they were killed when they hit a soft shoulder and crashed into a tree. Just a few years ago, a boy who was working for your dad hit a soft shoulder on his motorcycle and was paralyzed. They're dangerous, and the only people who have them are hoodlums."

I wondered if June, Bob, and the kid who worked for Dad had been hoodlums. I thought if something called a soft shoulder pulled them all to their doom, then there wasn't much of a problem—avoid soft shoulders. Remarkably, I didn't say any of that.

Dad pulled Mom aside and talked softly with her for a while, and she calmed down a bit. I'm certain he told her that I would never get the thing back into one piece, which played right into my mother's strange perception of me.

My mom has always had this notion that I'm incapable of completing anything. When I wanted to take piano lessons, she said, "You won't stick with it. We paid for lessons for Angel for three years, and then she quit." So at age eight, I bought a guitar with my Christmas and birthday money, and spent two hours a day, every day for the next eight years, teaching myself to play.

Part of the reason for the misunderstanding, other than the mysterious permanence of family myths, was that I rarely saw my mom. I spent most of my time in my room and lab, and she avoided both as if the plague was loose there. Admittedly, this was not outside the realm of possibility. After an unpleasant incident with anesthetized mice, and one hefty shock from an electrostatic generator, I never saw her on the third floor. Pretty handy. It dramatically reduced the potential for embarrassment when I was getting busy with a Playmate of the Month.

“Well, I don’t know how you plan to get that motorcycle here,” my dad said. “I don’t have time to help you, and we’re not putting greasy parts in Rocinante anyway. You’re on your own with this thing, buddy.”

Yeah, my dad’s 1963 Pontiac Catalina is named Rocinante. Not as bad a name as mine: Monroe Sanborne. Pretty fucked name. Or my older sister’s: Angel. From the time she was about zero years old, she’s been working hard to demonstrate this was a stupendously bad choice.

The lack of transport was bad news. It meant that Lenny and I would have to haul the parts through Brighton ourselves. And we only had three days to do it. That might kill my whole dream of a motorcycle. And I’d be out forty-five bucks.

## BERSERKER

“No sweat, Monroe, we’ll haul the parts in my Radio Flyer wagon. I still have the thing. My dad put wooden sides on it to haul the trash cans to the curb. Three trips max. We can do it. No one’s going to screw with us if we just keep our heads down and walk fast.”

I had my doubts, but we put some bits of rope and twine in Lenny’s little red wagon, and started hiking to Harold’s place. It was a warm day, and I started sweating and breathing hard even before we crossed Beacon Street. I didn’t think it was just the warm sun. The streets were pretty empty, and we didn’t see any other guys. We were about a mile from Harold’s house when Lenny said, “If we cut through the park, we’ll save three blocks.”

That sounded insane to me, but my feet hurt, my hand had a blister from the wagon handle, and I needed to pee. Saving three blocks overcame my rational concern.

We entered the park and looked around as we walked. No one in sight. I breathed a sigh of relief and plodded on across the baseball diamond. We were almost to the middle of the park when I saw dark forms rising to their feet from the steps in the deep shade of the clubhouse. I felt a fresh flutter of fear that deepened as they approached. If we turned around, they’d run after us.



No way we'd outrun them. They angled towards us and intercepted our path a few hundred feet from our planned exit. I recognized the leader, a tough jock named Sean Kelly.

"Hey Fat Boy, where you going with your little wagon?"

Lenny piped up. "We bought some motorcycle parts, we're just going to get them."

Kelly looked at Lenny. "I wasn't talking to you, Jewboy." He nodded at one of his pack.

The kid punched Lenny in the stomach. Lenny collapsed on the ground and curled up like an armadillo.

Kelly shoved me hard in the shoulder. "Take off your glasses and put up your dukes, Fatty."

"I don't want any trouble, we just want to get our stuff."

"Take off your glasses or I'll slap them off your face." He slapped me hard across the mouth. My glasses flew off and landed in the dirt.

I stared at him. My cheeks stung. I kept my hands down, praying he'd just leave me alone.

"C'mon, you fat pig, I heard you've been picking on little kids. Let's see you pick on me."

Ridiculous. Sean Kelly had no idea who I was. I've never picked on anyone in my life. Sean Kelly was justifying kicking the crap out of me. He slapped me again. It stung, but I thought, *This isn't bad. I can live with this.*

But then he swung his fist into my nose and upper lip. I realized I wasn't going to get out of this confrontation with a little slapping around. He was going to hurt me. I didn't feel immediate pain. Just a burning feeling centered way back in my throat, and a stab in my upper

lip as my teeth cut into it. I tasted blood. I was still scared—scared that he'd keep hitting me in the face. But behind the fear I was screaming, insane, piss-your-pants berserk. I wanted to obliterate his grinning, stupid face. But I knew if I swung at him he'd dance around me and beat me to a pulp. I put my hands up to my face, watching Sean through my fingers.

He grinned at his buddies and pulled back his fist. I lurched at him. I grabbed him by the neck with both hands and head-butted him. He hit me in the ear with his fist and I head-butted him again, with all the fatboy strength I could muster. It hurt like a motherfucker, but it was a good pain. A beautiful pain.

Keeping one hand behind his head as he staggered back, I pounded his face again and again with the flat of my fist. I felt a surge of joy when his legs buckled and he dropped to his knees on the ground.

I threw myself onto him, knocking him onto his back. He reached up for my throat, but I stuffed his arms under my knees and beat his face with both hands until his friends piled onto me and yanked me off onto the dirt. I screamed, bit, kicked and punched at everyone I could see, made animal noises and cried with years of bottled rage. Sean's friends scrambled to their feet and got clear of me.

My face was wet with saliva and snot, and Sean's was covered in blood. At some point in my beserker rage I had pissed my pants without knowing it.

I felt like I was wading through molasses as I rolled to my feet. One of Sean's buddies seemed to come at me in slow motion. He was yelling something, but I couldn't hear him through the buzzing. As he came at me I made a fist. I was still squatting low, so I started a swing behind my back near the ground and, as I stood, I rotated my whole body into the wild haymaker

with all the power I could muster. Anyone could have ducked it. Anyone could have seen it coming. But my attacker was swinging a wild punch at my head. I scrunched my eyes closed, expecting his punch to hit me, but my fist connected with his face and blew him off his feet. I opened my eyes just in time to see the dust fly up around him as he hit the ground.

He didn't get up. He didn't twitch.

I picked up my glasses and saw that one lens was cracked. Sean Kelly propped himself up with one arm. "Mother ... fucker," he said, as he prodded his splattered nose. His little band stood quietly, stunned by the fall of their leader. And the other guy was laid out in the dirt. Out cold.

I began sobbing. The bastard hit me for no reason. My glasses were busted. I wet my goddamn pants. My forehead hurt. My knuckles hurt. My nose hurt. My lip was bleeding. The damn piss was going to chap my legs.

Lenny put his arm around my shoulder. "Come on, Monroe, let's go home."

"No!" I screamed in a weird, warbling wail as I wrenched away from him. "I'm getting my fucking bike!"

So we left. The little gang looked at me like I was dangerously, unpredictably insane. No one tried to stop us.

### GOING BACKWARDS

It took three trips to move the BSA to my basement. We got quite a lot in the first two trips, but the third load was a doozy, since we didn't want to take a fourth trip. We avoided the park, and stuck to main streets, and the kids we saw gave us a wide berth. I saw them talking and pointing. Word spread fast in Indian Country. I kept my head down and avoided eye contact, careful not to push my rep as a berserker. I knew if I did, someone would step up and beat the crap out of me, and I'd be back to being chased whenever I wandered out of Brookline. But for now, they left us alone. No one wanted to have their face turned into something resembling a veal shank by the lunatic fat guy. They also didn't care to be cold-cocked like Sean Kelly's younger brother, David.

I set up my shop in a back corner of the basement. I covered the dirt floor with cardboard from a refrigerator box, installed an old table raised on cinderblocks to bench height, wired a couple of bare bulbs to the main cellar light, and I was in business.

I got out the parts book that Bernie had supplied, and inventoried every part. He'd lied, of course. But most of the missing parts weren't crucial, and the ones that were didn't seem likely

to be expensive. As I inventoried the parts, I washed them in kerosene and then oiled them lightly. I wrapped the bearings and bigger parts in waxed paper, and put them into boxes categorized by subassembly. I sorted the bolts and nuts by diameter and thread pattern: coarse and fine. I wondered why Bernie had thought it was necessary to take apart the transmission. He hadn't taken apart the crankcase, but he hadn't protected it from dirt or junk falling into it. I looked inside with a flashlight and saw dirt and some little nuts and screws. I shook the parts out of it, and made a note that I'd probably have to take it apart and clean it. I now had eleven boxes, fifteen envelopes with sorted bolts and nuts, and a plan to take apart the crankcase. I was going backwards fast.

## KRAZY KRUST KAKES

My family was growing comfortable with the notion of me fumbling with motorcycle parts before abandoning the project, but I knew this wasn't Lenny's plan. Lenny wanted a completed motorcycle. Ideally it would be his, but Lenny has an aversion to low-level employment. He was more like management. He came down to the basement to see how long it was going to take me to build my motorcycle for him.

"How's it going, Monroe? Any idea how long this is going to take? When do you think we can start riding this thing? Geez, there's more boxes than when you started, when are you going to start putting it together?"

"It's going to take time, Lenny. I cleaned up the parts, and I used the parts book to sort them into the stuff that goes together."

"I know you'll stick with this, buddy, you always do, but I don't want to be thirty when I take my first ride."

Usually I ignore Lenny's prodding, but he hit a nerve and pissed me off. "Hey, why don't you just buy your own motorcycle? You're always bragging about your trust fund. Go buy a new one. Your family is rich."

"Yeah, right. Like I get to ever touch that money. That's my college fund. Every penny that comes my way goes into it. I might as well be poor."

"You could work at your dad's bakery again. He let you keep that money."

"Nah, I hate that place. All I did was clean up. Those greasy crumbs get on your skin. Gross. But they won't let me work there anyway. The bakers told my dad they were going to quit if I stayed. I had a few accidents and they got their tits in a wringer. Bunch of dirtbags. But hey, there's a guy works for my dad that has a motorcycle. He even has a race bike. Maybe he could help out, or get you going. He's probably got manuals or something. Let's go talk to him. Guy's name is Silvio. It's almost noon. He'll be on break if we go now. He can help. Let's go."

Once Lenny gets the bit in his mouth, it's pointless to resist. I was tired of just looking at motorcycle parts, anyway. So we got on our bicycles and rode to Rosenthal Fine Foods, to talk to Silvio Anatole, the motorcycle guy.

Silvio looked the part of a motorcycle guy—even in a baker's cap and apron. Immaculate white T-shirt with a pack of Marlboros tucked in a rolled-up sleeve. Lots of show muscle on his 5'6" frame. We saw Silvio's road bike in the parking lot, a 1962 Harley Davidson XLCH, a Sportster. Which had little in common with my BSA, other than the number of wheels.

Silvio was in the break room eating a sausage sub. I could tell from the crispy roll and the melted mozzarella that it came from the Nautilus Sub Shop. They stick the subs in a pizza oven once they're put together. My mouth watered.

“Hey, it’s the human fucking disaster area. You better not be here to work. We tol’ your pop that if you’re here, we ain’t. I ain’t fixing more of your fuck-ups. Not one.”

“No, we’re here to see you. This is my buddy Monroe. He’s putting a motorcycle back together and we need a manual or something. I know you’re a motorcycle guy and thought you could probably tell him how to do it.”

“Yeah, right. I’m gonna sit here, eat my sandwich and tell him everything he needs to know. What kind of bike you got, kid?”

“It’s a BSA A10, the guy who owned it crashed it and took it apart. I’m trying to put it back together.”

“Ah, a box job. Lemme see, how many of those I ever seen come back to life? Oh yeah, fucking *none*.”

My disappointed look made Silvio laugh, and he said, “Hey, there’s always a first time, and I got exactly what you need. I bought this book couple a months ago to work on my scrambles bike, but I got a half-assed sponsor who works on it, so I don’t need it. I’ll sell it for half price.”

“Hey, that’s great. I appreciate it.”

“Sure kid. I’ll give it to dickhead’s dad tomorrow. I paid six bucks, gimme three for it and we’re good. I gotta get back to it.”

Silvio balled up the sub wrapper and tossed it nonchalantly across the room, nailing the pivoting cover of the wastebasket and spinning it so the wrapper dropped inside. I couldn’t do that in a million years. He walked out of the break room, pulling his cigarettes from his T-shirt sleeve.



Lenny gave me a high-five, and we went back outside. On the way, I stopped to look at Silvio's immaculate Harley. I looked over the engine and admired the glossy black paint. The seat was a wide leather saddle that looked comfortable. I reached out to press the leather.

"Hey, fuckface. You touch my Harley and I break your fuckin' arm!" Silvio called from the doorway. He'd stepped outside for a cigarette.

He walked over towards us with his fists balled and his face contorted in anger. "Did you touch my motorcycle? Hey, fuckface, I'm talkin' to you, did you touch it? Never touch a guy's motorcycle, you got that, you fat fuck? Especially mine. Now get the fuck outta here and take fucking dickhead with you."

When we got home, I gave Lenny the three bucks. "Do you think he's still going to sell me the book? He was mad."

"He'll do it. He's always mad. I thought he was going to kill me more than once. The other bakers are scared of him. They say he's all mobbed up. I say if he's mob, then how come he bakes Krazy Krust Kakes all day? Not impressed. Not impressed."

"Yeah? For a guy who isn't impressed, you sure hotfooted it to your bike."

So that's how I became acquainted with the 1953 edition of *Modern Motorcycle Mechanics*, a hefty book that I devoured in a day and a night. And then reread sections over and over. The information was so dense that I found new stuff every time. The book's author, J.B. Nicholson, had a gift for explaining how to do complicated things with minimal tools, which was a good thing, as far as I was concerned.

So now I had a little knowledge, but everything looked complex. The exploded diagram of the transmission made my stomach hurt. I identified each part, but getting them all to fit,

mesh, turn, and work looked like a job for a watchmaker. I needed some advice and I needed some parts, and the Yellow Pages told me I might find both in Albion.

## SIR GUNK OF ALBION

I took a bus to Somerville. There was a BSA dealer there called Albion Cycles, where I hoped I'd be able to buy the missing parts and get some free advice and a shop manual. I opened the door and fell in love. A motorcycle shop to measure all others against. The place was empty—I probably needed to ring a bell on the counter or something, but I wanted to look around anyway. The showroom was dimly lit, but two rows of new and used British motorcycles gleamed in the faint light. Somehow they looked bigger and badder that way.

I filled my lungs with a perfume of naugahyde, oil, gasoline, brake fluid, new tires, enamel, and burnt brake linings. At the back of the room was a long parts counter with a grimy glass front protecting accessories, racing parts, gloves, scarves, and wallets with long chains. On the right side of the room were racks of leather jackets and pants, and heavy black canvas touring outfits, reeking with some sticky, waxy waterproofing compound. There were several stacks of motorcycle magazines and catalogs on the counter, each a foot high. I'd be happy to just take a stack, sit on the cold, concrete floor, and spend the afternoon reading. But I was here for serious business.

Behind the counter, a door opened and a guy with a tight-clipped flattop stepped through. He was about a foot shorter than me, but he looked strong, like his muscles started someplace deep inside him. His loose, dark blue Albion Cycles shirt didn't do much to mask a weightlifter's upper body. The name embroidered above his pocket was PAUL.

"Hi, can I speak to a mechanic about a bike I'm putting together?"

Paul gestured at a sign above the door leading to the shop and said, "No customers allowed in the shop. Those guys are paid flat rate. They don't talk to anyone who isn't paying them."

I nodded, as if I knew what *flat rate* meant.

"Well, maybe you can help. I bought a BSA 650 that was crashed and it's been taken apart..."

"Whoa," he said. "I might know the bike you mean. You bought it from that guy Bernie, right?"

I said, "Yeah, that's it. A 1958 BSA A10."

"Oh, man, yeah, I know that bike. He tried to sell it back to us for parts, but there's no telling what shape those parts are in. You bought a lot of trouble, kid. That guy wasn't taking care of that bike when it was together. He's an idiot. He crashed because he seized the engine. My guess is he ran it out of oil or overheated it."

I didn't know that Bernie had seized the bike as he hadn't volunteered that information, but now I understood why he'd taken the bike apart.

"What do the pistons look like?" the parts guy asked me.

“I’m not sure. I noticed that they felt a little rough when I washed them, but they’re the first pistons I’ve ever seen.”

From reading *Modern Motorcycle Mechanics* I knew what *seized* meant—the engine or transmission had locked up because a bearing had gone bad, or the pistons had overheated and melted onto the cylinder bores—but I had no idea what that looked like.

“What do I have to do if they’re seized?”

Paul leaned on the counter. “Well, you might need new pistons and rings. If you do, of course you’ll need to bore the cylinders. You should use all new gaskets, and certainly you need a new head gasket. People try to reuse them, and that can lead to trouble. There’s a possibility that the crank was damaged, since that moron Bernie probably ran the thing out of oil. If that’s so, then the crank needs to be ground and fitted for new rod bearings.”

“So, what’s the worst case—if it needs all that, what would it cost?”

“Assuming you do the labor yourself except for boring the cylinder and grinding the crank, you might get away with one-fifty.”

I felt cold all over and my stomach churned. “That’s three times more than I paid for the bike!”

“Now you know why it was so cheap. You did good on the price, though. If nothing else, you can probably sell off the parts. I might’ve gone that high—he was asking a hundred fifty when I talked to him, and I didn’t feel like dickering. In fact, if you want to get rid of it, I’ll give you your fifty bucks back.”

This made me feel a little better. At least I had an out. But I didn’t want the money, I wanted a bike. I looked around the shop. It was full of beautiful bikes I could never afford. Some

of them were more than a thousand bucks. I turned to the counter guy and said, “Any chance of getting a job here? Could I talk to the owner?”

“I’m the owner, and that depends on what you can do.” From the look on his face, I could tell he didn’t think that would be much.

“I’m a hard worker, and I can learn to do anything. I know a lot about electronics and electricity. I don’t give up easy. I’m methodical.” That was about all I could think of.

“You got a job now?”

“I work at a drugstore lunch counter as a short-order cook. I come in at six every morning to clean up the store and stock the shelves with anything that’s come in the day before. Then I prep the lunch counter and cook breakfast and early lunch. I finish at noon. I can be here by one.”

“What do you know about motorcycles? I sure don’t need a cook. What does being a short order cook qualify you for?”

Paul looked away from me as a new customer came in the shop. The guy was looking over the bikes. It looked like he was just browsing, but he had Paul’s attention. Paul turned away from me and walked along the counter.

“Hey, have you ever done that?” I said. “Keep all the orders going at once, wash dishes, take orders, cook everything just right, collect the money, clear away the dishes quick to keep the seat turns going? Make the customers happy, and deal with complaints and the wise guys? I learned to do it in a week. At the end of my second week, the drugstore owner said I was the best cook he’s ever had. I never did that before, either. You can ask him.”

“As far as motorcycles go, I’ve inventoried all the parts on the bike I bought, washed them in kerosene and numbered them all with the codes from the parts book. I found the parts that are missing. Here’s my list, with the part numbers. Oh, and I read *Modern Motorcycle Mechanics*, by J.B. Nicholson. And I’m working through it again, taking notes on the stuff I think is important for building my bike.”

I could tell by the look on his face that I’d made an impression. I shut up and let him stew.

“Hmmm, that’s probably more than most of the bozos I have working in the back have read in their whole lives. Okay, look, I gotta talk to this guy. You know what a gunk is? It’s the guy who cleans bikes and parts for the mechanics in the back. When they need an engine pulled or a dirty job done, you do it. You get minimum wage, plus a tip from the mechanics at the end of the week. The more you do for them, the bigger your tip is. If you learn enough, when someone leaves, you might be in line for their job.”

Paul walked around the counter and made a beeline for the new prospective customer.

“Do I need tools? I don’t have many, and *Modern Motorcycle Mechanics* said I’d need Whitworth wenchers and sockets. I don’t have any of those,” I said to his retreating back.

He turned and said, “Nah, mostly you’ll be cleaning parts and bikes. If you need tools for a job a mechanic wants you to do, they’ll let you use theirs. Just be sure you wipe everything clean afterwards, and put things back where they were.”

“Hang out here, I’ll get you your parts and introduce you to the guys. You’re in luck; the last gunk got canned a few weeks ago. The guys are tired of cleaning their own stuff. By the way, I’m Paul, but you can call me Boss or Your Highness. One simple rule—the job is open because I

caught the last gunk stealing spark plugs for his bike. Steal anything—a screw, a washer, a gasket—I’ll beat the living shit out of you and then fire you. That applies to everything—you want to take a stripped bolt, you ask for it first. Got that?”

“Sure.”

And that’s how I became the gunk of Albion Cycles.



## COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Silvio lived well for a baker. Too well. Besides his Harley CH, he had a 1963 Triumph TT special that he raced at half-mile flat tracks and TT races. He had a succession of women, none of whom stuck around more than a few weeks. The fortunate ones realized early that his uncaring detachment was not a pose. The first or second time he brutalized them was enough. The not-so-fortunate discovered that cruelty was not something he used to control behavior; it was a reflex and a source of pleasure. Their good behavior didn't temper it.

He had an apartment to himself, and plenty of spending money. His acquaintances and the other bakers thought he was connected, and he was—at least, in a family way. His mother's brother, Uncle Gino Capano, known to everyone as Gino Capo, was a high-level bagman in Boston. He sat on his porch in suburban Arlington and received a regular flow of visitors. Numbers runners, bookies, and pimps bringing the bucks in; bosses, politicians and cops taking bucks out. Sort of like a fat banker, only he smoked Parodi cigars instead of Cubans, and sipped sambuca and amaretto instead of scotch.

But Uncle Gino didn't like Silvio—Uncle Gino wasn't interested in taking Silvio under his wing. When Silvio was ten, Gino said to Silvio's mother, "Andrea, why is your kid such a fucking weasel? Who's bringing this kid up?"

His uncle's assessment had never changed.

So none of Silvio's money came from mob business. Silvio sold dope to hippies. There had been a sudden shift in the marijuana business, from musicians and blacks to relatively affluent, white hippies and college professors. And Silvio stumbled into a position to take advantage. He did a few classes at junior college, mostly so he could boff college chicks. Some of the kids in the class took in his gangster look and assumed he could sell them dope. The first time he was asked, he just said no. The second time, he thought it might be something worth pursuing. The third time, he said yes, and found some dope to resell. Once the market found him, he located sources and started to retail. The margin was okay, but he could smell money further up the chain. He could see the guys he dealt with were small-time.

With minor effort, and some vicious beatings judiciously applied, he found his way higher. He discovered that no one in the marijuana business was protected. Everyone up the distribution chain to Mexico was freelance. The heroin side had hard guys, but marijuana was run by lightweights with no backup.

He found the direct importer that covered most of New England, a skinny, acne-scarred half-Mexican with the unlikely name of Franklin Harris. Silvio followed him around until he discovered where Franklin kept his bulk stash—a rented storage unit in an old warehouse in New Bedford. He caught up with Franklin at the crappy little house he rented in New Bedford and backed him into the kitchen by pointing a .22-caliber Colt Woodsman at his forehead.

“Sit the fuck down in that chair, Franklin, and put your hands behind your back.”

“Hey look, you wanna rob me, my wallet’s in my back pocket, it’s all I got. Take it and leave me alone.”

“Shut the fuck up, or I shoot you in the knee, just for fun.”

Silvio had prepared a butterfly loop made of window sash cord. One of his favorite toys for playing with reluctant women. He slipped it over Franklin’s wrists and cinched it until Franklin gasped in pain. He took a cord from his pocket and tied the dope dealer’s hips down tight to the chair. Then he took a long end of the improvised handcuff knot and cinched Franklin’s wrists to the top of the ladder-back chair, locking Franklin’s shoulders and causing him to scream in pain.

“Shut up, you faggot! I ain’t even done anything yet.” Silvio whipped him across the face with his pistol, breaking several teeth on the left side of Franklin’s mouth.

Silvio put a wide strip of gaffer’s tape over Franklin’s mouth. Then he leaned forward and pinched the dealer’s nose shut, watching impassively as Franklin’s eyes bugged. Franklin shook his head to try to dislodge the pinching fingers, then started kicking and flopping frantically. Silvio held Franklin’s nose until he passed out. It was a game he had played with cats as a kid, and it gave him a little pang of nostalgia. He hadn’t played it often, too much chance of being caught, but he remembered how much fun it was. He remembered the warm pleasure of feeling life go out.

## ALBION BOOT CAMP

I expected the gunk job at Albion to be easy. I didn't count on four tough motorcycle mechanics delighting in busting my chops. Paul wasn't exactly a gentle mentor, either. I have to admit I was a little worthless at first. But I tried to make sure they had to show me something only once. If I had to ask again, the shitstorm was unbelievable. The first time I washed a bike, I couldn't even get the bike back onto its center stand. No matter how I yanked and pulled, I couldn't lift the damned thing. The closest I got was skidding the center stand backwards across the concrete, and twice I nearly dropped the heavy bike. I practically had to throw my body under the bike to keep it from crashing onto its side.

Randall, the nicest of the mechanics, walked over and took the handlebar from me. He stood on the extension arm of the center stand with one foot and reached down under the edge of the seat and gave a slight pull while he pressed down with his foot. The bike popped effortlessly onto the stand.

"Dumbass," he said.

When I rolled the washed bike over to Fred, the head mechanic, he said, “What the fuck am I supposed to do with this? You have to dry the bike off so water doesn’t get in when I open the covers. Take it back outside, blow it off with the air hose, then dry it with the towels. Make sure there’s no metal filings or junk on any of the towels. You scratch a customer’s tank and Paul will kick your ass to the street. And look here at the drain plugs. You didn’t clean around them, there’s dirt and oil there. When we’re puttin’ drain plugs back, it’s easy to get dirt inside the engine. You have to learn this shit fast, buddy, we don’t have time to baby you.”

So I did. I learned fast. I asked questions about anything I didn’t understand completely, even though the mechanics flipped me shit every time.

The steam-cleaning machine terrified me. Albion had an ancient steam cleaner for degreasing really messy parts. It wasn’t used much, since motorcycles don’t tend to get terribly greasy. Mostly, it sat rusting away in the corner of the wash area, waiting to explode and kill me. The first time I had to use it Paul took me through the process.

“Put a cup of detergent in this tank and mix it with water. Use the steam wand to stir the tank, don’t stick your fingers in it—nasty shit. Then fire up the injection pump and make sure the tank comes up to fifteen pounds with the steam valve closed. It’s a positive displacement pump, but the steam valve has a spring seat set around fifteen. Open the gas valve and use a long match to fire the boiler. When the pressure comes up to eighty pounds, open the steam valve, stick the wand in the detergent tank and pull the trigger to mix the detergent and warm up the water. Then open the detergent injection valve. Don’t let the main steam-tank pressure get over a hundred pounds. If it does, just turn the gas down and hold the wand trigger open until it drops back to ninety. Do your cleaning, but keep an eye on the pressure gauge. There’s a relief valve at a

hundred twenty-five pounds, you don't want to lift that. It'll go off with a fuckin' bang and fill the shop with steam. Scare the shit out of everyone. When you get the parts about half clean, turn the gas down and finish cleaning, then shut the detergent injection valve. Wash the parts with just steam and hot water, turn off the gas and wash the parts until there's just hot water coming out."

"This thing has no safety shutoff. At a hundred pounds of steam pressure, the water is going to be over three hundred degrees Fahrenheit. If that rusty boiler explodes, I'll be full of shrapnel and flash-cooked like a lobster!"

"Yeah, well, that should focus your attention—don't fuck up. The boiler isn't gonna blow, the relief valve goes at one twenty-five. But Fred will never forgive you if you pop it."

When there weren't any parts to clean or shit jobs to do, I looked for other stuff to keep me busy. I took all the incoming work orders, calculated the total flat-rate hours for each job, and asked the mechanics to tell me who preferred to work on which type of job. I prioritized the jobs, equalized the hours, distributed the work, and showed the plan to Fred. He grunted and said, "Yeah, okay, do that."

I cleaned the incoming bikes, pulled engines, split chains, and learned to fix flats. For tune-ups, I'd pull the right spark plugs, get the right amount of oil, add any special parts, put them in a box with the work order, and push the freshly cleaned bike over to the mechanics area.

One day, I was washing bikes when I overheard Fred talking to Paul. "That kid's different. He's been here three weeks and everyone in the shop is tipping him twice what we used to tip your schmuck nephew."

Paul grinned. "Yeah, he'll probably have your job in a few months."

"It's not my job that he's doing better than I ever did," Fred said. "It's yours."

Paul said, “Bah,” and walked back to the parts department.

A few minutes later Paul came back to the wash pit. “Hey, Monroe, how’s your box job coming?”

“Pretty slowly,” I said. “My dad got me some black enamel from work, so I got the frame painted. I put on the triple crown and mounted the front forks. Your tip, about hardening grease by keeping it in the icebox and gluing all those little ball bearings to the races, worked perfectly.”

“Yeah, that’s a good trick.”

“Bernie didn’t take the fork tubes apart, so I just changed the fork oil and made sure they were straight by turning the shafts in the triple clamp and measuring at the axle, like it says in *Modern Motorcycle Mechanics*. I put on the swing arm, greased the bushings, and made sure it pivots smoothly and doesn’t have any shake. I mounted the shocks and put on the wheels. It all seems right, so I have a rolling chassis.”

“That’s pretty good progress. How about the engine and transmission?”

“I haven’t done anything with the engine except looking at the pistons. They’ve been seized, for sure. I’m going to need new pistons and rings, and a bore job. I haven’t taken the bottom end apart yet. I’m not sure I can afford to get the crank ground yet, or bore the cylinders and buy pistons and rings, so I’m waiting until I can. Besides the money, I haven’t had much time. Between here and the drugstore and my science project, I barely have time to sleep.”

“What are you making at that drugstore? Minimum wage?”

“Yeah, well, minimum wage plus tips. Though the tips aren’t much. People eating at a lunch counter think a dime is rich. Most of them don’t leave anything.”

“So look, why don’t you quit the drugstore and go full time here? I’ll give you a raise—a buck-thirty-five an hour. I can use you out front on Saturdays, too. We get busy in the parts department, and sometimes folks kick tires in the showroom and leave before I can try to sell them something. With the extra time, I can teach you a few things. Like how to use the boring bar and the Sunnen hone. The mechanics would like that—boring cylinders is a fussy job.

“I’ve got a bunch of junk cylinders you can learn on, and when you think you’re good enough, we can use your engine for practice. If you bring your transmission, you can learn to set up a gearbox. What do ya say?”

“Wow, that would be amazing, but Mr. Fernly gave me the job for the summer. He told me that high school kids always quit on him halfway through the summer, so he doesn’t like to hire them. I promised him that absolutely, no question, I’d stick it out. I can’t go back on my word.”

“Geez, kid. I’m offering you more money and a chance to get your bike further along on my dime. You want the time or not?”

“I want it, but I can’t break a promise. I’ll talk to Mr. Fernly, and see what he says.”

“Okay. I guess it’s stand-up of you not to just drop the guy when you get a better offer. I’ll go give him a call myself.”

I walked into the machine shop area and looked around. It was my favorite place in the shop—it felt sort of like my lab. The area was partly enclosed by a head-high plywood wall with Rigid Tool calendars that had skimpily dressed, big-breasted girls with adorable little grease smears on their cheeks and the tops of their boobs. They were holding big wrenches.

“Wow, what an apt name for that company,” I said to Fred.



And he said, “What the fuck are you jabbering about? Get that green Bonneville washed.”

I liked the smell of motor oil, solvent, and camphor from the preservative oil that Paul used on his precision tools. I’d already read the manuals for the boring bars and hone system, so I understood the theory. The week before, I’d adjusted the play in the boring bar, after one of the mechanics complained about the bit chattering. I think that was what made Fred consider me to be more of an asset. He said, “I tell those dickheads to read the manuals, but they read just enough to get the job done.”

Since Fred seemed to be in a good mood, I said, “You know, I think the guys are having problems with the boring bar because you’re using a hydraulic jack to hold the cylinders in place. The manual for the boring bar says not to use a hydraulic jack. Last week, when George was boring that Triumph cylinder and it moved off-center and got gouged, I think the hydraulic jack lost pressure. So now the guys really herk on it, which applies too much pressure and distorts the cylinders. I’m sure that’s why some of the bore jobs have a barrel taper lately.”

Fred found the screw jacks that came with the bar, and took away the hydraulic jack. After that, there were fewer problems with the boring bars.

I had some free time during lunch, so I went through the procedure for aligning the boring bar to a cylinder. I calculated how much I’d need to bore the cylinder, just familiarizing myself with the operation.

Paul came back out from his office. “You’re off the hook with Fernly. Nice old guy. Said he won’t hold you back if you have a better offer. He’s got someone that can move right into

your slot. The afternoon guy has been asking for more hours. So you start tomorrow at eight.

Bring your engine. You can bring the transmission later.”

## GET ON THE BUS, GUS

The rest of the day went by in a blur. It was looking more and more like I was really going to have a motorcycle. On the bus home, I wore a big grin. A really pretty girl—a complete stunner— sat down across from me. I realized that she thought I was smiling at her. She smiled back, which made me blush and look down at the floor. When I peeked back at her, she was reading a book, so I looked her over. She was absolutely, totally awesome. She had light brown skin that looked smooth and flawless. I like blondes; it's the pictures of blondes in *Playboy* and *Penthouse* that wind up as sperm cardboard, but my preference was challenged by the dark hair cascading over her shoulders. It looked heavy and rich. She had startling, big, blue-gray eyes, like my French fantasy girl. In fact she looked a lot like my French fantasy girl, only there were no little wrinkles around her lips. I knew what Lenny would say about that.

I was sure she was wearing makeup, but it didn't show. Most of the girls on the bus looked like their faces were drawn on. Her blue angora sweater was nicely filled, and she wore a tight, short skirt that showed off her smooth, muscular thighs. Fortunately I was carrying a handful of manuals that I could slide into my lap to cover a quickly growing hard-on.

She looked up and caught me staring, and gave me an amused and knowing smile. My blush turned red-hot. I felt my scalp tighten and my ears burn, so I looked down again. When she stood up in the crowded bus, she stood right in front of my knees, with her incredible ass vividly outlined by the thin skirt.

I could see the hems of her panties. Her scent was spicy. Light perfume mingled with Ivory soap, and the unmistakable scent of Jergens lotion on her hands. I was well aware of the erotic potential of Jergens. Combined with the warmth of her body, her perfectly innocent scent overloaded my senses. I had a fizzy feeling behind my eyes that seemed like I might be close to fainting. The bus lurched and she stepped on my foot. She looked down at me, smiled, and mouthed *Sorry*.

*Sorry?* She could have kneed me in the groin and I would have liked it. Loved it. I watched her walk down the aisle of the bus—an astonishing walk. A bit of a sway to her hips—not suggestive, just entrancing. When she reached the exit stairs, the man in front of her stepped back, and she arched her back a little, leaning away from the man with her upper body. When she did that, her bottom leapt into high relief, part of an astonishingly beautiful curve that started at the nape of her neck and ended at her feet. The fizzy sound reached a crescendo. I thought, *Here's where I stroke out at seventeen.*

I memorized the stop, checked my Timex and watched her walk away from the bus. If I caught the same bus every day, there was a chance I'd see her again. Maybe in ten years or so, I'd work up the nerve to say hello. In the meantime, I knew I'd have a date with her that night, in the quiet of my room. Just me, my highly active imagination, and lots of Jergens.

## THE PATH TO PROFIT

Franklin regained consciousness, writhing in agony. Silvio was pushing a penknife under Franklin's index fingernail. Franklin screamed into the tape and bucked in the chair. Silvio smiled, and then concentrated on removing the fingernail and splitting the back of Franklin's index finger open to the second knuckle. He considered taking the skin off. But it seemed too fussy.

He grabbed Franklin's hair, pulled his head back and yanked off the tape. "Every name. Every phone number. Every contact. Suppliers. Carriers. Dealers. You start talking *now*."

"You're just going to fucking kill me! How do I know you won't kill me?"

"Why would I kill you? I don't kill people. I just want your business. Tell me now or tell me when you don't have fingers left. Up to you. All the same to me."

"Let me go and I'll give you my book! Please! I promise I'll give you everything. I'll take you right to it! Please, please. I don't care about the business! Just please let me go."

"Ah, there's a book. That's nice. Where is it?"

"Let me go, man! Let me go and I'll show you."

“You’ll show me anyway.” Silvio applied a new piece of tape. He reached out and pinched Franklin’s nose shut.

## EROTIC PLEASURES OF CARBURETOR POLISHING

Everything in the Sanborne family had a name. Usually a lousy one, though I had to admit that Dad's 1963 Pontiac Catalina, Rocinante, was well named. I just didn't want to be Sancho Panza. Our previous car, a station wagon, had been called Emily. My bicycle was Caesar. I certainly hadn't chosen such a stupid name. My dad named it after a horse in a book. He'd say something like, "How's Caesar holding up?" I often struggled to understand what he meant. I never used the name myself.

I knew that if I didn't come up with a name for my motorcycle, Dad would pester me with suggestions. Or worse, he'd name it himself. In my imagination, the girl on the bus was named Sophia. So Sophia it was, and the name worked wonderfully.

I was sitting at the kitchen table eating Wheaties when Dad said, "How are things were going with Sophia?"

"Oh, I polished her carbs yesterday, and today I'm going to bore her cylinders."

I was looking forward to the day I could say, “I rode Sophia all day yesterday, and now I’m going to go lubricate her.” Sometimes I found myself sporting wood that had nothing to do with my passion for motorcycles.

In the week since I’d gone full-time at the shop, I had practiced enough on junk cylinders to bore my BSA’s barrels and fit a set of used first-oversize pistons that Paul had sold me for cheap. After boring the cylinder to the exact size of the piston, I used the Sunnen hone and some freshly squared stones to grind the clearance to the minimum spec, within a half thousandth of an inch. No taper that I could measure, top to bottom. Paul was impressed. He probably wouldn’t have been so impressed if he’d known how much time it had taken.

I gapped the rings and set the fully prepped cylinder assembly aside. I disassembled the crankcase and found that the crankshaft was fine. That was a relief, since grinding the crank was outside machine-shop work that would have cost money. Paul talked me into replacing the plain bearings in the rods with new ones.

“Look, it’s a couple of bucks. Sure, your bearings mike out okay, but those little dark flecks are grit embedded in the bearing metal. There’s a chance of scoring your crankshaft—why do that? Make it as perfect as you can on the inside.”

So, new rod bearings it was. Paul had three sets of standard size, so he had me lightly oil all of them and then test them with Plastigauge, to find the set that gave the best fit. My engine was going to be sweet.

Paul said, “Fuck me running, how did I get three sets of standard rod bearings? You know how often you sell standard bearings? Fucking never. You sell rod bearings after someone grinds a crank—mostly ten under. Jesus, this pisses me off.”



Bad for Paul, good for me. And at least *I* bought a set.

I cleaned out the sludge trap inside the crank, and then balanced the crank using static balancing weights. Fortunately, it was heavy on the web side, so I drilled out the balancing holes until the balance was perfect. Paul said our shop was probably the only one on the East Coast that had a crank-balancing setup. I didn't point out that J.B. Nicholson had said that any good machine shop could do dynamic balancing.

The main bearings were perfect, and the cases were true to the centerline of the crank bearings. I lapped the case joints, on a thick sheet of glass with valve grinding compound smeared on it, until they were even. Then I shimmed the crank to eliminate lateral movement. I reassembled the engine, by the book. Sitting on the engine box, the finished engine looked amazing. It looked huge and powerful. Purposeful.

Bernie had scraped up the side covers when he dumped the bike. I filed out the scrapes and then sanded the file marks, using progressively finer grades of sandpaper. I spent an evening down in the cellar, polishing them out. I had three grades of polish in wax sticks, and a mop to go with each one. A mop is a bunch of muslin-fabric discs that are sewn together. I attached one to Dad's old bench grinder, and loaded the edge with polish by pressing the polish stick against it. Then I pressed the part against the mop and applied enough pressure to generate some heat, but not enough to slow the motor. The polish looked dark and scuzzy at first, but after a while the part would start to take on a shine.

The grinder motor was weak, but whenever the mop caught the edge of the cover—WHAM!—it would grab on and yank the piece right out of my hands. Sometimes the cover whipped around the polishing mop and whacked me on the knuckles before flying into the

pegboard at the back of the bench. I did all the parts with coarse polish first, then changed mops and did medium, working my way through to fine.

After three brutal hours I emerged from the cellar with aluminum covers so shiny they looked like chrome, a remarkable collection of cuts and bruises on my fingers and arms, and a black face from the polishing rouge spinning off the mop face. The waxy lint off the wheel gave me an itchy, fuzzy feeling from head to toe. I turned the water in the bathtub black, leaving a ring I was too tired to clean up, even though I knew Mom would hit the ceiling when she saw it.

I climbed the steep stairs to my bedroom and propped the covers along the top of my desk where the light from my radio could shine on them. I slid under the covers. Once asleep, I dreamt of freedom, long rides, wind in my hair, and Sophia—both of them.

## DISCOVERY PROCESS

With a jolt, Franklin came to, screaming behind the tape.

Silvio finished splitting open the middle finger. He pulled the tape away. “Where’s the book?”

“Oh please, please,” Franklin sobbed. “Let me go and I’ll tell you.”

“Wrong answer.”

Franklin’s moan was muffled by the tape. The pinching fingers returned. A desperate struggle for air. Blackness. And then, the terrible pain.

Silvio was surprised and irritated that it took two more rounds to get the hiding place of Franklin’s book—in his bedroom, in a hot-air register. As expected, there was a crappy .38 revolver underneath it.

When he returned to the kitchen, he held the revolver under the nose of the sobbing Franklin. “Is this what you wanted, you little fuck? Did you think this would save you? You gonna fuckin’ shoot me, Franklin?”

He used the revolver to smash out a few of Franklin's remaining teeth. He sat at the kitchen table and went through the contacts, asking Franklin for details about every contact and every meeting procedure. Franklin sat with his head drooping, speaking almost unintelligibly through his broken teeth and bloody mouth. Whenever Silvio couldn't understand something Franklin said, or when Franklin didn't answer immediately, he'd peel back more skin with the knife blade. Then he went through the entire book again, asking the same questions, looking for inconsistencies. No reason to rush. He had all night.

Once he was satisfied that Franklin had told him everything, Silvio said, "Well, that's it. That's the conclusion of our little business transaction. Thank you for your cooperation."

He carefully wiped the blood and saliva from Franklin's face, and put fresh tape on his mouth. He gently raised Franklin's hand by the butterfly knot, picked up his knife and started stripping the rest of his fingers. Franklin's eyes bugged and his muffled screams went on and on. The fun part began.

Silvio sunk Franklin's mutilated corpse in the marsh outside New Bedford. Before he tipped the body into the muddy water he sliced open the chest cavity, punctured both lungs and stuffed his chest full of bricks. He trussed up the chest cavity with nylon rope before opening the abdominal cavity and slicing through the stomach. No point in letting the dumbshit bloat and rise to the surface. He moved Franklin's stash from New Bedford to a U-Store-It in Arlington. On the way out of New Bedford, he paused briefly to distribute two gallons of gasoline and set Franklin's house on fire. He abandoned his stolen car in Cleveland Circle and took a bus back to his apartment. With a straight line to Mexico and Franklin's stash, the business got a lot more profitable.



## THE GEOCENTRIC UNIVERSE

The next morning, I got up early to clean the tub before Mom saw it, and found it had already been done. The bathroom looked freshly scrubbed. I went to the kitchen to make some breakfast and was surprised to find Angel sitting at the kitchen table with a pile of her textbooks. Angel has an apartment off Commonwealth Ave near Boston University where she goes to school. She's rarely at our house.

People underestimate Angel because she looks, dresses, and acts like a bad girl. Lenny once called her *the slut next door*. I actually slapped him. He apologized, of course, especially when I said I was going to tell her what he'd said. Lenny can't even make intelligible noises in Angel's presence. She scares the crap out of him, and he worships her boobs. He calls them *the perfect creamy orbs*, or just *the orbs*. I have to admit, for a sister, she has a heck of a good set of bazoobas.

Truth is, I did tell Angel what Lenny said, and she thought it was hilarious.

I guess the biggest reason everyone underestimates her is because she doesn't behave the way anyone wants her to. Dad says she was seven the first time she gave him the finger. I learned

early that you shouldn't argue with her. Angel has always had the discipline to do any and all required research on anything that interests her. She considered school to be a contest of wills between her and the teachers. And she refused to lose, or even to settle for a tie. Not if all it took was a little extra studying.

Her teachers learned to give her an A for everything. She doesn't know how to compromise, she goes all in, every time. I think it's her own brand of geek obsession, but I'm not stupid enough to say that to her. I like my nuts where they are.

"So, dude," she said, "were you rolling in grease before you took a bath, or what?"

"I didn't know you were here. To what do we owe this pleasure?"

"Fumigation. The cockroaches were taking over, so the landlord is having the whole apartment tented and fumigated. I'm here for two days."

"Wow, you must have run out of alternatives. No boyfriends to bunk with?"

"None that I want to spend two days with. What's it to you, brother?"

"Oh, hey, I'm glad to see you. I was just thinking how nice it must be to be away on your own. Seems like it would be hard to come back. Do you want an omelet? What are you studying?"

"Sure, you can feed me. Greek classics. Hey, don't make that face, it's cool stuff. These were smart people. Cradle of civilization. The source of all the science you love so much."

I got out the pressed-steel frying pan I like to use for omelets. Mom scrubs it clean every time I get it seasoned, but it's a good pan. After warming it with a little olive oil, I found a piece of leftover ham that I chopped fine and tossed in. There were some mushrooms in the crisper.

They were a little wrinkled, but they'd liven up if I sautéed them, so I chopped those, tossed them in and raised the flame a little.

My sis got up from the table, pushed past me and peered in the pan. "How 'bout some veggies in that. We got any broccoli or spinach?"

I checked the crisper and found some sad, slightly yellow broccoli. I showed it to Angel.

"Good enough, toss some in," she said.

"I've been doing a new style of omelet I call an omtatta. Wanna try it? And how can you say that about the Greeks? They got everything wrong. The earth as the center of the universe, and the heavens as celestial spheres that spin around a flat earth. A sun the size of a chariot? They thought the universe was only a few thousand miles across. They couldn't have been more wrong. That's not science—that's just dreaming shit up."

"Sure, I'll try the omtatta. What's an omtatta? No, don't tell me, you tedious fuck. The Greeks observed nature and came up with reasonable ideas. If you drop a ball it doesn't curve as it falls. The Greeks didn't understand momentum, so they decided the earth must be stationary. But they could see the stars, planets and sun moving, so the celestial spheres must move. And the Greeks knew the earth is a sphere. I don't know why elementary schools teach kids that Columbus discovered the world is a sphere. What ignorant bullshit!"

I beat six eggs in a bowl and poured them onto the sautéed ham, mushrooms and broccoli. Then I used a spatula to scramble the eggs and push the cooked edges into the center. I kept tilting the pan to get the liquid to the edges and scrambled the edges back to the center until it was all somewhat firm and fluffed up. "Huh. So where did all this flat-earth stuff come from?"



“The flat-earth nonsense comes from Christian zealots, who tortured and burned the last Greek academics at the beginning of the Dark Ages. They said the planets moved because angels pushed them across the sky, and that was that. Science was heresy, just like idiot fundamentalist Christians believe today. The Greeks didn’t necessarily believe in celestial spheres, they considered it a thought exercise. A way to describe the movements they observed. It’s hard to explain retrograde motion of the planets without a lot of fiddling. But that doesn’t mean they believed their mechanism was real, any more than Schrödinger believed his cat was dead in a box. So have a little respect, brother. Or at least, know what you’re talking about before you dismiss stuff.”

I pulled the pan off the flame, spread the scrambled mixture evenly across the pan and grated some parmesan over it. Then I cooked it a little more to firm it together and gave it a flip, like a flapjack. I left it for few more seconds on the heat before cutting it in half and slipping one half onto a plate for Angel and the other on a plate for me. “Wow, and you called *me* tedious. But I know better than to argue with you. I guess seeing you here, voluntarily hanging out at the old homestead, just put me off my game.”

“Great omtatta, dude. You’re gonna make some lucky girl a wonderful wife.”

“Man, that’s gratitude. The Playboy Advisor says that cooking is one of the skills that any well-rounded man should learn. They say making your woman a post-coital omelet is a sexy thing to do.”

“How about showing some of my boyfriends how to do that? They seem to think the most important thing after sex is sleeping, farting loudly or getting a beer. So you’re taking guidance from titty magazines now, huh?”

“Playboy is more than just a titty magazine. There are some really good articles.”

“Yeah, I remember you reading a lot of those articles in the bathroom, buddy. Must have been some damned good writing.”

## MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES

Silvio had a volume problem. The supply end of the business was fine—the transactions were anonymous. At least, his suppliers believed they were. But Franklin's distribution channel wasn't large. Six guys to cover all of New England? What the fuck had the guy been thinking? Two of them were guys Silvio had roughed up on his way up the chain. When he called them to say he was the guy in charge, they bugged out. He went by each of their apartments when they didn't return his second call and found them gone.

He called Franklin's biggest dealer and arranged to meet him. The guy had some bullshit business in Harvard Square. Renting apartments. The office was in an old, brick commercial building with a tiled entrance hall that smelled like a urinal. Third-floor walkup. A pebbled glass door that said LINDSAY ACCOMMODATIONS in big, stick-on letters. Silvio opened the door to the one-room office to find Peter Lindsay sitting behind the desk, sorting through one-page listings. Lindsay was a fat guy with a hawk nose and black-rimmed glasses. He had a suit jacket over the back of his chair and was wearing a tired, blue dress shirt with a worn collar and a food-spotted tie.

He rolled his chair back from the desk. “Yeah? Can I help you? I got lots of apartments available right now.”

“I’m here about other business. Franklin sold me his deal. I’m your new supplier.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, right. I’m your new supplier.” Silvio tossed a three-ounce bag onto Lindsay’s desk. “That’s a freebie—a little goodwill to start the relationship.”

“I’m sorry, I have no idea what you are talking about. Is that some spice? Oregano, perhaps?”

“You tellin’ me you didn’t deal with Franklin Harris?”

“That name is somewhat familiar to me. Perhaps I helped him with real estate.”

Silvio was getting angry. He didn’t know how to get through to this guy. He paced back and forth in front of the desk and caught his boot on a guest chair. He kicked the chair away and leaned across the desk on both arms. Lindsay rolled a bit further back.

“Yeah, bullshit. Franklin told me you been doin’ business a long time.”

Lindsay leaned forward with an irritated frown. “Be that as it may, I don’t know what you’re talking about and I don’t know you. If you want to talk about Mr. Harris’ transactions, perhaps you should bring him to a meeting to make introductions.”

“He had to leave town—back to Mexico. That’s why he sold. You want to keep selling grass or what?”

“I have no idea who you are, or what this meeting is about. If this is some police entrapment, then it’s clumsy. I’d like you to leave.”

“You think I’m a cop? Do cops do this?” Silvio grabbed Lindsay's tie, intending to pull him forward and punch him in the mouth. But the tie was a clip-on and it came off in Silvio’s hand, which enraged him. Lindsay pulled back, startled, and started to rise to his feet. Silvio vaulted over the desk, shoved Lindsay back into his chair and punched him in the mouth.

“Do cops do this, huh? Do cops do this?” He kicked Lindsay in the nuts, grabbed him by the hair and dragged him from the chair to his knees.

“How about this, you fuck?” He kicked him in the kidneys, then in the shoulder. As Lindsay fell forward, Silvio kicked him hard in the ass.

“What about this?” He yanked the phone off the desk and threw it at Lindsay’s head. The heavy base hit the back of Lindsay’s head.

“Do cops do this?” He kicked Lindsay in the side of his head, crushing his temple inward, leaving a large, soft-looking dent. Lindsay started convulsing, and vomited.

“Fucking asshole! Think you’re clever, asshole? Fucking pussy!”

Silvio turned and left the office, locking the door behind him.

## OH SOPHIA, HONEY, IS THAT YOU?

When Sophia boarded the bus to Somerville, the bus was crowded and I was quite far from the door. I worked myself a little closer so I could look at her. She was wearing the same skirt with a different sweater. This one was ivory-colored, with some complicated knitting around the neck and shoulders, and little pearls stitched into the pattern. The random shuffling of people getting off and on propelled us closer together. She was suddenly inches away, and I was thrilled and utterly terrified. She was absorbed in a paperback book. When I dipped my head to look at the title, she looked up at me with her big, crazy blue-gray eyes. I felt like I had fallen into an elevator shaft. My brain turned to oatmeal.

“Are you a Steinbeck fan?” she asked.

Amazingly, Sophia had asked probably the only kind of question I could actually answer without just babbling. Well, she could have asked a question about physics, bacteriology, electronics, or motorcycles, but that was unlikely.

“Um, gee, I guess. Sort of. I read a couple of his books. East of Eden, Cannery Row, Tortilla Flats, the Grapes of Wrath. So, yeah, I like the way he describes places and the way he writes dialog.”

“Wow, are you a lit major or something?”

“Uh, no, I just like reading. How about you?”

“Oh, I’m not in college yet. I think I’m going to study business, not liberal arts, but I like reading, too. I’ve seen you before on this bus. You work in Somerville?”

“Yes, for Albion Cycles, the motorcycle shop. How about you?”

“I work in an insurance office. I think it’s a good place to start, since I want to learn all about business. I’m a file clerk, but I’m also learning how to do the accounting when I have free time. Whoops, this is my stop. Maybe next time I see you, we can talk about books.”

“That would be amazing, I mean wonderful. I mean, that would be really fun. My name is Monroe.”

“Very nice to meet you, Monroe.” She looked directly into my eyes for what seemed like a long time. She smiled and said, “My name is Claudia,” and she was gone.

Claudia. She’d pronounced it *Cloud-ia*. I had actually talked to Sophia—no, Claudia. Not just looked at her, or said hi, I talked to her. About books. And she wanted to talk to me again. It was practically a date.

In a daze, I rode three stops past the shop. As I walked the half-mile back, I whispered, “Cloud-ia. Her name is Cloud-ia.”

## RESTRUCTURING

Silvio sat at the kitchen table in his apartment. His cash-flow problems were compounding. The newspaper said that fat fuck Lindsay croaked. Didn't matter, the dick wasn't going to sell dope for him anyway. Still, he probably shouldn't have lost his temper. Fucker was so smug. He deserved it. The rest of the dealers were just as bad. Bunch of pussies. Even the ones he pushed around just a little, to convince them he was their new boss, had run as soon as he left. There was nothing holding them in place, so they just scattered like little rats. He knew he wasn't good at talking to the little weenies that would sell dope. He needed to recruit guys who could recruit other guys. That structure looked familiar to Silvio. Some people might think of a corporate structure, some might think of military hierarchy or a sporting team metaphor: owner, manager, coaches, team members. But to Silvio's mind, he needed a gang.

Silvio understood the structure and operation of gangs, and the reasons for each element. He'd grown up in a gang-controlled world. Though his mother was not involved in the mob, and his father disappeared when he was four, lots of his relatives were involved in the Boston Mafia.



While the structure of motorcycle gangs may appear to be simpler than that of the mob, the two operate in similar ways. There's an inner circle, general members, and outliers. There's a leader, a council, enforcers, and administrators. And there are the grunts and wannabes. For Silvio to build a group that could do what he wanted—sell dope to hippies and college kids—he didn't need complexity, he just needed willing participants who would do what he wanted and keep their mouths shut. The Warlocks had tried to recruit him, and he knew a few guys in the Emeralds, but Silvio didn't want to start as an underling, that was for saps. He wasn't looking for people to tell him what to do, and that's what being in an organized gang meant.

To keep his members quiet, he would need to have a code, and the members would have to look cool to recruit new members. He scoured a book his father had left behind about WWII bomber and fighter squadrons and their insignia. The logo of the 393 Bomber Squadron—the squadron that dropped nukes on the Japanese—is a roaring tiger with a mushroom cloud. He didn't want the cloud, but he appropriated the tiger for his logo and settled on a name: Hard Cats, Boston. He traced the logo and lettered the name in an arc across the top. And across the bottom he wrote the motto: *Scio nullum esse*, a Latin phrase that roughly translates as “I know nothing,” a reference to the code of silence that Silvio planned to instill as the foundation of his club. He took his design to an embroidery shop in downtown Boston and ordered twenty embroidered patches that would be big enough to cover the back of a jean jacket.

He was on his way.

## CHICKS DIG BIKES

“Holy shit, Monroe, the bike looks fantastic,” said Lenny. “It looks ready to go. Kick it over, start it, let’s start it up.”

“We can’t, I haven’t finished the gearbox. You might notice that there isn’t a kick-starter yet. The kick-starter turns the engine through the gearbox, the primary drive and the clutch. I still have to shim the transmission and get the shifting throw adjusted just right, put it in, and assemble the primary drive and clutch. And do the wiring, check out the carbs, set the timing, and then we can probably start it. I’ve checked out the magneto, it’s working perfectly. But I need to buy a new drive chain and both the main and countershaft sprockets. I don’t think Bernie ever lubed the chain. It stretched so badly that it hooked the sprockets.”

“What are all these gears on the side for?”

“Well, some of them turn the cam. It has to turn at one-half engine speed, since this is a four-stroke. You know what a cam is for, right?”

“Sure, I’ve heard all about them. Full race, hot cam, all that stuff. They make the bike fast. I didn’t know we had one. Does that make this a race bike?”

“As usual, you’re faking that you know something. The cam opens and closes the valves. In a four-stroke, the engine goes through two revolutions for each power stroke. There’s an intake valve a few inches from the carburetor. The intake valve opens when the piston is going down. Air rushes through the carb and picks up fuel from the jetting system, and it fills the cylinder above the piston. Then the piston starts up and the intake valve closes. The flywheel gives the piston enough energy to continue to rise, compressing the air and gas mixture.

“About when the piston gets to the top of the stroke, the spark plug fires and makes the gas and air burn, which increases the pressure a lot. The pressure pushes the piston down, creating power. About when it reaches the bottom, the exhaust valve opens. That’s just a few inches from the exhaust pipe. The burned gasses start coming out, and the piston comes up and pushes it all out. Then it starts all over again. Fred calls it *suck, squeeze, bang, blow*. Got it?”

“Sure, I knew that. But what about a full-race cam?”

“Well, there’s some power to be had at higher rpm, from opening the valves earlier than you’d think, and closing them later. Full race is just a bullshit name for a high-duration cam that takes advantage of the inertia of the gasses to make more horsepower at high rpm. It makes the engine run rough at lower rpm, when the valves are open for too long, but with a race motor no one cares about that, so you put up with the roughness to get more power.”

“So, are we gonna have a hot cam?”

“Nope. Though from what I’ve read, the cam in this bike is more radical than a car would have.”

“Monroe the mechanic. You sound like an expert. What about the tank? It’s got a dent and it’s scratched up. We should paint it. I’ll paint it! There are spray cans in our basement, from

when my dad painted our lawn furniture. They're light green, but it'll look cool. Better than this scratched-up shit."

"Actually, one of the mechanics at the shop is a good painter. He painted a couple of the bikes at the shop. He offered to paint the tank, the fenders, and the side cover. I've just got to pay for the materials and detail his truck for him a couple of times. I'm going to do a reddish orange. I'm bringing all the parts into the shop on Monday. He says it will take two weeks, and by then I should have everything else ready. It will look great."

Lenny threw a leg over the bike and sat on the frame making engine noises like he was riding it. "Cool. Hey, let's do it custom! Like those bikes in the magazines. Take off all the badges and stuff. Chop the fenders—bam, bam. Put on ape hangers. It would be way cool."

"Well, I want to do it pure stock. If we want to do some custom work later, we can do it, but it's going to be straight stock first. In fact, I'm going to put lower, narrower bars on it, the kind they use in England. We have a bunch of them at the shop. Americans don't like them. Paul said I could have a set for free. One of the mechanics is from Birmingham, and he says no one in Europe would ride a bike with the wide bars we use. He says you can't control the bike with wide bars."

"I don't know, Silvio does fine with his ape hangers on his bike. He gets girls like he's a babe magnet."

"Silvio rides a Harley, which the guys in the shop say handles so bad that ape hangers don't hurt anything. And Silvio looks like an Italian James Dean. I don't want to bust your bubble, Lenny, but I still don't buy this thing about girls and motorcycles."

“You shitting me? Look at the magazines. Chicks hanging out, waiting for bike guys to give them a ride. Chicks dig bikes. It’s obvious. Obvious.”

## TALKING DOWN HEMINGWAY

I struggled onto the bus with two cloth shopping bags full of parts to be painted. They clanked and clunked all the way to the middle of the bus, where I finally found a seat. When Claudia's stop came, I was disappointed not to see her. Moments later, a soft voice behind me said, "Can I join you?"

Claudia! She must have entered the bus by the back door. I stammered, "Sure, let me make some room," and moved my bags of parts over to the wall and between my legs, making as much room as I could. Claudia plunked down, her thigh pressed against my thigh. I froze in place, afraid to move. If she felt motion she might pull away. It felt unbelievable. Warm, and firm. The sensation was accompanied by a heady aroma of light, spicy perfume and the inevitable Jergens lotion. My deeply erotic, imaginary relationship with Claudia centered around that innocent fragrance. It caused a noticeable dip in the Jergens bottle my mom kept in the bathroom. My erection was immediate and I had no books to cover myself with. I would have picked up a bag and put it in my lap, but she might have moved away. So I leaned forward and crossed my forearms awkwardly across my lap.

From this contorted position, I looked at her book. “Hemingway! I didn’t think women liked Hemingway. He doesn’t seem to like women much. I’d think the feeling was mutual.”

Claudia smiled. “He’s a Neanderthal, but such a wonderful writer. It’s poetry—so sparse, and every word seems to be carefully placed. So—what is all this stuff?”

“It’s, um, parts from my motorcycle that need to be painted. One of the guys I work with offered to paint them.”

“You have a motorcycle, but you ride the bus?” Claudia said, puzzled.

That made me smile. “Yeah, well, it’s never actually run since I owned it. I bought it from a guy who crashed it and took it all apart. I’ve been putting it back together and fixing it up for months. I got the job at the bike shop so I could learn more about bikes and get this one running. It was a bigger project than I expected, but I’ve learned a lot. I’m getting it done.”

Claudia tipped her head in mock appraisal. “I’m not sure I can picture you on a motorcycle. I see you more as a sports car guy.”

*Damn, she was beautiful.* I stammered, “W-w-well, that would be nice. But I can barely afford to get this bike going. Do you like motorcycles? My friend Lenny thinks a motorcycle will get him girls. I think Lenny’s nuts, but he’s certain it will do the trick.”

She put her delicate, long fingers below her lower lip. “Ooh, I don’t know. I’ve never known anyone that has a motorcycle. Most of the guys I see with them look pretty tough. Are you a tough guy, Monroe?”

“Wow. No, geez. I hate fighting. I’m big. But big doesn’t mean tough. I don’t see myself on a motorcycle being tough—I don’t think of motorcycles like hanging out, being in a gang, or

being a juvenile delinquent. I picture riding on country roads, going where I want to go. I think of it as freedom to go places like that.”

“That sounds cool. I understand why you want that. I guess I can picture myself on the back of your motorcycle. Maybe we can go for a ride sometime, though I think my dad would completely flip out. He doesn’t even want me to get in a car with a boy.”

As soon as I realized she was talking about riding on my motorcycle, I began to backpedal. “It’s going to be a while before it’s ready—at least two more weeks of work. And I don’t have a license yet. I’m seventeen, but I didn’t have access to a car, so I didn’t get a license. You can’t drive a motorcycle with a car license, anyway. I don’t even know how to ride a bike yet. I would love to take you for a ride when everything is ready. But, um, even then I’d have to practice some to handle emergencies. I wouldn’t take you before I’m sure I can really handle the bike. I’d never want to put you in any danger of getting hurt.”

I looked away, staring out the window in embarrassment. I noticed that her thigh was no longer pressing against mine. She’d figured out what a hopeless geek I am. She was pulling away—no surprise.

Then I felt her shoulder bump against mine as she reached across and turned my head with a hand on my cheek. Her fingers stroked my jawline, almost to my earlobe. Her touch was as soft as a butterfly’s, but I could feel the smooth pressure of each finger. She moved closer and said, “I really like how you just told me the truth about yourself. I think that’s brave. Most guys lie to make themselves seem cool, but it’s such bullshit. You’re a cool guy, Monroe.” And she leaned forward and kissed me lightly, right on the lips.



When she pulled back from the kiss, I stared into her eyes. My mind went completely blank. I heard my voice, way off—like at the end of a carpet tube—saying, “I expect it’s way too soon for me to tell you that I love you.”

Claudia laughed and she kissed me again, a little harder. “Yes, it’s way too soon. How about if we go on a couple of dates first, or maybe just go to the park down by the river this weekend and bring a blanket and some books? I’d love that. Let’s get to know each other, and then you can tell me you love me.

“Let me give you my phone number.” She wrote it on the back of my hand. “I have to work a little bit on Saturday morning, but I’ll be free to meet you about ten. Call me Saturday. Here’s my stop. Now give me one more little kiss goodbye.”

When I got off at my stop, I was amazed my legs worked.

## HERDING HARD CATS

The Hard Cats was a success. There were now three members: Silvio was the leader, a rail-thin guy called Stick was counsel, and a big ex-Navy guy, called Walrus for his flowing mustache, was enforcement. Stick had a Harley Duo Glide and an unsettling demeanor. He looked weak because he was so skinny, but he wasn't. Even if he had been, people didn't fuck with him. He had a look about him that said *bad news*. Bad news of the "you disappear" variety. Walrus rode a Triumph Bonneville. He was big and looked tough, but perhaps he wasn't.

They wore their colors when they were doing deals. Other than that, they stayed inconspicuous and assiduously avoided the larger gangs, for two good reasons. First, there would be questions like, "Who the hell are you guys and where's the rest of the gang?" And second, they would probably get their asses kicked. There's safety in numbers. Three is not a safe number.

All three were selling marijuana to hippies and college kids like it was cold beer in the desert. Both Stick and Walrus had dealers working for them. Even Silvio had managed to recruit

a couple of college boys as dealers. Demand was endless. It was just a matter of making connections and making certain that whoever was buying the dope wasn't a cop.

Silvio laid out the business plan in their first gang meeting. "So yeah, you can sell dope one lid at a time, but that's a fucking slow way to make money and a lot of people will know your name. Sooner or later you'll sell to a cop. You need cutouts. People who don't know where you live or what your real name is. They sell, and if they get busted, what do they know? They call a number when they want to buy more, that's all they know, and the number is an answering service that you call to pick up your messages. No contact, no names, no addresses. Got it?"

"Sure," said Stick, "but I got connections in the music biz because I work as a roadie sometimes. I can move a lot there, but they know who I am."

"You take the risks you wanna take. I'm telling you the plan. Just remember if you get busted, you're on your own. You know nothing. Break that code and you die. I don't care how long it takes or where you go. Give my name to a cop, you die. Give any Hard Cat name to a cop, you die. Got that?"

"Sure, sure, it's the code, we got it," Stick said, glancing at Walrus, "I'm just asking if it's okay, but I guess you said it is."

"I got lots of connections at BU," Walrus said. "I'm burning up my GI Bill there. I was gonna make dealers out of a couple of little fucks in my classes, but they know my name. So I'll just do them retail."

"So here's how you do it," Silvio said. "Anyone that starts buying from you more than a few times is probably splitting and selling. So you tell them you can put them in contact with a supply at wholesale—which is thirty percent off. They sell for whatever they want to sell for.

What do we care? You give them the number of the answering service. They call, you pick up the message. Then you get another club member to follow the guy and make sure he ain't a cop. If he ain't, then you start sellin' to him, but always through the number, right? As far as anyone knows, you're just a delivery boy."

They had one close call that served to firm up the determination to follow the plan carefully. A prospective customer for Walrus was followed by Stick—right back to the Cambridge police station. It turned out that the idiot who recommended the cop was in a class with him, and the narc had been openly asking other students if they knew where he could score some pot. Fortunately, Walrus had been noncommittal about whether or not he could get any weed for the guy, and when the cop asked again, Walrus said he'd decided weed was a bad thing and wasn't going to have anything to do with it. Then he tried to get the cop to come to a prayer meeting with him.

Walrus said, "The cop scraped me off like dogshit on his shoe. He couldn't get away fast enough when I started talking about Jesus."

## RIVER OF POSSIBILITIES

I woke up at five on Saturday morning, too early to call Claudia. But of course, I couldn't go back to sleep. I didn't feel like reading, and if I made noise in my lab it would wake Mom and Dad, which wouldn't be good on a Saturday morning. I put on my best-fitting pants and newest shirt, snuck downstairs and made myself breakfast. When I was done with breakfast and had washed the dishes, it was 6:35. Too early to call Claudia.

I'd transferred Claudia's number from the back of my hand to a notebook. Then I thought I might lose it, so I wrote her number on the inside cover of a paperback copy of *The Honey Badger* by Robert Ruark—the book I'd decided to bring on our reading date. I also had a new copy of *Cycle Guide*, so I wrote the number on the inside cover of that, in case I lost the book and the notebook, and my hand got smudged. But then I thought it was dipshit to keep the number on the back of my hand, so I wrote it on a slip of paper and stuck that in my wallet. I washed my hand. After all that, it was still only 7:10. Still too early to call. I lay down on the couch in the living room and closed my eyes for just a minute. I woke up when my mom let out

the cat. 10:15! I leapt to my feet and raced to the phone. I dialed the number and a man answered.

“Hello, is Claudia home?”

“Let me see, who shall I say is calling?”

“Oh, ah—Monroe Sanborne.”

“Wait, please.”

I didn’t say anything. Several moments passed.

“Hello, are you there?”

“Ah, yes.”

“I said wait, please.”

“Oh, of course! Certainly! I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?”

“Um, I was apologizing for not answering right away.”

“Oh, did you intend to be impolite or were you just thinking of an answer?”

“I didn’t mean to be impolite, I just didn’t know you were expecting an answer.”

“When people ask a question, wouldn’t you think they expect an answer?”

I heard Claudia’s voice in the background say, “Father! Give me that phone and stop torturing my friend.”

Claudia came on the line and said, “I’m sorry, Monroe. My father is in one of his hilarious moods. How are you? Father, go away! You’ve had enough fun for one morning. Sorry, he’s a pain. So, shall we take bicycles? That would be fun. You have one, don’t you?”

I tried to assemble a coherent sentence, but nothing came. I was still trying to process the conversation.

Claudia said, “Oh, that was thoughtless, if you don’t have a bicycle we could take the bus, or just go for a walk.”

“No, I have a bicycle. I was just trying to get over your dad messing with me.”

“He does that with boys, he thinks he’s being clever. I can meet you somewhere, or you could come to my house.”

“I’ll come to your house and we can ride from there. Judging from your bus stop, you’re on the way to the river anyway.”

Claudia gave me the address and we settled on noon. I wrote Claudia’s address in all the places I had her phone number. At least I didn’t have to scrub my hand again. I stocked Mom’s largest Tupperware container with two apples and some cheddar cheese. I added a thermos of ice water and grabbed my book. I put everything in the basket of my bicycle, padded with our old beach blanket. The Playboy Advisor made it clear that the man was responsible for preparation for a successful date. It was 10:25, and Claudia’s house was probably fifteen minutes away. Might as well go. I figured if I did a ride-by and then hung out somewhere nearby, I wouldn’t be late again.

I didn’t consider the terrain. Claudia’s house was near the top of the only big hill in the area. I had to push my heavy, one-speed, piece-of-shit bike all the way up the hill. I had circles of sweat under my arms when I reached her street. I pushed on, past her street, to the park at the top of the hill. Leaning my bike against a bench, I took off my shirt and fanned it in the air to dry.

“What the fuck are you doing, weirdo?” A big guy had walked up while I was pulling off my shirt. He was holding his toddler daughter by the hand.

“Oh, sorry. I have a date with this girl, and I didn’t realize she lived way up here, so I pushed my bike up the hill—but now I’m really sweaty, and I didn’t want to, ah, you know ...” I tapered off to a mumble.

“Put your shirt back on, leave it loose at the bottom and walk around a little. No one wants to see your man-tits. Show some respect. People live here.” He walked away.

*Geez, man-tits. Nice. This day is off to a swell start. I hope things get better quick.*

I walked around a little and dried off. The view was great. A crisp, spring day, just a few puffy clouds in a bright blue sky, though there was a brown haze over downtown. The whole city of Boston was laid out before me. I could see an organic structure to the city I hadn’t noticed before. In the parts of the neighborhoods nearer the streetcar lines, the smaller wood houses gave way to larger brick apartments. Was that planned or had it just happened? I could see the river, and the old horse track that the WBZ antenna tower had fallen across during Hurricane Carol in 1954. I remember my mom taking me to the WBZ studio to meet Buffalo Bob and watch him ride his horse. I must have been five or six because the tower was still in place. Oops—11:20, time to go.

I tucked in my shirt and coasted down to Claudia’s street. I planned to just cruise by the house, but it was at the end of a cul-de-sac. I’d look stupid if they saw me turning around and coming back later. I leaned my bike against the porch, walked up the stairs, took a couple of deep breaths and rang the doorbell.



An hour later, the most beautiful girl in the world was lying on our scruffy beach blanket in the dappled shade beside the Charles River, resting her head in my lap, with her book open across her amazing thighs.

“This is really nice, Monroe. One of the most pleasant days I’ve spent with a guy.”

I felt jealous, which is so dipshit. I didn’t want to think of Claudia with anyone else. But my God, I hardly knew her. I was being so immature and illogical that it embarrassed me. I dug for something to say, to cover the feeling.

“Your house is nice, and the neighborhood is pretty cool. It must be fun being up on a hill, you have a great view.”

“I’ve lived there all my life, so I don’t think much about it, but it’s a nice neighborhood. Our neighbors all used to be Armenian, like my dad, but now there’s only one other Armenian family. My grandfather—my dad’s father—was a master carpenter, and he built our house and some other houses in the neighborhood. His name was Abel Kabekian. He died before I was born. Left the house to Gram. We lived with her until she died, three years ago. She used to piss me off, but now I just miss her. I miss my nana, too, my mother’s mom. I think she was a lot like me. She had a lot of kids and grandkids. I have zillions of cousins, but I think I was her favorite. Thanks for coming to the house. I’m sorry I wasn’t ready.”

“Nah, it was my fault. I got to your house about a half hour early.”

Claudia laughed. “You got to spend some time with my dad and mom. I promise you, not intentional.”

“Your mom looks a lot like you, and her accent is pretty. She’s French?”

“I don’t think we look that much alike, she has such pale skin, and her nose is way different. She and Dad met at college. I’m sure they told you they’re both pharmacists. I love them, but they can be intense and weird. They get along because they barely understand each other—even after twenty years. Mom speaks French, Spanish, German, and fractured English. Dad speaks English and gutter Armenian. When they argue, it’s hilarious. I’d like to just get some popcorn and watch. Like one of those Lucy episodes, when you know there’s going to be something so awful.

“My mom is almost too cool. She cares, but she’ll never show it. Dad is emotional and super judgmental. Drives me nuts. Once he decides something, that’s it. Concrete. I can’t believe my mom left you alone with Dad. She knows better than that. I think she was having fun at your expense, and mine.”

“Hey, I like your dad,” I said.

Claudia stared at me and crossed her eyes.

“Well, he scared me a little.”

“Yeah, no shit, Monroe. Most guys won’t come to the house a second time. Dad hates them all. I could tell he likes you. So tell me what he said to you.”

“I don’t want to, it’s too... Crap, I don’t know the right word.”

“Let me guess, he asked you if you thought you were going to get in my pants, right?”

“Well, yeah, sort of.”

Claudia lifted her head up from my lap and put her hand on my arm. “What did you tell him?”

“I don’t know, I was nervous. I think I said that would be completely up to you.”

“Oh, wow. You really said that? No wonder my dad liked you. He actually smiled when we left.”

She put her head back down in my lap, apparently oblivious to my dick, which was attempting to drill its way out of my pants. She reached up with one hand to squeeze and pat my knee. “It seems like when you get nervous, you blurt out what you’re really thinking. That’s wild. Most guys lie like hell under pressure.”

“Really? What would they say?”

Claudia adopted a deep, ponderous voice. “*Oh no, Mr. Kabekian. I respect Claudia too much for that.* Then we get in the car and they turn into Mr. Octopus.”

“Well, I couldn’t think of something like that. I freeze up. I try not to just say what’s on my mind. I’m socially retarded, sure. But I know people don’t want to hear everything.”

“Oh, man, I have to watch everything I say, especially in the office where I work. It’s full of old biddies that are always ready to pick anyone apart.”

“I can’t do that,” I said. “I have a hard enough time making myself understood. If I start worrying about how people take the things I say, I’d never make sense at all.”

“Stroke my hair for me, Monroe. I love that.”

Wow. So did I. I stroked her hair, then I ran my fingertips across her forehead, and combed the hair back from her ears with my fingers. She smiled up at me.

“So what do you think about me, Monroe?”

“I think you’re the most amazing and beautiful person I’ve ever met. I can’t believe you want to spend time with me.”

“Wow, what a sweet talker. And now I know that every word is true, even though you’re blushing all the way to the top of your head. Slide down here and kiss me some, you big goof.”

## THE JOYFUL NOISE

The racket was deafening: a 650cc vertical twin motorcycle revving at 2000 rpm. We'd propped open the bulkhead door at the top of the cellar stairs, and an old fan pushed the oil smoke out, but the cellar was filling rapidly with blue smoke and fumes. Lenny and I stood on either side of the bike. I anxiously looked for oil leaks, watched for gasoline leaks from the carb, and checked and rechecked the oil return in the tank to ensure the oil pump was working. The blue smoke from the exhaust cleared away as the rings seated, and the engine ran strong and true, with minimal vibration. I thumbed the kill button and the engine stopped instantly. The sudden cessation of noise left my ears ringing, mitigated only by the whine of the old table fan.

"Holy Fuckowitz, Monroe," Lenny said, "that sounds like the anvil chorus. I've got goosebumps on my wiener. Was it revving pretty high? Is it supposed to fucking rev like that?"

"Yeah, it sounds great. A few more little things and it will be ready to go. I've got the license plates, and I saved up enough for insurance. Now I just need a license. It would be good if I actually knew how to drive it. I set the idle high, to be sure to get good oil pressure to all the

bearings and make sure the cam doesn't go dry. I'll set it lower before I actually ride it. I want to break it in carefully."

"That paint! Fantastic! Looks like a brand-new bike—better than new. I can't believe it! You fucking did it! What an amazing job. Every nut and bolt looks perfect. It's just so... it's beautiful. It's mean, it's tough. It's fucking amazing!"

"I'm can't wait to show it to Claudia. She's coming to dinner tonight. I hope my folks don't freak her out. She's likely to take one look at them and drop me like yesterday's news."

"So when do I get to see this babe? I want to see what you think is good-looking."

"Probably never. It's bad enough that she's going to meet the family. If she met you, she wouldn't quit running until she got to Springfield."

I moved the fan to try to push out more of the smoke. It was giving me a headache.

"Funny, asshole. Very funny. Your parents aren't all that bad. They cut you slack. You should try living at my fucking house. My dad's talking military school. Can you imagine a fucking Rosenthal at military school? Christ on a crutch, they'd be cornholing me day and night. I'd be wearing lipstick in six months. What the fuck is he thinking?"

Lenny looked like he was practicing semaphore. When he gets excited, the gestures get dramatic. One of many reasons you can't trust him near anything breakable.

"I know what he's thinking—that he'll scare you into doing better. Seems to me it might be working."

"Maybe. But if he gets serious, I'm just heading for the west coast. No fucking way I'm going to some fucking school full of jocks and Nazis. I told him that, straight out. Save your money. I'll just be gone. I'm not putting up with that crap. I can take care of myself."

Lenny slung a leg over Sophia. I cringed, anticipating disaster, but amazingly he didn't kick off anything or dent the tank.

"Hey, Lenny, you can just move in here. You don't need to go anywhere. Who would I get to negotiate for me, if you were gone? Where would I get advice on women and life? Stick around, buddy, I need you."

"Thanks, bud. Nice to be wanted. Haven't seen much of you between your job and this shiksa you're dating. I want to see what she looks like."

"Actually, she gave me a picture a few days ago," I said, handing over my wallet.

He sat quietly on Sophia and studied the picture for long moments. "Oh, bullshit. You cut this out of a magazine. You're not dating a girl that looks like this."

"That's her. She's wonderful, huh?"

He flipped the wallet back at me. "No way guys like us get girls like this. I figured she'd look like my Aunt Tissie—you know, the fat one with the mustache? You're in big trouble, my friend. Huge fucking trouble. You're gonna get your heart broken. Hold onto your nuts with both hands. Both fucking hands."

"Seriously Lenny, it won't be a surprise. Believe me, I understand all that. I keep expecting her to come to her senses and dump me, but while it lasts, I'm enjoying the ride. She's the nicest girl I've ever met. She seems to really like me. I don't really know if that's enough for her to keep hanging out with me, but for right now, it's great."

I shooed him off the bike so I could lie down next to it to check for leaks. I didn't want Lenny stepping on my head.

“Yeah, you’re fucking gone. You got no idea what being dumped by Miss Gorgeous is gonna feel like. She’ll say, *We should just be friends*, and you’ll say, *That would be swell* while you’re puking up the back of your throat.”

I wiped off the bottom of the engine, looking for drips. Nothing. Cool.

“What are you now, Dear Abby? How do you have even a clue about what I’m going to feel like? Never mind, it doesn’t matter. I’m having fun. No matter what she looked like, I’d enjoy being with her. She’s smart and funny. I’m already not so stunned by how she looks, because I really like her.”

“Oh, fuck me. What a bunch of crap. Listen to yourself. You’re fucking dreaming.”

“Well, yeah. She makes me crazy every time I look at her. But honest, I’m not expecting it to last. We’re both too young for that. And she’s just way too fucking gorgeous. She gets hit on all the time, even when I’m standing right next to her. She flirts back, too. That bothers me a lot more than I let her know.”

“Hey, girls flirt, don’t let that bug you. It’s what they do,” Lenny said.

“What really bugs me is that when she’s talking to some guy who’s hitting on her, I don’t even understand the conversation. The other day, this guy said, *Do you dig Chinese Rock n’ Roll?* And she said, *I dig Chinese Rock n’ Roll*, and they both laughed.”

“No shit. So what does it mean?”

“She wouldn’t tell me. She said, *Nothing, it doesn’t mean anything*, but she had a funny smirk on her face. So, y’know, when she’s done talking to other guys, she’s still with me. That’s a good thing, huh? But I wouldn’t be surprised if she walked away with some dude. It doesn’t feel good to think that. It makes me angry with myself that I get jealous. I mean, it’s not like I



have some big claim on her. Someone with looks and money is going to come along, and I won't be able to compete."

"Well good luck, buddy," Lenny said. "I want to meet her sometime. If she's still around after meeting your family, maybe I'll get a chance. Ask her if she has any good-looking friends who'd like to meet a stud like me."

"Sure, maybe we can double-date sometime. We could go to see the Beauties and the Beasts. Hey, I have to go. Paul's going to teach me to ride a motorcycle. You want to come? I'm meeting him at the Stop and Shop parking lot on Harvard Avenue. They're closed on Sunday, so there isn't much to hit."

"Why not? I can use a laugh."

"Fine, get your bicycle. Let's go," I said, as I stuffed a helmet and gloves into my newsboy bag.

## LEAPIN' LENNY

When I got to the parking lot, Paul wasn't there. Harvard Avenue was almost deserted. A few minutes later, I heard a high-pitched whine. Paul was riding towards us on a motorcycle that looked too small for him. It left behind a light plume of blue smoke as it progressed across the parking lot. Paul stopped in front of us and climbed off.

“Hey, Paul, this is my friend Lenny. He came along to see me make a fool of myself.”

Paul shook hands with Lenny. “Well, there's usually lots of opportunity for that when I teach someone to ride. So, Monroe, this is the perfect bike for you to learn on. It's a BSA Bantam we took back on trade, years ago. It's broken in, and runs nice. Not a lot of horsepower—but it's light, and easy to handle. It's been crashed and thrashed by so many new customers learning to ride that you can't really do much damage to it. You'll get the basics really quickly with this thing.”

“Why does it smoke so much?” said Lenny.

“It's a two-stroke,” I said. “You mix oil with the gas and the engine burns it. It's a lighter, simpler engine—no valves and no cam, not even a full-race one.”

“And it’s perfect for what we’re going to do today,” said Paul. “Okay, here are the basics. I know you already know some of this stuff, but I’m going to go through everything, just like I do for our new customers. First thing I tell people is that almost every rider has two accidents on a motorcycle. The first is caused by incompetence, the second by overconfidence. The second one is generally much worse. So, safety gear all the time. No excuses. The time you don’t wear it is the time you’ll need it most. Never sling a leg over your motorcycle unless you have on long pants, stout boots, an abrasion-resistant jacket, gloves, and a helmet. Leather is always good.

“Monroe, you’re not completely dressed for this. Jeans are okay. Sneakers are not. Your jacket is too flimsy, and your gloves would look nice with a London Fog overcoat, but won’t do you much good when you’re sliding down the road. Next time, I want to see the right stuff. We’ll skip that this time. It’s not my skin, and I should have been crystal-clear about what to wear.”

I didn’t want to tell Paul that this was about as good as I had. I figured I would go to Goodwill and see what I could find for cheap.

Paul went over the controls: front brake, clutch, headlight dimmer, and horn on the handlebars. We laughed at the weak, little fart-squeak that came from somewhere under the fuel tank when Paul hit the horn button. Foot brake on the left, shift on the right.

I got on the bike and put it in neutral. Kicked it to life with just one good shove on the kick-starter. Pulled in the clutch, clicked the gearbox into first, eased out the clutch while I fed a little throttle, and drove off. I felt like screaming in triumph. It felt exactly as I’d dreamed it would. Better than the first time I rode a bicycle without training wheels. I made two laps of the parking lot, shifting up and down the gears, testing the front and rear brake, and weaving around the shopping carts. When Paul held his hand up, I pulled up to him.

“Okay, wise guy. Why didn’t you just tell me you’ve been practicing?”

“I haven’t,” I said. “That was the first time I’ve ever driven a motorcycle.”

“Let me see you take off from a dead stop again.”

So I did. Gave it a little gas, eased out the clutch, and off I went. Another lap, and Paul waved me in.

“Now let’s try a panic stop. Circle around, and then drive towards me at a good speed. When I raise my arm, I want you to brake as hard as you can—front and rear brakes together. Come to a complete stop, and put your feet down.”

He didn’t say anything about pulling in the clutch, but when he raised his arm and I nailed the brakes, I could feel that I was about to stall the engine, so I pulled in the clutch lever just before I came to a stop.

Paul walked over. “You are totally bullshitting me. You didn’t kill the engine doing a panic stop. Everyone does that the first time.”

“Seriously, Paul, why would I lie? This is my first time. It feels great, though. Just like I dreamed it would.”

“Well, I don’t have anything else to show you except how to drive slowly, by standing on the pegs. Give that a try. Drag the front brake a little, and balance the front brake with a little gas to hold the speed where you want it.”

I tried it, and it seemed easy. I came back and Paul gave me a hard look.

“Maybe it’s just that I’ve been reading about it so much, and dreaming about it so long. I guess it’s how I imagined it.”

“Well, however you pulled this off, you’re ready to take your test, kid. I assume you’ve read the driving handbook and can pass the test.”

“Yeah, I’m covered there. I know it backwards and forwards.”

“Figured you had. We’re done here, about an hour early, and no scrapes on the bike.”

“Hey, how about letting me try it?” Lenny said.

“Well, okay, but get the helmet and these gloves on, and take my jacket first. That T-shirt won’t do much for you.”

The beat-up Bell Helmet I’d bought used from Albion was much too big for Lenny. I have a huge head, and Lenny is a pinhead. He looked like a cartoon turtle in it. Paul’s helmet fit him better, though he still looked like Marvin the Martian. Big helmet, little body.

Lenny kick-started the bike and clicked it into gear, without pulling in the clutch. The bike lurched, and stopped. The lurch pulled Lenny off balance and popped the bike out of Paul’s reach. Lenny and the bike slowly toppled over and the hot exhaust pipe burned his leg. We yanked the bike off him. Lenny hopped around cursing for a few minutes before getting back on the bike. This time I stood in front of the bike, so I could catch it, if necessary.

Lenny started the motor, pulled in the clutch, clicked the bike into gear and let out the clutch too quickly. The bike lurched and the engine died. Paul caught Lenny before he fell over again.

Next attempt, same result.

Paul said, “Give it a little more gas and ease out the clutch.”

So Lenny revved the motor far too much, popped the clutch and bounced into a wheelstand, his legs flailing on both sides of the bike. I grabbed the luggage rack as he went by and held on, trying to help him horse the bike back into control.

I yelled, "Pull in the clutch! Pull in the clutch!" but he didn't. The acceleration pulled him back in the seat, making his throttle hand twist even more. We rocketed away, me holding the luggage rack and running behind him, Lenny flapping like a rag doll. I finally tripped and lost my grip. I fell face-first on the concrete, tasting blood and feeling the sharp, stinging heat of abrasion burns on every point of contact. Lenny and the bike crashed into a shopping cart and wadded into a heap, with the engine screaming and Lenny yelling, "Get it off me! Get it off me!" while the hot exhaust pipe burned one leg and the spinning wheel chewed at the other.

Paul dashed over and turned off the engine. He pulled the bike off Lenny and helped him to his feet. "That's more like it," Paul said. "More like my typical first-time students. Ready for lesson two?"

"Fuck that!" said Lenny. "That goddam thing is going to burn right through my leg."

I certainly wasn't ready to play catch with the motorcycle again. I was bleeding profusely from my chin, nose, forehead, knees, elbows, and palms.

"Monroe, it didn't do you any good to bullshit me after all. You look much worse than your buddy."

Which was absolutely true. And in just a couple of hours, I had a dinner date with Claudia and my family. Wonderful.

## SCREAMING, NAKED, ON THE TOILET

When I got home I went straight to the bathroom and filled the tub. I tried to inch down into the water, but it hurt like holy hell. I finally eased myself all the way in. I soaped up a washcloth, gritted my teeth and scrubbed the tar and dirt out of the abrasions. By the time the abrasions were clean, I felt lightheaded and exhausted. In first-aid class, they called those early symptoms of shock. I definitely felt like I was going that way.

I took advantage of the general numbness to daub on hydrogen peroxide, and then merthiolate, which blasted through the lightheadedness with a searing pain that put me on the edge of screaming. The fact that I was sitting naked on the toilet—with an outstanding collection of abrasions daubed pink and orange—prevented any outbursts that could have brought someone running to my aid. I covered each abrasion with gauze, which I secured with lots of white surgical tape, wrapped a towel around my waist and snuck up to my room.

I picked the loosest, lightest clothes I had, but any contact still hurt like crazy. I steeled myself and walked downstairs to the kitchen, prepared to do a lot of explaining.

“Monroe! My God, what happened to you, son?” my dad asked, with mother hovering anxiously.

I tried to explain, “I went to learn how to ride a motorcycle, and—”

“Motorcycle!” my mom said. “I told you they were dangerous, I told you they could hurt you. Look at you, all cut and bruised. You could have been killed.”

“Mom, I wasn’t riding my motorcycle, I was—”

“You took that bike out without telling us!” Dad said. “You don’t have insurance, you don’t have a license. What if you hit a child or got ran over by a car!”

“Dad, I wasn’t on my motorcycle. My bike is still down in the cellar. Paul brought a small motorcycle from the shop to teach me to ride in a parking lot—”

“What is this Paul guy thinking? We didn’t give you permission to go riding a motorcycle.”

“I need to learn to ride a motorcycle, he was helping me out. I’m seventeen, do you really expect me to ask permission for everything I do?”

“You crashed someone else’s bike?” Mom said. “Who is going to pay for that, mister? What were you —?”

“Look, Mom, Dad, *stop!* Listen to me for a second. I didn’t crash a bike. I didn’t have any problem riding the bike. Paul taught me how in a few minutes and I rode it fine. But then Lenny wanted to learn, and he lost control, so I grabbed the luggage rack to try to help him and I fell while I was running. Lenny is fine, I’m scraped up from falling is all, and we didn’t damage anything.”



“My roast! Oh my God, my roast. You distracted me with your crashing motorcycles and now the roast is ruined. What is your new girlfriend going to think of me, that I can’t even cook a roast?”

I went to the living room and sat down, trying to arrange my pants so that my knees didn’t burst into flames. The doorbell rang. Lenny’s dad.

Oh, great. The drama continued. More explanations that no one listened to—I might as well have been flapping my lips. Bottom line: Lenny was not to get anywhere near my motorcycle.

“And what the hell is a kid doing running wild with a motorcycle?” Lenny’s dad wanted to know. He did a little backpedaling after my dad got irritated by the “running wild” comment.

When Lenny’s dad finally left, I looked at my watch and realized I was going to be late picking up Claudia from her house. The last thing I wanted to do was to ask my dad to drive me there. I ran most of the way to her place—a mile of flat ground and half a mile of hilly ground. It was quite an achievement, especially with my abraded knees banging against my pants. By the time I got there, the knees of my pants were damp and I could feel my sleeves sticking to my elbows. The gauze had soaked through, pretty much everywhere.

Ten minutes late, I rang the bell. Claudia’s mom opened the door with Claudia right behind her. *Oh my God, Monroe. Have you been attacked?* sounds so much better in a French accent. Even *Monroe* sounds sexy in a French accent.

“No, I’m okay, I fell while I was trying to help my friend Lenny. We were learning how to ride a motorcycle, and Lenny—”

“Why would you be learning to ride a motorcycle?”

“Well, I need to learn so I can get a license. I have this motorcycle that I—”

“You have a motorcycle? Monroe, those are so very dangerous. David!” She called to Claudia’s dad, “Were you aware that Monroe has a motorcycle?”

“What! No, Monroe, you cannot take Claudia on your motorcycle! Claudia! You are not going anywhere on that motorcycle!” Mr. Kabekian opened the front door to see if my motorcycle was waiting at the curb, ready to kill or maim his daughter.

We spent a half hour at the kitchen table, with me swearing that I would *never* take their daughter out on my motorcycle without their express permission, which would certainly include some sort of certification of my competence and would probably require enclosing Claudia in a cocoon or a parachute-equipped escape capsule. And that my motorcycle was not ready to be ridden by anyone. I needed to pass tests, the bike needed further tuning and inspection, the proper insurance must be obtained. It would be months, perhaps years, before I could venture out alone on the motorcycle, much less consider having a passenger of any sort.

On a positive note, Claudia’s beautiful, though ancient mother—at least thirty-five years old—used her long, cool, incredibly soft and gentle fingers to put some wonderful secret pharmacist salve on my nose, chin, and palms. She re-bandaged me in a manner that looked much less like someone had thrown gauze at me. In fact, I thought I now looked rather rakish. I rejected the offer to re-bandage my knees, since it would require dropping my trousers, which Claudia’s dad and mom seemed surprisingly comfortable with. I guessed it must be a continental thing, or maybe a pharmacist thing.

Finally, Claudia and I were walking toward my house. I was in a bit of a daze. The steady onslaught of questions and pain had worn me out. I still had the entire evening ahead of me.

First, there would be more conversation about my motorcycle, my injuries, and Lenny's injuries. Mother would hold forth on the family embarrassment and shame of having Lenny's father come over to complain. There'd be a long string of questions for Claudia and me, and then I'd walk her home. By then, her parents would have dreamed up some new tests to put me through. I'd walk back home and either toss myself out of my third-story window, or I'd go to bed and sleep for a month.

Claudia said, "Are you all right, Monroe? You seem distant."

"I'm just a little tired from all the drama, and I'm dreading a lot more from my folks at dinner. Which, by the way, is going to be extremely overcooked."

Claudia pulled me into the shadowed entrance of a closed store. "Perhaps this will cheer you up," she said. She took my hand and cupped it over her high, smooth, left breast, which filled my hand with a miraculous weight. Then she kissed me, hard, and slid her tongue into my mouth.

Yup, that cheered me right up. If it had cheered me up a tiny bit more, I would have had to change my pants before dinner.

Claudia said, "That's just a taste. We'll do some more of that on the way home. Think of that while you're enduring dinner."

The combination of residual shock and adolescent horniness made for a potent analgesic. I still hurt everywhere, but I no longer cared as much.

When we got to the house, there was a surprise addition to the group. Angel had decided to join us. Unusual behavior for Sis, she wouldn't come to dinner without a reason. She's curious

as a cat, but we respect each other's space—usually. I guess she just needed to see what kind of hag I was dragging home.

“So this is Claudia. Welcome, Claudia,” Angel said, giving her a big hug. She looked at me over Claudia's shoulder, widened her eyes at me and mouthed, *You stud.*

We went into the dining room, where Mom was setting out dinner. Everything boiled or baked into complete submission. Home cooking. Oh, yum.

Angel sat next to Claudia and immediately engaged her in a complex conversation. Mom tried to interject a few times, but her words bounced right off the armor of adolescent jargon, so she kept trying to keep a second conversation going—mostly with herself—while Dad stared at Claudia, looked at me, and back at Claudia.

*Okay, Dad. I get it. She's really, really hot, and I'm really not. Get over it.*

Dad finally started talking about the new Michener book he was reading, while I feigned interest. Mom was clearly angry at me or someone. I didn't know who or why and I sure didn't want to ask. Claudia and Angel were having a great time, talking about college, books, business, cosmetics, fashion, and quantum chromodynamics, as far as I could follow.

I pushed food around my plate and cut it into ever-smaller pieces, without actually ingesting anything. Finally, I helped Mom clear the table. When we got into the kitchen she said, “I like your friend, and she is certainly lovely, but it would be nice to have a conversation with her. Angel is so thoughtless. I can't get a word in edgewise.”

Whew.

We had Boston cream pie from Hazel's Bakery in Allston, and instant coffee. Sanka, of course, because regular instant coffee doesn't taste quite bad enough. The Boston cream pie was good, though. I love Boston cream pie, especially Hazel's. I always wonder why they call it pie.

Angel said her goodbyes to Mom and Dad, and said she'd walk us part of the way to Claudia's. As soon as we got outside, she said, "You two have fun," and headed off, toward the MTA stop.

"Hey, Sis," I said.

She turned.

"Thank you for all that."

"No problem, brother. Besides, I wasn't helping you." She winked at Claudia.

It was chilly, and raining—a steady, fine mist. I hadn't gaged down enough calories at dinner to sustain a hummingbird, but I was in a damned fine mood. I hadn't said anything stupid. Claudia hadn't run screaming from the house when she met my parents. And now I had my arm around the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, and she seemed to like it. The wet streets reflected the street lamps, which had clouds of foggy light around them. I'd seen this scene in a dozen movies—impossibly romantic.

Claudia had a stylish raincoat with a hood that framed her amazing face. And kept the rain off her. I hadn't been able to wear a hat because of the bandage on my forehead, so rain was pooling on my huge gourd and trickling down my back. The knees of my pants had hardened into something like lymph fiberglass, and my elbows were throbbing, but all in all, I felt great. I felt like the king of the world.

Claudia pushed me into the same darkened doorway as before. When I bent to kiss her, she said, “Wait,” and opened her raincoat, then the top of her blouse and pushed her bra down. “I want to feel your hands on me.” She guided my hands to her breasts. My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my toes. While I was kissing her, I felt her hand slide down the front of my pants. My knees buckled and *bam*, that was that.

She opened my fly. Her soft, warm hand wrapped around my sticky cock and pulled it out of my thoroughly gross and sticky underwear into the cool air. The contrast was astonishing. I was battered with conflicting feelings... lust... fear that my knees would collapse and I would fall backwards through the plate glass ... lust... terror that the burglar alarm would trigger as I was cut to shreds by the falling glass ... lust ... guilt ... lust ... the absolute certainty that someone would wander by and see us ... probably Claudia’s father ... lust ...

Lust won by a substantial margin. A huge, devastating margin, and when Claudia stroked my cock and I held her magical breasts and felt her tongue dance against mine, I exploded in a second orgasm that made the first one seem like a hiccup. I was sure it would flood the doorway in an ocean of semen. I was quite certain I could feel my seminal vesicles turn inside out and blast from the end of my penis.

When I finally stopped shuddering and regained the partial use of my legs, Claudia delicately tucked away my penis, zipped my fly, put away her breasts and gave me a satisfied, smug-kitty smile. She looked so beautiful and adorable with her hair wet and her makeup streaked, I almost wept.

“Would you like me to do something like that for you, if it’s even possible to do something like that?” I said. “That was incredible.”

“No, baby, not tonight. But next time for sure. I have to get home. That was really nice. I liked doing that for you.”

I woke up the next morning in my own bed, feeling like I had slept for three days and was ready to conquer all of Rome and the Hebrides. I do vaguely recollect Claudia’s parents had follow-up questions. Apparently, I answered them adequately. I have no recollection of the walk home, probably because—compared to the rest of that outrageous day—it was simply too uneventful to register with the few neurons that weren’t involved in straining to remember every tiny detail of what had happened in that doorway.

What was crystal-clear in my memory was that Claudia had said, *Next time for sure*.

There was going to be a next time.

Oh boy.

## MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS

Just when things were looking good and Silvio was considering quitting the bakery, Uncle Gino's enforcer came calling. Sam dropped by the apartment at about seven one night. He was about the size of Silvio's apartment door. He'd known Silvio most of his life, and he didn't like him. But this was business.

"Your uncle told me to talk to you about your dope business. He said it's okay if I hurt you some to get your attention, but not to break anything. So. Do we talk or do I start trying not to break stuff while I kick the shit out of you?"

"What makes Uncle Gino think I'm in the dope business? I work at a bakery."

"You dipshit, you think you're invisible? You think you're so fucking smart you can fool your uncle, who's been doing serious shit on the streets for fifty fuckin' years?"

"Okay, say I am selling a little dope. If my uncle is mad, why didn't he just say so?"

"I'm here to say so. Your uncle doesn't like you dealing shit that can hurt his business. He has obligations. People find out what you're up to, they figure it's him."



“So is he saying I have to quit or is he saying I need to pay him? Whatever he says, I’ll do it, but tell him this business is just laying there for someone to take up—someone’s going to do it. I’m not dealing with the niggers or the spics. I’m not selling hard stuff. I’m selling grass to hippies and college kids. It’s not huge money, but it’s good money and it will get better. What does he want me to do?”

“Where’s your phone?”

Sam mumbled on the phone for a while, then turned, the phone receiver nearly disappearing in one giant fist. “He says five hundred dollar fine for doing this without permission, then thirty percent of the profit from now on, and be ready to have your books checked any time. You pay on the tenth of the month, starting this month.”

“Okay, I don’t have five hundred right now. I’ve got one-fifty here in the house and I’ll get the rest in three days. Does this mean he’s got my back?”

“It means what your uncle says it means. Gimme the one-five and we need the rest in three days—and the rest is five. Got it? Five. Your fucking one-five is your rent for the fin. Don’t be late on any of this stuff, Silvio. This could work out for you, or it could go bad. You could have walked out of this business, but you put yourself in it. Don’t fuck around, don’t do the stupid shit you always do.”

Sam tossed the apartment to see if there was money stashed anywhere. Took the one-fifty, took Silvio’s clock radio and left without another word.

## TOO MUCH HOBO

If the DMV offices had been in black and white, with fog drifting through, I would have expected Rod Serling's disembodied voice to say, "A young man, steps into a nondescript government office and finds himself traveling in another dimension where the clock slows with every tick, a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind. That's the signpost up ahead—your next stop, the DMV Zone."

The people behind the counter were moving so slowly it made me nervous. They looked so grim. People in the lines were visibly angry, even people who had just arrived immediately adopted the surly mood.

I stood in line to get my appointment. I stood in line to get the paperwork. Then I stood in line to turn in the paperwork. What if I failed the test? I'd have to stand in every one of these lines all over again. I wondered why they did things this way. I was seventeen, and I could see ten ways to speed up the process. When I got to the front of the paperwork-checking line, the guy said, "Just a minute," and disappeared for more than five minutes. Maybe he took a bathroom break, though as slowly as he moved, I think it would take him twenty minutes to pee.

I aced the written test. Not exactly an accomplishment. The questions hinted at the right answer. I looked at my completed test and noticed that if you answered C to every question, you'd score sixty-four percent. Then I went to the waiting room to wait for a driving test examiner. Good thing I'd brought a book.

The test instructor finally called my name. I asked him if it would make any difference if I took the test on the Bantam, since I wanted to be licensed to drive my 650cc BSA. He said, "If the bike you test on is less than 250cc, then that's the maximum displacement for which you qualify. But let's see how you ride. Honestly, I don't know why anyone would take the test on a big bike, but most people do."

Wow, the first person who had spoken a sensible sentence to me since I walked through the door.

I'd been riding the BSA Bantam every day, in the alley behind Albion. Paul had showed me a few riding moves, from something he called *English trials*. I had a dim memory of having read about it, though I didn't remember exactly where. It's a competition in which riders demonstrate their control of a bike by driving at slow speed over obstacles and difficult terrain. Now that I thought of it, I realized it would be a perfect sport for the DMV people.

I practiced the simple moves, like driving over a eight-inch-tall cinder block without touching it or putting a foot down, just by hopping the wheels over at exactly the right moment—first the front, then the back. In trials, if you put a foot down, it's called a dab and it counts against you. If you fall it's called a fiasco, which I thought was cool. I got good at the cinder-block trick, though it'd cost me a little more skin off my knees to get the timing down pat.

The bottom of the Bantam frame wouldn't clear the cinder block, so I had to do the rear-wheel hop at just the right moment or it would hang up and I'd fall over and yell, "Fiasco! Fiasco!"

I expected the riding test to be challenging, but all I had to do was to ride through some cones, start and stop the bike, and then ride in a straight line at 20 mph and come to an emergency stop. I came to a stop well before the required line, balanced on the pegs without putting a foot down, then turned and drove back to the instructor. I didn't mean to show off. It was just what I thought I should do.

"Nice riding," the instructor said. He winced as the next victim locked up the back wheel of his Harley, skidded sideways, froze hard on the brake and crashed loudly. "You're good to go. I'll sign you off for unlimited displacement."

I stood in two more lines to turn in my endorsed paperwork and get my license. Presto, I was now legally entitled to ride motorcycles or drive cars. I thought the license was temporary, because it looked so bogus—a simple card with some printing, a seal, and my information typed on it. But it was actually my permanent license. Not even laminated, though there was a place next door that did laminations for twenty-five cents. I invested in the slick, laminated look. I was licensed, and the bike was registered and insured.

All I needed to do now was to get it out of the cellar.

I had known from the start of my motorcycle-building project that getting it out of the cellar was going to be a real problem, but I didn't have any other place to do the work. Lenny said I was like the guy who builds a boat in his garage that's bigger than the door, but it hadn't only just dawned on me that I was going to have to get 424 pounds of motorcycle up ten steep

and narrow cellar stairs, through a bulkhead door and into our scraggy back yard. I was certain I could figure out a way to do it. I just didn't think I'd have to do it all alone.

Lenny was banned from helping with the bike. When I asked him to help me move it, he said, "Sure, but let me go home first to pack for military school."

I considered asking Stanley Cohen and Howie Barth, but just looking at them made me realize they would be less than useless. The heaviest thing they'd ever lifted was a book. In Stanley's case, a forkful of food. Stan made me look skinny and fit. My geeky friends were not going to solve the problem.

When I asked my dad, he pleaded a bad back. When I asked the mechanics at the shop, they just said no. All of them. Chuck, the meatiest of the mechanics—I'd seen him lift the back end of a motorcycle one-handed—said, "We all know a clusterfuck when we hear one. I'm supposed to waste my Sunday, so I can have a bike fall on me? No thanks."

If I was Bud Ekins stunt-driving for Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape*, which I'd seen twice, just for the motorcycle scene, I would have just driven the bike right up the stairs. I wouldn't even have laid down a board for a ramp. But I wasn't Bud, and there was a post right in the middle of the escape route, about six feet from the bulkhead doors. At the speed I'd need to maintain to exit the stairs, I'd certainly nail that post dead-center and bounce back into the cellar.

Fortunately for me, that post supports a second-story porch above our cellar bulkhead. And fortunately for me, my dad and Mr. Morris next door had never, ever thrown away a piece of rope. There were even five pulleys available. Two of them were single-block and somewhat limited in use, though I knew I could get a three-to-one force advantage if I rigged them right. Three of them were double-wheel pulleys, so I could get some real mechanical advantage.

I decided Sunday morning was going to be the big unveiling. Naturally, on Saturday night my parents decided to go New Hampshire on Sunday. As usual, I was invited. As usual, I said no. So I had no backup. Mom and Dad wouldn't even be there to call an ambulance if the bike squashed me. I didn't raise the issue, since I knew they'd just suggest that I put it off.

Sunday morning, I saw my parents off and then started rigging. I was surprised at how confident I felt. Purely an emotional reaction. My analytical side considered the odds of an uneventful extraction to be slim.

I ran a line down from the porch, rigged with two double pulleys that I could heave on from the top of the stairs and snub on the porch post for a five-to-one mechanical advantage. Then I nailed boards onto the rough cellar stairs to make a ramp. I rigged a second line, with one single-wheel pulley and one double, at a shallower angle down to the bike, to give me some forward pull as well as lifting power. I realized I could attach my spare single-wheel to the same beam as the first single-wheel pulley, to reverse the rope direction.

Wow, two single-wheel pulleys are the same as one double. You *are* a flipping genius, Monroe.

My plan was to tension one set of lines and then the other, going back and forth, to slowly lift the bike out. I immediately ran into a problem, since even the most vertical line was slanted about twenty degrees to reach down into the cellar, and the vector force pulled the bike hard against the stairs and made it difficult to keep it upright. On my first try, the bike tipped at a forty-five-degree angle. When I tried to right it, my feet slipped on the ramp, and I fell up the stairs. I couldn't let go of the rope, so I ended my stair dive with my face pressed against the

scuzzy stairs, smelling the funk of debris, dust, and rat turds that had accumulated there over the last fifty years.

I scrambled to my feet, tied off the rope to a step, and sat down to think about the angles.

I sank an eyebolt into the top of the doorframe, and ran a line from the eyebolt to the handlebars to restrain the forward movement and convert the angled pull from my lifting lines into vertical lift. Then, I worked my way back and forth between the lines, slowly winching the front wheel up the ramp. Each time the restraining rope started to lift the wheel clear of the ramp, I slacked it a little bit, inching up until the main lifting line was vertical. Then I released the restraining line. The bike wobbled, but the line held. I slowly worked the bike up until the front wheel rolled over the sill of the bulkhead door.

I rigged a safety line from the porch support pole to the upper fork legs. This way, even if everything went bad, the bike wouldn't plunge back into the cellar.

Now the full strain was on the main line, and the ropes didn't look as substantial as they had when I'd dug them out of Mr. Morris's cellar. They buzzed and creaked, and dust shot out where they rolled over the pulley wheels. I had to keep going. Just as the center of the bike—the engine and gearbox—was over the bulkhead sill, the upper pulley on the main rope let go with a *spang*. The broken pulley hit me on the forehead, adding a fresh bruise to an already-festive array of healing facial scrapes.

The bike lurched sideways, threatening to break the lighter second line. I jumped behind the bike, grabbed the seat rails with both hands, got my feet firmly on both sides and heaved the bike over the sill. Now the second line was slack, and the bike was teetering, the handlebars waving side to side. I walked up the steps, pushing the bike like a wheelbarrow until the second

line tightened and stabilized the front wheel. I lowered the back wheel to the ground, flipped out the kickstand, and collapsed in a heap next to my newly liberated bike.

I lay there, calculating that I had lifted at least two hundred pounds and held it, while four hundred and twenty four pounds of bike wobbled and swayed. A remarkable feat, for a guy who used to huff and puff carrying two sacks of groceries. I figured it was something like the stories of women lifting cars off their children. But I also knew that things had changed. I could see actual muscles spasming in my arms. Pretty weird, for a committed geek.

I lay there and wondered why I hadn't taken all the paintwork back off, to lighten the bike and ensure it didn't get damaged. I felt like an idiot. The tank even had a gallon of gas in it. I could have taken at least thirty pounds off the weight.

When I finally rolled back to my feet, I realized that there was absolutely nothing stopping me from taking my bike for a ride. My parents weren't home to stall me or freak out. I had a license, the bike was registered and insured, and there was a gallon of gas in the tank. I had \$23 in my wallet, and I had a helmet, boots, gloves, and a leather jacket. I was ready to go. It was a shocking revelation. I really didn't know what to do about it. I'd had a mental picture of lengthy preparation before the maiden journey. Mom and Dad waving. Short rides around the neighborhood. Little weak flights to dry my wing feathers.

I went into the back closet and got my Goodwill jacket, boots, and gloves. I grabbed my helmet and got on my bike. It started on the second kick. I let the engine warm up. I opened the oil-tank cap and watched the oil return spurt a pulsing stream of fresh oil back into the tank. Checked everything over one more time, clicked the bike into gear, and I was on my way. I felt



like screaming. I was scared and exhilarated. I felt like some weight had been taken from me.

Like the road was open before me, and I could just keep going.

It felt like I shouldn't be doing this. That some part of the situation was illegal or not permitted. But it wasn't. I was free to go. Free to do what I wanted. Free to ride.

When I reached the end of my street, I screamed, "I am the God of the Road!"

Hmmm, that didn't sound right. I tried again.

"I am the King of the Road!"

Uck. A little too Roger Miller, sounds like a hobo.

"I am the Road King!"

*Perfect.*

## PETERBUILT

I stopped at a gas station, filled my tank with premium—at the absurdly high price of twenty-three cents a gallon—and headed west toward Framingham.

I chose to go west, because I thought traffic might be lighter, and there were fewer stoplights. I was having a little difficulty with the BSA's clutch grabbing on release, and dragging some when I disengaged it. I tightened the cable adjuster a little, but I knew I'd need to adjust the spring tension to bring the clutch plate flat. It wasn't so much of a problem that I needed to stop.

When I reached Framingham without incident, I decided to make a big, northerly curve around Boston, and perhaps go as far as the coast. The engine sounded wonderful—a deep throaty bellow when I opened the throttle, accompanied by a satisfying shove of acceleration. The bike handled well, it felt tight and responsive. The brakes needed a little work, perhaps. The front brakes felt a little soft and didn't pull the bike down, the way the Bantam's brakes had. The rear brake didn't seem to do much at all. But the bike could stop a lot faster than a car could, so I

felt reasonably safe. I made a mental note to arc the brake shoes and re-bed them later. I should have known Bernie would have misused them; they were likely glazed.

As I approached Concord, I saw a sign for Walden Pond. I decided to get off the main road and take a look. I could see glimpses of the pond from the road, and the thought struck me was that this was the road I had dreamt of. Smooth, linked turns that I swooped through, as if I were flying. The bike felt amazing, just as it had in my dreams. I could feel its power. I looked around at the country road and realized that only a short time ago I could not have been here, not without my parents driving me, or some unusual and difficult expedition on my bicycle. But now I could be here casually, any time I wanted. Freedom. A dreamy feeling of heavy air that felt like liquid on my skin, and leaves on the road that blew away from my front wheel. I leaned into a tight blind curve. As I neared the apex I heard the yammering of a jake brake. The corner opened and the path I expected to take was filled with a huge, yellow oil-delivery truck, halfway into my lane and drifting deeper, with its wheels bouncing and smoking as the driver tried to slow enough to make the corner.

I went for the brakes but realized they wouldn't help—if I stopped, the truck would crush me flat just as thoroughly. I was moving too fast to turn inside the truck, so I got off the brakes and aimed for the outside shoulder. I squeezed past the truck, on the left side. But I had to continue my wide turn to clear the back of the truck. Now I was deep in the shoulder, the infamous soft shoulder my mother was so certain would spell my doom. I stayed off the brakes, leaned the bike over a little with some reverse steering lock, and dropped my foot to the dirt to steady the bike. The heavy BSA shook its head a little, the rear wheel slid out a bit, then settled with a little throttle. I drove out of the turn, onto the macadam and back to my side of the road.

I was amazed at how every move seemed to take place in slow motion. I pulled off in a wide spot, stopped the bike, put my head down on my arms and considered having a good cry. I looked back down the road at the curve that had nearly killed me, and I laughed. A weak, shaky laugh, but still, I laughed.

I got off the bike and looked back at the track my rear wheel had gouged in the dirt. Looked at the massive pine trees just beyond the verge that would have broken me and Sophia if I hadn't been able to turn. I shuddered, and then I laughed again.

I realized that when I was dismissing my parents' concerns, I hadn't considered any deadly outcome. But in one stark moment, I had learned that taking risks meant accepting the consequences. That could have been the end of me, right there. One ride on my motorcycle was not worth dying for, but living my life too frightened to have adventures wouldn't be living, either. I knew I had to become a good motorcycle rider to manage the risks, and now I had the freedom to do that.

Murphy's law is that if anything can go wrong it will. Actually, that's Murphy's third law. The eleventh is: "You can't make anything foolproof, because fools are so ingenious." Sitting there at the side of the road, I thought about that. I could sit in my room, wrap myself in mattresses and wear a helmet, and someone could crash an airplane into the house. I could manage the risks to the best of my ability, but there could be another truck driver on the wrong side of the road at the next turn. I promised myself I'd keep my bike in top shape. I'd make sure my brakes worked. I'd wear the right clothes, always wear a helmet, and learn to control my bike. But the plan wasn't foolproof. There would always be a more ingenious fool.

I started the bike, and rode on. I hit the coast at Beverly and rode as close to the water as I could manage, heading slowly back towards home. I had lunch at a clam shack in Swampscott. I parked my bike in the parking lot, and walked in. There were only a few customers, since it was a little late for lunch. I stifled the urge to tell everyone that the BSA was mine, that I'd been for my first ride. That I'd almost been killed, but I was okay. I looked at the old guy at the end of the counter eating big-bellied Essex clams and sipping a beer. At the mom with her two kids, waiting for her husband to come back from the takeout window. No one to tell, no one who'd care. I watched my beautiful BSA through the flyspecked window, and ate my baby scallops and onion rings.

As I watched, a drip of oil fell from the engine to the ground. Arrgh.

I went outside and lay beside my bike. I looked up at the engine covers to see if I could locate the leak. While I was watching, another drip of oil formed on the end of the oil tank's breather tube and fell to the pavement. *Ahhh. That's okay, it's supposed to do that, and I might reroute the line so it dripped on the chain.* I made a mental note to ask Paul for a suggestion. I'm big on making mental notes, but not so good at retrieving them.

I rode past the amusement park and the beach concessions in Revere, then back through Somerville. I rode to Albion cycles for the heck of it and got there by about three. Paul's truck was there, and the back door to the shop was open, even though it was Sunday and most businesses had to be closed according to Massachusetts' Blue Laws. I stopped to see what was going on. As I was getting off the bike, Paul came out, wiping his hands.

For some reason, I told him about my close shave and how it had made me resolve to be better at riding. He looked at me a moment. "You're a strange guy, Monroe. That's a reasonable

decision to make, and some people might think that a day or a week after having a close shave like that. Some people would just forget about it. Some would quit riding. But coming up with that right away—I don't know, that seems strange to me.”

“Maybe, but it's what happened. So why are you here on a Sunday?” I asked.

“Working on the race bike. Your bike looks great, by the way. Now that you have your shakedown run finished, you should do a nut-and-bolt check, tighten everything, and make sure nothing shook loose. These big vertical twins can shake bolts loose faster than an air wrench. Go ahead and pull it inside, you can use one of the stands. I don't mind company while I work, just don't ask me questions. I need to pay attention to what I'm doing.”

“Well, answer one question before you get back to it. I'm getting an occasional drip of oil from the tank breather. Should I route it to drip on the chain or is there something else I should do?”

“Leave it. It's supposed to drip a little. If you route it to the chain, it will wind up everywhere—the chain will fling it. Chain oil for chains, engine oil for engines. Simple.”

I rolled the bike up on a work stand and did a nut-and-bolt check, finding a disturbing number of loose fasteners. I took the front wheel off to check the brakes. Sure enough, the shoes were glazed. I sanded the glaze off with coarse sandpaper, covered the shoes with blue chalk, and put the wheel back on. I spun the wheel and jammed on the brakes, then took it all apart again to find the high point, where the chalk was scraped off. I gently eased the high points down with sandpaper wrapped on a wood block, and repeated the check and sand process until the brake shoe was making even contact through its entire arc. Then I did the same for the rear brake, which was even more glazed. Bernie must have been using the rear brake hard.

Paul was still working, so I did a quick clutch-plate adjustment, getting the pressure plate flat by evening the spring pressure. I used one of the shop's dial indicators to speed the process up. It was only a little off. I put everything back together, topped off the oil, and pushed the bike outside.

By then, the sun was low on the horizon, so I said to Paul, "Gotta go. I'm not comfortable enough to ride in the dark yet."

He said, "Wait here a second, I've got something for you," and disappeared into the front of the store. He came out a few moments later with a slim book written by John Surtees. "The first half of the book is about preparing racing bikes. There are some good tips in there, even for street bikes, about getting everything just right. The second half is about controlling your bike at speed. I know you aren't that interested in racing, but if you want to be good at handling your bike, this is the place to start."

I thanked him, started my bike and rode home. The brakes were much better, powerful and progressive. I couldn't feel any difference with the clutch.

Dad's car was in the driveway. I pulled up around it and parked my bike in the backyard. I had a chain that I'd put inside an old bicycle tube to keep it from beating up my paintwork. I locked it through the frame and back wheel, and went into the house.

My father looked at me with a strained expression. "You need to tell us when you're going to be on that motorcycle, your mother has been worried sick for the last hour."

"Sure, Dad, I'm sorry to have worried you guys. I took it for a shakedown run and then stopped at the bike shop to check it all over. I didn't mean to be gone so long."

“I planned to follow you in the car the first few times, to make sure you didn’t have problems.”

“I didn’t know that. There weren’t any problems—well, none that really matter, and I fixed them. You can follow me next time, if you want.”

My father looked at me for a long time without saying anything. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, “It doesn’t seem necessary now. You’re growing up, Monroe, and I know you’re going to be trying new things. I’m glad to see it. I thought you were going to spend your whole life up in your room. But you need to think of your mother. This all scares her. When she looks at you, she still sees the little kid that couldn’t walk across the backyard without getting hurt. Give her some time to adjust.”

I went over and gave Mom a hug. She didn’t say anything. She was gripping a wadded Kleenex and her eyes were red.

“I’ll be careful, Mom. I really will.” I made my escape to my room.

In the quiet of my room, I could still feel the thrill of being on my motorcycle. The feeling that I could just point my bike in any direction I chose, and go until I hit the ocean. Freedom of movement. I got my guitar out of the case and played for a while, to ease the weight of the silence. It had been a few days since I’d played, and I felt a clumsiness that shouldn’t have been there. I played some jazz riffs and strung them together, just improvising and amusing myself. Then I played “The Shadow of Your Smile” in an arrangement I had worked out, which was part Wes-Montgomery-style—all chords, with a little finger melody added in the breaks. It was fun, but I needed to lighten my mood, so I played some Beach Boys—“Help Me, Rhonda,” and finally, “Little Honda.” I sang along in my crappy voice: “I’m gonna wake you up early,



'cause I'm gonna take a ride with you. Were going down to the Honda shop, I'll tell you what we're gonna do ..."

That night, I dreamed about my ride around Walden Pond. In my dream, when I came around the blind turn, I rode straight into the front of the truck. I woke up scared and shaking. As I fell back to sleep, I tried to change the dream so I would get around the truck. But I ran straight into it again. The last thing I saw before I lurched awake was massive yellow fenders, a huge chrome grill, and PETERBUILT.

## CARPETBAGGER

On Monday I rode my bike to work, but decided to leave it there and take the bus home. I wanted to see Claudia, and there was no way to do that with the bike. I called her at work in the afternoon to synch up our bus ride. She plunked down next to me at her usual stop, and gave me a kiss. “Hi lover boy, we need to stop meeting like this.”

“That would be a shame,” I said.

I told her about my bike ride, leaving out the part about the truck. So much for my remarkable honesty and openness, but I had certainly warned her I didn’t tell people everything.

“You remember that I’m leaving for Lake George tomorrow, right? I won’t see you for two weeks. Maybe while I’m gone, you can practice enough to feel okay about driving me to work. I hope you can drive okay with my tits in your back and my hands in your lap,” she laughed.

“Wow,” I said, “I don’t know how to practice that. I’m sure I’d drive straight into a lamppost.”

“Okay, I’ll keep my hands to myself until you’re better at paying attention to your riding. You need to convince my dad that you’re a safe driver. You’ll probably have to take him for a ride. Then I can ride behind you, and grab your cock when I feel like it.”

Claudia still shocked me with her frankly sexual talk. I liked it, but it was startling.

I was only somewhat prepared for her frankness. It was my sister who’d told me about sex. She was open about what she and her myriad boyfriends did for fun, though she never went into any really helpful or entertaining detail. Claudia was bluntly sexual in a different way. She’d say things that turned my ears red, while she looked into my eyes without blinking. She had these disconcertingly blue, innocent eyes. Sometimes I felt hypnotized when I looked at them. I felt like I was tipping forward, even when I wasn’t.

“So, Lake George doesn’t suck too bad. We have part ownership of a cabin, and at this time of year, the place is jammed with college boys. I intend to keep myself entertained,” Claudia said.

My gut ached at the thought of some college boy kissing Claudia. She said, “Hey, don’t look at me like that. We’re not married, we’re not even going steady. You should feel free to date anyone you like. I do. And I’m not giving that up unless I choose to. And right now, I do not choose to.”

I tried to look like I didn’t mind, but I wasn’t used to anything like this. I didn’t know what to say, and couldn’t say what I felt. So I just looked down at my feet.

“Monroe, don’t do this. We’ve just started a relationship, and neither of us knows where it’s going. We’re not even eighteen yet, and I have no idea what the rest of my life is going to be like. I do know one thing, though. I’m not into drama. So quit acting like I just kicked you in the

balls. You're my friend. Some day you might be my lover or more, but not now. I'm going to have fun and I'm not going to feel guilty about it. So either get over it or give me up right now. You can moon all you like on the bus, but my mom and dad have already left for New York. There's no one at our house. Tomorrow morning my aunt is going to come by and take me to the cabin. You can come over to my house and we can have fun together, or you can play drama boy, go home and jack off. Your choice."

Well, that was an easy choice, and like the dog I am, I perked right up.

"Sorry, Claudia. I know I have no claim on you. Everything we've done is the first time it's happened to me. Seriously. I guess that exaggerates the importance of everything, and I'm getting carried away. I'll back off. I hate drama, too. I can't believe I got so weird so fast. I'll do better."

"Good, and now that you've broken the ice with me, you should feel more comfortable with other girls. Please, give yourself a chance. Chase some other women. At least, talk to them. I don't want to teach you everything. Just the most important things."

I smiled and nodded, but I didn't expect much to happen. Now that the bike was done and all I needed to do was some minor tuning and tweaking, I was back into my science project, full-bore. I was building a linear particle accelerator using a Van de Graaff electrostatic generator as a high-voltage source to accelerate an electron beam inside a long vacuum tube with a beam port at the end. I planned to bash the electrons against various materials. It wasn't anything groundbreaking, I'd more or less copied and scaled down the design from experiments done in the '30s and '40s, and I certainly wasn't going to learn anything new about the mysteries of the universe. The energy levels were going to be low.

But how many seventeen-year-old guys have their own particle accelerators?

The previous year, my telemetry robot project took second place in physics at the state science fair, and I'd been invited to a junior science symposium at MIT. During the symposium I was introduced to Dr. Ambruster, a physics professor at the school. We hit it off, and he volunteered to advise me on my future projects. I ran the idea of my electron accelerator past Dr. Ambruster, and he thought it was not likely to work well on a small scale. He said that even though some early accelerators had been built that way, I should remember that those experimenters had had a lot of resources available to them. So while my accelerator might be simple by today's standards, I shouldn't underestimate the complexity or precision required to make it work. He also didn't think my ideas for focusing coils would work without a lot of complex electronics. But he said I should go ahead, because that's what science is all about. Having ideas and testing them, and letting the chips fall where they may. I figured during the two weeks Claudia was away, I'd be able to make some real progress.

I stopped by the house to tell my folks I was having dinner at Claudia's. I said we were going to watch TV afterward, and I didn't know when I'd be home, but it wouldn't be too late. I didn't bother to mention that her parents were away.

Hmm. I might not be much of a direct liar, but I was getting better at omission. I took a quick shower and put on chinos, a blue button-down shirt, and some nice loafers my cousin had handed down to me. Then I grabbed my grubby girl's-bike-in-drag and zoomed to Claudia's house. I swear the air felt tingly, like a promise, on my skin. Or maybe I was just still damp from the shower. I rang the bell. Claudia opened the door almost instantly, grabbed my hand and pulled me inside. She kicked the door closed and gave me a big kiss.

“Tonight, it’s my turn. You’re going to get me off. You’re going to get me off a zillion times. I’m so hot and wet that my panties are soaked.”

She was right. But I could hardly hear her with the pounding noise in my ears and all the hair follicles on my whole body contracting. I felt like one tingling, fuzz-covered nerve cell. She kissed me hard and stroked the front of my pants. I came immediately with her first touch, and a huge wet spot started to spread around the fly of my chinos. I felt a surge of embarrassment, but Claudia just smirked and rubbed the wet area. I realized it didn’t matter. It was going to be a long, interesting night.

We went into the living room and collapsed on the couch. She took her panties off and lifted her skirt in front. “I want you to look at me, to touch the lips of my pussy gently. Don’t push your finger in me, I’m still a virgin and it will hurt. Just stroke the lips and then I’ll show you where my clitoris is. By the way, I intend to be a virgin after tonight, too. We’re going to play, but we’re not going all the way, so put that out of your mind.”

I stroked her gently, watching her lips get red and slide open. When I pushed my finger gently between them, she said, “Ah, right there. Be gentle.”

I said, “I read in *Playboy* that women like to be licked on their pussy. Would you like me to do that?”

“Yes, I would. Do you think you’ll like it? You won’t be grossed out?”

I said I was pretty damned sure I’d like it, and I did. I’m sure Claudia liked it a lot. The noises she made were a little alarming at first. She bucked around, banging my nose with her pelvis and squeezing my head with her thighs. When I lifted my head to ask if she was okay, she grabbed the back of my head and shoved me back down.

Oh, and she sort of sucked me later on. I think it was the first time I said I thought I should go, at about ten. I lasted about as long as I had when she'd grabbed me in the doorway—just long enough to feel her lips around the head of my penis. I hoped that wasn't going to be a problem for me. I'd read that it can be, and in *Playboy's* advice column, they insinuated that guys who pop off right away are lame and can't satisfy women. I wondered why the guys who had that problem just didn't lick their girl's pussies. Claudia seemed happy with that.

I think I fainted at the end. Next thing I knew, it was midnight and she was kissing me gently and telling me, "You're my sweet boy, but you have to go, I need to sleep. If we both conk out and my aunt finds us, my next two weeks are going to really suck."

When I got home, my dad was still up. Or rather, he was sleeping in his recliner with the TV hissing, the screen just noise. He got up when I came into the living room. He looked at me and said, "Don't get anyone pregnant, and whatever you've been up to, take a shower. Don't put your clothes in the hamper. Wash them yourself. Your mom will recognize that smell in a second."

I guess I looked a little bug-eyed. Dad said, "Don't worry about it, just go to bed, but we need to have a talk about condoms and birth control, before you get yourself in trouble."

I had no idea what was getting into my dad, but he was confusing the heck out of me. I'd expected him to be clueless. I was starting to suspect that he might have had some experience with being a guy and growing up. I guessed it made sense, but I'd always thought of my dad as a permanent adult.

## PSYCHOS ARE US

Sam walked into the office in Gino's nice home in Arlington. He dropped \$150 on the desk and said, "You sure you want to do this, Gino? There's something about that little shit that I don't like. I never have. There's something rotten about him."

"I know what it is, Sam. The fucking kid is a psycho, just like my sister Andrea. She always acted like butter wouldn't melt in her mouth, and she'd never admit it, but I know for a fact she killed our dog because he chewed up one of her fucking dolls. I saw her feeding the dog hamburger. She never paid any attention to the dog before that. Two days later, the dog is dead. Vet said it was broken glass in his food. My folks never said anything to me, but that was the last pet we had in the house. They knew as well as I did. I knew I should never turn my back on her.

"Her husband, the dickhead clarinet player. Right? No one knows what happened to him. Well, *I fuckin' know*. The little fuck was stepping out. Poking some blond. Everyone knew that. Then Andrea shows up with a bruise on her cheekbone. I say, *Hey, you want I should give dickhead a beatdown?* She says, *No, Gino, it's nothin'. I walked into a door. It's nothin'.*"



“I figure still, I’d kick the guy around a little and tell him what’s what. But couple a days later, dickhead is gone. You ever hear her say she was worried about him? That maybe he didn’t run off? Did she ever ask me if I did something? Does she say *Hey, did you pop my husband?* No. I tell you why. She slipped him something and gave him a fucking dirt nap, sure as shit. She knows he ain’t coming back. She did it. I know it. I could see it in her fucking eyes the first time I said something. Same as with the dog. Not shifty, nothing like that. Just empty. Black and empty.

“The fucking kid is the same way. Sneaky little shit.”

“So why are we fucking with him? Why not just put him out of that business and call it good? It’s penny ante,” said Sam.

“Same reason, Sam. We don’t turn our backs on him. We’re better off with him doing shit in front of us, rather than behind our backs. I don’t trust him. So we watch him. But if he starts doing something crazy, we put him down and he disappears. I got no problem with that. The world will be a better place. As long as it doesn’t get back to Andrea.”

## A STREETCAR NAMED LUST

The next day on the bus, there was no Claudia, of course. It was disappointing not to see her there. A fat lady sat next to me and elbowed me all the way to Somerville. Quite a contrast. She smelled like old sweat, cheap perfume, and boiled cabbage.

With summer winding into fall, there wasn't much to do at the shop. Some of the mechanics didn't come in at all, and there was only one tune-up for the two who did, so they were both gone by ten in the morning. Paul came by and told me to clear out. "No point in just doing busywork. You're headed back to school in a few weeks anyway, right? We'll talk later about what you can do after school, but why don't you take the next couple of days off and enjoy your bike?"

I rode home, enjoying how the heat coming off the engine and up the side of Sophia mixed with the chilly morning air. Traffic was light, so I took a little swing around the neighborhood before going home. I started thinking that Albion Cycles might not be a reliable job in the winter. I needed to work. Whatever college I got into, assuming that any would have me, was not likely to give me a full-boat scholarship like my straight-A, knock-the-college-

boards-out-of-the-park, national-merit-scholarship-winning sister had gotten. And my dad had made it clear that I'd have to pay at least half of all the costs. "I put myself through college with no help from my folks. You can at least do half," he said.

I got home before noon, and no one was there. I decided to go to the public pool to swim. I didn't want to take my motorcycle. The only place to park wasn't visible from the pool, and I was nervous it might get stolen, so I rode the streetcar.

The streetcar wasn't crowded. I sat towards the front. I was wearing shorts and an old T-shirt, carrying my bathing suit rolled up in a towel. There was a pretty woman sitting in front of me, probably in her mid-twenties. She was wearing a tight blouse that showed off her big boobs, and a lot of makeup and perfume. The scent was nice, but it made me a little woozy. When I got up to get off at the stop for the pool, she stood up, too. She exited the streetcar before me. I got off and glanced back at her. She stopped and gave me an odd smile.

I turned back towards the streetcar to see if she was smiling at someone behind me. No one there. I turned back to her and she motioned me to come to her. I was startled and nervous. I looked back at the streetcar again and there was an older black woman glaring out the window at the two of us. She gave me a stern look that clearly said, *Don't do it*. I automatically obeyed her authority and started to walk away from the woman, but she had such a disappointed and rueful expression on her face that I hesitated again. I remembered what Claudia had said about being open to experiences. So I turned back and walked up to the woman.

She said, "Hi honey, you're a big one, aren't you? If we go have some fun at my place, can you keep your mouth shut about it?"

I said, "Sure."

She looped her arm through mine and we crossed the street. Then she said, “The super in my building is a nosy pain in the ass. I’m going to walk ahead of you to my apartment. You just follow a few hundred feet back. When I go in, I want you to walk around the block and then walk right up to the door like you belong there, and ring the bell for apartment 4B.”

I thought, *Here’s where she ditches me, it’s just some silly game*, but she buzzed me in and was waiting at the apartment door.

She gave me a long, slow kiss and put her tongue way into my mouth, much deeper than Claudia had. I was a little scared; I didn’t know what was going on or why she’d chosen me. But my dick wasn’t having any misgivings. I could feel the head throbbing against my shorts. She felt it, too. She put her hand inside my pants and rubbed my cock through my skivvies. She pushed me against the wall and rubbed my chest. She said, “I’m going to do all kinds of things to you. Is there anywhere you need to be?”

I said, “I have all day. I was just going swimming at the pool.”

“Good.” She took off all my clothes and had me lie on her bed. She was still dressed, but she touched me and stroked me. She wouldn’t let me touch her—she pushed my hands down by my sides. She had me turn over and she rubbed my back, the backs of my legs, and my ass. I felt her climb onto the bed, and then I felt her heavy breasts on my back. She ground her body against me, like she was doing a dance.

I didn’t come, like I would have if Claudia had done that. I think I was in shock, and the situation was so foreign to me that it wasn’t as arousing as it might have been.

She made me turn over, and then she rubbed some slippery stuff on my cock and rubbed it slowly. She took off her panties but not her skirt, and climbed onto me. She guided my cock into her pussy with one hand and then fucked the bejeesus out of me.

By four o'clock, I felt totally dehydrated, my lips were sore and puffy from kissing her lips, her breasts, and all the other things she'd pushed them into. I'd come about a dozen times, and I felt empty and hollow in my nuts. She rolled over and said, "Wow, I am totally fucked out. My name is Donna, by the way. What's yours?"

"Monroe. I don't think my cock will ever get hard again. You broke it."

"Don't worry honey, it'll heal. I bet if I popped that poor chapped little guy in my mouth he'd wake right up. You want a beer?"

"Gee, a Coke or just water sounds better."

"You don't like beer?" she said.

"I tried it a couple of times but didn't really care for the taste. I had an uncle who was an alcoholic and died young. He always smelled of beer. At the end his brain was so pickled he couldn't remember his name. My mom said he was very intelligent before he became a drunk. I'm afraid it might hurt my thinking, and thinking is really important to me."

I babbled away. I have no idea why I was spilling my guts to her. I guess I just like talking to naked women with beautiful breasts. Especially if they've just finished screwing my brains out for three hours.

I said, "This is a really great apartment. Do you live here alone?"

She said, "Sort of. Do you know what *being kept* means? I'm the mistress of a guy who lives on Beacon Hill. He comes here most weekends and stays with me. Sometimes we go to

clubs or to the track, but mostly we stay in and have sex and watch TV. He pays for the apartment and keeps me in spending money. I have a night job as a waitress, but it doesn't really pay for this. If I wasn't fucking Robert, I'd be in some dump with three roommates, cooking on a hotplate."

"Huh," I said, brilliant conversationalist that I am. I searched for something to say as the awkward silence stretched out. "Would he be angry if he knew I was here? Is that why you had me go around the block?"

Donna laughed, "Fuck no, honey. I told you, that was so I wouldn't have to deal with the nosy super. Actually, Robert would want to join in. You know what a three-way is? We've done that a few times, once with a friend of his and a few other times with another girl he brought over."

I was confused. "Sex with three people? I read about it in *Playboy*, or maybe *Penthouse*. They called it *ménage a trois*, but didn't really give details. Do the people take turns?"

Donna laughed again. "Not necessarily."

My confusion must have shown on my face.

"Endless possibilities, honey, and Robert likes them all. I don't remember the last time we had sex with his cock in my pussy. Mostly I give him blow jobs in his big black Cadillac while he drives. Or he fucks me in the ass. Pretty much all the stuff his snooty wife would never do.

"I like young guys, I'm in control. I can do whatever I want to you. That makes me horny and I come hard and fast. I don't think I've come with Robert for almost a year. It's a good thing I'm such a good little actress, or he'd be bored and looking elsewhere. He told me his last

mistress didn't like it in her ass, so he dumped her. Ever since he told me that, I've been saving my money like crazy, and acting like I love it. Sooner or later, I'll be out on my cute little sore ass, but I'm going to have a stake.

“In the meantime, roll back. Put your hands under the edge of headboard, like you're tied up. Maybe next time you come here, I'll tie you up and fuck you unmercifully, but for right now just pretending is enough.”

I left Donna's at around six, after taking a shower and checking my clothes for her scent. Good thing she'd stripped me naked before we started doing anything. I had no idea what my dad would think if I walked in the house smelling like Donna did when she rubbed herself all over me.

I spent the next two days at Donna's. We pretty much did everything she could think of, which was quite a bit. After things calmed down a little, she took her time and showed me exactly what she liked. I'd never even thought about having my toes sucked, but I highly recommend it. Girls like it, too. At least Donna does.

It was almost a relief when Paul called the house on Thursday evening and asked me to work Friday. I got to the shop at nine, just as Paul was opening up. He said, “I'm down to one mechanic, which is okay since Fred is the one who's staying, and he can do about anything. But there will be a lot of little stuff to do, like tune-ups and fixing flats. Do you want to go on flat rate as a mechanic?”

“You bet,” I said. Suddenly, the future looked rosy.

“The money is a lot better if you work efficiently, but there has to be work to do for you to make anything. I can give you some hours if you help me reorganize the parts department, but

other than that, you just work when there's something to do. When there are jobs, I can call you the night before, to let you know what there is. Fred gets first dibs on any work, and if it's just fixing flats, you can bet he'll be doing it. He's got a family to feed."

With that, the future had turned a little bleaker. But, as it turned out, I was solidly busy for the next week with a steady flow of tune-ups, and one bike that needed its front forks repaired after a run-in with the back of a truck. Fred was busy with sudden flurry of major engine repairs, and transmission and clutch work, so he was glad to have me get the smaller jobs out. At the end of the week, Paul handed me my check. I was flabbergasted. Even after taxes, it was three times my usual check.

I called Donna every night after Paul had given me the rundown of jobs for the next day. She was nice about how busy I was. "Make your money while you can, honey. There's plenty of time for play later." I called her Friday and she told me Robert was spending Saturday but not Sunday. I turned up at her apartment at ten in the morning on Sunday, after calling to confirm that their plans hadn't changed. I had a hard-on while I was walking up the stairs. Four hours later, I thought I might never have another one again. But what fun.

I called her Monday and the first thing she said was: "Hey, are you over eighteen?"

I said, "No, I'm seventeen, but I'll be eighteen this summer."

"Fuck. Honey you can't come here anymore. I can't see you. I could be arrested. That asshole super came by and told me he was certain I'm entertaining an underage boy, and if it didn't stop he would have the police question me. I told him he was fucking crazy and to leave me alone and mind his own business. I didn't know, you're so big I thought for sure you were over eighteen. I could be in big trouble."



I could tell how terrified she was, even through the phone.

So that was that.

Just as well, I suppose, though it was hard to convince my dick that this was the case. I'd get hard at the weirdest and most inconvenient times. Sitting at the breakfast table. Working on a motorcycle. Working on my science project. I'd get a mental image of Donna's closely-spaced, heavy, dusky breasts with their wide, pink nipples, and smell the powder she liked to put on them. I'd remember the sparkle of the powder flecks on the underside curve of her breasts, or the way her breast looked from the side when she sat in a chair in front of her vanity and raised her arms to tie up her hair, and I'd be instantly sporting serious wood. The impossible-to-hide kind. The kind that will *not* lay down against your leg, no matter how hard you push.

## WHAT WOMEN WANT

I think Claudia was surprised that I'd wound up in bed with someone else the day she'd left. She said she was glad about it, but there was obvious hesitation and some hurt in her eyes. I hadn't expected that. She told me about a boy she met at Lake George. She said he was going to college in D.C. and she wasn't interested in seeing him again. She acted a little funny. I hope she's not really interested in that guy. Something was certainly eating her. She looked at me funny and she's been quiet. I might be getting dumped. I have no idea.

I think I'm going to keep my head down for a while and work hard on my project. School has started, so the only time I can see Claudia is the weekends. I told her I'd spend every moment I could with her, but she said she needs some weekend time for herself. I understand microbiology, quantum theory (sort of), and electronics, but not women. I thought about calling Donna just to talk, and maybe get some advice, but it seems like a bad idea. I'm sure it would freak her out.

So here's the thing. I was a happy geek until this whole girl thing came along. Or maybe it was the motorcycle. Maybe Lenny is right, owning a motorcycle makes women hot. Anyway,

I'm semi-miserable right now, which is a new feeling for me. I wanted to get some girl to like me, and maybe to get to kiss one, but I never thought I'd be having all this crazy stuff happen, and certainly not with a girl that looks like Claudia. Or Donna, either, for that matter.

I'm happy it all happened. Better to have loved and lost, and all that crap. But right now I feel like I'm in limbo and I can't think clearly. I keep wondering what Claudia is doing and thinking, and wondering if I'll ever get to fuck my brains out with Donna again.

Right now the two of them are running neck and neck in the Jergens jackoff derby.

School started, so that's grim. I've always sucked at school. Lots of D's and F's. Probably because I couldn't see the blackboard until folks finally realized I was nearsighted. Teachers stick the tall guys at the back of the class. That was me—last seat, last row, since the time I was eight. I had no idea that other kids could see the blackboard until it magically jumped into crystal clarity when viewed through my amazing new glasses.

I loved schoolbooks. They'd give them to us the first day of class, and I'd take them home and read them. And then the teachers would inch slowly through the stuff I'd already read, waving their arms around at the invisible blackboard. By the time I got glasses and could see what the teacher was doing all the way at the front of the room, I didn't care much. I was on another planet. Teachers considered me mildly retarded. I was kept back in the seventh grade, and I can't say repeating a grade did much to relieve the boredom. Finally they gave me an IQ test during pass two through the seventh grade, and then they started yelling at me for not living up to my potential. Mr. Colito, the paunchy assistant principal called me to his office and told me to have a seat. Then he stood and loomed close over me, and stroked his chin pensively to demonstrate his intellectual depth and give the majesty of the moment a chance to sink in. He

leaned forward, giving me the benefit of deferred dentistry and a fondness for salami. “Mr. Sanborne, you have the highest IQ I’ve seen in five years of administering these tests. What are you doing with your God-given gifts? I’ll tell you. You’re squandering them.”

I just gave him my standard clueless look and waited for him to stop berating me. I was surprised to have done well. I got distracted by some of the questions and lost time pondering them. I was certain all the other kids were smarter than me. In fact, my first conclusion was that smarter kids would be even more distracted by the questions, and so I did well because I wasn’t as smart as they were. It took me a while to figure out that they probably weren’t.

## FEAR OF FLYING

My science project was suffering. Well, first of all it wasn't working, so that was a problem. The accelerator tube would charge up and the beam would flicker to life and almost stabilize, but then a nice fat lightning bolt would jump from the Van de Graaff collector ball to ground, and it would quit. It was hard to predict when the discharge would happen because if I edged close to the machine to read the microammeter, sometimes a fist-sized bolt of homemade lightning would hit me in the shirt pocket—where my pens are—and drop me, twitching, to the floor. I took the pens out of my pocket and got hit in the belt buckle—not an improvement. Without the belt, it would probably be my fly. The pens went back in the pocket.

With the erratic discharge, I couldn't synch the accelerator coils spaced along the tube. I'd had the bright idea that I could space a lot more coils down the tube, and terminate them in the air with corona points, so the over-voltage discharge would be prevented by cascading down the coils. When the beam initiated, it would induce current in the coils. If I wound them the right way, it might self-regulate the voltage of the Van de Graaff. But I'd have to build a new tube in order to do that. Everything would need careful spacing and quite a bit of math to get the coil

positions right. It looked like a hundred hours of work—at least. And the state science fair was looming. I blew through the city science fair with a first place, just by showing off what I'd built, along with a poster that illustrated how nuclear accelerators work. I didn't bother to tell the judges that if I lit off my system, it would probably whack them to their knees with an errant lightning bolt. But now the state science fair was weeks away, and my pile of crap didn't work.

Also, there was a lot more work to do at Albion than I had expected. Fred had packed it in and moved to Florida. "I just don't want to be here for the winter," he said. "It's only fall and I'm already freezing my nuts off in this drafty shop. I'm tired of these cold, concrete floors. I'm gone."

And so he was. Now I was doing all the mechanical work at Albion. I was gaining confidence and skill. There'd been a rapid decline in the amount of rework I needed to do because of screw-ups, and some of the customers told Paul their bikes had never run so well until I'd done some magic to them.

There was no magic involved. I was still a baby mechanic—no knowledge base, at least nothing like Fred's encyclopedic mastery of all things motorcycle. But even if I was only one step ahead of the customers, at least I had access to the shop manuals and proper tools. I was mostly using Paul's tools while steadily building up my own collection. Good tools are expensive, but you only buy them once, and I was making darned good money at the shop. I was saving most of it, but I invested a steady trickle into my toolbox.

I'd also been practicing everything I read in the John Surtees book that Paul had lent me. Amazing book. I learned to manage my bike under hard braking and acceleration, and how to read a turn so I could get the braking points right. I learned to brake hard coming into a turn,

keeping the bike upright and straight until I reached the proper speed, then leaning over hard and aiming past the apex of the turn, to make a late apex that brought me out of the turn exactly where I wanted to be, instead of wandering off the edge. I practiced every opportunity I had. I'm sure some other drivers thought me insane or a daredevil, but I was dramatically improving my control of Sophia, and she responded magnificently to better riding. I gained a lot of confidence in her abilities and in mine. I also maintained her in top shape, and that increased my sensitivity to variations. I could feel when either tire was a little under-inflated. I could sense when a road surface was slippery, and compensate for it. I could ride faster under wet conditions than I had been able to under dry conditions. It was exhilarating.

Of course, since I was pushing it, I had the inevitable "overconfidence" crash. I was accelerating out of a turn on a back road near Lowell when I hit some muddy water running across the road from a broken sprinkler at the edge of a lawn. The front wheel went out from under me before I could react, and the bike slid across the road and through the gravel on the shoulder. Fortunately, nothing dug in to cause the bike to cartwheel. I fell off on the low side, slid across the pavement on my back, went straight across the gravel without slowing much, and hit the low bank with my feet. Pure luck—if I'd hit headfirst, the impact would have broken my neck. My momentum carried me up and over the bank in a rag-doll somersault, and I landed on a grassy lawn on my back, with the wind knocked out of me. I couldn't breathe except in tiny gasps, and I teetered on the edge of consciousness, starved for oxygen. I heard the squeal of cars locking up their brakes and car doors slamming. I could hear people down the bank, near my bike. They were looking for my body in the woods just past the lawn. Of course, they weren't finding anything. After a few minutes, I slowly sat up. I got up and walked down to where my

bike had been put up on its kickstand by some Samaritan. I was looking the bike over when some people came back out of the woods and told me they hadn't found the guy. I said, "I'm the guy."

"Geez, sit down, we'll get you an ambulance."

"I don't think I need one, I think I'm okay. Nothing seems broken. I scraped up my jacket and my helmet. I think I'm okay. I'm just a little shaky."

"Man, I saw you go flying when you hit that embankment. I thought you shot right into the woods. I figured you were dead."

"Nope, I landed on the lawn. Got the wind knocked out of me, and I had to lay there for a while. Sorry for the excitement."

Sophia was relatively undamaged as well. She had a scraped and punctured primary cover that was leaking a little oil. Her footpeg rubber was gone, the handlebars were bent and the clutch lever was just a stub. But she was rideable, and she started after a few kicks and some coddling. I refused the offers of a ride, got on Sophia and carefully rode her to Albion.

Paul gave me another set of the unsellable narrow handlebars, I bought a new footpeg rubber and clutch lever, and Paul sold me a used primary cover that had already been polished. I got away cheap, but it was another good lesson—don't ride at the edge of control unless you know what's around every corner. I started giving myself a lot of extra room. I didn't see any reason to tell anyone about my mishap. My helmet was so beat up that the new scrapes weren't obvious, and my jacket was rough, worn leather.

I saw Claudia on the Sunday after she came home. Whatever was bugging her had somewhat run its course, and we had a wonderful time together. Things weren't quite as crazy as they had been before, but maybe that was because we couldn't seem to get any privacy. We had



both calmed down a little bit. When we were together, we were doing more than just grabbing each other. I loved spending time with her, even if it was just up in her room, with her mom or dad issuing random checks to make sure we weren't making babies. I actually started navigating the puzzle of what kind of person Claudia was, instead of just how she tasted. The answer to both was: very, very fine.

I learned that the shape of her legs came from playing soccer. I'd heard of it, but had never seen it played. From Claudia, I learned that the rest of the world called soccer *football*, and it was the world's biggest sport. Given my fondness for Claudia's gorgeous legs, I decided it must have a lot going for it.

The fly in the ointment was that Claudia's mom and dad had been bending her ear for a long time about spending some time in France before she went to college, and it sounded really great to her. I assumed that meant she'd go for a few weeks in the summer, but it suddenly became clear that they were talking about a much bigger, longer trip. It looked like it might be all summer. There was even talk about her leaving school early.

While our relationship had become more serious, we both still held the notion that this wasn't necessarily a permanent thing. I had no real idea what my life was going to be after high school, while Claudia's path was certain. She was a straight-A student except for a solitary, much-regretted B in the sixth grade, and had a stunning set of SAT and AP scores. Her parents had started saving for college when she was born, and her mother's parents had left a substantial sum in their will for their only granddaughter's education. She could go anywhere she wanted.

Though I did well on my SAT; thanks to my undisciplined approach to math, I didn't test as well as I might have. Some of my AP scores were even better than Claudia's, but my grades were still in the dumpster.

On a positive note, I solved the synch and discharge problems of my accelerator and narrowed the focus of the beam by surrounding the column with forty narrow coils that terminated in corona discharge points. I hadn't needed to build a new vacuum tube. It just took a little math to optimize the spacing, which turned out to be semi-logarithmic. The coils distributed the voltage applied to the top of the stack and regulated the voltage to keep the tube from arcing over. Once the beam initiated, it drained a little of the charge, and that helped, too. Bottom line: I was getting a more energetic beam than I had expected. And lightning bolts were no longer knocking me to the floor.

The magnetic field generated in each coil pinched the beam into the center of the tube, and focused it into forty-one little blobs of energy. It was pretty at night, but if I left it on long, it slightly fogged the film I kept wrapped in thin, black paper close to the accelerator. So I knew it was leaking some gamma rays and probably flinging some energetic beta particles around, too. I considered building a Geiger counter, but I decided instead to limit how much I used the system, and to stand well away when it was running. I think I really just didn't want to know how nutso I was being. I also wrapped the discharge port and the target holder with lead roofing sheet. It all looked intimidating.

I learned that an early experimenter had used similar equipment to generate a proton beam, by changing the exciter polarity and releasing a trace of hydrogen into the tube's high vacuum, ionizing the thin gas. The resulting stripped-hydrogen ions accelerated down the tube

and made a proton beam. I tried it, and it worked perfectly. I proved they were protons by electrostatically deflecting the beam in the opposite angle from the electron beam, though the violet color of the beam inside the tube seemed like a good indicator as well.

Even though it was a simple modification, accelerating protons made my particle accelerator far sexier. After all, every television has an electron accelerator—the picture tube. Not only are the electrons that activate the phosphor screen accelerated, they're also steered and modulated. I was just blasting them out of a mica window. Every vacuum tube in the cheapest radio flings electrons around. But protons! Now we're talking particles.

I redid most of my original experiments with protons, showing the differential penetration into plastic. It was almost useful work. I could make a case for original thought, even though it was original only because no one gave a shit about the difference in penetration and polymerization of protons versus electrons in polyethylene.

I did find something interesting. Exposing thin polyethylene to my proton beam made it permeable to gas but not to liquid. I could breathe through it, but it still held water. Electrons didn't do the same thing—only protons did. I think the protons knock some molecules out of position and make microscopic holes. Electrons don't have enough mass to do that.

The judges at the state science fair were probably expecting a non-working model of a particle accelerator. I startled the heck out of them by lighting off my accelerator to show that I could produce high-energy beams irradiating a target external to the accelerator with protons. I demonstrated how it was possible to judge the energies by testing the depth of cross-linking in stacks of polyethylene. They walked a short distance away and had a long conversation. I sent over my trusty spy, Lenny, to eavesdrop. He told me it sounded for a while like it was a toss-up

as to whether they would award me a prize or call the FBI. In the end, I received first prize in physics. And the judges and the safety proctor told me I was never, never, ever to turn my accelerator on while they were present.

## AWAKENING

A few weeks later, I got my report card. I had an F in physics, joining a raft of D's and C's, and one lonely B. The headmaster and my physics teacher hauled me to the office to yell at me. Mr. Lamkin, the advisor to the science club, where I was one of the head geeks, was also present. It looked like they'd already been berating him—he was red in the face and looked uncomfortable.

The headmaster spluttered that I was clearly not making any effort in class. He asked me if I thought I was so special that I shouldn't be judged by the same criteria as the other students were. He turned a brighter red in the face than Mr. Lamkin, and looked like he was going to stroke out. So did Dr. Plum, who was my physics teacher and the head of the science department.

They continued for about ten minutes, telling me how lazy I was, while I grew steadily more irritated by their assumptions. I finally said, "I invested more than six hundred hours of work into my project over the last year. I built every part by myself, including blowing all the glass parts. For most of the summer I worked two jobs so that I could buy the parts. I don't think

laziness is my primary problem. I got seven-thirty-five on the physics AP. Seriously, sirs, this seems to be more of a reflection of the approach to teaching than my ability or potential.”

So that went over well.

Mr. Lamkin snorted slightly in amusement. The two teachers began reiterating their entire “you’re lazy” thesis at a higher volume. This led me to consider them too stupid to engage with in serious conversation, so I clammed up. Except when one of them (I don’t recall who) said, “I suppose you think you could do a better job of teaching these subjects?” To which I simply had to answer, “I’d be incredibly disappointed if I couldn’t.”

I have no idea where I got the guts to say that. I don’t talk back. I’m nothing like Angel, but maybe when I’m pissed enough, a little of that DNA comes forward.

The headmaster melted down. He said that if he could withdraw my science fair award, he would. He said they had been planning to congratulate me in an assembly, but that was before they had reviewed my grades. There would be no presentation, no honors, and no recognition.

I couldn’t keep myself from smiling a little. *Toss me in the fucking briar patch.* They finally dismissed me from the office and I went back to class. If I’d just quietly flunked physics instead of winning a prize at the state science fair, they would have ignored me.

After school, I was walking to my motorcycle when Mr. Lamkin intercepted me. “Don’t let those guys get you down. They simply don’t know how to respond to what you’ve accomplished. That was one hell of a project, and I’m amazed at what you done. You’ll go far, Monroe, and these guys have gone as far as they’re going to go. You made them realize that. Don’t let it worry you.”

“Thanks, sir, I won’t.”

“You do need to do something about your grades. They’re going to affect your ability to do the work you should be doing. Make an effort to bring them up. I know you think it’s all baloney, and in a lot of ways it is, especially your terrible grade in physics, but with those grades, you won’t get into the kind of college you should go to.”

I nodded, got on my motorcycle, and left. But I was thinking about what he said, and I didn’t have any problem seeing the truth in it.

## HUMAN RESOURCES

Silvio's recruiting challenges didn't end after Stick and Walrus joined the Hard Cats. Certainly they were moving plenty of grass, but there was a lot of uncovered territory. In fact, other than small areas of Boston, pretty much all of New England was open. So far his efforts to recruit other gang members had fallen miserably short. Most of the kind of members he would have liked to add—tough, menacing, motorcycle-owning hoods who would follow his orders—either were already members of bike gangs or didn't want anything to do with gangs. Especially not ones with three members.

Silvio decided the answer was to take advantage of a tried and proven structure element—associate members. He called a meeting to discuss the new plan.

“I want you guys to add three new associates. I'll find some, too. Don't rush it, you gotta check guys out before we let them in, but say ... in the next six months. Three new guys each.

“They don't hafta be hard guys. Good if they got a motorcycle, but an associate can get one later. I'm not talkin' about dealers, those are guys we don't trust—ever. What associates



gotta be are guys that follow our code. Guys that will say *I don't know nothing* when a cop is pushin' them around. Keep lookin' for full members, but we can bring associates along."

"So, associates can get dealers, or are they sellin' direct?" said Stick.

"Yeah, they get dealers. But we'll make territories so they won't step on your toes."

Walrus said, "I been layin' pretty low, keepin' things quiet. The only guys I know are college punks, and I wouldn't trust any of 'em. I can add more dealers. I'm goin' out to Amherst this weekend to recruit some. But unless I start hanging out more, I can't see how I'd find associates."

"Well give it a fuckin' try, huh? You wanna say you can't do it before you even look around? I know what your fucking problem is, same as what Stick is hintin' at. What's in it for you? Here's what. You get ten percent of everything your associates bring in. But don't get fucking greedy and start recruitin' like we was sellin' fuckin' Amway. They gotta check out. That's it, we're done."

Silvio noticed that, as always, Walrus was the first one out the door. No hanging out, no small talk. He just walked outside, got on his bike, and rode off. *What's with that fuckin' guy?* he thought.

## EXPRESS TO LOSERVILLE

Mr. Lamkin's remarks left me with plenty to worry about, and having Claudia in my life brought it all into focus. Before meeting Claudia, I'd had no sense of importance about the path I was on. I'd sort of assumed I'd just keep flailing along and being a geek. Getting by. But it was crystal-clear that, compared to Claudia, I was on the road to Loserville.

I went to see Dr. Ambruster at MIT. I gave him a blow-by-blow of the conversation with my teachers and a general overview of my status.

"That story is somewhat amusing, but I'm concerned for you, Monroe," Doctor Ambruster said. "These educators, for whom you show little respect, were alerting you to an obvious problem. They may not have done so as effectively as one might wish, but their intent was good and your presence here is evidence that they succeeded, to a degree.

"You'd probably find success at a top-level college with a teaching staff experienced in dealing with cogs that don't fit the standard machine. You'll find students here at MIT who underachieve in most academic pursuits except for a narrow area in which they phenomenally excel. That doesn't really describe you. Your college boards are not strong enough to erase the

stigma of your grades. In fact, nothing in your history would accomplish this, not even your excellent science projects, which are only a peripheral qualifier. You could still be accepted to some fine schools, and I'll put a word in for you here at MIT, but I'd say it would be a pleasant surprise if you were accepted. We accept fewer than ten percent of our applicants, and the overwhelming majority of those applying would be welcome at most schools.

“On the off-chance you are accepted here, there is another problem you might find insurmountable. You can't expect much financial aid. Most of the scholarships I see have grade-point requirements. It's expensive to go here. Especially compared to a community college.

“If you go to a lesser school, it's going to be extremely difficult for you to succeed. You have undisciplined study habits. Most state or community colleges accept a lot more first year students than they graduate. They expect a lot of students to drop out the first year. If you can't keep up, you'll simply be eliminated.

“I honestly don't know how to advise you. I think it's going to be difficult for you to meet your potential. You work assiduously on the projects you care about, and you have a powerful and creative mind, but you don't seem to know how to apply that mind to anything that doesn't directly interest you. Mental discipline is simply a requirement. Look at my desk, at all the work I'm required to do that has nothing to do with physics. But to hold this job, which I love, I have to discipline myself to do uninteresting things.

“I'm sorry I can't give you better news. I wish there were some way your talents could be recognized. I don't imagine it's much comfort, but your problem is certainly not unique. Schools just aren't designed to help those students I'd call *almost-geniuses*. Not unless they get good advice and help early. I've seen students who turned their high-school career around, and showed

huge improvement in their junior and senior year. I know firsthand that colleges like to see that—if nothing else it's more interesting than a consistent pattern of performance. It's a quality that shows a great deal of effort to overcome a start from behind. But it's perhaps a little late for that for you, even if you could do such a thing, which seems doubtful.

“Let me ponder this, there are some resources here at Tech that might prove helpful. We have some talented study coaches, and one I consider the best is an acquaintance of mine. I'll arrange to chat with him. In the meantime, I'm afraid that's all the time I have, Monroe. I have a class to teach. Good luck to you.”

I walked down the hall from Dr. Ambruster's office feeling like I was going to vomit at any second. I went into the first men's room I could find, but nothing happened, except maybe I cried a little bit. After the feeling passed, I walked through the halls, looking at bulletin boards filled with notices that would never mean anything to me. Before this reality check, every time I visited the school, I had gotten a thrill out of looking into the lecture halls and labs. But now it just made my stomach hurt and gave me a lump in my throat.

I felt my comfortable notion of being a scientist shrivel and die—I'd probably wind up pumping gas. I'd be like a janitor I'd met who was a member of Mensa, desperately displaying his pointless IQ to compensate for a crap life.

On the way down the granite steps, I saw a guy I knew. A kid named David Keller, who had gotten second place in physics this year at the state science fair. I'd felt like the king of the world when I beat him. I knew him pretty well from science fairs past: math wizard, super student, a lot younger than me, because he'd skipped two grades. He was speaking French with two older students. He was holding books and notebooks with MIT covers on them. Probably on

an inside track I didn't even know about, taking some early admission classes, while he was still in high school. I had a fucking D in French. He saw me and gave a little wave. Blue blazer with brass buttons, white shirt with the collar open. Gray, tailored slacks. Looking more sophisticated and capable on a random Tuesday than I ever had in my entire life. I could feel the vomit rising up my throat, so I waved back weakly and hurried away before I spewed across his tasseled loafers.

Doomed at seventeen.

## MR. SPORTY

A few days later, Lenny showed up at my house.

He was grinning ear-to-ear and carrying a small stack of books and magazines. “Hey, guess what. Your motorcycle worked out for me after all.”

“How so?”

“Well, I was bugging my dad and mom constantly, telling them I wanted to buy a bike like yours and fix it up. That at least, I wanted a scooter. You know I’ve got that trust fund from my nana, and it kicks off some steady interest. So I had about a thousand bucks that the trust says I can spend. Of course, Dad says it’s all for college, but I kept pinging them, and finally my dad bought me a car to shut me up!”

“Really? Wow. What did you get?”

“He was pushing for me to buy an old Plymouth his buddy had for sale, but I found this Triumph TR3 for six hundred. So he kicked in half, and I took half out of my college fund, and I got it!”

“Fantastic. Let’s go for a ride.”

“That’s what I’m here for. The thing is, it’s not running well, and it pulls to the left and has a shimmy at about forty-five. I figured you could help me fix it.”

I knew what “help” meant to Lenny. It meant I would fix it while he did something else. That’s what the stack of books and magazines was—shop manual, parts manual, a couple of aftermarket books, and some magazine articles. Knowing Lenny, I was sure he hadn’t opened the manuals but had probably read the magazine articles. The stack had come along with the car.

But I liked the idea of working on a sports car, and I’d probably get to drive it some. Maybe even take Claudia for a ride. Her family remained dead set against a motorcycle ride.

We went outside, and there it was at the curb. Gorgeous. A 1962 Triumph TR3, British racing green, with a red interior and silver-painted wire wheels. We went for a ride around Brookline, with Lenny happily driving. The misalignment was obvious; Lenny was sawing at the wheel a lot. Of course, he wasn’t driving it well, but I could see the car was twitchy. The engine didn’t sound right, either. I could hear hesitation when he hit the gas, and the idle was high.

When we got back to the house, I said, “Okay, you’re not going to like what I have to say, but the car definitely needs work, and it’s not safe as it is. I don’t know anything about cars, so I’ll need to read the books, but you need to park this thing until we can fix it. If you don’t, you’re going to crash it for sure. It’s twitchy and when you hit the brakes, it darts left. The engine sounds terrible, and you’re grinding the gears going into first, because the idle is so high. You’re going to ruin the transmission. So yeah, I’ll fix it for you, but you have to park it, and it might take a week or two for me to get to it.”

Lenny was not happy. “Can’t you do something temporary while you figure the rest out? I just got this thing. You know, tighten some stuff up, tweak the motor, do the cams or something?”

“Hey, you could take it to a shop and get it worked on. That’s probably a better idea. They’ll know what they’re doing.”

“Nah, my dad is watching all this like a hawk. If I try that, my dad will make the guy take the car back and I’ll be driving a gray Plymouth. You gotta help me here, pal. I don’t want a fucking Plymouth. No one ever gets laid in a Plymouth. I want this sexy thing.”

“Okay, calm down. If you promise not to bug the shit out of me, I’ll work on it this Saturday, but park it until then. No shit, Lenny, if I see you driving before we make it safe, I’m not touching it.”

I called Paul and asked if I could work on the car on Saturday in the back lot at Albion. Paul said, “Heck, you can pull it into the shop, there’s not much going on right now.”

I stayed up until three in the morning, reading the books and making notes. Fascinating stuff. The TR3 looked simple, but it had disc front brakes and a reasonably powerful engine. Plus it had a four-speed transmission and an electro-hydraulic overdrive. The overdrive seemed ridiculously complicated. I hoped I wouldn’t have to touch it.

The four-speed transmission had synchromesh for the top three gears, but not for first. Probably part of the reason Lenny was grinding it. Synchromesh seemed mysterious, and the manual didn’t explain how it worked. I couldn’t see any way to adjust it. I hoped I wouldn’t have to touch the transmission.



Everything else looked more or less doable. The SU carbs were of a design I hadn't seen before, they used differential air pressure to control the mixture. That made great sense to me—they could automatically adjust for altitude and they'd manage changes to the throttle more smoothly than Lenny's on-off switch of a right foot.

Saturday morning at half past eight, I was in the kitchen eating breakfast and waiting for Lenny. He showed up a few minutes late. I heard him grind his gears as he backed into a spot in front of my house. We made the trip to Albion with only a few near misses and terrified pedestrians. I couldn't tell whether it was because the car was that bad or because Lenny was a horrible driver.

Paul opened the roll-up door for us, and Lenny nearly ran the car into three parked motorcycles. While Paul and I looked over the engine bay, Lenny wandered around the shop. Within fifteen minutes, he had knocked over a trash can, spilled oil on the floor, and leaned on a bike, bumping it off its kickstand and catching it just as it hit the floor.

"All right!" roared Paul. "You—out of here! I don't care where you go. No, don't go into the front. I can't afford to have you around my new stock. Right out that back door. Straight to the street. Leave!"

Lenny looked upset, but I escorted him off the property. "You're not helping anyway. Go someplace, take a walk, read a book. If you stick around, Paul's going to toss your car out, too. Come back about three, and knock on the back door. Or just call. Here's a card. See you later."

With the whirlwind of clumsiness gone, Paul and I quickly found the major problems. Paul's maintained his wife Lara's MGA, so he knew a lot about British cars. First thing we did was to carry out a careful tune-up. The ignition timing was way off, the automatic advance was

stuck, and the inside of the distributor cap had a lot of graphite dust ground off the carbon rotor contact. The plugs were grungy and the points were pitted. The auto parts store down the street carried foreign car parts. They had a rotor, distributor cap, condenser, air and oil filters, and some plugs and points in stock.

I was thrilled to find that all the nuts and bolts were American SAE. I'd expected a bunch of Whitworth and BSF stuff. With the timing set, the valve lash adjusted, the carbs synched, the mixture set, and the empty dashpots filled, the engine started on the first crank and would idle smoothly at 900 rpm.

Paul said, "We should probably check the compression and cut the old oil filter open to look for metal, but whatever we find will just be bad news or no news. From what you say, your buddy couldn't have it fixed, and the engine is running well. I say it's good."

Then we turned to the handling problems. Paul set up jack stands at each corner and ran strings between them, to create a box that nearly touched the tires while I hit all the grease fittings with a couple shots of grease. Then we squared up the box and bounced the car. When we measured the distance to each face of the tires, we found that the front end had about an inch of toe-out. No wonder it darted around.

Paul adjusted the toe-in to the factory spec of 1/8". Then we jacked the car up off its wheels and wiggled each one. Both front wheels had a lot of bearing shake.

"The bearings are probably not bad. There's no grinding or tight spots. We just need to adjust them."

We repacked the bearings with fresh grease, and set up the bearing preload so the wheels still spun smoothly but one more flat of turn on the axle nut would cause some drag. Then we

pulled off the wheels. I checked for broken spokes, and found a few. I backed them out of the nipples, but we didn't have any replacements. I couldn't true the wheels, since they wouldn't fit in our motorcycle-wheel building stand, but I tightened up the loose spokes until the *doink* of a loose spoke—when struck with a spoke wrench—turned to a *poing*.

Paul pulled out the disc brake pads. “Here’s why the car pulls under braking.” The pads were glazed, and had a taper you could spot just by sighting across them. “These Girling calipers are good, but they flex when you stand hard on the brakes, so the pads taper a little. If the pads get glazed, you wind up standing on them harder and harder. More taper. These are about as bad as I’ve seen. Actually, scratch that. These are the worst I’ve seen.”

I called the auto parts store, and they didn't have replacement pads. Paul showed me a great trick. He put a vertical cupped grindstone in the drill press, and then put a flat metal plate over the vise table. He put the pad on the plate and slowly shaved off layers of the pad until it was flat and unglazed. I executed the process on the other three pads. The rear brake shoes were glazed, too. I sanded the glaze off and arced in the shoes with chalk and more sanding. I was spitting black brake dust by the time I was done, but I figured the hazard of damage to my lungs was trivial compared to the hazard of being Lenny's passenger in a car with bad brakes.

We put everything back together. It was one o'clock.

“We need to bed these brakes. Your buddy will glaze them right back if he sets foot in the car before it's done. Let's close the shop. I'll show you how to bed brakes, and then we'll take this thing for a ride to get a sub at Nautilus.”

I locked up the shop, and set the BACK AT sign on the front door to two o'clock. Paul hopped in the driver's seat, and off we went. Paul got up to about 40 mph and braked hard, but

just before the car came to a stop he let it roll, and then he drove a while to let the pads and discs cool. Then he did it again. After about ten cycles, he pronounced the brakes ready, and we cruised.

The little TR3 was transformed. The engine ran sweetly, the brakes didn't pull, and it was smooth and sure in Paul's hands. I expected that Lenny would still be a horrible driver, but it wouldn't be the car's fault.

We got back around two-thirty, and Lenny was standing by the back door with his arms folded and blood in his eye. But when he heard the motor purring, he calmed right down. "Wow, that sounds great!"

Paul said, "Yeah. Everything's good. Now don't fuck it up."

Paul went back to the front of the store, I convinced Lenny to take a walk while I changed the oil. Then he drove me home, with just a few moments of terror.

"It's perfect, Monroe. No, it's more than perfect; it's absolutely transformed. You're a genius."

"The only genius move was getting Paul to help. He knows what he's doing, but I learned a lot today. This is a great car. By the way, you owe me twenty-six forty, for the parts and oil we used."

"Ouch. Well, sure, I'll pay you next week. I've only got five bucks right now."

"Give me the fiver. You better start setting some money aside for maintenance. Even if I do the work for you, this thing is going to use some parts. We couldn't get brake pads and shoes, or it would have been more like forty bucks. But you're going to need new ones in a few thousand miles. There's a lot more we could have done. I don't think your shocks are doing

much. I doubt a sports car is supposed to be this bouncy. I need to check out the electrical system and align your headlights. And I was going to rotate the tires, but I didn't want to put any new loads on the spokes. You need new spokes, and the wheels should be trued and balanced once we put those in. We can't replace the spokes and true the wheels without pulling off the tires, and that would be a lot easier at a tire shop. I didn't look at the spare. In other words, the car is safe to drive, but it's a long way from being right."

Lenny didn't say anything, but I could almost hear the wheels turning in his head.

My mom and dad came out to see Lenny's car. Angel was home, doing some laundry. She came out and gushed a little over Lenny's wheels.

"It's so cute! Why Lenny, you're going to have girls hanging all over you," Angel said, and then winked at me.

As usual, Lenny couldn't take his eyes off Angel's boobs while he talked to her. Finally Angel put her hands on her boobs with her index fingers pointed up and said, "Hey, Lenny. I'm up here."

Cracked me up. Lenny had the stunned look he wears whenever Angel is around. She scares him silly.

After Mom, Dad, and Angel went back inside, Lenny said, "Why don't you try driving this thing? See how you like it."

So I did. I liked it a lot. The car felt tight and responsive, like a motorcycle. I sat so close to the ground that 20 mph felt like 50. I also noticed how girls on the sidewalk looked at the car and the two of us riding in it. "Hey, Lenny," I said. "You were wrong about chicks liking motorcycles. It's sports cars that they like."

Lenny suggested we drive by Claudia's, so we could show her the car and he would finally have a chance to meet her. I didn't want to just drop by, so I stopped at a pay phone.

"Hi, can I speak to Claudia?"

"Can I tell her who's calling?"

"Hi, Mr. Kabekian. I'm onto your game. I'm at a phone booth, so I can only spare about a minute. What would you like to talk about?"

"You're no fun anymore, Monroe. She's right here. Just as well, she was going to start kicking me."

"Hello, Monroe. Are you going to come over and ravish me?"

"Not if your dad is still listening. I'm done working on Lenny's car, and I'd love to come by and see you, but we're in Lenny's car. He wants to show it off and meet you. Do you think you can stand two geeks hanging around your house? I'll get rid of him as fast as I can."

"No, you won't. I'm dying to meet the famous Lenny, and I'd love to see his car. That's what I want—a sports car."

We drove to Claudia's with Lenny talking a mile a minute all the way. Claudia was sitting on her front porch in the late autumn sun, reading a book about touring France. Good news, bad news. She was wearing jeans, an open-necked white shirt, and a bulky sweater with a scarf over her shoulders. She looked wonderful. Fantastic. Beautiful and sophisticated—way beyond either Lenny's or my league. Different planet. Different universe.

Lenny was Lenny. He stared at her like she was from Mars. As we headed up the walk, I grabbed Lenny's shoulder and said, "Lighten up, Lenny, she's a nice person. Don't treat her like she's some *Playboy* bunny. Just talk."

Didn't help. Lenny went right into trance mode, but Claudia was having none of it. She grabbed his hand, pulled him down on the porch next to her and started peppering him with questions about himself, his family, what his dad and mom did, what he wanted to do with his life, how long he had known me, and why we were such good friends. In a few minutes, she and Lenny were talking like buddies. It was the first time I'd ever seen Lenny actually talk to a girl since reaching puberty, after which the sight of a pair of bumps under a sweater made him insane.

Then we went and looked at Lenny's car. Claudia hopped right into the passenger seat and said, "Take me for a ride, Lenny." They were gone for half an hour, and when they came back, Claudia was driving. Lenny was talking to her and laughing.

Claudia got out of the car. She said, "I like your friend, Monroe," and kissed me on the lips and Lenny on the cheek. We talked a few more minutes, but Claudia had to go to dinner with her parents, so Lenny drove me home.

"You lucky bastard," he said. "You ridiculous, lucky bastard. You miserable cocksucker. You motherfucker. There can only be one of her in the whole fucking world. Son of a bitch. *Son of a bitch!*"

"Yup," I said.

"She said she has a friend who might want to go on a blind date. I didn't even ask; she brought it up. She said her friend is nice. Does that mean she has a mustache and weighs two-fifty?"

"I don't have a clue, Lenny. I've never met any of her friends. Just like she hadn't met any of mine until now. Seems like we haven't had the opportunity."

“Yeah, I bet you haven’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been seeing her for months, and this is the first time I’ve met her. Have you even taken her on a date?”

“No. Well, we went to a movie once, but it was lousy, so we just went back to her house. We’ve both been busy, and we like just hanging out together. She loves to read, and we study together a lot. But no, we haven’t gone anywhere.”

“You better think about that, dickhead. Gee, she likes to hang out with you. So that’s all you do? She’d like to do date stuff. All girls do. If you don’t fucking take her places, someone else will. You’ll be her buddy, and someone else will be bopping her.”

“Man, I can’t be spending much money right now. I’m saving all I can for college and I’m working hard to get my grades up. It’s really hard for me to concentrate on boring crap, and for a lot of the stuff I’m supposed to know, I have to go back years and learn the basics that I didn’t get the first time through.”

“You lose that girl for those lame fucking reasons, and I’ll never speak to you again. Tell you what, I’ll lend you my car for a night to take her out, and I know just the thing to do. Take her to the Boston Pops. My dad can get tickets for free—he supplies all their baked goods. That’s how I’ll pay you for your time working on my car.”

It didn’t exactly work out that way. I called Claudia and she loved the idea, but she said, “My friend Maria said she’d be interested in meeting Lenny. Why don’t we make it a double date? That way, she can meet Lenny without either of them feeling like they’re on the spot.”



“Geez, Claudia, are you sure? You know Lenny’s like a brother to me, and I’d love to help him meet someone, he’s really lonely. But he’s such a doink around women. What’s Maria like? Can you tell her how to calm him down so he’ll act human, like he did with you?”

“I told her all about him. Well, actually, first I told her all about you. How you’re a complete geek, but you’re so sweet and good to me. How it’s so nice to be around a guy without him being stupid or aggressive, or always pawing you—I might have oversold that last part. You do a lot of pawing.”

“Gee, you make it sound so attractive.”

“Yeah, well, Maria has had her share of jerk boyfriends. It all sounded good to her. You know what she said? She said, *I like jocks, but I know that in fifteen years they’re going to be fat, and just as dumb as they are now, and they’re going to be working for guys like you’re talking about.*”

“Wow. Well, it would be nice if she were right about that. Okay, I’ll talk to Lenny and we’ll figure out how we can do this. All four of us won’t fit in Lenny’s TR3. Lenny will certainly say yes. So let’s make it for next Friday night.”

“Okay, lover, you got a date. If Lenny bails, you might have to handle the two of us.”

Claudia hung up, leaving me with blood pumping audibly in my temples. I knew that sounded like just a little joke. But knowing Claudia, I couldn’t be sure. Not only that, but ever since Donna completely and graphically described ménage a trois, I had been daydreaming about Claudia and Donna together. I have a good visual imagination, and Claudia had just pressed *Play*.

## DOUBLE DOUBLE

“No, absolutely not. No! No fucking way!”

“Are you nuts? You asked me to do this!”

“Yeah, but that was before I met Claudia. I’m supposed to double with the *nice* girl, while you have your way with beautiful Claudia. This Maria is probably fat, with pimples and glasses.”

“You’re a skinny little twerp, with pimples and glasses. But that’s not the impression I got. Claudia said Maria’s had plenty of jock boyfriends. Does that sound like someone repulsive? And besides, you’re the one who said I’m in trouble because my girlfriend is so beautiful. What’s your problem?”

“I just don’t want to do it. I know it’s going to be a disaster. I don’t want Claudia seeing me step on my dick, and I’m not thrilled about you seeing that either.”

“We won’t let you, Lenny. We’ll make it work. She’ll be a nice girl and you’ll have fun. It will help you learn to meet girls on your own. You need to take some baby steps. Even if this doesn’t work out, you can chalk it up to experience and move on.”

Lenny continued to resist, but I was relentless, and he finally weakened enough to say yes. When he told me the next day that he'd decided he couldn't do it, I told him he would have to make his excuses to Claudia, since she'd already set it up. That shut him up.

Friday rolled around. Lenny picked me up in his dad's big Buick, and we drove to Claudia's house to pick up our dates. Lenny actually looked good, in a nice, dark gray sports jacket I had never seen before, worn over an open-collar, light blue dress shirt, and light gray pants. I said, "Who dressed you?" and Lenny said, "My mom," without a hint of irony.

We got to Claudia's without major incident, but I said, "Lenny, I know this is your dad's car, but I'm going to drive. You drive badly enough when you're not distracted or showing off, but with two girls in the car, you'll get us killed."

Lenny handed me the keys and said, "Actually, my dad insisted that you drive. Which irks the shit out of me, since he and Mom immediately took off in my TR3."

We rang Claudia's bell. The door opened, and I had to restrain myself from turning to grab Lenny, since I figured he might bolt.

Maria was completely outrageous. She certainly wasn't fat, with pimples and glasses. She had a knockout figure, a pretty face, and curly, blond hair. She had big, soft-looking curls, like the model on the bottle of Breck shampoo. Maria looked somewhat like this TV actress whose name I can't remember, though she had a lot more muscle on her frame—all six foot four of it. Lenny is five foot six. In flat shoes, Maria was at least an inch taller than me, and she towered over Lenny. I figured that in heels, she'd be six foot six, easy.

I thought, *Holy crap, what is this woman thinking of Lenny? This is not going to go well. She's going to ditch him as fast as she can.*

Claudia made the introductions.

Lenny managed to stammer, “Nice to meet you.”

We went to the car, and Lenny held the back door open while Maria folded herself in. She made the Buick look like a clown car. She was extremely graceful, though. Lenny gave me a look of sheer terror over the door and climbed in, to his certain doom. I drove towards the city, and Claudia turned around to talk to Lenny and Maria.

“Maria is the star of our soccer team, Lenny. She’s center forward and the highest scorer in our division. She runs like the wind. She’s a great player.”

I looked in the mirror and saw Lenny smile wanly. “I don’t know much about soccer.”

Maria turned to him and said, “I’ll teach you. I want you to understand the game when you come see me play.”

Holy shit! Lenny was being adopted by an Amazon princess. I thought, *Wow, my dad was stunned by Claudia being with me. Wait till he gets a load of Lenny and Maria.*

We found parking fairly close to the Pops, on Mass Avenue. When we got out of the car, Maria took Lenny’s hand and walked a little ahead of us, talking to Lenny about soccer. Or talking *at* Lenny. I didn’t hear him say much.

Lenny’s dad had gotten us great tickets. The usher raised his eyebrows and looked at us goofy geeks. Then he stared at the stunning women we were escorting. When he conducted us to our café table, he treated us like royalty. He fussed about, adjusting the seats for the best view. He even shuffled chairs at the next table to make more room for us. We could see the whole stage and we were looking right at the piano keyboard and the conductor’s box. He clearly assumed we

had to be filthy rich. What else would explain these women? Lenny gave him a fifty-cent tip. He didn't seem impressed. What was he expecting? A dollar?

I kept trying to figure out if Lenny was okay, but I couldn't catch his eye. He was staring into Maria's face while she talked quietly to him in her deep, throaty voice. We ordered some food. Lenny didn't eat his, but he drank about six glasses of water and a Coke. All that liquid finally had an effect, and he excused himself to find the men's room.

I would have followed, but I wanted to hear what Maria had to say. Claudia asked her, "What do you think of Lenny?"

Maria said, "Oh, I really like him. He's so attentive. He's fun to talk to. You remember Cliff, my last boyfriend? He just talked about himself and his great plays and his team constantly. He never listened to anything I said."

I tried to imagine that, but failed completely. I tried to remember if Lenny had said anything other than *Nice to meet you* and *I don't know much about soccer*. I didn't think he had. Seeing Lenny so quiet was like watching Liberace sit on his hands. Lenny came back, sat down and turned towards Maria. She took his hand again and started talking nonstop. Lenny just smiled and stared into her big brown eyes.

The music was wonderful. Peter Nero was playing and Arthur Fiedler was in great form, conducting both the orchestra and the audience. When Peter Nero played "Embraceable You," Maria levered Lenny to his feet and took him off to the side to dance. I watched as she let him fumble clumsily for a few moments, then drew him close with her hand high on his neck. She tilted her beautiful head down while she pretty much stuffed Lenny's face into her boobs, and then led him in a gentle shuffle. When they came back to the table Lenny looked like Jerry Lewis

as the Nutty Professor, with his glasses twisted and lightly fogged. I don't think he cared, but Maria took them off his nose, polished the lenses and put them delicately back on his face.

Claudia gave me a somewhat worried look. I shrugged, and we just enjoyed the music. It was late when the performance finished. We went back to the car, and I drove to Claudia's house. It was quiet in the back seat. I didn't know what to make of that.

Lenny and I walked Claudia and Maria to the door. I gave Claudia a little kiss and then turned, surprised to see Lenny and Maria in a full-on lip-lock. I swear it looked like Maria was going to pick Lenny off the ground. I gave Claudia a much better kiss, and then Lenny and I went back to the car.

"So hey, Lenny. I hope you believe that I had no idea Maria was that tall. I don't know what Claudia was thinking, but I'll ask her if she knows someone more, um—your size. I hope you aren't pissed at me."

"Are you nuts? Are you fucking nuts! I mean, what—are you fucking nuts! I'm in love! That's the most amazing thing that's ever happened to me. She kissed *me*, for Chrissake! She smashed my face into her incredible, head-high boobies! They're magnificent, unbelievable! I nearly smothered, I couldn't breathe, I almost died, but I was so happy. You got any idea how unbelievable this is? I'm going to marry that woman. We're going to have giant, half-Jewish babies. I'm going to watch soccer practice tomorrow. I'm going to spend all day with her. I'm gonna spend the rest of my life with her."

"Geez, Lenny. Calm down."

But he didn't. He talked about Maria all the way to my house. When I got out of his dad's Buick and closed the door, Lenny was still talking. He was probably still talking as he drove the three blocks to his house.

I walked into the house. My dad was snoozing in his recliner.

"You guys have a nice time?"

"Yeah. It was fine," I said, a little dazed.

"How about Lenny, how did things work out with his blind date? Was she cute?"

"Cute is definitely not the right word, but she was pretty. Lenny liked her a lot, and she liked Lenny."

"A girl liked Lenny? That's hard to understand."

"Hey, Claudia likes me. Miracles happen."

"I've got to give you that one."

I called Claudia the next morning and told her what Lenny had said.

"Good," she said. "Because Maria wouldn't stop talking about Lenny. I guess it's just chemistry, or maybe she just really wants a pet. Somehow I didn't realize how big the height differential was until they were together. I think it's just that you're so big, and Lenny doesn't look tiny next to you. Well, it's not just height. Maria is a big, powerful, physical woman. She dominates the field in soccer. She's fast and ruthless. I'm really glad she's on our team; I'd hate to oppose her. Lenny looked like a skinny little munchkin next to her. But she likes him. She likes him a lot."

"Well, we'll see where it goes. I'd come to watch your practice, but I have to work. Can I see you tonight? Just the two of us."

“Sure, baby, come to my house. We can study some and maybe think of something else to do.”



## TROUBLE IN ALBION

The front windows at Albion Cycles had a lot of stuff in them. Most of it had been there for years. Ancient mannequins with odd-looking motorcycle clothes, some of them made of vinyl that had cracked from sun exposure. Advertising signs made from strange, waxy corrugated paper. An old BSA single, with two mannequins—male and female—riding it. One of the female dummy's hands was close to the guy's lap. It always made me think of Claudia. The clutter and dust made the showroom look dingy, even when the weather was sunny. On an overcast fall day like this one, it was downright depressing. Paul was off, having a Saturday lunch with his wife, and I was minding the store and the parts counter.

I was leaning on the counter, mentally paging through my gloomy options, aided in my solipsistic depression by the gray light. My mood didn't improve when Silvio walked in with two guys I'd never seen before. They wore jean jackets with the sleeves cut off, over heavy leather jackets. The jean vests had name tags on the chests. When two of them turned to look over a new Triumph Bonneville I saw a big patch on the back that said Hard Cats, Boston and a motto that looked like Latin. Sheesh—a Latin motto for a motorcycle gang?

The bigger guy, with the name tag that said WALRUS, looked like the kind of guy that liked beating guys like me to a pulp. The other guy, whose tag said STICK, looked like the kind of guy that would just stab me to death. Silvio stacked some cans of 40-weight oil on the counter and asked for some Champion J12Y plugs. I knew we didn't have anything close to that heat range.

"Sorry, we don't carry those, and I don't have anything that's a close-enough equivalent to that heat range. You'll have to try an auto parts store. What are they for, anyway?"

"For my Harley Sportster. Just give me something that fits, that heat range stuff is a bunch of crap anyway."

"It's really not. If I give you too hot a plug, it can cause detonation—knocking. And that can damage a piston. If it's too cold, it will foul and short out. You can go a half-step either way for tuning, or maybe one step, in an emergency, but our closest plug is two steps colder. It won't last twenty miles."

Silvio leaned forward with his forearm on the oilcans and gave me a threatening look.

"You some kind of know-it-all? You think you know bikes better than me?"

"No, I don't know much about Harleys at all, but I'm a mechanic here, and I do understand heat range. It really is important." I gave him my most deprecating smile.

He looked at me little longer, which made me sweat a little. "Hey, I know you. You're Lenny's buddy. The guy that bought a box job? I sold you that fucking mechanic book. Is that where you learned all this shit?"

I smiled again. "Yes, I learned a lot from it. It's why I have this job. You did me a big favor."

“Yeah? You ever get that bike together?”

“It’s the orange bike, right there in the shop.” I pointed through the open door.

Silvio headed for the door. “No shit. Wow, maybe I shoulda kept that book.”

I said, “I can’t allow customers back in the workshop—”

“Hey. Shut up, kid. I just wanna take a look.”

I followed Silvio to the shop door, looking back at Stick and Walrus to see what they were doing. I stopped in the doorway, realizing I couldn’t watch all three of them.

Silvio circled my bike, taking it in. Stick and Walrus walked past me into the shop and started looking the place over. Picking up tools, casing the joint. I was scared and nervous. I followed them into the shop, but I didn’t have any idea how to get them out of there without getting my ass kicked.

“Hey, look. If the owner comes back and you’re in here, it’s my job. Please, come back out to the parts department. I’ll call the auto parts place down the street and find out if they have your plugs. But please, come out of the shop. The boss is really strict about that. You’re gonna get me fired. I need this job.”

“Calm down, kid, we’re going. Great job on the bike. You really do that yourself?”

“Yes. Thanks.” I walked behind them as they sauntered out of the shop area.

I closed the door behind me, wishing there was a lock on it.

Walrus gave me a hard look.

“We could use a guy like you in the Hard Cats,” Silvio said. “You should think about it. It’s not just a club. There’s real money in it, for the right guy. We’ll take you on as an associate, bring you along on a couple of rides. You’ll like it.”

“Gee, that’s a nice offer, but I’m still in high school. My parents don’t let me ride my bike except to school and work, and my time is really taken up on the weekends with this job and my homework, but I really appreciate the offer.”

Silvio gave me a long, appraising stare. “Yeah, well. Maybe the offer stands when you get out from behind Mommy’s apron. Look me up sometime. I’m still at the bakery. Pretty funny to see some big, lumpy buddy of that fucking idiot Lenny, working in a bike shop. You must not be much like Lenny. He’d have burned down this place by now.”

“Hey, thanks. Do you want me to call the auto parts store?”

“Nah, we’ll stop at the Harley store. We was just riding by, and I figured you’d have what I need.”

I collected \$2.40 for the oil, and they left. I breathed a sigh of relief.

When Paul returned, I told him what had happened. I thought that possibly Stick or Walrus had taken something while I was distracted. They were messing with the tools.

Paul took a look around. He said, “It’s a sure thing they clipped something, that’s the real reason we keep people out of here. Well, that, and I don’t want them seeing how some of our ham-fisted guys treat their precious bikes. But it was probably something small, like ... I don’t see that good Snap-On number two Phillips that was laying on the bench. Yup, it’s gone. Those fuckers!”

“I’m sorry, Paul. I tried to get them out, but it took some time and there were three of them. I couldn’t watch them all.”

“Don’t sweat it. We’ll put a buzzer lock on that door. I should have done that a long time ago. You did good getting rid of them. Just make sure you stay clear of those guys until they

forget about you. Gangs don't usually recruit people like you. They look for more muscle and attitude. But they know you're a mechanic, and they can use that. Just turn them down nicely and keep your distance. If you have any real trouble, let me know. I have some favors I can call in."

On the way home, I thought about what it would be like to ride with a gang. It didn't seem like any fun to me. They were all scary dudes, and I didn't like any of them. I certainly didn't feel any desire to hang out with them. Heck, I'd cross the street to avoid them.

The cold streets seemed slippery, even though there was no snow or ice on them. My headlight seemed weak in the waning fall light. The cold cut through my dungarees and froze my crotch and upper legs. It burned my knuckles through my thin gloves and shoved its way up the sleeves of my jacket. With sunset coming earlier every day, I wondered how deep into winter I'd be able to justify riding my bike. Claudia wasn't working, now that school had started, so there was no reason to ride the bus anymore.

*Damn* I was cold.

## NICE TO HAVE AN AMAZON

Lenny's and Maria's relationship moved along even faster than Claudia's and mine had. Lenny had dinner at her parents' house a mere two days after their first date. Astonishingly, her parents thoroughly approved of Lenny. They loved Lenny (according to Lenny) and Maria said almost the same thing.

I really liked Maria, too. She was geeky in her own way. Other than being great at soccer and some other sports I didn't know anything about, she was bright, and surprisingly well read. She was fun to talk to when she wasn't going on and on about soccer.

Lenny's mom and dad treated me like their son's savior. The motorcycle incident had been completely forgotten. I was the great and good friend who had introduced Lenny to the woman who was remaking their son into the man they had dreamed he could be. Or so went the myth. In truth, I'd had little to do with it. I hadn't known Maria, and had had misgivings about introducing Lenny to any of Claudia's friends. But Lenny's folks were amazed at my perspicacity in picking the ideal girl for Lenny.

I have to admit that Maria was cleaning Lenny up quickly. They had been together for just a few weeks, and he no longer showed up in the same stained T-shirt and jeans three days in a row. His hair was trimmed, and he no longer smelled funny. He was dressing like a preppy. Polo or Oxford shirts in light blue. Tan or gray chinos, polished loafers, and patterned socks. I bet even his underwear was clean. I might have given him some grief about it, but seeing him made me realize that I was doing the same thing.

Preppy geeks.

Even Angel said Lenny had changed for the better. “When the moose puts a few pounds of muscle on you, you might look good for a dwarf,” Angel said. And Lenny just smiled. He was now more or less capable of talking to Angel without staring slack-jawed at her boobs.

While Claudia and I had to squeeze our time together into a busy schedule that included school, my job at Albion, my attempt to transform my grades, and Claudia’s soccer practice—Maria’s and Lenny’s only constraint was school. Anywhere Maria was, so was Lenny. I’d see them driving by in Lenny’s TR3, or I’d see Lenny at soccer practice, on the rare occasions that I dragged my books to the field to spend a little time with Claudia. They were inseparable, and they were both happy with that.

Amazing.

Still, Lenny was Lenny—a little more mouthy than was probably wise, as clumsy as ever, and as weak as a kitten. Outside a Burger King in Cambridge, Lenny and Maria were accosted by a hockey player named Charley Peabody, a teammate of one of Maria’s old boyfriends.

“What are you doing with the runt, Maria? Babysitting? If you’re hard-up for a boyfriend, I’m available.”

Lenny turned to him and said, “Yeah, she’d have to be hard-up.”

Like I said, mouthier than was wise.

Charley took a step towards Lenny. Lenny cringed, preparing to roll into his fetal armadillo position. Maria said, “Back off, Charley. Leave us alone.”

Charley said, “Is he going to make me?”

Maria straight-armed him in the chest, rocking him back on his heels. When Charley came back at Maria, she uncorked the left underhand punch she had cocked when she straight-armed him with her right. It caught him in the solar plexus and, as he folded, she kicked his legs out from under him so hard that his shoulders hit the ground before his butt did.

As he struggled to breathe, Maria stood over him and said, “If you get up, I’ll break both your arms. And if you ever touch Lenny, I’ll find you and put your nuts in a pickle jar.”

Charley stayed down.

As they drove away, Lenny said to Maria, “I feel like a putz, having you stick up for me.”

Maria said, “You spoke up for me, even though that jerk is bigger than you. Besides, honey, eleven years of karate lessons—they got to be good for something. You have to start coming to my dojo. Monday and Wednesday nights. You’ll come with me. Mr. Takahashi is really good with new pupils.”

The story spread like wildfire, and became far more interesting. I didn’t see Lenny for a week and a half. By the time Howie Barth told me the story, Maria had kicked Charley all around the parking lot and was about to tear out his heart and show it to him while it was still beating. Lenny rushed in and saved Charley’s life by calling her off.



One afternoon, Angel and I were sitting on our front porch when Lenny walked past. He came over to say hi. He was subdued about the whole affair, saying it wasn't that big of a deal.

Angel cackled and said, "Still, sometimes it's nice to have an Amazon, huh, Lenny?"

Lenny said, "The guy would only have beaten me up once. As it is now, Mr. Takahashi beats the crap out of me every Monday and Wednesday. And Maria cheers him on."

## KOUNT OF KONDOMIA

In Boston, winter is a time to endure. There are bright moments. Sometimes, when there's snow on the ground and the sky is blue and sunny, it's perfectly beautiful. But there are a lot of gray days, when the sun doesn't shine and the cold just bores in. The slush in the streets plugs the storm sewers and ice-cold puddles form, splashing you with a wave of gritty water and snow each time a car drives past, or slopping over the tops of your shoes and filling them with ice water as you try to tiptoe across the street.

Claudia and I spent some time together in the run-up to Christmas. Claudia and I still hadn't had sex, though we did a lot of peripheral fooling around. We came close a couple of times, but on both occasions, she changed her mind while I was trying to wrestle on the condom. It was a little frustrating, but not bad. And really it was Claudia who pushed things to the brink. I wasn't trying to force anything.

I had an idea why Claudia kept backing off. Before our first few attempts, I never practiced putting on a condom. I probably should have. It took me too long to get it on. I think it helps for these things to be spontaneous. The first time, I caught an expression on Claudia's face

that was somewhere between fear and amusement. At home, I put on a condom to get a better feel for it, and then I looked in the mirror. Not great. It looked like I had a puppet on my crotch, with a white stocking cap. Like Punch, from Punch and Judy. Certainly not sexy. I didn't blame her for backing off, and I was really glad she hadn't laughed at the little guy with the hat.

Honestly, for some reason, I was a little nervous about having sex with Claudia. I viewed her in a different light than I had Donna, and I wasn't quite ready to take Claudia off that pedestal. You'd think with all the fooling around we did, it wouldn't make much of a difference. Lick a girl's pussy for most of an afternoon and some of the wonder dissipates. But somehow I felt that having sex would change things.

Claudia got early admission to Harvard. I was thrilled for her and, at the same time, I was nervous about what that meant for our future. She and her family were going to spend the holidays at a ski cabin in Vermont. The idea of skiing every day for two weeks was foreign to me. Claudia was excited about the trip. To me, it just seemed like two weeks that I wouldn't see her.

My family had some Christmas traditions, none of which really thrilled me, but I tried to get into the spirit of things. We visited an otherwise-empty lot, lit by a few rows of colored bulbs, to pick a Christmas tree. I would have taken two minutes to pick one, but my parents took an hour. The lot had Christmas music blaring. A stack of 45s on a cheesy portable phonograph played through a PA amplifier and a rigid horn speaker. Only no one was resetting the stack, so the last one played over and over. "Little Drummer Boy," endlessly. Pa Rum Pum fucking Pum. I could hardly see the trees in the dim light, and I had no idea what Mom and Dad were looking for, anyway. Then we had to put up the tree and have cocoa, which my mom made so hot that it

scalded the roof of my mouth. I would have strings of skin hanging down for days. Mom and Angel decorated the tree while Dad napped in his recliner and I studied.

Christmas was uneventful. I got mostly clothes. Angel gave me some really great motorcycle gloves, and my mom and dad gave me a set of gorgeous Snap-On sockets. I gave Angel a sweater that she claimed to really love. Claudia had picked it out for me. I had gotten Mom a bracelet and Dad a bottle of what Paul had told me was really good scotch. It must have been great; it was eight bucks.

My college fund was growing well. I didn't spend money on anything except bus fare and a few Christmas presents. Everything went into the kitty, and my paychecks at Albion were good, since I was the only mechanic. Actually, the only employee. Most days I'd head to the shop right after school. I'd get there by three, and work until at least five. Sometimes, if there was a backlog, I'd stay late into the evening. I worked all day Saturday. The National Science Fair was coming up, and my project was completely done. I just had to go to Washington D.C. in February, to show my project. So all my effort went into catching up on schoolwork, and getting good grades.

Dr. Ambruster had introduced me to another instructor at MIT. Mr. Conklin called himself an academic trainer, and part of his job was to help new students at MIT learn how to study more effectively. He told me I probably had a distraction issue. He said it was a neurological condition that a lot of bright people have to deal with. He spent several hours teaching me study methods that would mitigate the issues. Mr. Conklin showed me a note-taking method he called *focused notes*, which I thought was stupid and tedious. He virtually forced me to try it. While I read a textbook, particularly a boring one I was having trouble with, I'd write

down what each sentence meant to me. I know, that sounds like it would slow me down tremendously, but as Mr. Conklin pointed out, people like me will read on for several pages before realizing that they haven't understood, or paid any attention to, the words they've been reading. Going back and re-reading takes longer than ensuring that each sentence is understood the first time. So I had to write down what each sentence means, and at the end of each paragraph I had to summarize what the paragraph means.

The night before taking a test, I read the paragraph summaries. If they didn't make complete sense, I'd read my sentence summaries. If those didn't make sense, I'd re-read the original content and write new summaries. Usually I didn't have to do any of that, the paragraph summaries brought it all back. Then, just before the test, I'd skim the paragraph summaries once again.

The results were amazing. I adopted the method as the answer to every study problem, and for me, it was. In a week, my test scores went from mediocre to perfect. I didn't even have to go back that far to fill the holes caused by my lackadaisical studying. I could identify exactly what I needed to go back to learn.

When I mentioned that to Mr. Conklin, he said, "Understand that all you have learned is how to pass a test. You still need to go back to cover what you've missed or the gaps will remain, and they will limit what you can learn in the future and what you can do with your education. That will take uncommon discipline. If you are accepted here at MIT, you'll find that almost all our instructors think ordinary tests are nonsense. It's what you know that counts, and they work hard to make sure your knowledge is effective. You won't be able to get away with learning and forgetting things."

“MIT has an unusual grading system. If you don’t pass, they don’t record a failure; you have to take the class over. But if your knowledge isn’t effective, you’ll never pass. Spend the time to go back and fill in those holes, especially in math. You can get by without a perfect understanding of English grammar, but you won’t make it through MIT with spotty mathematical knowledge.”

All the same, things were looking good. I no longer wanted to puke every time I considered my future.

Mr. Conklin said my fears about my future were bullshit. He said, “You only stumble if you’re moving. Failing at something is only a setback. If you let it get to you, then you’ll stop moving, stop trying, and that means you won’t fail—and you won’t do anything. So get moving, and don’t worry about failure. Failure is good. Repeated failure is the truest indicator of real effort. Don’t give up on getting into a good school. Don’t give up on getting into MIT. Pull out all the stops, and get going. Knock the ball out of the park in school. All it takes is work and focus. You can do that.”

So I did. I was still scared, still certain that I was fucked. But I was giving it a serious shot.

## ONE TO THE GUTS

When Claudia came back the week after Christmas, she told me she'd had sex with some guy. I just looked at her for a while. I felt so hollowed out that I couldn't say anything. I couldn't think. She said more stuff, but I couldn't hear. I could barely breathe, so I turned and walked away.

## GOING ON

I had this strange feeling about Claudia. At first, I thought I was just being a dick, childish and stupid, not to mention completely unfair. We talked about this stuff a lot. We agreed “no drama,” and when I had my thing with Donna, Claudia was affected some, but she kept her side of the deal and got over it. But after this happened, I felt different towards her. Not angry, exactly—more like the other shoe had dropped.

I’d been waiting for something like this all along, and now that it had happened, I could move on. But I didn’t think I’d be able to get back to the way I used to feel about Claudia. If I was angry or hurt, I could get over it, but I felt indifferent. Well, no ... not indifferent. I just felt blank.

I felt like my life wasn’t real. Like I had wandered out of my geek fog, found some bright shiny world, but I was just playing some artificial, temporary part in it. A stand-in. My past looked like empty, forgettable bumblng. The present felt like nothing I did really mattered. The



future looked like a shithole of failure. The beautiful possibilities I saw through Claudia's eyes were going to go on without me. The fog was rolling back in, sticky and opaque.

It was much, much more than just the sex. I felt the way I did, because I couldn't see how to get where I needed to be in order to have a life with Claudia. I couldn't see a way to bridge the infinite gap in how I saw our lives playing out. She was going to go to Harvard. She was going to do fabulously well. Who the fuck was going to look at Claudia and refuse her anything?

I had dismal prospects. Where would our relationship go? She'd go to Harvard, I'd go to Dickhead U—some community college. And then I'd flunk out. That would be the end right there, no matter what. She was going off to Europe, and would be gone all summer. If she'd wound up in bed with someone else after a few days at a ski resort, what was France going to be like? A goddam sausage festival, that's what.

Back when I first started dating Claudia, I'd told Lenny that I expected it to end, and probably badly. I really had no idea what I should do about what I felt. I just knew it didn't really hurt right then. I felt numb. Maybe that's how to leave things.

I knew how to deal with my little depression. Start a truly impossible project and bash away at it without regard to sense and reason. I would ride my motorcycle across America, and I would do it that summer. I would have adventures, be scared, learn stuff, meet people, and see new places. And I would do it alone.

## BAGGAGE

I wanted to try to get into a good college, and for that I would need as much money as I could put together. But this trip was important, too, as the only way I could think of to outrun the fog. When it was over, I could bust my ass full-time to save for college. So I decided my budget for the trip would be ten percent of my college fund, plus ten percent of my usual pay from now until I left, plus any money I could scrape up by working extra. As far as having enough money for a good college, I thought it wouldn't hurt a bit if I worked for a year or two before I started. I'd be more mature. I could make sure my math was up to snuff. It was trendy; I'd read about it in the Boston Globe. The only dark cloud was Vietnam. They had started to draft guys. I didn't really want to die in a rice paddy somewhere, just because I hadn't been quite ready to go to school. At some point, I would need that student deferment.

First things first, though. I needed to carry stuff. I wouldn't be able to afford to stay in motels, even cheap ones, very often. I'd need to camp, and that meant I would need to carry a tent, a sleeping bag, cooking gear, food, and clothes. I'd need to have enough stuff to be able to rotate what I wore and used with what I was washing or carrying dirty.

I told Paul I was planning to be away for a month, and that I'd be back to work full-time after that. Paul said, "You deserve a break, and I've been in touch with Fred. The Florida thing didn't work out, and he's coming back to Boston. I've been putting him off until repair work picks up, but I'm covered. As long as you're back in a month, I'll hold your job. We usually have three mechanics in spring and summer, but Fred can cover a month by himself."

"What do you think I should do about carrying gear on Sophia? Just some leather saddlebags? Are they expensive?"

"Most guys get leather saddlebags and put a bedroll on top, but that's only good for a few days. If you're going for a month, you need more capacity, better design. Let me grab this catalog ... See, here's some European gear that will work."

Sleek suitcases and a box, sitting on top of a luggage rack. They were lovely, but the price was more than my budget for the entire trip.

"Okay, well why don't you find some suitcases the right size, and make a rack that can hold them as panniers? I got a buddy who might be willing to show you how to make a good rack to hold them. I'll talk to him."

I loved the idea. I told my mom and dad what I was looking for, and Mom said that my Great-Aunt Carla had travelled a lot when she was young. That seemed hard to believe, I always thought of Aunt Carla as frail and ancient. When I called her, she said she had lots of luggage.

Mom said, "Don't you dare just show up at Aunt Carla's, take what you like, and leave. She'd like some company and I'll bet there are a few things that need to be done around the house. Spend a little time, even if she doesn't have anything you can use."

I took a bus to Jamaica Plain. Aunt Carla lived in a beautifully maintained bungalow on a quiet shady street. She stayed in part of the house and rented the rest to a couple who looked nearly as old as she was. The family story was that Aunt Carla was comfortable. Uncle Eric had been the vice president of a large insurance company and had never retired. He was well into his seventies and still working, when he'd passed away fifteen years ago. Aunt Carla was still quite spry, and she led me up to the attic.

“Oh my, it's such a good thing that I didn't donate them. A few years ago, I had some people from my church come and take a lot of things from the attic for a rummage sale. They asked about the luggage, but I said no. Some of my best and fondest memories are wrapped up in that luggage. But also, I don't think many people buying things at a rummage sale would have any appreciation of the quality. Your Uncle Eric always said we should buy the best luggage we could afford, because they form your first impression on people in foreign countries. I told him that anyone who judged me by my luggage wasn't worth knowing, but he didn't agree. I have to confess that he was right. Everywhere we went, we were treated better than the people who'd showed up with ugly luggage. It might be silly, but that doesn't mean it isn't true.”

Aunt Carla couldn't have weighed more than eighty pounds. The thought of her shepherding the mound of steamer trunks that stood in front of us seemed completely ridiculous. All the trunks were much too big. The smallest of them could have held a Shetland pony. I had made the trip for nothing. I wanted to hear more about her travels, so I said, “I barely remember Uncle Eric, he sounds like an interesting guy. I'd love to hear about your travels in Europe.”

“Oh, Monroe, I'm always afraid to tell stories. When I see other people going on and on, they always seem like they just don't know how to have a conversation.”

“I’m taking this trip so I can have something like your adventures. You’d be doing me a big favor. Can we sit here on these trunks and you just tell me a little?”

I dusted off a low, dark green trunk with heavy brass fittings. We sat down, and Aunt Carla composed her thoughts for a few moments.

“You know, your Great-Uncle Eric was well thought of in the insurance business. He was a pioneer. He opened offices all over Europe, and built a successful international underwriting department for the company. I loved his work because we got to spend nearly half the year in various European countries, every year from 1922 until 1935, when Europe got dangerous. After the war, we went back. It was sad for a while, but things got better, and many of the wonderful places we knew were either spared or rebuilt so well that you couldn’t really tell they had been destroyed. Well, I suppose you could, but we didn’t want to.”

“So did you enjoy Europe, Aunt Carla?”

“Oh, I loved it. Especially Paris, but also Italy, Greece, even England. It was all wonderful. I never cared for Germany. Germany was so economically depressed and the people seemed angry and inhospitable. They treated us well enough, though, because we were Americans, but they were awful to other Europeans, and they always wanted to know that we weren’t Jewish. We stayed mostly in Paris or London.”

“Tell me about Paris. I’ve always wanted to go there,” I said.

“Well, you should. Anyone who doesn’t want to go to Paris is just a fool. The first time we went there, we had been in London for a few weeks. That year, London was just so dreary. It rained and I never could get warm the whole time we were there. But it was still London. As long as you didn’t care too much about good food, it was a fine place to be. The British Museum

just captivated me. Those rascals looted the world, you know, and they brought a lot of it back to the British Museum. One afternoon I was wandering, looking in every direction at wonders, when I came into a small room with a big stone in the middle of the room. No cover, no guards, not even a rope to keep you from resting a hand on it, or even knocking off a bit for a souvenir. It was the Rosetta Stone. The real thing, right there.”

“Wow. That’s one of the museums I want to visit. Someday I also want to see the Natural History Museum.”

“I’m afraid I never went there. There is so much to see. But after a relatively short time we always escaped London because the food is horrid. And the waiters have the best manners and the worst breath. Big, horrid, yellow horse-teeth, because their gums have withdrawn due to poor hygiene. You can be in the nicest restaurant and the waiter will bring you food that wouldn’t pass in a soup kitchen. They mash their peas, you know. Really. They mash them! Like potatoes. Turn them into green paste, and serve sausages that are at least half bread. Thank God they steal all the best wines from Portugal, or dinners would be intolerable.

“Well, Paris is nothing like that. It’s hard to find a bad meal in Paris, though the waiters can be insufferable. I’ll trade manners for decent food any day of the week, and once they know you in a restaurant, they take wonderful care of you, even while they savagely ignore the bumpkins from Ohio at the next table.

“It was a bit of an ordeal to get to Paris in those days. We took a train, and then a small ferry across the English Channel. Such a brutal little stretch of water—never a pleasant thing. Eric suffered terribly from seasickness his whole life, while I felt no ill effects whatever. I think

he greatly resented that I never joined him at the rail. No one was a bigger fan of airline travel than Eric. I believe it extended his business career by ten years.

“After the ferry, we took a noon train to Paris. We arrived in the early evening, and we were exhausted, especially your uncle, since he had spent the night being comprehensively sick. We were staying at a wonderful hotel called Le Meurice, just across from the Tuileries Garden. Beautiful area, but that evening it was wasted on us, we went to our room and fell fast asleep. The next morning I arose early. Eric was still asleep and showed no indication of rising before noon. Feeling restless, I dressed and went for a walk. The sun was barely up and the city was foggy, so I could barely see anything. I finally found my way to the river. The sun suddenly burned away the fog, and there was Notre Dame—the huge cathedral, on its own island in the middle of the Seine—right in front of me. I felt as though I had discovered it! I found a lovely cafe, had coffee and chocolate croissants, and later discovered that it was one of Hemingway’s haunts. I saw him there, a few days later. It became one of our favorite places, too.”

“Wow. That must have been a wonderful time to be there. I’ll go there someday, but I don’t imagine it will be quite the same. Tell me, Auntie, is there anything I can do for you? Maybe wash your windows while I’m here? I’m afraid all this luggage is much too big for what I need.”

“Oh, thank you, sweetie, but that’s not necessary. We have Harold, the handyman, who comes here to do all those kinds of things. You’d be taking work away from him. And the luggage isn’t just the trunks. It’s inside the trunks. There are all manner of suitcases in there. I think you’ll find what you’re looking for, inside that big black trunk right there.”

The trunk opened vertically, like a wardrobe, and inside there were a half-dozen smaller suitcases. At the top of the pile were twin leather cases, in light-tobacco-colored leather, with heavy latches, and two leather straps that wrapped around the cases. They had sturdy stitching and leather-wrapped handles. Perfectly beat up, with luggage stickers, and scrapes, scratches, and mysterious stains. They measured about a foot deep, a foot-and-a-half high, and just over two feet long. Perfect for my purpose.

“These are wonderful, Auntie! I’ll take good care of them and return them just as they are.”

“Nonsense, dear. I’ll never use any of this again, I fear. You keep those cases to remember me by. Those are by Corbin. They made rugged and lovely luggage. I’m pleased they’ll work for you—your Uncle Eric used them extensively. He would have approved of your adventure. I sometimes make fun of your uncle and his manners and attitudes, but he was the love of my life, and we shared great adventures and a wonderful life. I know that insurance executives seem boring, but Eric had a daring spirit and was brave and capable. I could go anywhere with him and feel safe.

“Your mother said you needed two small suitcases and a duffel. I don’t have one of those, but there’s a soft bag inside that gray Louis Vuitton trunk that might do.”

The soft bag was a leather valise with one broken handle. It was almost the same color as the suitcases, and would make a perfect top bag.

I took my treasures downstairs and had tea with Aunt Carla. We talked for most of the afternoon. I’d never had a real conversation with her before, and I realized what a huge mistake that was. She was wonderful. Irreverent, judgmental, bigoted, and fabulous. It was a fine



afternoon, and now I had cases that made the expensive, European motorcycle baggage look like gauche crap.

In the course of our conversation, she said something that has stayed with me. She said, “Eric and I never wanted to settle down and have a family. We wanted to play, to live the high life, to have money and clothes and stay in fine hotels. I admire your mother and father for the sacrifices they made in raising you and your sister. I wasn’t willing to do that. Your father was a wild one. Of our family members, he was the one I least expected to settle down, but your mother was too beautiful for him to resist, and she wanted children and a stable home. He set aside his dreams to please her and provide for you two. You should never forget that.”

Not what I expected to hear, but it made some of the interactions I had with my parents a little more understandable. In my entire life, I’d never seen Mom crack the whip, but apparently she knew how to get the things that were important to her.

## CANNOLI RACK

I had the perfect bags. Now I needed to build a rack to hold them all. And I didn't know how to weld. Paul sent me to talk to Mario, a friend of his who made custom bicycle frames. Calling Mario a welder is like calling Michelangelo a painter. Yeah, he welded, but people waited a year to pay him \$500 for a frame. Per frame! For a bicycle! Not even a whole bicycle, just a frame.

I told Mario what I was up to, and why I needed to make a custom rack.

“I'm *much* too busy to do the work for you—and you couldn't afford my help anyway, but I'll show you how. Perhaps. The first thing I need to see is a precise design. I don't have time to play with you. Show me some crap drawing that we can't work from, and I'll tell Paul he just wasted a favor and boot you out of here. I want to see a smart, good design, with exact dimensions. Otherwise, pffft.”

I spent a few hours a day, for the next four days, designing the rack. I found a roll of soft copper tubing and bent the underlying framework onto the bike, as a mockup. I designed a pedestal rack that attached to the seat attachment and the upper shock mounts of my BSA. The

lower supports curved down and forward to attach to the passenger peg mounts. The flat top rack would hold the duffel bag firmly, even if it were overstuffed.

The side suitcase mounts dropped from the first inner bar of the pedestal rack, parallel to the rear wheel, clearing the axle and swing arm brackets narrowly, but the close tolerance was permitted by the stiffness of the bag supports, which kept the bag from sliding forward or backward. I planned to pack everything into two ripstop nylon bags that would fit inside the suitcases. I could remove the bags for the night, or carry the suitcases whenever I needed to.

I did full-sized drawing with dimensions specified to within a thousandth of an inch, and brought the design to Mario. He looked it all over and said, “Bring your motorcycle by, so I can check your bullshit measurements.”

I said, “It’s outside.”

We went out and Mario measured, checked the drawing, and measured again. Then he looked at me and smiled and said, “This is worth building. We can’t hold the tolerance your drawing calls for, but if we aim at that, you won’t have any problems bolting the rack onto your bike.”

By the time Mario had finished “instructing” me, I knew how to precisely cut tubing to design. How to fishmouth, how to make lugs, how to bend thin-wall tubing. He sold me chromoly tubing instead of letting me use mild steel. When it came time to weld it up, he took the torch from my bungling hands and laid down welds so perfect, they seemed to have grown there—it would almost be a shame to paint. Then I sandblasted the whole rack, sprayed on two coats of enamel, and pushed the bolts through holes so well aligned that not a single bolt needed to be forced or tweaked. It was gorgeous with the leather suitcases mounted, their leather straps

wrapped around the side brackets to hold the cases securely in place, and the duffel, stuffed with rags, tied to the rack. Glorious.

“Never use bungees—they’re unreliable,” Mario said. “Learn to tie a few knots and rely on rope.” He refused to take any payment. “You did most of the work. I wouldn’t know what to charge.”

I figured having me do the work must have cost Mario twice the time it would have if he’d done it himself. I asked Paul what I should get for Mario, and he told me, “He loves Brigham’s coffee ice cream, and cannoli from Cafe Dello Sport in the North End. Either one works.”

I looked at the gorgeous rack on my motorcycle and decided to get him both. I carried three quarts of Brigham’s packed in dry ice, in the duffel, and a big bag of cannoli tubes, plus squeeze bags full of flavored ricotta, in one side case. I even brought chopped hazelnuts and chocolate chips for dipping the ends of the cannoli. I loaded it all into the refrigerator he had in his shop. Mario grinned and said, “Best deal I ever made. Have a cannoli.”

I dropped by two days later to get a few pieces of scrap tubing to make spacers, and the refrigerator was empty. Mario said, “Never do that again. I ate it all. I couldn’t leave it alone. You’d think I’d be sick of cannoli and ice cream, but if there was any left, I’d eat it right now. I sucked the last of the pistachio ricotta out of the bags for breakfast this morning. Some things you just shouldn’t have lying around.” He actually looked noticeably fatter.

So now I had luggage, and a rack to hold it. I was working hard on the rest of my gear. My old Boy Scout axe, a sheath knife, a two-man wall tent, my sleeping bag, a poncho, and I had my eye on some Barbour waxed-canvas rain gear in the showroom of Albion—a little expensive,

but not out of reach. Groundcloth, a set of nesting cooking pans from my Scouting days, candles, fire starters, waterproof matches, condiments. The duffel was filling up fast. I had a folding trench shovel that I added to the pile and took away, several times. I decided to keep it in the pile as long as there was room.

I started working on the folks. "I'm thinking of taking a trip this summer on my bike." That slipped by without comment. As the days went by, I started elaborating on my plans, waiting for my folks to flip out. They more or less never did. Just about when I decided to up the ante and tell them I was planning to go to California and back, they told me they were going to Canada for a month. Nova Scotia, actually. They said I was certainly welcome to come, but I got the feeling they would be happier if I said no. So I did, and I told them I might go all the way to California on my bike trip. My dad said, "That's a long way," and my mom said, "What will you do for food?"

So I was pretty much set there.

Lenny called me and said, "Hey, I've tried to give you a lot of space on this Claudia thing, I know you're hurting and I don't know how to help you. But I figured I have to tell you this. She leaves for France tomorrow morning. If you're going to talk to her, it's probably now or never."

"Oh my God. Oh my God! Lenny, I gotta hang up! Thanks for telling me, but I gotta hang up."

I paced around the kitchen. When my mom asked me what was wrong, I held up one finger and tried to say something, but when I opened my mouth, nothing came out. I just shook

my head and ran upstairs. After a while she called up the ladder to me, “Monroe? Monroe, hon, are you all right?”

I said, “I’m okay, Mom. I just need to think.”

A little later, I came back downstairs and called Claudia. I said, “I’d like to get together and talk.”

She said, “Oh honey, it’s going to have to be now, I mean right now. I’m leaving for France in the morning. My folks arranged for me to leave before the end of the school year.”

I went over to her house. When she opened the door, she looked so sad. She reached her hand out and touched my face, and suddenly I was crying, I didn’t even know why. I never cry. Well, hardly ever. We sat on her porch and held each other and I just cried like a big fucking baby. When I finally calmed down, she asked me what I was feeling, and I told her it was complicated. But then I spilled it all.

“I know you think the way I acted is unfair, and petty, and childish. I think so, too. I know it was. But it wasn’t because there was some other guy. That was nothing. It’s because I know I’m going to lose you.”

Claudia started to speak, but I said, “No, please let me finish. This is all stupid, but I have to try to get it out. I don’t want you to think I’m a baby who went off pouting just because you had sex with someone.”

She reached out and took my hands. I looked down at how small and perfect they looked in my big, rough mitts. I said, “You opened my eyes to how important this time is in our lives, and I realized my life is not going where I want. It’s not a direction that should include you. I’m trying hard to fix that, but I’m not sure I can. So when you told me about the other guy, and

everything went blank, I hung onto that. It was better than thinking about losing you because I'm a fuckup."

She squeezed my hands remarkably hard, and I watched some big, bright tears drip from the end of her nose.

"Does that make any sense?"

"I don't know Monroe, it's a lot to take in, and I can't think clearly right now. Right now I'm just sad."

"Me too, baby, me too. I love being with you. But as horrible not being with you made me feel, I thought it was better than feeling hopeless. Now I think I was just stupid. Now you're leaving and I missed out on spending time with you. I fucked up, dammit, I fucked up."

The more I talked, the more I sounded like some confused, clueless little fucking whiner. I tried to stop talking, but I couldn't. I told her about my idea for a trip. Finally I ran down. Out of breath. Out of words. I couldn't think of any more stupid, pointless things to say.

She looked at me with her amazing eyes. "I love you for who you are. You're a good man and I'm glad to have you in my life. I want you to fix that path you're talking about. I want you to have a good life. If it's not with me, then I'll feel good knowing that maybe I pushed you in the right direction."

I almost started bawling again, I could feel this horrible, burning sadness well up in me, but I gagged it down and didn't cry. Hearing her say my life wouldn't include her made it horribly real.

I didn't say I loved her. Somehow it just didn't feel right to say it, even though I felt it. Clear and strong, not the tiniest doubt. I just didn't want to hang that on her.

I missed feeling that powerful way I used to feel. I felt like I was bigger and better than everyone around me, because I had Claudia, but she was going to be gone in the morning, and short of some miracle, she was not likely to come back into my life.

We held each other a long time without saying anything. Then I gave her a long kiss. Got up and walked home. As I was walking, it suddenly came to me that for all the time we'd spent together, all the fooling around, we'd had sex only with other people. It was an ugly thought, and it made me feel wretched. I don't know if it was the missed opportunity, or the simple vulgarity of the idea, but I didn't like thinking about it. I felt the fog closing in, and a big hole opening up inside me.

And in the morning, she was gone.



## FIRST LOSER

I had never been to Washington D.C. before. The state of Massachusetts paid for my train tickets and a shared room at a ritzy hotel. There was a doorman and everything. There were two banquets for the science fair, one welcoming us the first night, and on award night. Meals were included. Breakfast at the hotel, lunch at the fair. Sandwiches, a carton of milk, a little apple, and an individually wrapped Ho-Ho. I thought they only came in pairs. Maybe this was just a Ho.

I was still having an emotional hangover from losing Claudia. Nothing seemed completely real. It was like there was a greasy layer over the whole world. And they wouldn't let me fire up my accelerator. When I got there on the first morning, there was a sign posted on my exhibit, forbidding me from even plugging it in. All I had to show were a bunch of plastic samples showing polymerization, and my big, scruffy apparatus. I stepped back and looked at it. Without a beam of protons blasting through it, it just looked like a scabby, homemade Van de Graaff electrostatic generator, a complicated glass tube, and some vacuum pumps. While the judges were there, a proctor showed up to ensure the equipment was not started since its safety had not been verified. Hell, I wasn't dead. My hair wasn't even falling out—what was the big

deal? So, I got second. I was depressed. No, I was way fucking more than depressed, I felt like I'd wasted my whole life. Second fucking place. My last chance to get a first place at the National Science Fair, and now it was over. Second. Fuck.

There was a genuine geek girl who showed some interest in me. She asked me about my exhibit and seemed impressed. Her project was interesting, technically speaking. She had built a completely self-contained Plexiglas habitat for a few white mice. Their feces and urine dropped through a grid into a nutrient bath that fed algae. The algae were harvested automatically as they expanded into the narrow end of the bath by a slow-moving belt. UV lights sterilized the algae, and the belt eventually compressed them into pellets to feed the mice. The water vapor exhaled by the mice was recovered and added to water that had been purified by an osmosis filter. The only inputs were sunlight and electricity. It was nicely engineered, though she told me her father had done most of the work; it had just been her idea. And it wasn't really working. The system kept running down in about two weeks and the mice began to starve. She got first prize in biology.

She had nice boobs and a lot of pimples, dressed like she was Amish, and had some minor tics. In other words, a stone fox, in the geek world. She'd actually be attractive if her skin cleared up and she bought some clothes that didn't make her look like she was in her late forties. I was semi-interested until I got second place, then I just wanted to go off by myself and mope. The other geeks circling her were thrilled at my ennui.

The Smithsonian was cool, but in general, Washington D.C. looked like a good place to stay away from. Some of the kids went to Georgetown after the banquet and said it was great; they'd even gotten served at a bar. But I wasn't with them, and the next morning I was on a train

to Boston with a second-place ribbon and a \$500 scholarship. Whoopee. First place was \$3,500. That would have made a difference.

Good news: I got accepted to MIT. Bad news: I couldn't afford the tuition, much less room, board, and books. There was no doubt my acceptance was thanks to recommendations from Dr. Ambruster and Mr. Conklin, though perhaps my drastic grade improvement and science project had helped some, too. My \$500 scholarship would barely make a dent. I needed at least \$3,000 a year. Realistically, more like \$4,000. At my current earning rate, if I worked full-time for a year, lived at home like a hermit, and saved every penny I could, I'd be able to afford one year of school for every year of work. Once I thought it through, I realized a lot could happen in two years. Maybe I'd land some scholarship. Maybe I'd get my MIT degree by alternating years of work and school. Whatever it took, I was going to give it a go. The only real failure would be to not try.

I spent a day in the admissions office talking to people, and eventually got to talk to the dean of admissions. He was a brisk guy, who seemed to like the idea that I was willing to work for a year to get my first year's tuition. "Yes, we can give you a year of deferral. It's not without precedent. I think a lot of students could benefit from a year of maturity and work between high school and college. We'll start the paperwork, but the answer is yes. And I'm the guy who can say yes."

### THE AGONY OF VICTORY

One Sunday in the spring, Paul invited me to come to the motorcycle races in Westfield. The race on Sunday was TT, which was Paul's favorite style. Practice started at two, and Paul put me on his pit crew so I could get in for free. It was a bright, sunny day, so I bundled up a bit and rode my motorcycle to Westfield. I left early and took the back roads. It was a nice ride.

When I got there, I was surprised by how many competitors there were. The pit area was full of trucks and motorcycles, and cars pulling trailers. Some of the competitors were pulling the lights and mufflers off their street bikes to race, but a lot of them came with purpose-built race bikes. The track is a half-mile oval, with additional turns and a jump added to the infield to make a TT track. I found Paul's pit near the track entrance with the Albion truck.

"Hey, good to see you," he said. "How about checking the timing while I get this carburetor back together? I'm getting a high-speed miss that I can't track down. I'm using thirty-nine degrees at full advance."

Paul's bike was a 1957 BSA Goldstar, a lightweight, 500cc single-cylinder bike that he had extensively modified. It was fussy and a little fragile, but the trophies he'd won with it filled an entire case at Albion. I pulled the cover off the magneto points to hook up the multimeter. The point contacts were slightly misaligned. When I opened the points with a small screwdriver, I could see that the movable arm was twisting.

"I might have found your problem. I think your points are bad. The bushing's not square and the spring seems weak."

Paul took the screwdriver from me and checked them himself. "I'll be damned. I looked at them first, but I didn't notice that. There are a couple new sets of points in the spares box."

I installed them and set the timing. A few people stopped by to talk to Paul and watch us work.

One of them was Silvio. "Hey, Lenny's buddy. What's your name?"

"Hi. It's Monroe."

"So, Monroe, what kind of fucking name is that? So you even know about racing bikes too, huh? Pretty smart kid."

I just gave him a nod, and kept working. Paul talked to him for a minute and Silvio left, which was fine by me. Every time I saw that guy I had an uncomfortable feeling.

During the qualifier, Paul's bike ran cleanly, but it sounded a little flat when he hit the end of the straight. When he came off the track, I told him I thought he was running rich. I pulled his plug and it was sooty, though we didn't have what the Surtees book called a clean chop. Which meant that while the engine was running flat-out under load, Paul should suddenly pull in the clutch and shut the motor down with the kill switch and then coast to a stop, so we could read

the plug. Still, I felt confident that dropping the main jet by one step, and raising the needle in the slide to lean it out a little at three-quarters throttle, might give him a little more power. So we did it.

In the heat race, his bike pulled cleanly. Paul was in fourth at the first turn, and pulled into third position as he was coming out of the corner. First and second place had a good lead, but Paul chased them down for the next three laps. On the last lap he pulled into second place at the end of the straight, which was cool, considering that the guy he'd passed was riding a Triumph TT special, a 650 twin, made for dirt-track racing. Paul took that momentum all the way to the finish, pulling up right behind first place at the flag.

Paul took his cool-down lap. When he hit the straight, he gave the bike full throttle almost all the way to the pit entrance, holding down the kill button and pulling in the clutch to coast to his pits. Or rather, our pits, since he was following my instructions. I pulled the plug and read it. I could see light brown on the nose, and at the base of the insulator I could see darker brown. Still a bit too rich.

Paul's finish qualified him for the main event. So while the racing cycled through all the smaller displacement classes and the semi-qualifier, I completely checked over Paul's bike. I looked at his points again, checked the timing and valve lash, and went one size lower on the main jet.

Paul said, "I'm not going to be happy if we burn up this motor. Fred says it's better to be too rich than too lean."

"I understand why he says that, but you're probably losing two horsepower that way. If you were cruising away from everyone, then it might make sense to keep the engine cooler, but if

you want to beat that guy in first, you need all the horsepower you can get. Besides, I'd say its better to be exactly right than either too rich or too lean, and it's going to be just right. It will run clean, and put out as much horsepower as this little motor can."

Paul said, "I hired a gunk, and I got a race mechanic. How did you learn all this stuff? I've never been able to really read a spark plug, I just pretend to."

"Books," I said. "*Modern Motorcycle Mechanics*, the Champion spark plug manual, articles in cycle magazines, all the shop manuals, but mostly that John Surtees book you gave me. It's a gold mine. There's not all that much information available on the stuff I'd really like to know, like cam timing and cylinder flow, but I've read everything I can find. It's nice to be able to apply some of what I've learned. This racing stuff is neat."

In the main, Paul got the lead in the first turn and pulled away steadily. By the time the flag fell, he was leading by almost the entire length of the straight. I noticed Silvio finished fourth.

Paul was elated, and started telling everyone his tuner had got him an extra five horsepower in the pits. I doubted it was five. Maybe it was two, but it was enough. People congratulated Paul and asked me questions. I got a little bout of shyness and wanted to get away from everyone, so I said goodbye to Paul and went to get on my motorcycle. I was going to be driving a good distance in the dark, but my lights were good and I had confidence in my ability and my bike. I was feeling damned good about myself.

## RULEBREAKER

*Fucking ludes, thought Silvio, I gotta quit those things.*

After his mediocre performance in the race, Silvio had decided to get a little high with Stick and Walrus. He was going to smoke a little grass, but Stick produced a little envelope of 714s.

“Hey, I got these Lemmons from a roadie I know. He says just one of these will roll your socks right up. Quality stuff, three hundred milligram.”

So they each took a Quaalude. They loaded Silvio’s bike onto the trailer hitched to the 1953 Ford pickup that Walrus had borrowed from his uncle. Silvio and Stick rode their Harleys to the track while Walrus hauled the race bike.

“There’s that fucking fat kid, that Monroe guy who hangs with old man Rosenthal’s kid. Fucker should be in the Hard Cats, he could tune our bikes. He’s gotta be a college kid next year. He could recruit some dealers for us.”

“I don’t know Silvio,” Stick said, “he looks like a pussy to me. He looks soft. You think he could keep quiet if he got nabbed.”



“Maybe not, so we’d take him on as an associate for the summer, and see how he does. Man, that’s one ass-kicking lude. You guys feeling that? Whoowee!”

“Feeling what? I don’t feel a thing. I don’t feel my head, I don’t feel my arms, I don’t feel my legs,” said Walrus.

They all laughed.

“Hey, I’m going to go talk to that fuck and get him to join. Get me a beer, I got fucking cottonmouth. I’ll be right back.”

Silvio lurched uncertainly to his feet, and walked over to where Monroe was preparing to start his BSA.

## RECRUITING

While I was putting on my jacket, Silvio walked up and said, “Hey, kid. That bike ran better than I’ve ever seen it. You must know your stuff.”

He seemed to be acting oddly and his eyes looked strange. They were super dark. His voice had an odd slur to it that I hadn’t noticed before. I didn’t smell alcohol.

I said, “It’s just what I learned from books. I didn’t do anything special, just made sure it was running well.”

“Well, I could use what you know. My bike was running like crap. The club has a garage where I keep my Triumph. How about coming by tomorrow night? You can help me get ready for next week.”

“Oh, I can’t. Paul has a strict rule about mechanics taking outside work. Besides, I need to do my homework.”

Silvio raised his head sharply, and when he did, it upset his balance. He staggered back a few steps, then came back at me as if I had pushed him. I thought he was going to throw a punch at me. He got right in my face.

“Hey, fuck that and fuck Paul. You’ve got an attitude about me and my club. What, you think we’re not good enough for you? I offer to let you ride with us, you turn me down, I ask you to help me with my bike, you turn me down. I don’t take that kind of crap from people.”

“Gee, no, I’m not giving you attitude. I just don’t have the time. I still live with my folks. They’d take my bike away if they knew I was in a bike gang.”

“It’s a club, kid, and I don’t make this kind of offer to just anyone. And there’s serious money in it. If you’re a fucking member, you can have dealers of your own. But now you’re on my shit list. Here’s my phone number. Call me if you want off it.” He stuffed a piece of paper into Monroe’s shirt and walked over to where Walrus and Stick were standing. He said something to them and pointed to me. That couldn’t be good. And what the heck did he mean about having dealers? He wasn’t making any sense.

I’d enjoyed the whole experience, right up until the last few minutes. And now I felt shaky inside, like I had the time I wandered outside of Brookline when I was about twelve, and some tough kids started following me. That hadn’t turned out well, either.

## ENFORCEMENT ACTION

Silvio walked back to Walrus and Stick, who were leaning on the car.

“Little fuck said no, you believe that?”

“Really?” Stick said. “I’ll go over and cut his nutsack off. Teach the fuck some respect.”

He pushed off the car and put his hand in his pocket.

“No, not here. I’m on probation fighting with one of the other racers. I told him to call if he changes his mind. Give him couple of days, who the fuck cares.”

“How much did you tell him?” Stick Asked. “Do we have a problem here?”

“I didn’t tell him jack. But if we don’t hear, then Walrus will do him. Walrus is the enforcer. This is his job. Right Walrus?”

“Sure. How do I find him?”

“You’re gonna follow him in the car. Shouldn’t be hard. Bright orange bike, and he drives like a pussy. Stick and I will meet you at the garage.”

Stick and Silvio walked to their bikes and started them. Walrus and the kid were already gone. As Silvio struggled to put on his gloves, trying to make sense of which way they'd gone, he thought, *What the fuck did I say to that kid? Did I tell him we were selling dope? I said something about it, I know I did. What the fuck? I gave him my fucking phone number. What the fuck was that? Fucking ludes.*

## DENTAL MEDITATION

I told Paul about my run-in with Silvio, hoping he'd confirm his offer to make sure Silvio stayed off my back.

Paul said, "You might want to lay low. I asked some of my friends about him and they said he's connected. You know what that means? No one is likely to give him heat unless they really need to."

"Oh, great," I said. "I've somehow pissed him off, doing stuff for you, and now I'm on my own dealing with him!"

"Hey, I didn't say you were on your own. But there's not a lot of point in really getting on the wrong side of this guy. How soon are you leaving on your trip? If you're gone for a month, he'll forget about you."

"I graduate next week. I'm pretty much done, I've got my grades—all A's except for a B in Physics. What an asshole that Mr. Plum is. There are guys who got A's in that class who think Newton has something to do with figs. They just did their lab notes really pretty, like he insists on. What does that have to do with physics?"

“Gee, I don’t know. What does any of that have to do with not getting your ass kicked by Silvio and his thugs? Maybe you want to skip graduation and get rolling.”

“Yeah, okay, I’ll see what I can do. I think the formal stuff is just a show for the parents. I can probably skip it, and my folks won’t care that much. They’re thrilled I got into MIT. Well, actually, I think they’re mostly thrilled that I’ll eventually be leaving the house. I haven’t told them that I’m planning to live at home all the way through college.”

“What the hell is Silvio’s problem with you, anyway? Lots of people turn down invitations to join bike gangs. As long as you do it respectfully, it’s not a big deal. The Warlocks asked me a couple of times. Why is he so insistent?”

“I don’t know, he said something about working on his race bike, and being an associate. Then he said I could make a lot of money and have dealers. I don’t know what he meant by that.”

“Dealers? That could be it right there. Some of the West Coast motorcycle gangs wholesale drugs. They’re big importers. He might be setting up something like that.”

“Oh man, I *really* don’t want to get involved with anything like that. This sucks.”

“Don’t worry about it too much, that might give me some added leverage. In the meantime, see what you can do about making yourself scarce.”

The next day, I went to the school office. I assiduously avoided the headmaster, and talked with the secretaries. I told them my parents were leaving for Canada, and I would have to go with them. Could I have my diploma sent to me? The secretary went over to a pile of paper, riffled through it for a moment, pulled out my diploma and handed it to me. “We don’t have the frames yet. They’re just pieces of cardboard, but if you want one, we can send it.”

I didn't. I took my diploma, grabbed stuff from my locker, turned in my textbooks and left high school for the last time.

My parents didn't mind about the graduation ceremony. They were preparing for their epic Nova Scotia trip. I packed up my bags, strapped everything onto my motorcycle and decided I'd leave in the morning.

I had used my dad's Triple-A membership to accumulate a pile of detailed maps and TripTiks. I had my money stuffed in a strange-looking money belt that Aunt Carla had insisted on giving me. She told me her purse had been slit by a thief in Rome, but all he'd gotten were cosmetics, thanks to this money belt. It was a light beige fabric that looked like something you'd make a bra from, but even when it was filled with the things I considered vital—my license, registration, and \$165 in cash—it was comfortable and didn't show through my clothes.

I also rolled up \$200 and stuffed it deep into the handlebar of my motorcycle. All the stuff I thought I might need on hand (including the Instamatic camera Angel had loaned me, some candy bars, two plastic bottles for water, and a squeeze purse of change for tollbooths) was stuffed into a daypack I still had from my brief but intensely unpleasant experience as a Cub Scout. I tied the daypack to the top of my tank, with a doubled-up towel in between, to protect the tank from scratches. I went to the gas station so I wouldn't have to do it in the morning. I topped up the tank, filled up my emergency gas tank—a two-quart canteen I had painted red—and tied it onto my duffel. I checked the air and oil, and adjusted the chain and thoroughly lubed it.

The sun was still out when I got home. My parents were out for the evening, and there was no milk in the refrigerator, so I walked to Harvard Avenue to buy some from the



Cumberland Farms store. The street looked beautiful in the low sun. I could see dust motes in the air. As I was crossing Commonwealth Avenue, the bulky ex-Navy guy, Walrus, got out of a parked car.

“Silvio says you didn’t call, so you need an ass-kicking,” he said, walking towards me.

“Look, I don’t understand why Silvio is angry with me. I just want to be left alone. I’m not looking for trouble.”

“Sometimes trouble just finds you,” Walrus said, and he punched me in the face.

I staggered back and stumbled into a low iron fence. My face hurt like crazy. I yelled, “Leave me alone, I didn’t do anything!”

Walrus grabbed my shirt and cocked his hand back to hit me again.

I put my hands up and shoved him.

He staggered backwards. “Oh—there’s some fight in you. That makes it more fun.” He came at me and straight-armed me in the chest.

The iron pickets were knee-high. I fell backwards over them and into the tiny, grassy yard of an apartment building setback. As I scrambled to my feet, I felt anger building. I hadn’t done a thing to deserve this. There was no reason for Walrus to beat me up, but he was going to. I had to try to fight. I had to try to knock his block off.

As he stepped over the picket fence, the toe of his boot caught the top of it and he stumbled. While he was windmilling to regain his balance, I stepped forward and swung at his face. I put my whole body into it. When my fist hit his mouth, it was like punching a brick wall. I felt an electric tingle down my arm and a shock in my knuckles and thumb. I shut my eyes tight in agony, and cringed in fear of the counterattack, but nothing happened. When I opened my eyes

I saw Walrus on his knees, choking, with his hands at his throat. I watched him turn red and then purple. He fell on his face in the patchy grass, without even putting his hands out.

I went over to him. He flopped over onto his back with his heels drumming against the ground, hands still at his throat. I put my face down by his mouth and felt a slight movement of air. He was pretty much unconscious. His feet stopped kicking. I opened his mouth and saw that his throat was blocked by a broken dental plate. It looked like some toothy creature was trying to eat its way out of his throat. I stuck my fingers in his mouth and was rewarded with a reflex bite. I stuffed my wallet in the corner of his mouth, reached down his throat and struggled to get a grip on the plate. I turned his head a little sideways, jammed my hand deeper and hooked two fingers behind the plate. I pulled hard. At first it didn't move at all, but then it suddenly popped free and a gust of air and spit blew into my face.

I looked at the plate. It seemed to be about three-quarters of a lower plate. I looked in his throat for the rest, but it wasn't visible, and I didn't see anything on the ground.

His color improved steadily. He was breathing almost normally, and his eyes were open. They seemed unfocused, but they were aimed in my general direction. I pried my wallet out of the corner of his mouth and stood up. I walked home and washed my bloody knuckles. I left my folks a note, put on all my riding gear, hopped on my bike, and got the fuck out of Boston.

## COLD AT COCHITUATE

That night, I didn't go far. Just to Framingham, to the park by Lake Cochituate. It was empty this early in the spring. I washed my hands for the tenth or twelfth time under the spigot outside a locked-up restroom. I figured cutting your knuckles on the teeth of a guy like Walrus could give you some spectacular infections. I washed my face, brushed my teeth, filled my water bottles and tried to get some sleep. I didn't try to set up camp; I just got into my sleeping bag and leaned up against a tree. I was overwhelmed.

This was a strange place for a geeky guy like me. I felt like a fugitive. My knuckles were swollen and bleeding, the whole left side of my face was aching, and I was lonely and scared. From what Paul had said, it seemed like the mob might be looking for me. According to the grisly stories my mom loved to read aloud from the Boston Record-American, they make a regular practice of shooting people in the head, and dumping their bodies in a swamp or leaving them in the trunks of stolen cars parked on Commonwealth Avenue.

I didn't sleep much. The air coming off the water was cold and made my head feel stuffy and my throat ache. I put my helmet on to keep my head warm, and found this made it more comfortable to rest my head against the tree. A sleeping helmet—I imagine I made quite a sight.

I couldn't stop the crazy threads of thought running through my head. It took forever for the sky to lighten. I think I slept a few hours, but I wasn't really sure. About six in the morning, I packed up my sleeping bag, double-checked the load on my bike, and drove into Framingham Center to find some coffee and a warm place to sit.

The only place open was called Tastee Donuts. The coffee was good, the crullers were still warm, and the booth was comfortable. I checked my face in the washroom mirror. It wasn't obvious that I'd been hit unless you knew to look for it. A little redness over my cheekbone and next to my nose, but that could be a zit. My knuckles were swollen and cut. I washed them carefully once again, letting the cold water run over them for a minute, then dried off and returned to my booth.

I sorted through my TripTiks and maps, trying to decide how far to drive for my first real day on the road.

The lady behind the counter was probably fifty or so. She looked at my maps, and at the motorcycle at the curb. She said, "Where you headed?"

I told her I was going to drive across the country, do the southern route headed there, and probably drive the length of California, maybe Oregon and Washington, then come back along the US and Canadian border, depending on the weather.

She yelled into the back, "Hey, Wally! This kid out here is living your dream."

Wally came out from the back, with flour dusted up past his elbows. I had to repeat my itinerary for him.

He closed his eyes and smiled. “Oh yeah, that’s the trip. And on a sickle. I never thought of that, but it’s the way to do it. Someday I’ll unload this joint and I’ll do that.”

Wally got a cup of coffee and sat down in the booth across from me. He asked me all about what I planned to see. He knew all the roads, all the way across the country and back, though he’d never been west of Ohio. He talked about the routes and what he planned to do. The places he’d stop, the things he wanted to see—like New Orleans. He wanted to eat Cajun food, drink chicory coffee, and try beignets. “They’re like a donut. I made some here, once, from a recipe I found. It’s like deep-fried éclair dough, but an old guy who came from Nawlins—that’s how they say it—said they weren’t quite right. Close, but not quite. I gotta see for myself.”

He wanted to see the Mississippi. To drive across Texas and have some barbecue, Texas-style. And maybe some Mexican food. “I tried a Mexican TV dinner a couple of times,” Wally said, “but I bet it ain’t much like the real thing. I’ve had TV dinner meatloaf, too, and it doesn’t taste like any meatloaf I’ve ever made.”

We talked about California. The water, the Redwoods, Pacific Coast Highway, Sepulveda Boulevard, El Camino Real. And Highway One, the road that snakes up the coast of California through Oregon.

“Thinking ain’t doing, but I’ve been thinking about this trip so long, it feels like I done it,” Wally said. “I got people that count on me here, but in a few years my kids will be gone. My wife passed away years ago. I’m going to do it. But even if something happens or I get old too fast and I can’t, it’s good to talk about it.”

Wally asked me how far I expected to drive each day. He wasn't impressed when I said I thought three hundred miles would be a good day. He told me about a place called Bellevue that was about that far, near Wilmington, Delaware. He said Bellevue was a huge, semi-deserted estate that belonged to one of the du Ponts, and it was being converted into a state park.

Wally went back to his kitchen. I went to the phone booth and called my folks. They didn't seem particularly concerned by my sudden departure. "We were leaving for Nova Scotia tomorrow, but we decided, what the heck? Monroe has the right idea, why are we waiting? We're going to leave this morning and take our time driving."

I called Paul at home and told him the whole sad tale.

"Wow, Monroe, that's horrible! You did the right thing leaving. At least, you did if the guy was okay. If he's dead, that might be a problem. I didn't see anything in the paper this morning, but I'll make some quiet inquiries. But hey, have a good trip, and check in with me in a few days. I'll see what news I can put together for you."

I felt shaken after talking to Paul. It hadn't occurred to me that Walrus might die. He'd seemed okay when I left, though I had no idea where the other part of his lower plate was. Now that Paul had raised the issue, it seemed entirely possible that he might have died. And I had left the scene. I didn't know much about law, but I knew that didn't sound good.

When I got out of the phone booth, Wally walked up to me and handed me a bag of cake donuts. He snagged a postcard from a rack of souvenir postcards by the cash register, wrote his address on it and added a two-cent stamp. "These cake donuts last a lot longer than the raised donuts. When you get to California, just write "I made it" on the postcard and stick it in a mailbox. I'd just like to know you got there."

I shook his hand, got on my bike and cruised out of Framingham, heading west.

Despite my concerns, I was determined to follow my plan as best I could. The first major thing I wanted to see was the Outer Banks of North Carolina. I had a lot of the Eastern Seaboard to get through, and I would have to pass through New York City to head south. I didn't want to spend any time in the City. I'd been there before, and I figured it would be really expensive or dangerous for me to stop there. So I resolved to get well past New York City before I tried to stop. I could bypass it entirely if I turned west toward Scranton, Pennsylvania, from Hartford, but it would add almost a hundred miles, which seemed like a big detour this early in the trip.

When I crossed the border into Connecticut, it was still morning. In Stamford, I stopped for lunch and gassed up. I went to a grocery store, bought some kosher salami and provolone cheese, and two bulky rolls. I made a sandwich and drank my water bottle dry.

I rolled through New York City in heavy traffic. I was amazed at how aggressive the cab drivers were. They'd pull right up close to me and force their way into the line of traffic. I was happy to put the city behind me and be out of that maze of concrete. The highway was surrounded by concrete walls, with overpasses everywhere. It was an open tunnel. There were stripped cars pulled off to the side. On my way through the city, some of the places made me think, *If I broke down here, how would I even get out?* Fortunately, my bike was running sweetly and never missed a beat, so I didn't find out.

I was just about to Wilmington, Delaware, when I started getting tired and sore. I knew I could go on, but if I went much further I'd get into the Baltimore/D.C. area, and I didn't know what that would be like for camping. I figured it would be tough. So when I saw the exit for Bellevue I left the highway. I found the entrance, skirted the bigger buildings, and made my way

to a wooded area close to the Delaware River. I pulled well off the road, pitched my tent, and crawled into my sleeping bag with a sandwich. I woke up at about six in the morning, to discover that my sleeping bag was full of ants that had been attracted by my sandwich. I'd fallen asleep after taking only a few bites.

I decided I wasn't going to call anyone that day. This trip was supposed to give me time to think on my own, time to experience new things and new places. So even though I wanted an update from Paul, I decided to give it a day to jell, and continue on my way without thinking about any of that. Considering my tendency to obsess over things, I didn't expect to succeed. But being on the road helped.

I dug into my Cub Scout pack and found the bound notebook I had bought at Bob Slate Stationer in Harvard Square. It was going to be my travel journal. A fat little book, made in France, with black covers and an elastic band built into the back cover to keep it closed. I loved the thing.

*Monroe's Travel Journal: Travels with Sophia*

*Day Two, Framingham, Mass to Bellevue, Wilmington, Delaware 335 miles*

*June 10, 1965*

*I left Brookline on June 9, so that's Day One, even though I only went 28 miles to Framingham. I learned that it's important to keep my neck warm at night. I had a stiff neck until mid-morning, and a sore throat like I was getting a cold. On the road by 7:45 a.m. Nice to be on the road. My bike feels great though my butt gets sore after about 100 miles. I made my way through heavy traffic to Connecticut, bought food and ate in Stamford and I got a heavy scarf at a secondhand clothing store. Feels great on my neck and the sore throat went away fast. Drove*



*through New York City in the afternoon, well before rush hour. I continued through New Jersey, skirted Philadelphia and decided to stop at Bellevue, a former du Pont estate that seems almost deserted.*

*I got chilled while I was pitching my tent because I pulled all my riding gear off and got into shorts and a T-shirt so my pits could air out. So I dragged my bags into the tent, got into my sleeping bag to eat a sandwich, and the next thing I knew it was 5:30 a.m.*

*Total miles: 335. About eight hours on the road with the traffic in Connecticut.*

*Expenses: Gas 3.1 gallons at .29 = \$.87 Food Coffee and Cruller (extra crullers free) \$.45 with tip. Half dozen rolls and a half pound of hard salami \$.65*

*Total \$1.97*

## NOT DEAD YET

Walrus was definitely not dead when he came through the front door of Albion Cycles. He looked big and mean in his leathers and Hard Cats colors. But his cheeks were swollen, his jaw was black and blue, and he had no lower teeth.

He said to Paul, “Wherth the fat kid—Monroe whath hith name?”

Paul had to choke down an automatic but unwise giggle. He said, “Not here. And I don’t expect to see him for a long time, if ever. I think he went somewhere out west. He might move there permanently.”

“Yeah, well, that’th good. Tell him it’th a good idea to lay low, Thilvio hath a hard-on for him for thome reason. I got no beef with him—we’re even. I might even owe him one—he could have jutht let me choke to deafth. I told Thilvio that and it pithed him off even more.”

“If I hear from him I’ll tell him that,” said Paul.

“Kid hath one hell of a punth. I never thaw it coming. Broke my lower plate in two and thtuffed half of it down my throat. I wath about choked out when he fithed my plate out, but I could thee it wath him. He looked about as thcared as I wath. I thought I wath gone. You tell him

I said thankth for that, and if I can chill Thilvio out I will. If Thilvio cometh here, tell him the kid is running thcare. That'th what I'm going to thay, and it might calm him down thome. He'th uthed to getting hith own way, but that might be good enough."

Paul said, "I'll do that."

Walrus turned on his heel and left. So the kid wasn't totally out of the woods, but he didn't kill anyone and the goon he'd hit was treating it like the mouse and lion.

Good news all around though, and maybe he could turn up the heat on Silvio and give him other things to worry about.

Paul picked up the phone.

## DRIVING TO SUMMER

In Wilmington, I stopped at a diner called The Owl. I took a seat by a window, so I could watch my bike. I really like diners, they feel comfortable to me, and I love the way they look—so compact and efficient. You'd think they'd be spotless inside, but most of them are old, and I guess the grime just accumulates. The Owl was a dump, no question. My eggs were overcooked, the sausage was undercooked, and the potatoes were greasy and cold. I could do better than that with my eyes closed. I expect a lot better for fifty-nine cents, so I got the waitress to take it back, but round two just reversed the problem. Now the eggs were undercooked and the sausage was burned. I ate glumly, wondering how a restaurant that had to run on local business could survive with a cook that didn't know how to do his job.

As I got back on the road, I decided on two things. First, no more greasy spoon restaurants. I'd make my own food, unless I found something great that I could afford. My budget for the trip was four dollars a day for the days I'd camp, and eight dollars every third day, when I'd stay in a room so I could clean up. So far, I was under budget.

The second thing I decided was that I was going to make it to the Outer Banks tonight. According to Triple-A, it was about 450 miles, and if I got through traffic without too much delay, it should be about eight hours of driving. I could certainly do that, though it didn't leave much time for sightseeing, except for the high-speed kind. I didn't want to do what my dad did on road trips, which made them such an unpleasant chore. He'd blast through areas, regardless of how interesting they were. His goal was always to get to where we were going as quickly as possible.

It was a beautiful day to be on the road, and riding my bike took most of my attention, so I didn't have time to dwell on things like how I felt about Claudia, how I was going to pay for college, and whether Silvio was going to have me beaten to death or shot by mobsters and stuffed in a trunk. Little things like that.

I skirted Baltimore and caught a few glimpses of Chesapeake Bay. I pushed on past Washington D.C., and briefly considered driving through the city, but figured that would take too much time for too little benefit. Since going there for the science fair, I wasn't that interested.

I reached Richmond a little past noon. I stopped for gas and thought about lunch, but my stomach still felt full from the grease I'd had for breakfast. So I munched half a roll with some salami, drank some water, and rolled on.

Newport News and Hampton looked interesting, so I stopped to look at my maps. I decided I liked the look of Virginia Beach even more, so I continued on. I crossed Hampton Roads and the Elizabeth River into Norfolk, and then turned off I-64 to follow the coast road as best I could. The road curved through run-down beach neighborhoods that had been built up against a continuous berm of sand, so I could barely see the water. I followed a confusing set of

roads inland and got lost for a little while, but I eventually found Shore Drive, which got me to Atlantic Avenue, which took me right into Virginia Beach.

The part of the town closest to the water reminded me of Revere Beach in Boston. There was an assortment of scuzzy bars, amusements, and greasy food stands, and a pier with what looked like sport fishing boats moored along it. There were a lot of people who looked to be about my age walking around, and the beaches were crowded. I thought about stopping and going for a swim. If there were showers, I could have some exercise and get clean at the same time. But I figured that would make it late by the time I got to Kitty Hawk. I figured I might take a swim and shower when I got there. I followed the coast from Virginia Beach, heading south as far as I could, and then I took a lot of little roads to hook back up to I-64. Away from the town, the coast looked prettier and the houses and stores were nicer.

In the early evening, I crossed the causeway to Kitty Hawk and turned north to Carson, a town my cousin had told me was such a great place. Lots of young people, a pier, two dancehalls, and some really good food. It sounded good to me. Besides the pier, the huge dancehalls, and a scattering of souvenir shops and little restaurants, the town seemed to be mostly dinky beach houses, painted with improbable colors, and a few motor courts with even tinier cabins. I pulled into the Gray Gull, which I chose because it was the shabbiest of the motor courts and had the fewest cars parked in front of the cabins. It advertised: OCAEN VU, CLEAN, QUITE AND COMFY. DAY, WK AND MTHLY RATES. I thought it was a good choice for whoever painted the sign to shorten as many words as possible since they couldn't handle either *ocean* or *quiet*.

The geezer in the office looked like a combination of Wally Cox and Walter Brennan. He tore himself reluctantly away from *The Price Is Right*.

He aimed a thumb at the TV set. "Those people are stupid. I always beat them all. They should get me on that show."

He leaned on the counter and raised his arms slightly, sending out a heavy cloud of B.O. that hit me almost as hard as Walrus's fist. I thought about how much they'd need to clean him up before they put him on TV.

"Four bucks a night for a cabin, and no noise after ten or we toss you out."

"Oh, I'm sorry to have bothered you," I said. "That's too rich for my blood. I'm going to stay three days, and I can't afford to spend twelve dollars. I budgeted six. Is there someplace less expensive you'd recommend?"

"Nah, this is the cheapest place in town. It's the high season, you know."

I thought, *If this is high season, I could sleep in the middle of the road in the winter.* I lifted my tank bag and prepared to leave.

The geezer said, "Tell you what. Cabin Six has a busted TV. You take that, and I'll let you have it for three bucks a night."

"Sorry, all I can do is two."

"Okay, good enough. Six bucks for three nights, in advance, no refund. You decide to move on early, that's just tough. I'm Mal."

I paid, signed the register, and got the key. Mal looked at my cut-up knuckles as I signed.

"I warn you, I don't want any trouble here, you motorcycle toughs are always lookin' for fights. Find 'em at a bar or the dancehalls, don't bring 'em here."

Thinking of myself as a *motorcycle tough* made me smile, which I think Mal took as an acknowledgement of my savage nature.

“That’s a pretty fancy bike you’ve got, for a guy that can’t afford three bucks a night. That’s got to be worth a thousand bucks,” Mal said.

“Well, I bought it for forty-five bucks from a guy who crashed it, took it apart, and couldn’t put it back together. I built it myself. When I got it, it was in seven boxes and a bucket. I’ve got less than a hundred into it.”

“Yeah, so you’re a mechanic, huh? Could be I got a deal for you. My Chevy won’t start. Nearest mechanic is in Kitty Hawk, and he’s a thief. You fix it, I’ll give you couple a days for free.”

“I’ll take a look, but I’m only staying three nights. I don’t have much in the way of tools with me. If I fix it, you can give me half my money back.”

“You got a deal. There’s some tools in the shed. Here’s the key to the Chev,” Mal said. He wrestled with the key ring for a few moments. “And the shed key is on there, too.”

“Fine, I’ll look at it in the morning.”

I moved my bike over in front of my deluxe cabin. I pulled all my bags off my bike and stored them in the tiny closet. The cabin was surprisingly nice—it smelled clean and fresh. Outside the back door was a low dune and the beach beyond it, with some good-sized waves breaking over a sandbar. There was a rough wooden porch across the back, and a big window that looked right at the water. Truth in advertising, at the Gray Gull Motor Court. Amazing.

The bed was soft and didn’t sag. The duvet was an old patchwork quilt that had been washed to a uniform baby blue. The sheets were clean and smelled fresh. The floor was a little



sandy, but there was a broom next to the refrigerator and hotplate. I could actually cook here, sort of. No bathtub, but the shower was wonderful. I luxuriated in it until the water started to run cold.

I had to shave about every fourth or fifth day, and today would normally be the day, but I thought my bristles made me look older, and that might be a good thing. I dressed in chinos and a polo shirt, dug my squashed loafers out of the bottom of my suitcase and polished them, and slapped a little Old Spice into my clean pits, just in case. I locked up the cabin, and locked my bike to a stanchion out front. As the sun sank towards the horizon, I walked into Carson.

I ate at a beachfront crab joint called Hurricane's, which specialized in blue crab, soft-shell crab, and oysters. I'd never had soft-shell crab, and was surprised to learn you eat it whole. Guts, feathers, and everything. I thought I might not like it, but I ate every morsel of the two I'd ordered, and mopped the plate clean with bread. They had a light roux poured over them that I thought was darned perfect—a little salty and a little hot spice. I had a dozen barbecued oysters with garlic and butter, and then ordered a dozen more. The only thing I didn't like was what they called *sweet tea*. It tasted like tea-flavored syrup. I settled for water.

I stuffed myself, and the bill came to a whopping \$2.40 with the tip. I felt guilty about that, but reminded myself that I might be able to earn three bucks back, if I could get Mal's car running.

## SHAGGIN'

I walked on toward the pier, feeling full but good, and came to the immense dancehall. Standing around outside, smoking and talking, were kids my age, older people, and even some real geezers. I went through the big open doors and got stopped at a rope by a hefty-looking guy.

“Haven’t seen you before. There’s no cover here, but we expect you to have a couple of drinks or we give you the boot. Eighteen to twenty-one, you sit on the west side at the yellow tables. You can get three-two and pop. If you’re over twenty-one, you sit on the east side, and you can bring in a bottle for cocktails and we mix them for you, or you can get beer and wine. If you tell me yer over twenty-one, I gotta see ID. Otherwise, sit at the yellow tables and have a nice time.”

I said, “I’m not twenty-one.”

Mr. Hefty pulled the rope back and said, “Have a nice time, you can’t be standing while you’re drinking, and don’t sneak across the floor. We keep an eye out, and you only get one chance. Don’t drink too much three-two, if you get drunk you’re eighty-six.”

I had no idea what those numbers were about. I went to the yellow tables and found an open one in the middle of a crowd of kids, all talking animatedly. A band was playing songs that were kind of rock'n'roll and kind of not. Every so often, a person would get up and dance, sometimes with a partner, sometimes without. They were doing fast, complicated foot moves that I couldn't make much sense of, except that it looked like a six-count rhythm—sort of, mostly. When they danced by themselves, they usually had their hands out to the sides and didn't move their shoulders or head, and they never looked at their feet. When they danced together they held one hand, like jitterbugging, and sometimes looked at each other's feet.

I was just thinking, *Wow, I can't do that*, when a girl at the next table leaned back from her conversation and said, "Hey, honey, you want to dance?"

I started to look down at my feet and say no, but I remembered this trip was supposed to be about adventure. So I looked into her eyes and said, "I'd like to, but I don't know how to do what you guys are doing. What's it called?"

The girl got up from her table, pulled out a chair across from mine and sat down. "It's called the Shag. Where are you from? What's your name? Do you dance at all? What dances do you know?"

I blinked, marshaled my thoughts, and tried to answer her questions.

"Boston, Monroe, yes, but poorly, and my sister taught me how to waltz and jitterbug."

The girl stared at me for a second. I realized I hadn't given her a clear cross-reference for each element of my reply and was preparing to elucidate.

She laughed and said, “I talk so fast, even I can’t remember what I say. I can teach you how to shag when exactly the right song comes on, which it ain’t right now. So what are you doing in Carson? Most people stay in the bigger beach towns.”

“I’m on a motorcycle trip. My cousin spent a summer here and told me this is a great place. So far, I’m in agreement.”

“Where are you goin’ on your trip?”

“Well, I’m going to stay here for a few days and explore the Outer Banks. Then I’m taking the southern route to California, taking my time, you understand. Then up the west coast and back across the northern route, or maybe up through Canada, if I have the time.”

“Wow, take me with you,” she said. When she saw my hesitation, she added, “I’m just kiddin’. My Dad would track us down and drag me back. And I love it here, especially in summer, but it gets a little narrow, if you know what I mean. In the winter, I know every single person for twenty miles in both directions.”

“I grew up in Boston, where you hardly know anyone, but I guess I can understand. I’ve certainly read books where people live in small towns. You know my name, but you haven’t told me yours.”

“I do? I don’t remember that you told me your name.”

“Yes, it’s Monroe.”

“Ohhh. I thought that was a town in Boston or something. Please to meet ya, Monroe. I’m Ada.”

“That’s a great name, like Ada Lovelace.”

“It actually is Ada Lovelace—Ada Lovelace Richards. Now I really know you’re not from here. Pretty sure nobody here knows who Ada Lovelace was. Daddy was a math professor before he inherited from his daddy. Then we moved here to manage the property and business in Kitty Hawk.”

Ada had a round face with wide-spaced eyes, a thin nose, and big, pouty lips. It doesn’t sound like a pleasant combination, but she was pretty in her way. Not stunningly beautiful like Claudia, not sexy and sensual like Donna. Ada looked energetic, happy, and confident. She looked like fun—with maybe a naughty side.

The third or fourth time the music changed, she stood and extended a hand to me. I realized she had a great-looking body, and she was tall, probably five ten or so. “C’mon honey, time for your Shag lesson.”

She pulled me to the side of the dance floor. “Okay, let’s start with a jitterbug, show me your stuff.”

So I did the stiff, awkward moves my sister had shown me before she pronounced me unteachable.

“Well yikes, sugar, that’s not gonna do. I want you to just look at my feet and do what I do. We’ll start simple, with just a two-step.”

Turned out that Ada was a wonderful dancer and great teacher. After five or six songs I loosened up and was following her simpler moves with some accuracy.

She finally said, “Okay, you’ve got the basics, but you’re still stiff. I’m gonna sit back down and watch, and I want you to dance by yourself. Don’t be shy, everyone does it, and this is the perfect song to start. Archie Bell and the Drells. It’s called “Tighten Up,” but I want you to

do just the opposite. Close your eyes, feel the music, don't open your eyes and look at your feet, just move. You've got that little flick-hop almost down—that's your best move, but don't do it quite so often. Stay loose, keep it simple. Lose yourself in the music. It's all about the music, not how fricken awesome you are at dancing.”

I moved way over to the side and started dancing self-consciously. I looked around and noticed that almost everyone was dancing solo. Even people who'd walked out to the floor with a partner had let go of their hands and were really dancing alone. I closed my eyes and danced for a while. Tried to lose myself and be relaxed. The band segued into a song I recognized as one of Jackie Wilson's, and I kept dancing. I thought I was doing well. It was fun.

Just as the song ended, I felt a pair of arms wrap around me from behind. “Oh, you're doing so good!” Ada said. “You look like a local out here, dreamin' and shufflin'. Next song is a belly-rubber though, and I need my belly rubbed. Dance slow with me, honey.”

There's no question that Ada felt my hard-on as she snuggled up against me. I was embarrassed and tried to turn a little to keep my cock from pressing into her, but she put her head on my chest, pulled me to her and rubbed herself against me.

“Somethin's come up between us, honey. That's a nice compliment.”

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything.

We danced a lot. During about the third or fourth belly-rubber, Ada looked up at me and said “You gonna kiss me or what?”

I kissed her, and she kissed me right back, and then some, with her lips a little loose and her tongue sliding into my mouth. It was languid and shockingly hot. Ada abandoned her friends, who seemed to think nothing of it. In between dancing, we talked a little. She sat in my lap,

which seemed strange, but at the same time, felt so natural. I wrapped my arm around her round bottom and rested my hand on her hip. She settled against me and talked to me like I was an old friend she was filling in on what had happened while I'd been away. Even the way she said things made me feel like I'd known her for years. "Well, you know I don't want to go to college. I'm still happy working for Daddy, doing accounting and managing the properties.

"I'll inherit them someday," she said. "Though you know I'm surely not in any hurry for that. Daddy pays me well, and if I need some extra dough for something reasonable, I can just ask. I don't ask often, so he never turns me down when I do. I'm going to travel some, instead of college. I added up what college would cost, and I think I'd learn more going to San Francisco, Montreal, London, Paris, Madrid, Singapore. Maybe even somewhere in Africa. Four years at some respectable girls' college would be more than twenty grand, and who in their right mind wants to waste four years at some snooty fuckin' girl school? I told Daddy what I want to do and he said it's fine with him. My momma's gone, I know she'd be kicking up a fit over the whole idea, but Daddy's easygoing, and he knows I'll do what I want anyway."

"I'm sorry to hear your mother died. Were you young when she passed?"

"Oh honey, she ain't dead. She ran off with some guy to go live in Galveston. I get a letter from her now and then, but I don't write back. She's still trying to tell me what I must do in every letter. I don't remember her consulting with me before she started fucking around on poor Daddy. So I don't need any of her guidance now. Let's talk about something way, way happier. Where are you staying? I want to go somewhere quiet and make out."

I said, "The Gray Gull. And it's quiet, though they spell it q-u-i-t-e."

“I know it well, honey. That’s everyone’s favorite place for shacking up. And by the way, the sign is misspelled on purpose. Mr. Rollie owns that place, same guy who owns this dance hall and a lot of the real estate here in Carson. He laughs about how many people come in to tell old Mal that the sign is misspelled and wind up staying there. That’s marketing. You Northerners think people are dumb because they talk slow. That’s just an accent.”

“You don’t talk slow, you talk faster than most people I’ve met.”

“That’s just because I’m so fricken smart.”

We walked back to the Gray Gull along a pitch-black road, illuminated only by the occasional car.

Ada asked me what I was thinking about.

I said, “Nothing that makes for good small talk.”

“That’s okay, tell me anyway.”

“I was thinking about the fusion reactions that power the stars, and what a delicate balance it is. The gravitational force is balanced by the power it generates, through compression of the matter and thermonuclear fusion. It happens on such a vast scale that it’s impossible to visualize, hard even to look at the math and make sense of it. When the hydrogen atoms get squeezed close enough together, they bang together and fuse, and excess binding energy is released, just like in an H-bomb. Only we use isotopes of hydrogen that are easy to get to fuse, while stars fuse regular hydrogen and sometimes other light atoms all the way up to iron.”

“You mean the sun is exploding like a hydrogen bomb?”

“Yeah, it is. Only more so.”



“Wow, you sure know how to sweet-talk a girl,” Ada said. “I’m going to get laid by a brainiac. Maybe I should let you get me pregnant, so I can have a smart kid. The gene pool’s about ankle-deep around here.”

“I thought we were going to make out.”

“We are. Briefly.”

*Monroe’s Travel Journal: Travels with Sophia*

*Day Three, June 11, 1965 Bellevue du Pont park, Wilmington, DE to the Gray Gull,  
Carson, NC*

*I’m stupidly writing in my journal while a lovely naked woman is lying semi-asleep, next to me. In a few moments she’s going to wake up completely and demand that I show her what I’ve written. So this is all I’m going to write.*

## ALBION DETECTIVE AGENCY

If the guy walking through the door was just a little bigger, he would have to turn sideways. Although, given the size of his gut, it might not have helped. He wore jeans so greasy they looked like they could stand up by themselves, a leather jacket, and a cut-off dungaree jacket with a Warlocks patch on the back and MOUNTAIN stitched on the front pocket.

“Bruce, good to see you. You could have just called, you didn’t have to drive all the way out here,” said Paul.

“Yeah, well, it’s Shirley’s phone that I use, and I’m kinda laying low from her right now. So this was easier. And I was up for a ride, anyway. It’s a pretty day. And the name is Mountain now.”

“Yeah, okay, whatever you say, Bruce. I assume you found out something about our pal Silvio? Like I told you, he’s got a hair across his ass about a kid who works here. I don’t really get why. Nice kid, he’s going to be a good mechanic. Very polite. Silvio sent a guy to kick the shit out of him. I’d like to know why and make sure it doesn’t happen again,” Paul said.

Mountain scowled at Paul. Then he grinned and sat on the customer stool at the parts counter and leaned on his elbows. “Well, I don’t know why he’s got it in for your guy. We know about this Silvio dude, he’s connected through his uncle to the mob, but I think that’s all it is. Hell, I got an uncle who’s a cop, but that doesn’t make me connected to the BPD. Still, he looks tough and rides a hog, so the prez gave him an invite. Guy says, *Not interested*. Maybe he’s pissed at your guy for turning him down for that shitass club. Fucker turned the Warlocks down and no one gave a shit. What a dick.

“So you were right about the dope. I talked to that Walrus guy,” Mountain continued. “Oh ... speaking of shit, get this, he found the other piece of his false teeth. He shit it out! He fished it out of his shit, cleaned it up, and took it all in and got it repaired. Can you believe it? The guy puts those shit teeth back in his own mouth!”

“Wow, can you imagine putting those in your mouth when you’re hung over?” Paul said. “It would take me three tries to get them in on a good morning.”

When they finally stopped laughing, Mountain continued, “So I leaned on this Walrus and he tells me they’re selling marijuana. Not juice or pills, just grass. Mostly to college kids. The gang has three members. Three. That ain’t a gang, that’s a tea party. But all three are livin’ well. So I’m thinking there’s something here, y’know. I took it to the prez. He’s thinking maybe we take it away. Might be good for us and it’s probably my deal to run. So yeah, good for me. I don’t know if it helps your guy if we squeeze Silvio out, but it might.”

“That’s exactly what I was hoping for. If there’s heat on Silvio, it will take his mind off my guy. If you guys don’t wind up taking his business, slip me the word. I know a guy in the PD who could probably make his life miserable.”

“Yeah, well, don’t do anything yet. I think the prez is gonna go for it. I could use some cash, and this looks easy.”

## GREASY-FINGERED DISCOUNTS

“What are you writin’, honey?” Ada said, as she rumbled my hair.

“I’m keeping a journal of my trip.”

“Oh,” she said, scrambling to her knees and bouncing on the bed, “let me see what you wrote. Am I a good lay? How did I score in your little black book? Lemme see, lemme see, lemme seeeee!”

I reluctantly surrendered the book. She read what I’d written, then tossed the book on the floor. “You set me up, you wiener. That’s no fun. Now you’re going to pay. One more time around before I get out of here and go to work. Hey, wait a second. Who is this Sophia chickie?”

“That’s what I named my bike.”

“Ah, so you spend all day with Sophia between your legs. Isn’t that backwards?”

After Round Whatever-the-heck-it-was, we showered together in the microscopic stall, which was great. Soaping Ada’s boobs and nether regions was great fun, and apparently my cock was very, very dirty. It could have been counterproductive, since we both got worked up again, but Ada had to get to work.

“Hey, I can take a couple of days off and ride around with you. I’d like to see the Banks through your eyes.”

“That would be great, but I don’t have a spare helmet.”

“I don’t need one, they’re not compulsory here.”

“Yes, you do. They’re compulsory to me. I don’t want to kill someone I like so much.”

“Okay, I’ll dig one up. Meet me at Rooney’s at five tonight, and I’ll take you to the best place in the world for dinner. It’ll even be my treat.”

“Can’t beat that. I’d drive you to work, but I’m serious about not taking anyone on my bike without a helmet, and mine wouldn’t fit you. I’ll walk you, though.”

“That’s nice. You’re a good guy. And I’m a good girl. Do you know what the definition of a good Southern girl is?”

“Nope.”

“A nice girl goes out, goes home, and goes to bed. A good girl goes out, goes to bed, and goes home.”

When I got back to the Gray Gull, I went behind the office to take a look at Mal’s Chevrolet. It was a 1961 Impala two-tone, light blue over dark blue, with a white vinyl interior. Looked in good shape. It had a battery charger connected and showed a full charge. I disconnected the charger and pulled the fill plugs. The water was above the plates, but had evaporated well below the fill lines, probably from overcharging. I unlocked the shed and rummaged around until I found a jug of distilled water to top off the battery. I hoped it really was distilled water. This wouldn’t have been the first time someone decided it didn’t matter that much

and ended up ruining a battery with mineral deposits. At least that wouldn't happen until I was long gone.

I cranked the motor. Nothing, not even a little pop or fart. I pulled a plug wire, found a rusty plug wrench in the jumble of tools in the big wooden box, and pulled the handiest plug. I looked the plug over. It was a little fouled but not in terrible shape. I connected it to the plug wire and laid it on the block to give it a ground. Then I turned on the ignition and shorted the solenoid with a screwdriver to crank the motor. I was rewarded with a fat spark.

*Okay, that spark should have easily fired the motor, I thought, let's look at the fuel.* There was a chunky, aftermarket fuel filter spliced into the fuel line with pieces of rubber hose. I disconnected the carburetor side, turned off the ignition, and cranked the motor again—a thin trickle pumped through. When I pulled the fuel filter out of the line and cranked it again, fuel gushed from the tube. I looked at the filter and could see that it had been installed backwards. Junk was accumulating in the cup of the filter element, instead of being washed to the base of the filter housing. I used one of the rubber hoses to splice the fuel line, eliminating the filter, and turned the key. The engine caught after a few seconds, once the float bowl had filled.

I critiqued my troubleshooting technique and realized I could have diagnosed this quicker by opening the carb's float-bowl drain, but I dismissed the critique as working backwards from the known fault. It's a lot more common to have an ignition problem than a fuel problem. Or as Fred would say, "Sparks first, then gas, then compression."

The engine was running, but it was rough. I thought for a second and realized that a crappy mechanic, seeing an idling problem caused by a low float-bowl level, would have richened up the idle jet. I screwed it in until the engine faltered, and turned it out slowly until it

ran clean. I turned it back until it didn't, and then back to barely clean—a magic spot called *lean best idle*. I shut it off and walked to the office.

Mal was watching soaps.

“Mal, I got your car running. It's fine, but the oil looks and smells burnt. You need a new fuel filter, and it's not running as smoothly as it should. You owe me three bucks. If you pay for the parts and oil, I'll change your oil and do a complete tune-up for ten bucks. It needs it.”

Mal looked at me suspiciously. He turned off the TV and led me out behind the office. He slid behind the wheel and the engine started first crank.

“Hey, that's great. It hasn't started that well in years. I need to charge the battery all the time so I can crank it long enough to get it started.”

“It could run even better, and if you don't change that oil and filter, you'll ruin the motor pretty soon. Nice car, it needs to be taken care of.”

“Okay kid, ten bucks. Here's a ten to cover your three bucks and for the parts and stuff, and we'll settle up when you're done. Get a receipt.”

I didn't feel like driving in Mal's car, it smelled too much like Mal plus a few years' worth of old cigarette smoke, so I took my motorcycle to the auto parts store. Six quarts of oil, some points, a condenser, an oil filter, and a fuel filter ate up \$6.20 of Mal's tenner. I would have replaced the distributor cap, but that would have put me in the hole.

I went back to the hotel. By noon, I had Mal's car running like a top. Changed the oil, installed new filters, cleaned and gapped the plugs, and installed new points and a new condenser. I set the timing with an ancient and dim neon timing light I'd found in the shed. I also pulled the little sintered metal filter out of the carb and cleaned it, then set the float level. You



couldn't hear the starter crank, and the engine fired on the first rotation and ran smoothly. I took it for as long a drive as I could stand. With the windows wide open, it didn't smell much worse than a gym locker room. Mal needed a tune-up, too—one that included a soak in Lysol. But his car was running perfectly.

He took it for a test drive and came back grinning. "Better than she was when she was new."

I gave him the receipt. He opened his wallet and gave me a twenty. "I don't need no change, the rest is a tip. It's just fair is what it is. That thief in Kitty Hawk wanted twenty bucks just to tow my car in. No telling what he would have charged me to fix it. Last time, he fiddled with the carb and charged me ten bucks, and it only worked for a few weeks. If you decide to stick around, you could do a good business fixing cars."

"Thanks Mal, but I'm on a trip before I start school, and I'm going to be moving on in a few days. I got a lot of ground to cover."

I spent the rest of the day at the beach, mostly people-watching. There were a lot of pretty girls in one-piece and two-piece bathing suits, and even a few bikinis. The girls in the bikinis looked pretty much naked to me. Most underwear covers more. I liked bikinis a lot.

I took a long swim and was surprised at how far I could go. I usually huffed and puffed, and my arms got tired quickly, but for some reason, today I could just swim and swim. I went over the sandbar and got into the waves a little. There were some guys who were swimming hard and catching the waves and riding them, with one hand pushed out in front to help keep their heads up, I guess. I tried, but I couldn't get the timing right. Still it was fun.

There were two guys and four girls on a blanket near me. One of the guys was sitting on a cooler, playing a beat-up guitar. He was just strumming basic chords and singing folk songs. He had a decent voice and one of the girls—the prettiest one, in a group of very pretty girls—joined in with a good, clear voice. It had been a week since I played, and I was itching to finger a guitar. When the guy finished, he laid the guitar on the blanket and sat next to one of the girls. I screwed up my courage, walked over and said, “Would you mind if I played your guitar for a few minutes? I’m traveling, and didn’t bring mine. Listening to you made me really want to play.”

The guy said, “Sure,” so I picked up the guitar and played a few tentative chords.

I was uncomfortable playing in front of them, and I wished I could take the guitar away out of earshot. But that didn’t seem possible, and I really wanted to play. The tuning was off, so I corrected it, played a few more chords, and tuned again. The low E-string didn’t want to stay in tune, so I tuned it a little high and gave it a tug. Perfect. The guy gave me an exasperated look. I felt embarrassed and uncomfortable, so I looked down at my feet and played a version of Duane Eddy’s “Rebel Rouser” that I’d worked up a few years ago to include both a bassline that simulates the drum and a countermelody for the sax. It’s not really difficult, but I can play it almost automatically, and it makes a lot of music from just a guitar.

The guitar guy looked at me with his mouth open, and said, “Holy shit!” and the girl with the nice voice jumped up excitedly, saying, “Play something I can sing to.”

Somehow I felt suddenly almost confident. Their attitude seemed to indicate that perhaps my playing wasn’t poor. Maybe I had finally overcome the mechanical style that had plagued me for the first few years I was teaching myself to play. I said, “Do you know ‘Mystery Train’? The Elvis version.”

“You better fucking believe it, honey.”

So I played that, with a little Chet Atkins bump. Her voice was even better than I thought, and people started coming over and sitting in the sand.

When she finished, she said, “That was really fun. What else do you know?”

I said, “I play a lot just following along to the radio, I can usually do okay with that, unless the song has a lot of changes or tricky fingering. Just sing what you want and I’ll follow.”

Fortunately, she chose songs I knew well. The newest one we did was “Sound of Silence,” which I’d heard only once but really liked, so I had it playing in my head, and then a bunch of Beatles tunes, which are easy. I tried to hand the guitar back to its owner, but he held his hands up and said, “I ain’t touching that thing while you’re around.”

The singer said, “Play me something you really like to play, even if it’s instrumental.”

So I played Scott Joplin’s “The Entertainer,” and then a Chet Atkins version of “Sweet Georgia Brown” that’s just flat-out fun, and the girl sang along in a cute and clever, sort of 1920s-flapper-style. Then I said, “Thanks so much for letting me play. I’ve got to go.”

The singer said, “One more song. Something pretty.”

So I played “Stardust” for her, Chet-Atkins-style, which is about as pretty a song as any I know. She joined right in, which surprised me, and she did a remarkable interpretation of the moody, halting style I liked to use for “Stardust.” I handed the guy his guitar, and got up to go. The singer, stepped close, put her hand on my arm and said, “That was really beautiful. So beautiful.”

She stood so close I could taste her breath, and it gave me a tingly feeling. I had sort of an idea that she was interested in me, which seemed strange, since we hadn’t talked or anything.

I said, "I'm honored that you liked it. You have such a beautiful voice. It was really great playing with you." She smiled and leaned even closer toward me, which made me nervous since I didn't know what to do, so I turned and marched away across the sand, trembling inside. I felt like a complete idiot. I heard myself saying, "It was really great playing with you." They were probably all laughing at me.

As I walked back across the sand, I realized this was the first time I'd ever played in front of anyone, and the first time I'd ever played for a singer. I play in my room, alone. I've always been much too embarrassed to play in front of people. Judging from the singer's and the other girls' reactions, that might be a mistake, but I'd have to overcome the embarrassment. Given the horrible way I felt right then, embarrassment would continue to be a big barrier.

When I got back to the Gull at around four, Mal intercepted me in the parking lot.

"Hey, kid, my buddy's having a problem with his Caddy. I showed him what you done to my Chevy, and he'd like you to take a look at the Cad. I told him twenty bucks for a tune-up, plus parts, and he thinks that's just fine. Can you do it tomorrow morning?"

I was planning to go exploring tomorrow, but twenty bucks was rich. Maybe I'd stay an extra day, if things worked out.

"Well, okay, but I might need to stay another day. Get him to toss that in and we're good."

"Hmm, sure, okay. But if he asks, don't tell him I charged you two bucks. I'm gonna charge him four. It's high season. He'll do it, he's got bucks."

## DEEP-FRIED FUSION

I showered and changed into my spare polo shirt and the chinos I had worn the night before. I rode to Rooney's, a nice little beach bar at the south end of Carson. I was fifteen minutes early, but Ada was already there, sipping a beer and looking very dressed up. I said, "Wow, look at you. I feel like a bum."

"You look fine, sugar, just fine. These are just work clothes. I'm bein' too lazy to change."

She looked darned elegant and a lot more sophisticated than me, in my old flight jacket and half-assed preppy outfit.

I sat at the booth with her, and she reached down under the seat and lifted out a helmet. She'd taken off all the tags and stickers, but I could tell it was a brand-new Bell.

"Gee, that must have cost you a bundle."

"Nah, and besides, it's what all the girls will be wearin' next fall. Where are we going tomorrow?"

Oops. “Well, there’s a complication. I fixed Mal’s car, and now some pal of his needs his Caddy tuned up, so I’ll do that in the morning. Shouldn’t take long, though the parts store doesn’t open ’til nine. So I should be done by ten or so. Then we can go.”

“Oh great, I went out and bought a helmet and took two days off, but now I’m stood up for some buddy of stinky Mal’s.” She grinned as she said it, so I didn’t think I was in too much trouble. “Maybe I’ll help you. I can hand you tools.” She dropped her hand to my leg and gave my upper thigh a friendly squeeze.

“Are you always in this good a mood? I thought you might be angry.”

“Sugar, it helps a lot that I’ve been freshly serviced and tuned up myself, with a good prospect for more of the same. That’s a fine way to keep me cheerful. Would you like a beer or something, or should we go? Dinner will be pretty much whenever we get there.”

“I don’t want anything. Let’s go.”

Ada said, “Hey Roon—stick that on my tab, okay?” and we left. I got on the bike and put the passenger pegs down. Ada slid in behind me and cuddled up.

“Ooh, this is going to be fun. What do I need to do, should I lean into the corners or what?”

“No, you don’t really do anything. If you lean a bunch, you’ll screw me up. Just relax and look over my shoulder. It helps a little if you look over the shoulder on the inside of the curve, but we’re not going to go fast, so it won’t matter. Where are we going?”

“Daddy’s house. Our housekeeper is cooking for us. Best food you’ll ever taste.”

I felt a little trepidation. Okay, more than a little. I had envisioned a nice little seafood restaurant on the shore. Meeting the father of a girl I’d met at a dancehall and pretty much taken

straight to bed seemed like it could make for some challenging conversation. Especially since, as far as I could see, Ada hadn't taken any pains to make sure people didn't know. This was a small town. She guided me to her house, which was a big cedar-shake structure, right on the beach. It had a porch that ran the full width of the street side, and an even deeper porch on the ocean side. Quite a bit of land around it, all landscaped. It looked like it would take a lot of work to maintain.

I took off my jacket and helmet, put my chain through the sleeve, and locked up my bike. I was stalling while I worked up my nerve.

"It's safe here, honey, but if you want to lock it, that's fine. You look like you're going to your execution. Cheer up. My daddy's a great guy, he's not going to jump in your shit or play twenty questions. I'm over eighteen, and my daddy doesn't tell me what to do with my time or my life. He certainly doesn't tell me who I screw or not screw."

I didn't say anything, but I gave her a little smile.

"Look, I didn't tell you where we were going, and I admit it was manipulating you. I thought you'd come up with excuses, and I wanted you to come. I'm showing you off to Daddy. Mostly I date morons. All they talk about is cars and sports. You talk about how stars burn. I know my daddy will like that. But if you want to leave, I'll go in and make excuses, and we'll go somewhere else. But you'll be missing the best fried chicken in the world."

"Well, that would be incredibly foolish of me. If you'll guarantee your daddy isn't hiding behind the door with a preacher and a shotgun, then I'm good to go."

Ada slugged me gently in the shoulder. "Honey, it wouldn't matter what you talked about, I ain't marrying anyone until I get to see what's over the next hill. That might mean never, and

after seeing what most married people are like, I'm perfectly okay if that's so. If Daddy had a shotgun, he'd have to point it more at me than you."

Then she kissed me long and hard, her tongue deep in my mouth.

"I'm not complaining, but what was that for?"

"I'm just reminding myself why I brung you here. It worked."

We walked into the house to meet Ada Lovelace Richard's daddy.

The house was sparsely furnished, but somehow everything looked like it fit, and had a story. We walked through the living room and dining room and into the kitchen, where Ada introduced me to Katherine, the housekeeper and cook.

Katherine was transferring food—enough to feed a few dozen people—from pans and pots into serving bowls. "Your dad is in the library reading the paper. I yelled at him, but he's getting deaf as a post, so I'm sure he's still there. Get him to make you a cocktail. This chicken would be best if it has a few minutes to rest, and the rolls aren't quite ready."

Katherine was tall and slender, and blue-black. She wore her hair short, in tight curls that looked natural, and she had an aquiline nose and an almost square-looking dimple in her chin. Her face was animated when she talked, and her lips formed the words precisely, as if she was building the words individually. Hypnotic. She spoke with an odd cadence, but it sounded somehow familiar. Ada gave Katherine a big hug and a peck on the cheek, which surprised me. She took my hand and led me to the library. She bent her head toward me and talked quietly as we walked.

"Kat's my mom, way more than my biological one. My real mom's been gone for six years, but Kat's been raising me for eighteen years. I want to warn you in advance, that it might



be obvious there's more between my dad and Kat than just housekeepin'. It's one reason I don't bring many friends home. This might be North Carolina, but it's the South. Might be legal, might even be common. But it's not a good idea around here to be obvious about a white man lovin' a black woman."

I didn't know what to say. Having an affair with your black housekeeper probably wouldn't be universally accepted in Boston, either, but I wasn't prepared to talk about racial harmony, or the lack thereof, in every place I'd been.

In the library, Mr. Richards was sunk deep in a leather recliner that looked more comfortable than a bed. He got to his feet, shook my hand, and kissed his daughter. "I'm glad I got that right," he said. "Sometimes I get confused about who to kiss and what to shake."

I didn't know if it was a joke, but I smiled politely. He didn't look anything like I had imagined. I assumed a math-professor-turned-businessman would have a certain elegant leanness, and be wearing something tweedy with leather elbows, and might be holding a pipe. Mr. Richards looked like a plumber. He was quite stout, a little shorter than Ada, bald on top, with a thin comb-over, and was wearing a khaki shirt and pants. All he needed was a name tag and a bag full of grubby pipe wrenches.

"Would you like a cocktail, Monroe? I know what you want, Ada. Your name sounds Southern, Monroe. Doesn't sound like a Yankee name at all. How did you come to be named that?"

"Daddy, I promised Monroe you wouldn't play twenty questions. Make us both an Old Fashioned and let's have a polite conversation. And *no* stories, especially not about me. Stories are not conversation."

“You’re right, sweetheart, you’re right. Does an Old Fashioned sound good to you, Monroe?”

“I guess. I don’t really know what they are. But I’ll try one.”

“That’s the spirit. I don’t encourage Ada to drink, but I know she does, and I’d prefer she do it in front of me. Not that she’d bother to hide it, anyway. Let’s take these into the dining room. This room gets so dark in the late afternoon, it makes me sleepy.”

I sipped the Old Fashioned. It tasted good, and had a bite of alcohol, but it wasn’t overwhelming as long as I kept the sips small.

“Ada said you told her about the stars. I know it’s hydrogen fusion that powers them, but it’s been a long time since I studied physics, and I haven’t kept up. As I recall, there was some doubt that fusion would happen often enough to really power the stars. Something about the protons couldn’t collide often enough.”

“Yeah, the Coulomb Barrier. The protons of any two atoms repel each other electromagnetically. You have to get them going really fast and in exactly the right direction, to have them collide with enough velocity to overcome the repulsion and get close enough for the short-range strong nuclear force to make them fuse. Given the distributions of velocity in a high-temperature plasma, and the random directions the protons travel, it seemed that there would not be enough fusion. But that was just considering classical physics and not quantum physics. In quantum physics, there’s a statistical probability that any two protons will overcome the repulsion, regardless of their velocities and location. In effect, they tunnel through the Coulomb Barrier and fuse. The probability is higher for higher velocities and zero-degree deflection, but of

course it's positive for any speed, direction, and origin. When you add all those probabilities, it's enough for fusion to work."

"Hmmm, I've never really understood quantum physics. I always thought it was a way to work around problems, rather than to really solve them. Einstein had the same problem with it, so I have good company."

"Well, both the sun and whatever's left of Eniwetok are convincing evidence that it works. As are transistors, lasers, and exotic devices like tunnel diodes, which wouldn't work at all if quantum tunneling weren't real. I don't think anyone really understands quantum physics, people can't have an intuitive grasp of it, but it works well, and it's consistent—mostly. You can't say much more than that about mathematics or science in general. The deeper you go, the less obvious it becomes, and the more complex the explanations are of things that seem like they should have a simpler answer."

"Ada, thank you for bringing your young man to our home. I think we're going to have a interesting evening."

"I'm glad you like him. I just think he's cute as a bug, but I'm telling you right now that you don't get to just have your own little private conversation. I'm here, too, and so is Katherine. No monopolizing. But Kat's is ready. You two sit down and I'll help her serve."

The fried chicken was completely outside my understanding of what fried chicken can be. I had pictured something like the spongy coating my mom achieved at home, or the crisp-but-heavy breading over dried-out meat I've had at picnics. But Katherine's chicken had this explosively crunchy crust, with a nice spice all by itself. It kept the chicken moist and tender. It was fantastic. Katherine joined us at the table, and when Mr. Richards said the blessing, he held

her hand. It all seemed comfortable. They were a more functional family than most I had encountered.

I paid a lot of attention to the food, but the conversation was every bit as good. We talked about my trip a little, and about travel in general, about mathematics, and the little bit I understood about symmetry and invariance, and Ada violated her own rule about stories and graphically related my attempts to learn the Shag.

There were also wonderful mashed potatoes with cream and butter folded in, and carrots that were lightly sweet, with a sauce that seemed to be liquefied carrot. Mr. Richards called this dish *carrots to the fourth power*. There were greens I liked, though I didn't recognize them. Corn on the cob, oven-roasted instead of boiled, and spectacular, flaky rolls that fell in two steaming halves and begged for a pat of butter and a little honey. I ate far too much, and was embarrassed by the pile of bones and corncobs on my plate.

"I guess I was hungry. I forgot to have lunch."

"It's nice to see a young man enjoy his dinner," Katherine said. "I don't cook to make leftovers. I'm glad you liked everything. I hope you saved room for dessert."

"I think those last three pieces of chicken were my dessert. I couldn't eat another thing. But please, don't let that stop anyone else."

Ada went to the kitchen and came out a few minutes later with small slices of pecan pie dolloped with ice cream. I took a tiny taste, just to be polite. A few minutes later I was surprised, and even a tiny bit disappointed, to find it was gone.

"Why don't you take our guest for a walk down the strand, Ada?" Mr. Richards said.

"Oh, we can help clean up," I said.

Ada took my arm and said, “Speak for yourself, buddy. I want to go for a walk.”

The deck on the back of the house connected to a boardwalk that ran along the sand dunes. The wood of the boardwalk was silvered both by the effects of salt water and by the moonlight. It followed the rolling upper dunes in a beautiful set of curves. There was a light onshore breeze that carried the iodine scent and chill of the water. But the sand was still warm from the sunny day, and the warm air rose into the chilly, salty breeze in a pleasant way. As we passed other houses, I noticed that each one connected to the boardwalk.

“Later in the summer, this boardwalk is busier than the street,” Ada said. “I know it looks sleepy now, but in a couple of weeks all these houses will fill up with out-of-towners and the restaurants and bars will be packed and the dance halls will be hoppin’. It’s a fun time. Maybe you can come back sometime and see it.”

“That would be nice. And if your travels take you to Boston, I want to show you around.”

“Hadn’t thought of Boston, I guess I should. Especially if I’ll have a guide. Daddy likes you a lot. Hell, he’s ready to move you in. I’ve only brought a couple of guys home for dinner and he couldn’t get rid of them fast enough. He doesn’t criticize me, but he won’t try to make conversation with people that don’t know squat.”

“I like your dad, but I couldn’t move into your house. If I did, I’d weigh five hundred pounds in a month. You’d be burying me in a piano box. How do you stay in shape? For that matter, how do your dad and Katherine?”

“We don’t eat like that! That’s guest food. Didn’t you see Kat keeping the chicken away from Dad when she passed it to you the second time? She’s got him on a short leash. Good thing,

too. He was fat when Mom was around. Besides, you're the only one who ate three or four chickens. Maybe five."

"Yeah, I'm embarrassed, but damn, that was good."

"I told you so, but don't worry, I have plans for some exercise later that will burn some of those calories."

*Monroe's Travel Journal: Travels with Sophia*

*Day Four, June 12, 1965 at the Gray Gull, Carson, NC.*

*Miles: none*

*Later. Honest.*

I woke up the next morning with my arm trapped under a warm girl. It was a feeling I could get used to. We got back to the Gray Gull around eleven, and had slow, snuggly, playful sex. It wasn't the crazy passion we'd had the night before, and we didn't wake up at two in the morning and do it all over again.

I lay there for a half hour with my arm trapped. I didn't want to wake Ada up. It felt really good to be laying there, holding her. I wondered if the rest of my trip was still worthwhile. What if I just stayed a month at the Gray Gull? What would I find out in the big world that was so much better than this? I'd never expected to have a real relationship with a girl, and now I'd had three in a fairly short time. Heck—four, if you counted Nancy. I had to conclude that Lenny was right. Chicks dig motorcycles, even when they don't know you have one. I almost had myself convinced that was true. I know I wasn't much like the guy I'd been before I got my bike. Would Monroe Sanborne, total geek, have met a girl in a dancehall? Learned the Shag, shagged

the dickens out of her all night long, then eaten fried chicken with her father and his black paramour, and finally shag her again and wake up with his arm trapped?

Well, like quantum mechanics, there was certainly a statistical probability, but I wouldn't be waiting around for it to happen. Which got me thinking about how limited probability was, as an explanation for physical events. Everything that happens has a probability of one, and everything else looks improbable. Just like the probability that I'd be lying here. I wasn't going to share that thought with Ada. I was sure physics and math were cute only on occasion.

Ada finally rolled over and kissed me, squinted at the alarm clock behind my head and said, "Shit honey, we're burnin' daylight. Let's get some breakfast and fix that Caddy. Would it gross you out if I used your toothbrush? My mouth feels like a mouse slept in it."

"I think after the last two nights, anything that might be in your mouth, or pretty much anywhere else on your body, has already been in my mouth. So sure, you can use my toothbrush."

"You could just say yes, you know. You're a nut, but you're my kind of nut. Let's get breakfast, I'm hungry."

"I can't believe it, but I'm hungry, too. I didn't think I'd ever eat again."

## CALLIOPE

When we got back from breakfast, Mal's friend was there with his Caddy, a beautiful 1958 Sixty Special. It was a monster of a car, with fender skirts and stainless-steel trim on the lower rear fenders. It was in immaculate shape. Ada knew the owner, Dr. Brooks.

"I didn't know you were friends with Mal, Doctor Brooks," Ada said.

"Don't know if I'd call him a friend," he said crisply, "but we go fishing together. He tells me you're really good with cars, young man."

"Well, I take a logical approach to troubleshooting, so I can usually—"

He chopped off my soliloquy, saying, "I don't really care about all that. I've had several local people try to fix this thing, but it hasn't got any better. I'm going to take it to Norfolk to a dealer, but if you can do something, it will save me money and time, and time is money. I'll be back in two hours."

He was walking briskly away when I yelled, "What's it doing?"

He said, "Drive it and you'll see," and continued on his way.

I looked at Ada and shrugged. "Go for a little ride?"



We hopped in the Caddy and set off. It was beautiful inside. Creamy leather upholstery, heavy chrome everywhere. The back seat had more than just legroom. Even if I stretched out my long legs, I doubted they would reach from seat to seat. There was room to spare. You could fit a pony back there.

When I turned onto the main road I gave the Caddy a little gas, and the engine stumbled and bucked. I feathered the throttle a bit and let the engine gain rpm, then gave it gas again and the stumbling was just as bad.

“Wow, that sucks, this might be tricky. This thing might simply need a whole new carburetor.”

I looked at the odometer. 12,422 miles. The car was seven years old. That was less than 2,000 miles a year.

“Does the Doc live here full-time?” I asked Ada. “Is it possible this car gets stored?”

“Geez, I don’t know. I just know him because of Daddy. We rent him part of a warehouse in Kitty Hawk.”

I turned the car around in a handy driveway, no point in going far, and headed back to the Gray Gull. I pulled back to the shed. Ada and I both got out. I was puzzling out my next steps.

She said, “You look kinda stumped, sugar. What are you thinkin’ so hard about?”

“Well, I doubt I’ll really be able to fix this thing with the few tools I’ve got. The carb could be full of deposits from gasoline that evaporated while it sat. The stuff is like gooey shellac, and it’s almost impossible to get out of all the little delicate and precise jets, pumps and needles in a carb.”

“Can’t you just scrub that crap out?”

“I don’t really want to take the carburetor apart. Not without a clean bench to work on, and a service manual. I might never get it back together, no matter how careful I am. Carbs have all kinds of little gotchas in them. Sometimes you pull off a cover plate and a handful of springs and bits shoot all over the place when you pull out the last screw. Even if I just take off the top and peek in, the floats might get stuck, or the needle valve might drop out of the seat if I let them move too far. Been there, done that.”

I opened the hood, pulled off the massive oil bath air cleaner, and set it aside. “Could you get in and start the car, hon, and jab the gas pedal a few times while it’s running?”

When Ada did that, I could see the accelerator pumps squirting a good shot of fuel into the throats, so the most likely suspect—plugged-up jets—was partly eliminated. I heard an odd little whistling noise, though. It was barely audible over the engine noise, and didn’t seem to be coming from the carb.

“Shut it off a minute.” I put the air cleaner back on and had Ada restart the car. The whistling noise was a little more obvious. I tried to get a fix on it, but couldn’t quite figure out where it was coming from.

Ada got out of the car and bent over the engine with me. “Zo, Doctor Monroe, do you sink zis patient vill liff?”

“I don’t know. Can you hear that little whistling noise?”

“Little? Are you deaf, it sounds like a fricken calliope. You guys can’t hear shit. I’ve got ears like a bunny rabbit. A soft, pink bunny rabbit that thinks we ought to hurry up and fix this fuckin’ thing so we can go wrestle in your room. It’s coming from that tube right there.” She pointed to the pipe for the vacuum advance.

I ran my fingers along the tube and found a little divot. When I put my finger over it, the whistling stopped and the engine idle picked up.

“Ha! That will be twenty bucks please, Doctor.”

I shut the engine off. When I checked over the pipe, I could see where it had slipped out of a clip and moved close to the air-conditioning drive pulley. Whenever the engine moved in its mounts, the pulley rubbed against the pipe, and it had eventually worn through. Not only was the vacuum not advancing the ignition, the pipe was letting unmetered air into the manifold, and leaning out the mixture. I cut the line above and below the hole, repaired the line with the extra piece of rubber hose from Mal’s old filter, and re-clipped the line to keep it away from the air-conditioner pump. Then I adjusted the idle mixture—someone had probably tried to fix the problem by richening the carb.

We hopped back in, and I took Ada for a test ride. The car felt smooth and powerful. Done, and done. I had totally lucked out with both cars—nothing tricky to fix, just straightforward things that someone else had missed. Mal might think I was a wizard mechanic, but it wasn’t as if I was rebuilding cylinder heads with a busted screwdriver and a spokeshave.

I told Ada we were done, and that I’d just made twenty bucks with her help.

She said, “Are you really going to charge the doc twenty bucks for ten minutes of work?”

I said, “You bet. The doc would have paid a dealer three or four times what I’m charging him, and they might not have found and fixed the problem. He would have driven to Norfolk and back to do it. I saved him a wad of cash and aggravation. It’s worth what I charged him.”

Ada hugged my neck and said, “I know that, honey, I was just fuckin’ with you.”

We went back to the motor court and I told Mal the car was ready.

We walked back across the parking lot and I said, “Bunny rabbit, huh?”

“Yessir, sugar, and I know where there’s a tasty carrot.”

My ears turned red, but we picked up our pace a bit and headed for my cabin.

About two hours later, Ada and I took off on my motorcycle, heading south to Hatteras.

*Monroe’s Travel Journal: Travels with Sophia*

*Day Five, June 13, 1965*

*Total miles: 228 Cruising south on the Outer Banks to Hatteras and north, back to*

*Carson.*

*Expenses: Gas 3 gallons at .31 = \$.93 Food: Lunch at crab shack \$2.35 with tip. Dinner  
—pizza and beer, Ada insisted on treating me.*

*Drinks at the Dancehall - \$2.00*

*Total \$2.97*

## HOSTILE TAKEOVER

At three-thirty in the morning, three Warlocks broke into Silvio's apartment. One of them picked the lock. They made almost no noise. Silvio was asleep when they pulled him out of bed. He was alone in the bed; they'd watched him to make sure. They slapped tape over his mouth, tied his arms behind his back, and covered his head with his own pillowcase. Then they carried him out and tossed him in the trunk of a car.

Silvio lay in the dark for about half an hour, breathing with difficulty through his stuffy nose. He heard the car doors open and close, and felt the car start to move. He assumed this had something to do with his uncle. Maybe the senior Mafia had found out about his business, and they didn't like it. Maybe Uncle Gino had found out how much Silvio was cheating on his take. Either way, he was in for a beating or a bullet. When they stopped the car and pulled him out, his imagination had settled on the bullet. His bladder let go.

"Oh, crap. This guy just pissed himself," Pistol said.

"Yeah, he's a tough one," said Mountain.

They carried him into a shed, closed the door, and pulled off the hood. Silvio immediately recognized the Warlocks' colors, though he didn't know the three men surrounding him.

"It's come to our attention that you're selling marijuana to lots of nice white kids, which we think is a growth opportunity. We've brought you here to let you know you're out of the business. We want your stash. We want all the contact information for your suppliers. When I take the tape off your mouth, you are going to start telling us everything we want to know. If you don't, we'll beat you until you do." Mountain ripped the tape from Silvio's mouth.

"Are you out of your fucking minds? Do you know who my uncle is?"

Mountain put the tape back in place and said, "That's not what I wanted to hear. Let me tell you something. Your uncle and all those other fat wops aren't going to do a thing. They got families. We don't. They go to war with us, the first thing we do is take some wives and kids. They keep it up, and bad things happen. They know that. We've demonstrated it before. So no one is going to help you. And now we're going to show why you want to answer my questions, and only my questions, from here on out."

Mountain nodded to the other Warlocks, who methodically beat Silvio until his bowels released.

Mountain stepped in and said, "Look at this mess. You've pissed and shit yourself. We can keep this up all day. I've got my little axe. I have my ice pick. From here we do stuff that won't heal. Or you start talking and our business is over. We're not going to kill you unless you make us. I admit, normally I would. I don't like loose ends. But in this case, it's easier to let you live. Your uncle won't be tempted to avenge anything, just a little piece of business that went away. So, hard way or easy way? Believe me, what's happened so far is the easy way."

He yanked off the tape and Silvio told Mountain everything he wanted to know. Every bit of information he had extracted from Franklin in nearly the same way. He figured chances were good they'd kill him, but they might make it quick instead of beating him to death.

When they were satisfied, Mountain pulled out a heavy sheath knife. He held it in front of Silvio's face, and then traced a light, bloody line across his neck. "That's how easy it is. I push just a little harder and you empty out. You're out of this business. Your gang of weenies is dissolved, I see you try to muscle back in and you're gone. *Poof.*"

Mountain cut the ropes around Silvio's hands. The Warlocks walked out of the shed, leaving Silvio sobbing in his own waste.

## VOCABULARY IN FLATLAND

The geography of the Outer Banks is bizarre. It's so long, skinny, and flat that it feels like there are only two dimensions. The striking thing is how big it is and how far you have to go to get anywhere. There are long, undeveloped stretches that are national parks. I don't know how they decided what to make parkland and what to make residential. I can't see a big difference in the terrain or the features.

There are only a few causeways to the mainland, and these come as close to linear space as geography is likely to get. When we stopped for lunch, I told Ada I felt like I was in some version of Flatland, which I then had to explain. She seems to like hearing about technical stuff. I suspect she's smart. She's certainly quick-witted and sharp. I told her I thought she was actively resisting education, and she said, "That's about the sum of it, sweetheart."

I thought she was calling me all these loving names because she likes me, but I discovered she calls everyone honey or sweetheart or sugar. Even when she's angry. It seems odd to me that I'm really comfortable with Ada. Much more comfortable than with Claudia, but



while I don't understand Ada at all, I think I more or less understood Claudia. At least, the normal stuff, like what she wanted to do and what she would talk about.

Ada says things I don't comprehend. Even though the words seem clear, they come from some view of the world or some set of rules that I've never heard of. She seems to be living in a completely different universe. It feels familiar, but every detail is foreign. I understand what she says about traveling instead of going to college, but how she thinks about it and how it occurred to her are unfathomable to me. From watching her interact with other people, I get the feeling that she's very hip in this world that I know nothing about. She's like royalty, she knows everyone, and everyone seems to take what she says as important.

Her accent is variable; I've seen at least three variations. With her father and Kat she speaks precisely, even slightly mimicking Kat's individually formed words and interesting cadences. When speaking to me, she uses a mix of precision and slang that varies according to the subject. With her friends her voice turns a little nasal, and the rhythm of the words changes so that I understand only about half of what she's saying.

Even her relationship with *Daddy* is outside my experience. It seems like a nice father-daughter relationship in total, but the rules and customs of the relationship are new to me and completely outside my experience. For instance, they speak of each other in the third person, their manners toward each other seem careful, and I don't think she really works for her dad, I think she runs the business. I think he acts more like a handyman. My initial take on him, as a plumber, might not be too far off. And yet, I can see that it works. I don't really know any of that stuff for sure, and direct questions don't really work. Most of the time, her answers seem to have little relevance to my questions.

It's like learning to Shag. Here's this thing I'd never heard of, never seen before. Not just a way of dancing; a way for people to be together, interacting. Or to be off by themselves, dancing and enjoying the music. Even the music is different—familiar, but different. She's absolutely expert at every aspect of it. If she dances with some guy who has some incredible move, she can duplicate it, without seeming to think about it. She knows when to dance and when not to dance.

I crossed a causeway to a long, skinny island, but I feel like I've landed on another planet. Is that going to happen everywhere I go? Maybe that's why travel is such a big deal. It's not just to see other bits of land, or mountains or beaches. Maybe it's visiting other universes.

Or maybe I'm just a clueless geek and everyone else would understand all this. Maybe I'm still in the fog.

I'm going to quit tracking expenses; it's a pain in the ass. Maybe I will track gas and miles, and probably write about any really interesting food I have. I wanted to count pennies so I wouldn't burn through my bucks, but I'm up by more than forty dollars, and I think I have a pattern for this trip that can help me make sure I don't run out of money. Having some real skills, beyond being a scientist or an accountant, means it's easy to make some money.

Ada says, "Gee, sugar, folks with bullshit jobs like mine can't do that. No one's gonna slip me twenty bucks for cleanin' up their books and negotiatin' a lease. I've got to think about that. I'd like to have something like your wrenchin' to fall back on when I'm trekkin' around the world. I guess I could be a hooker."

After our ride, we went back to Carson and went dancing. Ada talks to her friends and dances with them and makes little attempts to include me, but I don't have anything to say. I'm

not good at small talk to begin with, and I don't know what these folks are talking about. I don't even know when to laugh. So I danced a lot, by myself and with Ada. She told me I'm a natural. She showed me some trickier moves and I managed to do them, more or less. Then I practiced until I got them down. One of them is a little shuffle-step that feels so good it just makes me smile. Every time there was a belly-rubber song, Ada would track me down.

When we're dancing slow, she burrows right into me and stares into my eyes with a serious look. She says, "That's what you're supposed to do, sugar bear." I don't know where that rule comes from, but it gives me a major league hard-on every time. I feel like a goof walking back to the table with a tent in my chinos.

We went back to our seats at the dancehall after a long set of shagging and belly-rubbing. The tables around us had been empty when we got up to dance, but now they were full of Ada's friends. One of them turned out to be one of the people I'd met on the beach. She said to Ada, "Wow, that's Mystery Guitar Guy!" Then she turned to me and said, "You're a fantastic guitar player."

I smiled and gave an embarrassed little nod.

Then she went back to talking to Ada about me, as if I wasn't there. "He jus' blew us all away, all shy and quiet and all, jus' like he is now. Johnny let him borrow his guitar 'cause he was done playin', then he starts fiddlin' and tunin', and Johnny gets grumpy, like you know he does, an he's 'bout to take it back from him 'cause Mystery Guitar Man is jus' dinkin' around, when he starts playing and *bam*, he's magic man. Shannon, you know Shannon, the stuck-up blond gal that sings with the TruTones? Well, she was singin' with him and they were jus' great together. She'd jus' start singin' a song, any song, and off he goes, just weavin' music aroun' her.

Wrappin' it all tight aroun' her. Sounded like three or four people playin'. You shoulda seen Johnny. He about shit. He's been blamin' that guitar for all the fucked-up chords that come out of it, and then this guy plays it and magic happens.

“So Shannon is fallin' in luuurve right there on the beach blanket, and people are sittin' down in the sand to listen to them. So she asks him to play some stuff he liked, and then he plays “Stardust” for her and knocks her panties right the fuck down. I thought she was goin' to bop him right on the beach, right there in front of us. But he just thanks her real polite, gives Johnny his guitar back and walks away. Mystery Man. Magic Man.”

Ada said, “Yeah, well Mystery Man is all mine. Least he is right now, ain't you, honey? Ain't you all mine, Magic Man? Didn' play no fuckin' guitar for me, though. He knocked my panties down talkin' about how stars burn.”

Ada's friend looked at me with big eyes and said, “Wow.”

I turned beet red from my toes to the top of my head.

## FRIDAY MORNING LEAVING TOWN

I called Paul in the morning to see if he'd heard anything about Walrus.

"Yeah, he's fine. Though when I saw him, he was missing his teeth. He sounded like Sylvester Puddy Tat, it was all I could do not to laugh in his face."

"Wow, that's a big relief. I was thinking he could have died. That would have been just terrible. So is he still looking to kick the crap out of me?"

"No, actually, he's grateful to you for saving his ass, but he says Silvio still has a hard-on for you. I'm working on some ways to take his mind off you, but I really can't talk about that. I'll do what I can do. Call me every week or so and I'll update you. How's your trip going?"

"I'm having a really great time. I'm meeting people and it's great riding my motorcycle. Except for worrying about Walrus, I've been really enjoying the freedom."

"Yeah, well have a good time and stay in touch. A customer just walked in the door so I gotta go."

"Okay, sure. Hey thanks so much for helping me out, Paul. I really appreciate it."

"I haven't really done much yet, but I'll let you know how it goes."

Ada and I planned to ride north on the Banks the next day, up towards False Cape, but it was such a pretty day that we wound up driving just a short way to Ada's favorite beach. We spent the day swimming, sunning, and talking. I made a little driftwood fire and grilled a whole small snapper I'd bought from the fish market in Duck. I cut up an apple and some good cheddar cheese. We ate the fish with our fingers and then swam a while to wash up. In the late afternoon, we walked the boardwalk in Duck, and poked around in a few stores. I bought a souvenir T-shirt. I almost bought Ada a T-shirt that said *I'm with stupid* with an arrow pointing up. But she said it cut a little too close to home.

We had dinner in the requisite crab shack. Good, not great. The one in Carson is better.

Afterwards we sat on the beach and I told Ada I was thinking about sticking around a while.

"Oh, don't do that, honey," she said.

"Why? I thought you were having a good time with me, I thought you'd like it if I stayed."

"Honey, why do you think I picked you up in the first place? I could tell you were just passing through. That means sooner or later you'd be gone, and I wouldn't get attached. You turned out to be more than I expected, and that's dangerous. You stick around, we fall in some kind of love, and then I give up on all my plans and chase you around like some fuckin' puppy. No matter how good what we had was, I'd always feel like I missed out."

She put her hand on my arm and said, "I'm having a great time with you, you're fun. My daddy keeps bringing you up, which he never does. That means Kat likes you, too, even though she hasn't said anything to me. So that makes you extra-special dangerous."

“Wow, so it’s just sex and then adios? Didn’t I perform well enough?” I said.

Ada’s eyes flared. “Am I just wastin’ my breath? Haven’t you heard a fuckin’ word? The sex was fine, I’m not going to blow smoke up your ass and say it was the best ever. The first few times, it’s all brand-new. You’re a few years too late to be my first. After that, it’s more of the same, even if it’s not. Though I gotta say, that toe-sucking thing was cool. Damn, you got me way off track. I don’t remember what I was gonna say.”

“That’s okay, I was just being a punk. I understand. You want to have some fun but you’re not looking for commitment.”

“You’re still being a punk. I’m going to miss you. I’m going to cry and call myself a fool for chasing you away. But please don’t stay. If we get together when the time is right, then it could be fireworks forever. But that’s not now. I know who I am. I’d fucking hate you ten years from now for fucking up my plan. I don’t want that. I don’t want to be my mother. I don’t ever want to be my fuckin’ mother.”

Then Ada clammed up and looked totally pissed off. I think bringing her mom into the discussion really made her angry, even though she was the one who did it. Whatever it was, she didn’t want to talk about it. Asking her even the most fundamental question just yielded an angry, silent stare. She finally said, “How about taking me home?”

So I took Ada home, and went back to the Gray Gull, resigned to spending my last night in Carson by myself. I decided to catch up on my journal with some of my thoughts so far. Maybe writing things down would bring some clarity. For some reason, the thoughts didn’t come. I had lots to say, but didn’t know how to say it. Blank page.

It was about four o'clock and I didn't want to go into town, didn't want to risk bumping into Ada and her friends. I turned on the TV. Blank screen. Aha—just what the doctor ordered. A stupid, pointless project.

I got out my tool roll and pulled off the back. The TV was a Munz, which has a certain reputation among TV repairmen and electronics geeks. Rumor has it that Munz took components out of a TV until it quit working, and then put the last one back and started taking stuff out of somewhere else. Of course, I doubt that's really true, but they definitely economized on design, and it makes troubleshooting difficult. Most TVs tell you where the trouble is. The picture rolls vertically and you know it's a problem with sync. It goes fuzzy and noisy, so you know it's the signal amplifiers. Munz TVs tend to go black when anything is wrong.

I got out the little multimeter I carried to set the points on my bike, and checked the continuity of the fuse. It was okay. So I started pulling tubes one at a time and checking their filaments. On the fifth try, I hit pay dirt—open filament. Pretty simple to find. Anyone could pull the tubes and take them to a tube tester at a drugstore. It made me wonder if Mal did any maintenance at all. Who kept the place so clean, and sweet smelling? Who trimmed the azaleas and raked the crushed white gravel? Who washed the sheets and towels every day? Just one of those little mysteries.

I went by the office and told Mal, "Hey, I can fix that TV set. Give me two dollars for the tube and I'll have it running."

"What, am I made of money? Yeah, sure, why not. Are you staying the extra day? You can stay two if you fix the set. I got some other buddies who could use some work on their cars."



“Nope, I’m moving on in the morning.” I took his money and rode to the drugstore, got the tube, put the TV back together, and watched the news and a rerun of *Gunsmoke* that I’d seen three times already. Whenever I watched *Gunsmoke*, I wondered if people understood it was set in Kansas. That just never seems like the Wild West to me, though I know it was. When I mention it, people say, “No, I think it’s in Nevada.” My mom won’t believe that Miss Kittie is a prostitute. She says, “No she isn’t, she’s a businesswoman. She owns the Longbranch Saloon. Look how she dresses. She’s a respectable woman.” Okay, Mom. Whatever.

I packed my bags while I watched. I tried to bring some order to my packing method, and to get things I used most up into my tank bag or the valise. All my clothes were clean except the shorts and T-shirt I was wearing, thanks to a tip from Ada about the remarkably inexpensive wash, fluff and fold service at the Carson Cleaners.

About nine, there was a knock on my door. I opened it and Ada was standing there, holding her helmet with both hands, her eyes red and puffy. She looked like a sad little kid. She looked so adorable I wanted to just swoop her up.

“Tell me you’re going to leave in the morning.”

I said, “I’m going to leave in the morning.”

“Well, okay then, take me to bed and say goodbye the right way.”

So, of course I did.

## ON THE ROAD AGAIN

In the morning Ada was pretty weepy, for a girl who was booting me out the door.

She said, “I don’t expect letters or nothing—but you better stay in fuckin’ touch.”

No, I don’t really know what that means, either.

I dropped Ada off at her house on my way out of town. She gave me her helmet to take with me. She said, “You never know when you might want to take some babe for a ride. I won’t be usin’ it. But I expect it to be waitin’ for me in Boston if I ever get there, so don’t let nobody skanky wear it.”

I tied it to my rack, gave her a big hug and kiss, and said, “Be careful in your travels, Ada, and have a spectacular time. You’re an amazing woman. Wherever I am, your helmet will be waiting.”

“Wow, that’s so fuckin’ romantic I could just puke.”

I left about seven, and crossed the causeway at Kitty Hawk about an hour later.

My version of the southern route was to follow the Atlantic Coast as well as I could, riding the edge of North Carolina and South Carolina. Then I planned to cut through Georgia and

Alabama, bypassing the Florida peninsula. I wanted to see New Orleans, Houston, Austin, and maybe San Antonio. Head up through New Mexico and across Arizona, and on to Southern California. After I got past Elizabeth City, the roads were empty and I made good time. Ada had warned me that every little Southern town had a speed trap of some sort, so whenever I saw a speed limit sign—especially one that was a big drop from the 65 mph of most roads—I'd hit the brakes until I got to the limit, and then creep through the town. It was great advice. I saw lots of cops pulled off to the side of the road, hidden by trees or road signs. Every town had cops writing tickets. I think in my whole life up to that point, I hadn't seen more than ten people pulled over and getting tickets. In one day of driving, I must have seen thirty. Those were some busy local cops. I noticed all the people getting tickets had out-of-state plates.

Ada told me I had to go to Savannah, which she said was the only remaining city of the true South, whatever that means. She said, "You can't just pass through Savannah, you have to go there. It's the end of the road. But it's a great place and I think you'll love it. You like weird shit."

Hard to pass up a recommendation like that. So I planned to reach Charleston by evening, and maybe push on to Savannah if I felt up to it. My reworked Triple-A maps said it would be about 450 miles to Charleston if I went through Jacksonville and Myrtle Beach, and about 560 miles to Savannah. That was a lot further than I'd ever driven on my bike, and I didn't know if my butt could take it. The guidebooks said the roads were smaller and there were a lot of towns. I ignored the advice to take the longer inland route. I'm glad I did. The roads were beautiful, and the country was like nothing I'd ever seen. I kept thinking of Pogo cartoons in the Dismal Swamp. There actually is a Dismal Swamp State Park.

In a town called Shallotte, a cop pulled me over, even though I was doing the speed limit. He checked my license and registration. Asked me what I was doing so far from Boston. I told him a little bit about my trip and what I wanted to see.

He said, “You ain’t one of those civil rights guys down here looking for trouble, are you?”

I think my confusion must have showed on my face, because he said, “Never mind. Have a good trip. Be careful around here, there’s a lot of blind curves and a lot of drunks. And a word to the wise: do your gassing up and stopping in the bigger towns. There’s folks in the small towns that would wonder about a Massachusetts license plate.”

I headed down the road thinking, “Isn’t this the United States?”

After spending some time in Savannah, I knew the answer. Not really.

Myrtle Beach looked interesting, but I kept going. I was really enjoying the ride, even though my ass was definitely getting sore. I also felt a new vibration in the bike. Never a good sign.

I stopped outside of Charleston for gas, checked the oil and tire pressure, and did a little nut and bolt check. Though the primary chain adjustment was still good, the big pivot bolt for the transmission was loose. While I was trying to get enough leverage with my cut-down socket wrench to tighten it, the gas jockey came over with a half-inch socket wrench and a box of sockets.

“Looks tough to get to, I thought this might help,” he said.

“That’s really nice of you. It seems to vibrate loose about every few hundred miles,” I said.

“Well, you ought to lockwire it,” he said. “That’s what we do for race cars ’round here. Any bolt or nut that’s likely to be a problem, just lockwire it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I’ve never done it, but I’m sure I can look it up somewhere.”

“Well shit. Pull that nut off, and let’s take it in the shop and do this right.”

The gas station shop was cramped with equipment and a big hydraulic lift in the middle of the floor, but everything looked well organized. My new friend pulled out a wooden cigar box that had an unusual-looking jig, a spool of bare, hard stainless wire, a few long-shank drills, and a complicated-looking pair of pliers. He took the nut from me and locked it into the jig, and then clamped the jig to the bed of an old drill press. I could see that the jig held the nut with one corner perpendicular to the press, and there was a hole near the edge of the jig that the drill ran through. He drilled through the corner of the nut, then took the nut out of the jig, grabbed the wire and the funny pliers, and went back to my bike.

“You do the tightening—I don’t want to strip out a nut on your bike. Get it tight as you like and I’ll lockwire it.”

I tightened the nut, and then the mechanic stepped in. He threaded the wire through the hole on the edge of the nut, roughly measured the distance to a convenient hole in the transmission bracket, then clamped the pliers onto the doubled wire and pulled a handle on the pliers. They spun and smoothly twisted the wires together. He turned the wire under the bolt.

“You always want your safety wire pulling the nut in the direction that tightens it, otherwise it don’t do no good.” He threaded one wire through the hole in the bracket, clamped the two wires together, and spun the pliers to tighten the wire against the bracket. Then he

clipped off the excess, bent over the end of the wire with the angled tip of the pliers, and used the flat of the pliers to fold the end flat.

“That’s what the angled end of the pliers is for. Making that little folded-over bit at the end. Them wires can poke a hole in you right easy. You can tell a good job from a bad one by how neat it is, if it pulls the right way, and if it’s got that nice finished end. I do a perfect damn job every time, naturally. Of course we should lockwire the bolt on the other end, since the bolt could turn inside the nut, but friction usually prevents that, and it would mean pulling stuff apart, and this’ll probably do it.”

“Well, thanks for the lesson and the help. What do I owe you?”

“Oh nuthin’, I wasn’t doing anything anyway. Just hold a good thought out for me, I’m racing tonight in Charlestown.”

“What kind of racing? I was thinking I’d go on to Savannah, but my ass is killing me. Maybe I’ll go to the races.”

“Oh, dirt track, you know. Sprint cars, stockers, quarter midgets. I drive a sprint car. You’re a Yankee, so you wouldn’t know, but dirt-track racing is a big deal here. I’ve got a spare pit pass that one of my buddies was supposed to pick up, but he called me from Charlotte, he ain’t coming. Yours if you want it.” He pulled a little pass out of his pocket and handed it to me.

“Thanks, I’ll figure out how to get there. And thanks for the help.”

“Sure. Hey, I forgot to say that’s a beautiful bike. I’m Bobby, you’ll hear most folks call me Bobby Ray, but I’m trying to break people of that. Sounds like a hick.”

“Okay, Bobby Ray,” I said with a grin. “I’m Monroe. I’ll see you tonight.”

Bobby gave me a mock sour look, and I headed for Charleston.

## FLUFFY TOWELS

As I drove into town, I spotted a Howard Johnson's just outside downtown. It looked brand-new. I felt rich after picking up an extra forty bucks in Carson, so I decided to splurge on a little luxury. Turns out luxury costs \$4.80, which would have been nearly three nights at the Gray Gull, but what the hell, there was a swimming pool.

"Sorry, sir," the desk clerk said, passing my license back. "You have to be over eighteen years of age to check into a hotel unaccompanied."

"What? I'm more than a thousand miles from home, taking a month-long trip around the U.S. by myself, and you're saying I can't get a room? What's the alternative, sleep in the streets? I'm almost eighteen. Can't you do something for me?"

"Tell you what, you wait here and I'll talk to the manager."

A few minutes later the manager came out, a bluff-looking guy with a friendly face. He said, "Driving around the country, huh? That sounds like a great trip for a young man. Wish I'd done that. Okay, I'll make an exception and rent you a room. But we're going to go up and clean all the alcohol out of the minibar before we give you the keys. And please don't go into the bar,

you have to be accompanied if you're under twenty-one. The coffee shop is over there, or you can wait in the lobby while we get your room ready."

I was sitting in the lobby feeling young and small, when three stewardesses in Pan Am uniforms came through the lobby. I smiled and said hi. They looked down their noses at me, like I had just farted loudly. Apparently my magnetic charm wasn't up to full power. Still, I congratulated myself for saying anything. There was a time ...

"Your room's ready, sir. Here are your keys. Do you need help with your bags?"

"Oh. Thank you, no. There's just these." I slung the duffel and tank pack over my shoulders, and picked up the suitcases and my helmet. I got in the elevator. Just as the doors started to close, a hand grabbed the edge, and the elevator filled with stewardesses. The three I had seen earlier, and three from Northeastern. I shuffled into the back and looked at the floor.

They were chattering away, and I wasn't paying much attention. But I heard one say, "He's the kid that tried to pick us up."

I looked up and saw the lady who was doing the talking. She looked at me smugly, so I said, "I just said hi. I was being polite." And then I went back to studying the floor.

They filed out of the elevator a couple of floors before mine. I got to my room and discovered it was just as nice as I thought it would be. Big towels, soft bed, good-sized room, nice shower with an array of bottles with colored stuff in them. The lap of luxury. I took a long shower with an endless supply of hot water. I started thinking about Ada and how much fun she was in the shower. So that was pleasant and lonely at the same time. No question in my mind, it's a lot better with a soapy, warm girl. Good thing the shower didn't go cold on me.



Itoweled off with the fluffiest towel I'd ever seen, got dressed and started trying to figure out how to get to the track.

I couldn't find any reference to a race track on my maps, so I went down to the lobby to see if the clerk might know where it is. She said, "Oh, sure. Actually, there are two tracks close by, which one?"

I showed her my pass, and she said, "Ah, Charleston Speedway, that's easier to find."

She took my map of Charleston and used a colored pencil to sketch the route. "If you just go left on Sullivan, that's the road at the end of the entrance to the hotel, you'll be headed in the right direction. It's probably a twenty-minute drive."

## DIRT TRACK DATE

After about fifteen minutes of driving, I could hear big engines roaring and knew I was close. I pulled into a huge, dirt parking lot, which framed a structure that looked bigger than a football field. I showed my pass to a guy at the gate and he waved me through. The quarter-mile oval was slightly banked at the ends and was surrounded by a tall chain-link fence. There was a gap, then a second fence, and then an aisle for people to walk along the front of the bleachers, which surrounded almost the entire track in ten tiers. Surrounding the bleachers were big stanchions with lights on them, and the whole area was lit, even though there was still some daylight. The bleachers were full. Must be popular.

The practice session ended, and I could see where the cars exited the track and pulled into pits behind the bleachers on the south end. I found a seat to watch the next practice session, which was for specially built cars I'd never seen before. Single-seat cars with big roll bars over the driver, and big, fenderless tires. They looked almost as wide as they were long. Some of the cars had roll bars that looked like cages, and others had a single bar over the driver and another

bar that looped over the engine cowl. They each had double bars at the nose and a single bar in the back. It looked like they expected trouble.

The track was dirt, packed hard and shiny except at the edges. So hard that the surface looked like it had been buffed, and a broad line of blue-black dirt followed the line that most of the cars took around the track. Every so often, one of the cars would move off the line and spin its rear tires loose, sliding sideways—I guessed it was intentional—and throwing a tail of dirt all the way through the corner.

The pipes had no mufflers that I could see, and the noise was deafening. I sat with my fingers in my ears until one of the folks sitting close to me handed me a little white wad. “Cotton, with beeswax in it! Skoosh it up with your fingers and stuff it in your ears,” he yelled.

“Thanks.” I did as I’d been told, and the noise dropped to a tolerable level.

After a few minutes, the cars left the track and were replaced by jalopy-looking things. Some had no front fenders, and some were fairly modern cars. The newest one was a ’56 Ford. Like a mix of hot rods, only they were very beaten up. They roared around the track a few times, and then they left and were replaced by miniature versions of the first cars I’d seen. Wonderful-looking little things, with loud barks that sounded like single-cylinder engines. The drivers looked like they fit well inside the cars—were these for kids? If they were, those were some lucky kids. It looked like fun.

There was a break in the action, and the announcer started talking about what sounded like classes, qualifiers, and feature races, using terms I didn’t understand. I decided to see if I could find my benefactor, Bobby Ray, so I could get a briefing on what all this was, and thank him for the pass.

I walked to the end of the bleachers to a gate, where I was stopped and asked to show my pass. The guy at the gate said, “You got to wear it where we can see it, as long as you’re in the pits. You got a pass-holder?”

I shook my head, so he reached into a shoebox and pulled out a loop of black ribbon tied to a plastic sleeve. “Stick her in here, and wear it around your neck.”

Walking around the pits with my pass on display, I felt official. The pits were the usual jumble of trucks and trailers, and toolboxes on tires stacked in the dirt. People working on cars, and people just talking. The smell of hot oil, fuel, and burned rubber was intoxicating. Every so often an engine would fire up, rev hard for a few minutes, and then go silent. After a few minutes I spotted Bobby and walked over to say hello. He was bent over one of the special-looking cars, adjusting the carb linkage.

“Hi Bobby,” I said, “This is great. Thanks for the pass. I’m looking forward to seeing you race.”

“Oh, hey, Motorcycle Guy. I’m sorry, I forgot your name. You actually came. That’s good. You’ll like the racing. Lots of passin’ and fender-bangin’. Not like the stock cars that go round and round for hours.”

“So what do you call this kind of car? I’ve never seen anything like this. Looks like a dirt version of an Indy car.”

“We call it a sprint car. Made for dirt racing, though we sometimes run ’em on a paved track. Hey, do you mind helping some? My pal that’s stuck in Charlotte isn’t the only one that didn’t show. I’m all alone here and there’s a bit to do.”

“Sure, that would be fun. What do you need?”

“Not much, everything was running fine in practice. When I come in from the qualifier, I’ll need to check over everything—top off the fuel, check the oil, maybe tweak the suspension if it’s tight or loose. If I make the main from the qualifier, then we’ll switch to the good tires. If I gotta go to the semi, we won’t.”

“I don’t know what you mean by tight or loose,” I said.

“You know what oversteer and understeer are?”

“I’ve read about them, but I haven’t paid that much attention to suspension theory. I’m mostly a bike mechanic, and a basic one at that,” I said.

“Well, *loose* means the rear wheels lose traction first, so the back end steps out. *Tight* means it understeers—the front wheels lose traction first and push, so nothin’ much happens when you turn the wheel. We use jack screws right here on the rear suspension, to change the weight bias on the springs. We call ’em wedges. I got one more practice before the qualifier, and the car feels good. But if I come into the hot pits and yell *loose*, then I want you to take two turns off this screw. If I yell *tight*, tighten it two turns. I don’t think that’s gonna happen, but you need to be standing there with this ratchet that has this socket pinned to it, just in case it does.”

“Cool, I can do that.”

“We’ll have lots of time to do everything if I make the main right from the qualifier, but if I have to go to the semi, it’s gonna be a rush. The main comes right after the semi. Though of course, there’s stockers and quarters first. That’s assumin’ I make the main from the semi, which I expect I’d do, but you never know. If I don’t, we’ll both be spectators.”

“Do you have time to tell me what I’m watching? I didn’t understand what the announcer was saying. What’s a quarter midget?”

“That’s a car that’s one-quarter the size of a midget race car. Midget racing has died off, but the quarter midgets are popular. Mostly kids in them, though some of the kids shave. I don’t know that much about them myself. I think they mostly have Continental motors, but they can be any single-cylinder, air-cooled motor. I think the displacement limit is 125cc.

“There’s also dirt stock, and that’s a total mess. There are as many sanctioning bodies as there are tracks, and they all got their own idea about what the rules and classes should be. At this race the biggest class is stockers, so they’ll be four or five qualifying heats, but they lump them all together, so pretty much all you’ll see making the main is modified’s, unless someone gets lucky, or a bunch of someones get unlucky. Which ain’t out of the question. To me the only difference between a demolition derby and a stocker race is that more cars are running at the end.

“Open-wheel sprint cars like mine are the fastest thing on the track—though there’s some up-and-coming closed-wheel, semi-stock body classes that use a racin’ chassis and big motors that are just as fast, and sometimes faster. Those classes are banging and passing racin’, but they’re not here tonight.

“You’ll see some banging in sprints, but it’s open-wheel, so it’s easy to get wheels tangled. When they do, the cars flip. So banging isn’t part of the strategy, but it happens. On a dirt track, getting hit is part of the game. You won’t see guys getting their panties in a knot just because they got knocked out of the race with a bad pass. Well—maybe sometimes, but not every race, like those pussies that race asphalt.”

We finished checking over Bobby’s car. It was a simple-looking thing, basically a motor, a chair, and wheels. But under the simplicity was fabrication that looked like it belonged on an airplane rather than a car. A lot of the bolts and nuts were lock-wired. All the tubing was surplus

military stuff with woven stainless wire over the rubber. The fittings were the slick AN stuff, instead of barbed nipples and hose clamps.

Bobby said, “In dirt racin’, if it can break or fall off, it will. So everything has to be as good as we can afford to make it. Some of the stock motors are just junkers, but some of the rattiest cars have beautiful work under the hood.”

The qualifying races started, and the sprint cars were last up, so I went to the fence and watched a while. Bobby pointed out the guys that drove well and what they were doing. The terminology was different, but the principles were the same as in the racing books I’d read. The good drivers were smooth, and they got into the turns in way that maximized their mid-corner and exit speed. The straights were short, but I could see what a big difference it made to have more speed at the corner exit. The less-skilled drivers came into the corners too fast, squirreled around and came out slow, if they came out at all. There were a lot of stockers that hit the walls.

The quarter midgets were slow by comparison, but the crowd yelled and screamed at every pass and every good move.

“That’s their families and neighbors in the bleachers. They scream and yell for the other races too, but you can’t hear them.”

Bobby’s turn came up quickly, and he lined up in the first sprint car heat. He got a poor start, played catch-up for the whole race, and finished fourth, which meant he had to run in the semi to qualify.

When he got back to the pits, he said, “I got a crap start. Nothing wrong with the car. If I’d been in the top three, I could have stayed with them. No one made any big mistakes that I could take advantage of.”

We watched the rest of the qualifiers to see whom Bobby would be racing against in the semi. “Well, this sucks. There’s going to be four fast guys in the semi. I’m gonna have to pull out all the stops. Let’s put the good tires on, I’m going to need them. The car’s likely to push a little with the better tires, so I’ll give it one turn of wedge. Just guessing, but that’s usually how it goes.”

We swapped on the better tires and topped off the tiny fuel tank. I checked the oil while Bobby checked tire pressures and loosened the car a turn.

“It’s not likely to do anything, I’m just doin’ it to make me feel better.”

Once again, Bobby got a bad start. He reached the first corner in third place, with fourth place tight to his tail. But either his better tires hooked up well or he just drove better, because his speed coming onto the straight was noticeably higher than the cars behind and in front of him. By the second turn, he had nearly caught up to the car in second place, number 23. As they exited the turn, 23 bobbled, and they entered the straight side-by-side. At the entrance to turn one, the nose of Bobby’s car was slightly ahead of second place, but he drifted in the turn. The front edge of his rear tire hooked the back edge of the 23’s front tire, and the tail of Bobby’s car lifted into the air. Both cars ran into the wall, and red flags dropped. The early crash meant a restart, but Bobby’s car was coming back to the pits on the hook, with a broken wheel.

Bobby got out of the passenger seat of the wrecker.

I stepped up and said, “Are you okay? What do we do? Is there a second chance or something? Should we fix it?”

Bobby drawled, “We get a damned beer and watch the races.”



Which we did. I still didn't care that much for beer, but it fit this moment with all the satisfaction of a puzzle piece dropping into place. Talking and laughing with Bobby, sitting in the bleachers at a dirt track race on a hot evening in Charleston. Ice cold beer with a bitter bite tasted as good as it ever had.

## DIVESTITURE

When Silvio arrived at Uncle Gino's house, Sam stood in the doorway to the study and pointed to a chair at the dining table. "Sit, and wait, and don't say nothing. Your uncle is busy this morning. You're in the shits. What a surprise."

Silvio had three broken ribs, internal bruising of his kidneys, two black eyes and a broken nose, and was still pissing blood.

After a very uncomfortable hour, Gino yelled, "Send that little fuck in here!"

Silvio struggled to his feet, walked into his uncle's office, and stood in front of his desk.

His uncle said, "Nice face, you look better like that. You've caused some trouble, but it ends right here. Right now."

"What do you mean? I was doing just what we agreed I'd do. Then I get grabbed by those fucking Warlocks and get the shit kicked out of me. And they think I'm not going to do something about that?"

“You’re not doing a thing. Shut your mouth and listen. We got a relationship with those animals. They reached out and told our guy who works with them that they took away your business and shut down your stupid gang. They told him they didn’t kill you because you’re my nephew, but they won’t tolerate any interference in their new business, or any reaction to roughing you up a little.”

When Silvio started to say something, his uncle roared, “No! You shut the fuck up! One word out of you and I’ll have Sam take you for a ride. You think those punks gave you a beating? If Sam does you, you won’t be walking. Shut up!

“I didn’t say anything about this deal. It’s not something we do, so it’s not a big thing. But now people are saying, *What the fuck?* to me, so now you got me in some hot water. I’m paying a five-thousand-dollar fine. Let me correct that, you’re paying a five-thousand-dollar fine. You’re out of business. Any business. Your stupid gang is done. I don’t want anyone seeing you schmucks together, especially on motorcycles.

“Don’t think I don’t know you been shorting me. The take climbs twenty percent a month and then goes flat for three months? What, did all the potheads decide to quit smoking dope? Sam was gonna come over to audit your take—kick your ass until you account for every penny.

“Go be a fucking baker. You owe me five large. Pay what you got and for the rest it’s ten percent a month interest. I cut you a break for Andrea’s sake. Stay the fuck away from me. Don’t cry to your mommy. The biggest slack you’re getting is I don’t just put you in the mud out in Essex. Now get the fuck out of here. Sam! Get this little prick out of here and go get my five large!”

## WEIRD DOESN'T COVER IT

The next morning I packed up, put everything on my bike, and then decided to have breakfast in the coffee shop of the hotel. The prices floored me. Three bucks for sausage and eggs! I was going to leave, but decided a bowl of oatmeal and coffee for \$1.20 was within my budget, though still ridiculous. I could buy five pounds of oatmeal for that. The oatmeal came with cream, raisins, stewed apple slices and coarse brown sugar, which seemed just right for oatmeal and almost made up for the insane price. While I was experimenting to find the right combination, a figure in blue loomed over me and said, "I'm glad I caught you. I was an asshole last night, and it bugged me."

I looked up at the stewardess who had been snooty to me last night.

"Doesn't matter, it's no big deal," I said.

She sat down in the booth across from me, and said, "It does too matter. I'm a nice person. I kept thinking of the hurt look you had when you said, *I was only being polite*. It bugged me all night. You could be my younger brother, and I'd punch anyone who treated him that way."

I didn't say anything; I just took a sip of coffee.

"I take it from the helmet next to you that you're the guy who owns that orange motorcycle. Did you really drive all the way to South Carolina from Massachusetts?"

"Yes, I did. I'm on a trip across the country."

She told me her name was Carole with an e, and she prodded me into telling her about my trip.

I told her the route.

She said, "You should have a lot of adventures on a trip like that, have you had any yet?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, I would say that so far it's been action-packed. I didn't tell her much about Ada, even though she dug at me when I mentioned I'd met a really nice girl. But once I started, I discovered Carole was easy to talk to. So I told her about the Outer Banks, about dancehalls and the Shag. How different everyone was. How the food was so unique. Soft-shell crab, fried chicken that you couldn't stop eating, and a little about the people and how strangely they talked."

"Well damn!" She said. "I travel more miles in a year than you probably will in your life. Everywhere I go is just the same. Airports, motels, and coffee shops. Same people, same bullshit. I was mean to you because we just flew in from San Francisco. I was in First Class and I was pinched, prodded and propositioned for the whole three thousand miles. By that point, I would have bitten the head off a puppy. But I'm really sorry I did that to you."

"It really is okay," I said. "I'm glad I got to meet you now. I confess it bothered me more than it probably should have. I'm trying to be less shy, but it's still hard for me to even look people in the eye and say hello."

Carole's mouth dropped open and her eyes welled up. "Well, shit. That makes me feel a whole lot better." She dabbed her eyes with my napkin, then blew her nose in it. "Oh ... sorry, that was your napkin, huh? I'm a mess this morning. Look, you say you're going to drive up the coast of California? When you get close to San Francisco, give me a call. I live in Berkeley with a bunch of other stews. It's a big house, and there's always some space to crash. I'll tell the other girls to expect a call. There's almost always someone there, even if I'm off on a flight. San Francisco and Berkeley is a real fantastic scene, and I'd love to show you around. You might not want to hang out with an old bat like me, but some of the girls are younger and might like to take you places, too. If nothing else, you'll save a few bucks on a place to stay."

"Thank you, that's very nice. I'm on a tight budget, so that might be important. People tell me Frisco is expensive. And you're certainly not an old bat, I'd be lucky and proud to go anywhere with you."

"You're doing well with this shyness thing. Those drunk, grabby bastards in First Class could take a few lessons from you, buddy. You say stuff like that to a woman and you'll melt their heart. But A-number-one, it's San Francisco. Only tourists say Frisco. Call me. A nice guy like you needs a guide for the place. A lot of good stuff happening there, but there's some bad stuff, too. I'll keep you out of trouble and you'll have a blast."

She wrote her number, name, and address on a piece of paper and handed it to me. I tucked it in my wallet. "I've got to go, honey. Really nice to meet you."

The waiter came by a few moments later with more coffee and said, "Tell me I didn't just see that beautiful stewardess with those unbelievable legs give you her number."

I just smiled at him and signed the check.

I went to check out and found that somehow \$4.80 had become \$7.65 with tax and breakfast.

I said, “Wow, I can’t be doing this too often.”

The clerk said, “Did you take anything from the minibar?”

I said no.

She said, “Be thankful you didn’t, honey. If you think seven bucks is bad, you ought to see the bill for folks who start snacking and drinking from the minibar.”

She gave me my change. “Safe travels.”

It’s about 110 miles from Charleston to Savannah. You’d think they’d be a little bit alike. Charleston—what little I really saw of it—felt like a seaport, and had a bewildering mass of restaurants. When I rode through the downtown area on my way out of town, I felt like I’d probably missed out on something special and should probably hang out and at least have lunch. But I expected much the same in Savannah, so I wasn’t too concerned.

Charleston is a Southern seaport, crisp and ready to build new stuff. Savannah doesn’t seem to have changed since the turn of the century. Every few feet there’s a park, and every park is surrounded by beautiful old houses and a church. Lots of churches. Lots of black people, too, much more mixed together with white people than in other Southern cities I’ve seen. I’d guess black people there outnumber white people two-to-one. But that’s just a guess. It’s oddly restful. I’m sure there’s some racial tension, but I didn’t see it. A lot less obvious than in Boston, where if you are a white guy in a black neighborhood, you feel like you’re in hostile territory, and black people in white neighborhoods are watched carefully for criminal activity. I stopped near a big

park and walked around for a while to stretch my legs. It was nice to be among friendly black people, who hardly seemed to notice me except to say hello.

As I rode around, I noticed two things. Everyone was really well dressed, and I couldn't find a restaurant. I shouldn't say I couldn't find one, but unlike Charleston, where interesting restaurants were on every corner, Savannah had only a few, and they looked ordinary. When I stopped at a Mobil station to gas up, I asked the guy what was good to eat in the neighborhood.

“Dey got good samidges at a drugstore.”

Took me a little while to figure that one out. I tried again. “When you want something special to eat, where do you go?”

“Well ... I guess I'd have to say I go home.”

So much for that. Near one of the parks in the historic district, I spotted a restaurant in a small house. I parked my bike to one side of the drive, tight to the bushes, and went to the porch to look at the menu. While I was looking at the menu, an elderly lady in a huge, old Buick came weaving up the drive at a steady 20 mph and clipped Sophia, knocking her into the bushes. She continued unconcernedly up the drive and parked in the back. I ran to my bike, pulled it out of the bushes and assessed the damage. My beautiful rack was bent in on the right side, shoved into the wheel of the bike. The leather suitcase on that side had taken most of the impact. The bushes had scratched the top of my tank, and something had put a quarter-sized dent into my lovely orange side-cover. I walked into the back to find the lady, but the car was empty. She must have already gone into the restaurant. I entered by the back door and walked into the dining room where the only customer was a lady—probably seventy or eighty years old.



I said, “Ma’am, you ran into my motorcycle and caused a lot of damage, and then you left the scene of the accident. That’s hit-and-run. That’s a felony.”

She stared at me as if I was speaking Japanese. The hostess came out of the kitchen and asked me what the problem was. I told her the lady had sideswiped my bike and driven away.

The hostess said, “Well, this is Mrs. Swanburg. She’s a well-respected member of our community. I’m sure she didn’t see your motorcycle. Why don’t you just fix it, and everything will be fine?”

“What? Everything won’t be fine! She damaged my bike. If I’d been standing there, she might have killed me. I need to call the cops.”

“Well, you can do that if you like, but you can’t do it from here. I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

I stormed out, walked to a phone booth, and called the police station. About thirty minutes later, a police car rolled up quietly. Two police officers got out and came over to me.

“So what’s the problem here, son?” the older cop said.

I related the incident to them and showed them the damage. I told them how she had swerved back and forth in the drive. They asked me some strange questions that didn’t make sense. I told them I was standing on the porch looking at the menu, but they still asked if I was on the bike. And then they asked if I was injured. They also asked if I’d been drinking that day.

I said, “I don’t understand. It’s my motorcycle that has been sideswiped. You wanted to see *my* license and registration. You’re asking me all these questions. You haven’t even talked to the driver or ascertained her condition. For all you know, she might be drunk.”

“We know Mrs. Swanburg, son. We don’t know you. We’ll get you towed over to Freddy’s garage. Freddy can help you fix your bike and get you back on the road. And then I suggest you do just that.”

“You guys are amazing. At the least, I need Mrs. Swanburg’s license and insurance information so I can report this to my insurance company.”

“Son, that’s just not going to happen. If you set foot in that restaurant, we’re gonna arrest you for trespassing and you’ll spend at least one night in our uncomfortable jail with a bunch of puking drunks. Wait with your bike, go to Freddy’s, and we’ll finish up here.”

The tow truck showed up fifteen minutes later. Freddy actually knew how to bring a bike in with his rig and didn’t do any further damage. While I stomped around, trying to figure out what to do, Freddy took off all my bags, unbolted the rack, clamped it in a cushioned vise and lit a torch.

“Hey, wait!” I said, “That’s thin-wall chromoly tubing. You can’t just heat it up and whack it.”

“I know that, son. I been fixing shit since before your daddy was born. Watch and learn.”

Wally heated the sprung areas on the inside of the bend, and let them cool. Some of the bend was gone, just from the expansion and softening of the metal. He heated the same areas again, and extended the heating down the legs a little, finally bringing the torch directly over the bend to soften the bend itself. The rack was nearly straight. He took a wet cloth and touched the outside of the bend, and the last of the bend pulled out.

“Okay, that was slick, though I doubt it’s as strong as it was, and it looks like crap with the paint burned off.”

Freddy shot me a sour look and said, “I didn’t even bring it to red heat, it’s still plenty strong. Stop bitchin’ at me. I didn’t hit your bike.” He gave the rack a light sanding, sprayed the rack with two coats of rattle-can black paint, and left it to dry.

He took some fine, white rubbing compound to the scratches on my tank. “Just branch scratches—nothing metal got to it and really took paint off.”

Most of the scratches came right out, leaving just one deep one. “We’ll leave that one as a souvenir of Savannah. If I try to buff it out, we might get down to primer. Wax will cover most of it.” He was right about that, too. “I can try tapping this dent out of your cover here with a sandbag and a soft mallet. Might work, or it might crack the paint. Your call.”

“Let’s do it.”

“Thatta boy.” He placed the cover with the finish side down on a rawhide bag full of sand. Then he selected a beat-up, old, hide hammer. Sanded the face of it flat on a pedestal grinder, then gave the dent a firm whack. When he turned the cover over, the dent was gone, but there was a small crack in the paint.

“I was afraid of that. Well, you’ll have to live with it. Let’s put a little clear nail polish on the edge, so you don’t get rust under it. You might keep your eye out for a sticker that you’d like to have on your sickle, and put it right there.”

The rack was dry, so we remounted it and put the bags back on, and I put the cover back in place.

“Thanks Freddy, what do I owe you?”

“Oh, nothin’. Mrs. Swanburg runs into something a few times a year. I’ll collect from her housekeeper. She only drives from her house to the restaurant a couple times a week. You was just in the path of the hurricane.”

I filled up my gas tank and paid Freddy for the gas. I got on my bike and started out of town. I had only gotten a few blocks when the police cruiser pulled me over with his lights. The old cop got out and walked over to me. I didn’t take off my helmet. I didn’t really want to talk to him, so I looked straight ahead.

“You headed out of town?”

“Yes.”

“Sorry about the unpleasantness. This is from Mrs. Swanburg.” He handed me a little envelope. I stuffed it in my pocket without looking.

“Am I free to leave your jurisdiction?” I said without looking at him.

“Look, we do things a little different here. We take care of our citizens.”

I turned towards him, angry beyond caution. “Are you kidding me? That lady could have killed someone. What are you going to do when she runs over a baby carriage? Arrest the mom? You twist the law to your own purpose. That makes you a crook with a badge.”

“Have a nice ride.” He turned on his heel and walked away.

I started the bike and rode off. I felt like giving them the finger, but it didn’t seem wise. I felt like committing some random vandalism, like crapping in one of their pristine fountains. But I rode off. Ada was right; Savannah was weird. I could definitely do without it. I got onto the highway and drove until it was almost dark. I reached a town called Brunswick. I found a little

park with a beach, and pulled my bike off the road into some trees. As I was setting up my tent, I opened the envelope from Mrs. Swanburg and found \$200.

The money was welcome, but the whole encounter left a nasty taste in my mouth. Those cops could have done anything they wanted to me. I felt powerless. Still, two hundred bucks. That's a lot of money. I don't know what insurance would have paid for the damage; I'm thinking maybe fifty bucks, if that. My bike was fine, I was fine, but I was really pissed off.

It was hot and sticky, even now that the sun had gone down. And I was too pissed to sleep.

*Monroe's Travel Journal: Travels with Sophia*

*Start of Day Eight, June 16, 1965*

*I'm sitting in my tent writing by flashlight, it's almost dawn. My plan was to catch up on my journal a little and then hit the road early. I could make it to New Orleans today if I pushed. But I realized I really don't like writing in this thing and I'm not writing anything important. I skip the tough stuff, like that fucking cop shoving me around. So screw it. I sure like this little notebook though.*

## MERMAIDS AND GATORS

There wasn't much around Brunswick. I think maybe the center of town was well off the main road, but I didn't see much purpose in looking for it, so I settled in for the ride to Jacksonville. The predawn air was cool and damp, and it felt good on my skin. I had my jacket folded up under my rear bag and tied down securely. It felt good to ride in shirtsleeves, even though it made me feel vulnerable. With my headlight on, I could see big bugs coming at me from a long distance. I'd see them hovering way off, looking about the size of golf balls. Then when I got close they'd seem to sweep towards me, an illusion caused by relative velocity, I guess. And then they'd thwack me in the chest. Some of them were so big they stung when they hit. If they hit my shirt, they bounced off, though I'm sure they were quite dead. If they hit my helmet, they splattered, and a few hit my face shield and left big splotches of yellow-green guts.

I stopped at a gas station outside Jacksonville to fill up, and clean my helmet and face shield. An old man came out to collect my thirty-six cents. I asked him if there was someplace nearby that was good for breakfast.

He pointed down the road. "Roady's," he said, and walked away.

Roady's turned out to be Rhodie's, a little restaurant that had a neon OPEN sign in the front window. It was a neat little place with checkered tablecloths, lace curtains, and little vases with flowers on each table. The food was wonderful. The eggs had yolks so bright they were red-orange. The biscuits were flaky and hot from the oven. And I finally tried grits, and loved them.

I had encountered grits before, in the form of a blob of whitish paste on my breakfast plate at a restaurant in Carson. After a tentative taste that left me thinking they would be best used for gluing wallpaper, I had eaten around them. The grits at Rhodie's were bright yellow, with little bits of half-melted white cheese. I tasted them, and then devoured them with the ham and egg. They made a perfect foil to the saltiness of the ham and the richness of the egg yolk. That got me thinking about balance in food, and how good cooking pays attention to that balance. Even a single thing like a hamburger is best when it has balance. A roll could have crunch, instead of just being a way to hold meat. Or it might have the tougher texture of an Italian-style baguette. Crisp, cold lettuce and raw onion balance the hot, yielding hamburger. A good mustard adds piquancy, as can a pickle, if it's chosen properly. Tomato? Maybe. Certainly cheese, for the rich taste that Japanese call *umami*. I wondered if anyone had created a vocabulary of flavor, building the five tastes of bitter, salt, sweet, sour, and umami into something like a sentence. If they had, could it be applied as a template to cook better food?

I resolved to try to make as perfect a hamburger as I could, as soon as I had access to a kitchen.

I was staring into space when the waitress said, "Are you okay, honey?"

"Yup, just daydreaming."

I paid the bill and left. Ninety-eight cents, for a breakfast twice as good as any I'd had in the previous week. I left a generous, twenty-five-cent tip.

Jacksonville looked interesting, but I pushed on past it. Shades of my father, driving past everything interesting, in the blind rush to reach his goal. I resolved to stop at the next thing that caught my attention, but the inland course of the road from Jacksonville to Tallahassee conspired against me. All I saw were souvenir stands and constructed attractions. PREHISTORIC DINOSAUR LAND, with genuine, concrete dinosaurs. Gatorland: FEED THE GATORS, PREHISTORIC MONSTERS THAT STILL STALK THE EARTH. Prehistoric seemed to be a recurring theme. I considered the notion of prehistoric monsters still stalking the earth and wondered if that constituted an oxymoron. I wondered why all these places were painted yellow with red trim. Was there some rule? Did someone prove that yellow with red trim made people stop and open their wallets?

Tallahassee looked something like Savannah, only with fewer parks. A lot of big old mansions that looked a little run-down. I looked for something appealing enough to justify a stop, but it wasn't until I was almost out of town that I saw a sign advertising boat tours of the river. Okay, that might be interesting. Got to stop.

So I paid fifty cents to get on a boat with bench seats under a canopy, with a group of other tourists. My expectations were low, but it turned out to be a marvelous experience. I hadn't realized it would take two hours. The time went quickly. We saw a lot of alligators. And manatees, which the guide said might have inspired stories about mermaids in the area. I thought anyone who could mistake a manatee for a mermaid needed glasses or a shrink. When the boat spooked the manatees, they created a surprising explosion of water as they dashed away. The river was broad and slow-moving, like a lake with a little current, and the trees that overhung the



banks were massive, with exposed roots and moss in their branches. It was spectacularly beautiful. Best of all, my seat didn't vibrate.

Then again, I was a long way from New Orleans and I'd pretty much killed three travel hours, including shopping for groceries and making lunch. I'd likely be driving in the dark if I tried to make it all the way. I reset my goal to Pensacola.

I was getting ready to leave the park when a short, thin girl carrying a daypack came up to me.

"Excuse me. Are you headed west?"

"Yes, probably to Pensacola."

"Could I get a ride?"

"Gee ... I don't know. I haven't carried passengers often. Wouldn't you be more comfortable catching a ride in a car?"

"Please. I'm a little scared. I got a ride this far from an older couple, but they turned north. So far the only people that have stopped for me have looked creepy. I ran away from one guy who told me to *just get in the damned car*. I'm trying to get to California. I could give you a buck for gas. I won't move around or bother you."

"I'm camping out in the evenings. I don't like to drive much in the dark. I don't know where I'm going to stay tonight. I think you'd be better off with someone else."

"How about just to Pensacola? It's a bigger city, there'll be more traffic."

"How old are you? I think if I take you across a state line, I could get in trouble."

"I'm eighteen." She showed me her license. Mary Ann Twombly. Yup, eighteen—even though she looked younger than me.

“Okay, Pensacola and that’s it.”

I handed Mary Ann the helmet Ada had given me, and wondered if Ada would think she was a skank. Certainly not a babe. Mary Ann got on the back before I could even start the bike—she was probably worried I’d ride off and leave her. I had to show her how to fold the passenger peg up and move her leg back so I could use the kick-starter. Of course Sophia chose that moment to be hard to start, and it took ten or so clumsy kicks to get her running. Finally Sophia caught and settled into a loping idle and we rode off. It really didn’t feel like there was anyone behind me, except for Mary Ann’s hands holding tentatively onto my sides.

We reached Pensacola before dark. I stopped and said, “Where do you want me to let you off?”

She said, “I don’t want to hitch at night. If you’re going to camp someplace, I’ll bunk down the same place.”

I couldn’t imagine she had much camping equipment in that small bag. But I didn’t argue, I just looked for a place to camp. I found a state park that offered campsites for twenty-five cents a night. I paid the fee at the entrance and they gave me a number for the campsite. It was nice, with a water spigot, a fire pit, a place for a tent, and a picnic table.

I set up my tent and rolled out my sleeping bag. Mary Ann stood around looking lost.

I said, “Do you have a sleeping bag?”

She shook her head.

I said, “Okay, my sleeping bag unzips into one large surface. We can both sleep on top of it. We won’t need covers tonight, it’s going to be warm. The tent has a mosquito net, so we

shouldn't get bitten much. It's fine with me if you want to sleep in the tent. I won't try anything, if you're worried about that."

Mary Ann gave me a weak smile and headed for the tent.

"Hey, there's a restroom right over there, if you want to clean up and brush your teeth. I'm going to go do that."

We walked together to the restroom. I used the facilities, washed up and brushed my teeth. When I came out of the men's room, Mary Ann was waiting for me. We walked back to the tent in silence and climbed in. I zipped up the mosquito net. We took off our shoes and slept in our clothes. Not comfortable, and I knew better than to do that, but I couldn't figure out what to do about it. I felt like I was stuck with this sad little girl. But I'd get rid of her in the morning—for sure.

Sometime in the middle of the night, I woke up and heard Mary Ann crying softly. I put my hand out and touched her shoulder. She startled a little, but then turned over and buried herself against me. She started sobbing. I held her uncomfortably until she fell back asleep, and then I fell asleep, too. When I woke up in the morning, she was cuddled up against me like an abandoned kitten.

Shit.

## ROLLING ORPHANAGE

The fire ring had a few partially burned chunks of split wood, and the empty campsite next to ours had a few more, so I built a fire. I let part of it burn down to coals and then I put on a pan full of water to boil. Once it was at a rolling boil, I added oatmeal, took it off the fire, and added chunks of apple and a handful of raisins. I mixed powdered milk with a little less water than usual, put the oatmeal into two Sierra cups, added milk and brown sugar, and handed one to Mary Ann.

She ate it so hungrily that I felt bad for not having offered her any food the previous night. I gave her the little extra that was in the pan, and started gathering the dishes to clean up. She took them from me and said, "I can do this." She washed everything under the spigot and packed it back in my bag.

I packed up the rest of my gear and got ready to hit the road. Mary Ann helped me as much as she could, and then said pretty much what I expected her to.

"Could I ride with you another day? I'm not a bother, am I? I can cook stuff, too. I've got a little money."

“Look, I’m not just going to California. This is a vacation for me. An adventure. I really don’t want to have someone else along. It seems like it will ruin what I’m doing.”

When she answered, she was looking down at her feet, in a pose I knew only too well. “I’m not in any hurry. I just need to keep headed that way. You’re a nice guy and I feel safe with you. I’ve never been on my own before. It scares me something awful. Couldn’t you please take me along for a little while?”

I didn’t say anything, I just handed her the helmet. Like some idiot. Somehow this Don Quixote had gained a Sancho Panza. When she got up behind me, she wrapped her arms around me a little less tentatively. The air coming off the ocean was damp and a little chilly. After a few miles, I felt her snuggle tighter against my back.

We reached New Orleans at about two in the afternoon. It looked amazing. Lots of old houses that hung out over the street. We drove through the outskirts of the French Quarter, which was bustling with people, even though it was midweek. It didn’t seem like camping would be even remotely possible. So I told Mary Ann I was going to look for an inexpensive motel. After asking at a few gas stations, I found a nice little place on the outskirts of the Garden District. A room with twin beds was \$2.50 a night, breakfast included. We moved our bags into the room, and Mary Ann sat on one bed. I said, “Go ahead and use the shower first. I’ll wait. Once we’ve both cleaned up, I’m going to take a look around New Orleans. You’re welcome to come along if you like.”

She liked. Mary Ann took a surprisingly short time in the bath. I’m used to Angel, who can easily spend a couple of hours. There was plenty of hot water, so I enjoyed the shower and

shaved. By the time I'd finished, Mary Ann had dried her hair and changed into clean jeans and a sleeveless shirt. She looked cute, in a scrawny way.

"I don't mind staying here if you want to go by yourself. I can find something to read, or just take a nap."

"That's up to you, you're welcome to come along. I'm going to see what the French Quarter is all about."

I locked my bike to a stanchion. The manager said it would be safe in the parking lot, since the lot was fenced and had a gate. He said, "You leave that in the Quarter, it'll be gone soon as you turn your back."

We caught a trolley and were there in a few minutes.

We walked along the riverfront and looked at the boats. We entered the French Quarter and looked at the bars, the restaurants, antique shops, and souvenir shops. I mused a bit about Mary Ann, realizing that I wasn't doing what I wanted to do, which was to find a nice restaurant and enjoy some Cajun cooking. I was holding off because she was along, and I didn't want to pay the way for a person who had just glommed onto me. I decided that was stupid and mean-spirited. If I wasn't willing to just tell her to get lost, then I should do what I wanted to do and not worry about a little more cost. I had enough money.

I said, "Are you hungry? I'm thinking about finding a nice restaurant and trying the local food. Today is my eighteenth birthday. It's not a big deal to me, but I want to celebrate a little."

"Oh ... happy birthday. I'll just walk back to the motel and let you do what you want."

I saw her ears turn bright red and she looked down a little, avoiding my eyes.

"I can't really afford to eat in a restaurant," she said in a tiny voice.

“I know that, Mary Ann. Sit down on this bench a minute.”

We sat. I composed myself and tried to find the words that would make her comfortable without making a commitment I didn't want to undertake.

“Look, you forced yourself on me, but I understand you're a nice person who's in some trouble. I'm not going to promise to take you where you need to go. But you aren't that much of a burden, so we can travel together for a while. I don't mind paying for a few meals. But let's not go through some big discussion every time I ask if you're hungry. Okay?”

“Okay, I won't say nothing, but I'll pay you back when I can, if I can. I know you don't owe me nothin'.”

I found a restaurant that had a raw bar in the window. I love oysters. We went inside. I ordered a dozen oysters for myself, and a bowl of gumbo for Mary Ann. The guy opening the oysters made quite a show of it, and he was lightning-fast. She made a face when I offered her an oyster, so I enjoyed them thoroughly by myself. Mary Ann put her hand on my arm and said, “Happy Birthday, Monroe. I wish I had a card or somethin' for you. I feel like you saved me and I want you to know I'm sure grateful.”

Then we shared crawfish étouffée, which I thought was spectacular.

We walked around the French Quarter until about nine o'clock. There was a big crowd, even though it was a weekday. A lot of the people were drunk, and they all were rowdy. A woman walked towards me. She had heavy makeup, a wild hairstyle, and her hands thrust in the pockets of her trench coat. When she got close, she swung the trench coat open. She was completely naked under it. Great body. We also saw some guys that were wearing just little

Speedo swimsuits with sequins on the crotches, walking around like it was no big deal to be essentially naked. Strange place.

We were overwhelmed and out of it, so we caught the trolley back to the motel. I was so used to going to bed at sunset that nine-thirty felt very late. We got into our separate beds and I fell asleep quickly. In the middle of the night, I woke up to Mary Ann's soft crying.

I said, "Are you okay?"

She said, "Yes ... no. Not really."

"I can hold you if you like."

She crawled into my bed and was asleep again in a few minutes. Her hair smelled like hotel shampoo and warm girl. I drifted back to sleep.

Breakfast was included in the room price, and I had my first beignets and chicory coffee! Hopefully not my last. The beignets were hot, crisp, and hollow, with a custardy texture to the inside. Like a sophisticated doughnut. Wally was right; these were special. We also had boiled eggs, and some salty ham that was good with a chunk of crunchy baguette. Once again, Mary Ann ate everything put in front of her. I wondered how she stayed so skinny.

While we were sipping coffee, Mary Ann said, "You haven't asked me what's wrong with me. The old folks that gave me a lift were plenty nice, but they wanted to know every detail. How come you don't ask?"

"It's none of my business. You haven't asked me anything about what I'm doing. I assumed you're being polite. I am. too."

"I'm just trying to not be a pain, so you don't drive off and leave me."

"Look, I'm not a busybody, I don't have to know."



“I want you to know. I don’t want you to think I’m just a bum. I’m a good person. I did good in high school. I had two jobs. Nothing great yet. Just bein’ a waitress and working at a store. I lived with my mom. My dad died in a car wreck about ten years ago, and last year Mom remarried. The asshole seemed nice at first. Things were fine, but then he started touching me too often. Sometimes he’d pull me into his lap to talk to me. Then he started coming into my room. Touching me, feelin’ me up and kissing me.

“I told my mom, and she got mad. Said I was leading him on. Which I never, never did. When he found out I’d told Mom, he got mad. He told me if I was going to live there, that I would have to submit to him. He said the Lord says that. Right in the Bible it says that women submit to men. So I gotta.

“So I packed up my stuff, took the money I had saved, and left. I got a brother in Santa Monica, California. We’re not close. He doesn’t have any money either—he works at a clothing store. I called him and he said he’d help me get started out there. So that’s where I’m headed. So now you know my stupid story. I’m sorry I told it to you because it sounds stupid to me. Like I got no stupid place in the world and no stupid place to go.”

“Sometimes the place to go is just away from where you are.”

“Yeah, I guess. I’m glad I told you. Feels like I’m hanging on to you like a lifeline. That ain’t fair, but I been thanking the Lord for you every night.”

“Let’s hit the road. It’s three hundred fifty miles to Houston and five hundred fifty to San Antonio. I say we push for San Antonio, what do you think?”

Mary Ann smiled and said, “San Antonio sounds great.”

## MAKIN' BACON

We curved up through Baton Rouge, and stopped at a Piggly Wiggly for groceries and gas in Lake Charles. The scenery was nice, though the land was getting a little drier looking. Lots of farms and small towns. When we got about fifty miles from Houston, my engine started sounding a little different. I found a gas station, parked behind it, and told the attendant that I needed to check out my bike. The oil looked good, and the compression seemed normal as I pushed the kick-starter through with my hand. I pulled the plugs and looked at them. They looked normal. I checked the valve clearance and found the left-hand exhaust valve had almost no clearance. Not good news.

Usually valve adjusters get looser and the engine develops a little clatter. The only likely things that would make the clearance on a valve get tighter are a valve seat getting pounded deeper or a valve face bending in a way mechanics call *tuliping*. I set the valve to the correct clearance, and we continued on. When we got to Houston, I could hear the engine sound changing again. I found a phone book and located a British motorcycle dealership called Houston Cycle. We drove to the shop and I went in to talk to the owner.

“I’ve got a 1958 BSA A10 that might be eating a valve. I’ve had to loosen the adjuster twice, and I can hear it tightening up again.”

“Is it doing anything else? Spitting through the carb, or popping?”

“No, it’s the exhaust valve on the left side. I could hear a change in the exhaust note.”

“Well ... we can take it in, but we’re slammed right now. We’re deep into our riding season and our mechanics are super busy.”

“I’m a motorcycle mechanic. I can do the work myself, if I have access to parts. But the tools I have with me are not quite up to the job.”

I explained I was on a cross-country trip, and that I worked as a mechanic at Albion Cycles in Boston.

“That’s not something we’d normally do, especially as busy as we are, but I’m two mechanics short. I’ve got a bunch of pissed-off customers who want their bikes fixed. If you can work for us for a few days, I’ll pay fifty percent flat rate labor and ten percent parts, and you can work on your own bike.”

“Well, you’ve got a deal if I can tear down my bike first, to see what’s going on. I suspect it’s going to take machine-shop work. Have you got a good machine shop in the area?”

“One of the best. This is oil country. Machinists make a lot of money here. The old German guy we use can make anything, but he’s busy too. We send all our work his way and he owes me a few favors. If you need machine work, I can ask him to give you some priority.”

“That would be great. I really appreciate the favor. No matter what, I’ll probably be laid up for at least two days. I’ll give you my best effort while I’m waiting for the machine work.”

I found a motel close by the shop and rented a room for two nights at \$2 a night. I installed Mary Ann in the room and took my bike back to Houston Cycle. I took over an empty work stand, rolled my bike up on it, and removed the tank, exhaust pipe, and carbs, and pulled the plug wires. Then I pulled the head and laid out all the parts on shop towels on the bench. I used the shop's valve-spring compressor to remove the valve locks, spring retainers, springs and the valves. It was immediately obvious that the seat was receding on the left exhaust valve. The right exhaust-valve seat looked like it might be moving a little as well. It was going to have to go to a machine shop.

I boxed up the cylinder head parts, borrowed the shop's parts-runner bike (an old BSA Bantam, just like Albion's), and took the head to the machine shop. The old machinist really looked the part. Face like a basset hound, big hands, clean coveralls, and he smelled like cutting oil. I bet he smelled the same way in his go-to-meeting clothes. He looked over the head and valves, and said, "Looks like iron for the seats. Okay sometimes, but I see many fail—especially exhaust. I like tool steel for this. Intake seats are okay, but we should replace with better while we got it on the mill? Yes?"

We settled on a price for the replacement seats and regrinding all four valves for \$18. It seemed fair. With a bit of luck I could earn that much in the shop. The head would be ready in two days. "Soonest I can get to. I got people screaming."

I went back to Houston Cycle and talked to the head mechanic.

"Glad to have you. We're slammed. I'll want to check your work since you'll be moving on. I don't want to pay you and then have redo a bunch of stuff for free once you're gone."

“No problem. But my tools are limited. The shop tools look fine, but can I go to your guys for special tools?”

“Yeah, but you won’t need to. I’ve got about fifteen tune-ups for you to do. They don’t take much in the way of tools. Some of the guys here do the Japanese ones with the tools in the bike’s tool kit, since they fit all the access covers.”

I looked over the work orders the head mechanic had given me, and ordered them by the dates the bikes had come in. Some of the bikes had been sitting there for more than two weeks, waiting for a simple tune-up. No wonder the customers were pissed.

I was amazed to see they were charging \$25 to tune up a twin, plus parts. It was \$15 at Albion. I said, “What’s the shop rate here?”

The head mechanic said, “Seven bucks an hour.”

Seven bucks, holy smoke! Albion charged five, and it had seemed high, considering the minimum wage was \$1.25 an hour. That still didn’t account for the tune-up price—more than three hours to tune up a twin?

“You’re looking at the tune-up price, huh? Kind of rich? Two reasons for it. First, people will pay it. Folks around here are working oil fields, or for oil companies. Money comes easy. That’s why we don’t have more mechanics. If you can swing a wrench, you can get a good job. Second, the flat-rate manual screws us for these Jap bikes. Do some warranty work, and you’re making pennies. When we do a warranty job, we try to add in a tune-up to make up for the screw job. We also get some back on maintenance work. And for anything off warranty, we don’t follow flat rate; we track hours. We charge whatever it takes. Like I said, people will pay it. They want their bikes back running right.”

The shop sold a mix of British bikes: Norton, BSA, and Triumph, as well as Japanese Hondas, and Lambretta scooters. Most of the bikes that had been waiting the longest were Hondas. I lined up two CA95 150cc twins and three Super 90s and started working on them.

The mechanic working next to the bay I'd taken was a small guy named Bo. He said, "That's the best way to do them Jappers. Five or six at a time. That way you don't get hungry for a tune up again in a half hour."

I moved from bike to bike like I was on an assembly line. I checked all the points, replaced three sets that were pitted, and set the timing. Pulled all the spark plugs and set the valve lash while the engines were easy to turn over. Then I replaced and gapped all the spark plugs, and cleaned the air filters. I started all five bikes and warmed them up. Then I shut them off and pulled the plugs to drain the old oil. The bikes were all dusty, and one of the twins was a greasy mess.

"Isn't there a gunk to wash the bikes before we work on them?"

"I wish," said Bo. "They come and go. If the owners want their bike washed, they can wash them their own selves, I reckon." And he returned to work.

I wrapped each drain plug in a rag and tied it to the keys of its bike, then disconnected the ground lead on the battery, so no one would start a bike drained of oil without at least a little warning. "I'll be right back," I said.

I walked the three blocks to the motel and found Mary Ann reading a Bible in the room. "Hey, would you like to make a few bucks? I need to have a bunch of bikes washed and prepped for me to work on. I'll pay you a buck per bike to wash them."

"You don't have to pay me. You done a lot for me. I'm glad to help."

“How about if I pay you, and then you can cover your own expenses sometimes? I’d like that better,” I said.

We went back to the bike shop and I put Mary Ann to work, washing all the bikes I was going to be working on. I showed her how to clean particularly well around the drain plugs and engine cases, and dry the bikes with the air hose and then a towel.

I said, “You need to be fast, but do a good job. If you use a new towel, check it carefully for metal shavings. These things get cleaned by a service and sometimes there’s stuff left on them that can scratch the paint. I need these next three bikes done in an hour. Then you can wash the ones I’m working on. I like to work on a clean bike, so I don’t get any dirt or crap inside while I’m working on them. But I also want the ones I’m finishing up to be clean. That tells the owners we did a good job.”

I gave Mary Ann the stack of work orders, and showed her how to use the license numbers to find the bikes in the long lineup outside the shop.

Without a word, Mary Ann took the cleaning supplies to the wash bay and went to work. Just as I finished up the oil change for the five Hondas I’d started with, she rolled the next three bikes into my area. She rolled the five I had finished out to the wash bay. The front of Mary Ann’s T-shirt was wet. And even though she had on a matronly bra, there was enough pink titty pushed up above the cups to be eye-catching.

“Pretty fucking cute gunk you’ve got there,” Bo said. “You just travel with a handy spare?”

“She’s a nice kid, and she did a great job on these three bikes.”

Mary Ann rolled the finished Hondas back to the end of the lineup, checked the math on the work orders and put them in the finished rack. Then she found the next four bikes I was going to work on and rolled them to wash area.

“Hey, can she do the bikes I gotta work on too?” said Bo.

“Sure, a buck a bike, and any added tip you want to give her. Pay her in cash at the end of the day, she can use the money.”

Bo walked out and talked to Mary Ann. He handed her three work orders and pointed to the bikes. In one clean swoop, Mary Ann had gone from sitting in the hotel room reading a Gideon Bible to making about five bucks an hour.

By the end of the day I'd done thirteen tune-ups. Nine twins and four singles. By my reckoning, I'd made about \$170 including parts, and I owed Mary Ann \$13. She'd done seven bikes for Bo. He gave her ten bucks, and asked if she was coming again tomorrow. Mary Ann looked at me. I nodded, and she said, “Sure.”

I was cleaning the tools and putting them away when the shop owner came back to talk to me.

“That was impressive. Thirteen tune-ups in half a day, plus a tear-down on your big twin, and all the bikes are washed. The owners were thrilled.”

“Thanks. I told you I'd do my best.”

“You've got a job here, if you want it. I'll take you full-time. Your girlfriend, too. You're quite a team.”



“She’s just a friend. But she did a nice job, didn’t she? I appreciate the offer, but I have a job back in Boston. And I’m going to continue my trip, as soon as my bike is ready. But I’ll be here tomorrow.”

“Let me know if you change your mind. I’ve got ads out in other states looking for good mechanics. If you stay, I’ll just quit trying to recruit. You could make a lot of money here.”

“Thanks again. I’ll keep that in mind.”

I had no desire to stay in Houston. It looked like a interesting place, but I was just passing through. Mary Ann and I walked back to the motel to shower. I handed her twenty bucks.

“I’ll get you change,” she said.

“Nah, we’re good. You helped me make some good money today. If you do as well tomorrow, you’ll be flush.”

“Thirty dollars in a day! That’s more than I’ve earned in a week as a waitress, including tips. And it was easy. I didn’t have to run my ass off and listen to customers bitch.”

“Let’s get a shower and find some dinner. We’ll have to walk. I hope there’s something close, I’m bushed. By the way, the shop owner offered me a job, which I’m not going to take, but he also offered you a full-time spot. I don’t think you’d be making quite as much, quite as fast, but they’ve got a big business there and no one to do the work. You might want to consider staying. You could learn the rest of their business. Maybe even work your way into being a parts manager or a mechanic. There’s a woman mechanic in Boston, and I’ve heard she’s really good.”

“I’ll think about it, but I think I need to get to California. And I think the Lord sent you to me, so I need to stick with you.”

“I doubt that, and I will be leaving you when I get you to your brother’s place. Having you with me has changed my trip. Not in a bad way, but it’s changed. My idea of what this trip is supposed to be is that I experience things on my own. That’s not exactly happening.”

We walked quietly for a while.

Mary Ann said, “I think I know what you’re bothered by. If you meet some girl you like, I’d be in the way. I won’t be. I promise. I can even get a separate room at the motel if you like.”

“No, that’s not necessary. Unless you want your own room. And I’m not talking about meeting women, though that could be a little part of it. I’ve lived surrounded by people I know my whole life. I spend a lot of time alone, working on my science projects, but they’re still there. I want to find out what I’m about. By myself.”

We got back to the motel, and Mary Ann took the first shower. I was pulling out some clean clothes when she walked out of the bathroom naked.

“I’m sort of flat-chested, huh? I tried to make them bigger, I do exercises with these little weights that are supposed to help. I say, *I must, I must. I must improve my bust*, while I do this,” and she showed me the exercise she did.

I didn’t say anything. I just thought furiously. If I let myself get more deeply involved with Mary Ann, I would probably regret it.

She said, “I try to work with what I got. I usually do sit-ups every morning to keep my tummy flat, and I watch what I eat. Do you like my figure?” She turned slowly.

Her hips were curvy, her bottom was round, and her belly was flat. I thought it made a interesting counterpoint to her small-but-perky breasts, long neck, and interesting face.

“You’re very pretty, Mary Ann, and you have a nice body. I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I don’t think it’s a great idea for us to take our relationship further. It’s just going to make things harder. And I don’t think you need a lot more pain in your life right now.”

“I was just tryin’ to be nice to you. You’ve never taken advantage of me, and God knows you had opportunities. So maybe it’s not that I’m in your way with other women. But I know you don’t really want me around. I just want you to know that if you want me, I want you just as much. I know what Pastor Johnston would say about me fornicatin’ but he says just thinking about it is a sin, so I been sinnin’ a lot lately anyway.”

I said, “I appreciate that, Mary Ann, and believe me, I very much want to make love to you, but it’s a really bad idea. I have lots of complications to my life I haven’t even begun to sort out yet. I don’t need to add to that, and I don’t want to feel guilty later. So let’s stay friends. But just friends.”

Mary Ann wrapped herself in a towel and came over and hugged me around the neck with her cheek pressed against my chest. Then she looked up at me, kissed me softly on the lips and said, “I knew the Lord sent you to me.”

We had dinner at a steakhouse nearby. The food was great. The bill came to nearly eight bucks for the two of us, but I was feeling flush. Mary Ann was in a talkative mood. She told me that her mom was very religious, especially after her dad got killed. She asked me if I went to church.

I said, “No, I don’t have any particular faith. My family isn’t religious. We never go to church other than Easter and Christmas. I don’t have any real belief in God, though I think I’m reasonably open and tolerant about other people’s beliefs.”

“Is that because you’re all wrapped up in science stuff? Pastor Johnston said scientists are atheists, tryin’ to prove God doesn’t exist. You believe in that evolution stuff ... that we come from monkeys? Pastor Johnston says that’s just a theory.”

“Well, I don’t think science has anything to say about religion, one way or the other. Science isn’t about belief, other than believing that the universe has rules that govern how it works, and they’re consistent. At least, statistically. I don’t think that precludes some supreme being. It doesn’t prove one thing or another—unless you insist on taking the Bible literally. In that case, the universe and the earth are less than ten thousand years old. That’s just ridiculous.”

“But if that evolution stuff is true, then doesn’t that say the Bible isn’t right about where we come from?”

“Not really—well, I guess it does if you insist on the Bible being literal. But evolution doesn’t preclude God. It just says there’s a mechanism that resulted in us. It doesn’t say anything about why we exist. And yes, yes, I think the evidence supporting the theory of evolution is overwhelming. We didn’t come from monkeys, though. That’s a parallel line. And when people say something is just a theory, they’re confusing how science works with the general, non-scientific meaning of that word. Good science is always trying to disprove fundamental concepts, and replace them with more precise ones that are more consistent on all scales and in all circumstances. We call things laws when they prove to be particularly strong in their predictive character. But they’re really all theories. We know, for example, that Newton’s laws don’t mean the same thing when you get down to the size of an atom.”

I could tell that I was mostly talking to myself. Though Mary Ann looked me in the eye and nodded every so often, I didn't really think my discourse on the philosophy of science was sinking in.

When we got back to the motel we watched some TV together, and then Mary Ann got into her own bed. I felt relieved at that. I thought she had decided I was a godless, monkey-loving atheist. Until about two in the morning, that is, when I was woken by her sliding into my bed. She snuggled her behind up against me, then took my hand and put it over her small breast. I lay still, though my cock betrayed my interest, and she fell back to sleep. I stayed awake for at least an hour, trying to figure out what to do next. I fell asleep before I'd had any really great ideas.

The next morning we had oatmeal with apples, made on the motel hotplate. Mary Ann walked around in thin panties and a tight T-shirt with no bra under it. Very distracting. It seemed our relationship had taken a turn that I wasn't really clear about. I didn't really know what she was thinking or why she was acting like she was. Was she being seductive, or did my turning her down eliminate the need for modesty? Once again, I found myself not really understanding the motivations of a woman. And I didn't want to ask for explanations.

There was some really bad coffee in the lobby, and I had some more really bad coffee at the shop when it opened at eight.

Mary Ann started washing the bikes that Bo and I were planning to work on. The head mechanic, Stanley, and another mechanic, who was named Carl, came over and said, "Say, do you think your girlfriend would have time to prep bikes for us, too?"

"I can't see why not. A buck a bike, plus a tip, if you like her work."

I could tell that Carl liked more than just her work, the way he kept looking at her all morning. She had apparently swapped to a bra that was less matronly, so the wet T-shirt was interesting. I found myself looking at her more than necessary. She was cute in a waif way. Especially surrounded by greasy guys in a motorcycle shop. I wondered what they would have thought if Claudia was washing bikes for me. I laughed at the image. I must have laughed out loud. Bo gave me a funny look.

When we broke for lunch, I went to the deli with the guys. Mary Ann kept working in the sunny wash area. I brought her a sandwich back. She ate it while she rinsed soap and engine cleaner off two bikes.

“You’re done with my whole stack of work orders. You’re going to work yourself out of a job.”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “Eight more bikes came in this morning, and there’s still fifteen left that weren’t assigned. Stanley said he’d get them assigned after lunch, so I can wash them all and get paid. You got three more tune-ups, out of the eight that came in. Stanley says I’m the best gunk they’ve ever had. He said he’d teach me how to pull an engine. He said the mechanics pay two bucks for pulling an engine out of any bike that needs it.”

“At their labor rate, it’s worth at least three-fifty. It takes a good mechanic about a half hour to pull an engine. I don’t know if you’re strong enough to lift an engine out of the frame,” I said. “It sounds like you’re reconsidering staying.”

“I’m a lot stronger than I look. I’m thinkin’ on it. You could make a lot of money here. I’d stay for sure, if you did,” she said.

“Well, don’t make your plans around that, but this could be a good place for you. You know these guys now, they’ll look out for you. The money’s good.”

I got back to work and finished all the tune-ups I’d been assigned. Twenty-one tune-ups, plus the thirteen I’d done the day before. A huge tower of tune-ups, and I figured my take was somewhere close to \$400, a ridiculous amount of money for two days of work, even if I had worked my ass off.

Best of all, the machine shop called and my cylinder head was ready. I took the shop bike and rode to the machine shop. The work was beautiful, the new valve seats looked better than new, the head had been soda-blasted, and the gasket surface milled flat. The valves were ground and lapped in, the springs were shimmed, and everything was installed.

The machinist said, “I called shop for spring specification and seat pressure. Your intake springs sagging just some, yes? No sense to change, good quality. Exhaust valve springs are ruined. I replace with better—S&W—and I put insulating washers. Otherwise springs overheat from exhaust port. Same spring rate. Preload is perfect with only one point oh twenty shim for each, so all is fine. Your cylinder head is good—flat with only skim. Two thousandths. No increase to compression, but watch gas quality. Perhaps pay for premium octane. I’m seeing detonation in the head. Look right here.” He pointed at some tiny cleared marks in the carbon deposited on the head.

“Look at pistons and you see more clear areas in what I think you Americans call the coke? Not critical, maybe just up steep hills, but we see some, yes?”

“Okay, yes, I’ll use premium.”

“Take it easy on throttle first fifty miles, then check valves. Set clearance a tiny loose, yes? And listen to engine—I know you can do that, yes? But I think all is normal.”

I paid the bill, with a few bucks extra for the new springs and shims and a five-buck tip for the nice work. The machinist handed the five back and said “Not necessary. Is profession. Tips is for waiters.”

I went back to the shop. I felt really good. My bike would be ready for the road tomorrow. Too late to put it together tonight, the shop would be closed soon. But first thing in the morning.

The shop owner, Harold, came by when I was setting the head on my bike with a new head gasket. No point in taking a chance on something getting into the engine. He handed me a fat envelope. “Four hundred forty-eight dollars and fifty-four cents. I didn’t take out taxes, it’s not worth the paperwork. We’ll just stick it under Outside Services. Nice piece of work. I don’t see how you can walk away from money like this. You could do what you just done all summer long. We got tons of business. It’s boomin’ around here.”

“I greatly appreciate the money and the offer. But I have plans and I’m going to head out tomorrow.”

“I got a favor to ask. We have a BSA A10 in here, same as yours. It’s got a bad rod bearing and maybe a bad main bearing on the primary side. The crank seems to wiggle a bit. None of these guys have that much experience with beezers, and I’d like to get this thing out of here. It’s been here three weeks and the owner is a neighbor of mine. The estimate is three hundred twenty for labor, plus parts. I’ll pay you two hundred if you can get it done. We have all the parts, I ordered everything I thought it might need. Will you work on it tomorrow?”



“Sure, I can do it. But if the crank needs to be reground, I won’t have time to wait for the machine shop. If I get stuck, you won’t be any worse off than you were and I won’t charge you. I’ll get on it tomorrow, as soon as I finish my bike.”

“Hey, I know you don’t have transportation, and there’s not that much to do right around here. Take the shop bike for the night and go take your girlfriend someplace nice to celebrate. She made some good money today too. We’d love to have her stay. She did a great job on all the bikes she cleaned, and the customers noticed. With all the oil jobs, Houston has way too many guys and too few women. They liked the idea of a cute gal cleaning their bike for them. We usually get people kicking about the price, but when she pushes the bikes out with that wet T-shirt, gives a few more little licks with a polishing cloth, and hands the work order to the service manager, the customers don’t say shit. We might be on to something interesting here.”

## RIGHTSIZING

Silvio met with Walrus and Stick at a diner near Dudley Station to give them the bad news.

“My uncle is making me pull the plug. The Warlocks beat the crap out of me and took my stash. My uncle wants all my money because he got fined for doing a side deal that blew up. So I guess that’s it,” said Silvio.

Without a word, Walrus stood up, shook hands with Silvio and headed for the door.

Stick turned to Silvio and said, “Really? You’re quitting a deal that you made into a goldmine? Just because it’s getting tough? How do you think the Warlocks got on to us?”

“Only thing I can think of is that fat fuck mechanic kid. I tried to recruit him, he got his panties in a knot and whined to his boss, that Paul guy. I heard he has connections to the Warlocks, he probably tipped them.”

“How did they know we’re doing dope? The kid didn’t know.”

*Maybe he did,* thought Silvio, *maybe I fucked up and told him when I ate your fucking lude.* “I don’t know, maybe they followed us, maybe one of our dealers squealed. Maybe that

fucking Walrus who just rushed out of here like his pants were on fire ratted us out. I don't know, but when I find out there's going to be blood. Lots of blood."

"You want your revenge, let's do it fucking right. Let's get what's ours," said Stick.

"I'm not seeing a lot of options, Stick. Well, I see some options but I'd need backup to pull anything off, and it's down to just you and me."

"So, okay, it's you and me. Let's start from there," Stick said.

## TRAITOR

When I got back to the hotel room, Mary Ann had already showered and dressed. I took a quick shower. We got on the little shop bike and buzzed around Houston, taking in the sights. The Museum District looked interesting, and I would have liked to visit the Space Center, but I'd already spent too much time in this city, even if I'd been cooped up in a bike shop for most of it. We found a nice-looking Mexican joint and ordered way too much food. I'd never had Mexican food before, so I stuck to things that sounded familiar. After we'd settled in and ordered, I looked around the restaurant and realized I didn't see any Hispanic-looking people other than one of the waiters. Since I had seen Mexicans in Houston, I figured that was a good indication we weren't getting anything authentic. It tasted good, if a little bland.

While we were eating, Mary Ann told me she had decided to stay and work at Houston Cycle. "There's nothing special in California for me. My brother would help me, but I know he wishes I wasn't coming. The best I'll probably find is a waitress job. I can make more here in a week than I would in a month anywhere else. If I decide to move on, I'll have enough money for a bus, I won't have to hitchhike. Heck, I've got enough for bus fare already. I talked to the guy at

the motel desk and got a really cheap monthly rate. If I really like it here, I'll look around for a place to stay, maybe get a roommate.”

I told Mary Ann I thought that was a great idea. We wound up with two cartons of leftover food. I figured it would be okay cold, and maybe I could even heat it up. Mary Ann insisted on buying dinner. “I’m a working girl now, I can afford it.”

We rode around a little more, and then we went back to the hotel and watched a little TV. When we went to bed, Mary Ann took off her clothes and climbed in with me. She faced me, slid her hand down my chest to my stomach and beyond, and said, “I’d really like you to make love to me. I’m a virgin, but I’m ready not to be. I’d like it to be you.”

My head was screaming *no*, but it was hard to say no to a naked girl in my bed holding my cock in her hand. We were soon screwing like rabbits. Those nights of sleeping with Mary Ann cuddled up to me, even when she was crying, had built up a lot of stifled passion. We had sex steadily until well after midnight. Mary Ann was voracious and wanted to try everything. She was downright demanding. I went through my meager supply of condoms, so the last few episodes were oral, which Mary Ann thought was really great. I did, too. Whatever inhibitions her religion instilled had pretty much gone out the window.

The next morning, Mary Ann was acting modest. She took her clothes into the bathroom to take a shower, and came out fully dressed. I took a shower, saw it was nearly eight, and said, “I have to get to the shop.”

She said, “Me too. That was really nice last night, Monroe. That was really the first time anyone has even touched me there except for an old doctor. Thank you for making my first time

so nice. I was so crazy hot by the time you were inside me that it hardly hurt at all, though it hurts like hell right now.”

“Didn’t you have any boyfriends at home?”

“No, my mom is really religious. She chased away any boys who were interested. She said I should stay away from men, they were only interested in one thing anyway.”

The fact that her mom seemed willing to make an exception for her stepfather seemed strange to me, but I’d already learned that people can justify almost anything.

When we got to the shop, I dove right in, intent on getting my bike done. It felt oddly special to be working on Sophia’s engine. The parts went into place with a pleasing precision. I fished the pushrods into the rocker arm cups, torqued the head and set the valves to the loose end of spec. Installed the carbs, connected the magneto, and mounted the pipes. I mounted the seat and tank, and connected the gas. I tickled the carbs and turned on the ignition. Sophia started with the first kick, and settled into a strong, fast idle. I adjusted the carbs to bring the idle down, and noted the much sharper engine bark when I blipped the throttle. I bet the valve seats had been acting up all along, or at least, long enough for me to get used to the sound of a less-than-perfect valve seal. I ran the bike until the oil got hot, and did a complete oil change. Then I checked the valve lash with the engine hot, noted the difference between the hot and cold settings, pushed my bike aside and started on the customer A10 engine job.

Mary Ann came to get my bike and took it to the wash pits. I disassembled the engine of the customer’s A10 and found one rod bearing worn down to the copper and the other showing less obvious signs of wear. The drive side bearing was damaged. It looked like the rollers had

been skidding. I stuck my finger in the oil drain pan and spread the oil onto a sheet of white paper. It was burnt and gritty, but there didn't seem to be any metal. Just old, gritty oil.

I cleaned up the parts and cleared the sludge trap in the crank, which was pretty much full. I replaced both the timing side and the drive side main bearings, and went to talk to Harold.

“So the engine is apart, the rod bearings are gone. The drive side bearing was toast, the timing side bearing looked okay, but I replaced it anyway. It looks like the owner doesn't change oil often. Everything is prematurely worn. He's running velocity stacks with no air cleaner. As dusty as it is here, I'm surprised the engine isn't completely worn out.

“Rings are shot, the bore shows wear. I'll do a bore job and replace the pistons. It will clean up at ten over.”

“Good, that's what we ordered for him.”

“The crank pins mike out okay but there are some light score marks. I usually wouldn't just replace the bearings, I'd get it ground to ten under, but I don't have time. It's in spec. I can just polish the crankpins with fine emery cloth and put it back together today, or you can take the crank to the machinist and have one of your guys reassemble the thing. The way this bike has been abused, I'd say it won't matter. If he keeps up this way, it's going to be toast in another ten thousand miles.”

“Well, that's no surprise,” Harold said. “The bike held together this long because he doesn't ride that much. I'll tell him what you said, but it won't change much. He doesn't have any mechanical sympathy. He was raised in the oil business. All their equipment gets abused until it's completely worn out. Go ahead and put it together with new rod bearings. He'll be happy just to get a running bike back.”

I bored and honed the cylinders. Then I assembled the engine with new rings and gaskets and all new bearings, put it back into the frame, and reassembled the bike. I finished about four in the afternoon. I filled the oil tank with light oil. It started second kick. The engine felt much looser than Sophia's. I let the rings seat and let the bike warm up and run for a few minutes. I took it for a ride to put some pressure on the rings without overheating them. There was almost no blue oil smoke when I blipped the throttle. Then I changed the oil again and did a careful tune up.

Harold brought the owner back. He was a big guy with a bright red face, a nearly purple nose, and a big belly, even though he looked fairly young. He looked like he'd burned his body's candle just about as hard as he had his motorcycle. I told him that the engine was good now, but he should run air cleaners and change his oil more often.

He said, "Well, thanks for the advice. I like the way them velocity stacks look, but I'll dig up the air cleaners, I think they're in my shed. Harold tells me you're just passing through but you stayed to fix my bike. I want to give you an extra fifty for your trouble," and he passed me a crisp fifty-dollar bill.

I thought *Not necessary. Is profession. Tips is for waiters.* But I certainly didn't say that. It was raining fricken money in Houston, and I had a net.

Harold gave me the two hundred he'd promised. I shook his hand and rode my bike to the hotel to pack. Mary Ann was there already. Showered, fluffed up and naked.

"I decided not to stay. I want to go with you."

"I'm sorry, Mary Ann, but I'm not going to do that. I told you I didn't want to get more involved. But now you have a different set of expectations and I'm not going to accept that. You



can't come with me. You have plenty of money for a bus ticket if you want to go to California, but I'm not going to take you."

"I figured you'd say something like that. It's probably for the best."

I packed up my bike and went back to the room to get my jacket and helmet. Mary Ann was still naked.

"If you won't take me with you, at least make love to me again before you go. I've been thinking about it all day and I'm going crazy."

What the hell, I thought, is this some recurring theme? The goodbye fuck. Is this the standard for human behavior? I didn't know what to say or do. I certainly wasn't going to change my mind. I hoped this wasn't some tactic. I didn't want to leave Mary Ann with some new burden, either of rejection or abandonment. But I wanted to get the heck out of there.

She got up and put her arms around my neck and kissed me hard, darting her little tongue into my mouth. Naked girl against a leather jacket. She felt so sexy and soft. I looked at the two of us in the bathroom mirror. I turned her around so she could see, too, and put one hand over her breast and slipped a finger in her pussy. She instantly started shuddering in orgasm and leaned back against me, curving one arm back around my neck. I picked her up and carried her to the bed. So we made love. Or, to put it much more realistically, had sex. She was half asleep when I got up and dressed. I put on my jacket, kissed her, walked out to my bike, and rode to San Antonio before I dared to stop.

Just outside of San Antonio, I found a campsite with an unmanned entry booth and only a few trailers in the spots. Took one close to the entrance. First things first—the valve clearance on my bike was unchanged from the hot setting I'd taken at the shop. The engine would be cold in

the morning so I could check it properly. Pitched my tent, tossed the bags inside, and crawled into my sleeping bag. I hardly got the mosquito net zipper closed before I fell hard asleep. Just before dawn, I jolted awake, worried about all the money I was carrying, and freezing my ass off. As usual, there was scrap firewood in the empty campsites around me. The nice little fire warmed me, as did cowboy coffee, then oatmeal. I stared at the fire and contemplated my strange life on this trip, and my many sins.

Two weeks into a month-long trip, and I had no idea who this guy was, sitting by a fire in a campsite just outside San Antonio. Could this be the same guy who'd built science fair projects? Who'd spent his life in his room reading science fiction and jacking off on *Playboy* centerfolds? Sure didn't feel like it.

## HIGH FINANCE

I felt bad about ditching Mary Ann, but it felt like a huge weight had been lifted. I could enjoy the trip again. I left her better off than when I'd found her, or when she'd found me. She had a job. She had people who'd look out for her. Maybe she'd stop crying at night. She wouldn't have to hitch if she went to California. She had a little bankroll. I never knew how much money she'd had to start with, but I guessed it wasn't more than twenty bucks.

I hadn't asked her to come with me. She'd pushed herself on me and refused to let go. I tried not to have sex with her. She'd pushed that too.

But the more I thought about it, the more I understood my guilty conscience. Someone desperate and scared grabbed on to me. I went along. I let her depend on me. Then I screwed her and left her. I thought about going back to Houston and getting her. But for what? So I could dump her in Santa Monica, leaving her worse off? Just to make myself feel a little better?

Nope. I'd done what I'd done. I wished I'd been stronger, but I hadn't. I'd learn from it and do better next time—maybe. While I resolved to do better about controlling my urges, I

thought if some cute, naked girl walked up to my campfire and asked me to screw her, I'd be damned likely to do it.

The only conclusion I could draw is that perhaps I shouldn't get into situations where my pecker takes over, unless I know I want it to. And then I thought, *Good luck with that.*

By the time the sun was fully up I was hungry again. I went into town, had a nice sausage-and-eggs breakfast at a pleasant and sunny café, and went looking for a bank. I went into the first one I saw. As I parked my bike and started to walk away from it, I realized how great it looked. I walked back and looked it over. Mary Ann had detailed my bike. She'd polished and waxed all the paint, shined all the polished aluminum cases and the chrome, cleaned the wheels and the spokes, and had even cleaned the rear sprocket. The little paint crack on the side cover had a small BSA stacked rifle decal hiding it. It looked like it belonged there. Sophia looked as good as she ever had. The only flaw was that the chain oil had gotten scrubbed off in the process, and my chain looked dry and a little rusty. I dug out my can of chain oil, lubed the chain and adjusted it. As I walked towards the bank, I stopped to look back at my beautiful bike—twice.

I had all my money in my money belt, including the \$200 I'd fished out of my handlebars. It made a imposing sum. I kept out a little over \$200 for trip expenses, and had \$1020 that I needed to put away somewhere. I told the banker that I was going to be on the road and might need access to money in an emergency.

He looked at me for a moment, with a quizzical look that revealed he thought I was a knucklehead. "That's easy. Why don't you just open a checking account? If you need money, you go to a bank and write a check. Or just pay for what you need with a check. When you get home,

you can keep the account, or do an interbank transfer or just write a check for the remainder to open a new account.”

“Great, but what about if I’m on the road and I want to deposit more money?”

“Well, you’ve come to the right place. This is Bank of America. We have branches in just about every major city. You can go to any B of A and make a deposit or a withdrawal. If there aren’t any close by, just about any bank can do an interbank transfer. It takes a while to clear, about a week. But if that’s not a problem, then you’ve always got a solution. Banks charge a sum to do the paperwork for interbank transfers, so you’d be better off going to a B of A, since it doesn’t cost anything to make a deposit, and it will clear within days instead of taking a week.”

So I handed over \$1020 and got a little deposit book and some checks.

“We’ll print you personalized checks for free, where would you like them sent?”

“My home in Boston, I guess. But I won’t be there for a month.”

“Well, let me print you a few more counter checks, and here’s my card. People might be worried about cashing a counter check, but if it’s between nine and five here in San Antonio, they can reach me. You also get your choice of either a set of glasses, dinner plates, or a Revere Ware frying pan. I don’t suppose you’d want any of that?”

“Hmmm, I could use a frying pan.”

Another big load off my back. I was feeling downright light-footed when I stowed my new frying pan under my rack bag, and hit the road.

As I rode out of San Antonio, it got hotter and a lot more desert-like. After a few miles, I had to stop and take off my jacket and tie it to my rack. A few miles further on, my back wheel suddenly locked up. I pulled in the clutch, but the wheel stayed locked. I left a long, black streak

to the infamous soft shoulder, slewed wildly in the soft dirt for a while, and slid to a stop. No crash, but it was a close call. I got off the bike and put it on the center stand, expecting to find some horrible problem with the transmission or the primary drive. I was getting ready to pull the primary cover when I noticed my leather jacket sleeve protruding from the rear chain wheel. The sleeve must have come loose and tangled with the chain, getting sucked into the sprocket and stopping the rear wheel. What a stupid way to almost have a crash in the middle of nowhere.

I managed to back the sleeve out of the sprocket and untangle it from the chain and wheel spokes. I couldn't see any damage at all, other than some holes and grease stains on my jacket sleeve. I rotated the wheel several times, looking for tight spots or a bent spot in the sprocket, but it was fine. I did a much better job of tying down my jacket, bag, and frying pan, and got rolling again.

I thought it was a good lesson, but I couldn't help thinking that some of these lessons I was learning might kill me. About that time, I noticed a new little vibration in the back wheel. I'd made a flat spot in my tire. From the many tire changes I'd done at Albion, I knew the flat spots that come from locking up a wheel don't go away. You can get a flat spot from parking a car with the tires a little soft, and leaving it for some time. That can clear up, if you get the tire pressure right and drive the car easy for a while. Lenny's Triumph TR3 had them, because it had been stored for a year before he bought it. They cleared right up. But an abrasion flat spot only gets worse, because the trailing edge wears away and makes the spot bigger. I'd need a new tire eventually. Right now, it was just a little irritation.

It got hot as blazes on the road. I stopped in Fort Stockton to get gas and water about three in the afternoon, but it was too hot to hang around and too hot to eat, so I continued on. The

sun got bigger and redder as it sank in the west and finally went down. I don't like to ride in the dark all that much. The headlight on my BSA is weak, and after getting dazzled by an oncoming car, it seems like I have almost no light at all for quite a ways. But it felt cooler in the dark, and the light-colored land reflected my headlight nicely. The road stretched out like a black ribbon, illuminated by the millions of beer cans and bottles along its edge. I thought the beer cans were a good safety feature. I imagined little reflectors in a tough, flat, plastic prism that could be glued to the pavement. Maybe yellow reflectors glued to the centerline, and perhaps ones of a different color on the verge of the road, at the edge of the pavement. People wouldn't drive off the edge of the road so much. But then I thought about what that would cost and figured it would just never fly. We're lucky the state pays for reflective paint.

I stopped at a little roadside cafe about sixty miles from El Paso. The waitress put a menu in front of me and said something in Spanish. I looked over the menu. It was sort of in English, but I didn't recognize any of the words except *pollo*, which I knew means chicken, and *puerco*, which sounds like pork. The only other customer was a trucker dressed like a cowboy.

I asked him, "What's good?"

He turned to the waitress and said something in Spanish that sounded like *carney toes*, and I recognized *cerveza*.

I said, "thank you."

He said, "Don't thank me. You just bought me a beer," and he laughed.

The waitress brought me a very hot, metal plate heaped with chunks of pulled meat, black beans, and rice with vegetables; a pot of red sauce that looked like tomato and onions; two bottles of sauce, one red and one green; a small bowl of fluffy green paste; some crispy chips; and a

little round wooden box. Inside it was a stack of soft corn tortillas. She brought both the cowboy and me cans of beer called Tecate that were sweating condensation. And she set down a little bowl of lime slices.

The cowboy said, “You know what to do with all that?”

I said, “No idea, and it looks like way too much food.”

He said, “Okay, start with the beer. You rub the lime over the top of the can, probably kills any bugs, then you squeeze some lime juice onto the top, shake on a little salt, pop the top and take a swig.”

I did as ordered. A spectacular flood of flavors, carried with ice-cold liquid, rolled down my throat. “Holy shit, that’s good,” I said.

“Holy shit indeed. So, the chips are for the guacamole and the salsa. Guacamole is the green stuff in the bowl—basically mashed avocados. Salsa is the tomatoes and stuff in the other bowl. You scoop up a little of both with the chip. Usually you’d get that first, but she just brought out everythin’.

“That meat is called carnitas. It’s deep-fried pork shoulder that’s been tore apart with a little sauce on it. You take a tortilla, spoon in some carnitas—add a little rice and beans if you like, a little salsa and maybe a dab of guacamole. Shake on some green sauce if you want it mild, or red sauce if you can stand heat. Fold it and eat it. That’s about it.”

I dug into the food. The smell was making me ravenous. The flavors were incredible and the icy beer went perfectly with them. I ran out of food shortly before I ran out of beer, and I drank about a pitcher of water as I ate. I was surprised to see everything gone except one lone tortilla.



“This is nothing like the Mexican food I’ve had before. This is incredible.”

“It’s the real deal, bud. All you got to do to tell if you’re going to have great Mex food is look at the tortillas. If they are a little irregular like these are, then there’s a little ol’ grandma lady out in the back, patting out tortillas with her hands, and you’re in for a treat. If they look like they were made in a machine, then it’s gonna be ordinary. Tex-Mex isn’t bad either, but it’s a different thing. Where you headed?”

“California.”

“Well, there’s a lot of good food along this road, all the way to California. When in doubt, eat Mex. Though there’s some kickass barbecue on the way, too. If you don’t mind spendin’ a little extra, try the Cafe Central in El Paso. Lunch is cheaper than dinner and it’s just as good.”

“I’m thinking about crossing the border and spending a few days in Mexico. What do you think?”

“I’d say don’t do it, but it’s your neck. Just remember: Their country, their rules. It ain’t Boston. Hell, it ain’t even El Paso, and that’s as close to a Mexican town as you can get this side of the border. Half the people in El Paso don’t speak English.

“Mexico is a great place, once you get away from the border. Lots of nice people. But any place along the border is sketchy, and Juarez is a particular tough place. You get in trouble there and boy, you’re really on your own. I gotta go, I’m headed east and I’m on the clock. Thanks for the beer. Have a good trip.”

The night was warm, the desert sky thick with stars. The Milky Way was a dense band across the sky. The outside lights on the restaurant had thousands of flying bugs bumping against them. I figured a lot of them would be mashing themselves on my helmet pretty quick. I buttoned

the top button of my polo shirt and tucked the collar under, to maybe keep the bugs out. I waddled to my bike, bloated by too much food and a gallon of water, and headed on to El Paso.

I didn't feel like camping, so I found a cheap place on the north side of El Paso, near the entrance to Fort Bliss. It turned out to have a surprisingly nice view of Franklin Mountain. There was nothing to see in the black night, though, and I was so tired I had a hard time locking up my bike and getting my stuff inside my room. About three in the morning, I was awakened by yelling and scuffling. Two Army sergeants had come back to the hotel early in the morning and had found two guys trying to lift my motorcycle into a pickup truck. A fairly serious fight had ensued. The police were called, and two semi-conscious Mexican nationals were arrested.

I was grateful to the two Army sergeants. They turned down my offer of dinner or a reward. They said it was no big deal. "Hey, if you saw those guys stealing our car, you'd have done something, same as we did."

I wasn't so sure. Those thieves looked pretty tough.

The cops were nice, too. They looked over the bike with me. There wasn't any damage except to my padlock, which the thieves had hacksawed apart. "Kind of a wimpy lock for that big chain," one of the cops said. I resolved to get a really good one. I pushed the bike into a hallway next to my room and locked the forks with the bike stuffed in behind a Coke machine.

The police said I needed to come in to the station sometime the next day, to give my statement. The army sergeants and I had to give separate statements about what we had seen and done. The thieves would be bound over to trial, and we wouldn't have to be present; our statements could be read into the record. That was a relief, especially when the cop said it could

take a couple of weeks. He said they'd probably plead guilty and get a shorter sentence. I asked how long they'd be in jail.

The cop said, "They'll get a year, but they'll only serve a few months or sometimes just get booted across the border unless they have too many priors. It's a revolving door. We catch a lot of these guys. Good chance we would have caught them at the border. Someone comes through with a nice motorcycle in the back of a junk pickup, they better have good papers. They fake up a bill of sale, but that doesn't work unless the border cop is asleep or is close to shift change and doesn't want the overtime. They go to jail, get out and do the same thing, until they rack up enough of a record and we put them away for a long time."

"I can't believe someone would risk jail to steal a motorcycle," I said.

"Well, there's not a lot of work in Juarez these days. Some of these guys are trying to feed a family. Some don't give a shit, they just want some money. They might get a hundred bucks for your bike in Juarez. That's a lot of money there."

I slept fitfully, and woke up a couple of times to check on my bike. I got up in the morning, ate cold, two-day-old, mediocre Mexican food for breakfast, and went to the police station.

A clerk at the station took my statement. I realized I didn't have that much to say. I hadn't seen anything until I came outside and found the two sergeants holding the semi-conscious thieves. Every time I said *thieves*, the clerk would mutter, "Alleged thieves."

Whatever.

When we finished, the guy told me the two "alleged thieves" had priors and were known to be violent. He said they'd come up against the wrong two sergeants. Both men were Green

Berets, a term I hadn't heard before. "Like Rangers, only more so. Super badass," was the clerk's summation. That surprised me. They had seemed so nice and courteous.

I asked how often thefts happened, and the clerk said, "You mean, cars and motorcycles? We get about three per day, twenty a week on average."

"Wow, it must be really bad here, huh?"

"No, actually, our crime rate is really low. Especially for a border area. LA has a car or motorcycle stolen every thirty seconds. Of course that's spread out over eight million people. Still, you're headed for California, right? Better keep an eye on your bike. From the photos, I'd say it's prime. If it gets across the border, the next owner will be riding it in Brazil, or the motor will be powering an irrigation pump somewhere."

I went back to the motel to pack up and check out. I got the hotel manager to buy two nice bottles of scotch—five bucks apiece—and he put the whiskey in the sergeants' room with my thank-you note.

I took out some notepaper from the desk in the room and started to sketch out an alarm system for my bike. It would have to disable the bike temporarily, make a bunch of noise, and maybe do something to keep people away from it. I considered using an automotive coil to charge the bike up and shock the heck out of anyone touching it. But I've blasted myself a lot of times with my own experiments. As used to electrical shocks as I am, I didn't think I'd maintain control if my system malfunctioned and shocked the crap out of me on the road. For that matter, shocking curious, innocent people who happened to touch my bike seemed a little extreme. So I decided to scratch that.

I settled for disabling the bike and making a lot of noise. I sketched out a few circuits I thought would work. I finally came up with a design that had three buttons. If you pushed the buttons in the right pattern, it would disarm. If the alarm wasn't disarmed, lifting the bike off the sidestand or jiggling it would close a mercury switch and trigger a latching relay to sound the horn until the alarm was disarmed. It would also short out the magneto to keep the bike from being started, like the kill switch did.

I got out the Yellow Pages and found an electronics store. I rode my bike there and browsed around and looked at the prices of the components I planned to use. I didn't like the size and cost of the mechanical approach I had considered, using multiple electromagnetic relays, so I sat down on the steps and redesigned it using a few resistors and transistors, the cost of which had recently come down a lot.

I talked to the owner about what I was going to do. He thought it was a great idea, but suggested I pot the circuit, to waterproof it. He showed me a simple, vacuum-formed plastic bubble that I could mount everything inside, before filling it with potting compound that would turn to a hard plastic block. Not only would it be waterproof, it would be harder to mess with than a metal box.

I bought the parts, a little piece of perforated circuit board to mount the components, the potting kit, and a soldering iron, and went back to the hotel. I told the clerk I would be staying another day, and went to my room to build my alarm system. To turn off the horn, or disarm the system without the horn blowing, I had to press two buttons at the same time. Then another two buttons—for example, the second and first button, then the third plus first. This unlatched the output transistor.

While I was building my alarm system, I thought, *What if I wanted to build ten of these? How could I code them uniquely?* So I set up four sets of jumper points on my circuit board. To select a sequence, you had to jumper any two sets. That gave me more than twenty unique codes. I only planned to build one alarm, but I like to consider the possibilities.

I built the circuit inside the little thumb-sized case, mounted the three pushbuttons into holes I'd burned in the bottom of the case with the soldering iron. I tested the circuit a few times, both on and off the bike. It was a little fussy getting the mercury switch at the right angle, but I got it to work well. Then I mixed up some of the potting compound and poured it in. An hour later, I had a functioning alarm system hidden behind my oil tank.

I figured I could make duplicates of my alarm system for under \$4 apiece, not including labor. They seemed like products I could possibly sell. I went to a hardware store and bought a better lock for my chain, with a hardened hasp. Then I went to a newsstand and bought copies of *Motor Trend* and *Cycle* to see whether anyone was advertising an alarm system and if they were, how expensive it was. There wasn't a bike alarm advertised, but there were car alarms, and they were priced between \$29.95 and \$39.95.

I also went to a sporting goods store and bought a tiny gas stove for backpacking. I was spending too much on restaurant food. I should have had one to begin with. My new stove had a cover that turned into a little pan. It had a little brass tank for white gas, but the salesman said you could use regular gas if you cleaned the metering orifice regularly, and he gave me a brass wire tool for that. My last stop was the grocery store. I picked up some eggs, spinach, cheese, and a little bottle of olive oil. I went back to the hotel, locked up my bike in the dead-end passageway behind a Coke machine, and set my new alarm. Back in my room, I made a spinach

omelet in my new Revere Ware frying pan, read my magazines while I ate, and looked at the advertising rates for small ads in the classified sections.

Went to bed and slept like a baby. I woke up around six-thirty, turned in my key at the front desk, and hit the road.

## A LITTLE TUTU

In the chilly early morning, the streets of Brighton were empty . The sky was a uniform gray and rain was spitting steadily. The Dunkin' Doughnuts opened at five-thirty, mostly to make doughnuts for the later morning rush, but a few people stopped in on the way to jobs that start early, or headed home from a late shift. Sam liked to sit in the quiet shop with coffee and four or five doughnuts most mornings.

As he unfolded his six-foot-five body from his Buick, Stick walked up behind him with a .38 caliber Colt revolver and shot him in the back three times. Sam howled in pain and his big left hand stayed clamped on the door handle as his body fell forward, pivoting to face Stick. His right hand reached under his jacket, and closed over the grip of the massive .44 Magnum Smith & Wesson revolver in his shoulder holster. He had it halfway out of the holster when Stick put two more rounds into his forehead.

Stick turned away and walked quickly up Brighton Avenue. His hooded sweatshirt and sunglasses obscured his face. He jumped into the Chevy sedan he had boosted off the street in Allston two hours before. He drove a twisted path out of Brighton, making sure he wasn't being



followed. Once he was sure he was in the clear, he stopped at a phone booth, called the number Silvio had given him, and waited for Silvio to say “Yah.”

“Done, he said. He hung up and walked away from the stolen car.

Silvio left the phone booth where he’d received the call. He drove a short distance and then parked on a quiet side street. He got out of the car he’d stolen from a used car lot a few hours earlier. He slipped on a long, cheap raincoat, and walked up the driveway to the back door of his Uncle Gino’s house, pulled on rubber gloves and knocked quietly. His Aunt Elaine shuffled to the door in her robe and slippers and opened it with a querulous look on her face.

“What are you doing at the back door, Silvio? For God’s sake, it’s only six-thirty. We just had breakfast. What’s the raincoat for? It isn’t raining, is it? Is Gino expecting you, Silvio? He’s mad at you,” she said.

Silvio pushed her back a step, then grabbed the front of her housecoat as he bulled into the kitchen. He spun her around, clamped a hand over her mouth, then sliced a razor-sharp box cutter across her neck. He held her for the few minutes it took for her to bleed out and convulse into unconsciousness and death. He looked around the kitchen and noticed an empty jar and a bowl of olives on the counter. *Who the fuck eats olives this early in the morning?* Then he lowered her to the floor, and dropped the box cutter. He pulled a roll of gaffer’s tape out of the pocket, then stripped off the raincoat and gloves. As he walked into Gino’s study, Silvio pulled his .22 caliber Colt Woodsman from under his belt in the small of his back.

As Silvio walked into the room, his uncle looked up from a stack of papers. He said, “What the fuck?” Then he saw the gun in Silvio’s hand, and scabbled for a desk drawer. Silvio shot once, hitting Gino in the right cheek. He corrected his aim and shot his uncle twice in the

chest. The small caliber gun made a snapping noise that probably couldn't be heard past the front door. His uncle fell back in his chair and made another weak attempt for the drawer. Silvio strode forward. He stepped behind the chair and crossed his uncle's arms across his chest, pinning Gino in the overstuffed office chair. He rolled the chair away from the desk into the middle of the room. He stepped around the chair, put the gun on the desk, and pulled a strip of tape off the roll. "Where is your safe and what's the combination?"

Gino looked up at Silvio and tried to say something. Bright red bubbles came out of his mouth without any intelligible sound. Gino Capo started convulsing. He choked, threw his head back and gasped loudly, then slumped forward in the chair.

"Fuck," said Silvio. "It's just a couple of little two-twos. You ain't supposed to die until you tell me how to open your safe. Fucker. If you can't talk, you ain't worth shit to me." Silvio picked up his .22 and shot his uncle in the top of the head at close range to make certain he stayed dead.

He returned to the desk and opened all the drawers. He found the .45-caliber Colt his uncle had been going for, and pushed it into his jacket pocket. Then he found a tin box with a thick stack of ready cash. He walked around the room, lifting pictures from the wall. No safe. He searched the rest of the rooms and found a wall safe in his uncle's bedroom closet, behind a rack of suits. He tried a few likely numbers. No dice. He returned to the office. He knew his aging uncle no longer trusted his memory; he was always complaining about it. Gino said he had "CRS—Can't Remember Shit." He had to have the number written down somewhere. After a long and nerve-wracking search, Silvio found it on a piece of masking tape under the pull out typewriter shelf in the desk.

The safe opened on the third try. Turning back past the first number to the second one was the trick, just like a cheap bicycle padlock. Inside he found five slender, banded stacks of cash and three thick ones, and five bearer bonds for \$20,000 each. He cleaned out the safe, including a couple of notebooks, and headed downstairs just as the doorbell rang. He considered just leaving by the back, but there was just no telling whom it was or what they'd do. He looked through the peephole in the door to find a fucking cop standing outside.

"Shit. Shit, shit, shit," Silvio whispered. He set the bag of cash down behind a floor vase, pushed the .22 under his belt in the small of his back, and opened the door for the cop.

"Good morning, officer," Silvio said.

"Hey, g'mornin', who are you?"

"Gino's new assistant," he replied.

"Yeah? Where's Sam?" said the cop.

"Probably at the doughnut shop," Silvio said.

The cop walked in. "I'm here to see Gino, he's expecting me."

Silvio said, "He's in his office," and closed the front door.

As the officer walked toward the office door, he could see the pictures hanging askew. He said, "What the fuck," and froze for a moment. Then he started to crouch and spin back towards Silvio, scrabbling for the gun in his holster. Silvio already had his .22 pointed at the officer's head, and his first shot struck the policeman in the temple. The cop crumpled to the floor, kicking and thrashing on the Oriental carpet. A pool of dark blood rapidly expanded past the carpet and onto the dark wood flooring. Silvio shot him again, punching a black hole above his right

eyebrow. Then he picked up the bag with the cash, bearer bonds and notebooks, and left by the back door.

### WHERE THE HELL IS CALIFORNIA

Even though I liked El Paso, I was glad to see it in my rearview mirror. This hot, dry stuff was not what I had in mind for a trip. It was getting hotter every day. I figured I could push like crazy, turn my butt to stone, and make it to the California coastline in one day. According to the highway sign, it was 725 miles to San Diego. An awkward distance. If I were to stop somewhere in the middle, after 350 miles, this would put me roughly in the middle of Southwestern Arizona. Which meant another day of featureless desert. I was ready for some seacoast. The closer I got, the closer I'd be, and the harder it would be to stop. So I set my sights on the Golden Coast.

When I was 280 miles of identical, buff-colored, rocky, boring desert closer to my goal, I saw the dot of a car on the shoulder of the deserted highway. As I got closer it resolved into a Jeep, with its hood up and a young woman standing beside it. She was dressed in khakis and a floppy canvas hat like she was on safari. She was waving both arms at me. I drove right past, concentrating on my Pacific Ocean goal. But it was a blazing hot day. I hadn't seen another car in an hour. Would I want people to drive past me, if I were stuck out here?

I turned around and reluctantly chugged back. She stood with her hands on her hips watching me approach. She looked irritated. She might have been attractive, in a beefy way, if she wasn't scowling and covered in dust with big sweat circles under her arms. Then again, maybe not. She had a wide jaw that jutted slightly. It looked cartoonish. And a nose that was flattened in the upper section, but rounded to the point of being almost bulbous at the end. Her thick neck tapered to powerful-looking swimmer's shoulders, and she was heavy enough to have a double chin when she tilted her head down towards me. Still, there was something appealing in the whole package, or maybe my reptile brain just screamed *female*, over and over and my pecker picked up the chant.

"You're the first person who's even slowed down in three hours. But you can't tow me anywhere with a motorcycle," she said in a clipped, angry tone.

"Well ... look, I can stop at the next gas station and see if they can come get you. Or I can call someone for you."

I was already feeling sorry I had turned around. She was clearly blaming me for all the other people who had driven by.

"Oh damn! You're going to take off and leave me, aren't you? I suppose I should be grateful you stopped." She didn't sound the slightest bit grateful. "Could you at least take a look at my engine and see what's wrong? Guys are supposed to know these things."

"Sure." I opened the radiator cap. There was water, but it was barely over the core. "Did it overheat?"

"It always overheats!" she snapped. "I put water in it every time I stop."

"Geez, how far did you come?"

“San Diego. I’m doing postgrad work in geology at UCSD.”

“You came four hundred miles in a Jeep that overheats all the time?”

“It’s always done that. I get about a hundred miles between stops. No big deal.”

I pulled the oil dipstick. The oil looked like old axle grease and smelled like burned sulfur. “How long since you changed the oil?”

“I add oil whenever it gets low,” she said, with obvious exasperation.

“Yeah, but how long since it was changed?”

“I don’t know. Never, maybe.”

“Great.” I turned the key and pushed the starter button. Bam, bam, bam. The obvious sound of a thrown rod.

“It’s done for. You killed it. You’ve got a thrown rod. I’d say you need an engine rebuild, but from the looks of this thing, it’s probably not worth it. Maybe you can find a junker engine and someone that will put it in cheap. But if the rest of the drivetrain is as poorly maintained as the engine, I’d say the weakest link in a very weak chain just broke.”

“Wow! You’re a ray of sunshine. How am I getting my samples and gear back to UCSD?”

“I have no idea, but this thing isn’t going any further without a tow truck.”

“Great. Well, then give me a ride to San Diego and I’ll figure it out from home.”

“Ah ... I’m just going to Yuma,” I lied.

“Okay—Yuma, then. At least I’ll be out of this sun. Let me grab my backpack and we’ll go.”

She lifted an overstuffed, khaki backpack out of the Jeep's open back. She took my spare helmet off the duffel and put it on without asking. "Let's go. I'm hot and hungry."

I started my bike, she climbed on, and off we went. As she wiggled around to get comfortable, nearly sending us off the road, I thought, *No good deed goes unpunished*. I think Oscar Wilde said that. If he didn't, he should have. Just as I was considering the aptness of the quote, she yelled in my ear, "And don't get any funny ideas!"

We got to Yuma after two stops for *biological breaks*, as she called them.

She said, "I drank a lot of water while I was waiting."

As if I cared. There were no trees, and no brush. So she just went a few steps from the bike and did her thing, after telling me, "Don't look."

Really? I thought I'd rather claw my own eyes out. By that point, she wasn't looking even slightly female to me.

At about four-thirty, after seven hours of more-or-less nonstop riding, I stopped at a combination gas station/cafe. I said, "I'm going to leave you here. I'll get some gas and then find a motel."

"Well, I need a motel too. So I'll stay with you until then."

This wasn't going well. I couldn't get away with anything. I had rehearsed that line for a hundred miles. Should I say, *I think I'm going to leave you here*? Or should I say, *This is as far as I'm going*? Or maybe, *I'm going to drop you here*. I filled up on gas and said, "I'm going to get some dinner."

So of course, she said, "Great, I'm hungry, too."

I wound up sitting across from her in the cafe. Eating bad hamburgers.



She said, “Are you going on to California eventually? It would be a lot more convenient for me if you took me all the way to San Diego.”

I’d finally had enough. “Why should I care what’s convenient for you? All you’ve done is bitch at me and take advantage from the moment I stopped to help you. I don’t owe you a thing. I’m not taking you to San Diego.”

She stared at me for a moment, then her face crumpled and she looked somehow terrified and small. She said, “Oh my God, I’ve done it again. I get so obsessed with what I’m doing that I think everyone should just help me. I’m so sorry, I don’t even know your name. I don’t deserve your help. I don’t deserve anyone’s help.”

She shrunk a little more and she just looked terrified. I knew she wasn’t upset because she’d treated me poorly. She wasn’t putting on an act, looking for sympathy. She wasn’t even afraid I’d leave her. She was terrified because she knew she was broken, and she didn’t know how to fix it.

I tried to eat my hamburger and wait her out, but I couldn’t. The waitress came by and asked if everything was all right, and looked hard at me. I didn’t care.

I paid the bill and said, “Come on outside.”

I got up, but she didn’t. She just shook her head. I stood and waited until she looked up at me. I said, “Come on. We’ll take a walk.”

She got up and walked outside, forgetting her daypack. I picked it up—it must have weighed more than fifty pounds. I followed her outside, set the daypack on my bike seat, and walked her over to a bench.

She took deep breaths for a while, and then started talking. “I have a disorder, my shrink calls it an obsessive personality. Makes it sound like I just like my room to be neat. Which, of course, I do. Sometimes I’m okay. But sometimes I lock onto things and can’t get them out of my head. Some things are locked there all the time. I can’t go past a jewelry store without counting the watches in the window. Stress makes it worse. I was super stressed when my Jeep broke in the middle of the desert and no one would stop for me.”

“You have a shrink? You mean, a psychiatrist?”

“Hey, I’m from Santa Barbara, everyone there either has a shrink or is a shrink. But yes, I’ve been going to one shrink or another since I was four. I’m a weirdo. I’m nuts. I’m twenty-three and I’ve never had a boyfriend longer than two days. I’ve got two friends, and they’re as fucked up as I am. I ruined my Jeep because I care more about the rocks in the back than I do about the motor in the front. Do you think my rocks will be okay?” she said, plaintively.

“I’m sure they’ll be fine.”

“I can call my family. They’ll arrange for someone to pick me up. Fortunately my family is rich, or I’d probably be off in a funny farm or sleeping in a cardboard box instead of working on my doc in Rocks.”

“I’ll take you to San Diego.”

“No, really. I played this all back in my head. I’ve been horrible. I don’t want you to do anything more. I’m not a good person. I didn’t even ask your name. I don’t even know your fucking name.”

“It’s Monroe,” I said.

“Monroe, okay. Okay. Okay. I’m Gina Overbye. People in the geology department call me Gina Overbearing behind my back.”

“Okay Gina Overbearing, get back on the bike and let’s go. It will be nice driving in the cooler air. No more wiggling around, though. You’re going to get us killed. If you have rocks in your daypack, you have to leave them here. You can get them later.”

She gave me a weak smile, went to her daypack and pulled out four grapefruit-sized rocks. She took them to a corner of the parking lot and arranged them to look natural.

“You think they’ll be okay there?”

“I think so. But if anyone takes them, I’m sure they’ll give them a really nice home.”

She looked at me hard, and then smiled a little bit. “I’m not that crazy, they’re thunder-eggs. Big ones. Worth as much as fifteen bucks apiece, once I cut and polish them. I use the money to buy dope.”

Riding across the desert at night felt a lot like flying must feel. There was no moon, but the stars were so bright that I could see the tan color of the land for a good distance. The cone of light from my weak headlamp reached a long way with no other lights around. The two-lane blacktop stretched away from us into infinity. The rolling thunder from the exhaust pipes bounced around the canyons and goaded me along. My speedometer said 90, but it felt like we were doing 200, dipping and soaring as the road undulated and curved through the low hills. My world shrunk down to just what was before me. My hands and arms. The illuminated speedometer and tach. The string of road. Every so often, Gina would shift a little bit, but she had settled companionably into leaning against my back with her arms wrapped around my middle.

There were no other cars on the road as we started climbing what I assumed was the coastal range. As we neared the top, the sky got clearer and stars seemed to sizzle. I pulled into a roadside rest area that had no lights for miles in any direction, and shut the bike down.

Gina said, “What’s wrong?”

I said, “Nothing, I just want to turn the lights out and look at the stars.”

We got off the bike. Gina set her bag next to the back wheel. I felt my way to the edge of the parking lot and found a patch of dry grass. I laid back and looked up at the Milky Way, so rich with stars that it looked almost like clouds. I could see the zodiacal light—sunlight reflected off dust clouds at the edge of the solar system. When I pointed it out to Gina, she said, “That has to be just a high-altitude cloud.”

“Yeah, it’s a cloud all right, but it’s out past the asteroids.”

We watched stars for an hour. I named the few I knew. Gina pointed out some stars and constellations I wasn’t familiar with. Sirius. Leo.

She said, “Why don’t you know more star and constellation names? You know about zodiacal light but you don’t know Leo?”

I said, “They’re just names, and they’re not meaningful or descriptive. I don’t see much reason to memorize stuff like that. If I needed to know a constellation for some reason, I’d look it up.”

We both spotted Jupiter, a rounded star with less twinkle. I said, “We could see the four biggest moons of Jupiter with just some good binoculars. I’ve seen them through a decent telescope. It’s really strange to see so clearly that it’s a separate world, with its own moons.”

When we got back on the motorcycle to leave, Gina hugged me around the shoulders and said, “That was great.”

I thought, *Yeah, it was good for me, too.*

Sophia smelled like hot oil, so I backed off the speed a bit as we climbed over the mountains, past El Cajon, and down into San Diego.

We got to the UCSD campus at about one-thirty in the morning. Gina had an apartment in the Single Graduate Housing. She said, “You can stay with me while you’re in San Diego. It’s the least I can do. If anyone asks, you’re my brother. But nobody will. Nobody gives a shit what we do. It’s cool.”

I had my doubts about staying with Gina, but she had changed dramatically. Without the stern look, she was marginally prettier, and somehow even nice. Weird and fucked up, perhaps. But nice.

I said, “I planned to camp out. The weather’s great, and I’d like to see the Pacific Ocean. You don’t need to put me up. Giving you a ride wasn’t that big a deal. I was headed here anyway.”

“It was a big deal. It’s a big deal to me. Please stay, at least for tonight. Your bike will be safe. The campus has good security. I don’t know where you’d camp. This is La Jolla. I hear they roust people here if they even look like vagrants. Though now that I think of it, that can’t be true. That would be a real challenge, the way the grad students and faculty dress. You’re overdressed, if anything.”

She helped me carry my stuff up the two flights of stairs to her little apartment. It was cool. Nicely decorated, nice furniture. Everything very neat. Surprise, surprise.

“You can bunk here on the couch. I have an extra pillow and bedclothes. We can make the couch up into a nice bed. You’ll see. Let me shower and change, and we can take a short ride to go look at the Pacific Ocean from the cliffs. It will be more impressive in the daylight, but it’s only about a mile and a half away.”

While Gina was showering, I sat at her tiny kitchen table and read the newspaper.

Gina came out of the bathroom. She was obviously naked under a huge, lumpy-looking bathrobe that made her look really fat and unexpectedly cute and cuddly at the same time. She said, “The shower is free if you want to use it.”

I did. In her shower I found a bunch of unfamiliar things. Two big potted plants in macrame hangers. The gave off a nice smell that somehow seemed very California. An organic-looking cucumber-shaped thing that looked like a plant-based Brillo pad. A flexible pad of brush bristles on a strip of roughly woven cloth that had rope handles. A big bottle of soap—or was it shampoo? It said Dr. Bronner’s Peppermint Castile Soap. It had all kinds of small print on the label that rambled through various topics, including some Zionist-sounding mysticism, but also claimed the soap was perfect for many uses, including brushing teeth. I washed my hair with it, and it felt and smelled great. Then I washed my body and it made my skin feel both hot and cold. I used the cucumber thing as a sponge, and scrubbed myself and I realized the rope-handled thing was a back scrubber, so I put some of the Dr. Bronner’s on it and washed my back. I must have been at it a while. I heard Gina at the door saying, “You okay in there?”

“Yup. I’ll be right out. I’m just trying all your stuff.”

When I came out, she sniffed the air and said, “Ah ... you discovered Dr. Bronner’s. Great stuff, huh? You should try a shower like that when you’re stoned.”

I said, "Yeah," probably with too little commitment.

Gina said, "Hey, you've never been stoned? I thought you bikers did grass day and night."

I stiffly replied, "I think there's a lot of different people that ride motorcycles."

"Yeah, well, let's get fucked up and go for a walk around campus. I do it a lot. It makes me a lot more human. My shrink says I'm trying to self-medicate. Maybe so, but it works as well or better than any of the pills they pushed on me."

"I don't think I should. I want to be some kind of scientist. I'd say physicist, except I don't think my talent for math is strong enough. I don't want to do anything that might screw up my ability to think, and I damn sure don't want to get hooked on something. I had an alcoholic uncle that drank himself to mush. My mom said he was very intelligent before he got hooked on alcohol."

"Pot isn't alcohol and it's not addictive. If it damaged your mind, then two-thirds of the student body and half the faculty would be brainless. People here smoke a lot of dope. You should try it and see if you like it. It's not heavy like alcohol, and it doesn't make you sick. It mostly makes you relaxed and in tune with your body. Aren't you open to a little adventure?"

The magic word.

"Okay, I'll try, what do we do?"

Gina got out a little box that had a complicated glass apparatus inside it. She filled the central container with water, and stuffed some pungent-smelling weed into a blackened glass bowl.

She said, “Don’t try to take too much into your lungs the first few times—choking on this stuff is rough. I’ll light it and pass it to you. Just puff smoke into your mouth, then inhale it into your lungs with a lot of air.”

Gina lit the bowl and sucked hard on the mouthpiece. She filled her lungs with smoke, then held her breath and passed the apparatus to me. I sucked enough to make it bubble, and gently pulled the smoke into my lungs. I held it for a second and then exploded into choking coughs.

Gina grinned. “Smooth, eh?”

We passed the bong back and forth a few times, and each time I managed to get a little more smoke into my lungs.

“That’s probably enough, I’m fucked up already. You probably won’t feel so much, even though this is good stuff.”

I felt a little disconnected, like there was some stuffiness behind my eyes, but that was about it.

The idea of riding to look at the ocean had evaporated. We went out for a walk on the campus. I expected to cover the whole campus in a few minutes, but Gina laughed and said, “This campus is just over two thousand acres. Six undergrad colleges, five grad schools, and two medical colleges. You can walk around here for days. There are restaurants here I haven’t even tried yet.”

“Restaurants!” I said. “I need some food. I’m ravenous.”



“I bet you are, we stoners call that the munchies, and you’ve got to be careful of it. You can eat yourself sick and still want more. If you don’t want to get fat, you’ll have to control that part of getting high.”

“I’m not high, I’m just hungry.”

“Yeah, that’s what everyone says. There’s absolutely nothing open, it’s after two in the morning. Let’s go back to my place, I have some snacks.”

We wound up eating pistachios and drinking Fresca, which tasted amazing. I could smell the fake grapefruit in the Fresca and the bubbles expanded in my mouth. It was like drinking stars. Fuzzy, grapefruit-scented stars. We sat on the couch to talk.

Gina said, “Put your head in my lap, I want to show you something.”

She stroked my head lightly, so she was barely touching my hair. It felt amazing. I was looking up at the bottom curve of her breast, and it looked wonderful. I put my fingers up to touch it, and she pushed my hand away.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“Sorry. The bottom half of your breast looked so beautiful, I just wanted to touch it.”

“Well... okay then. Go ahead.”

I touched her breast where it swelled above her torso. I hadn’t realized her breasts were large. They felt so smooth and heavy. I traced lightly up to her nipples.

She said, “Mmmm, that feels wonderful.”

I stroked her breasts for a while, and then I somehow fell asleep. I woke up in the morning on the couch with my boots and pants off, and a sheet over me. I vaguely remember

Gina pulling off the boots. I didn't remember anything about the pants. The living room window was open and the room was chilly. I pulled a blanket onto me and fell back to sleep.

When I woke up again, Gina was standing over me in thin, silky pajamas and holding a cup of coffee. "Good morning. You're trying to sleep the day away. It's after nine."

I looked around for my pants, spotted them on the arm of the couch, and tried to get them on under the sheet.

"It's a little late for modesty, I took your pants off last night when you crashed. Plus you played with my titties half the night. That was nice. The coffee is for you."

She sat down next to me and said, "I wanted to do this last night, but you were sound asleep," and she leaned forward and kissed me, long and sweet.

It's a strange world.

## PHILOSOPHY OF SURF

“So, what do you believe in?” Gina asked.

We were walking along a cliff, overlooking the Pacific Ocean. Gina was taking me to La Jolla for what she described as the world’s most wonderful breakfast.

“I don’t know, watcha got?” I replied. “And why are you asking, do you really care?”

“I do, sort of. I’ll admit I’ve been taught to ask questions like that by one of my shrinks. It’s a way of faking that I give a shit about people. Which I normally don’t. But I am curious about you. I don’t know why you act like you do. Most people I meet start doing U-turns or crossing the street to avoid me. I thought maybe it’s a religious thing.”

I thought about that for a few moments. “Nah. It’s an empathy thing. I have my own set of neurological glitches, and so do most of my friends. But if you’re asking do I have some formal religious belief or faith, then no, I don’t.”

Below us, in the kelp, there were two sea otters eating something and playing. They’d roll on their backs to eat, and then the second otter would swim up and grab for whatever the first was eating. It didn’t look like serious theft, it looked like they were messing with each other.

“Actually, I was ranging a little further, or trying to. But since you brought it up, do you think everything is material and deterministic, or do you hold out some hope for a spiritual aspect?”

“I pretty much think we’re just meat. When we die, we die. It’s what I see in nature and what I see even in stars and galaxies. Birth, life, death. Order moves towards disorder. I don’t see compelling evidence for more than that. At the same time I realize that logical thought doesn’t have much of value to say about spiritual issues.”

“What? Why not?”

“My sister conned me into paying some attention to what the Greeks thought about thinking that broadly defines science, and the kind of thinking that defines religion. They called an accounting of facts that could not be questioned *mythos*, from which we got the word *myth*. Myths don’t need to be proven true or false.

“The other form of thinking they called *logos*. Logic. A truth that can be debated or demonstrated. But I think the separation of thought processes is a good way to think about the separation of religion and science.

“I don’t get it. It sounds like one thought process is bullshit and the other is not.”

“It would be a lot simpler if that were so, but even logical approaches lead to stuff that feels a lot like mythos. To Newton, a rock was more or less a rock. Solid, impenetrable. To someone like Neils Bohr, a rock was a mostly empty space that feels solid only because electromagnetic fields repel anything that tries to penetrate it. And the most precise way we have to describe those fields are as just probabilities. The deeper we go, the less real the rock gets. Not

because there's something wrong with the theories, but because it's a reality that can't make sense to us except when it's expressed mathematically."

"What does this have to do with what you believe?" said Gina.

"Well, basically, nothing much gets ruled out. I don't have a spiritual side that I know of, but I'm not rejecting the notion. I don't find anything in the things I study to rule it out, or to make a case for it. In other words, I don't know, and science is no help in deciding either way. And I don't think it's supposed to be. Mythos, logos."

"How about people like my mother, who thinks the Bible is literally true? Every word of it," said Gina.

"It's got to be really hard to maintain that myopia. To me, that's just zealotry. It's unreasoned, and so I don't have anything to say about it. Are you telling me you believe that?"

"Are you nuts? I'm a geologist. The earth is six thousand years old? Give me a break. I knew my mom was nuttier than me when I was four."

We arrived at the breakfast place. I had a California omelet. I make a technically better omelet than the cook did. He wasn't using proper technique, so mine are fluffier, but the ingredients were spectacular. Thick pepper bacon, mushroom, spinach, jack cheese. Avocado on top and green chile salsa on the side. I couldn't wait to make that for myself, I said that to Gina, and she didn't believe I could cook a better omelet. So we went back to her place so I could show her.

## THE LAM

After dumping the car, Silvio found a phone booth on the corner of Harvard and Commonwealth. He planned to take the MTA back to his apartment, but first he needed to call Stick.

“How did it go with Sam?” Silvio said.

“Like I told you before, done. I popped him when he got out of his car, just like you figured it. He tried to pull a piece, but I finished him off with a head shot. How about you?”

“Yeah, no problems. Got my Aunt Elaine with the cutter. Gino didn’t hear me coming until I was on him. He went for a gun in the desk, so I hadda pop him and I couldn’t make him tell me where his safe was. But I found the safe, and the combination. I got all his money. Took too long—a cop showed up for a payoff or something, so I hadda pop him too.”

“You what? You shot a cop!” said Stick.

“Hey, no fuckin’ choice, he was at the door when I was leavin’. What’s the big fuckin’ deal? We got the money. Probably more than I expected. I didn’t count it yet,” said Gino.

“I’ll tell you what the big deal is. If it’s your uncle and his muscle, the cops figure it’s mob and don’t give a shit. We pop some Warlocks and those fucks think it’s the mob. The Warlocks shoot mob guys and the mob thinks Warlocks offed your uncle. No one is looking at us. But you shot a cop, so cops are going to be all over this. They talk to some snitch and find out that you were in the shits with your uncle, and bam, the trail leads to you. Changes everything,” said Stick.

“I ain’t believin’ this! You got the balls to shoot Sam, but now you’re wiggled out. Harden the fuck up. We’re gonna do the fuckin’ plan. We’re gonna go shoot Warlocks and make it look like the mob. No one’s gonna be looking at us. Nothin’s changed. We got money. Soon as we get this war started we’re clear,” said Silvio.

“I don’t know ... this wasn’t the plan,” said Stick. “I need to think about this.”

“Fuck thinking about it. Sometimes shit happens. Be at your place in two hours. We roll quick and dust the Warlocks before the cops start nosing around. Two hours. Fucking be there, Stick.”

Silvio hung up and walked to the streetcar stop, mulling over his conversation with Stick. It seemed that Stick had calmed down, but it was hard to read the guy. Sometimes he was frosty; sometimes he was chickenshit. He sat in the waiting hut for the streetcar, looked around to see if anyone could see him, and transferred the .45 auto from his pocket to the bag. With the gun in the bag, he racked the slide. His uncle must have kept the gun ready to rock—there was already a round chambered and it ejected into the bag. He decided not to drop the clip to replace the round in such a public place, and left it in the bag. He studied the gun, took off the safety and left the hammer cocked, just in case he needed some quick help with Stick. As the streetcar pulled up he

checked that the .22 was secure in the small of his back, and that his shirt covered it. Then he got on the streetcar to head to his apartment.

Back in his apartment, Silvio counted the cash from his uncle's safe and desk drawer. The five slim stacks of cash had ten thousand. Twenty hundreds in each stack. The two thick stacks were five thousand bucks in twenty-dollar bills. In the bathroom, he pulled the medicine chest out of the wall, and stashed two thin stacks and one thick in the hollow. Then he replaced the chest and wiped the white wallboard powder off the sink and floor.

He took a quick shower and noticed blood swirling in the bottom of the shower stall. He found blood clotted thickly on his left forearm, where it had run up his arm past the rubber glove and under the raincoat sleeve. He washed carefully all over and then got dressed in fresh clothes. He stuffed everything he had worn into a paper bag. He ejected the clip from the .45, added the round from the bag that he'd ejected earlier, slammed the clip home and put the gun back in the bag. He liked the look and feel of the big Colt. He was looking forward to seeing what it did to a person. Then he reloaded the .22 and pushed it back under his belt at the small of his back.

He took the back stairs to the basement garage, tossed the clothes bag into the dumpster behind his apartment, stuffed the bag of money into the saddlebags of his Harley, and rode to Stick's apartment.



## CALIFORNIA SCHEMING

“You want to smoke some more dope? We can get loaded and go get lunch. That’s always fun. Wait till you see what good food is like when you’re high,” Gina said.

We were back in Gina’s apartment. I’d just finished showing Gina the technique for making an omelet. She thought my omelets weren’t better, just fluffier. She was fluttering around the place, carefully positioning and aligning everything in the sparsely furnished living room. The sun was flooding through two big windows. It felt great to sprawl on her soft couch and feel the warmth. But I got a clear feeling that I was an improperly aligned decorating element.

“No, I don’t think marijuana is for me. Well, maybe once or twice a year. But it seems like a big distraction. I mean, it might not be addictive or bad for you physically, and all that. But it seems like it would be tough to be productive if you did it often.”

“You’re not wrong. I nearly flunked out the first year I started doing it. I got myself under control just in time. I don’t do it when I have stuff to do. But it’s a big help to me in getting along with people,” Gina said. “Hey, I’ll teach you to surf if you stick around a couple of days.”

“Do you really surf? Are you any good at it?”

“I’ve been surfing all my life. Everyone surfs in Santa Barbara. Where did you think I got these shoulders? Standard surfer’s hump.”

“I’d love to try surfing, but I can’t stay for more than a day. I’ve got a lot of the West Coast to see, and I’m supposed to be back on the East Coast in less than fifteen days,” I said.

“Well, let’s go. If you get hooked, you’ll stay. If not, at least you’ll have tried it.”

“Don’t you need to do something about your Jeep?” I said.

“I did, I called my dad. He’s arranged to have it towed to a garage here. They’ve got a loaner car ready for me. Drive me there on your motorcycle. I can grab the car and we can drive to the beach. I can’t control two longboards sitting on your bike, no matter how slow you go.”

We got the loaner car, and Gina pulled two surfboards and some neoprene outfits out of a storage locker under the apartments.

“You can use this old farmer-john shorty suit I have. You couldn’t fit into my full wetsuit. This shorty might be tight, but it ought to work okay. The water’s a little too cold to just go in trunks. Especially since you’re going to be falling in so much,” she said, smiling.

We went to a beach near La Jolla that Gina said was good for beginners. I was surprised by how few people were on the beach, and how many surfers were in the water. Gina pointed out that Southern California was basically one long beach. Unlike on the East Coast, where the beaches tend to be concentrated and there are a lot of private or inaccessible beaches, there are almost no private beaches in California. There’s not much crowding. But surf spots are special. Waves refract, like light through a lens. When the contour and underwater features of a beach are just right, the waves focus and break in a way best suited for surfing. That wouldn’t matter that day. We were just going to play in the broken waves.

“It used to be that even at the best breaks, there would only be a few surfers. I know I said everyone surfs in Santa Barbara, but in the early days there weren’t that many people who did. When I was a kid, I knew every surfer in Santa Barbara. Even really special breaks, like Rincon, had only twenty or thirty regulars. Then the movie *Gidget* came along, and a bunch of other surf movies with chicks in bikinis shaking their tits and dancing the Frug around a driftwood bonfire, and suddenly there were thousands of would-be surfers, clogging up the lineups and kooking up the scene. There were lots of fights, and the locals chased a lot of the kooks out of the best spots. But there are a lot more surfers now.”

Gina showed me how to dig the fins of the boards into the soft sand, so we could stand on them without damaging them.

“You need to learn to trim the board, and how to pop up to catch a wave. Most beginners get too far back on the board to catch a wave. If the nose of the board isn’t skimming the water, then you’re pushing a wedge, and you won’t catch much. People pearl the board a couple of times—they push the nose under while they’re catching the wave—and they think that means they need to be further back. What you need to do is to be forward enough to trim the board and drop down the wave, then pop to your feet and control the board. Lay down on the board and I’ll show you where to be.”

Gina took a chunk of wax and drew a line where she wanted my nose to be. Then she showed me how to pop up.

“It’s like doing a pushup, or really more like the cobra pose in yoga. Push your head and shoulders up as far as you can reach, and then spring to your feet with your dominant foot forward. Your left foot is forward, so you’re *regular foot*. We call right foot forward people *goofy*

*foot*. If we get you up and in a wave today, we'll be doing good. First we have to paddle out to the sandbar, so I can push you into a couple of waves.”

She had me put my hands fairly close together on the wax line, do a bent-knee pushup, and then leap to my feet. It took me thirty or so tries to do it in a single sweep, then ten more for Gina to say I was doing it well enough.

“At first it's harder to do the pop-up maneuver in the water, but then it gets easier, once you learn to use the board's movement to help you. Let's get wet.”

Paddling out turned out to be a lot harder than it looked. Gina kept yelling at me that I was too far back. Sure enough, each time the wax line was no longer at my nose. Somehow I kept sliding myself back. I finally reached the sandbar after ten minutes of flailing. Gina immediately turned the board around. She said, “Pick a spot on the beach to paddle towards. When a good wave comes, I'll give you a little push at the right time. As soon as you feel the push, paddle like heck and then pop up.”

I fell just about every way humanly possible, including face-first onto the board and bouncing off, stunned and gasping. When I fell, I had to grab for the board to keep it from being shot all the way back to the beach. Each time the board got away, I had to swim thirty yards to the sand to get the board, and then paddle back out. At least my paddling was improving. After a while I could paddle faster than I could swim.

“Why don't we have a rope tied to the board so it doesn't get away?” I asked.

“A guy named O'Neill who makes wetsuits is experimenting with ways to do that, but it's stupid. A good way to get an arm or leg ripped off, or to get cut by the fins. O'Neill lost an eye when his board snapped back and hit his face, but he's still trying. If your board is caught in a big

wave, you don't want to be tied to it. Learn to stay on your board and control it when you fall, and you'll be fine. That leash idea will never catch on," Gina said.

Even just catching the swell on my belly gave me a rush that is hard to describe. I finally managed to stand and feel the rush of catching the swell standing. I knew immediately that I was hooked. That I had to learn to do this sport. After some time, I was able to catch a wave by myself and pop up, though it was still rare for me to remain standing.

I paddled out to Gina and said, "Let's go out where those guys are catching actual waves, that looks easier."

"Nope," she said. "Not only is it not easier, you aren't qualified to be there. You'd be in the way, and you could hurt yourself or someone else, and those guys would never forgive me for letting you kook up their lineup. Keep practicing here for a few minutes, I'm going to go poach a few waves, and then we'll get some lunch."

Gina paddled out and I could see that she was accepted in the lineup. She waited patiently for most of the guys to cycle through getting a wave, then paddled into a head-high wave with just two strokes. She slid her board under her feet with such a smooth, controlled motion that I never really saw her stand up. In the wave, this clumsy, brutish-looking woman was transformed. She did big, carving turns and short slashes at the top of the waves. The moves were so controlled, I was sure they all had names. She seemed to be better than most of the guys.

I kept paddling and practicing, falling more than standing, but I felt like I was making real progress. Every time Gina went for a wave, I'd watch her. The way she coiled and uncoiled her body to put energy into the waves and take it back as speed was just remarkable. She finally came in and got me, and we paddled to shore.

I said, “You’re an amazing surfer. Those guys absolutely respected you.”

“They’d better, I taught half of them how to surf. And of course I’m amazing. I’ve been doing it since I was four.”

We strapped the boards back onto the car, peeled off the wetsuits, and took a cold-water beach shower. Gina changed into dry clothes under a wrap of beach towel with practiced suddenness that was almost as impressive as her surfing. When I tried the same thing, my towel fell off just as I was pulling up my jeans. A car passing by on Pacific Coast Highway honked and the driver yelled, “Full moon!”

We drove to a nearby taco stand and had some amazing carnitas tacos. I said it was time for me to move on.

Gina said, “Why don’t you stay the night and leave first thing in the morning?”

But I was determined to keep moving. If I stayed, I suspected there would be more of a romantic entanglement that I didn’t feel any urge to pursue. I wasn’t really attracted to Gina. It wasn’t because of her physical appearance—at least, I didn’t think so—or her psychological difficulties. Having issues myself, I’m pretty accepting. We just didn’t have any chemistry. But I had a lot of admiration and respect for Gina. She was living the life she wanted to live, and pursuing her own goals—and man, could she surf.

We went back to her apartment and I loaded up my bike. Gina came down with the last load and gave me a big hug after I had secured everything to the bike and double-checked it.

I put my arm around her shoulder and said, “Thanks for the surf lesson, that was wonderful. And thanks for letting me stay with you. I’m glad I met you.”

She looked steadily at me, as if she was looking for something false in my eyes or face. “If you ever come back my way, I want to see you.” She gave me a piece of paper with her parents’ address and phone number in Santa Barbara. “If you want a place to stay in Santa Barbara, just give them a call. I told them all about how you rescued me. We have a guest cottage on the estate that you could live in for a year, and they’d never notice you or care that you were there. And you can get in touch with me there anytime, after I finish my fucking thesis, whenever that might be.”

Then she kissed me, long and hard. And let me go. Considering the shoulders and arms Gina had—if she had not turned me loose, I’m sure I’d still be there.

I hit the Pacific Coast Highway and turned north. The cool air rolling off the ocean smelled like adventure.

## PCH

The gently winding turns of the Pacific Coast Highway are perfect for a motorcycle on a beautiful day. The pavement was smooth as glass. No potholes! There was little traffic until I reached the little beach towns. Then it clogged up, but that was okay, because I wanted to gawk anyway. The California coast was a revelation for a guy from the East Coast. For one thing, it smells so different. East Coast shoreline is pines and seaweed. West Coast is warm incense, infinitely varied. I'd get a whiff of eucalyptus and then flowers, then something that smelled like freshly washed sheets, then green, then kelp, then cocoa butter. And the water views are expansive. There are lots of places on the East Coast where drivers only get occasional glimpses of ocean. PCH runs mostly along the coast, and the public beaches seem endless. It was odd to have train tracks right next to the water in a lot of places—what the hell were they thinking? But at least the tracks didn't obstruct the view.

Del Mar, and every little town like it, has nice roadside restaurants and stores, followed by a sweep of small houses close to the water. After Leucadia, PCH drifted from the shore. So I took some side streets, to stay in touch with the water and see where people lived. At Oceanside,



the road jogged inland through Camp Pendleton, which is huge and impenetrable. Eventually, I reached San Clemente and could find the ocean again. I drove up through the little village of Dana Point and along a fairly long run of virtually uninhabited coast to Laguna Beach, which seemed to consist mainly of art galleries. Laguna is right on the water, and it looked inviting. I parked my bike, walked around some, and had a spectacular sandwich at a little cafe with an 180-degree view of the cliffs and the water.

After lunch, I pushed on up to Huntington Beach. I simply had to stop there and walk up the famous Huntington Pier. There were surfers on both sides of the pier, and I watched them surf for a while, but nobody tried to shoot the pier. I couldn't see how that was possible, anyway—there were so many pilings. It would be like trying to ride a motorcycle at speed through a forest.

I considered detouring to Anaheim and spending a day in Disneyland, but I decided to leave that for another trip. I didn't want artificial fantasy. I wanted real fantasy. Besides, it sounded expensive, and I considered myself to be on a tight budget. I still had to pay for school.

I got back on my bike, filled my gas tank, and continued my coastal cruise. I'd never seen so many beautiful women. Girls in bikinis or jeans or expensive-looking suits. Wearing bright dresses with scarves and sunglasses. Riding in convertibles, pedaling bicycles. It was numbing. I'd had the feeling numerous times on my trip that I was in another world, but the California coast was so different from the Atlantic coast that I couldn't absorb the individual differences. Even the grass had blades that looked like pointed, thick thumbs.

At some point I had acquired a goal of getting to San Francisco, staying at Carole's place, and having some gorgeous and worldly stewardesses show me what San Francisco was all about.

I mean, really. What guy wouldn't want that? Sounded way better to me than Disneyland. Real Fantasyland. The more I thought about it, the more worthy the goal seemed. I'd heard so much about Frisco—make that San Francisco—being such a happening place. But I was determined not to let my goal prevent me from being in the moment.

Even though the main roads tried to pull me inland, I stayed close to the water. Past a huge harbor and some swanky-looking homes on a headland. Past Redondo and Manhattan Beaches, both of which looked funky and interesting. I finally stopped just north of Malibu to have lunch at a place that advertised fresh seafood. It was part-market, part-takeout -restaurant, and had picnic tables outside. I got Dungeness crab, and corn on the cob. What a feast. The crab was fantastic—flaky, rich meat that's almost sweet. I think I like it better than lobster. The boiled corn wasn't as spectacular as the roasted corn I'd tasted on the Outer Banks, but it was fine.

As I rode on, the settled area gave way to open land and clear coast. Just south of Santa Barbara, the trend reversed. Suddenly there were a few scattered houses that looked sandy, beachy, and relaxed. Like jazz musicians or painters might live there, lounging around in bathing suits with surfboards in the yard. Then there were a few developments. Cookie-cutter, single-story houses on small lots. Then the houses got bigger, and more expensive-looking, with more property, hedges, and walls. I started looking for someplace to camp, but I realized I'd probably gone too far into the settled area. It didn't look like there were places to escape scrutiny, which is the basis of the outlaw camping I'd been doing. I decided to try giving Gina's folks a call. It sounded nutty, but nutty was part of the big experience. All it would cost me was a dime for the call. If it didn't work out, I'd just continue past Santa Barbara and find somewhere to camp.

When I called, I got Gina's mom. She sounded cold and distant. After some attempts at pleasantries that fell flat, I managed to stammer out that Gina had said I should call if I needed a place to stay. It sounded like such an imposition that I immediately tried to back out. But Gina's mom abruptly cut me off and said I was welcome to stay in the guest house. The way she said it sounded like a limitation of the hospitality. *You can stay in the guest house, but don't come anywhere near the main house.* She gave me the same address Gina had supplied and some basic directions.

I found the place without too many problems. All there was to see was a long, high wall and an ornate steel gate, with the street number set on a plaque in the gatepost. Next to the gate was a speaker box with a button on it. I wasn't sure what to do, so I gave the button a tentative push.

Almost immediately, a voice with a Spanish accent said, "Hello?"

"Hi, I'm Monroe Sanborne. A friend of Gina's."

"Oh yes, Mr. Sanborne. We're expecting you. Take the drive to the first house on the right, that's the guest house. Mateo will meet you there shortly. Please go in and make yourself at home."

I was about to say, *Well, the gate is closed,* when it swung silently open. Wow, James Bond enters Goldfinger's estate. I rode up the drive to a sprawling adobe house with a red tile roof. The landscaping was lush and formal. Palm trees lined the drive with military bearing, and tall trees stood behind them, with bark that looked like skin. The air smelled like eucalyptus and spice—cinnamon or clove. I parked my BSA in front of the garage. I thought I might have

missed the guest house, though I had been watching carefully. I walked back out to the driveway and looked back towards the wall. No cottage. Perhaps I'd gotten the directions wrong.

As I walked back to my bike, a golf cart pulled up and a young Hispanic guy climbed out.

"Hello, I'm Mateo. Do you need some help with your bags? The house is open."

"I can manage the bags if you can just point me to the guest house," I said.

"This is the guest house," Mateo said. "Ah, that's right. You haven't been here before.

This is a big place. Let's get you settled and I'll brief you on the lay of the land."

We went into the house, as richly furnished as any place I'd ever seen, even in magazines and movies. The entry opened into a casual living room with big leather chairs. Most of the walls were covered with bookcases holding beautifully bound books. One bookcase near the entrance had what I assumed were more recent releases with gaudy slipcovers.

Mateo saw me looking at the contrast between the leather volumes and the flashy slipcovers and said, "When Mr. Overbye likes an author, he has a complete set of their books bound in leather."

He led me to a big bedroom. There was an oddly large bed with a Navajo-patterned blanket across its foot. The bathroom was as big as my bedroom at home.

"This bedroom is handiest to the door, and it has a nice view of the garden from the balcony. The governor sleeps here when he visits, and there've been a few presidents that have stayed in this house. But don't worry; we washed the sheets. You won't get any politician bugs on you. So, I hear you rescued Gina," Mateo said, with a grin.

"I just gave her a ride to San Diego. She blew up her Jeep in the desert," I said.

“The family is very grateful, especially Mr. Overbye. Gina called and asked that you be shown hospitality. Mr. Overbye was pleased to accommodate the request.”

“I don’t really get that. It was a minor favor that Gina already repaid by letting me crash on her couch. This seems like a substantial accommodation.”

“Gina is the Sanborne’s only child. It’s a little unusual for someone to go out of his way to help her. They are simply demonstrating their gratitude.”

“I’m not complaining, but walking into this amazing house the gratitude feels out of proportion. I got a clear feeling Mrs. Overbye didn’t want me here. I feel a little uncomfortable. I don’t want to impose, and I’m not looking to be repaid for a simple act of kindness. Perhaps I should go.”

“Please don’t. It would reflect poorly on my ability to convey Mr. Overbye’s welcome. I am Mr. Overbye’s aide. He’s traveling. Usually I’d be with him, but my mother’s birthday is this week, so he kindly insisted that I stay behind this time. But since I *am* here, I represent his wishes. He would like you to stay as long as you like. As to any overreaction, let me explain as much as I can within the bounds of Mr. Overbye’s expectations of privacy. I’ve known Gina all my life. If you gave her a ride and didn’t abandon her as soon as you could, then you’re a real Samaritan. I like her—she’s like one of my sisters—but she’s an acquired taste.”

“Wasn’t that big of a deal,” I said. “I know what you mean, but we got past all that. I think she’s a nice person.”

“She is. She’s a generous soul, surrounded by a shell of all the wrong instincts, and she’s been indulged in most of them her whole life. Now that she’s away from her family, she’s doing better. That sounds like judgmental gossip. But Mr. Overbye would be comfortable with what

I'm saying, and so would Gina. It's rare to find someone who sees past that shell and likes Gina, other than her father and me," Mateo said.

"Well, this place is really nice. Gina said her folks were wealthy, but I didn't expect this,"

"The Overbys have been in Santa Barbara for generations. The main house was built by Mr. Overbye's grandfather. Mr. Overbye is an astute businessman and is highly esteemed. He's an interesting man to work for."

"I look forward to meeting him," I said.

"Well, that won't happen unless you stay for more than a week. He's in New York until then. You're welcome to stay as long as you like. Seriously. There isn't anyone scheduled to come for the rest of the year. Even if there were, this house has another wing."

"That's amazingly generous, but I'll only be here overnight. I'm on a long trip, but I only have a few weeks left, and I have a lot more to see."

"That's fine, do as you please. With Mr. Overbye gone, there won't be a typical dinner tonight. Mrs. Overbye prefers to eat in her chambers when he's away. But the cook is here, and you can order just about anything you'd like. Just call the kitchen."

"Wow, that sounds great, but it's just too much fuss. Maybe just a sandwich, or some of whatever the cook is making for Mrs. Overbye."

"You probably wouldn't like what Mrs Overbye is having. She has some interesting beliefs about food. I'll bring a light collation by shortly. You should walk around the estate. The gardens are beautiful, and the main house is very elegant. If you'd like a tour, I can take you through the place in a way that won't disturb Mrs. Overbye."

“Thanks, but I’ll just relax here for a while. I’m buzzed from riding all day. It would be nice to just sit and look out the window.”

Mateo left, and I heard his golf cart engine strain a bit climbing the slope of the driveway. The exhaust popped softly, like it needed new a manifold gasket. I thought briefly of offering to fix it, and then put the notion out of my head. I browsed through the leather-bound books of the library and found a section of Steinbeck. It made me think of Claudia. I took *Cannery Row* to the reclining leather chair by the cold fireplace, and read about ten pages before falling asleep.

## PARADIGM SHIFT

Silvio reached into the bag to check that the .45's safety was off. He knocked on the door of Stick's apartment.

Stick let him in and walked to the kitchen. He pointed to his gun on the table and said, "Sorry I freaked out. Don't shoot me, okay? I don't want to start a gun battle. That's my only gun, okay? I'm in this thing all the way. We don't have to start shooting each other."

Silvio reached in the bag and pulled out Uncle Gino's .45. He pointed it at Stick's head and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. The trigger wouldn't move. His hand wasn't high enough on the grip to engage the grip safety all Colt M1911 pistols have. He kept the gun trained on Stick's head. "Tell me that you're in this like we planned. Tell me you're not going to fuck me over."

"I am. I'm in, I swear, I am," Stick said, bug-eyed with fear. "I got nervous when you said you killed a cop, and I spouted off, but I calmed down. I'm in all the way. Fuck, I killed your uncle's triggerman. I got no choice. I don't want to back out anyway. I'm in this."



Silvio lowered the gun and said, “Then let’s count this money and go shoot some fuckin’ Warlocks.”

Stick hooked a couple of Narragansett beers from the refrigerator and popped off the caps. They sat at the kitchen table sipping the beer and counting the cash.

“Thirty-eight thousand, nine hundred and twenty in cash, and if we can cash these bearer bonds it’s a hundred thousand more,” Silvio said. “You get two bearer bonds and fifteen in cash. We’re gonna restart the marijuana operation and you’re gonna be my right hand guy, yeah? But I’m gonna start it someplace else. It could get hot here. We go shoot some Warlocks to keep the cops confused. I’d love to shoot those bastards that beat me up, but any Warlocks will do. You got a full load in your pistol?”

Stick nodded.

“You shoot. I’ll drive. First we need to boost a car. We need something that looks like what someone in the outfit would drive.”

Silvio took the clip out of the .45 and ejected the round in the chamber. He cocked the pistol and checked that the safety was off. He noticed the sprung section of the grip safety. He held the pistol with the grip safety depressed and pulled the trigger.

*Click.*

Aha. Mystery solved. But maybe it was a good thing he hadn’t popped Stick. He needed a gunner. He racked and dry fired the gun several more times. Then he loaded the ejected round into the clip, inserted the clip and racked the slide. He clicked the safety on, left the hammer cocked, and put the gun in his jacket pocket.

They hid the cash and bonds in the closet, and walked to the streetcar stop on Commonwealth. They rode to the end of the line. In the MTA Park and Ride, they found a black Buick, used a doorstop and a slipstick to open it, and hotwired it.

“Okay. When we get to the Warlock’s place, we’ll see where there’s some of their guys. We don’t want too many, like four or five. Whichever side of the street they’re on, we’ll work our way around and come at them so they’re on the driver’s side. You’ll get in the back and shoot from that side. I’ll have my gun ready too, in case we need more firepower. But you’re the shooter. You should shoot at all of them, but just kill one or two and shoot the others in the legs and shit. We need some of them alive to hear me yell, *That’s for Gino Capo you fucks!* Then we split.”

Silvio drove conservatively to South Boston where the Warlocks had their garage. Silvio had cased the garage a few days earlier, and he drove right to the cross street. The main hangout for the Warlocks was the bar across the street from the garage. There were four Warlocks sitting on the stoop, drinking beer. Stick climbed over the seat into the back and opened the rear window on the driver’s side. Silvio opened his window and put the .45 on his lap. He drove down the street and as they came up to the bar he swerved to the wrong side of the street to bring the target closer.

“Now!” he yelled.

Stick opened fire on the four Warlocks, hitting one in the chest and shooting up the rest as they dove for cover.

“Shoot the window of the bar, too! Just keep shooting!” Silvio yelled.

Stick fired at the bar until his revolver clicked empty.

Silvio yelled, “That’s for Gino Capo!” and nailed the accelerator.

Stick said, “You forgot to say *you fucks*.”

“What?” screamed Silvio.

“You fucks. You said you were going to say, *That’s for Gino Capo you fucks*, but you only said, *That’s for Gino Capo.*’

“So, you want I should go back and say *you fucks*? What the fuck are you talkin’ about?”

“I was just sayin’. Fuck, man, did you see that? I got two of them right in the chest. Bam! Fucking blood everywhere. I got one in the back. The fourth fucker rolled behind the stairs. Chickenshit bastard!

“After the fucking window broke, I saw people running inside, and I nailed one of the women. We shot ’em up good. I don’t see no one behind us.”

Stick started to climb over the seat, but Silvio said, “No, stay back there, just fuckin’ stay there. I gotta drive. I’m not taking a chance on you flopping around and kicking the wheel. Just wait.”

Silvio made several quick turns and drove at high speed out of the neighborhood, then got onto the expressway and matched his speed to traffic. After about fifteen minutes, he exited near the Fresh Pond Drive-In Theater and drove around behind the back of the screen.

“What are we doing here?” asked Stick.

“Making sure no one followed us.”

“Ah, that’s smart.”

Silvio turned around towards Stick, raised the Colt and shot him in the chest. The boom of the big .45 was deafening.

Stick thrashed around in the back seat, kicking his legs and trying to grab the seat to pull himself up. Silvio opened his door and got out. He opened the back door, grabbed one of Stick's legs and pulled him from the car. Stick was breathing in shallow gulps, his eyes staring at Silvio. He raised his hand from his chest and reached out towards him. Silvio raised his gun again, said, "Fifty-five K is just too much for you," and shot him through his outstretched hand. A large chunk of the hand blew away. Stick made a keening sound that was as loud as he could manage with a big hole in his lungs. The sound was irritating, so Silvio stepped closer and fired the gun directly in Stick's face.

Silvio fished Stick's keys and wallet from his pocket. He found the empty .38 on the floor in the back of the car, stuffed everything in his jacket pockets, got back in the car and drove to Stick's apartment.

## HERE'S TO YOU, MRS. OVERBYE

I woke up in the early morning. Someone had covered me with a heavy Indian blanket. I got up and went into the main room, feeling a little stiff from sleeping in the reclining chair. On the table was a thin loaf of French bread next to a plate of interesting cold cuts, the edges looking a little dry from sitting out all night. There was a plate of cheeses, some fruit, a pitcher of water, and a bottle of wine. The label read: OVERBYE ESTATE PINOT NOIR.

I had the sense that I had missed the opportunity to explore this place and find out how a different class of people lived. I might have learned something valuable. I wrapped the food in newspapers and stuffed it all in my tank pack. Waste not, want not. The bottle of wine went in my valise. I turned my bike around in the driveway and double-checked that everything was secure. I was about to get back on the road when Mateo drove up in the golf cart.

“Mrs. Overbye would like you to join her for breakfast, if you have time,” Mateo said.

“Well, I was about to leave. I’d like to get to San Francisco by this evening,” I said.

“I can certainly tell her no, but San Francisco is only about three hundred miles. It won’t take more than an hour to have breakfast. She wants to know that Gina is not headed in a bad

direction. You might be able do Gina a good turn here, and assure Mrs. Overbye that intervention is not necessary. In her mind things have come to a crisis, and she intends to do something, probably while Mr. Overbye is gone. It would be in Gina's interests if that were delayed. And it will be an excellent breakfast, in Mr. Overbye's style. You'll like it."

"Sure. I appreciate the hospitality. I'll do what I can to help Gina. Though I can't imagine what that might be."

"If someone with a third-party perspective tells Mrs. Overbye that Gina is doing fine, it may work wonders. Or at least give her pause."

I hopped into the golf cart and Mateo drove me to the main house, which was a huge version of the guest house. The little pop from the leaking exhaust manifold bothered me. I said, "Your exhaust manifold is leaking."

Mateo said, "Excuse me?"

"It's nothing, there's a little pop in the exhaust note. I'm a mechanic, things like that bother me to distraction."

He smiled at me. I could guess what he was thinking: *Gina may not be the only person with obsessions*. He replied, "I'll have it checked. Thank you."

The entry to the main house was amazing, with marble floors and columns. There were flowers everywhere and what looked to be fine art on the walls. The furnishings were as elegant as the surroundings. A long, wide hallway led to a courtyard with a pool. We walked past the pool to an outdoor dining room with a vine-covered trellis over it. Mrs. Overbye was sitting at the head of the table and sipping from a delicate porcelain cup.

Even though she was seated, I could tell Mrs. Overbye was tall. She looked somewhat like Gina, though her face was narrower and she was thin, almost to the point of looking skeletal. She was wearing a bright, floral-printed caftan and her hair was elaborately arranged. She held out her hand and said, “Welcome, Mr. Sanborne, thank you for joining me, and thank you for rescuing Gina from the desert. I can’t imagine how difficult that must have been.”

I started to say something, but Mateo caught my eye and shook his head, so I just said, “Thank you for the hospitality. I enjoyed staying in the guest house.”

Mateo said, “Mr. Sanborne was about to leave, but I told him we would serve him a hearty breakfast. I took the liberty of having Santos make some substantial food.”

Mrs Overbye looked a little peeved as two uniformed maids brought out a platter with waffles and fruit. Then they put a plate in front of me, added two crisply toasted English muffins, a little pile of spinach and ham chopped together, and two poached eggs, all topped with freshly made hollandaise. There were also some fat sausages, and a rack of toast with honey and a light strawberry jam.

Mateo sat as well, and shared the huge breakfast.

Mrs. Overbye was served a cup of clear consommé, and a little pile of dark green stuff flecked with white.

“I frequently have kale and egg whites for breakfast. It prevents inflammation and promotes positive body humors. Someday, people will learn to prefer good health to the animal pleasure of heavy foods.”

I tied into the wonderful breakfast. Everything was excellent. I’d never had such crispy waffles. They stayed crisp, even after I’d drowned them in what was obviously real maple syrup.

I wanted to ask what the secret was, but I realized Mrs. Overbye would have no idea how they were prepared. The poached eggs were also perfect, with firm whites and liquid yolks. Fabulous hollandaise. Lovely English muffins, with a delicate bitterness to the crumb. I wondered what the brand was; I'd never had any that tasted quite so good. I really enjoyed it. Mrs. Overbye didn't seem to be interested in talking while I was eating, which was fine with me. But as soon as I pushed my plate away, she bored right in.

“Please tell me all you can about Gina. Is she behaving rationally? Was she injured in the desert?”

I was started by the question, so I said, “No. I mean—no, she wasn't injured, and she's perfectly rational. We had a pleasant time together.”

“What? You had a pleasant time with Gina? I don't think I quite believe that.”

“We got off to a rocky start,” I said, savoring the pun, “but we got past that. Gina took me surfing and showed me around the campus. We had a pleasant time together. She's a scientist and I'm a science buff, so we have a lot in common.”

“Gina has problems that only God can help. Science, and all those so-called experts my husband retains, can't do a thing. Do you know if she is praying at all? I've told her she needs to pray.”

“I don't know,” I lied. “Maybe she is. I think prayer is a private thing. A conversation between a person and God. I didn't see her praying, but maybe she is. Maybe that's why seemed fine to me.”



That silly comment rocked Mrs. Overbye back. She opened and shut her mouth a few times. She looked down as if she were looking at something cradled in her hands and seemed puzzled. Then she stood up and walked away, silently, into the house.

“Wow, I guess I screwed that up,” I said.

“Are you joking? No, no, that was wonderful,” Mateo said. “You couldn’t have said anything better than that. She has gone off to pray for Gina. You took the air out of her with what you said about prayer. She’ll be chewing on that for months. I’ll tip Gina off that any time her mother starts harping on her about praying that she needs to say her relationship with God is private. That was marvelous. Absolutely marvelous, believe me. I’ve known Mrs. Overbye most of my life. I understand her reactions. Mr. Overbye is going to be pleased as well.”

“I didn’t really do anything—”

“Ah, but you did. Anyone Mrs. Overbye asks about Gina immediately recounts some gruesome story about obsession problems. The therapists tell her Gina is disconnected from normal social empathy. The only person who tells her that Gina will be okay is her husband. You said she’s fine, and then you gave her a reason that she can’t question. If we had plotted how to get Mrs. Overbye to give Gina some breathing room, we would never have come up with something so simple and so complete.”

“Well, it was an accident, but I’m glad you think it was helpful.”

“As Gina’s friend you’re already welcome here at any time, Mr. Sanborne, so it’s pointless for me to say that again. But please understand that I’ll be glad to see you anytime you come, and so will Mr. Overbye. I noticed you took that bottle of Pinot noir I left for you. Let me

add an even better one as well. I think you'll enjoy it, and I'm certain Mr. Overbye would want you to have it."

A few minutes later, I got back on my bike and hit the road. The gate opened automatically when I ran over a buried sensor. I felt pleased, in my own foggy, confused sort of way.

## GASTROPODLIAN DRAMA

Highway One from Santa Barbara to San Francisco is amazing. Some of it runs inland, but where it touches the coast, it's magical. The road zooms along steep cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean crashing on rocky outcroppings and island remnants of the eroded coast. Numerous times I'd crest a hill and miles of coast would be revealed, with bridges arcing across deep ravines, and deep scallops of a beach at river mouths. I'd never seen anything so beautiful.

The linked turns that follow the cliff are a playground for a good motorcycle, and Sophia loved it. At times like that she truly feels like a living being. I could feel her stretch out in the straights and dive into each set of corners, pushing closer to the edge of control than was quite wise. I couldn't pass up the opportunity to truly experience that magnificent road. Sophia ate up the miles.

I reached Monterey shortly after noon, and wanted to see the area that had inspired Steinbeck. The marine layer had rolled in, solid and gray, so I decided to make it a quick stop. I rode down to Cannery Row and the wharf. It looked like a budding tourist trap. The canneries were mostly gone. I had lunch in a restaurant on the wharf, and had my first taste of abalone and

sand dabs. The abalone was a bit of a disappointment, I guess I was expecting something more dramatic than a little circle of pounded shellfish, and it tasted odd, like slightly spoiled clam, with a bitter hint of iodine. The sand dabs were better, though the breading was too thick. I had to scrape off most of it to be able to taste the fish. I figured I'd stopped at the wrong place.

I thought about what Doc, the central character in Steinbeck's *Cannery Row* would think of this restaurant. Actually, he'd know not to go there. I wondered how Gina would have reacted, and realized I didn't know. Mary Ann wouldn't have said a thing. She'd have just eaten everything and thought it was fine. Ada would have thrown the dish at the cook and called the waiter *a fuckin' moron*. Claudia would have taken a tiny taste and pushed it away with a disappointed look. The owner of the restaurant, the waiter, most of the male patrons, and the cook would have fallen all over each other to do whatever they could to make it up to her.

Just then, I got a sudden catch in my throat, and felt like I couldn't quite catch my breath. I thought, *My God, do I miss her that much?* And then, without even the tiniest gag as preface, I vomited my entire lunch across the table. Apparently, it wasn't the thought of Claudia, but the tainted abalone, that had caused my symptoms. The restaurant cleared briskly. The waiter refused my offer of payment, which made sense, since I'd given back all of the lunch. I hit the road with a tender stomach.

## STRATEGIC WITHDRAWAL

Once he'd recovered his money from Stick's place and from behind the medicine chest, Silvio walked through his apartment, packing traveling clothes into a pair of leather saddlebags. His Harley was gassed up and ready to go. He packed the big Colt, along with a full clip and a box of shells he'd picked up at a sporting goods store, and he added his favorite little .22-caliber pistol. The money and the bearer bonds were in the bottom of the bag, safely covered with underwear and socks. There was nothing else he could take. He didn't know if anyone would be looking for him, but he didn't plan on being easy to find if they were.

He put the bag on the Harley and drove to Natick, where he checked into a Howard Johnson hotel. He turned on the television to watch the news. The lead story was about the murder of his aunt and uncle and the cop. When Stick killed Sam, it led the cops to Gino Capo's, where they found the three bodies. Things were moving fast.

Worse yet, some maintenance guy had found Stick at the Fresh Pond Drive-In. Damn, he should have buried Stick in the marsh. Dumb mistake. The Warlocks probably knew that Stick was a Hard Cat, and that linked him directly to Silvio.

Suddenly, the whole plan of creating a war between the Warlocks and the mob sounded stupid. It wouldn't be that hard to figure out that he had something to do with the killings. First Sam, then his aunt and uncle, then Stick, then some Warlocks. Everything pointed back to him. He could feel people closing in. If the cops got him he'd be arrested and then killed later in prison. But if the Warlocks or the mob got him he'd die slowly, screaming.

He decided to call his mother and see if she knew anything. The phone rang for a while, which was odd. She spent all her time at home and usually picked right up. Finally she answered the phone and said, "Hello?"

Silvio tried for casual. He said, "Hi, Ma. How you doing?"

She said, "I'm good. Where are you, honey?"

"Why do you ask that? Is someone there?"

She hesitated a few heartbeats and said, "No."

Silvio quietly hung up the phone.

It was time to get out of Boston and head somewhere that no one knew him. He figured somewhere on the West Coast would do for a start, but maybe he'd have to go to Europe or South America. Wherever he went, he had enough money for a good start. But first he had to take care of some unfinished business. He left the motel, tied the bag carefully onto the Harley, and headed for Somerville.

## KID IN A CANDY STORE

I rode cautiously for a while, expecting any moment to suddenly fill my helmet with puke. But it seemed I had gotten rid of whatever was bothering my stomach. I reached San Francisco at about five in the afternoon, just in time for some truly stupendous traffic.

Although getting to San Francisco and perhaps staying a couple of nights at Carole's place had somehow become my goal, I suddenly found that I was too chicken to call her. What if she didn't remember me, or had changed her mind about showing me around? Probably she was just being nice and didn't really expect me to call. I decided to see the city on my own and not to risk getting rejected or, even worse, tolerated as some goofy pest who had taken a throwaway gesture as being real.

I struggled my way into the city and looked at the outrageous prices at some motley hotels fronted right on heavily trafficked streets. I thought about how noisy the rooms would be, and dug out my note from Carole. I found a pay phone, called the number, and identified myself to the chirpy female voice on the other end.

“Oh wow! You actually called! Carole isn’t here, but she’ll be back from La Guardia tomorrow. But you come right over, there’s plenty of room. She told us all about you and what a heartbreaker you’re going to be. Anyone that can get through to the Ice Queen is someone we want to meet. My name is Nancy Riley, and I’ll wait for you here at the house. I was planning to go out for dinner, but maybe I’ll cook something instead.”

Nancy gave me directions. She said at this time of evening, it would probably take about an hour to get from the west side of San Francisco to Berkeley, where their house was. It was more like ninety minutes before I rolled up the driveway.

Nancy turned out to be a short, perky, and very curvy blonde. She introduced two other stewardesses: Miriam, who was slender, dark, and a little taller with beautiful eyes and lips that kept grabbing my focus whenever I looked at her face; and Paige, who could easily have been Nancy’s sister. Paige was taller than Nancy, but equally curvy and blonde. And not the least interested in me. She turned back to her magazine after a cursory hello.

Nancy had made shepherd’s pie and sautéed green beans, which sounded hideous. My mom made shepherd’s pie often, which meant greasy hamburger with onions and celery, covered with lumpy mashed potatoes. Nancy’s shepherd’s pie was a revelation. The hamburger wasn’t greasy. It had some spices, onions, and little carrots and peas in it. The mashed potatoes were smooth, with roasted garlic and cheese beaten in, and then baked, so they formed a thin brown crust on top. The sautéed green beans had a perfect bite, and tasted fresh and good. A fabulous meal.

I pulled the first Pinot noir from my luggage and it caused a stir.



“Overbye? Are you kidding me?” Nancy said. “This is a great Pinot, and it’s hard to get. One of the best of the Santa Barbara Pinots, and they’re world-class.”

“Oh, I have another bottle. It’s supposed to be better, but I don’t know why.”

I handed the second bottle to Nancy, who set it carefully down on the table. “Holy shit, you’ve been carrying this on your motorcycle? 1955 Overbye Private Reserve! We’re not drinking this with shepherd’s pie, honey.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I fumbled to open the first bottle. Nancy took it away, expertly cut the capsule and pulled the cork.

She poured a taste, sniffed and then sipped it. She wiggled her lips to slosh the wine around in her mouth and swallowed with her eyes closed. She opened her mouth and gently breathed in across her tongue and then said, “Nectar.”

Paige sidled over to the table, filled a glass, sipped, and then plunked bonelessly down in a chair to eat without a word to me or any of the others.

Miriam said, “Nancy is our resident wine snob. She takes classes at the co-op and belongs to our neighborhood wine club. But even I can tell this is really good. You should have some.”

“I don’t drink much. Maybe just some water?” I said.

“Oh Jesus,” Paige said, “He’s Opie. I knew it when Carole was going on and on.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant, but I took a half-glass of wine and had it with my shepherd’s pie. I’d had wine before a few times—the Manischewitz wine that Lenny’s parents drank, which Lenny called *raisin Kool-Aid*. Then there were Candy Stripers—cocktails I’d had at a party, which I was told were WWS (Whatever Wine is on Sale) mixed with 7 Up.

This Overbye wine wasn't anything like that. It wasn't sweet, and I realized it had more than one flavor. Nancy described the flavor using what Miriam called *wine words*, and I don't remember what they were, but I understood what she meant. It tasted nice—smooth, and it complimented the spices in the pie. I guessed there was more to this wine stuff than people getting blotto. You'd think a foodie like me would have more of a clue, but I skipped over that part since my folks never had wine in the house.

Miriam and Nancy bombarded me with questions about my trip. Where I'd gone, whom I'd met, if I'd met any girls, if I'd gotten laid. I blushed and didn't answer the last question, so they laughed and made a game out of trying to find out how many times and how many women. Without my answering, they managed to extract the number of women and the number of times, just by interpreting my expression, my silence, and my blushing.

“Hey Paige,” Miriam said. “Opie's getting more action than you are!”

“That bar is low, since I'm not humping any dickhead passengers or any asshole pilots,” said Paige, and she gave me an appraising look.

“Honey, I hate to eat and go to bed like a farmer,” said Nancy, “but Miriam and I are up at five for an early flight. Let me show you where you can bunk. We'll be back tomorrow night. Hope you stay around a few days, so we can go have some fun together.”

Nancy took me to a small room with a single bed and a bureau. Stacks of boxes were crammed into the rest of the space. “The bathroom is down the hall to the right, first door. We'll try to be quiet in the morning, but don't be surprised if it's a little noisy. There are two other girls besides Carole living here. They'll both be here late tonight, and I think they're both on flights

tomorrow. This is a busy place sometimes, especially the bathrooms, but it's fun. There's always stuff to do and people to go with. You'll see. Anyway, sleep well."

Instead of leaving, Nancy stepped into my room and looked back to see what the other women were doing. She must have been satisfied they weren't paying attention. She turned back to me, put her hand on my chest and kissed me lightly on the lips, with a little flick of tongue and looked in my eyes for a few moments. She said, "Damn, I just can't, I need to sleep," and shrugged and left.

I was pretty sure I understood what that meant. I'd liked the kiss, and it was exciting having her stand close like that. I undressed, got into bed, and turned out the light. About eleven o'clock, I woke to the sound of people moving around in the kitchen, and hushed conversation. Probably the other two stewardesses I hadn't met. Then about one or two in the morning, I woke up again as someone slipped into my bed.

"Can't sleep, I'm horny." I recognized Paige's voice. She said, "Don't get all weird about this. You're just handy. I couldn't stop thinking that all I had to do to get laid was go to the next room."

She slung a leg over me, rubbed my cock until it got hard, which didn't take much. Then pushed me inside her and rode me until she came, which also didn't take long. I was a little too stunned to be turned on, but when she started to get off me, I took her wrists and laid her back down on the narrow bed. When I slid on top of her, she kissed me, and I pushed back inside her. I curved my arms under her shoulders, cupped her head in my hands, and held her face close to mine so I could see her in the dim light. Her eyes looked warm. Her lips were amazingly soft. She kissed me gently as we rocked, and when I felt her second orgasm start, I came with her. I

collapsed over to the side, lost my balance and fell off onto the floor, wedged between the boxes and the bed.

“Wow, that’s romantic,” Paige said.

She retrieved her robe and left the room. I struggled back on the bed and fell back to sleep, and didn’t wake again until after nine.

## ENTHALPY

Silvio coasted his Harley quietly into the back lot at Albion Cycles and found Paul steam-cleaning the engine bay of a light blue MGA. He climbed off the Harley, walked over to Paul and pulled the Colt Woodsman from the small of his back. Paul released the trigger on the steam wand and turned to find Silvio pointing a gun at his head.

“Into the shop, fuckface.”

Silvio walked Paul into the shop, watching him closely. He could see Paul tensing to try some move, so he shot him in the thigh. Paul screamed in pain and whirled towards him, but Silvio was several long steps away.

“Don’t even think about it. You wanna live, do what the fuck I say. Otherwise I take out your knees. Sit in the fuckin’ chair and put your hands behind your back.”

Silvio used his butterfly knot to tie Paul’s hands behind the back of the chair. He stripped off some tape and covered Paul’s mouth. He needed answers and he needed them fast. There were too many people looking for him to stay in Boston. He didn’t take the time to tie Paul’s hips

to the chair. He wanted a quick answer, then he could just shoot this fuck. He set the .22 down on the bench next to the chair and pulled out his knife.

He pinched Paul's nose shut, and enjoyed watching him buck for a while, but didn't take him all the way to unconsciousness. He opened his knife and sliced Paul's index finger open, from palm to tip. He worked the blade into the meat of the fingertip, and wiggled it around a little while Paul screamed through the tape and bucked in the chair.

"Where is that little fuck Monroe? That fat little fuck that ratted me out?"

He held his knife blade below Paul's eyeball. "You yell and the eye comes out. Got that?" Paul nodded and Silvio pulled the tape loose.

"He's on the West Coast. After your buddy tried to beat him up he blew town."

"Who told the Warlocks I was dealing?"

"No one. They followed you and figured it out."

"How come they were following me? Wait—how the fuck do *you* know they were following me?"

"I don't know. I just heard they did."

"Yeah, right, asshole. So it's the hard way."

The tape went back on, and Silvio lifted Paul's undamaged hand and brought his knife down. Just as he shoved the blade tip into Paul's palm, there was a tremendous bang. The entire shop began filling with steam. When Silvio turned to see where it was coming from, Paul drew both legs up and kicked him in the gut. Paul and the chair toppled backwards onto the floor. Silvio staggered backwards into the steam cloud and tripped over a motorcycle stand. Having worked his bound arms free of the chair back, Paul scrambled to his feet and limped towards the

back door. Silvio clawed his way back to his feet and groped in the steam, looking for the bench where he'd put down his gun. Paul kicked the Harley off the sidestand and ran towards the main street.

Silvio finally found his .22. He ran for the door just as Paul cleared the corner of the building. He thought about running him down with his bike, but Paul might be out of sight before Silvio could get the heavy bike back on its wheels. Silvio ran to the corner and aimed his pistol at Paul's retreating back. Silvio fired three times. He watched Paul stagger, take a few more steps, and then fall to his knees. A car came around the corner and lurched to a stop at the strange sight of a man kneeling in the middle of the street with his hands tied behind his back. The driver and passenger doors opened and people got out. Another car was driving slowly towards the group. Too many people; not enough bullets.

Silvio ran back to his motorcycle and levered it upright. He started the Harley and drove away.

## CHILLY HOURS OF UNCERTAINTY

I got up, showered and dressed, and found my way to the kitchen. There didn't seem to be anyone around and I didn't feel comfortable scrounging around for breakfast in the communal refrigerator. I was sitting at the kitchen table considering my options, when Paige walked into the kitchen wearing a robe.

She sat in my lap, smiling in a bleary way, and ruffled my hair. "You're more fun than I thought you'd be, and you made me sleep and sleep. I haven't slept that well in months. I'm in a much better mood. I don't know if it's the sleep or the sex, or both. Everyone is gone, we have the house to ourselves. What are you going to do today?"

She smelled amazing, like musky perfume and sex. Her scent, and the gap in her robe showing the curve of her breast all the way to a rose-colored nipple, made me dizzy.

After gathering my wits I said, "I don't know. Probably find breakfast, then look around Berkeley. I'd like to go see San Francisco, but Carole said she wanted to show me around. I guess I'll wait for her. I've only got a couple of days before I need to push on. In about a week and a half I'm supposed to be back in Boston."



“How about if I make you breakfast and we go crawl back into bed? My bed is wider, so we can bounce around more.”

So we did.

I woke up again around eleven. Paige had pretty much used me up. I turned my head to look at her and found her staring at me.

“How old are you?” she said.

Whoops. This could be ugly.

“Intellectually, probably twenty-six. Socially, about fifteen. But physically, I’m eighteen.”

“Oh shit. I knew it. I’m fucking babies now. Last night I was watching you talking to the girls, holding your own and charming the goddam pants off two experienced stews. I figured twenty-five. But looking at your face in the sunlight while you were sleeping, I just knew you’re a baby.”

She had an angry look on her face.

“Paige, I’m pretty grown-up, by any standard other than time. I’m traveling the country on my motorcycle—by myself. You’re not the first person older than me who I’ve had sex with. It’s not like you picked up some kid from high school. I’m not a naïve virgin. I understand if you don’t want to have anything more to do with me, but I don’t know why you’re angry.”

“Do you have any idea how much crap I’m going to get from the other girls when they figure out how young you are? They’ll know I slept with you. I know what they say about me. That I act like I’m too good to screw a passenger or a pilot. And here I am, jumping in bed with a child I hardly know,” Paige said.

I propped my head on my hand and said, “Why do you care what they think? We had a great time. It’s even legal. Yeah, I don’t know a thing about you, other than that you’re beautiful and fantastic in bed, but I’d like to. If your major problem is that we don’t know each other, then why don’t we spend some time together? You can show me more of Berkeley than just the inside of your bedroom.”

Paige’s face softened, then slowly turned to a grin. “Beautiful, and fantastic in bed, huh? Well, I guess I really don’t care that much about what the girls think. Especially Nancy. If she hadn’t had an early flight, I don’t think there would have been any room in your bed for me.

“You’re right, I can live with this. I’ll want more tonight, so I better. But purely for fun—no attachments, no regrets. Right?”

“Sure, no expectations, no regrets.”

“I’m starting three days off today. We’ll hang out. Carole’s back late this afternoon, and she’s going to want to spend time with you. Maybe I’ll come look you up in Boston when I get grumpy and need a good fuck.”

“Sounds perfect. Show me around Berkeley.”

Paige was a great guide. We walked around the college campus and browsed through a couple of cavernous bookstores. I love bookstores. We looked at what Paige referred to as *hippy clothes*. Then we had lunch in a café, where a guy and girl entertained the customers, playing mediocre guitar, but they sang well together.

I said, “Man, I really miss playing guitar when I’m on the road.”

When the two musicians took a break, Paige got up and asked them if I could play some. I was terribly embarrassed, but I’d opened my big mouth. The people in the café weren’t paying

any attention. So I picked up the guy's beautiful Martin D-18, sat on the edge of the little stage and strummed a while, getting used to the tone and the slim neck.

Paige yelled, "Play something!"

So I launched into my reliable arrangement of "Rebel Rouser," which sounded great with the resonant base of the well-aged Martin.

When I finished, Paige hooted, "More," which completely embarrassed me.

The guy and girl returned to the little stage. I tried to surrender the guitar, but he said, "No, we're still on break, but we'd like to sing with you. What songs do you know?"

"Well, I can kind pick things up on the fly. If you start singing something, I'll fill in. If I don't know it, I can fake it."

The girl stepped to the mike and started singing, "Catch the Wind" by Donovan, which was great, because it sounded good starting *a cappella*. I picked up the melody as she started to sing, "To feel you, all around me, and to take your hand, along the sand, ah, but I may as well try and catch the wind ..."

I knew it well, even in her key. The guy jumped in at the same time, and they harmonized really nicely. When they got to the *dee, dee, deee* part, which I hate, he played harmonica, which was a pleasant surprise for me. I played the melody and added in a little rhythm line to fill it out. Then they did "Like a Rolling Stone," which I've played a few times, so that was easy, too. They got ready to start another song, but I said, "My food is on the table, thanks so much. It felt good to play," and I handed the guy his guitar and stepped down.

The guy said, "What's your name, dude?"

I said, "Monroe Sanborne."

He grabbed the mike and said, “That’s our special guest, Monroe Sanborne, ladies and gentlemen, rrrripping it up on the guitar.”

A surprising number of people clapped enthusiastically for me. I turned so red that my ears rang and a sharp little headache started behind my right ear. I sat down and picked up my sandwich.

Paige said, “Wow. Okay, I’m glad I fucked your little brains out. You’re something else. I thought you’d play something simple. You’re a real musician!”

Clearly, this guitar thing had benefits I hadn’t fully considered.

“Not really. I’ve met real musicians, friends of my sister’s, who have real talent and dedication to music. They practice and work on music all day long. I just dabble for a couple of hours a day, but I’ve been doing that for about ten years, so it adds up.”

“It’s impressive, honey. And when a girl tells you she’s glad she’s screwing you, just smile and say *that’s nice*, okay?”

“That’s nice.”

“Let’s go back to the house, Carole’s going to be there soon. And she’s going to want to see you.”

## LIKE AN OYSTER

When we walked into the living room, Carole was already there, sitting on the sofa with a glass of white wine in her hand. Carole took one look at the expression on Paige's face and said, "Oh—really, Paige?"

When I started to say something in Paige's defense, Carole interrupted and said, "I'm sorry, it's not a problem. Honestly. I'm only surprised at *who*, not *what*. I figured Nancy would jump Monroe as soon as he got in the door. Now that I'm over the surprise, I'm glad it's you, Paige."

Carole stood up and gave me a hug and a big kiss right on the lips, then stood back and looked at me at arm's length. "My, you've changed, even since Charleston. You're a little more seasoned-looking. Are you losing that baby fat, or am I just seeing a more confident face?"

Before I could say anything, she turned to Paige and said, "I've only got tomorrow free, one of the stewards on the New York flight got into a hissy fit and quit, so I have to cover. I want to take Monroe to San Francisco, do you want to come?"

“No, I have a ton of errands to do,” Paige said, “but I could catch up with you in the evening.”

“I’ll call the house and let you know where we’re going to have dinner. I’m thinking drinks at the Top of the Mark, and then something dark, French and romantic.”

We hung out at the house for a while, and then I went to dinner with Carole and Paige at a Bistro in Berkeley. I had a superb Entrecôte steak frites, with the fries so crispy they shattered like glass. Paige insisted on picking up the check. I brought the bottle of Overbye ’55 with me, and the proprietor *oo*hed and *ah*hed over it. When he poured it for the table he gave me a hard look but I said, “Please, have a glass and tell us if it meets your expectations. And just a taste for me.”

He smiled, grabbed a glass from the bar, tasted the wine and said, “My God, the great Burgundian houses have a serious problem. This is stupendous. Wonderful coriander accent to the raspberry core flavor. I’m finding fennel and a decisive minerality, but very transparent. The wood is well judged and the finish is long and exquisite. A true Burgundy. That’s so rare. So many California vintners are trying to make Pinot into Cabernet.”

I guess I stared at him, a little stunned. He poured me the same amount as the ladies and a little more for himself. He walked off talking to himself. To me, it tasted pretty much like the wine we had with the shepherd’s pie. I couldn’t find any fennel, but then I’m not certain what fennel tastes like. I said “What does fennel taste like?”

Paige snickered and said, “Licorice.”

“Really? Licorice? I don’t taste that.”

“How about coriander and a decisive but transparent minerality?”

I made my what-do-I-know?-I'm-a-dumbass face and both Carole and Paige laughed. I just enjoyed the wine, the meal and the company.

We walked back to the house without talking much, overwhelmed by the meal, I guess. We stayed up a bit while Paige and Carole told stories about being stewardesses. It sounded like an odd and interesting life. I somewhat expected Paige to slip into my bed in the night, but she didn't. The next morning at breakfast she seemed a little distant, but nothing like when I'd first arrived.

We had a full day. Carole took me all over the city. I wouldn't have wanted Ada to hear me say so, but it was the best day of the trip so far. I think I'd like to live in San Francisco some time. It's so lively, and the people all seem so cool and worldly. We did some of the tourist stuff first—the Marina District, Fisherman's Wharf, Irish coffee at the Buena Vista café. That was good, though it left me feeling a little buzzed all morning. The bartender didn't ask for my ID, I think the fabulous woman hanging on my arm was probably all the identification he needed.

We rode cable cars and walked around some neighborhoods I would never have found on my own. They really interested me and seemed to be much more of a melting pot than Boston, which tends to have neighborhoods segregated by nationality or race. I certainly felt like I was in a different country in Chinatown, where we had an amazing lunch of little dumplings and tasty things called *dim sum*. I've never had anything like it except maybe a knish. I tried everything, including chicken feet.

We were walking near Market Street when we passed a group of attractive women dressed in revealing clothes. They looked at me boldly and said something I couldn't hear that really cracked them up.

I asked Carole, “Are those women prostitutes?”

Carole laughed and said, “I’m the only woman on this street.”

At first I thought she was saying she was the most womanly woman, which seemed like a bit of a brag. Then she said, “Look at their hands and their necks. They have Adam’s apples. They’re men—transvestites, and maybe transsexuals. It’s not that uncommon in San Francisco.”

I goggled in amazement until Carole said, “I said look, not stare.”

It was really easy to talk to Carole. She told me all about her life and loves. She’s been through some tough times with men, but doesn’t seem bitter. I didn’t realize that the house I was staying in actually belonged to her. She’d made the down payment, and she rented out the rooms to cover her payments and maintenance. She owned a second house nearby, which she rented primarily to administrators and staff at UC Berkeley. Definitely not a woman who was relying on her looks to get by.

We sat on a bench near a pond in Golden Gate Park and she got me to tell her everything about me, which seemed lame, sheltered, and limited. Especially after hearing her story. When I wrapped things up with my arrival in Berkeley, she said, “So you’re not going to tell me about Paige, huh?”

And I said, “Nope.”

“Good for you,” she said, “though I’d love to hear the story. Paige is a tough gal to figure out. I’ll tell you this, though. I listened to what you said about how your life has been going and your relationship with Claudia, and that gal in North Carolina, and the woman you gave a ride to in the desert, and so on. And one thing comes through that I’ve never heard from any man I spent



time with. It might be the best thing about you. You respect people, no matter how odd they are. Hang onto that tight.”

“I don’t know about that. I don’t think it was respectful of me to take advantage of Mary Ann. That still bothers me.”

“See, that proves my point. Most guys wouldn’t give that a second thought. They’d use her until they were tired of her, and then dump her. And then there are wimpy guys that a girl like Mary Ann would grab hold of, and they’d never get free of her. I see them all the time. Guys married to women they can hardly stand, just because they got stuck with them. It’s a different form of disrespect. I’m not going to go on and on about this, I’m just telling you that you don’t need to change that.”

“Well, I’ll do my best. To whatever degree that’s true, it probably comes from being such a social outcast. All my friends at home are weird and geeky, like me. Compared to them, most people seem cool,” I said.

“I also understand why you’re shocked about your recent success with women,” Carole said. “But it’s not anything unusual. You’re becoming handsome without being pretty. You have confidence that doesn’t seem cocky. I suspect women find that attractive—I certainly do. You’re on the road, which makes you mysterious and available. You don’t have parents looking over your shoulder, and no likelihood of a wife or girlfriend in the background.

“But mostly, you’re lucky in your timing. People don’t have a clear set of rules now. I’m sure the pendulum will swing again, but right now it seems like everyone is screwing everyone. Believe me, it wasn’t that way even just a few years ago.

“San Francisco is pretty wide-open, but just a couple of years ago, if a stripper showed her nipples, the place would get raided. Now, some places are totally nude. I saw a guy reading *Penthouse* on the plane a few days ago. The centerfold had her pussy showing. That would have been illegal a year or so ago. Hippies talk about free love like it’s something they invented, but I see it everywhere. Enjoy it while you can, it’s probably going to change again.

“I can see you’re searching for your way. I don’t have any advice, I’m certainly no example of taking the perfect path. But it seems to me you’re doing the right thing. You’re impressed by people who follow a plan, but I see them every day, honey. They’re not happy. The happy people I see are finding new adventures all the time. The doctors, dentists and lawyers are the ones that sit in First Class, and if the stew is cute, their wedding ring suddenly disappears. Do your own thing, baby.”

Carole had been sitting close and looking into my face while she talked to me. She suddenly put her hand on my neck and pulled me forward into a sexy kiss. Shocked me quite a bit. Up until then, I had thought she was being motherly.

She pulled back with a little laugh, and said, “I had to see what you kiss like. I wasn’t impressed that time. You want to try again?”

I did.

We kissed for a while. It was really nice. Her tongue was long, slim, surprisingly hot, and lithe. Then she said, “I don’t think this should go further. You don’t need to screw everyone in our house. But I like kissing you, even though I’m really robbing the cradle, I’m nearly twice your age. You must think I’m a crazy old woman.”

“I don’t think anything of the kind. You’re beautiful and sexy. We’re going to have to sit here for a while, so I can walk around without a tent in my pants.”

She laughed, and in a few minutes we got up and walked on, but she walked closer to me, and brushed her hip against me. We hadn’t gone far when she stopped and kissed me again and pressed her body tightly against me. I felt intoxicated by her perfume, her firm body, and her sexuality.

She cupped my face in her hands while I held her with my arms around her waist. Her lips were inches from mine and in a husky voice she said “Screw Paige, I saw you first. Let’s go home.”

So we didn’t make it to the Top of the Mark or a romantic French restaurant. Straight to bed before five o’clock. Carole was a lot like Donna, she knew what she wanted to do, and we did that. I didn’t have any feeling of mutual exploration, we were doing what she liked and wanted, but she was patient. We spent quite a bit of time just on how she liked her breasts to be licked. She liked me to start under her breast, on the upper curve of her abdominal muscle, and then slide my tongue slowly up the bottom of her boob, so the flat of my tongue pushed her breast into my mouth. Then when her nipple slid into my mouth I’d gently suck, and slowly close my mouth until only her nipple filled my lips. The first time I got it right she came gently, shaking through a silent orgasm even though I wasn’t touching her anyplace but on her left nipple.

She taught me how to bring myself close to coming, and then back off a little to prolong the fun. The trick is not to get too close, or you have a little inconsequential mini-orgasm while

you're backing off, and it takes the edge off everything. We had sex more or less continuously until about two in the morning.

We did some things I hadn't done before. All wonderful. Carole is certainly kinky—nothing like the poised, conservative, almost prim person she looks when she's dressed.

I think sex is like eating oysters. When you step back and look at some of the variations, it doesn't seem like something you'd want to try, but once you do, it's great, and you wouldn't mind some more. Of course no one really steps back ... at least I didn't. I just got carried along.

I did suck her toes, and she said, "Oh, I'd forgotten how good that feels." That's as close as I came to showing her something new.

When I woke up the next morning, I was in Carole's bed. She was dressed and ready to leave. She said, "You'll be gone before I get back. Have a great trip and be safe. That was great fun for me. I haven't had sex in months. I hadn't realized how much I missed it.

"Paige is right—no passengers and no pilots. They treat stewardesses like hookers on a plane. Some of the girls are pretty loose. But it's an easy way to get a dose of the clap, and with international travel, there are rumors of even nastier stuff going around. If you'd been screwing Nancy instead of Paige, I probably wouldn't have been so enthusiastic about jumping in bed with you. Send me a postcard when you get home, I want to know you made it okay. And have a great life."

She leaned over the bed and gave me a gentle kiss, stroked my cock through the bedcovers, and she was gone.

*Geez, I thought, how am I going to face Paige? Should I pack up and sneak out of here? For that matter, where the hell are my clothes?* I finally found my pants in the bathroom

adjoining Carole's room. Never did find my shirt. I showered in Carole's bathroom, put on my pants, and crept out of the room just as Paige was coming out of her room.

Yikes.

## DUDED

Paige saw me coming out of Carole's room and frowned. She said, "Good morning, you little cheating bastard," but she said it with a grin.

Oddly enough, Paige didn't seem very upset. She said, "I was pissed last night. First no phone call. Then I heard all that noise coming from Carole's room. Pretty obvious what you were up to. But I don't have some big claim on you. I didn't even invite you here, Carole did. I was the one who said *no attachments*. That works both ways. So there's nothing to be angry about. I hope you two had a swell time."

"I'm sorry I let you down, Paige," I said, "I'm ashamed that I hurt you in any way. If you want, I'll get out of here as quickly as I can."

“Hell no. No way. I don’t want you to go. If you weren’t so spent-looking I’d drag you back to bed. I probably will anyway, but come have breakfast with me. Just do one thing for me. I have two days left before I have to go back to work. Don’t screw anyone else until I’m gone. Just me. Okay?”

I grinned and said, “Yeah, I can manage that.”

“Good,” she grinned back. “I know you only have the clothes you can carry, but they are going to limit the places I can take you. If you can afford to spend some money, say fifty bucks, we can do a makeover. Hair, clothes, the works. I think you’ll be pleased at the end result.

“Yeah, I can swing fifty bucks. I’m near the end of my trip, and I haven’t spent any of the money I expected to. In fact, I made quite a bit of money. I can spend a hundred, if it’s necessary, and fun.”

“Let’s start with grooming. You’re very clean, that’s nice, you’ve showered every day you’ve been here, and you brush your teeth a lot. But your hair is, um ... really unflattering and untidy. I have some good contacts for hair care, and buying clothes. One of the perks of being a stewardess is that I can occasionally get people discounts for air travel. Most importantly, my best friend works at Brooks Brothers. He’ll help us out. But first, you need a haircut.”

Paige picked up the phone and started making calls. I found a magazine and settled in. A few minutes later, she jumped up, grabbed the magazine out of my hands, and said, “Let’s go, we have to fly! I’ve got you an appointment, but it’s for right now. Best hair stylist in the East Bay.”

Paige took me to a hair salon, which I balked at. “This is a women’s hair salon, can’t we just go to a barber?”

“Don’t be a baby. Stylish men have been getting their hair cut at salons for years. Barbers do the same clip job to everyone. You need a style, and that’s personal. That’s what hair stylists do.”

Paige introduced me to her favorite stylist. “Monroe, this is Sophia, she’s the best. She’ll take good care of you.”

I told Sophia that my motorcycle was named Sophia.

She said, “Why did you call her Sophia?”

I didn’t want to tell the whole story, but I said, “It’s a name I dreamed up for a beautiful girl I saw on a bus. It seemed to fit her. I thought she was wonderful, so I named my motorcycle for her.”

“Wow. Okay, Paige. I see why you like this guy. I’m ready to go out with him myself. Let’s see what we can do with this mess. It looks like you have about a month of growth after a seriously horrible haircut. Did cats gnaw on your head? My God! Okay, we have enough to do something good. Lots of people are wearing their hair long now, but you don’t have that much length in the back, so we’re going to do something conservative, but very shaped.”

She was twisting my head back and forth as she said all this, pulling at my hair to see its length, and fluffing the sides and top to see how it stood, I guess.

She said, “Big head. We can make this work. Long hair would just make your head look huge, like Gerard Depardieu, only with a straight nose. Now that I think of it, it might not be bad, but nah.”

“Usually I tell the barber I want it short on the sides but a little longer on top.”

“And that’s exactly why I’m not asking you what you want.”



She started by washing my hair, even though I'd shampooed it just that morning. I said so, and she replied, "You're going to just shut up now and let me do my job. One reason I'm shampooing your hair is that it's full of cheap soap."

Sophia worked away on my head with little scissors for a long time. I'd never had a haircut that took longer than fifteen minutes. After about an hour, she got out a straight razor, lathered my neck, and did some trimming. Then she was done. She handed me a mirror and showed me the new Monroe. I had to admit, I looked damn cool. I can't say what she did was radically different, but it was somehow much better looking. My giant head looked less like the box that heads come in. I just looked...cool.

"When you get out of the shower, don't comb it. And for damned sure, don't part it," Sophia said. "Just fluff it dry with a towel, no hair dryer, and then run your fingers through it and let it dry. Don't put any crap in your hair. And stop using crap shampoo or hand soap.

"If you get your hair cut by a decent stylist, say in a month, they'll know what I did here. They can trim you up to look this good without a lot of effort. If you go to a barber, you'll be back to the cat-gnawed, buzzy-clipper look, but that's your choice. And we're done here."

"Fantastic, I'll do all that. What do I owe you?"

"Nothing. I don't charge men who name their motorcycles after me."

I protested, but Paige grabbed my arm and said, "Sophia has customers waiting. Say thank you, and let's go get you dressed in a manner that suits that great-looking cut."

We got into Paige's Volkswagen and drove across the Bay Bridge to San Francisco. I had no idea where we were going. Huge buildings surrounded us. Paige said we were in the Financial

District. When we parked in a lot Paige turned toward me and said, “Hey, c’mere a minute,” and we necked for a while.

She said, “I just wanted to kiss that cute guy. I have other ideas for later.”

We walked to an imposing storefront with a tasteful sign that said BROOKS BROTHERS. I said, “Hey, I think there’s one of these stores in Boston. I recognize the sign. It’s close to the Boston Public Library.”

“Honey, Brooks Brothers has been in business for over a hundred and fifty years. They just do men’s clothes, which is a shame, but I have a good friend here, and he knows more about men’s style than anyone I know.”

When we walked in, an impeccably dressed man greeted us. Paige said, “We’re here to see Ronny. Could you tell him Paige is here?”

Ronny bustled up a few minutes later, did continental-style kisses on Paige’s cheeks—right-left-right—and then hugged her. “I’ve missed you so much, girl, you look so wonderful. So who is this young vagabond you’re dragging around?”

“This is Monroe. He’s from Boston, but he’s traveling around the country on his motorcycle. Sophia just cut his hair, doesn’t he look gorgeous?”

“Hair is good, clothing is ragbag. What do we have in mind for him?” He stopped ignoring me just long enough to size me up critically. He looked like he was visually measuring me for a casket. I don’t think he was impressed.

“I want to take him to some clubs, show him San Francisco nightlife, but I don’t want him to stand out. I want him to look natural with a beautiful creature like me on his arm.”

“Now that’s a big order, darling, but we can try. He’s a moose, so we have to battle that. We’re going to have to go dark with almost everything. Get some vertical lines going, but not too many. We don’t want him to loom. Let me pull some things.” Ronny dashed off.

“Geez, Paige, he seems effeminate. What kind of clothes is he going to pick for me? I don’t want to look like I’m a fag.”

“Shame on you honey, fag is a nasty name. You’re lucky Ronny is willing to help you. Yes, Ronny is gay. Have you ever seen a poorly dressed gay man? He’s also a wonderful man, and my truest friend. He’s worked here for twenty-five years. He’s the general manager of this store. He could be a senior executive for Brooks Brothers, but he won’t leave San Francisco.

“Homosexual men and women are comfortable in San Francisco,” Paige said. “They’re a big part of our culture and a big part of the reason San Francisco is special.”

“Oh, man, I didn’t mean to be a jerk. I don’t know how to act around gay people. And I’ve never heard the term *gay* before, is that different than regular homosexuals?”

“No, it’s a term that homosexuals find more palatable. As far as how to act, just be yourself. Try not to judge. Don’t try to reassure Ronny that you think gay people are just swell. You won’t feel that way until you really get to know a few. Being gay doesn’t make you stupid, he’ll figure out if you’re full of shit, just as quickly as anyone else would. The only real difference between Ronny and anyone else you meet is that he’s attracted to men instead of women. Other than that, he’s just a guy with a fantastic sense of style.

“Oh, and not that it really matters, but you don’t have to worry about Ronny hitting on you. I’ve met his love interests, and you don’t come anywhere close to his style.” Paige laughed to herself. I didn’t get the joke.

Ronny reappeared, pushing a chrome clothes rack holding a selection of shirts, pants, and sports jackets.

He said, “So, we know he’s on a motorcycle, so we need easy-care. These pants and jackets are a blend that can be folded and still look good after hanging a few minutes. I can’t bring myself to put any friend of yours a permanent-press shirt—they look like plastic bags—so we’re going collarless with pullovers and tees. Let’s try these slate-gray slacks, this charcoal jacket, and this light gray silk T-shirt.”

Ronny pointed imperiously toward the dressing room and I went in and changed. When I came out, both Ronny and Paige looked me up and down.

Ronny said, “Well, that works. He actually looks almost scrumptious. Let’s try a little pattern, though.” And he handed me a jacket with a light vertical chalk-stripe to it. I changed jackets.

Ronny said, “No, nope. No, no, no. He looks like an awning. Let’s try this Harris tweed.”

I tried on the tweed, and Ronny said, “Oh god no. Now he looks like a gigantic couch. We’re going with number one. I think the pants are just right, too. This tee, in a few different colors, and we’re as good as we’re going to get. Unless we do a full suit, and that might take days.”

Paige said, “Shoes, socks, and then we’re out of your hair, Ronny.”

Ronny said, “Actually, my love, you’re out of my hair now. I’m going to turn you over to Joshua who will find the right shoes. I have to attend a telephone conference in five minutes and I must prepare. But you, girlfriend—you need to come to town for lunch. I want to catch up with

you. Or dinner. Dinner would be good. Call me, Paige. Seriously. I will be very angry if you don't.

“Nice to meet you, young man. You look good in that. Stay close to that style and those colors, and you can't go wrong. With your size you'll always want to pick muted styles. You can wear a dress shirt and tie with that, too. Just pick a white or light blue Oxford in pure cotton, preferably Egyptian, and a good silk tie, and you'll be gold. Be very, very nice to Paige. She's special, you're lucky to be with her. I have to run. I'll tell Joshua to give you an employee discount on everything.”

I held out my hand. “Thank you very much, Ronny, I appreciate you taking the time to help me. And I already know how lucky I am to have met Paige.”

Ronny shook my hand firmly, and said, “Okay, Paige, he's not as bad as he first looked. I think you can take him anywhere except the opera, and who the fuck wants to go there anyway?”

He dashed away, and the impeccably dressed man who'd greeted us took Paige's arm and said, “Let's find some great shoes.”

When we walked out of Brooks Brothers, I looked at myself in the window and thought, *Who the fuck is this dude?* The bill was substantial, a little under my hundred-dollar budget.

Paige said, “You're wearing two hundred bucks' worth of clothes. Ronny's discount is killer. You look good enough to eat. That's making me hungry. How about buying me lunch with what's left of that hundred?”

We had lunch at another fantastic dim sum place. I took my jacket off and hung it on the back of my chair, and was careful not to get any food on my silk T-shirt. Paige laughed at my contortions and asked the waiter bring me a lobster bib. They didn't have any, so he brought me a

napkin so big it looked like a tablecloth—maybe it was—and he tied it around my neck. I looked like an idiot, but my precious silk shirt stayed clean.

We explored more of San Francisco together. Paige took me to some clubs that I shouldn't have been able to get into, but my new look and the gorgeous woman I was with finessed the doormen. It probably helped that I didn't drink alcohol. The waiters didn't have to ask for ID when I ordered a Coke. We saw some great bands. We danced so close and sexy in a dark jazz club that my knees felt weak.

We went to a club in San Francisco the night before Paige left, and saw Jim Morrison and the Doors. I had heard a few Doors songs. I thought they were good, but I wasn't what anyone would call a fan. But after seeing them live, I became entranced. Morrison was ... I don't even know the word. Maybe *phenomenal* works. I also don't know what to call what he did on stage. Seduction?

I'd heard people say that rock 'n' roll undermines people's morals and turns them into beasts. I'd always thought that was moronic, but Morrison's performance made both Paige and I unbearably hot. I would have screwed her right there on the table, but we made it to the Volkswagen and had sex in a dingy parking lot a block off Broadway, with people walking by—didn't care. To this day, hearing "Light My Fire" transports me back so strongly, I can smell Paige's sweat, perfume, the scent of her blazing hot pussy, the vinyl of the VW seats, and the gasoline in the leaky heater. I can taste her lipstick and the bourbon on her tongue. Fortunately, it doesn't bring back the muscle spasms in my lower back and right thigh. I hopped around the grimy parking lot, wearing nothing but my new slacks, trying to walk off the cramp.

When Paige left, I left. It was time. Nancy had given Paige and me a wide berth, once she'd figured out what was going on. Which was instantaneously. Women must have some ESP about who is fucking whom. But shortly after Paige left for the airport at some ungodly hour, I was in the kitchen eating a bowl of Wheaties. Nancy plunked down in my lap in her thin pajamas and ran her fingers through my new haircut, while pressing her boobs against my cheek. I didn't want Paige or Carole to think I was just working my way through the house, so I packed up and got out of there. By now, I knew enough about my weak will to realize that if Nancy showed up in my room naked, I wouldn't tell her to leave.

I felt good about my decision to leave before anything started with Nancy. I'm convinced that the best way to deal with temptation is to try to avoid the situation to begin with, and I was feeling somewhat smug until I camped for the night and found myself in a drizzly rain that made my tent walls damp with condensation. As I huddled in the cold, musty sleeping bag, I couldn't help thinking how much nicer it would be if I were snuggled up to Nancy in a warm bed.

## WATCH YOUR BACK

I called my folks. They were back from their epic trip, and they were happy to hear from me. I talked to Mom about their trip, and told her a bit about mine. Then she said, “Oh, your dad needs to tell you something.”

When he came on the line he quickly said, “Your boss, Paul, called last night. He said you need to call him—collect, if necessary. He said he needs to tell you something important. He sounded nervous and out of breath. But when I asked what it was about, he said it was just something to do with one of the bikes you worked on. You should call him when you have a chance.”

After I finished the call with my folks, I fed a bunch of quarters into the pay phone to call Albion Cycles. Fred answered. When I said hello, he responded, “Monroe! I’m really glad you called. Paul needs to talk to you. He’s in the hospital. Get a piece of paper and I’ll give you his number.”

“What? Why is Paul in the hospital?”

“Long story. I’ll let him tell it. You ready for the number?”



I got more quarters and called Paul's hospital room.

"Damn, Monroe ... Glad you called," Paul said with a wheeze. "Where are you?"

"I'm still in California, but I'm headed home."

"Take your time your buddy Silvio went nuts here and killed a bunch of people including a cop. He's in the wind. Take your time getting back to Boston."

"That's insane, why did he do all that? Why are you in the hospital?"

"He came to see me, wanted to know where you were. Tortured me and was going to kill me. I got loose and ran. He shot me through a lung but I'm recovering. I'm going to be okay."

"Holy crap! Jesus, Paul. I'm sorry you got hurt. What a fucking mess! Why is he looking for me? The guy's crazy! What did I ever do to him?"

"Friend of mine, a Warlock, pressured him. I hoped he'd forget about beating you up. It backfired. Who knows what Silvio thinks or what he figured out. Has bug in his ass about you. There's nothing stopping him from shooting you if he finds you."

"God, that's so crazy. Geez, Paul, what set this off?"

"Drug thing," said Paul. "Can't talk about it. Don't rush back. Keep your eyes peeled. Call me before you show up at the shop. The guy is nuts and he's got a gun."

I said I would. Paul said he had to rest. His voice sounded breathless. So I said goodbye, and then I hung up and thought about Silvio. I figured by now, he'd probably be in Mexico.

## PROBABILITY MEETS KARMA

Two days later, my zigzag delaying path took me to I-80 in the high desert of northern Nevada, about fifty miles past Winnemucca. I stopped at a combination café/gas station to top off my tank and have lunch. After lunch, I headed east and picked up my speed to a comfortable 65 mph. I'd been obsessing about this whole Silvio thing, and it seemed that Boston was probably the safest place to be. He might be nuts, but he couldn't stay there. I wondered how long I was going to have to worry about this lunatic. I hoped they'd catch him so I wouldn't have to spend years looking over my shoulder. I decided to stop zigzagging and head for Boston to see what was going on with Paul.

About a half hour after I made my decision to head home, I saw another motorcycle coming towards me from a distance. I always like to see other motorcycles. I always wave. As the rider got closer, I could see he wasn't wearing a helmet. I raised my left hand in a salute. Harley Davidson. Black tank. Short rider with a blue handkerchief tied over his head like a hat. Dark hair. Muscular. Lots of Harley riders like that. Couldn't be Silvio. Nah, didn't look like

him. He flashed past me on the other side of the median. I breathed a sigh of relief as I watched the rider in my mirror. I'm going nuts. *The wicked flee when no man pursueth*. Silly bastard.

Then I saw the brake lights flare on the Harley. The driver braked hard, his back wheel swerved. He turned, crossed the dirt median, and accelerated after me. *Fuck me*. Had to be that psycho son of a bitch. I couldn't see how he would recognize me; I was wearing a helmet. But he could have recognized my bright orange bike.

I knew he wouldn't hesitate to kill me, even just to make sure I wouldn't tell anyone I had seen him. I opened the throttle wide and crouched low behind the bars. I had a good head start on him, but his Sportster was probably a little faster than my BSA. After a few minutes of flat-out running, I chanced a glimpse at my mirrors. I could see he was gaining. Paul said Silvio had a gun. If he got close enough, he could just shoot at me until he picked me off my bike.

Up ahead, I could see a turnoff that wound up the hills. I gauged my distance from Silvio. I could make the turn and still be well ahead, but when I slowed for the turn I might be in pistol range. If he continued chasing me, he would also have to slow for the turn. And the winding road would favor my lighter and better-handling bike. The only problem was that I couldn't see over the ridge, so I had no idea where the road led. It might become a dead-end. I didn't have many choices. If I kept going straight, when he got close enough he could just shoot me in the back.

I slowed just enough to make the turn. At this speed, crashing could be fatal. I held the turn late while I braked hard, and then turned in for a late apex, giving myself enough room to be sure I'd come out of the turn on the blacktop. I heard the sharp crack of a pistol. He had taken a shot at me, and missed. I accelerated hard out of the turn, heading for the next bend and seeing

Silvio in my mirrors. He swerved a bit as he ran his bike off the pavement. When he took the shot, he'd waited too long to brake and almost missed the turn.

I took the bends up the hill as hard as I dared without chancing a crash. I braked hard for each turn with the bike vertical. Then leaned over hard, turning in for a late apex. I used up almost all the pavement, but gave myself a little safety band to ensure I stayed on the road. I could see I was pulling away from Silvio quickly. If the road stayed good, I would get away.

As I crested the ridge, I came to a tight blind turn with gravel scattered across it. I stayed on the brakes a little longer, tiptoed through the gravel and leaned the bike over hard, aiming for the apex that appeared around the edge of the hill. The corner tightened up unexpectedly. I exited at the edge of control, looking down a steep embankment littered with big boulders. Just up ahead, thirty yards from the exit of the corner, the paved road turned to dirt. I picked the bike up straight and got on the brakes as hard as I could. Just before I dropped off the pavement to the dirt, I got off the brakes and gave Sophia a neutral throttle. I lifted my weight off the seat and onto the pegs. The bike hit the dirt, and the back end swerved a few times before straightening out. I slowed the bike, slewed it around in a U-turn, and drove back to the pavement. I waited close to the berm of the blind corner, blipping the throttle to keep the engine running clean.

I knew I couldn't stay on the dirt road. It might end at a gate, or simply peter out. Even worse, I might be leading a killer to a house containing innocent people. I didn't think Silvio would leave witnesses.

If I timed coming back through the turn just right, Silvio would be distracted and wouldn't see the dirt road. If he dumped his bike, I'd have enough of a lead to probably get back

to the highway in the clear. I'd be able to get far enough away to head back for Winnemucca and a police station.

I heard his engine noise change as he entered the turn. I twisted the throttle, dumped the clutch, and aimed back towards the turn. As Silvio entered the turn on the outside edge, aiming for the apex, I went straight at him on the inside, leaving him no room to turn. I could see the panicked look on his face as he turned away from me.

I misjudged where he'd be, and our bikes collided with a glancing blow that I took mostly on my right suitcase. It was enough to skid the back wheel, and after a few wobbles and some panicky braking, I went down on the shoulder of the road at low speed. I looked back down the road just in time to see his bike fly off the verge and cartwheel through the air towards the rocks below. The bike struck on its front wheel, pitching Silvio into the rocks, and then it spun up into the air, shedding parts as it crashed through the rocks.

I picked up my bike to examine it for damage. After finding only a few scrapes on my primary case and luggage rack, I aimed the bike back up the road and started it to make sure it would run. I let it idle while I went to look at Silvio.

Even from the road, I could see that he was badly injured. He was draped over the rocks with some angles in his legs and hips that didn't look normal. His arms were moving, but that was all. He didn't look like he would jump to his feet and chase me down. I went back and stopped my bike before working my way down the rock field towards him.

"You fucking cocksucker," Silvio gasped. Bloody bubbles came out of his mouth with each breath. "God, I'm fucked up. I can't feel my legs. Why did you run me off the road, you fucker?"

“You were trying to kill me! You killed a whole bunch of people! You tortured Paul! You shot at me! Why do you think I ran you off the road? You’re a fucking murdering fucking psycho!”

He stared at me and just breathed. The blood kept bubbling in his nose and mouth.

“Hang on. I’ll go back to the gas station and get them to call for help.”

“Yeah, right. There’s going to be a nice little life for me afterwards. I killed a cop, I killed a made man and his wife, I killed a bunch of Warlocks. There’s no such thing as help. Go get my gun and shoot me. It’s in my saddlebags,” Silvio said.

“I can’t do that,” I said. “Hang in there and I’ll go for help.”

“There’s a bunch of money in the saddlebags, too. More than a hundred grand that no one even knows about. You can have it.”

I thought about the situation. Silvio was probably going to die before I could get help to him, not that he deserved help. But I thought about how I would feel if I was left draped over boulders with my body broken, breath coming in gasps, and blood bubbling in my throat. Silvio was an animal, but in a weird way, I felt a tiny bit beholden to him. Yeah, I know, for what? Because he sold me a book? But I wouldn’t even leave a rat to die like this. I’d put it out of its misery.

I went to Silvio’s motorcycle, which was wadded into an almost unrecognizable shape. I found his gun on the ground near the bike. The saddlebags had been thrown clear. Stuffed in among the clothes and toilet kit, I found a smaller pistol that looked like a .22, and a paper bag, stuffed with cash and big pieces of paper with fancy engraving and ornate letters spelling

BEARER BOND. I carried the bag over to Silvio and looked over the gun, trying to figure out how it worked.

“Pull the slide back to cock the gun,” Silvio said. “It’s hard to pull, I can’t do it. If you won’t shoot me, cock the gun for me and give it to me. I’ll off myself.”

“I’m not giving you a gun. You’ll shoot me. You already tried to.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right. It’s already cocked. Just give me the fucking gun.”

I sat there for a while and thought about the situation. I didn’t see a clear answer. I didn’t want Silvio alive, but I didn’t want to shoot him.

He groaned, “It’s starting to really fucking hurt. Give me the gun!”

I started to do it, I really don’t know why. Maybe the unreality of the moment, maybe just that he was so fucked up and broken. I don’t know, but as he reached his hand for the gun I saw the glitter of hate and something empty and inhuman in his eyes. He looked excited. Like I was giving him a present.

I recoiled from him as I would from a rattlesnake. Pointed the gun at the side of his head, and I pulled the trigger.

I must have.

The noise was amazingly loud, and his head jerked violently away from the blast. The far side of his head blew out and spewed brains and blood over the rocks. My stomach heaved, but I got it under control and dropped the gun onto his chest.

I wanted to kill him. But I didn’t think I was going to. But I did.

I went back to my bike, and got ready to get the cops, but then I realized what I’d done wasn’t justifiable. If I told the police I’d done this, I’d be fucked. I didn’t know much about the

law, other than what I'd read in police procedural fiction, but I was sure this was at least manslaughter. Even with all the death and destruction Silvio had caused, my blowing his brains out while he was lying there, helpless, wouldn't be lightly dismissed. I had no faith in my ability to lie to the cops. I couldn't go to the police.

Fortunately, I hadn't taken my gloves off. I didn't have to worry about fingerprints. What else? I searched the shoulder where my bike had dumped. I found some little bits of taillight plastic, but after I checked out my bike I didn't bother picking them up. My taillight was intact. I found a dead branch and used it to smooth out the furrows my bike had carved in the dirt. I went back over to the body and wiped down the gun. I found the ejected shell and pocketed it. I put the gun in Silvio's hand and fired a round into the air. Then I lay his hand and the gun where I thought the kick from the big pistol might have left them.

I dug all the money and bearer bonds out of his saddlebags and transferred them to my tank bag. I left about \$600 in loose bills and change, so it wouldn't look like he'd been robbed. I didn't check his wallet. I didn't want to get any nearer to his body than I had to. I figured a body covered in my puke might be something of a giveaway. Then I tossed the saddlebags close to the corpse. I surveyed the scene and decided I'd done all I could do, or at least all I could think of right then. I could smell something like sulfur on my gloves and there was a slice mark where the slide of the gun had cut the leather above my thumb. I figured I'd burn them in my campfire when I stopped for the night and buy some replacements.

I was shocked at how calm I was. I sat on a rock for a few minutes and thought it through. I'd just killed a guy. But if he'd survived he would always have been there in the dark. I got on my bike and headed east.



## GEEK HEAVEN

I am quite the stud in the MIT dorm. A guy with a motorcycle, a guitar, and the ability to talk to women without staring at his shoes—a rare bird in the geek center of the universe. Didn't hurt my reputation any that Angel helped me move in and mesmerized the entire dorm with her big grin, her boobs, and her flirty attitude. She had fun turning all the genius guys into gibbering dolts.

At MIT you don't declare a major the first year, but it's already clear that physics is not gonna happen. I'm struggling with freshman calculus and analytic geometry. The text is by a fiend named Thomas, and he's totally fucking with me. I pay attention in class. I read the text carefully, using my magic note-taking method. But the assigned problems seem to have nothing to do with what I've studied. Sooner or later I figure out that the necessary concepts were covered, but the bastard twisted it so that we'd have to figure out how it applies. Makes me crazy, but I'm plugging through.

I'm taking a heavy load, fluffed up with a lit class that turned out to be absurdly time-consuming. Tons of reading, but at least it's stuff I like. I'm barely keeping up in a course that consists mainly of reading. How fucked up is that?

College is nothing like high school. At least, this college isn't. They don't plod through textbooks page by page. We're gulping down material as fast as we can. I can't believe the workload. But I love it—sort of. At least I can't whine about being bored. I hear at some schools there's time for social life and partying. Not here. I have a little time some weekends, when I've managed to catch up or even claw my way ahead, but it's rare.

I squirreled away ten thousand bucks of the money I took from Silvio, and I haven't had to use any of it yet. It's not my money, but I won't have any big moral problem with using it as a backup if I need money for school. If I don't need it, I'll donate it.

Silvio killed his uncle and aunt and they didn't have any kids, so I didn't see any reason to try to give the money back to them. But the cop that Silvio shot had a wife and two kids. So I wrote a short note on a typewriter at the Boston Public Library: "Sorry for your loss. I hope this helps." I sent the note to his widow along with the rest of the money and the bearer bonds. I figured she'd keep quiet about it, but she didn't. It made quite a stir in the newspapers. Everyone assumes Silvio sent her the money. Sounds fine to me. No one is trying to take it from her. She was defiant about it, calling Silvio a coward who'd killed a good man. She said he couldn't buy off her hate. Good for her.

I've had a few nightmares about Silvio. Mostly the theme is that he's chasing me, trying to kill me. I don't seem to have any particular guilt about finishing the job that was started by his trip off the embankment. I notice that I didn't just say *killing him*. So, there's that.

I'm mostly worried about how little it bothers me to have killed a human being. I pointed a gun at his head and blew his brains all over the rocks. I thought it might be that it seems so unreal, but it's not that. When I was sitting there, thinking about giving Silvio the gun so he

could off himself, I thought about all the harm he could do if he survived. He could hurt or kill my friends, my family. He could kill other innocent people. It seemed clear to me that he needed to die. And when I knew he'd kill me if I gave him the chance, the solution seemed obvious. I'm not saying it was self-defense. That's a hard argument to make about a guy whose feet were pointing backwards. I guess the bottom line is: I didn't see a good alternative. I didn't see a reason to preserve his life. Maybe I'm not such a good guy after all. Maybe there's a little bit of Silvio in me. Whatever it is, I think I did the right thing, so it doesn't bother me. I don't feel any urge to confess my sins. I'm comfortable with keeping it my secret.

No one has found him yet, and it's been more than six months. Lots of people are looking, but in most cases that futile effort seems like a good thing. Keeping the Warlocks and the mob busy looks like a positive outcome to me.

I kept the notebooks that came with the money. There were a lot of important and surprising people taking money from Silvio's uncle. I thought about giving them to the newspapers, but I'm sitting on them. I handle everything with a pair of thin leather gloves I bought. I'm getting used to thinking about covering my tracks.

I had a good rest of the summer at Albion. I was extremely busy since it was just me and Fred all summer long. Paul finally came back to work and he seems fine, but his left index finger doesn't work so well. Every time Paul said he was going to add a mechanic, we talked him out of it. I worked at least twelve hours a day. With the money I made at Albion and the money I'd made on the road, I was able to cover the first year of tuition and my room and board. I even had some seed money to start a business making motorcycle and car alarms.

I made twenty alarms and put an advertisement in *Cycle* magazine—just a little ad in the classified section with a picture. I sold thirty-eight for \$24.95 apiece. Pretty exciting. After costs, I cleared almost \$400 for the first twenty. But then school started, and I was so busy I didn't have time to screw around building alarms. So I found two third-year electrical engineering students who would assemble, test, and ship the alarms for me, at \$5 per piece. They're thrilled with the income. I cleared another \$300, and they're working with me on other versions of the alarm system. Together we came up with a better movement sensor that uses coaxial pendulums, so it's self-leveling. We're working on a version that uses the pushbuttons to set the disarming code. We don't have to set the jumpers and make sure we give each buyer the right code—they create their own.

I used all the first month's profits to place more ads, and it's looking good. Most of the ads are making a profit. I guess I own a business.

I asked Angel to run it for me, and she's handling all the legal stuff and working on expanding it. She's keeping track of which ads work best and where they work. I hadn't thought about tuning up the ad performance like that, but it makes sense. I think it's going to be successful.

Angel is perceptive about business. She impresses me more every time I talk to her about what we should do with this little company. I said that building a better alarm system would make us successful.

“Oh, yeah, the world will beat a path to our door. That's horseshit. Yes, the product has to be good, and we need to continually improve it. But advertising, distribution, and customer service is what will make this company successful.”

Angel wrote a series of advertisements for our company, the most successful one has picture of a sleazy-looking guy (Lenny) in a hooded sweatshirt reaching to grab the handlebars of a motorcycle (Sophia) so he can roll it into a truck. There's a chain with a cut lock lying on the ground, and the guy is furtively looking over his shoulder. The car version shows the same sleazebag holding a hammer in one hand and reaching through a broken car window with the other. I asked Angel how she had done that photo.

“Shot it in a junkyard,” was her answer. Brilliant.

I found a beauty salon that keeps my hair trimmed. Costs about fifty cents more than a barber, but the woman who cuts my hair washes it first, gives me a scalp massage, and cuts it perfectly. Tell me that isn't worth half a buck. Yes, apparently I'm a preppie geek.

Angel saw me in my Brooks Brothers getup and my slick haircut at a family party. She said, “Hey stud! Who are you and what have you done with my brother?”

It feels cool to impress my sister, but I don't get much opportunity to dress up. My list of priorities reads: school, school, school, and then everything else. I've been like a monk. I'm trying to keep up my guitar practice, so I work at it when I have free moment, and I try to do it publicly to help overcome my shyness and embarrassment.

I was playing my guitar in the lounge at my dorm when a couple of guys asked me to join their band. I told them I don't have any time to practice with them, but they said I didn't have to, because I was better than anyone else in the band and they have a paying gig. So whenever I can, I spend Friday and Saturday evenings at the Jolly Beaver Coffeehouse in Harvard Square, earning ten bucks a night. I justify the time as practice. One really cute waitress and some of the

female patrons seem interested in me. Sounds crazy, but I'm too busy for such distractions. And I know how quickly my dick can screw up my plans, so I'm avoiding the possibilities.

One of Donna's maxims seems to have sunk in well: *Make your money while you can*. I'm not a grub about it, but I don't pass up opportunities to make a buck, as long as it fits my priorities.

Speaking of Donna, in some of my hornier moments I've thought about getting in touch with her. I'm well over eighteen now. We could tell the superintendent at her apartment to go piss up a rope. But it seems a bad idea. I don't need to get quite that kinky yet. I remember that black lady who stared disapprovingly at me just before I followed Donna home. That lady was probably right. Donna is on a track I don't envy. I don't need to join her. But still ...

I got a long letter from Claudia, she's still in Paris. She followed my lead (which I wound up not following myself), and delayed entering Harvard by a year. She's modeling for a fashion house. No surprise there. And she's met a guy. She didn't tell me much about him except he's a med student. I'm surprisingly happy for her. She might make a better friend than girlfriend or wife. I'd always wonder who was hitting on her. She told me some of her pictures are in *Vogue*. I went and bought a copy. Wow. I can't believe that incredible woman was my girlfriend. She popped off the page and made the rest of the models look ordinary. Really.

I haven't shown the pictures to anyone here. I don't feel the need to impress anyone. I haven't made any friends. I hold my cards close to my chest. It just seems wise. Most freshmen are heads-down anyway. The few guys I know well enough to talk to wouldn't believe me anyway. I can hardly believe it myself. I saw a family picture of myself from the time I first met Claudia. My God, what was she thinking? I hope I'm better looking now. That guy was sad.

A lot of the fat is gone. Most freshmen put on weight here. The freshman fifteen is more like fifty. Cafeteria portions are big, and they're heavy on spuds and fried stuff. But I've had good nutritional advice from Angel, who now sees me as not physically hopeless. So I'm avoiding potatoes, bread, and fried food. I eat mostly meat and vegetables. Oddly enough, the chef in our cafeteria cooks vegetables really well—especially since I went back to the kitchen and complimented her on them. If you get to them before they've sat in the steam table for too long, they still have a little bite and the color is bright. When she sees me come in, she'll often come out with a skillet of vegetables, freshly sautéed in olive oil. Pretty cool.

I skip most desserts, though when they have apple pie in the cafeteria, I just give it up and scarf. Our chef makes killer pies. Each morning, I do fifty sit-ups and fifty push-ups. It's turned out to be a really important thing for me. It makes me slow down and think through what I need for my day. Since I started doing it, I show up with the right stuff for almost every class, and I always remember the notebook that has my schedule in it. Just eliminating the stress of forgetting my schedule and not knowing where to go next is worth the occasional ab cramp.

I do a lot of a lot of running around carrying loads of books. But running to class and my morning routine is probably all the exercise as I'm going to manage for a while. I have the good example of Claudia to drive me toward some kind of fitness. At least I have physical fitness in my mind as a worthy goal. One of many things I never cared or thought about pre-Claudia.

I wrote her a long letter back, just chatter mostly. I didn't tell her much about my trip. I was surprised by how little of it I wanted to share with her. I bet she's doing the same thing to me. When I started writing, I realized that I love her. I carefully told her so. I tried to do it so she knew I wasn't trying to make claims on her or tie her down or interfere with her relationship with

her new guy. But she'd told me before she left that she loved me, and I didn't tell her that back. I really can't say why I chose to do that now, and I don't know that it was fair or wise. I'm surprised to find that I absolutely believe it's a love that will last my whole life. Maybe that's naïve, but I don't think so. I realize there's a little bit of gratitude wrapped up in it, and some of it is just that I simply like and admire who she is. There's something deeper there that I can't express, and which has nothing to do with looks or sex, or the fact that she changed me so fundamentally.

I just love her, and that's good enough for me.

When I think of Claudia, I often get this stilted phrase in my mind. I don't know where it comes from, or why I keep thinking it. *I wish her well*. That's it. Kind of weird, and not the way I usually talk—not even in my head. But it's what happens.

I also got a letter from Mary Ann. It was almost illegible, her handwriting is horrid, but I puzzled it out. She's still at Houston Cycle. She's cleaning bikes, making money, and dating Carl. Good for her. He seemed like a good guy.

I sent a letter to Ada in the spirit of *You don't have to write me or nothin' but you better fuckin' keep in touch*. I haven't heard back. She's probably in Afghanistan or something. I told her I missed her, which is quite true. I think of her often and I wonder what she's up to. I can't eat fried chicken anymore without thinking of her. Fried chicken is ordinary at best without Kat's magic. It's ruined for me.

I saw Carole briefly, when she made a stop in Boston. She looks amazing in her stewardess outfit. All legs, and perfect hair and makeup and style. We had a nice lunch. She said



that she and Paige have grown a lot closer, and that she's glad she can finally see that Paige is a nice person. She told me that Paige said hello.

Carole acted motherly and restrained, but when we left the restaurant, just before she stepped into a cab, she kissed me and put her tongue down my throat. Confusing, but wow! I had sporadic, vicious hard-ons for the rest of the day.

I wrote to Gina, and haven't gotten a letter back, but I got a giant package delivered by a freight company. A black, nine foot four, Gregg Noll Da Cat surfboard. I know the length because it's written in pencil under the fiberglass, along with the inscription FOR MONROE. I assume that's some indication that my little white lie did her some good. I didn't realize that people surf on the East Coast, but they do. I'm going to give it a go as soon as I have time, which will probably be in five or six years. But it looks great in my dorm room and it's cranked up my stud reputation by another couple of notches. I wonder what the guys would think if they knew it was sent to me by a mega-wealthy surfer girl who is working on her PhD in rocks at UCSD.

Dropped by Tastee Donuts, on one of my rare rides on Sophia, and gave Wally a bunch of postcards I'd collected for him on the road. He was thrilled. Made me sit in a booth for an hour or so, and tell him all about my trip. I left out a lot of the good parts and just told him about the geography, the road, and the beignets. I left with four dozen donuts that he forced on me. They didn't last long in the dorm.

Sophia lives in a rented garage space about two blocks from the dorm. Warm and dry for the winter. I keep the suitcases on her, simply because she looks so good ready for the road. And they make a good place to store my tools, anyway. She has our latest alarm installed.

All my life, she'll be mine and I'll be hers.

Before I tucked Sophia away for the winter, I took her to visit Aunt Carla so I could show her what I did with the luggage. Aunt Carla loved the rack, loved the luggage, loved the way the bags looked. “It’s a piece of art, Monroe. A pure, rolling piece of art. You must take me for a ride.”

I didn’t have Ada’s helmet with me. The notion of taking Aunt Carla for a ride was so outrageous that I hadn’t considered it. I said, “I can take you some other time, but I don’t have a helmet with me. I don’t take people on my bike without a helmet.”

“That’s fine for everyone else, Monroe. Commendable. But I don’t need a helmet. You’re going to drive carefully. If I fall off your motorcycle, my old bones will break like a bundle of dry sticks. A helmet won’t help. So you just stop objecting and take me for a ride.”

I kept protesting, but she was adamant. I relented and we both rode helmetless through the back streets of Jamaica Plain, at about fifteen miles per hour. I thought I could get away with a quick trip around the block, but Aunt Carla was having a fine time. She kept directing me down yet more streets and waving at neighbors. It was a little more than an hour before we got back to her house. I had to slither off the bike and help her down, but she was thrilled with her adventure.

I sat in her living room, drank a lot of tea, and told her about my trip. For some reason I told her a lot more detail than I’d told anyone else, though I left out any mention of Silvio. I think I could have told her about that, too. Nothing I said shocked her in the slightest. Whenever I tried to skip over something salacious, she would draw it out of me. She loved hearing about the stewardesses and San Francisco.

“That’s so perfect for you, Monroe. Nothing like women with some experience to get a young man on the right path. Americans are such primitives when it comes to really enjoying

life. Europeans can be completely horrid about so many things, but they do learn how to have a good time.”

I was surprised at the late hour when I left. Aunt Carla is easy to spend time with, and fun to talk to. She didn't tell stories about her adventures; she just used little fragments from her life to add color to my trip. I need to learn how to do that.

I tried to spend some time with Lenny and Maria, but they are disgusting. Goofy in love. They can't keep their hands off each other long enough to have a conversation. Maria is at UConn on an athletic scholarship, so that's where Lenny is going. They're going to get married; it's only a question of when. Lenny looks remarkably cool. Same old Lenny, but now he has style that fits his TR3 and his gigantic, gorgeous girlfriend. He's even got some muscle. Unbelievable. Maria is a miracle worker, though she doesn't get any credit for the transformation. That all accrues to me, since I had absolutely nothing to do with it except for having the right girlfriend. Lenny's parents would petition for sainthood for me, if Jews had saints.

I was struggling through a problem set devised by that evil bastard Thomas, when the dorm proctor, Malcolm, entered my room without knocking. He was visibly disturbed, which isn't all that uncommon. Our dorm proctor is what people here at Tech call a *tool*. The kind of guy that walks around with his big K&E slide rule hanging from his belt. The cases actually have belt loops, but you'd have to be a tool to wear one. I've never seen Malcolm without his.

Malcolm said, “There's a crazy woman that wants to see you. She's causing a serious, serious disturbance in the lounge. You need to get down there and get her out of here. No one is getting any studying done. She wouldn't listen to me. She told me to be a good boy and run along to get you. A good boy! That's outrageous!”

“And yet—here you are.”

I walked down the hall to the lounge. There was a small crowd of students standing in front of the couch. I heard a familiar voice and then saw the lovely lady holding court and causing the ruckus.

Ada.

Oh dear.

The End

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

Riding Sophia is fiction, but perhaps every first-time writer draws on the structure of his or her own life. One thing is certain: I am not Monroe.

As for Monroe, he's becoming of a man of substance. Flaws abound, green shoots of hubris are finding fertile ground, but some of the fog has lifted. The path before him may no longer head straight to Loserville, but its trajectory is anything but clear. He has interesting friends scattered across the USA and one special friend in Paris. The world is more open than he could ever have expected. It's the late Sixties. He has a little money in his pocket and Sophia is road-ready.

Time to ride.