

A Journey Between

Dave Peterson

Chapter 1

The Launch

It was the summer of 95. I had finally returned home, anxiously turning the motorcycle towards my house. The garage door inched upwards, as if expecting my return. Moments later, my wife Mary Jean ducked from under the rising door, and rushed towards me. However, she slowed her approach after a quick glance at my weathered face, unruly hair, and several days of bearded stubble. She instead greeted me with a cautious arms-length hello. I left her eighteen days before, setting out on a journey from Kansas to the Pacific Northwest. She forced a half-smile—one half saying, “I’m glad you’re alive.” and the other half saying, “How could you leave me for eighteen days?” I recalled her begrudgingly watch our 21-year-old son Brian and me prepare our bikes for the long journey. Brian had recently returned home from a two-year tour in Japan with the Air Force, and I quickly stole him away for a bike trip of a lifetime. He was anxious to reacquaint himself with his motorcycle, his country, and me. However, I didn’t know three weeks earlier that our trip would etch itself so deeply into my psyche.

"Are you okay?" I heard a voice say.

"Huh?"

"You're acting strange, are you...?" she started to ask, then paused.

"Yeah, sure, I just...I need a minute. It's been a long time...I need a little time."

She let me be. "Tell me about the trip when you're rested."

I gave her a distant, yet grateful look. "Thanks—there's plenty to tell."

Eighteen days before, on the morning of our departure, we rolled the heavily packed bikes from the garage. We rode seasoned, yet fully qualified motorcycles. I rode an 88 Kawasaki Concours, and Brian rode an 87 FJ1200 Yamaha. Mary Jean nervously, but silently watched us prepare. She believed the conventional opinions about motorcycles; they were dangerous. Brian and I agreed about the danger, but we believed the risk to be manageable. In spite of our confidence and reassurances, her uneasiness persisted. She sensed something, but it remained unspoken, and I didn't want to know. I wanted this trip, much the same way a drunk wants a drink. I could taste it—easily pushing aside any arguments to stay home. I tried to ease her fears by involving her in the route planning. Our trip plans were simple, but long. We would ride from Kansas to Salem, OR where I'd work a week at my employer's west coast facility. In doing so, I could finance the trip by exchanging the plane ticket for an equivalent amount of cash. During that week of work, Brian would ride down to San Francisco to visit an Air Force friend. He would later meet me back in Salem, and then we'd head to Medford, OR for the beginning of a five-day motorcycle rally sponsored by the Concours Owners Group, a national organization centered around the bike that I rode. The rally was a rolling event that would cover over 2000 miles, moving us to a different destination each day throughout the Pacific Northwest.

Leaving the comforts of civilization, the first day's trek landed us in another time zone, 700-plus miles down the road. Dusk greeted us while searching for a camping spot north of Craig, CO. We slowed at the "Campground" sign and turned onto an unpaved road for a 10-mile journey into the woods. The high-mileage day had taken its toll on our butts, but the threatening clouds overshadowed the physical pain. Apparently, we exhausted our "good weather luck" because just as we pulled up to a campsite, the rain came down faster than our kickstands. Without saying a word, we jumped off our bikes and quickly set up the tent. We tossed our gear through the tent flap haphazardly; we could straighten it out later. We covered the bikes, as the barrage pelting our helmets drowned any thoughts of a campfire. Once inside the tent, the rain pummeled the flimsy nylon walls without pause. Our wet raingear glistened in the dim light, as we slipped around on the mud-tracked floor. We were

chilled, tired, and grumpy. Blinded by darkness and confusion, we bulldozed the mounds of gear toward the buffeting tent walls, clearing room for our sleeping bags. The pounding rain held us speechless as we slipped into the bags, trying to relax. I stared into the ever-darkening space of the tent, and then exhaled a pensive sigh, reflecting on the long day, and possibly longer night. I wanted sleep to come quickly. Soon, a thumping near my left knee caught my attention. We had a visitor! Reaching for the flashlight, I sat upright for a closer look. The yellowish beam zeroed in on the intruder. "Dammit!"

Brian sat up quickly, startled by the tone of my voice. "What's wrong?"

"The tent's leaking!" I shouted while sliding my hand across the floor. "The whole place is wet!" Rainwater infiltrated our wilderness motel, soaking everything. I sat motionless, stunned by our predicament. I beat myself up for not resealing the seams of the tent before the trip. Brian, sensing the self-inflicted lashing, said nothing, as the brisk Colorado wind carried away the last hopes of a restful night.

"Brian, we need to make a run for it. The storm acts like it could go on all night...we need to get our stuff dry before heading out tomorrow."

"Where to?" he asked cautiously.

I didn't answer—I had no answer. I waited for an idea to visit, then finally suggested, "Let's go back to Craig; maybe we can find a motel. Even if we can't, maybe...maybe we can find a Laundromat to warm up and get dry." Brian remained silent. His delayed response seemed interminable, an indicator of a stupid idea.

"I'm ready, let's go for it!" he said grunting to get out of his wet sleeping bag.

We reloaded quickly, and with our wet gear heaped onto the bikes, stretched the bungee cords across the loads to snug them down. Unfortunately, the excitement of being packed disappeared when discovering that the road had turned to slime. We rode slowly, inching our way back to the highway. Size 11D outriggers drug along in the mud, as the thunder and lightning released more disappointment onto our

dream trip. Eventually we made it back to the asphalt, where we turned south and headed back to Craig.

We stopped at the motel on the edge of town. Considering the late hour, and our uncivilized appearance, we were fortunate to get a room. While I decorated the room with wet gear, Brian hustled across the street for a 12 pack. Once inside the toasty room, we nestled in amongst the chaos, feeling secure again. With shoes kicked off, and lying on our beds, we each opened a beer. We relaxed quietly, privately appreciating our late-night good fortune. I broke the silence, "What a first day, huh Brian?" He didn't answer. "Brian?" "Brian?" With 10 beers to go, he was sound asleep. I set my unfinished beer on the nightstand and reached to switch the light off.

Chapter 2

Skeeters

The next morning we stepped from the room to greet the dawn. Two very muddy bikes confronted us. Only the second day away from home, and filth had already jumped aboard. We fixed a quick breakfast in the motel room, then repacked our dried gear, and headed to find fuel. A car wash next to the gas station provided a quick shower for our bikes. Once washed and refueled, we pointed north, feeling clean, rested, and eager. The brilliant blue skies of Colorado smiled as we crossed the border, moving unceremoniously into Wyoming. We soon came to I-80, where we aimed west and let'em rip! We stayed on the super-slab only until Rock Springs, and then turned north towards Jackson, WY. A couple of hours later, our tires imprinted Jackson's welcome-mat. Following a nice lunch, we relaxed along a shady street lined with quaint shops and tourists. Brian worked on his bike, fixing a never-ending parade of things coming loose.

"Hey dad, ya have a little piece of wire? Hey dad, ya have some electrical tape? Hey dad, ya...? "

The digging through my gear for what he needed started to annoy me. I didn't know if the irritation came from simply being inconvenienced, or from something more serious—thinking he should have been better prepared. Nevertheless, the irritation subsided when I relaxed my expectations. After all, I had considerably more experience with motorcycle trips; he couldn't possibly know what I knew. Yet, I watched his innocent enthusiasm, the freedom to just be on the trip without the weight of worry. Perhaps I had something to learn from him. Brian seemed unflappable regarding his motorcycle; he knew it well, and I envied his self-confidence, certainly more so than his planning. Brian had a natural talent for mechanical and electrical things, and the Air Force F16's let him continue playing with the fast toys of childhood dreams. The FJ was more than a motorcycle though; it was a vehicle to traverse the highways of a father-son relationship. Some roads

were smooth—some bumpy. Brian began riding motorcycles in the spring of his life, even before starting elementary school. Each year, the warm summers called us to the open roads, where we immersed ourselves in motorcycling and camping. Even with the onset of winter, the adventures continued. Our garage came alive with the hissing of the old kerosene heater and the clanking of wrenches, replacing the humming motorcycles and crackling campfires, setting the stage to bond, and dream of adventures to come.

Brian grew quickly, with much of his youth seemingly spent watching the white-dashed lines of the highways blur by. His little hands gripped the handlebars while he straddled the gas tank, with my arms providing reassurance against falling off his perch. From his makeshift front seat, we shared our first “1000-in 1”, a motorcycling endurance feat of 1000 miles in 24 hours. Soon he became too big to ride on the gas tank, and moved to the seat behind me. Later he became too squirmy to ride on the back, relegating me to the backseat while he piloted. This lasted until he turned 14, when a second motorcycle came into our lives, one that we referred to as “Brian’s training bike”. He could ride legally on a learner’s permit, as long as he stayed within my sight. Brian tugged relentlessly on the visual leash, like a puppy on a first walk in the grass. Our learner’s classroom expanded to suit our dreams. We crossed many state borders under the auspices of training. After getting his regular license at age 16, his training bike became disenchanting to his teenaged ego. Soon, a provocative 87 FJ1200 Yamaha temptress found her way to our garage. Many rear tires later, and several encounters with the law, the time came to put her into a restful sleep under a white sheet. Brian left home to clank his wrenches on much faster, yet equally seductive birds in the Air Force. I felt lost the day he left home, the hollowness of his absence penetrated deeply. He would be so far away, for such a long time. On especially lonely days, I’d walk to the corner of the garage where his bike slept, pull the sheet back, and squeeze the throttle grip, telling him that I missed him, and wished him well on his adventure.

Brian soon had all the necessary fixes and adjustments made to his bike. Although tempted to linger longer, we did not succumb. Zipping across the border into Idaho,

we found the Targhee National Forest campground entrance just past Swan Valley. As we turned down the dirt road, a speeding pickup truck approached from the opposite direction. I waved for it to stop, wanting to ask about camping sites. The tires locked up on the loose gravel, as the truck slid to a halt. Once the trailing dust settled, it became apparent that the speedster was a young lady. I flipped up my shield and hollered, "Are there good camping spots back where you came from?" She just stared with a perplexed gaze, apparently unable to hear me. We turned off the bikes and tried again.

"Go to the top of the hill," she said while wiping the dust from her lips. "Turn right and just follow the road; there's some great spots down there."

I smiled, and thanked her. After spinning the starter motors, we were off to follow her directions. The road forked at the top of the hill as reported—we turned right. Fifteen minutes later, we continued bouncing along the dirt road looking for the promised camping spots. Perplexed, I stopped and waited for Brian to pull along side. "Did she say how far the spots were?" I hollered.

Brian didn't recall, suggesting we go a little further. We followed a small stream, and soon evidence of camping spots appeared. However, the spots were just spots—no tables, fire-rings, toilets, or signs of potable water—just a few open areas. I pulled into one of the clearings; it would have to do because darkness approached.

Just as I leaned the bike onto the side-stand, the mosquitoes attacked. Delusion seduced me into believing they would go away later; this was just their dinnertime. Not to become an entrée though, I stayed in full riding gear, with my face shield snapped shut. Sweat came quickly. The mosquitoes just loved sweat—a little appetizer before the main dish. The little bloodsuckers donned their bibs while I determinedly headed into the willows looking for firewood, leaving Brian to make friends with hesitation and uncertainty. Soon my arms were full, and I trampled back through the bushes heading toward the bikes. Wearing all black riding gear, I could have been mistaken for Big-Foot. Peering through the steamed faceshield, I

saw Brian waiting, sporting a pathetic look. With hands relaxing on his hips, his expression begged, "What'cha doin' Sasquatch?"

I stood motionless, clutching the wood, as I gasped for air. Finally, the foolishness registered. I dropped the wood, and gathered enough breath to shout, "Let's get outta here!"

In quick succession, we mounted up, fired up, and launched. Once moving, I lifted the shield slightly to let fresh air kiss my sweat. We rode back to the top of the hill where our navigational mistake occurred. An obscure sign hid in the bushes; it pointed to a campground less than a mile down the "other" road. We followed its lead, learning that the sign spoke the truth. Brian rode back to Swan Valley for ice and goodies, while I performed my natural role—thrashing around in the thicket, scaring the locals, while gathering firewood. The thrashing paid off, and when Brian returned to my welcoming fire, he proudly displayed his catch. We settled next to the warming flames as the cool air drifted down into the Snake River valley. I reached for a broken chunk of wood and tossed it on the fire. Sparks ascended into the darkness as the dancing flames licked the blackened sky. The crackles and pops harmonized with the silence. This was our first chance to sit quietly and relax with each other. Brian stared at the mesmerizing flames, while the orange glow flickered on his face. He had matured into a handsome young man, his well-groomed military haircut looking much better than the longer hair he wore in high school.

“Brian, this is great! I’ve wanted this for a long time.”

“Me too dad.”

“I’m sure you noticed...your mother’s not happy about what we’re doing. She’s been on my mind a lot today. I wonder what her deal is? I can relate to the nervousness about our trip though.”

“How’s that?”

“This is a big trip! Only our second day...think about all that’s happened so far. What’ll the next sixteen days bring? The adventure doesn’t scare me though—I

crave it! I don't know...it's like...it's like wanting something for so long, then when you get it, you can't enjoy it for fear of losing it. I'm worried that something will happen and we can't finish."

"I think mom's nervous about something else. She's scared. On one hand, she's afraid that we'll kill ourselves out here. On the other, if we do make it home safely, she's afraid that we'll of had such a great time that she'll be left out."

"Yeah, it boils down to being in a relationship...maybe she's nervous about being out of relationship with us, either through death or bonding. I guess as long as we don't get killed, it'll all work out."

"Yep...hey dad, while you're up, put a little more ice in my cup."

Chapter 3
Reflective Stop

My stocking cap pressed down tightly against my scalp, as I tucked deeper into the sleeping bag. Like a burgeoning bear cub, I brushed away the web of long sleep, moving slowly to peek at the outer world. My breath fueled the vapor clouds, confirming the temperature. Dressing quickly, I crawled from the tent to greet a glistening blanket of frost resting on everything, including last night's snoozing fire-pit. I walked to the bike to read my thermometer—the mercurial column parked at 31 degrees. "Burrrrr," I shuddered while whisking frost from the seat. I found enough small twigs to reawaken the fire. Brian faked sleep, just waiting to hear the crackling of a morning fire. Sure enough, the pops and crackles brought him out to greet the new morning, frost and all.

After a breakfast of oatmeal sprinkled with raisins, we doused the short-lived fire. The bikes were packed, and idling without chokes. Tapping the gearboxes into adventure, day three of the journey began.

We planned a side-trip to Stanley; a quaint town nestled in the heart of the Sawtooth Mountain Range. However, the day's excitement began before reaching the jagged peaks. Brian led the way while I worked to keep up with the pace. We rode briskly, yet comfortably, as my radar detector provided some protection from Idaho's revenue seekers. Brian's only protection came from vigilance. I kept up with Brian until a slow moving pickup truck held me captive in the right lane. I impatiently followed for what seemed like an eternity, looking for a chance to pass. Finally, the moment appeared. I slammed the shift-lever down, making a screaming launch before the next oncoming vehicle or yellow line appeared. Just as I moved into the passing-lane with the throttle cranked, a car appeared from over the hill, coming directly towards me. "Don't quit now," I mumbled through clinched teeth. Ducking below the windshield, the engine whined as I held the throttle tightly. My

full attention balanced the closure rate of the on-coming vehicle with the clearance of the truck's bumper. At the precise moment, I swerved back to the right, only to hear my radar detector screaming in my ear. "My God!" the car coming at me was an Idaho Highway Patrol! I'm a goner now!". Doing 85 MPH in a 55 promised serious discussions. I could see in my mirror the blue lights spinning above the patrol car's brake lights. He turned around with little effort and quickly closed in on my Kansas tag. I slowed and pulled to the side of the road.

The officer stepped from his car, putting his round-brimmed hat on as he walked towards me. A large man, he wore a well-pressed uniform with his pants tucked into his shiny boots. "May I see your drivers license, proof of insurance, and registration," the officer instructed. He was as cool as a cucumber, but as serious as an Internal Revenue Service auditor.

I nervously rummaged through my packs looking for what he wanted. When handing over the documents, I could see my concerned face reflecting in his sunglasses. My mind raced, trying to develop a defense strategy.

"Do you know how fast you were going?"

"Well, not for sure officer; we're on a trip and I was trying to catch up with my son so we wouldn't get separated." Brian surely saw the patrol car, but with a license already warmed by previous transgressions—he wasn't about to come back exploring the delay. The officer walked back to his car to check me out. Returning, he continued the questioning, inquiring about our origins and destinations. When not looking at my license, he studied the bike.

Suddenly, he reached out, handing me my license and documents. "This is your lucky day," he said. "I'm letting you off with a warning."

"Thank you sir, thank you," I gushed. Managing a slight grin, he turned, and walked back towards the blue lights.

Opening the door of his car, he turned and hollered back, "Oh, tell your son to slow down."

I nodded and smiled. After pulling my helmet back on, I rode on, feeling guilty for my one-sided perspective of law enforcement. The man that could give me a ticket could also save my life. A few miles down the road, I found Brian waiting by the roadside. I gave him a thumbs-up as I zoomed past his curious looking face. He grinned with obvious relief.

Spectacular, jagged, snow-capped peaks watched, as we carved our way through the evergreen-scented wilderness of the Sawtooth Mountains. We stopped for lunch in Stanley, and then continued the journey through the mountains. Popping out of nirvana around Boise, we continued our westerly trek. Darkness approached as we crossed the Idaho/Oregon border, and the long day started to extract its toll. Exhausted, we decided to stay in a motel—an easy decision to make.

Chapter 4

Small Cafe

We awoke to a cloudless sky on day four, a day destined to deliver us to Salem, OR. We began the ride on full tanks and empty stomachs. About mid-morning, we throttled back in a tiny town consisting of a few old weather-beaten buildings. We made a U-turn in the middle of the road—the café sign caught our attention. The small town appeared deserted except for the few pickup trucks parked amongst the tumbleweeds. The faded sign in the café window invited us in. Prying our helmets off, we then pulled the squeaky door open and stepped inside. To our left, empty tables and chairs sat silently; to our right, a large wooden bar accommodated four patrons slouching on pivoting barstools—their boots resting on the brass foot-rail. The bartender leaned over the sink washing glasses, with the customary towel draped over his shoulder. The front door slammed shut, sending a loud bang echoing across the hardwood floors. The locals turned and looked, staring, saying nothing. We paused briefly, jostling subtle clues that maybe we weren't supposed to be there. It looked more like the Longbranch Saloon than the advertised cafe. The silence penetrated, locking us into what seemed like an eternal moment. We broke the stares, and then walked towards an empty table. Sliding the chairs away from the table, a loud off-keyed screech bounced from the walls. Every move created an inordinate amount of noise—making unobtrusiveness difficult. We set our helmets on an empty table, and then looked around eagerly, watching for anything related to breakfast to happen. An ominous sign hung over the bar, picturing a pistol with the caption: "We don't dial 911". The intimidating marquee summed up the atmosphere of the little café along the Willow River. The old boys at the bar were long past the orange juice and coffee. They sipped the stronger stuff, the stuff that would speed them to naptime, or jail.

Amidst the echoing quiet, a thin, middle-aged lady appeared from the door behind the bar. Her apron fluffed in the breeze as she walked briskly towards our table, carrying menus and a pot of coffee.

"Good morning boys," she said while moisturizing her gum. "Coffee?"

We slid our cups her way.

"Like breakfast?"

We smiled without answering directly, but she read our expressions nevertheless. She flaunted a good memory; no pen or pad graced her tool-belt. Waiting, she exercised her gum while staring out the window overlooking main-street. We quickly scanned the frayed menus, hunger speeding us along. "I'll have the..."

"Sounds good, me too." Brian said handing her the menu.

In seemingly no time, our waitress hustled our breakfast from the kitchen towards our table. While enjoying our day's first meal, we looked around; feeling the isolation, and listening to the echoing ghosts tell their stories.

"Long ways from Japan, huh Brian?" He just smiled, knowing that quintessential America held us in her grip. The abundance of tables and chairs, the raised platform in the corner, the dance-floor, and the old wooden bar, all suggested wild Saturday nights in eastern Oregon. However, the slouching cowboys at the bar couldn't wait for Saturday to start rocking. A life of beer and whiskey for breakfast spoke of a world unto itself. Our day promised to be much more exciting—at least we expected it to last longer.

Finishing, we left our money next to the stained coffee cups. Scooting the chairs back, we grabbed our helmets and walked across the hollow room to the front door. The locals pivoted their stools to watch us closely again. Stepping outside, I let the screen door slam shut. The loud "WHAP" magically transported us away from the old smoke-filled café, and into the sunlit promise of great adventure.

"Want'a switch bikes for a while?" Brian asked.

"Sure, why not. I gotta see why you're hav'in so much fun."

The FJ entertained me with raw horsepower all the way over the Cascade Mountain range. Brian played aggressively with my bike also, working it hard. We arrived in Salem around dusk. After four back-to-back 500+ mile days, I looked forward to working awhile and giving the riding a break.

While I worked for the next five days, Brian rode down to the San Francisco area to visit his Air Force friend. Upon returning, he raved about Highway-1, famed for it's twisting ribbon of asphalt zigzagging across the California hilltops. I regretted not being able to share it with him, but in another way—sometimes it's good to be alone. Often others distract from the richness of the moment. When Brian joined the Air Force, he resisted my suggestions of what jobs to have, and which bases were good. He wanted his own adventure, one different from mine. There's wisdom in that kind of thinking.

Chapter 5

New Connections

The week of work passed quickly, and Sunday morning signaled riding time again. We were 2000 miles from home and our journey had hardly begun—an adventurous realization indeed. After some last minute adjustments, Brian had all his bike parts back where they belonged again. We took a side trip to Crater Lake National Park on the way to Medford, but I found the park difficult to appreciate. The park looked tired, worn down by too many visitors. Nothing seemed unusual or noteworthy. Maybe it reflected my disposition—the mid afternoon blahs were operating my viewfinder to the world at the time. Perhaps I looked too far down the road, with anticipation interrupting the present moment. Unsettled moods and all, we left quickly heading for Medford. Brian rode ahead of me, but he stayed hidden in the blazing setting sun. While passing through a small town, I had my second encounter with the law—speeding again. The officer asked the usual questions, and I responded in my rehearsed fashion. It had become a game of chance, never being sure of the dynamics tipping the scales. The risk was ever-present. The officer went through the customary check of my documents. I explained that my son rode ahead of me and I that needed to keep up with him. I then added that the setting sun blinded me to the speed limit signs. I apologized for my oversight. He thumped my license in his hand a few times, and then relaxed his posture, put on a mini-smile, and let me go. “UNREAL!” The patrolman wished us well on the trip, then interjected, "Tell your son to get his hands back on the handlebars." I rolled my eyes, and then nodded okay. "Jeez Brian," I muttered while pulling my helmet back on.

The first day of the rally felt awkward since we didn't know any of the 60 to 70 riders participating. Broken into small, randomly organized squads, we headed out on our first day's ride. Our group chose the Coastal Range Mountains route, following a ribbon of paved logging roads. The twisted road carried us upwards into the clouds thick enough to hide the road. We rode slowly, carefully picking our way

along the obscure roadway. Once the clouds broke, we quickened our pace, descending to the Pacific Ocean. Upon reaching the waters named by Vasco Da Balboa, we turned north to follow the scenic coastal highway.

I looked for the telltale signs of bike campers: tents and sleeping bags strapped to the back of the motorcycle. The only camper we spotted wore black leathers, and a burgundy colored helmet matching his 87 Concours. He left an indelible first impression—a slender, middle-aged man, sporting wire-framed glasses. He spoke with a British accent. Other than his plans to camp, we knew nothing about him.

Our group approached the campground a few miles south of Portland, Oregon. The majority planned to stay in a motel, so they rode on past the entrance, leaving only three of us to stop. Pulling up to the tollgate, we paid our dues, and learned we were the first bikes to enter that evening. Car campers and RV's filled most of the prime camping spots, so we pushed on to an overflow section in the middle of an open, treeless area. I grimaced at the blandness of the site, but since the sun would surrender to the evening, the shade became unnecessary. Perhaps the openness would help welcome the stars to our campsite.

Though relegated to the overflow area, we found a good spot easily, as only a few campers occupied that section of the park. Our camping companion's name was Noel Mulloy, which I learned during a brief introductory handshake. We then busied ourselves setting up camp. Noel was no stranger to tent pegs and rip-stop nylon. His olive drab camping gear looked like Army-issue. However, the British accent and the Army didn't match. I hurried to set up, wanting to find out more about the stranger. With the last hook secured on the rain-fly, I stowed the stuff sacks in the saddlebag. While preparing the first probing question to Noel, the sound of a bike riding across the open area interrupted my silent rehearsal.

"I'll be darn, another Concours!" Noel shouted.

We were easy to spot; even so, I waved jubilantly—as if he was a son returning from a foreign land. A kindred spirit I thought—the lone traveler who magically found the three of us.

He rode a red 91 Concours and wore blackish-gray Dainese leathers. As he pulled up, the friendliness of his expression peeked from under his raised shield. His eagerness in finding us equaled our pleasure in becoming a group of four instead of three. He packed lightly—a small tank-bag, a bedroll, and whatever he squeezed into the saddlebags.

I said to Brian, "Must be a rookie—in sharp leathers." His name was Dan Vrisimo; Calgary, Alberta the place of his origination. Dan looked to be on the early side of middle age, with graying hair cut short and brushed forward, and a medium build hanging on a six-foot frame. His facial features were strikingly similar to the movie actor Richard Gere. I didn't recall seeing Dan in Medford earlier, so I asked, "Were ya with us this morning Dan?"

He responded with a Canadian accent in a deep, booming voice. "No, I'm coming straight from Calgary."

Unencumbered of traveling and camping gear, I asked if he was camping or moteling it?

"I'm camping with you guys—there'll be others camping, eh?"

I laughed and said, "I think we're it. Don't you use a tent Dan?"

Dan explained his bivouac sleeping bag that would keep him dry. I thought it looked compellingly simple now, but jokingly wondered what it would be like north of Craig, Colorado.

Noel put the finishing touches on his home for the night, and then sat on the picnic table to rest. "Where you from Noel?" He looked up and said what sounded like Colonna. I acknowledged his response, while quickly translating the Queen's English. "Where's Colonna?" I queried.

"It's Kelowna...Kelowna, British Columbia," he corrected in an irritated tone.

I hid my geographical stupidity by remaining quiet. Further settling in with our campmates revealed that Noel taught high school English, having moved to British

Columbia from England 26 years before. Dan worked as a software developer in Calgary. A few details later also dispelled the rookie notion—Dan’s efficiency and light load fooled me. Brian and I enjoyed their company, nevertheless we watched for telltale behaviors, anything to help us calibrate if they were okay, or were otherwise. Noel said little, only enough to answer questions with short, choppy responses. He sat quietly on the picnic table with his gaze locked onto the ground. His silver hair rested in complete disorder, and his reddish face looked old and tired. Perhaps the long day’s ride tired him out, just as it did me. Dan acted more alert. He chose his words carefully when speaking, making him sound well educated and self-assured. He developed a natural rapport with Brian, partly because both lived the life of bachelors, and both had an affinity for technology. I felt more aligned with Noel—old, tired, and slightly grumpy. Regardless of our differences though, we sat around a fire long into the evening, sorting out the day, and each other.

Chapter 6

Exercise & New Yorkers

We awoke to a clear sky, atypical for western Oregon. Packing quickly, we headed to the Denny's restaurant next to Interstate-5. Over fried eggs and coffee, we plotted our route to Port Angeles, Washington. After breakfast, we headed north with side trips to the Mt St. Helens and Mt Rainier areas. By late afternoon, the rush hour traffic of Tacoma released us into the slow, predominant drizzle of the Pacific Northwest. We planned to camp, but the rain changed our minds, making a unanimous decision effortless. The motel selected for the rally headquarters filled quickly, so we ended up in an alternate motel; equally pricey, but appreciated only by the desperate. After checking in, we enjoyed a nice dinner together, and then turned in early, for tomorrow would yield more unexplored roads.

An overcast morning welcomed us to the new day. It began with exercises, heart-pumping, artery stretching exercises. After more than 3000 miles, the FJ decided to sleep late in Port Angeles. It refused to wake up! We pushed Brian's bike around and around the parking lot until we dropped. Exhausted of energy and good explanations, we gasped for air as his bike continued to snore away. Huffing and puffing, we decided on some exploratory surgery. Brian removed his motorcycle's skin to reach the ignition components. The connections at the coils were suspect. Having both coils fail simultaneously seemed remote, but too pooped to push that beast any further, we settled for no explanation. We patiently stood with crossed arms, and fingers, while Brian applied his magic with a folding Buck knife. After reassembling all the pieces, another trip around the parking lot finally brought life to the bike, and our winded spirits. We lost considerable time, however, our concern for the delay cleared like the mist. Rolling eastward, we headed towards the ferry that would float us to Whidbey Island.

Just as we approached the loading ramp, the ferry disconnected from the dock. "Ugh!" The boat wouldn't return for another hour and a half. The second major

time delay of the morning would make it difficult to get to Penticton, BC for the rally banquet that evening. We rolled the bikes to the front of the queuing area and began our wait. Like men detained, we paced back and forth, mostly staring at the ground, with an occasional glance at our watches. During the delay, we exchanged addresses, phone numbers, and asked questions about work and families. We had an early lunch while waiting for our ship to come in, that we hoped would make up for lost time. Our delays totaled three hours. The ferry would delivery us to Whidbey Island, and then a bridge on the other side of the island would carry us back to the mainland.

Once loaded and secured, the boat's engines started grumbling, sending vibrations throughout the structure as it slowly inched away from the dock. We cautiously stood beside our bikes, securing the tethering before wandering about the boat. I struck up a conversation with two other motorcyclists from the Bronx, who were circumnavigating the lower 48 states. They had ridden from New York to Florida, across the bottom to San Diego, headed north to the northwest corner of Washington, and now danced along the Canadian/USA border on their way back home. Listening to their story pulled me into the adventure—I wanted to travel with them. They carried a couple of high-tech toys: a cell phone, and a laptop computer. They documented the odyssey as they traveled, and emailed segments back to their coworkers in the New York office. Technology provided the means to experience both ends of the socialization spectrum with the push of a button. The guys in the New York office could taste the isolation of a mountaintop in the Cascades, while the adventurers could get a ticker-tape download from Wall Street. In spite of the electronic gadgets, a low-tech oddity snared my attention; stalks of celery protruded from a zippered pouch on the back of one of the bikes. I made no comment, but thought it unusual; celery and leather normally travel in separate circles. They dressed in thick leather pants and jackets, making them look puffy, like the Pillsbury doughboy. Black bags and packs covered their bikes. Looking closer, one rode a Honda V65 Magna, and the other a Honda VF1000 Interceptor. To date, a missed turn, and a resulting trip into a Louisiana bayou served as their only near-

miss event. They reported several coaching lessons with the local police along the way, but fortunately, they were all no-charge sessions.

The stretch of water across Admiralty Inlet never fully released its grip on the surrounding terrain. Just as we lost sight of our departed landmass, the opposite shore faintly appeared. Soon, the engines throttled back; our floating journey neared an end. The laden vessel bumped the dock, as we bumped our starter buttons. Receiving the signal from the dock attendant, we roared across the ramp like a pack of penned up hunting dogs turned loose. Our careless urges surprised me. A longer ferry ride would likely cause launching urges similar to the starting grid at Road Atlanta. Common sense soon rejoined us, and our pace moderated. After crossing back to the mainland, we parted company with the New Yorkers. I privately wished them a safe journey.

Chapter 7

Canyon Chopper

In spite of being three hours behind schedule, Brian's FJ continued hitting on all four cylinders. We rode towards Rainy Pass, which would lift us over the northern Cascade Range. The moderate gradient from Whidbey Island to Rainy Pass traversed upwards for 115 miles, as the scent changed from aquatic to forest. A motorcyclist must have designed the road—very smooth, with an abundance of predictable curves. Once in the twisties, I pushed the Concours over to extreme angles, confidently holding the bars steady while carving graceful arcs. The gentle incline made braking unnecessary. I merely dialed it in and held the throttle motionless while dancing from curve to curve. I looked back over my shoulder to see Brian waving his fisted hand in jubilation. He had never seen his dad push the old Concours over to such acute angles. Nor had I—the awesome feeling of being "on my game" visited so sparingly. Everything came together, the separation between the bike, the road, and me dissolved into a unity. A 7000-RPM magic carpet of oneness wound its way up higher and higher, rising into the cool misty air.

The magic carpet ride ended abruptly with a loud thumping noise bouncing from the canyon walls. I instinctively ducked my head, "What the hell!" It sounded like a helicopter settling down right on top of me. I looked quickly over my right shoulder towards the rock face—nothing! My heart raced as the noise intensified. "Jeez, it's behind me—straight overhead!" Suddenly the thumping shifted to my left side. Almost snapping my neck, I quickly swung my head back, expecting to see a chopper landing on the road. But—no helicopter. Instead, the corner of my eye caught the red fender of the FJ, with Brian in a full-tuck, slowly inching past me. Pounding like a Vietnam era chopper, the old FJ decided to go for the summit with only two cylinders. Brian's wrist feverishly twisted the throttle trying to get the power to keep going upwards and onwards. The FJ's demons reduced it to a 600cc bike, involuntarily supporting two 300cc air-compressors. I stayed even with him; sensing he would welcome some company during his misery. Dan and Noel came up

on our backs, and the voices spewing forth from the Vance & Hines canister shouted that exercise time had arrived. "Come on...come on; just get to the top," I whispered through clinched teeth.

Brian's bike snorted and popped, but we finally reached the summit. Pulling to the shoulder of the road, we rested the bikes while assessing our situation. The map showed Winthrop to be 25 miles down the mountain. It would be easy for the FJ to head downhill with only two cylinders, so we decided to make a run for it, and work on it down in the valley. While preparing to roll, silly antics visited me, perhaps born out of nervous frustration with that darn FJ. "Let's race to the bottom...without engines," I suggested. That suited Brian just fine, as it would let his bike cool down. We lined up across the road. With the gearboxes in neutral, and engines silent, we pushed off with our legs. The grunts and giggles soon gave way to the whirring of transmissions, as the tires grabbed for the road surface. We instinctively ducked low to make more perfect airfoils. The speedometer needle moved slowly past 35, then 40, and then 45. The wind whistled by my helmet, harmonizing with the gear songs. With gravity as the engine, the advantage favored low rolling resistance, and aerodynamics. Drafting strategy would play a big role towards the end of the run, but by far and away, the edge favored the coaster that had the guts to stay off the brakes, or the good sense to use them.

We were neck and neck as we approached the first turn. Entering the curve, I carefully pushed the left grip forward, following the bike's sharp lean into the corner. Suddenly, the slipping sound of the tires clawing for the road pushed my heart into my throat. I instinctively reached for a touch of rear brake. Dan and Noel apparently heard the same desperate slipping, as we stayed even while Brian moved slightly ahead at the end of turn one. Gaining familiarity with the sliding sounds kept the pucker factor low, however it didn't help my position in the race; I now occupied last place. Brian moved too far ahead to consider using as a drafting vehicle, but Noel and Dan stayed within working distance. I lamented about running last—my bravado apparently having more drag than aerodynamics.

The road began to straighten out as we continued our decent. I could no longer see Brian. Having already won the race, he apparently fired up and headed for Winthrop to work on his sick bike. Meanwhile, we three stragglers continued to jockey for position. It became clearer as the road flattened out that the person running last might win. The trailing low-pressure system, the draft, provided a welcomed power-boost. However, the mountain challenged us to figure out when the last downhill section would occur, and then make our move. I guessed wrong and ended up in last place. In spite of losing, Brian's absence brought relief. We later located him at a gas station in Winthrop, his tank already removed.

Moisture in the ignition system remained the prime suspect. We waited patiently, trying to be helpful as Brian cleaned and dried every connection. While he worked, I sat in the sun, wondering about Mary Jean, and remembering her silent concern about this trip. She wouldn't know of the problems with Brian's bike, or would she? I tried to remember details of home, family and work, but fifteen days of constant change dislodged detailed recollections. I experienced a strange disorientation, drifting further and further away from what I once knew. My immediate identification latched onto this undefined being experiencing endless sensations on a motorcycle, day, after day, after day. Unexamined, the day and the month hid in obscurity, the state we traversed remained unnamed. The disorientation lingered, punctuated by the clanking of Brian's tools, and the soft conversations of Noel and Dan. Yet the bewilderment blended with a feeling of unencumbered freedom, freedom to just be with each moment, with each experience, with each helicopter landing on my head. Perhaps old associations gave way to fresher and more relevant connections. The past seemed vague because it stayed in Kansas fifteen days before—something new slowly emerging to replace the old. Like the ferry ride to Whidbey Island, I sensed the void between the old familiar dock and the distant new shore. I floated along in a sea of present moments, clinging to a life preserver of awareness, waiting for the new landfall to appear. Strangely, it seemed unimportant if it ever appeared.

My reflections ended with the whirring starter of the FJ. We lost another hour getting Brian's two-wheeled helicopter hitting on all four cylinders again. "We're going to miss the banquet if we don't hurry," I said stretching to get up. Noel interjected caution about the strict speed limits in Canada. Memories of Winthrop quickly faded as our wandering Gypsy caravan roared towards the Canadian border.

Chapter 8

Canadian Ducks

Once we cleared the Canadian border checkpoint, I calculated our arrival time in Penticton, BC. We moved swiftly—still hoping to catch the banquet dinner, yet knowing no time would be available to find a camping spot or cleanup beforehand. With Noel's caution in mind, he became the point man on our evening patrol into British Columbia. Heavy traffic impeded our progress as we worked our way through the back-markers. Noel seemed to ignore his earlier caution about speed limits; we nervously followed suit. I had fallen behind, unable to pass. The frustration of peeking around slow traffic eventually became unnecessary. Instead, I just listened, waiting to hear the roar of that gnarly old FJ getting on the pipe. The signal drifted on the wind, telling me the Gypsies were making their move. I pinned the throttle, and pushed left, making a mad dash into the Canadian night.

The parking lot of the motel brimmed with on-time arrivals. We squeezed in amongst the other bikes, and then hurried towards the banquet room. We moved quickly down a corridor where lively discussions echoed from the double doors ahead. Walking in, the crowd looked up from their dinners and conversations. Our conspicuous entrance embarrassed me, but a hearty appetite led us through the stares. Fortunately, ample food remained. We navigated through the crowd to the buffet table where we filled our plates with banquet delights. As I reached for the celery on the relish tray, a spontaneous thought about the New Yorkers popped in my head. I wondered where they were eating tonight—it could not be this good! We quickly blended in with the others, eating away while the speeches spewed forth and the door prizes found homes.

When the dinner and speeches finished, we gathered our door prizes, and headed back to the parking lot. We still didn't have a nest for the night. We rode back to the south edge of town where we had spotted a campground earlier. Luckily, a few sites remained, ours being next to a small pond with a duck population. Campers packed

the campground—their tents silhouetting in the glow of campfires. We however decided against a fire, choosing instead to manage in the dark. Walking in the dark next to a duck bunkhouse had its perils though; we kept our shoes on. Noel and Dan's minimalist approach to camping continued to impress me. After we fumbled around in the dark setting up our camp, we found the showers not far away. Being the first to wander off with a towel and bar of soap, I returned dirty—they were pay showers! Being Yanks, neither Brian nor I had Canadian coins. The campground store closed an hour ago, dooming us to another day of that grimy feeling.

My bad news didn't change Noel's plans however. In his best Queen's English, he said, "I have change enough for one of us, so I'll have a'go at it mates."

He then wandered off into the night air to freshen up a bit. Meanwhile, Brian, Dan and I poured a drink of fine bourbon and began our night-talks amidst the croaking frogs and sleeping ducks. Enjoying the evening for a while, we then heard mumbling coming from the direction of the showers. The disgruntled voice grew louder as it headed our way through the darkness. Noel then appeared from the shadows, still grumbling.

"What's wrong?" Dan asked in his deep voice.

"The bloody shower took my bloody money and I only got a trickle of bloody cold water!" he blasted.

We laughed, not at him, but at his predicament. "Noel, have a drink with us," I offered. He declined. Nevertheless, he settled in at our table for some conversation. "Where'd you learn to camp Noel—you make it look easy," I commented. He said that he served in the British Special Forces many years ago. Competing with the croaking frogs, he began to tell of his military experiences, sleeping in snake-infested waters just to stay alive. Just after he really pulled me into his story, and before he revealed where this happened, his voice cracked. He stopped abruptly; it became uncomfortably quiet. He didn't continue, nor did we pursue any further.

"Quack—Quack—Quack"; our feathered bunkmates rudely broke the morning silence. The unusual alarm signaled the new day would not be the usual dreaded day of work. I smiled, while crawling out of the sleeping bag and getting dressed. It didn't take Dan long to break camp; being fully contained in his simple weatherproof sleeping bag. Other than migration, Dan and the ducks had similar strategies for an evenings rest. Noel was equally quick; efficiency learned from experiences in a swamp, but where would remain a mystery. Brian and I had to hustle just keep up with these two Canadian pros. I quietly prayed for a safe day while wiping the fresh morning dew from the windshield. "Let's roll!" I hollered, fogging my faceshield over.

Chapter 9

Chief Timothy

A few Canadian T-shirts later, we crossed back into Washington. We were in our fourth day of the rolling rally, winding along the Washington/Idaho border, heading for Lewiston, ID. Boredom pestered us most of the day as we pushed southward.

I instinctively looked for a runway when we crested the hill. Lewiston, Idaho welcomed us by presenting a 4,000-foot aerial view of the Snake River weaving through her heart. We followed the yellow lines, descending in a zigzag fashion down the mountain face. The river congested itself with nervous logs awaiting the sharp saw teeth within the mill. We rolled back on the throttles and sat upright, using our bodies as air brakes, floating gently into the ubiquitous scent of fresh-cut lumber. Once my ears finished popping, I felt acclimated to the lower elevation. We stopped in midtown to talk about our plans for the evening. Studying the wrinkled map revealed a campground on the Washington side of the state line named Chief Timothy. We fueled up with liquefied dinosaurs, snack food, and ice—the evening talk-juice already on-board, stowed in my bloated saddlebags. We then marched west, like the early pioneers, looking for the promise land.

We rolled into the yawning sun on US Hwy 12, grimacing at the desert-like surroundings. Ol' Chief Timothy would have to be good to compensate for the arid, sandy colored terrain. While pounding out the requisite 10 miles along the Snake River, I prepared for disappointment. Staring into the setting sun, I searched for any indication of life. Suddenly, a faded sign appeared, signaling a campground. Beyond the sign, an old bridge crossed the river, leading to colorful tents nestled amongst the green trees. Life! Green life!

The bike tires rattled the wooden bridge planks, as we approached the Chief's front door. No one greeted us, so we slowly rolled into the oasis. The exquisitely manicured lawns seem more fitting for a Palm Springs golf course than a campground. The adjacent river provided angling sport as well as welcomed drink

for the lush green grass. However, after a day of riding in semi-arid country, we appreciated the green tundra more than catching our dinner. We made a wide sweep on the outer circle of the park, finding a spot that looked perfect. Four key-clicks later, quietness settled in, except for the cooling exhaust pipes ticking in the high desert air, and Noel grunting to centerstand his bike.

I promptly scouted for firewood, but previous campers had picked the park clean. My priority then shifted towards hygiene. The showers across the road looked promising. I took off my leather jacket, then my boots, my leather pants, and lastly my socks. My feet giggled with delight as they sunk into the cool, lush turf. Once comfortably outfitted, I helped Brian erect the tent, as my tootsies continued their laughs of delight. Just as I turned to walk towards the shower, a man approached from across the road. I winced at the thought of a campground chatterbox. My fears quickly retreated as a robust grin crossed his face, and then asked if we would like some firewood. I smiled and said, "That'd be nice, thanks." He eyed the bikes while asking questions about our trip. He was not a motorcyclist, yet he wished he could travel with us. However, I could see his struggle with an adventure of this type; his family watched from their campsite across the road. Being a family man, his struggle seemed similar to mine...the conflict between safety and adventure, between being with your family and being alone. I wondered why we chose different paths. Does he worry about a life of adventures not taken? Should I worry more about a life of too many adventures, only to die as a lonely and estranged man? Maybe it wasn't that simple or clear-cut, but this strange man raised the question. He caught me glancing at the showers, which prompted him to politely excuse himself. He wished us well on our trip, and then showed us his stack of firewood. Life's full of nice people I thought—I judged him too quickly.

Tepid steam rushed from the concrete shower stall as the heated water bounced from my back. The outdoor mountain air amplified the sensations of the warm shower. Once dried off, I slipped on a clean pair of Hanes, and walked back to the tent through the cool evening air. Dan helped carry some wood from our neighbor's campsite while Brian and Noel showered. I stuck a match and ignited the kindling,

ushering the nightlife to our site. I wiggled my naked feet in the cool grass, as the flames warmed my ankles. Soon Brian and Noel returned from the showers, and crowded in next to the fire to warm up.

"I wonder where they're spending the night?" I casually asked.

"Who?" Noel asked. "

"The guys from New York." No one responded. "Did you guys notice the celery that one guy carried?" They turned to look at me, their faces carrying blank stares, while their minds searched for what I meant.

"What celery?" Dan asked.

"It's not important, never mind," I muttered. The evening lasted only slightly longer than the firewood. In the dim glow of the coals, we bid each other good night while crawling into our homes away from home.

The next morning, a question nudged me from a deep sleep, "Where are you?"

My eyes opened and the blue ambiance of the tent answered.

My mind countered, "I know you're in a tent, but where are you?"

I searched for possibilities. Ordinarily, my days were routine, the imperceptible changes lulling me into believing they were static. However, this rut-widening trip produced a dynamic scene, which I found pleasantly disorienting. I enjoyed the searching for who I was, where I was, and what the day promised. Brian rolled over, his groan bringing me back to the tent, and Chief Joseph. "Good morning BC." I slipped from the sleeping bag, dressed quickly, and then crawled from the tent.

Chapter 10

Blue Legged Turtles

Three cups of coffee, and two donuts later, we left the group of Concours riders at the Lewiston Kawasaki dealership. They would soon make their last day's ride back to Medford, Oregon, while we would journey eastward. Clearing the outskirts of Lewiston, we followed the twisting road traversing the canyon adjacent to the Lochsa River. The road twisted upwards as the oncoming water from the Bitterfoot Range cascaded downwards, seemingly frantic to get to a place of rest. The canyon glistened as the morning sun penetrated the misty air. I felt teary-eyed, not out of sadness, but from joy. Sobbing could flow from both grief and joy; polar opposites held together with tears. I watched the artistry of Dan, Noel, and Brian carving their way upward through the golden glow. Suddenly, my attention shifted from the sparkling mist, interrupted by images of celery. I couldn't dismiss the intrusion this time; my gut tightened with anger, and then the feeling of fear followed. Why did this image pursue me?

The sign on the west edge of Lowell warned that the next services were 70 miles away. Our fuel gauges flirted with the big "E", so we decided to stop. Lowell hardly qualified as a town; a spot in the road more accurately sized it. But, it did have fuel for the bikes, snack food for the tummies, and a shady spot under a large tree for a rest. Our relaxation ended when a forest service vehicle, with lights ablaze, roared down the highway from the east. It slowed down abruptly, turned off the highway, and came to a sudden stop in front of our bikes.

The driver jumped from the truck and asked, "Which direction are you coming from?"

We nodded towards Lewiston. He hesitated, appearing unable to digest our response.

"Why?" Dan asked.

He reported that several motorcycles forced a car off the road east of here. I immediately thought of the New Yorkers.

"What direction were they going?" I asked, while nagging images of celery pestered me.

"West," he blurted out.

I relaxed knowing it could not have been the New Yorkers. I told him that a couple of bikes came by a few minutes ago, heading west. Without any further words, he quickly jumped back in the truck and floored it, kicking up gravel as he sped towards Lewiston.

We continued eastward, following the tumbling river, looking for the foretold activity. We saw nothing regarding the accident the ranger mentioned. Spotting a turnout high above the river, I pulled over. My three companions followed suit.

"Why are we stopping?" Brian asked.

"To get in the water!"

We navigated over the boulders, working our way down the embankment towards the roaring water. The cool rising mist felt refreshing, as the mid-afternoon air had begun to heat up. We removed our boots, socks, and pants. With arms extended like circus high-wire walkers, we carefully jumped from rock to rock, looking for places to dangle our pale legs in the water. The noisy current drowned attempts at conversation. Instead, we sat peacefully on our private rocks, like river turtles basking in the sun. The racing water seemed to know where it was going, like it had been here before. The pace suggested an important destination, with little time for rest. Once past the hairy-legged turtles, it headed down the mountain to eventually fuse into the Pacific Ocean. Resting at home in the vast ocean was an illusion though. The sun would energize it, raising it up to the sky for the journey back to the top of the divide. Ever on the move, ever so determined, yet patient with obstacles, it makes the trip without question. I'd been here before also. Seven years ago while riding my motorcycle to Seattle, my daughter Libby and I stopped for a

dip in the Lochsa. I too had been energized to make the return trip. I felt a kinship with the river's cyclical pattern. We were both travelers; it seemed to be our nature.

My white legs soon had a bluish tint accompanied by a dull ache. Pulling from the water, I air-drying for a few minutes before getting dressed. Once ready, I carefully climbed over the jagged rocks, working my way back to the top of the bank. Peeking over the crest of the ridge, the bikes sat quietly, cooling off in the shade. I pulled the map from my tankbag along with my reading glasses, studying to get a feel for where Brian and I would be by nightfall. If the weather held, we would camp. It wasn't important exactly where, so I settled for "somewhere in Idaho". While refolding the map, a vehicle approached from my backside. I casually glanced over my shoulder to see the headlights. I squinted to focus better, realizing the lights were from two motorcycles. "Hey, some company!" I shouted. As they approached, their engines began to slow down. The amber blinkers flashed as they pulled up behind me and stopped. "My God!" I said aloud—it was the New Yorkers! I gave them a welcoming grin. "How did we get ahead of you?" I asked. "You should be a whole day east of us."

"A sheriff in Washington detained us."

"What for?"

"Doing 110 in a 55," they said in near unison.

They were charged with reckless driving and fined \$500 each. They had to hire a lawyer just to get out of the county with their shirts. I stood there, shaking my head in disbelief. Just then, the other blue-legged turtles lumbered up from the river. In spite of the grim news, the chance reunion brought jokes and laughter.

"We're going east, at least to Lolo; you guys wanna ride with us?" I asked. They nodded affirmatively.

"Okay then, let's hit it!" I responded.

Chapter 11

The Tiger

We brought the bikes up to speed, with me leading our group of six. The warmth from the engine returned comfort to my blue legs. I thought about the New Yorker's report back to the Bronx office. How would one describe a western sheriff and "110 in a 55"? Fine reading, no doubt. The snake of headlights in my mirror appeared to be tethered to my rear fender. I focused alertly while carving the 40-MPH curves at 65. Leading the pack, I tried not to set unrealistic expectations about keeping up with the pace. One of the New Yorkers suddenly blew past me—so much for my vigilant responsibility. My eyes locked onto his leathers fluttering in the wind, his crouched position, and the NY license plate. Most noticeable though were the stalks of celery buffeting about in the fast moving air. "There's that damn celery again!"

No sooner than dismissing my judgements about carelessness, Brian zipped around me also. I quizzically glanced at my speedometer, while hoping that everyone wouldn't pass me. My self-image sunk from confident leadership, to pokey ineptness. Brian and the "celery-rider" quickly disappeared. "Dammit Brian, I don't like this!" Something seemed not right—I could sense a bad situation, but could do nothing but follow.

I pushed the bar left, then right; the bike carved perfect arcs on the sticky asphalt high above the tumbling river. The engine growled with the same confidence felt by me. Back and forth, we sliced through the canyon. Approaching a "40 MPH" sign, I rolled off the throttle, squeezed the clutch lever, and tapped it down a gear for my next assault. I slid left on the seat, pushing the bar down. The bike responded obediently. Suddenly, I sensed something was wrong—dust clouded the air. My antennas went on full alert as I continued cautiously around the curve. Peering around the corner, I caught a glimpse of Brian running towards me, while his bike sat in the tall grass between the edge of the road and the steep riverbank. His face looked terrified! I came to a quick stop, glancing over my right shoulder towards

the river. I gasped! The red, blue and white colors of a motorcycle rippled from under the clear water in the middle of the river. It was the New Yorker! The other three pulled in behind me, eyes locked on the river. I ran back along the road to where Brian jumped over the edge to climb down to the water. Looking down, a lump of black leather lay spread-eagle on the large rocks below. I stood immobilized, unable to move any closer. I watched Brian climb down the rocks to where the “celery rider” landed. Expecting the worst, I watched Brian's face to confirm my worst fear. The black leather moved. "My God, he's alive!" I mumbled. I mustered the courage to move closer. Arriving at the landing zone, I could see he was conscious, and able to roll around slowly on the rock. Blood oozed from under the black leather of his right sleeve. He sprawled on the rock, staring blankly at his bike in the river. He managed to mumble out a question, asking whose motorcycle was in the river. We didn't answer, and he really didn't want to know, at least not yet. We asked a few lah-lah land questions, like what his name was, where he was from, and where we were. He flunked—zero for three. Dan reported that help was on the way. Apparently, a wrecker working on a stalled RV about a quarter mile up the road saw the accident. They went to a nearby house to call for help.

While waiting, we took turns helping the victim remain comfortable and calm. Fearing shock, the less he knew about what happened, the better. The “celery rider’s companion said nothing, but quietly tried to help by staying near. What a story segment for the office in the Bronx, first the reckless driving charge, and now the reckless driving and its associated trip into the river. I climbed to the top of the riverbank; I needed some space to get a grip on what had happened. Surveying the scene, it was a miracle that he was alive! I walked back to the road to follow his flight plan. He left the shoulder, immediately low-siding the bike. He slid on his side for about 25 feet through the tall grass, coming off the bike just prior to his space walk. The bike landed in the middle of the river, about 75 feet from the cliff's edge. He didn't fly as far, landing at the water's edge on the large rock 25 feet below. I shook my head in disbelief. Putting all this together, I estimated that he left the pavement doing about 70 MPH. He started his Frisbee like flight at around 60 MPH. How could he be alive?

Brian lumbered up the bank and slowly walked my way. Noel stood beside me while I labored at composure. I looked Brian squarely in the face, but was afraid to say anything. I was angry, scared, and thankful all at the same time. Taking a deep breath, I tried to settle myself. I put my hand on his shoulder, wanting to hug him, but instead said, "Brian, I know you were...you were somehow connected to this." I paused to gain composure, and then continued. "No matter how innocent your actions were, you were still part of it."

I then looked away, not pressing him for a response. I wasn't ready for what I feared the truth to be. Brian put his head down, and without saying a word, turned and walked away. "Noel, I'm so thankful that's not Brian sprawled on the rocks. I'm also glad that he experienced the other side of the razor's edge without someone getting killed." My heart ached while watching my number-two son stare at the scene below. The others quietly wandered around, wishing to be alone with their thoughts.

The wail of the siren came from the east, quickly joining the ambulance racing around the corner towards us. Once stopped, the crew hustled down the rocks to our man-of-the-hour. They spent considerable time checking his condition before putting him on the gurney. We helped pass him along a human escalator until reaching the top. Carefully sliding him in the back of the ambulance, the attendant then hopped in and pulled the doors closed. The ambulance moved away, heading up the hill towards Missoula—the lights flashing, but no siren. As the others slowly wandered back toward their bikes, I walked one last time along his fateful path from the road. I looked in the tall grass, walking slowly, looking for I knew not what. However, it found me. I lurched back! Nestled in the grass like a hunting tiger, four green stalks of celery stared directly at me!

Chapter 12

Parting

I led the pack again as we rode east towards the top of Lolo Pass. I felt numb, dead to the world. Something kept holding me back, causing unnatural effort to get up to the speed limit. A part of me had died; I was grieving—for what, I did not know. Perhaps the illusion that motorcycling was safe had died. My God, what kind of a sport had I lured Brian into? Maybe it was rationality that died—that the celery repeatedly coming into my mind was more than coincidence. I wondered about the meaning of the celery; what was its message? The dashed white lines flowed steadily by my left knee as I dug deeply, searching for answers.

Varooooom! I jumped straight in the air as Noel roared by. "It looked like Noel's was finished grieving. Dan was next to pass, then the lone New Yorker, and lastly, but very timidly, Brian. It was time for me to leave the funeral parlor also, and get on with the trip. Inspired with good intentions, it was nevertheless a formidable struggle.

We stopped for a late lunch in Lolo. Eating mostly in silence, we privately planned our journeys home. We discussed visiting the hospital in Missoula, but "celery rider's" friend suggested that we keep going on our trip—a visit wouldn't be necessary. After lunch, we rolled to the gas pumps for another fill, and then bid our farewells. The New Yorker aimed towards the hospital; the Canadians pointed to the cool north—Brian and me to the warm south. After a final wave, we separated.

The others were gone now; I felt the journey opening up, becoming simpler. With just the two of us, the terrain seemed larger and strangely more inhospitable. Though feeling less secure, the vulnerability created an eagerness about the road ahead. I felt the bike surge forward, like being swallowed up in the vastness of the high country. We let go and followed the pull.

Earlier in the day, we left Idaho using the Lolo Pass, a lofty gateway on the Idaho and Montana border. The late afternoon returned us to Idaho via another high passageway, the Lost Trail Pass. We climbed a twisting road towards the summit. My magic carpet invited me to jump on, but the fate of the "celery rider" kept my butt firmly planted. Brian remained grounded also. The hollowness intensified. Brian moved from his trailing position to ride by my side, appearing to feel the emptiness also. I glanced at him and smiled; a smile he couldn't see through the dirty tinted shield. We moved along in unison, as though we had become one—together today, alone tomorrow. We were reducing too fast! First, the "celery rider", then his companion along with our friends Dan and Noel—tomorrow I would lose Brian. My red motorcycle hummed along, oblivious to the deepening emptiness.

The Lost Trail Pass border crossing let us proceed unquestioned, and signaled the beginning our descent to the valley. Perspectives and feelings in constant flux, we drifted downward towards Salmon, Idaho. The sun flirted with the horizon as we decelerated past the edge of town. The main street bustled with young people getting ready for Saturday night. We idled past the onlookers, looking for fuel. We were a novelty in Salmon, pulling stares toward our bug-splattered bikes. I suddenly had a flashback of my return from Vietnam 30 years ago. Vietnam was such an unusual experience that my ordinary life at home paled in comparison. Like Vietnam, this trip had become a quick tour of a foreign land, only this time the landscape was of my mind. Ordinary life, once again, seemed destined to remain in the shadows. I could feel the traveling urges pass to those watching. Being on stage diminished the nagging feelings of separation from Dan and Noel. Just the two from Kansas now—the others were gone. A strong feeling of passage or transcendence visited as I peered at the onlookers. The glowing neon sign on our left promised everything we needed. We pulled in, our only unmet need being fuel.

Brian's recently acquired worldliness collided with life in Salmon. "They're stuck here! How can they stand it? They'll never learn there's a big world out there," he lamented.

Although I understood well what he felt, I didn't say anything, mostly because our hometown was much smaller than Salmon. Perhaps isolation was a perspective dressed in subjective camouflage.

"Brian, it wasn't just you," I said without preface. He looked at me quizzically. "Back at the wreck—it wasn't just you involved in the "celery rider's" trip into the river. We were all part of the scene."

"Some were just closer than others, huh," he said with a sigh of relief.

"Want to camp tonight dad?"

"Sure do, this will be our last night."

Chapter 13

Flashes

I wanted our last night to be a wilderness experience. With little daylight remaining, we rode south, racing along under the watchful eye of the Continental Divide. The dry air at 7000-feet complimented the sagebrush. Spotting a dirt road that wound its way toward the green trees in the distant high country, we followed its lure. Bouncing along the rough trail, the verdant foothills seemed to run from us as we approached. With little daylight remaining, we decided to stop where we were and pitch the tent. Looking in all directions, we saw nothing but distant silhouettes. Brian and I stood quietly, feeling the isolation penetrate. "Brian, sure glad you're with me—this is kinda spooky," I remarked, half-joking and half-serious. He said nothing, but instead proceeded to put up the tent. An evening fire would have been nice, but I suddenly felt uneasy about advertising our presence. We instead would let the night quietly consume us. We tied the tent rain-fly cords to our bikes as a precaution against something unknown. Rain was unlikely because of the terrain high dessert terrain, and the blackened sky sparkled with glimmering jewels. Impressions of distance vanished with the last lights of dusk, as we quietly looked around adjusting to the vast blackness.

“How can ‘nothing’ be so spooky Brian? It’s usually the opposite of ‘nothing’ that gets us. Maybe we’re naturally scared of what we don’t know...scared of solitude.”

“The only visitor to solitude is a speculative mind,” he offered in a calm, philosophic tone.

“Gee, that’s pretty good Brian. This is a good place to test your mind’s rev-limiter, don’t ya think?” I paused, and then asked, “Are you tired?”

"Yep, I’m pooped...we just as well crawl in the tent."

Carrying the flashlight, I led the way. I hung the light from a lanyard dangling from the ceiling. We moved our gear around, undressed, and slipped comfortably into

our sleeping bags. After reaching up to turn off the light, blackness knocked. We held still and speechless, adjusting to nothingness. "Well Brian, this is our last night; we've been on an incredible journey," I said while pulling the sleeping bag over my shoulders. "I wonder if we'll ever be able to top it?"

From the darkness came, "Yeah, I'll never forget it dad."

I let the silence have its way for a while, and then broke in, "Brian, some strange things have been happening lately."

"Like what?" he cautiously asked.

"I've been stalked by the celery the New Yorker carried."

He laughed, "Stalked by stalks!"

"No, seriously, the celery came to my attention on the ferry—it seemed odd, but I let it drop. Then, for the next couple of days, the celery kept coming back to my attention. I last saw it in the grass where the New Yorker wrecked. I then knew its pestering me had some kind of meaning. The images haven't returned since the wreck." Brian remained silent. "I wonder if the celery was a premonition. It's like something knew about the wreck two days ago, and the celery was the omen. Then once the forewarned event happened, the celery disappeared." I paused for a moment. "If the celery was an omen, I was too late figuring it out; its meaning didn't materialize until the event ran its course."

"I wonder what other events are still running their courses?" he asked.

"Yeah, at least the ones that we are part of," I added."

Brian continued, "Maybe the celery was some kind of link, like...like a connection between the old and the new."

"Huh? What old? What new?"

“Remember, you told me about the excitement you felt as the ferry left the dock. That’s when you first saw the celery. You said that you felt you were leaving something behind, and that something was being replaced with something new.”

“Where does the ‘new’ fit in?”

“I’m really reaching here, but because the celery quit appearing after we left the wreck, maybe it symbolized the beginning of what replaced the old. I’m just looking at what was happening when the celery came into your mind, and what happened when it left. You describe the celery as if it had a life of its own...other words, you didn’t call it to your attention, it called you!”

“I don’t get the connection with the wreck and something ‘new’. But ya know, the wreck felt like a death to me, I really grieved for something. But the death wouldn’t represent something ‘new’!”

“Why not? That’s what death is isn’t it...a new beginning, a transformation?”

“Yeah, it’s like a cycle of birth and death. I had a sensation of being cyclical when we dangled our legs in the river. I had been there before, but it was a different ‘me’ sitting on the rocks this time. We’ve been moving along on our motorcycles, not only following the highway, but more importantly, cycling from one energy field to another...following an energy field shifting to its opposite pole.” Each transition brings a refreshed traveler to a new position...a new understanding.”

"We're both weird dad," he chuckled.

"Hell, I don’t know...I’m grasping at what it all means. I still don’t understand the role of the celery, except it has been instrumental getting me to think about all this weird stuff. Regardless, this isn’t something you can discuss at a Chamber of Commerce meeting." We let the quiet settle back into darkness of our tent while digesting what had just been said.

Suddenly, the skin of the tent flickered with a flash of light. "Did you see that Brian?" I said whispering.

"Yeah, what was it?"

"I don't know; could it be lightning?"

"The skies are clear, and no thunder," he quickly countered.

"I don't know—strange whatever it was." My pulse quickened its surge against my chest. We froze in the darkness, my eyes locked wide open, while my mind raced. The tent flashed again! We said nothing, too afraid to speak. I feverishly searched for answers, "Could it be an airplane? How could anyone be out here? We would have heard someone come from the highway. Maybe someone was already between the foothills and us. Maybe it came from a secret military installation up on the mountain doing some weird stuff. UFO's, were they real?" The light flashed again, this time brighter. I heard nothing except my heart pulsing in my eardrum. I didn't know what to do—whether to stay helplessly still in the tent, or go outside to put an end to the rampant speculation. Brian didn't move. Scared beyond good sense, I crawled from the sleeping bag, and while kneeling on the tent floor, unzipped the window flap. I peered into the darkness. The tent flickered again, but I saw nothing outside causing it. I quietly unzipped the door flap. Dressed only in shorts, I crawled out into the night on my hands and knees. I waited on all fours, listening intently, as the cool desert air prompted a quick shiver. The light hit the tent again. This time I could see what looked like a light beam bouncing across the night sky, then disappeared so quickly that I couldn't tell where it came from. Erie silence pervaded the darkness, as I remained motionless.

"What do ya see dad?"

"Nothing," I whispered. "Well, not exactly nothing—I'm not sure what I just saw." I stood up brushing the dirt from my knees. I stared into the black starlit sky with my senses on full alert. I felt the tent flap brush against my leg as Brian wiggled from the tent. We stood silently in the pitch black, scanning in all directions, looking for anything. The longer we stood there, the more nothing happened. "Whatever it was, it seems to have gone to bed Brian."

"Maybe we should too," he said. "It was probably just some more energy taking a little polar trip."

We crawled back in the tent and slipped in the bags. I pulled the bag over my head, not wanting to see any more light until morning. After a day of the "celery rider" in the river, and our tent flickering in the dark, I was ready for rest. Though reluctant, sleep eventually visited our tent.

Chapter 14

Handshakes & Hugs

We greeted the dawn's first light with relief. Looking outside, everything that was once scary now seemed safe. Just as when we arrived last night, there was nothing around us but the distant peaks. We pulled the tent poles from the corner pins, watching the puffy fabric softly settle to the ground. A few minutes later we were slowly bumping along the rocky road looking for the highway. Once we hit the asphalt, we pointed south towards the bacon and eggs.

Brian must have been hungry; he let the FJ have its way. We rolled down the 7000-foot plateau at triple digit speeds. Throttling back in the tiny town of Mud Lake, we came to a stop in front of a café promising breakfast. It would be our last chance to break bread together, so we ordered the biggest spread on the menu, kind of a farewell meal. Except for the clicking of the forks on our plates, and the slurping of the coffee from the ceramic mugs, we ate quietly. We sensed our impending separation. I was a long two-days ride from home; Brian was closer, as he was heading for Hill Air Force Base in Utah. He would be on the base by early afternoon, while it would take me two more days to reach Kansas. For the first time since leaving, I felt ready to go home.

With stomachs satisfied, we pushed towards the morning sun. Although the new day was young and fresh, I felt tired. Perhaps, the excitement of yesterday still wore on me. I wondered about Dan and Noel, and how the "celery rider" was doing. I regretted not going to see him at the hospital. He must have felt terribly alone, not sure when and how he'd get home. Perhaps I was running from something that frightened me. I'd tried to live a life that minimized regrets, but this time, I really bounced from the wagon of few regrets, causing I was afraid, injuries more lasting than the "celery rider" experienced himself. I didn't even know his name! We arrived at I-15 by mid morning. Right blinkers flashing, we turned south towards Salt Lake City.

The reflective green sign signaled US Hwy 30 was one mile ahead. We exited the interstate and pulled into a bustling filling station. After refueling, we pushed the bikes to a clearing, and then went inside to pay. We each bought a soda, and then moseyed back outside into the bright sunlight. We sipped our drinks and avoided eye contact, like men at a funeral. We awkwardly filled the silence with voices addressing the weather, the time, and the bikes—anything but what we felt. Soon I said, "Well Brian, I guess I better get going; I have a long ways to go."

"Yep," he said stretching. "I'll get to rest long before you. Where do you think you'll spend the night?"

"I imagine somewhere in western Nebraska. I'll find a nice little motel, just like you'll find your nice little dorm-room on base." I extended my hand for a shake, but we collapsed into a hug. We awkwardly slapped each other's backs, unfamiliar with what we felt or what to do. "Ride safely," I said. "I love you."

"You too dad—be careful."

I reached over the top of my head and pulled my ear up, pushing the rolled foam earplug in with the other hand. Brian stood motionless as I repeated for the other ear. I slipped the Shoei over my head and swung my leg over the Concours. Turning the key, I then pushed the starter button. I looked up at my son; he just stood there watching me. I released the clutch lever, extending a wave as I moved away. Brian waved back, just as a big smile spread across his face.

Chapter 15

Bull Snakes & Chiggers

The sudden aloneness smacked me head-on as I scooted across the isolated terrain. Southwestern Wyoming accentuated the feeling of detachment, as there seemed to be little to connect with. Fortunately, anticipation of getting home gradually filled the voids created by the losses of the last few days. I looked forward to seeing Mary Jean again. I felt uneasy being a stranger to my wife of 26 years. Motorcycle adventures were not her cup of tea, yet she tolerated my vulnerability to the “two-wheeled call of the wild”. I felt fortunate to have her, as the red Kawasaki moved me along, seemingly with an agreeing hum.

I headed towards Interstate-80—a milestone—a place to get to. I finally made contact with the four-lane at noon, but still had 870 miles to go. I headed east and dialed in 80MPH. I began to feel closer to the other shore. I eyed my map through the scratched plastic map-holder on my tank-bag, calculating where I'd be by nightfall. Barring any unexpected delays, I'd try to find a motel close to the Wyoming/Nebraska border. Tomorrow would then be a comfortable ride home, beating the heat if I left early.

I hummed along the rising super-slab, heading for the Continental Divide. The bike performed flawlessly, behaving like it had no other nature. I looked at my onboard clock and figured that Brian must be at his destination by now. I identified with the anxiety he surely felt while finding his way around a new base. I was stationed at the same base 30 years ago. Coincident or design, I didn't know—the celery incident had permanently dislodged my understanding of phenomena and reality, and I was less sure of anything. Maybe he'll be staying in the same dorm I did. As I wondered about Noel, and Dan, and Brian, and the "celery rider", fatigue tried to make room for itself on the Corbin. I scooted forward a bit, as if to accommodate the pest, and with firm resolve, kept moving.

A couple hours of daylight remained when I crossed the Nebraska border. Too early to stop, I fueled up, grabbed a bite to eat, and then pushed onward. Arriving at Kimball, NE a couple of hours later, I checked two motels; neither had a vacancy. Not seriously concerned though, I figured that Sidney would offer more choices. Sidney indeed had more choices, but zero vacancies! I became seriously concerned. I lowered my standards quickly, checking the next several towns. Nothing! I resisted the inevitable, so wanting a place to cleanup and rest. However, I felt myself give up, submitting to the dark Nebraska night. In my final act of resignation, I removed my tinted shield, and replaced it with the clear one.

The clock read 10:30 PM as I forced myself to continue under a star filled Nebraska sky. The warm wind blew hard from the south, moving me at will. The sparse traffic consisted mostly of trucks. I rode less than the speed limit; I had no desire to smack Bambi's mom or dad. My only plan was to keep going. I couldn't sleep at the rest areas along the interstate; they were unsafe, especially at night. My best bet would be to sleep, if I had to, where no one would find me. That felt scary also, especially after the light show last night in Idaho.

After another fuel-stop at midnight, I found myself eyeing Exit 199 at 2:00 in the morning. The interstate emptied its travelers to the rest areas and on/off ramps, where the amber lights of the sleeping trucks glowed in the dark. The whole world had gone to bed, except for me. I couldn't go any further; I needed a few minutes of sleep. Exit 199 met my sole requirement of sleeping alone; it was pitch black. I rolled off the throttle as I glided onto the exit ramp. I turned right on a sand-packed road, looking for some sign of another road turning in either direction. I rode slowly for about quarter of a mile when I saw an entryway into a field. I turned in and rode between swaths of freshly raked alfalfa. "This will be great!" I rode in far enough to not be visible from the road. I shut the bike off, and the black aloneness immediately pounced on me. The sky glimmered with stars, as the wind rustled the trees next to the alfalfa field. I was too sleepy to seriously worry about the bull snakes that I knew to frequent freshly mowed hay. With my leathers, gloves, and helmet still on, I sprawled out on the soft swath of alfalfa. It felt wonderful. While staring at the

stars, the wind howled across my helmet. Listening to the bike cool down, I quickly drifted from the world, while fleetingly wondering about snakes and chiggers.

My body lurched as I suddenly reentered consciousness. I heard a door slam, but I didn't know if it was a dream or if I was awake. I rolled my head on the hay towards the sound. I gulped; someone was in the field with me! What vaguely looked like a pickup truck sat parked near the entrance to the field. The passenger side door was opened with the interior lights on. A man sat in the middle seat, with another man standing outside on the passenger's side, hanging on the window frame of the door. I froze, not making a move, trying to figure out what they would be doing in an alfalfa field at this hour, whatever hour it was. They showed no sign of knowing I was there. I felt drugged from fatigue and brief sleep, yet unadulterated fear drove me to make a move. I stood up and started to walk into the wind towards them. They didn't hear me approach. I stopped about 10 feet from the truck, paused a moment, then shouted, "WHAT'RE YOU GUYS DOING IN HERE?" He launched straight into the air, almost tearing the door off the pickup as he left the pad. Looking back to see the voice that ignited him, he lurched upwards again. The guy in the middle seat froze, with his eyes bulging and his mouth locked wide open. I didn't know whether to laugh or run. I felt better seeing they were teen-age boys. "Where's the driver?" I demanded, asserting my new feeling of power.

"He walked to the river...check'in some fish'in lines," the guy with the death grip on the door said.

"Kind'a late for fishing, isn't it? I didn't know there was a river over there," I said in a challenging voice. They had to be struggling to make sense of a guy dressed in full leathers and a helmet, who happened to waltz in from the darkness. Apparently too scared to ask, they just silently stared at me.

Thrashing noises in the trees beyond the reach of the dome-light divided my attention. A third young male, the alleged fisherman, trampled from the brush, and without saying a word, got in and started the truck. The astronaut released his grip on the door and quickly jumped back in. They backed out to the road, and pointed

the nose south. The driver gunned it, and within a few seconds, it was just the wind and the darkness again. I trembled and laughed simultaneously while walking back to my sleeping bike. I stopped and gazed into nothingness. "Where's the bike?" I mumbled, still breathing heavily. The excitement and the darkness disoriented me. I stumbled about in ever increasing circles figuring the bike had to be somewhere near. Just as an anxiety attack began, I spotted my trusty steed, quietly awaiting my return. It slept through the whole thing! I clicked the ignition key to see my clock reading 2:30 AM. I felt the only thing between a giant black hole in western Nebraska and me was my faithful red motorcycle. "What a friend." Too much adrenaline flowed for more nap, so I tapped the starter button and headed east down the interstate, piercing the night with a single beam of light.

Chapter 16

Green Leaves of Rest

I turned south leaving I-80 as a faint glow of light appeared on the northeastern horizon. The glimmer of light dissolved the lingering fear of the night. With only 240 miles to go, I finally felt the strong pull of home, a feeling that the darkness rigorously denied. I moved south through the twilight—the air warming up and thickening. In spite of renewed optimism, sleep seduced me again. I stopped to refuel and have a cup of coffee—the gas would keep the bike going, and the caffeine would keep me going.

Feeling refreshed, I headed east while watching the sun resist the new day. Regrettably, in less than 20 miles, the caffeine failed; I needed more sleep. My first priority was a place of stealth. Lessons learned—I avoided the creeks and rivers where young lads might be running bank-lines. Tall corn silhouetted itself against the eastern light. The cornfields would have a path that led to where the irrigation pipe stretched along the rows of corn—a place to hide, and sleep. I turned onto a secondary road, and then found an entrance into a field. With the green towering overhead, I followed the dirt pathway, riding adjacent to the silver-gray irrigation pipe. I stopped where it was still dry, not wanting to deal with accidental mud. Clicking the key, solitude again settled into the field.

Listening carefully, the tall corn creaked and snapped. It stretched for the sky, petitioning the heavens: "I'm growing, and thirsty for water."

The voices of the field matched my mantra; "I'm tired, and thirsty for sleep." I collapsed next to my bike, quickly drifting off to sleep.

The sound of "tapping" jarred me back to the conscious world. Opening my eyes, my mind raced to explain the green, humid surroundings. The "tapping" continued randomly, as I struggled to pry from the sticky glue of sleep. Looking towards the intrusion, a man stooped over the pipe, tapping the nozzles with a hammer before twisting them open. He looked up when he saw me move.

"I'm sorry I woke you," he said apologetically.

Feeling intrusive, I stood up and responded, "No problem; I need to get up and keep moving. I hope you don't mind me borrowing your cornfield."

He smiled, "You're no bother."

He methodically moved along the clearing, tapping and turning the nozzles. The water gurgled from the openings and began its journey into the green shaded rows. Amidst all the tapping, gurgling, and flowing, I put on my helmet, waved to my host, then left the field heading back to the highway.

The 15 minutes of sleep felt like a couple of hours. The sun finally peaked over the horizon as I moved through the sultry morning air. I chuckled at my two failed attempts to nap where no one would find me—Noel would not be impressed. Perhaps it was a sign to get on home. The celery alerted me to watch for patterns; perhaps one emerged in my inability to sleep without interruption. A few hours later, I turned from Hwy 24 onto my home street. The surroundings looked familiar, yet most of the details had been vibrated away after 18 days on the road. Reaching the driveway, I turned in, and rolled to a stop. I felt numb, unable to move from the bike. It had been a long day; 24 hours earlier, Brian and I sat in a tent in Idaho, 1264 miles away. Fatigue and distance warped my perspective, creating a surreal sensation of having been here before, but only a vague recollection of when. I knew that a different "me" rolled in the driveway than the one that left—a "me" that traveled more than just highways the past 3 weeks—a "me" that also cycled between metaphysical poles.

"Are you all right?" I heard a voice say.

"Huh?"