

Winds of Discontent

April 2001

Chapter 1

The wind swept across the barren farmland, clouding the separation of earth and sky. The sun had climbed high in the morning sky and I'd already covered 200 miles. Although not a record pace, it was adequate. The 60-degree air warmed my face, a nice change from the chill of daybreak. I rolled off the throttle, braking and downshifting to bring the bike to a stop. At the stop sign, I fidgeted with the shift lever searching for neutral; I needed a minute to regain my bearings. Studying the map, I looked for my next move. "Highway 34...this is where I turn west." I mumbled. I rested only a few moments; too much ahead to sit still—had to keep moving. I tapped the shifter down; the bike lurched eagerly as it clunked into gear. Flipping my face-shield down, I accelerated westward, following an artery of pavement cutting through the heart of America.

Highway-34 guided me towards Grand Island, Nebraska. The bike leaned into the wind, bobbing and weaving to the rhythms of spring. Traveling alone wasn't intentional; it just worked out that way. My wife traveled on other business for several days, so I found myself alone and with free time. I debated about whether to take a short trip or simply spend the weekend lounging around the house. After wrestling the issue awhile, opportunity eventually maneuvered laziness into a hammer-lock. So, I packed quickly and hurried out the driveway before slothfulness could wiggle free. Traveling alone had yet to bother me other than feeling peculiar about heading away from Mary Jean rather than waiting for her return. I'm no stranger to solo travel, despite ambivalence in doing so. Certainly traveling alone makes for easy going, requiring minimal coordination or consideration with anyone other than myself. Yet, solitary travel, especially camping, can have an unnerving side, where the imagination roams the psyche, prodding demons from their sleep. Demons aside though, I needed this trip. I feared becoming prey to

overindulgence. Life's regrets seemed to squeeze harder as the years passed; the trip might relax that grip just a bit.

Shortly before crossing the Platte River, I picked up Highway 2, a two-laner leading to the Sandhills of Nebraska. Once sensing new territory, a smile came to my face. A motorcycle ride turns me into a sponge, where I soak up the terrain, unconsciously storing tidbits about landscapes: the colors, the vegetation, the architectures, and land formations, and how they all interact with the road. Then, years later when traveling the same road, a faint knowing, an intuition, would occur—I've been here before. But, Highway 2 registered no faint knowing, no intuitions. A caffeinated kick of excitement had me panning from horizon to horizon, absorbing the newness. I sliced through a sea of warming air, feeling good about being on the road again. I wanted the bike and the road to suspend me in that high forever. A sense of well-being rarely lasts though, not even for a day.

A lunch stop in a town along the way provided a break from the wind. Although just a little place, the town managed to attract several fast-food franchises. I chose an establishment featuring composite fiber furniture, Styrofoam cups, and plastic tableware. Uniformed teenagers scurried around the kitchen in organized chaos, with bells, buzzers, and ringers adding to the clamor. They cooked and assembled the food with all the reverence of an orgy. Small towns are being transformed by fast-food; their easygoing nature giving way to the hurriedness of the cities. Profit-hungry investors fried quaintness and sacredness in the grease of efficiency and productivity. I too committed sacrilege, eating fast and resting little. I couldn't seem to slow down, to spend time with my meal, tasting the food, and appreciating it. Always in a hurry, I grabbed at life, compulsively stuffing myself with ripening existence, eating it before it spoiled. I fished in the box for the last fry, as though I wouldn't eat again for several days. Washing the salt down with my drink, I headed for the door, making way for more hurried people crowding in. Returning to the sun, I mounted up and pointed west. Farther and farther from home I traveled, the unknown beckoning me on. Once reaching cruising speed, I synced up with a mysterious rhythm, feeling calm, and like the bike, preferring the stability of speed to the wobbliness of a slower pace. The open road felt good, like I belonged there, familiar

like an old sweatshirt. I twisted the throttle, keeping the bike aligned with my mood—I couldn't slow down; no time for reverence; too much to do and see; too many places I hadn't been.

West of Grand Island the terrain roughened. The highway rose from the Platte River basin, leaving behind the dust and the tractors that corduroyed the soil. Continuing northwesterly, the season retreated, rolling back towards winter. The nakedness of winter barely covered itself in the foliage of rebirth. Only the odometer provided proof that I wasn't hallucinating, and that indeed time marched on, and not backwards. The road paralleled railroad tracks that weaved their way through the hills, following the lowest course. Later, the road and tracks joined a small river, all now searching for the easiest way. On and on they reached: the road, the river, the tracks, and one lone biker running from the squeeze of regret. The tracks belonged to the BNSF railroad and provided a conduit for moving coal from Wyoming to the east. All along the way, heaped "hundred-unit" coal trains sat idling, keeping the pipeline full, obsessed with efficiency and productivity. Trains coming back west carried the goods produced from the coal. Resources and goods on the move, seldom in the right place, rarely at rest, the earth in constant flux because of man's discontent. I saw myself in the trains: frequently on the move, seldom in the right place, rarely at rest—in constant flux.

My westward direction ended when reaching Highway 83. There I turned north towards Valentine, and entered the Sandhills region; 20,000 square miles of sand dunes covered with brownish-green grasses. The largest sand dune formation in the Western Hemisphere, they were created thousands of years ago when a dry bed of an inland sea blew eastward and settled as dunes. Eventually, grasses covered the dunes to protect them against eroding winds. The high water table of the Ogallala Aquifer also helped stabilize the soil. For hundreds of years, the area was home to vast herds of buffalo. As the buffalo numbers declined, the early settlers moved in and staked their claims. I read this information etched in a roadside display. It didn't tell the whole story though, how the government slaughtered the buffalo as a way of getting the Indians onto reservations so the settlers could move in. Many year later, cattle grazed over the impressions left by the buffalo, and cowboys in pickup trucks rutted the grasslands, cutting tracks where a proud

people once stood with their painted ponies, prayerfully contemplating the sacred land. The winds wobbled the motorcycle as I thought about all of this. My right to proceed seemed invalid, a privilege dishonorably earned, a passport tarnished with the blood of the Sioux. I nevertheless kept going, but now with an awakened, yet saddened heart, sailing northward upon a sea of grass.

Chapter Two

The bike's clock read "2:13". The temperature climbed higher than I anticipated, certainly for April. The rising heat traveled across the prairie on the spring wind, making my leather jacket too warm. Despite the stuffy feeling, I kept rolling, anxious to get to my oasis. Besides, I expected it to cool down towards evening, when I'd have a campfire, and some campers might wander over for an evening drink, and lively conversation, and maybe even philosophizing. The breath of the prairie pushed me along with little concern for speed limits. I crouched like a road racer, weaving in and out of the tumbleweeds that bounced along with me. I glanced at my map, finding a secondary road leading to Lake Merritt. An idling brain and a strong tailwind blew me past my turn. I turned around and exited onto a narrow paved road partially flooded with sand. The unmarked pavement followed the valleys through the dunes, weaving amongst islands of grass flourishing in the shallow pools of water. I used the entire road, requiring its full width to recover from sudden blasts of wind. A moment of inattention and I could have become a dune.

Further down the road I entered the park area surrounding Lake Merritt. Being unfamiliar with the area, I followed the signs leading to a general store serving the lake. I picked up some camping information and filled my cooler with ice. I followed the directions to the campground where I expected a ranger to provide the requisite briefing on park rules. But, there was no ranger, and no campers—just me. With trepidation, I entered the park, and immediately got tangled up with too much choice, going overboard looking for the perfect spot. I rode around and around, factoring in wind direction, shade, view, morning sun, privacy, and so on. After pegging the heat gauge needle, I finally settled for a site in the cedars, perched on a bluff overlooking the lake. I shut the bike off and just sat there,

paralyzed, slowly settling into the bike like warming butter. The midday sun bore down on my black leather, heating me like a burrito in a microwave oven. Everything looked lifeless and washed of color. I so wanted the iridescent greens of spring, to see the chartreuse of new life. Instead, I found an arid, bleached out terrain, where the wind rocked my head while the sand blasted the bike. I wanted to leave; yet I couldn't move. Mired in the muck of fatigue and depression, I sat immobilized.

Despite the dismal scene and a dark mood, I decided to stay. I undressed, dropping my leathers in a heap on the ground. The wind cooled me as it drank my sweat, giving cause to pause and enjoy the fleeting pleasure. Modesty soon slipped me into a pair of jogging shorts and sandals. Then I unpacked a chair from the bike and parked my butt in the shade of the cedars. I felt nauseous, my head pounded—I needed to hydrate and cool down. I just sat there, dazed, sipping warm water, trying to remain calm. I squinted into the glare; expecting at any moment to see a caravan of camels snaking over the dunes, lead by Lawrence of Arabia himself. I wondered if the heat and wind kept other campers away. I hesitated setting up the tent for fear that a ranger would tell me to move it, which would then also explain why no one else was there. I wondered if the wind would calm down towards evening, and maybe the air cool down some also. Optimism hid from me, or maybe it wasn't there at all, having jumped from the bike many miles ago, deciding that mutiny was better than desolation. I'd been in those situations before though, especially when camping in desert-like settings, where the heat and desolation would suck enthusiasm out like a criticism, only to have the cool evening air and a rose-colored sky fill me again with wonder and awe. Nevertheless, with no one to buoy my sinking mood, I struggled to remain hopeful.

Chapter Three

After cooling down and somewhat rested, I plotted how to erect the tent. Ordinarily, an easy job, however, such strong winds made it an entirely different matter. I had replaced my old tent, wanting something smaller and easier to put up. As it turned out, my new tent was smaller, but equally difficult to set up. I should have stayed with my very first

tent, an A-framed Eureka. The Eureka looked like Boy Scout surplus, cheap and unsophisticated; yet, it went up easily—an important consideration when tired. After pulling the tent from the stuff sack, I needed six hands to keep everything earth-bound. The stuff sack and the bag for the poles, even the tie-down cords, tried to take off across the lake. I had donned my favorite ball cap, the one with the flames and crossed matches embroidered on the front. It too had fantasies of flight; I pulled it down tightly, mushrooming my ears like meringue.

Although needing help, I wanted no eyes to watch what followed. The wind played with me like a cat plays with a mouse, slapping it, flicking it, letting it scurry far enough to be hopeful, only to be pounced upon again. And just like the cat, the wind had no intentions of letting me be. After the wind swatted me several times with rip-stop nylon, I lay spread-eagle on the ruffling fabric while rotating from corner to corner, grunting to push the stakes into the sand. Once finished, I headed back to the shade for a break, and to figure my next move. I had decided not to mess with the rain-fly; a storm seemed unlikely, and more importantly, I didn't want to parasail across the lake. After a few sips of water, I returned to the task at hand. I threaded two shock-corded poles through the channels sewn into the tent's fabric, and then attached one end of each pole to a corner of the tent. Then I pulled the tent over the first pole, anchoring it to the opposite corner. The tent stood up, wobbling like a newborn colt. My spirits soared, only to plummet with the tent when the wind bullied it back to the ground. I didn't panic though, preserving my composure for the second pole. I knew it would be more difficult and critical in getting the tent to stay upright. I waited for a lull; I only needed five seconds. When the moment came, I clutched the fabric and stretched it over the second pole, hooking it into the remaining corner. I had it; and so did the wind, bowing the poles inward, imploding the tent into itself. I frantically grabbed another stake and pounded it into the sand. I then pulled the tent back out of itself, securing it with a bungee cord from the bike. I promptly did the same for the other pole. I had it! Again! I stood back and watched it rock and sway, ready to grab it if it decided to take off. The tent shook as if fearing for its life. I then installed the last two poles that finally provided the strength to withstand the strong gust. At last, my home for the night seemed inclined to stay, so I slowly backed away,

one apprehensive step at a time, ready to lunge with each gust. I inched my way back to the shade; I needed more water and rest.

The sun continued its descent. My choices for bathing were few: jump in the lake, or wash with a towelette. Not wanting to explore the lake, I settled on the latter. I wiped my face, then my arms and shoulders. When finished, I tossed the cloth into my riding boots, my temporary trashcan. Not hungry yet, I started looking for firewood. I gathered sticks from neighboring sites, knowing by then I'd be alone for the evening. I stacked a large pile next to the fire ring—much more than I'd need considering temperatures in the 80s. Regardless, I figured to use the fire as a friend in the night. I sat down in the shade again, feeling anxious, hoping for some kind of change: like cooler air, or calming winds, or the transition from afternoon to evening. I thought about home, and about Mary Jean. She traveled also, her trip with friends to a church conference in Minneapolis. Although different than my trip, the purpose was similar: to stir the spirit, to travel new roads, to discover not only new surroundings, but also ourselves. I wondered about our kids, all married and away from home now, and how they were spending their weekends. I wanted a cell phone in the worst way, to speed-dial each of them, telling them about the crazy trip, about how isolated and lonely I felt. But, there was no phone, no one to talk to—just the wind whistling in the cedars.

Chapter Four

My stomach knew dinnertime neared, prompting me to light the stove. I set my single burner Coleman down inside a pivoting cooking grill located in the trees. I pumped the plunger six strokes, no more, no less. My stove and I have a long and tumultuous history, one fraught with flare-ups and burnt eyebrows. Once at a campground in Iowa, the stove threw a fit, and without warning, shot out a bellowing flame like a Saturn rocket, forcing me into the woods to hide until it burned out. Other campers gawked in disbelief, alternating their stares between the fiery column and the idiot peeking from the trees. Nowadays, familiarity is the better part of temperament; the stove ignites with a predictable flame. I swung the grill around to block the wind, feeling reassured by the

hissing blue flame. Next, the entrée—a can of beef stew. If I'd had a dinner guest, I would have baked biscuits. But alone, I didn't need to flaunt my culinary tricks, nor did I want the bother. While the stove settled into a cadence, I fidgeted with my ultra-simple can opener, a device that's one evolutionary mutation above the ameba of can openers, the military's P-38 C-ration opener. But, mutations are not necessarily progressive, or functional—I couldn't get the blasted thing to work. After several attempts, I did managed to puncture a slit in the lid, but that was it.

I clinched my jaws in frustration, my breathing now hissing louder than the stove. I opened my large folding knife and poked it in the small opening of the can. I pushed down hard, but it wouldn't cut through; it needed more oomph. I stood up from the table and positioned myself for a harder push. Then I stopped, as though a mysterious force intervened, wondering what I'd do if I slipped, opening up a squirting gash of flesh. I'd bleed to death before getting help. I folded the blade back in and put the knife away, feeling relieved, like when a rattlesnake quiets down and slithers away. I surveyed my food-bag: granola bars, dried oatmeal, apricot juice, and jellybeans—none of it a good substitute for beef stew.

I felt defeated, yet I returned to the can opener. I reasoned that openers didn't just quit working—it must be me. So, I tried a counter intuitive maneuver, one that made no mechanical sense. It wasn't a volitional act, but instead, I somehow let go of my preconceived ideas of how the opener worked and applied pressure in the opposite direction. It worked! As I inched it around the rim of the can, I thought about how my mind locked, trapped in a rut of assumptions. When things don't go my way, fear tiptoes in through a backdoor, and like a pyromaniac, ignites the heap of frustration, which soon becomes an inferno of anger, causing sufficient heat and smoke to blind me to any other possibilities. This starts a self-perpetuating cycle; fear causing the anger that causes the mind to constrict, which causes more fear and so on. Pushed to the brink, like under extreme circumstances of a stupid can opener, the cycle collapses when the frustration reaches a crescendo of micro-insanity, and I surrender in exhaustion. Then, without notice, the miracle occurs—preconceived notions take flight like pigeons, making room for new possibilities. Insanity is a frightening proposition, even if for a moment.

However, short burst of surrender can also be a blessing, an opportunity to learn, to let the key be passed through the bars of a jailed mind. I don't freely or naturally surrender, not without a struggle first. The acquiescence occurs only after getting pummeled by the situation. That's when I let go. Miracles are everywhere; big ones, little ones—if I could just learn to get out of the way.

After setting the can of stew on the stove, I filled my cup with ice, poured in some bourbon, and topped it off with water. Still restless, I moseyed over to the bike. I instinctively reached out and gripped the throttle, feeling the need to connect with something. The bike knew me well, having journeyed together for umpteen thousands of miles, to untold destinations, listening to my idle chatter, never questioning, both of us knowing there'd always be someplace else to be. Glancing at the clock and thermometer, I began mocking my predicament. "Good evening weather watchers...at six o'clock, it's a warm 82 degrees; the winds are from the south at 35 MPH, gusting to 50. For tonight, expect more of the same." I laughed at my antics, and at the silly me who thought this campground would be a utopia. I kicked up the sand as I sauntered back to the stove, feeling better with some comedic relief. Actually, my talking out loud extended beyond mimicking a weather forecaster. I'd been chattering all afternoon. Sometimes comments or questions would just spill out, as though someone listened. Oddly though, I never voiced a response back, which I found reassuring. As long as there was just one of me camping, I figured I'd be okay.

I stirred the stew, working the spoon between the potatoes and beef chunks, sloshing the gravy over the rim and down onto the sizzling flame. With no good place to set the spoon, I licked it clean. The stew tasted nearly sinful. I walked over to the tent and peered through the mesh. The blue floor had turned sandy colored. I shrugged it off, the bourbon helping me accept the wind and its friends. It'll be like sleeping on the beach; the howling cedars will be the surf, I joked. The place that seemed so bleak earlier now felt better, not perfect, but workable. I reveled in the simplicity, the essentialness of camping. I had the basics: food, fire, drink, shelter, a motorcycle, and jellybeans. I gazed out over the lake, sensing enchantment in the air, the kind that waltzes in and begins a slow dance with the blahs. The dullness didn't seem dull anymore. The colors deepened, becoming

richer, and cooler. The lake shifted from gray to a more vibrant blue, a blue set against the rolling dunes casting ever-deepening shadows.

The stew began to show life, percolating dime-sized burps to the surface. I shut the stove off, and then using my gloves as hot-pads, lifted the can to the table. I poured another drink, then sat down for dinner. Famished, I plunged the spoon into the steamy chunks. The first bite wasn't delicious—it was scalding! I jumped from the table, and hopped around like a beheaded chicken, trying to suspend the hot chunk of beef above my tongue. I grabbed my drink and took a gulp, holding the icy bourbon against the roof of my mouth. Once cooled down, I returned to the stew, this time more cautiously. Dinner proceeded awkwardly. The shape of my spoon was designed for a mouth other than mine; I couldn't wipe it clean. Even when forcing my lips to squeegee the spoon, I succeeded only in dragging my mustache through the gravy. I used my tongue and the back of my hand for a napkin. When finished, I set the empty can next to my leather trash barrels and licked the spoon clean. I returned to my portable camp-chair, and like a leopard after a tasty gazelle, licked my teeth while digesting dinner. I picked and poked at a stubborn remnant of supper, unable to dislodge it with my burned tongue. Finally, I took my knife and cut a small stem from the cedar tree, and then sharpened it into a toothpick. Cedar flavored toothpicks, I thought—how pleasant. Life was good at that moment.

Chapter Five

I kept a casual eye on the western sky, thinking there might be a photo opportunity at sundown. Oddly though, events weren't progressing normally. Instead of the sun settling to the horizon, the impatient hilltops seemed to be reaching to meet the orange sphere. A dark ridge of ominous clouds, swelling and boiling, rose from the distant hills. It didn't look good. I needed information, frantically wanting a TV, or a radio—anything! All I could do was watch, and think about what I hadn't done yet—put the rainfly on the tent. With gust howling, covering my nylon motel would be tricky. In the shelter of the cedars, I spread the fabric out enough to find the front edge. Then with a vise-like grip on the material, I hesitantly backed out into the wind towards the quivering tent. The rainfly

immediately shot straight out, pulling and jerking as though a pit bulldog tried to rip it from me. I leaned back to counter the forces, figuring that as long as I hung onto the upwind edge, it wouldn't end up in the lake. When reaching the tent, I held my arms high to clear the framework. Then once lined up, I pulled the leading edge to the ground, and then let go of one corner in order to secure the other. Once hooked, I reached for the other corner. But before I could catch it, the fabric jumped up and slapped me in the face. I retaliated in a rage, swiping blindly for the loose end, finally catching it before it before it smacked me again. Just as I pulled it down to hook it, the situation reversed itself in the blink of an eye. Nature delivered a weird vortex of air currents, causing the rainfly to come flying back over the tent and landing on top of me. I straightened up and just stood there, stunned, and then I broke down, not crying, but laughing. What a dork! With the threatening western sky, I had little choice but to continue. I crawled from under fabric and located the loose strap that earlier slapped me. Just as I hooked it, the wind cooperated by shifting back to its prevailing direction, causing the rainfly to lift back over the top of the tent. I scurried around to the other side and hooked both corners, and finished it off by securing extra guidelines deep into the sand.

I returned to my shelter in the cedars to wait, and watch. There I was, caught in a sticky web of an adventure fantasy, about to be eaten by the reality of the present. I began questioning why I even took the trip. Other than a few random moments of pleasure, the journey had been trying and uncomfortable. Was I just working this trip, stashing it away like a squirrel stores nuts for the coldest of winter days, to be enjoyed only in retrospect? Admittedly, the trip had investment written all over it, more than any other I'd taken. I knew beforehand that it might be uncomfortable, but I had felt compelled to go. In many respects, I was there under self-imposed duress, imprisoned by the fear of regret. I had no immediate answers, only the questions. I got up to mix another drink, figuring that the answers would appear in their own time. Besides, the sky once again commanded my attention by doing the unexpected. Just as quickly as the gloom and doom appeared on the horizon, it stalled out, parking there as if frozen in a photograph.

As darkness settled in, I started a fire in the pivoting cooking grill located in the trees. The escalating flames poked their way through the woody smoke, and like an old friend,

warmed me with familiarity and acceptance. The rest of the world seemed far away, almost nonexistent, and my association with it faded like the daylight. I didn't need the fire for warmth; I merely wanted to be with another life form, something alive to interact with, to tend to, something to listen to my thoughts. I spent the balance of the evening sitting, and thinking, and firefighting. The aggressive winds busied me with chasing embers around the campsite, the fire being more dynamic than I liked. I didn't want to burn down Nebraska—I only wanted an evening companion.

Time had ticked past eleven o'clock when I decided to turn in. I doused the fire with the slush from the cooler, and then sat for a few minutes looking at the darkness, searching for embers clinging to life. The waves on the lake glistened from a moon sliver in the western sky. The threatening storm apparently dozed off before doing its thing. As I stood to walk to the tent, a sudden gust lifted my cap and sent it sailing over the cliff. I instinctively grabbed for it, resulting only in a split-second-late slap on the head. Without thinking, I leaped over the edge, and slid down the embankment. Rocks broke loose and tumbled ahead of me into the darkness, splashing into the water below. It was only a hat, but something in me considered it much more. As luck would have it, the swirling air sucked the hat back to the water's edge. When reaching the bottom of the cliff, I stepped into the water, and made a stretching grab. Once catching it, I spanked it against my thigh to knock the water off, and then pulled it down past my ears, this time with the bill facing backwards. Water dribbled down my face and neck as I crawled back to the top. Losing my favorite camping hat would have been a loss, a loss of familiarity; one of the few comforts I had. I wasted no time crawling into the tent; I'd had enough for one day.

Chapter Six

I awoke as the new light ignited the darkness. I slept little, thrashing around the sandy floor like a large cat in a small litter-box. All during the night, wind gusts stirred the sand, sifting it through the nylon mesh, and then sprinkled it on me like talcum powder alighting on a baby's butt. Sand grated between my teeth; supporting my wife's claim that sleep has a way of opening me up. The wind had calmed down some, but still blew

unusually strong for daybreak. I lit the stove and began heating water for oatmeal. With home 500 miles away, I didn't dilly-dally. While the water heated, I drank a couple cans of juice, and then pulled enough stakes and poles from the tent to let it collapse. I felt excited—another day of riding, plus I was going home. It seemed silly to be homesick after only one night out; I'd been on much longer trips without those feelings. But it was a different kind of homesickness. I missed the carpet, the bathroom, the refrigerator, the coffee-maker, and the Lazy-boy. I missed comfort and convenience. On such a trip, few amenities come naturally; I have to provide everything by bringing it or finding it along the way. Whenever away from my home of familiarity, I'm a stranger in an ever-changing environment, and it's up to me to adapt. When I'm unprepared or fail to adjust, then discomfort and inconvenience move in. Our home is well insulated from change, which helps make it comfortable, but it also sets a trap for dullness. Too much predictability leads to raging boredom, which is partially what drove me out here to begin with. I wondered if the trip would ever feel good, even if only in retrospect.

Once the water warmed up, I poured it over the oatmeal, and then garnished it with raisins. So simple, yet so tasty I thought. I finished packing and broke camp in less than an hour. I vectored northeasterly, the road winding through the valleys of camel-colored dunes. I stopped for gas and coffee at a convenience store in Valentine. Upon entering the store, I passed into another world, a world of such tranquility, so fresh and clean, a stark contrast from where I'd been. I paused at the doorway to let the pleasantness penetrate. I was alone except for the young girl behind the counter, who blended well with the ambience. She scarcely looked at me, quietly studying a cash register printout. Her makeup was as fresh as the new day, her hair untouched by the winds. She wore a crisp white blouse, and lipstick as red as her belt. We stood in contrast. With my greasy hair matted in all directions, bloodshot eyes, and bearded stubble powdered with sand, I looked menacing. She didn't look the type who would know the road; too refined, too well groomed, skin too smooth, too pretty. I paid for the gas and coffee and wished her a nice day. She kept her eyes downcast, and while managing a flicker of a smile, said nothing. I stood outside sipping my coffee, wondering if I repulsed her. Occasionally, I'd sneak a glance back through the glass, wondering what her life was like. She didn't seem very alive, just sort of existing in her nest of adequacy, a condition I knew well. At her

age, I don't suppose she knew that the nectar of life comes with a few stings, something that I have to learn over and over again. I finished my coffee, mounted up and turned onto the highway, glad that I had stopped at that particular place. I had a fresh perspective on the tribulations of the open road. Things didn't seem as uncomfortable any longer.

Over the next several hours, I kept a twist on the throttle, rolling the odometer higher. I rode across a venturi of the plains, the full-bodied air rushing at me, filling my lungs and opening me to the vastness. The landscape livened up as I progressed eastward, the returning greens glistening under a cloudless sky. Bassett, Newport, Stuart, Atkinson...the little towns rolled by—so many places to be from, streets to live on, homes to live in. By mid afternoon I had angled my way back to the Platte River Valley where the wind and the land became one, shading the valley in tan. Heading east, the wind pushed me into an aggressive lean; the oncoming drivers watched nervously. The tankbag gave up the fight to stay in place, and surrendered against the left handlebar, the crosswind levitating it off the tank. The bike canted sharply, becoming wing-like—lifting, then settling, and then rising again. Up and down, up and down, floating, I held the bike in the zone, almost flying, but not quite. Then without warning, a gust raised the bike up, and slid it sideways several inches. “WHOOOA!” I bellowed out while pegging the puckerometer. I carefully rolled off the throttle, settling back out of the zone, vowing to stay away from the razor-edge of flight.

I pulled into the garage eleven hours after leaving Lake Merritt. The house was as I left it; Mary Jean had not yet returned from Minneapolis. Once inside, the comforts of home met me, welcoming me with an embrace of silence, seducing me with soft, spongy carpet and a warm shower, and then pampered me with a pair of cushy slippers. I didn't indulge in any trip-savoring, in fact, I scarcely gave it a second thought. I had hoped for a great trip, but to my chagrin, it was anticlimactic, something that I had done, and soon to be forgotten.

Several months later, I sat in my chair at work, comfortable, sipping coffee, working on an email. It was like most other days, one surrounded by the din of ringing telephones, clicking keyboards, and hushed conversations. I worked the keyboard, absorbed in a world of words and political correctness. Suddenly, without prelude, a feeling of joy

poured over me. Like a dream, images and impressions floated in and settled on my mind, transporting me from my cubicle to another world. I could feel the wind on my face, the bike's vibration, the growling engine, and the dance with the spring winds. It started to come back, each scene layering over another, dreamlike, vivid, yet not clear. The flapping tent, the loneliness, the can-opener, my hat in the lake, the depression, the girl in the store, my brief liftoff; it all came back. The bitterness of the difficulties now tasted like honey. The Sandhills had finally returned to me—the memories, like fine wine, merely needed time to age. Now I can taste the Chardonnay of the Sandhills, each sip a bouquet of fond memories.