

Compensation

July 2001

Chapter One

It was a typical July afternoon—hot, and thick. I sat at my desk, listening to the air whistle through the air-conditioning vent, struggling to finish the day’s work. Time slowed with each glance at my watch. Time-filling trips to the water cooler only increased the visits to the restroom. I was unable to concentrate; emails dissolved into open roads, spreadsheets into campfires. Enough suffering! I hung a “Return in a Week” sign over my desk, and slipped out the back door. Once home, I changed into my traveling clothes: a pair of cargo pocketed shorts, a white, oversized long sleeve shirt, and my scuffed up hiking boots. I scratched out a good-bye note to my wife Mary Jean, saying that I was leaving earlier than planned, and signing it with a happy face. After backing from the garage, I gave my packs a cursory last-look, and then shoved off.

A few miles from town, I crossed the Vermillion River, and then turned north. The road passed our family farm, the old two-story house sitting a half-mile to the west along the river. I remembered as a child my first bicycle ride to the end of our lane where I would turn around on the county road. Excitement would shoot through me when touching that road. Even at seven years old, I knew that road was my gateway to the world, connecting me with distant lands. And now, a half a century later, still on two wheels, I was zooming past that same magic spot, heading for far-away places. I felt the same charge of childlike excitement, full of wonder and awe. The world was my oyster, just as I had dreamed many years ago.

The sticky air saturated the Flint Hills, making Kansas feel tropical. The cooling crosswind remained behind after I’d turned north. With nothing to carry the engine heat away, the discomfort boiled up into the still-air pocket behind the windscreen. I’d swing my legs into the wind like hairy air-scoops to get temporary relief. However, the discomfort was

expected, and the inappropriate riding gear was a compromise—sort of a dance with the devil. The safety concession did not extend above my shoulders though; I kept my helmet on. The heat couldn't burn up my spirit though—each mile further raising the anticipation. I toyed with cool thoughts: frozen banana-sherbet on my tongue, an icy slush flowing from a fat red straw, the cold porcelain of a shower stall on a January morning—anything to keep the heat from possessing me. The motorcycle followed the road with little assistance from me; we'd been this way many times before. The trip would not be officially underway until I broke from familiar roads, which would not happen until the following day. Meanwhile, I headed for Omaha to spend the night with my son Brian and his family.

I worked my way towards Nebraska following Highway 63. Traffic was light, mostly farmers traveling between fields and farmsteads, busy with agrarian interest. Later during the day, the traffic mix shifted to people escaping work. Their faces sported an afternoon radiance so different from the frowns and scowls of a Monday morning. As I approached Highway 36, I began the slowdown. Suddenly, the engine stopped—no sputters, coughs, or jerks—it just died. I continued rolling—slowing...slower...slower. An eerie silence set in: the meshing gears, the rolling tires, the haunting winds. The lights on the instrument panel were blank—dead. I tried to remain calm; no need to rouse Mister Panic yet. I turned the key off, then on again...nothing. I checked the kill-switch. I pushed the horn button...silence. I had lost all electrical power. I pushed the bike to the side of the road. Speculation bolted uncontrollably, telling me that either the battery croaked from a massive internal arc, or that a wire shorted out and blackened the wiring harnesses like burned bacon. Panic strained to break from my forced composure; clear thinking was nearly impossible. I speculated on the possibility of a blown fuse. I would have to remove the side panel to get to the fuse. The panel was secured by a bolt that required a 5mm allen-wrench, which happened to be in my tool

kit under the seat, a seat weighted down with bags and packs suitable for a month long safari.

I wanted a cell phone in the worst way. I started pacing the roadside, looking for easy answers away from the bike. I wanted to call Brian—I needed his help. Brian’s rationality and reassuring troubleshooting prowess would help. I wanted to tell him that I might be in trouble, that I may be a little late, or might not arrive at all. I didn’t mind being stranded as much as inconveniencing other people. The complications affected others: my son-in-law Kurt, my son David, and his son Vance. They were all involved: vacations scheduled, plane tickets purchased, and campgrounds reserved. Foreboding concerns darted in: if I hitchhiked, the bike might be stolen, Mary Jean couldn’t hook the trailer to the Jeep, what if the trailer had a flat tire?

I began offloading the bike. I moved with a contrived coolness, mimicking the unflappable James Bond, Agent 007, figuring that my demeanor would influence my mind, thus stalling the panic. I surveyed the surrounding area for a safe place to stash my gear, in the event I had to hitchhike. Several vehicles came along, but none offered help. Although surprised by their indifference, it was still too early to knee the asphalt in prayerful desperation.

I removed the side panel to confirm my suspicion about the fuse. A similar electrical failure had happened years ago, and the culprit was a blown fuse. At that time, the panic lasted no longer than it took to replace the fuse. The bike never asked me to find the cause, and I happily let it be a mystery. I hoped for the same luck, unfortunately, didn’t get it—the fuse was good! The problem had now escalated, and I had no other hunches. I reinserted the glass fuse, and while rampant speculation gnawed on my noggin, a chirping radar detector went nearly unnoticed. Like a bolt of lightning, it hit me; POWER! I reached up and turned the ignition key on. Green lights, red lights, “I HAVE POWER!” I tapped the starter button,

and the bike rumbled to life, as though it had only been napping, and was now confused by the packs setting along the roadside.

I repacked fast, yet gingerly, afraid that an innocuous jolt that would send the bike back into a snooze. In retrospect, I was embarrassed that I had made such a big deal out of something so simple. Yet the paranoia was uncontrollable, fueling outlandish delusions such as hitching a ride with some character in an old car, something like a 70s vintage Pontiac. He'd introduce himself as Marvin. He would be wearing a sweat-stained tee-shirt, tennis shoes without socks, and thread-bare overalls with the side buckles unfastened enough to show bleached flesh instead of underwear. The old Pontiac would be tooling down the road, levitating on gushy suspension, the wind blending the fruity air-freshener aroma with scorched oil fumes secreting from the firewall. I'd be staring straight ahead, grateful, yet concerned. It would seem odd that Marv wasn't going anywhere in particular, arousing suspicion with overly friendly chit-chat. Marv needed scissors—his nose and ear hairs could attract house wrens. All the nightmarish drama was unfounded, brought about by runaway fear and a spring-loaded fuse holder. Once back up to speed, I dared not think too seriously about how tenuous the trip really was, how rolling down the road required the functioning of thousands of things, and how just one little apparatus, like a fuse holder, could bring it to an immediate end. The bike hummed along, wheels spinning, pistons hammering, oil flowing, electrons darting, innumerable physical and chemical actions and reactions, dancing in perfect harmony. I felt grateful, yet out-manned. I sensed the battle, a struggle between the excitement of the trip and thousands of devices that could fail at any moment.

Chapter Two

I looked for a place to eat in Nebraska City, more for the air-conditioning than the food. Cruising main-street on a superheated bike pushed my blood to the boiling point. I pulled into the parking lot of a Burger King. Sweat vulcanized my shirt to my skin. I left the keys in the ignition, and my helmet on the seat—all I thought about was the air-conditioned air on the inside, and the ecstasy of freeze-drying my sweat into crystals. But it was a mirage, because once inside the restaurant, it felt hot like the outside. I studied the meal offerings while wiping my sleeve across my forehead. I ordered the Number-One combo, and then picked up some ketchup and napkins on the way to a table by the window. Suffocating from a blanket of stagnant air, I gazed at the bike roasting in the sun-drenched parking lot. Salty beads rolled from my brow, dotting the napkin in my lap. I grabbed a newspaper, folded it to fan-size, and then flapped it like a mallard winging across a lake. The moving air helped cooled me down, enough to where I began eating.

I stared at the bike, fanning with one hand, feeding with the other. Then a wave of apprehension came over me. In the span of a hot afternoon, I'd ridden a mere 150 miles, traveling from eager anticipation to the blahs. The problems with the bike and the heat drained my enthusiasm without my knowledge or consent. I considered going back home. But I couldn't. I had a responsibility towards the others involved. Last spring, David, my oldest son, suggested we go to the Oshkosh Air Show in Wisconsin. He said that Vance would love the airplanes, the camping, and the "guy stuff". My pointing out that Vance was only three years old didn't dampen his enthusiasm. David sweetened the deal by suggesting that Brian, Kurt and I ride our bikes to the show, and that he and Vance would fly from Atlanta to Milwaukee, rent a car and meet us at a campground. When I mentioned his lack of camping equipment, he enthusiastically said he'd buy some.

The whole idea seemed out of character for David. It had been a good twenty years since we last camped together. He would have been 10 years old, and we had ridden the motorcycle to Missouri. I remember setting the tent up at the edge of the timber. Later, David had me move it closer to the road, for it seems that whatever scared him in the movie *Poltergeist* was lurking nearby in the Missouri woods. I still remember how he tried to do “my thing”, how he wanted to be with his dad, be one of the guys, but it was a struggle for the poor little fellow. He just didn’t like to ride on the bike, and seemed to care even less for camping.

I fanned the newspaper with one hand while dipping a fry into the ketchup with the other, continuing my reflections on David. At that time, it wasn’t clear whether camping wasn’t his cup of tea or if he really didn’t like being with me. I favored the rough and tough: getting along well with football, tools, guns, and camping. David liked the arts, excelling in photography, drawing, and music. Even as a young boy, he played the piano well. I could still see his hands and fingers in a blur playing a Scott Joplin rag, or slowing to the haunting beauty of a Bach concerto. David tried to play football, and in spite of having athletic abilities, he quit. I knew better than to make a big issue of it, and Mary Jean tried to keep me sensitive to David’s feelings. Still, my true colors leaked out, revealing my disappointment through neglect and disinterest. Instead of understanding and appreciation, our divergent interests created a chasm, and eventual hostilities. A torrid father-son relationship developed beginning the time David reached puberty, and I, a mid-life crisis. We survived our phases of life as individuals, yet our relationship suffered irreparable damage. And now, he’s married, and living in Atlanta. Distance and time had helped neutralizer the hurt, and letting atonement gradually begin. Yet I know, just as real as the July heat, David lives with a wounded child, one injured by the part of me that I hate, the part whose actions I can never escape. And yet, out of the blue, he calls and suggests a camping trip!

I finished my burger, then continued north to Omaha. Once in the city, I turned west on Fort Street, heading towards Brian's house. When I rolled into his driveway, he popped up from the busyness of his florescent lit garage, and motioned for me to pull on inside. I silenced my bike next to his old Yamaha that he was packing. "Whew", I exhaled.

"What's the matter?" he asked after noticing me stare at the myriad of electrical wires growing from his bike.

"I'm just hot and tired...glad to touch down." I said. Just then Brian's little girls stepped from the house into the garage. They huddled on the steps, wearing their pajamas, rocking on their toes, excited by the happenings.

"Give Papa a hug." Brian said motioning towards me.

Taysia, the oldest at eight, made the obligatory walk, casting her head to the side while giving me an arms-length hug. Tayla and Baylee, remained on the steps, watching me readjust my wind-blown sweaty shirt, having no part of that grandparent protocol stuff. I reached over and hugged Brian. "I see you're still packing."

"Yeah, I'm hooking up my cell phone, and getting the radar detector working."

Wires grew like Kudzu from his bike, stretching and spiraling across the fairing. With any one but Brian, this jungle of wires would have put the trip in jeopardy. But that was how he worked, his mind outrunning his need for order. Brian has little need for instructions, or illustrations. Instead, he simply studies the situation and figures it out, rarely getting hopelessly stumped. Not me. I'm like Hansel and Gretel, dropping crumbs of neatness and order along the trail, so that when I get in over my head, I have a path out of the forest of confusion. Brian and I had made many motorcycle trips, and I'd come to appreciate his trouble-shooting ability much more than any misadventures caused by disorganization.

After I showered that evening, Taysia and Tayla helped me organize my maps by cutting small squares from yellow paper and numbering them

sequentially, one for each plastic map holder. Tayla's numbers, from the hand of a three-year-old, were indecipherable, looking like Chinese calligraphy. Nevertheless, they were little squiggles from a big heart, and I kept them as good luck charms. Experience says to keep the maps and the territory in sync, and sorted in the sequence of travel. Meanwhile, Brian finished updating his fourteen-year-old bike with modern-day gadgets. Brian's wife Bessie stayed in the other room watching television, generally disengaged from our pre-trip activities. Her indifference didn't surprise me. She was pregnant with their fourth child, a boy they'd already named Brady Alexander. So I understood why she didn't share in our excitement. When Brian was younger, we two-wheeled whenever and wherever we wanted without creating major problems on the home front. This lasted until Brian married, then Mary Jean put the kibosh on my luring Brian away from his family. He traveled extensively with his job, plus, his family didn't appreciate his roaring down the highway on a hopped up, big-bore sportbike. But David surprised us all by suggesting the trip, something neither Brian or I dared suggest. The trip was not openly endorsed, but no one said "No Way!" either. For this reason, we masked our excitement, playing it, albeit poorly, like an obligation to David and Vance, a duty to be performed out of consideration and respect.

Chapter Three

At 5:45 AM the following day, duty called. We stood in the garage; Brian's six foot frame silhouetted against the ink-colored sky. He paced, studying the heavy, water-filled clouds, occasionally glancing at me for an opinion.

"Let's go, it'll be north of us...we'll be headin' east for awhile." Brian said.

I agreed. I slipped on my helmet and we rolled from the garage before starting the engines; we didn't want to wake the girls. Brian tapped the garage door opener, and just as the door lowered, Tayla appeared in the doorway. With strawberry blonde hair springing in abandon, she clutched her blanket. She watched with the saddest of eyes, comforted only by a sucked thumb. Despite having her lucky charms sandwiched with my maps, I once again had doubts about going, wedged between the adventure of travel and the lives of those who stayed behind.

We crossed the Missouri River, angling northeasterly towards Denison. We rode under clouds of charcoal, the air gooey and warm like pancake syrup. The storm hovered on the horizon, sure to catch us if we slowed or turned north. Despite the threatening weather, the four-year freeze on motorcycling with Brian melted away with each passing mile. I followed the Yamaha's taillight glow through the morning overcast, thinking about the upcoming 500-miles of two-lane highways cutting through rural Iowa and Minnesota. We had planned to be in Duluth by sunset for dinner with my daughter Libby and her husband Kurt. I glanced at Tayla's calligraphy in my map holder. I thought of her standing in the doorway, and the forlorn look on her freckled face. She couldn't understand our leaving, where we were going, or when we'd return. In her young heart, we were just gone.

The angular slice across Iowa produced impressions of travel efficiency, miles not wasted, time used well. Birds likely know of such

delights, the concepts of zigzag, curve, and double-back are nonexistent to such travelers. Straight lines and diagonals were compelling, especially when up against a schedule. However the zigzags were what I needed more of. They pulled my fixation from the destination and redirected it into the journey. Straight roads were for “getting”; zigzags and curves were for “being”. The topography and the road engineers had paved a way to the unexpected, to happenstance and serendipity. The miracles of impression did not follow straight lines. They instead waited at the corners with a change in direction: a new angle of light, a fresh scent on the wind. Impressions waited in the cafes, over eggs and coffee, or in the rolling hills of corn tassels, hoping I’d notice—but never insisting. Time and priorities governed a schedule—openness and flexibility governed serendipity. Traveling the byways of corn-country: black, smooth, heaving, started me thinking about priorities. Perhaps mine were misaligned. Admittedly, I’d have to rewire my compulsions before reorganizing, moving away from optimization, and going towards openness, realizing that if given time, life would unfold in a much richer way than by my design.

The headlight indicator on the console came on, signaling a burned out bulb. I switched to the low-beam and the warning light turned off. Apparently, only the high-beam part of the bulb had failed. No big deal, just an issue of being conspicuous to those blind to motorcycles. I made a mental note to carry a spare bulb in the future; the same note I had made the last time the bulb burned out. Obviously, mental tags no longer served me well; I needed to write things down, which was difficult while riding a motorcycle. And it’s not just utilitarian reminders: like spare bulbs, bring Visine, and, need extra earplugs. There’s the good stuff too. Catalyzed by the fresh air, the openness, and the motion, ideas percolated from the depths like fart bubbles in bathwater, impressions and insights worth keeping. But, if not shackled with a pen, they would run from the light of recollection, and wait for another time, if at all, to immerge.

We stopped in Denison for fuel and the morning's first coffee. While sipping and sauntering around the gas station, we inspected the bikes, looking for problems: eyeing for places where something once was, and looking for things that had come loose, but hadn't yet said goodbye. It's common for things to move around during the shake-down leg of a trip. I'm no exception. I hadn't ridden with Brian for four years, and I had to adjust to his riding style. We were 75 miles into the day's ride, and not once did he try to set the land speed record, or pull a "wheelie". I felt more relaxed with the grown up Brian.

"My dadgum headlight burned out Brian...still got low-beam though."

"Yeah, it was awfully bright for awhile...a bluish white."

"I thought of the electrical problem I had yesterday when it burned out...wondered if they're connected...maybe the trip is jinxed or something." I said with a snicker. "You know BC, these old bikes have a lot of miles, probably 150k combined...I guess they're entitled to a few problems."

"But ya know dad, I wouldn't want anything else. Think of where we've been on these old beaters. New bikes have no personal history. If I had all the money in the world, I still wouldn't..."

"...change a thing, I interjected. You need a certain poverty to afford this kind of a trip, huh. Too much money takes the edge off...kinda' like seeing just how far these old road-warriors can go."

It began to sprinkle as we headed north from Denison, but the sultry air kept me out of my rubbery rain-suit. Brian wore his expensive riding suit, a garment stiffened with enough material and armor to stand on its own, designed to keep him dry, and to keep his hide in tact in the event of a get-off. Added to his protective attire was a high tech, moderately pricey helmet, beautifully painted with graphics matching his riding-suit. We seemed out of character. I, "Mr. Safety", rode in shorts and a thin shirt,

and Brian, “Mr. Speedy”, cocooned himself in his Darth Vader protective gear.

Despite the ominous clouds hugging the horizon, Iowa felt right. The undulating rows of corn blanketed the hills. We rode the swells of a conservative heartland, dotted with small towns, churches, earthy values, and Chevrolets. An hour north of Denison, we stopped in Cherokee for breakfast. It had sprinkled just enough to dampen my shirt, but because of the warm air, I hardly noticed. Shortly after we sat down, a waitress appeared, and after circling behind the bar for the coffee, she scooted over to our table, bubbly, smiling. While she filled our cups, we scanned the menu and gave her our orders for the “Hungry-man’s Morning” breakfast. While waiting, we studied our maps. Brian looked uneasy, fretting about something. He spoke in broken sentences, stammering, contorting his face as if picking a scab. He seemed to be searching for the right words to unearth an artifact of thought, something he wanted to examine. Finally he managed to construct a question.

“Why we do this...what’s the attraction?”

I presumed he spoke rhetorically, so I said nothing. Brian didn’t vocalize his thoughts any further, seeming content with only the question. I knew his query referred to our mode of travel. Soon we had our breakfast before us and we dug in. I thought about Brian’s question while spreading jelly on my wheat toast. Then I offered, “It sure wouldn’t be as appealing in a car...there’s something about motorcycles, something about managing the risk, about the skill and the know-how required. A car is boring...it’s like a Lazyboy on wheels, encased in steel and glass. A car is designed to isolate, to let the senses snooze, in essence...to miss it!” My ramblings about fresh air and wind in your face were not new insights to either of us, but merely a conditioned response. Brian remained silent, confirming that I missed the mark; his question was deeper and more complex.

North of Cherokee the sky blackened, sporadically releasing warm droplets to the earth. I had not put on my rainsuit—still no need

considering the little difference between the sultry air and its cousin the raindrop. On the surface, a rainsuit seemed simple enough; put it on before it starts raining, take it off after it quits raining. However, for some reason, it seldom worked that way for me. The misjudgment was rooted in not wanting to stop, thinking that the storm would be brief, and that I could air-dry in a few miles of sunshine. That strategy worked well some of the time, but not on that particular day. The little drops that gently fell suddenly became big drops, then silvery sheets of cold water angling towards Missouri. I ducked behind the fairing, knowing full well that I'd been zapped again by indecision. Peering through the flexing windshield, I followed the glow from Brian's taillight, my beacon through the storm. I started to shiver, sending wobbles of instability to the handlebars. I tightened my grip and locked my arms rigid, keeping my trajectory steady on the slippery asphalt. Brian looked like he straddled a jet ski, shooting a roostertail of water above his helmet where the wind stream leveled it off and shot it back to me. The storm wouldn't let up, as though we rode with it rather through it. Several sets of headlights reflected from my mirror, the traffic now queuing behind our cautious pace.

Brian's amber blinker flashed in the grayness. He turned into a roadside park where we headed for a picnic shelter. I parked in the driving rain and ran for the shelter while Brian road his bike onto the sidewalk and pulled under the canopy with me.

"God I'm freezing!" I blurted out in a Woody the Woodpecker voice.

"Meeeee ta...ta...ta...tooooo." Brian responded with his jaws shaking uncontrollably. "This is wha...wha...what it's all ab...ab...about! ...can't do this in a ca...ca...car."

I didn't know if his stuttered comment mocked my breakfast ramblings or he had vibrated himself onto why we do "this". Brian peeled his suit from his shoulders, his blue colored T-shirt darkened by the rain. Although his \$700 suit was lined with Gortex, a breathable waterproof material, it leaked like gauze. Brian was upset, cussing like a drunken

sailor. He said that he washed it before the trip, and wondered if he was supposed to treat it with something. I removed my water-weighted shirt, rung it out and hung it across a concrete wall. The north wind whipped through our shelter, making two shirtless men dance and chatter like Kerouac and Cassady of the beat generation, hopped up on the illegalities of the fifties. Cars circled by our shelter, headlights piercing the watery torrent, wipers slapping, beady eyes peering through the rain-speckled windows. “They can’t be having as much fun as we are Brian.”

I made a dash into the storm to get a pack from the bike. I put on a dry shirt and my leather jacket—warmth returned. We were unable to stand there watching it rain—we had to keep moving. Brian helped me slip my rainsuit over my leather jacket. Once waterproofed, I slogged back into the squall towards the bike. Brian bounced from the sidewalk to the roadway, then we continued northward into the storm.

The rain had continued nonstop for nearly four hours. We pulled into a Hardee’s for a late lunch and to warm up. We squished our way past the gawking patrons to a table out of the way. We peeled off our wet clothes, and spread them across the furniture like laundry day in a college dorm. Once undressed, I went into the restroom and squatted under the electric hand drier, rubbing my soaked hair trying to fluff it dry. Once finished, I looked at my bluish-red face in the mirror, my hair looked as though I had been electrocuted. I tried to iron the unruly mess with my hands the best I could, consoled by being a stranger in that little Minnesota town. While waiting for lunch, I used napkins to blot water from the foam liner of my helmet. Brian was clearly miserable: shivering, blue lips, red eyes, and runny nose. He managed a tongue in cheek “...this is what’s it all about.” We took our time with lunch, occasionally breaking into laughter at the irony of it all. Soon the bug to move hit us again. We suited up and proceeded northward, this time however, under less threatening skies.

Chapter Four

We zipped across the Minnesota farmland, my compass biased towards Duluth. The storm had given way to sunshine that bathed the countryside in freshness. We were in the North Country, where the air was crisp, fresh with coolness, where the sun touches a cheek without a mark, where lungs fill with giddiness, where a sky is preferred to a roof, where shorts are worn, not by necessity, but by choice. I wanted to shout to Brian that “this” was what it was all about too, just as much as the shivering rain and the searing heat. I was sure he would agree with me, but he postponed his epiphany until he had changed into dry clothes.

Although we were running late, Libby and Kurt were ready for our arrival, as Brian had phoned progress reports ahead. As soon as we pulled up to their house, Brian greeted the sleepy little neighborhood by giving his Yamaha a quick 12k rip, blasting screaming decibels like shrapnel. The curtains of the neighborhood began peeling back, while I hunkered in embarrassment. Libby and Kurt rushed out onto the deck, Libby smiling like a opossum eating sour grapes, more from nervous embarrassment than good tidings. Kurt, on the other hand, seemed genuinely thrilled at seeing his Air Force buddy Brian. While we removed our riding gear, they hustled down the steps to greet us. Libby got hugs; Kurt got handshakes.

“Wild Turkey?” Brian asked eyeing Kurt’s drink.

“You know it...it’s the kickin’ chicken. Ready, eh?”

“Been waiting all day.” Brian gushed.

“Hey!” I said, “Before you guys get started, let’s get some of this stuff into the house.” Kurt suggested we put the bikes in the neighbor’s garage, pointing up the hill towards a garage that appeared to be accessed by a ski jump.

After a roaring assault up the ramp, we tucked the bikes in for the night. Then we carried our sleeping gear to the house and tossed it on the floor, mixed some drinks and gathered in their tiny living room. Within

five minutes, Brian was on Kurt's newly rebuilt dirt bike, ripping up and down the inclines of West Duluth. Brian's exuberance amplified my tiredness, making me feel old, and a generation out of place. When he returned, Kurt and Brian engaged in guy-talk: powerbands, torque curves, and suspension travel. The link that brought those two together in the Air Force continued before my eyes—motorcycles. It had been a matter of time that the same connection would bring Libby and Kurt together. Libby and Kurt were fulltime students now, he studying to be an English teacher, she studying nursing. Next to money, time was their most precious commodity.

While Kurt, Libby, and Brian continued with their laughter and reminiscing, I wandered off into the little computer room where they studied. I wanted to check the weather and emails at home. Dog-eared textbooks lined make-shift shelves; CDs were columned tall in a rack. Stacked milk crates provided storage bins, brimming with keepsakes and school supplies. Heaps of blankets, known as insulation in Duluth, filled one corner; guitar cases stood erect in the other. I pulled the swivel chair away from the desk, sat down, and adjusted my reach for the keyboard. Getting situated was not to be. The hardwood oak floor had a bias to the south, sloping enough to start a slow soapbox derby roll towards the lake. I'd apply the brakes with my hiking boots, and then begin a duck-waddle back to the keyboard, only to relax and head downhill again. Finally, I hooked my toe under the backside of the desk long enough to check email. My leg gave out before getting to the weather, and I called it quits.

I cleared a place in the middle of the room and unrolled my ground pad and sleeping bag. Once I fluffed up my nest, I went back to the party, which had moved to the deck, and grown. Kurt and Libby's friends, Tim and Sara, had joined. Libby introduced us. Tim stood to give me a warm and confident handshake. He was a nice looking fellow with a chiseled, youthfully tanned face, with a Robert Kennedy haircut. Kurt and Tim became friends through school, although Tim had since graduated and

worked various jobs around the area. Tim had majored in biology, but his real passion was in the arts. He spent his free time wandering the shoreline of Lake Superior, looking for driftwood that he could polish into sculptured stands for coffee tables, end tables, lamps, flower vases, and the like. I've seen Tim's work displayed in a museum in Duluth, and, it's special, special in the sense that Tim sees beauty in the ordinary, and knows how to bring it to those of us that are less insightful.

I knew less about Sara. I learned from discussions with Libby that Sara and Tim, although not married, were a couple. Sara made a memorable impression. The burning citronella candles cast a soft glow on her cheeks. When she smiled, her face would lighten up further, as though a light came from within. She was pretty, not in a glamorous way, but in a serene, wholesome way. Her eyes were gentle, her smile friendly. Sarah's glow reminded me of Mary Jean; they both radiated a tranquility, something deep and spiritual.

I wanted to stay and visit, but the days ride had me looking for rest. I bid my goodnights and excused myself. After brushing my teeth, I crawled into my sleeping bag on the computer room floor. That's when the gravity of the situation revisited me. The room's incline had my nylon sleeping bag slipping on the nylon ground pad, which then slipped on the polished oak flooring. Every time I moved, my nest came undone, becoming less of a bed, and more and more like a surfboard. I finally solved the problem by catching a wave that slammed me against the south wall. Perfect! Everything stabilized and I fell asleep.

Chapter Five

The next morning, in between cups of coffee, we carried our gear back to the bikes. We would eat breakfast along the way. We took turns hugging Libby goodbye. I loved travel, but hated goodbyes. Without goodbyes though, one never leaves to become something other than what they are. We followed Kurt's F3 Honda up a steep hill that led to a scenic road out of town. He wore a leather riding suit, white with red and black accents. His minimalist camping gear was stuffed into his tankbag and the rest bungeed onto the backseat, all in all, making an eye-catching little package of speed and utility. The three of us had ridden together before, and I was comfortable with Kurt's style. He rides fast, but not in a hurry, his moves were aggressive, yet, calculated. Neither he nor Brian could resist an impromptu drag race though. Brian's bike had more than twice the displacement, gobs more torque and horsepower, yet that little scooter of Kurt's runs neck and neck to about 100 MPH. A drag race I can resist, mostly because I never win.

We scooted along Highway 61, hugging the north shore of Lake Superior. A few miles past Two Harbors, we stopped for breakfast at "Betty's House of Pies". We sat at a table by a window overlooking the lake. In short order, we were into guy-talk, discussing of all things, our dream-house of the North Country. We figured that houses were designed and organized all wrong, the priorities of space completely messed up. A house should begin with the most important room, the garage, and then add on from there. Kurt thought a 40 by 40 would be an adequate starter size for those living on a teacher's salary. Brian wanted separate rooms in the garage, each room dedicated to a hobby, such as woodworking, motorcycle and snowmobile wrenching, and maybe one for building an ultra-light airplane. I offered adding a room for literary pursuits like reading and writing, but their expressions suggested such a room would be, at best, in contention with an indoor toilet. We played with the idea

while eating, knowing full well that our wives had other designs on our space, as well as our time. Perhaps that was it! Maybe that's what Brian struggled to enunciate earlier in Cherokee. Time, unencumbered time, time without strings. Was that his answer as to "why we did this?"

We left "Betty's House of Pies" with swollen bellies and a generous fix of caffeine. The mid-morning sun penetrated the crisp air, birch forest on our left, blue waters on our right. We rode for an hour or so before taking a break along the shoreline. Time seemed to be ours that day; we were unhurried and moved with leisure. We sat on a bench facing the sun, listening to the gentle surf wash the rocks below. The cool air and radiant sun struck a sensuous balance, so peaceful, so freeing from all worries. Smoke from Kurt's cigarette spiraled skyward while he and Brian quietly visited. I thought about how free I felt, and then recalled our discussion at breakfast about unencumbered time. Maybe time wasn't the issue. Perhaps space was, pure, unencumbered space. Unencumbered space, being in relationship with minimal strings, conditions or expectations. Free to simply be, to be who and what I am, feeling fully accepted by my surroundings, including myself. I thought of the relationship between a man and his dog. There was space in their togetherness, yet a bond forms through acceptance. I once thought that feelings of freedom that came with a motorcycle trip came from being away from the familiar, the routine, and responsibilities. Now it occurred to me that freedom doesn't come from being away from anything, but from being in harmony with my surroundings. And being in harmony means accepting and being accepted, shortcomings and all. I felt accepted unconditionally by the trees, and also by the water, and the air. I drank them all in and felt a peace, a restful home so near, so immediate, and present.

Canada called. We broke the reverie of reflection when moseying back to the bikes. Having already made camping reservations at Sleeping Giant Provincial Park in Ontario, we had the freedom to take our time and enjoy the day. Which was what I was doing, leading the pack, dialed in at

65 MPH, the wind in my face, sun on my shoulders, fully immersed in the North Shore, attentive, yet to nothing in particular. Then it happened, without warning, an uncontrollable and unconscious lurch off the seat. I couldn't breathe—my heart lodged crossways in my throat. The sound was instant, screaming and thunderous, like from a pair of F-16 Falcons strafing the deck. Residual images entered my periphery, whisking by only a few yards away, one on my left, one on my right. “JEEESus kerrrrRIST!” I bellowed when my mind caught up with the happenings. Then, two blurred objects came into focus, their reddish-white colors bobbing and weaving as they tightened their formation, melting into the horizon at an incredible speed. “Damn you guys!” I'd forgotten all about something like that happening again—it had been several years since they last buzzed Pappy. Strafing the ol' man had turned into a sport of sorts, and a surefire remedy for road boredom, which apparently afflicted them more than me. The barrage of profanity subsided with my heart rate, later turning into occasional smirks, followed by outburst of laughter. Did they plan such a move, or was it spontaneous? They must have used hand signals to indicate the opportunity, including who goes left and who goes right. I couldn't believe I was so asleep to the happenings behind me; normally I'm quite vigilant. Somehow they sensed my reverie, and pounced without warning.

Later that day, somewhere along Highway 61 between the fly-by and the Canadian border, I led the way into a darkened road tunnel. What happened inside the tunnel didn't surprise me; those two pranksters dropped down a couple of gears and launched into a race. The noise rocketed through the tunnel like a bullet spinning through a gun barrel. The reverberations sounded like dueling air raid sirens. This was not a race of speed though, but of decibels. They'd redline their bikes, then roll back off, and punch them again to the screaming point. I exited the sound chamber through a hole of white light, and that's when my peripheral eye caught a blurred image of stones tumbling from the rock face. Apparently

the sonic waves had disturbed the mountain, or so it seemed, for when I looked back in my mirror, I could see a plume of dust boiling by the roadside. When Brian and Kurt exited the tunnel, their headlights dimmed as they dove into the billowing cloud. They reemerged moments later, straining to look back at the avalanche they had triggered.

Around midday, we pulled up to the line of vehicles at the Canadian border. Not wanting a delay, we had rehearsed our responses to the routine questions of the border patrol. It's expedient to know where you are going, and how long you'll stay. Stumbling around with the questions about firearms, tobacco or alcohol could lead to further interrogation. The plan also called for Brian to shut his FJ down and walk it to the gate, just in case the customs officer was moody. Other than almost dropping my bike at the inspection window, after a few routine questions, we rolled onto Canadian soil.

Canada had a different feel from the states, perhaps brought about by the immediate submersion into the metric system. We stopped at a border welcome center to exchange some of our cash for Canadian dollars, figuring that's where the least profiteering on the exchange rate would occur. Besides, when buying gas, the conversion from gallons to liters was difficult enough without adding a currency exchange to it. I liked knowing what I'm paying for —never did like the feeling of being had.

Once crossing the Pigeon River at the border, the road and lake separated for a while, the shoreline continued northeasterly, and the road veered into the birch and aspen forests. Traffic was nearly nonexistent, and once isolated in the woods, we cranked up the pace, not slowing down until we reached the outskirts of Thunder Bay. There we connected with the Trans-Canadian Highway, a smooth road that continued leading us along the north shore. About a half hour east of Thunder Bay, we turned south on Highway 587 and rode out onto Lake Superior following a long finger of land called the Sibley Peninsula. The road centered the

peninsula, leading us 30 miles or so through the forest to the Sleeping Giant Provincial Park.

Chapter Six

We stopped at the gate to check in and get directions to our camping site. I'd made the reservation over the Internet by selecting a site of virtual perfection, in this case, a spot on the shoreline of Marie Louise Lake. Once paying our fees, we rode along a dusty tree-lined road, bordered on both sides by shaded clearings filled with colorful tents and gawking campers. We poked along in first gear, idling the obnoxiously noisy bikes as quietly as possible. The campers, especially the kids, came to the edge of the road to watch us parade by. We waved in passing, being friendly to the kids, and apologetic to the adults for the interruption. We found the post marker with our number on it and then backed the bikes in. It was perfect. Just as I saw on the Internet, our site was next to the lake; it had shade, a table and fire-ring, and enough space to setup three tents. Even the outdoor toilet was only a short distance away. Perfect!

We moved slowly, offloading our gear and setting up camp; plenty of daylight remained. I felt tired and slightly depressed, which I attributed to the mid-afternoon doldrums. We took our time, saying little, and when finished, our three tents silhouetted against the mirrored lake. We worked well together, and our experience at motorcycle camping made it look easy. Brian and I had many a night under the stars; Kurt was relatively new to the group, having camped with us several times in years past. Notwithstanding though, he was an experienced camper, very efficient. Kurt was low maintenance, and easy to be with. He had a selfless nature, one that he displayed profoundly on a camping trip in Idaho. One particular night, we were camped near Salmon, Idaho, 7000-feet up on the side of a mountain. The nearest drinkable water was nearly a quarter-mile away along a rock-strewn trail. Kurt volunteered to make the hike, bringing back a heavy, sagging five-gallon plastic water container, a feat of endurance and generosity. This happened before he and Libby were married, so I was naturally suspicious that he merely tried to impress his

way into the family, and Libby's heart. Since then, I've learned that my reservations were falsely formed; Kurt was a naturally nice, unassuming, and giving person, and few things could make a father happier than knowing his daughter married a gem.

We continued setting up camp for the evening, pulling an endless stream of supposed necessities from the bikes, which soon covered the picnic table. I stood looking at the heaps of gear, suddenly feeling panicky. I wanted to shout, "Let's get this crap organized!" Instead, I just stuffed the irritation, feeling it kick around in my gut like a bear cub in a gunnysack. I wanted to divide the table into three sections—I wanted my own space. Admittedly though, my junk would have required more than a third. And true to Kurt's unassuming nature, very little of it belonged to him. I have this thing about space, especially my space, and I panic whenever I sense an intrusion. That's partly why I liked motorcycling—lots of elbowroom. Don't even think about getting me into a crowded car; I'd rather walk. My claustrophobia went beyond being hemmed in by walls though. It extended to "things". "Things" and "stuff", and "clutter" would send me into a panic. My quirk about clutter was why I saw something unusual in Kurt. Not that he was clutter free, as Libby would likely attest, but he didn't seem to have this boundary problem. Kurt's sharing nature seemed to make lines and boundaries unnecessary. And my problem with crowding suggested something about my nature also. Perhaps selfishness needs space; much like a chocolateholic needs a Snicker's to take the edge off. Yet, I'm not always selfish, nor for that matter, hooked by chaos. It depends on my mood: relaxed or uptight, tired or rested. Sometimes I am open and accepting, other times, closed and intolerant.

Brian and I rode back to the park entrance to buy ice and firewood. Upon returning, a bicycle-peddling park ranger stopped us. He was a college-aged fellow with close-cropped blond hair, all decked out in shorts, a park service polo shirt, and a halved eggshell helmet. Which was

why he stopped us; we weren't wearing ours. We knew better than argue with the young chap whose uppity posturing and ego puffing created a counterfeit authority. I felt the crowding thing again, rules closing in on judgment and responsibility, bureaucratic gobbledygook that presumed a mindless constituency. One couldn't reason with that kind of machinery; the rule was supreme. Instead, I took a deep breath and put the urge to ridicule his helmet in the sack with the bear cub. He didn't seem the type to tolerate a slice of sarcasm.

Once we were settled and ready for the evening, I needed to cleanup. The tired feeling had progressed to achy, flu-like symptoms. A shower, along with aspirin, would be my next line of defense against an unknown ailment. The shower was a long walk from our campsite, and I didn't want to idle the motorcycle through the campground, wearing shorts, shower shoes, and a full-faced helmet, so I considered the lake, testing it first with my hand. It was cold. The bottom sloped away gently though, making a gradual acclimation easier. I stayed in my underwear for a swimming suit, then pulled on a pair of rubbery slippers, the kind used by surfers. I could have used them in Libby's computer room the previous night. I stepped into the water. My arms jutted outwards like outriggers on a Polynesian canoe. I slipped and stumbled across the grapefruit sized rocks, performing Olympian gyrations to stay upright. It wasn't until reaching a three-quarter-thigh depth that my breathing began laboring. Gasps of "Oh God!" traveled back to the shore where Brian and Kurt observed, and snickered. I considered taking the plunge, but chickened out, choosing instead to shiver in the breeze rather than risk cardiac arrest. I inched along, moving deeper. The flu-like aches had now been suppressed by more immediate sensations. When the water reached just above my naval, where the bear cub lived, I couldn't take it any longer. Heart attack be damned, I dove in. Once I surfaced, I frolicked in celebration, like a river otter on speed. Brian couldn't resist; he stripped down and joined me,

choosing to take the plunge immediately rather than suffer through a slow acclimation.

The late afternoon eased into evening. We acknowledged the transition by squeaking a cork from a bottle of Wild Turkey. Brian opened a bag of pistachios, offering them as an appetizer, worms and all. Kurt hunched over the fire-pit, nursing a match and kindling into a campfire. I fired up my Coleman stove and adjusted it to a simmer under a super-sized can of chili. We were set for a Canadian evening of camping, with only one problem; the aspirin hadn't kicked in yet.

The evening's chill had settled onto me long before reaching Brian and Kurt. I pulled on my leather jacket. Hunched over the hissing stove, I sipped on an iced Turkey while stirring the chili, watching the Sleeping Giant rock formation silhouette itself against the peach light of dusk. The moment was special, yet a bacterial or viral something-or-other battled for my spirit. I so wanted a memorable camping experience, even sensing there might be a predestined defining moment. Yet, on that evening in July, it wasn't meant to be—the aches and chills persisted. Once we finished dinner and cleaned up the dishes, I announced that I needed to turn in—and that maybe some rest would help.

I slipped into the sleeping bag, leaving my clothes on for extra warmth. It felt good to lie down, and once my nest warmed up, the shivers retreated. The night was young, and although being tired, I wasn't sleepy. I pulled the bag up under my chin and wiggled a comfortable pocket into my pillow. Once situated, I relaxed, and listened. A tent adds new dimensions to the senses, especially the auditory. Eyes rendered useless; there was nothing to see but the golden glow of Brian and Kurt's campfire dancing on the fabric. The narrow confines of my tent became a surveillance post, sensors spinning like radar dishes, picking up the night sounds. My brain would kick into high gear interpreting their direction, proximity, and source. Sight wasn't required to determine direction, as long as both ears were cleared of wax. Nor were eyes required to

determine general proximity; the sharpness or dullness on the eardrum indicated how long the sound had been traveling. However, sight was required to determine the source, especially if the noise was unfamiliar. The rustling of a ground squirrel could sound like a wolverine; the clanking of gear on the picnic table could be from a raccoon, or a black bear. And a spooked imagination provided little clarity. Once on a camping trip in Minnesota, I stayed behind to take a nap while the others rode into town for something to eat. My radar was particularly active that afternoon because I had left my camera sitting on the picnic table. Nonetheless, I dozed off and was later awakened by footsteps moving through our campsite. I immediately thought of the camera and bolted upright and peeked through the window. I saw a male figure walking away from the tent, heading towards the road. I started screaming, “HEY...HEY...hey there! Wait a minute. What are you doing?” I came flying out of the tent and saw that the camera was gone. My shouting had frozen him in his tracks, and when he turned around, I could see that he was no more than 12 years old. “What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded. I frightened him such that he had difficulty explaining that he was just taking a shortcut back from the restroom. I apologized once seeing he didn’t have the camera, and later to his parents, but not until after I found the camera in my motorcycle’s saddlebag.

The sounds from adjacent campsites lessened as the night aged. I heard Brian and Kurt visiting, the few distinguishable words indicated they reminisced about their Air Force times together. The night air carried soft voices, hushed giggles, ice rattling cups, chili farts and belches, and an occasional thump of a log landing on the fire. The night sounds lulled me in and out of sleep. Then, a scurry of motion suddenly broke the tranquility. It sounded as if someone had stumbled and fallen into the fire, or maybe someone jumped Kurt and Brian by surprise and a fight had erupted.

“JEEZ...Oh my GOD...What the hell!” Brian then hollered, “What was THAT?”

Radar dish spinning frantically, brain hammering to process the data, I heard my camp chair tumbling around like it was being smashed. Footsteps quickly moved away from the tent, and Kurt’s voice shouted from a distance, “A SKUNK!”

Then Brian continued his ranting, “God, he came right up from behind, walked under my chair and right between my legs!”

The skunk wasn’t as excited as Brian or Kurt; at least it didn’t smell like it. It jumped up on the table for a look-see, then back to the ground and swaddled away into the night. In my mind, that skunk was no different than the spring-loaded fuse holder—either one could have ruined the trip. Despite a few scares here and there, we seemed to be carrying enough good karma to keep going. If I could kick the flu, we’d be back full swing.

The following day, I awoke at first light, optimistic about feeling better. Although tired, the flu-like symptoms had subsided. I pulled on my jacket and crawled out into the stillness of dawn, anxious to get a pot of coffee brewing. While I coaxed the stove into a smooth cadence, Brian emerged from his tent. He looked like he’d slept in the backseat of Chevy coupe. He wore glasses instead of his contacts, the ones with mucus-colored frames and lenses suitable for an arsonist. He stood there for a moment, like trying to figure out where he was, and possibly who he was. “You’re up early.” I commented. “Sleep alright?”

“It was miserable,” he said with a raspy voice. “...cold...hard ground...no pillow.”

He started shivering, briskly rubbing his arms and shoulders. Then, in a Quasimodo stoop, he hobbled towards the fire pit. Once there, confusion seemed to freeze him again; he just stood there staring at the ashes. Finally, he knelt down and began to resuscitate the fire. Once the coffee pot started beating out a tune, I heated some water and poured it over a couple bowls of instant oatmeal. We then gathered at the fire for a standup

breakfast. On that particular morning, Kurt preferred sleep to food or caffeine. We slurped our morning brew while sporadically packing for the new day on the road. When Kurt finally woke up, we shifted to serious packing, and thirty minutes later, we were underway.

Chapter Seven

Once leaving the park, we returned to the main highway to continue our clockwise journey around Lake Superior. I could feel a recharge in stamina from the nights rest, although I still wasn't at full strength. I hoped that renewal would come as the day progressed. Other than stopping for a few vistas of the lake, we rode steadily. No one horsed around. Conversations were utilitarian—no expansion in breadth or depth. We all seemed to be self-absorbed with not feeling well; the ill-health of my companions coming from too much moon howling the previous night, and mine from some unknown bug. Nevertheless, we kept moving. We had a 380-mile day in store, which would get us to Pancake Bay Provincial Park on the eastern shore of Lake Superior.

We stopped for lunch at the Red Dog Inn in Terrance Bay, the northern most point on the north shore. The meatloaf special turned out to be a good choice. After lunch we loitered in the parking lot under clear skies and warming sunshine. The rest and food helped nurse me back to health. Kurt lit a cigarette while we watched two boys zip around the area on a tiny Yamaha drenched in neglect, buzzing around us like a horsefly. They flirted with us, attracted by our large motorcycles. Yet, they kept their motion and distance for a while, perhaps too timid to stop, or over-excited by being on stage. The buzzing finally ended when they landed next to us. The boys had nothing to say—they merely stood there looking at our bikes. We broke the silence by suiting up and starting the bikes. As we rode away, I looked back, expecting to see the boys watching our departure. Instead, I saw the little Yamaha bounce over the curb, and tear through the tall grasses of the ditch, and then level off on a secondary road, the oily smoke mixing with the road dust as they raced away, fully absorbed in their own adventures.

As it turned out, the lunch break in Terrance Bay was my pinnacle of feeling better. The balance of the afternoon deteriorated into aches and

pains, forcing a stop in White River for a rest. After a brief nap on the carpeted grass, we continued our trip. Each mile hurt, and I knew then that the bug had revisited me in earnest. We had to stop once more before reaching Pancake Bay so I could rest. I had no stamina, feeling only like stretching out on the ground and going to sleep. When we arrived at Pancake Bay Provincial Park, I stood in a long line to check in. Watching government bureaucracy at work didn't cheer me up at all. As soon as we reached our site, I put my tent up, and went to take a shower.

Rather than a community shower, each shower stall was private with a door opening to the outside, similar to a row of small self-storage sheds. When I entered my stall, the door slammed shut with an echoing thud. The chamber, tiled in a brownish Mary Kaye pink, had two sections, one for dressing and one for showering. Once undressed, I apprehensively stepped into the shower stall, unsettled by images of Nazi Germany. There were no knobs or valves, just this lens-like device flush-mounted into the wall. The ruby-red lens suggested it was an electronic sensor, and as soon as it saw me, the water would flow. I stood there, butt naked, feeling vulnerable, shivering, and dry. I tapped on the lens with my knuckle—nothing happened. Then I began a little dance in front of the lens, hoping to catch its attention. I had visions of being filmed by some fruitcake with a spy-cam, and could be seen at www.lookatme.com, performing to a synthesized tune of "*Dance with Me Henry*". I waited a few minutes, and then decided to stop the performance and get dressed—enough humiliation for one day. Just then the water began to fall, apparently my dues were sufficiently paid. I hurried with a bar of soap, knowing that I had no control or understanding of how the shower worked, and could see myself getting all lathered up, and then have the water stop; the controller wanting another dance.

When I arrived back at the campsite, Brian and Kurt has just returned from a little store down the road, the beer, ice, and firewood lashed high on their bikes. Bringing supplies in from a nearby trading post was

reminiscent of how the park got its name. Several hundred years ago, so the story goes, Voyageurs stopped there with only enough flour remaining to make pancakes, their last meal before restocking their supplies in nearby Sault Ste. Marie—thus the name Pancake Bay. Our campsite was directly across the road from the bay, an inlet meticulously lined with miles of pebbled beach. Had I been feeling better, I would have taken a long walk along the bay, to watch the sun dissolve in the distant shimmer, thinking about the life of the Voyageurs. But, at that time, my own illness commanded my attention—I felt miserable. I told Brian and Kurt that I needed to go to bed, gave them my stove for supper, and apologized for being such a party-pooper. Once tucked away in my sleeping bag, I quickly fell asleep.

I was the first to rise the next morning. Feeble trails of smoke spiraled from the fire pit. The table looked like a Delta House kitchen after “the big game”. Empty cans of stew, bowls, spoons, sacks, water bottles, camping equipment, all of it haphazardly strewn about. Yet, situated in stark contrast were about 20 empty beer bottles lined up like a squadron of glass soldiers. Brian and Kurt seemed to have had little trouble idling away the long evening without me. I walked to the bathroom to get ready for the new day, and when using the urinal, felt a burning sensation, and that’s when I noticed the blood. I then knew something was seriously wrong, which explained why I felt so poorly. I woke Brian when I got back to the campsite and told him that I was passing blood, and needed to get to a doctor. I was apprehensive about getting medical attention in Canada as an American citizen. I tried to call my employer’s benefits administrator, which resulted only in a tangled bureaucracy of computerized answering machines. I slammed the phone down and decided to look for a hospital as soon as we crossed the border in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, which was about two hours away. At the border, the customs agent directed me to a nearby hospital where I immediately got into another line to wait. Brian & Kurt sat on a bench outside the hospital

while I shuffled from one queue to the next throughout the hospital. Three hours and \$124 later, I was informed that I had a bladder infection, and received a prescription of antibiotics and painkillers. I thanked my riding buddies repeatedly for their patient wait. We were three hours behind schedule for our rendezvous with David and Vance in Wisconsin, so once we got back onto I-75, we let the bikes fly.

Our original plans were to cross the Straits of Mackinac on the five-mile long bridge that towered several hundred feet above the water, connecting the Upper Peninsula of Michigan with its lower mainland. I had traveled that bridge many years earlier on a motorcycle, and it was about as bird-like as one can get without flying. Unfortunately, we cancelled our plans to recoup lost time, and instead, turned onto H40, a secondary road plunging southwesterly into the Hiawatha National Forest. We stopped in Trout Lake at a Mom-and-Pop grocery for some urinary tract anesthesia, cranberry juice. Then on a whim, and despite being late, we walked back up the street and had lunch at a local pub.

The combination of cranberry juice, antibiotics, and generous doses of ibuprofen buoyed my spirits. I sensed a shift out of self-absorption back towards the world at large. Sickness seemed to incubate isolation, turning one's view inward, shielding the receptors to the world like a weighty x-ray blanket. Whereas wellness opened the pores like a warm bath, making it possible for the miracle of "what is" to penetrate. My newfound invigoration had us at triple digit speeds racing across the UP, keeping an eye peeled for the law, potholes, and four-legged locals.

Chapter Eight

I kept a running itinerary in my mind of David and Vance's schedule: when they would leave Atlanta, land in Chicago, leave again for Milwaukee, and eventually be in their rental car heading for High Cliff State Park. Later that afternoon in Escanaba, I asked Brian to try David's cell phone. David didn't answer his phone. Brian left him a voicemail, advising that we were running three hours behind schedule. At that point, we could only presume their locale.

Our pace quickened on the four-lane south of Green Bay. We were spread out and I was no longer able to see my partners, which could be risky business if not wanting to get separated for days on end. However, I felt comfortable because we had discussed exiting Highway 41 onto Highway 55 before we got to Appleton. And of course, a good rule of motorcycling was to wait for the others when changing to another highway number. Brian and Kurt rode somewhere up ahead of me; my chirping radar detector dictated a conservative twist on the throttle. When I exited onto the down-ramp at Highway 55, I expected to see the two speed-demons waiting. Instead, I caught a peripheral glimpse of Kurt's red Honda shooting by on the overpass, heading on down the four-lane. I screamed into a muffled helmet, "Kurt...Whoa...Whoa...you missed the turn!" Brian was nowhere in sight. "Geez...let the games begin." I mumbled in disgust.

I turned left at the bottom of the ramp, and pulled to the roadside. Just as I shut the bike off, I heard Brian's bike decelerating down the off-ramp. Mixed in with my elation was the question of how he got behind me. He pulled up, shut his bike off, flipped up the face-shield, and nonchalantly asked where Kurt was. "If you don't know, then that was him I saw heading towards Appleton, at a pretty good clip too." We agreed that he would turn around eventually, but neither guessed how long it might take. I stewed about having another delay, not because of the delay itself, but

because of what it meant to David and Vance. I was nervous about being late. Ever since the falling out David and I had when he was a teenager, I'd been concerned about David's feelings, largely because Brian and I have gotten along so well. It surely created pangs of jealous competition towards Brian, and feelings of isolation and inadequacy within the family. I especially didn't want the riding and camping we were doing in Canada to overshadow David's party. This was a special trip for him, and little Vance too, and if we acted like we had a blast in Ontario on the way to his party, and then show up late, it would reinforce the alienation.

While we waited for Kurt, Brian was able to reach David on his cell phone. Apparently their flights were running late, and had just now arrived at the campground. I felt some relief, yet we still had this small complication—Kurt was on his way to Appleton, perhaps still unaware that he was now alone. Brian decided to ride towards Appleton while I waited. Maybe Kurt had a breakdown, like a lazy fuse holder, or worse yet, was in the ditch with grass growing out of his helmet. Brian returned a half hour later, alone. We decided to continue onward, figuring that Kurt would eventually get reoriented. As we pulled back onto the highway, our lost buddy comes zipping up behind us. Nothing was said, or needed to be—we were together again, and at that moment, it was the most important thing.

David had said that he and Vance would go to a nearby town for supper, so we stopped for some burgers, figuring it was going to be dark before we reached the campground. And most importantly, we were now in communication with David and Vance, so further delay seemed okay. When we reached the entrance to the campground, I was thoroughly twisted around, not sure where we were. I had been there before, but now it looked unfamiliar. I knew the state was Wisconsin, and the campground was the High Cliff State Park, and this was where David and Vance were supposed to be. After we paid our fees, which seemed more plentiful than Wisconsin mosquitoes, we climbed back on the bikes. Brian became

impatient while I fumbled with a park map, and took the lead. He seemed to know where he was, and I didn't.

We followed a narrow asphalt road through the park, snaking along in first gear, threading our way amongst the campfires. Surely David and Vance heard our twelve-cylinders reverberate in the trees long before we arrived. I could imagine Vance's excitement—he loved motorcycles. When we finally arrived, David came out of the darkness casting a Herman Munster silhouette. Then I saw that the giant part was Vance riding high on his dad's shoulders. David and Brian hugged while I settled my bike on its side-stand. Then the towering figure walked over to Kurt, and then to me for a hug. Before I removed my helmet, I gave Vance a pat on the leg, saying, "...hey little buddy." Apparently he was unsure of who I was until he heard my voice; then he returned a "Papa!"

Without prelude, David, Vance and Brian went for supplies and firewood. Kurt and I remained behind to set up our tents, helping each other by holding the flashlight. When finished, I threw a towel around my neck, tucked my toilet kit and clean clothes under my arm, and followed my flashlight beam along a path, looking for the shower. Cleaned up, my refreshed mood convinced Kurt to do the same. While I waited in the darkness, David returned, the car squatting from a trunk filled with split oak. I helped stack some of it near the fire ring; the balance stayed in the trunk in case of rain. Since the air was comfortably warm, a fire would be more for light and ambience than heat. Our camp clearing had been gleaned of all sticks and twigs, so our hunt for kindling expanded to the surrounding woods. Vance went with me, jabbering excitedly about something I couldn't understand. He seemed undaunted by the darkness; in fact, he wandered off on his own several times, requiring me to shift the hunt from small sticks to a small boy. It was as though he had night vision, not needing a flashlight for illumination or security. Later, with our arms full, we followed a trail through the woods that led back to our site—me leading, and Vance following; his short legs doing double-time. He

chattered like I was his long lost buddy, excitement unparalleled in his little world. “Papa” and “motorcycle” were the only words I recognized—the rest of it probably only decipherable by his mom and dad. Vance was a happy little guy. He was in the midst of some big-time stuff: the dark woods, a night chorus of tree frogs, tents and sleeping bags, flashy motorcycles, crackling campfires, wood-smoked hotdogs dripping with ketchup, and all the grape pop one could want. We should all be so lucky at such an early age. And to have a dad that would bring his little buddy on such an excursion warmed my heart.

A well-placed match ignited the kindling we had gathered, and soon the flame spread upward through a tipi of twigs and sticks. We placed a bulky wooden table next to the fire and gathered around to watch the flames reach for the night. Vance stood next to his dad, mesmerized by fire. The orange glow warmed my face, relaxing me into a slumber. Soon I was yelping like a hyena with jaw-stretching yawns. I wanted to stay by the fire and enjoy the conversations, but those flu-like symptoms were still with me. I apologized and retired for the night.

Chapter Nine

The next morning dawned cloudy, and still. The leaves hung heavy, silently sipping the gray mist. The antibiotics and rest worked well together; I felt better. The others emerged from their tents without prompting—all anxious to go see the planes. Vance stood at the picnic table in his pajamas, his eyes puffy from sleep, blonde hair mangled in defeat. He gazed at the woods, munching on a strawberry Pop-Tart, and sucking on a straw speared into a carton of orange juice. Vance's hands were covered with long white socks pulled past his elbows and taped in place. Vance was born with acute eczema, a dermatological condition of severely dry and itchy skin. If not cared for, the itching would become so intense that Vance would scratch himself into an oozing and bloody mess. He requires daily bathing, oiling of his skin, and then special protective sleepwear to prevent scratching while sleeping. Compounding his problem, he has a particularly allergic reaction to peanuts, and foods using peanut derivatives, immediately breaking his skin into a reddening rash, or into a more serious reaction of swollen lips, tongue, and throat, choking off his air passage within minutes. David carried an emergency dose of epinephrine to be injected into Vance's thigh in the event of a severe allergic reaction. Vance required a lot of vigilance. When quiet, or out of sight, more than likely, he was scratching, raking and clawing for momentary relief. Would the Wisconsin woods be Vance-friendly? Only exposure would determine.

After a simple breakfast of oatmeal, juice and coffee, we piled into the Toyota Camry, heading for Oshkosh. Vance was strapped into his car-seat centered in the back, flanked by Kurt and me. After four days on a motorcycle, the car felt luxurious—comfortable, quiet, smooth, and quite utilitarian. Within an hour, we had our tickets, had passed through the gate, and onto the grasses and tarmac housing thousands of airplanes. If the planes had been lined up wingtip to wingtip, they would have stretched

for 52 miles, so the literature said. With so little time and so much choice, we divided the feast into “like to see’s” and “must see’s”. The old Warbirds topped our lists: the Corsairs, Mustangs, Spitfires, and Skyraiders.

When we approached the fat-faced A-1E Skyraiders, history nudged me without warning, pulling me back to 1965, to the Bien Hoa Air Base in Vietnam. I began reliving the extremes of Vietnam again: the heat, the humidity, and the vibrant greens, shimmering, thick, never-ending. I could smell Nam: the Vietnamese flesh, scented with a diet of rice and fermented fish sauce, the scent of wood-smoke, napalm, aircraft fuel, and the earthy smell of discard, rot and rebirth. I could see the Skyraiders rolling down the runway, wings laden with ordinances of death. The 18-cylinder radials roared, grabbing the sultry air, pulling skyward, skimming the waving greens below as they scrambled for cover in the skies. Transported back to Nam, I was twenty years old again.

To return home right then would have been okay. The unexpected nostalgia left a residual of contentment on my mind. Or, it would have been fine to stay right there under the Skyraider’s wing, sliding my hand over its skin, smelling its oils, and letting the memories of a wild adventure come home for a visit. But this was only my adventure; the others had theirs too, but under different wings. We moved along, David, Brian, and Kurt followed their memories into the crowd of planes. Just like me, they were reliving their Air Force experiences. David did his tour in England, and later participated in the Gulf War, providing avionics support for the F-111s. He says little about his experiences. Perhaps we are the same in that regard; his memories will be delayed like mine, not resurfacing until later in his life. Brian and Kurt were with a squadron of F-16s. They traveled around the world during their four years, and they surely had stories untold. All three had experienced something I never will—supersonic flight. David had flown in an F-111, and both Kurt and

Brian had flown in an F-16. Someday they will tell their sons and daughters what it was like.

Later, we spent a few minutes under the wing of a Spitfire waiting out a rain shower. Once clear, we moseyed through the sea of people and planes, stopping in a tent for lunch of barbequed burgers and Bratwurst sausages. I studied the crowd while we ate. The people scented of affluence, a whiff of privilege. Many resembled characters from the TV series, “*Baa Baa Black Sheep*”, led by ace Pappy Boyington: handsome, cocky, fun-loving, cigar-smoking, sporting aviator sunglasses, and outfitted in tailored olive-drab flightsuits. The Corsairs, the Skyraiders, and the Spitfires; all were largely owned by private collectors. I learned that two million dollars might get you in the cockpit, taking a little more perhaps to get in the air. Big toys for big boys, so the saying goes. It must be a masculine thing to never fully outgrow youth. The wallet doesn't determine if there will be dreams, only your ability to act them out. It was a world I could only dream about, but never participate in. I wasn't born rich, nor had I become rich through my labors, nor do I have the energy left to pursue more money and bigger toys. Fate had spoken; I'm grounded. Resigned to earth, my two thousand dollar motorcycle would have to suffice.

After lunch, we continued our walk along the tarmac, heading for the far end of the flight line where the ultralights grazed like enormous geese dressed in Easter finery. The ultralights were much smaller toys for big boys, boys with regular jobs, rush hour commutes, kids, orthodontist bills, and mortgages. The long walk took its toll on Vance. David, without complaint, carried the bundle of happiness most of the way. The little planes interested Brian more than the rest of us, in fact, he was serious about buying an ultralight, but hadn't yet rationalized his way around the reported dangers and family responsibilities. I wanted no part of his decision, and remained staunchly, and rudely, indifferent. And David remained silent also, although he thought it cavalier and borderline lunacy

for Brian to even consider such a thing. And that was a marked difference in David and Brian. David unflinchingly stepped up to parental responsibility, certainly more so than I ever did. He dutifully, and lovingly, sacrificed his personal wants for Vance. I figured that his parenting values were compensations for the void he felt in our relationship. Brian, on the other hand, took a different approach. He burned his candles from both ends; working and dancing to have his cake and eat it too. We wandered around in a sea of aluminum tubing and stretched fabric, me thinking about risk and reward. Suddenly an insight came to me. In an earlier day, David was the first to feel my selfishness—I didn't even try to hide it. Nature abhors a vacuum, and the law of compensation kicked in to reestablish equilibrium. David compensated for my neglect with his generous relationship with Vance. Brian on the other hand, being the product of a more civil relationship, and having the advantage of an observer, saw an approach he considered more balanced, not to suggest that he was successful in navigating the conflicts. He seemed to exhaust himself trying to be a responsible family man and follow his other compulsions.

Clearly, my selfish approach was hurtful, and frankly, something that I had not let roost for fear of facing guilt feelings. We stood around watching Brian situate himself in an ultralight. He settled down onto the canvas seat, shaded by the taut fabric wing, surrounded by pedals, levers, tubing, cables, and pulleys. Brian slurped his runaway drool while pointing out the safety aspects of the planes: instrumentation, auxiliary fuel tanks, stall prevention devices, and even parachutes, not for the pilot, but for the plane itself. Brian's eyes were wild with excitement. The rest of us remained reserved, struggling with our values and priorities. My responses were patronizing, but removed. I admitted privately to David that flying a nylon eagle would be a surreal experience. I recalled repeated dreams as a boy, dreams of making a helicopter in our shop on the farm, and then lifting off under the power of little Briggs and Stratton engine,

waving to my dad and mom, seeing the rooftops shrink as I rose. I could see the corn tassels dip and sway as I hovered over the rows of corn. Later my dreams evolved and I didn't need a plane to fly—I could lift off simply with intense concentration and the will to do so. But, that was a dream, one that I just couldn't pursue in my waking life. Brian would take it as a fatherly endorsement, and David might consider it as favoring Brian. Perhaps we were all caught in our karmic webs, our dreams inches from our reach, yet miles from our permissions.

After an hour or so of milling around, we began our long walk back to the hangers. Leaving, hardly a word was spoken. The silence was strange, yet familiar, and similar to the hush that followed my brother's bachelor party, when a couple of strippers slipped into the crowd of predominately conservative Catholic farmers. The following day, tight lips fell over the farmland; nobody was saying anything. And that was the kind of hush that followed us as we walked from the ultalights. We had seen something off-limits, we'd been tempted, not with bouncing breast, but with the fleshiness of real flight, of being bird-like. Yet, nothing needed to be said either; instead we walked along quietly, letting our dreams carry us along.

Vance joined me in the shade under the wing of a large bomber, where we stretched our tiredness upon on the grass. Resting my head on my rolled jacket, I watched Vance's head rise and fall with his pillow, my stomach. Meanwhile, the others moved closer to the runway to watch a reenactment of a WWII air assault. But to Vance and me, it was just another war, and resting seemed more important. We dozed off. Later, thunderous percussions brought us back to the world. The battle was at its zenith; planes were strafing the airfield while pyrotechnic crews ignited explosives on the runway. We kept our positions and watched the apocalyptic fireballs plume upwards through the billowing black smoke. The heat wave passed over us, warming the imagination of a wide-eyed little boy. War and little boys, they seemed so dissimilar, strikingly

contradictory. Yet, beneath the surface, they were related. Certainly with some, it was the little boy that climbed into those old planes, lured by the adventures fantasized in youth. The addiction of adventure evoked denial, labeling their service as duty and patriotism instead of what it really was. Many little boys never returned.

Chapter Ten

On the way back to the campsite, we stopped to buy groceries for the evening: sirloin steak, pork and beans, baking potatoes, and chips. Once back at the campsite, Vance help me start the fire, but not without a fair amount of grandparental council. We then paraded to the showers while waiting for the fire to make a nest of coals. Vance was suitably entertained in the public showers, a place of abundant nakedness. When finished, we marched back to the campsite, pinned our towels on a makeshift clothesline, mixed our drinks, and then dug into the chips and dip. An hour later, the steaks were grilling, the fat sizzling as it splashed onto the fire. Foil-wrapped potatoes bordered the coals, the beans simmered next to the steaks. Brian elected himself as the official meat flipper. He begrudgingly made an early claim to his steak by dropping a steak from his wood-carved fork into the ashes. When the meat finished cooking, we gathered around the table for dinner. The meat looked better than it tasted, tasting like leathery liver. No one could finish, and we tilted our plates to the fire, making an offering to the gods of lousy food.

We finished the evening around the fire, talking about the airshow, and watching Vance pee on the trees. Vance was like an alpha male in new territory, moving from tree to tree, scent-marking whenever and wherever he wanted. Brian went into his questioning mood again. Only this time he wanted know which plane we liked best. To say that you had no opinion or that you liked them all were inadequate responses. Brian dug for something, wanting specifics, and used our responses as his shovel to unearth whatever he looked for. He worked on each of us until we patronized him with specific models of planes. He then seemed satisfied, but later confessed that he couldn't make up his mind, just too many choices. We agreed, and before he could do more trenching, we shifted the conversation. Later on, Vance and I said goodnight to the others. David zipped the young man into his new sleeping bag, and I crawled into my

tent. Vance must have been tired; he stayed in the darkness without a whimper. I dozed off soon afterwards.

The following morning, the day broke clear and fresh. Yet, there was a subtle ambivalence in the air, for it was a travel day, and a day of separation. We packed quickly, deciding to have breakfast at a restaurant rather than munch on Vance's Pop-Tarts. Once on the road, David led the parade with Vance riding high in the back seat, securely strapped into his car-seat. I saw David roll the automatic windows down—perhaps a signal for a fly-by. Sure enough, Brian and Kurt, as if on command, flipped on their left flashers and “punched it”. I did the same. Vance heard us before he saw us, and turned a curious ear towards the high-pitched wails coming up on his left. Blonde hair whipping his forehead, eyes squinting in the wind, he watched in awe. Vance's psyche had now been imprinted with a “fly-by”.

We turned into the parking lot of a Perkins Restaurant. We removed our riding gear, as we watched Vance squirm to unbuckle himself from his seat, excitedly chattering something about “big motorcycles”. Once inside, the little guy bellied up to the table with the rest of us. We sipped the morning's coffee; Vance mimicked us with his glass of water. He sat tall in his booster seat, elbows on the table, surrounded by his buddies. Vance spotted a picture of blueberry pancakes on the menu and told his dad that's what he wanted. We chitchatted mostly about our travel plans home while waiting for our breakfast. Although no one was ready to go home yet, we couldn't resist the lure of a travel day. We discussed making the Oshkosh airshow an annual get together. We agreed that having David suggest the trip helps make it possible, especially for Brian and me. Next year's plans were of no concern to Vance though. Nothing was more important than being with his buddies, and those pancakes. He hunched over his plate, working his fork as fast as he could chew. The blueberries and whipped cream smeared his face, and some of it jumped off his plate and crawled down to the blue Suzuki motorcycle on his tee shirt.

Breakfast came to an end, and so too the reunion. We said our goodbyes in the parking lot; navigating an emotional moment with handshakes, whiskery hugs, and backslaps. David and Vance headed for Milwaukee, while the rest of us rode across the street to gas up. Then we headed out on Highway 41. A few miles down the road, Kurt peeled off and headed towards Duluth, hand waving in the air, sleeping bag and tent bouncing along behind him. If he stayed the course, he'd be home by mid-afternoon. Brian and I continued south, and if we stayed the course, we'd be in Omaha by nightfall. It felt good to be riding again, although the sting of separation was now with me. I thought of Kurt, anxious to get home, I'm sure, yet riding alone. He had no one to get lost or separated from now except himself. And David and Vance-man, I missed them already, so soon after we'd said goodbye. Brian's riding by my side helped ease the sadness. I knew that once we got underway on some new roads, I'd feel better. Newness worked that way for me—like an anesthesia—the morphine that takes the sting out of separation.

Brian and I continued south, looking for Highway 151, weaving our way through the rush-hour traffic. Up ahead, I spotted a white Camry with New York plates. It was David! I pulled up to his left side, and with a grinning wave, he lowered the windows. The wind seemed to take Vance's breath away. The little guy looked at me; squinting into the morning sun, he waved with a smile. Vance had the fever—I could see it in his face. Someday he would enjoy the open road, just like his Papa. I sped on ahead trying to keep up with Brian. When we began the slowdown for our exit, David came up on my left. He gave a final wave. Vance didn't wave or smile this time. Tummy full of pancakes, mind full of dreams, heart full of love, he slouched in his seat, eyes closed, sleep had come.

Watching David and Vance, I wanted to cry, not from sadness, but from joy. I thought about our lives, and how they turned out. Call it grace,

Divine intervention, or whatever; there was a force in the universe that rebalanced life. David's compensations were a testament to this rebalancing. The atonement between David and me reflected in Vance's happy face. After so many years of denial, guilt, and remorse, finally, I felt peace.

I veered towards the off-ramp while watching David pull away into the distance. "Have a good trip home son...you're a good dad...I love you."