

RIDERS ON THE STORM

The 86 Club door swung wide on its huge hinges, a macho fusion of overkill and practicality, peppered with machine gun holes. Chrome sparkled through the haze of exhaust, as ferocious iron horses lurched across the ramp, spreading an aura of primeval beasts loose upon the land.

The riders on these thundering steeds were faceless, engulfed by a throbbing, malevolent roar. Anonymous, the wind let them through, their mission unquestioned, destination uncharted, and reasons unknown...dark lords challenging the storm of life. Each held their own power, self-destruction at the twist of a wrist, and the road to that destiny just ahead.

In sullen contrast, the crochety '32 Ford truck, loaded with tools, beer, and heavy ordnance, trundled purposefully past the treefort, trailing the black swarm to rendezvous on an inky landscape far from our haven across an uncaring volcano. A thin asphalt ribbon shone silver in the moonlight as the seven machines throbbed along as one through virgin forests in lava flows no older than the girls we packed.

Past the final turns to the southernmost tip of America, we twisted our throttles open and let the phallic beasts have their heads, thundering V-twins churning between our legs, roaring in unison past startled white owls and echoes of the night. Jeez, to feel this fusion forever! Iris squeezed her legs in tune with me, sensing the ninety-six inch engine knew no compromise...it'd keep winding up 'til we couldn't bear its force, willing to take us past this life if we so wished.

Adrenalin surged as the machines shuddered into formation, a harmonic drone setting in as minor adjustments were made by each rider like an orchestra tuning up. Synchronicity was reached, and we swept in formation like a pack of predators just ahead of the sound and fury left in our wake. Joints were going back and forth. Running without lights, we weaved with the owls who ruled this dark wasteland.

Some runs were protective, like ushering in convoys, or impressing our purpose on a delinquent account, but tonight was a pleasure outing to test-fire our weapons and practice with the det cord. We vibrated along in a ribbon of sparks and that curious throb only a cluster of Harleys creates...in touch with each other as a pack of wolves closing on its kill, tuned to their prey and themselves, one with the moment ecstatic. The occasional chatter of girls broke the night riders' song to remind men and machines of their connection. On other missions, nothing dared disturb us, and only that rumble bore witness to our reality.

This night was full of beauty and a special camaraderie as we rode together in unique clarity, each face shining and proud of our creation. The moon rose in whitened rainbows above the snow-crested summit. Through feathered clouds, the ocean swirled in variegated patterns, enlarging on themselves 'til they covered a grand vista below us. We were laughing at each other, and weaving in and out, giggling at our merry troupe set in this expansive wonder. I'd forgotten the vile-tasting mushroom smoothie the girls had whipped up and passed around the clubhouse earlier, and smiling around our ranks, discovered we'd all just figured out how really stoned we were.

We pulled over at a lookout fifty miles from nowhere, and rolled off our machines, laughing into a silence broken only by the chinking of our cooling exhaust pipes under the crystal canopy of a billion stars. The girls glowed in realization that their afternoon stroll in the pastures, gathering tiny mushrooms, had produced this incredible state, and we all muttered in acquiescence that the power of the universe was upon us again. "Nurse!" called one. "Medic!" cried another as we waited for the Model A and beer to arrive.

The Uzi was wrapped in an oily rag just inside my saddle bags, a recent gift from Moe, and looking at black figures near me, I saw the rubber killers at Phuc Yiu. Herod and J. D. rolled across the cold pavement closer to the mirror lying by my front wheel to toot some coke, and there were the forms of Speedo and his assassins.

My hand slipped in and gripped cold steel and thrall of an instant finality. This piece was still a secret. I sprayed the night sky with an awesome burst of fire and sparks, the whole clip kicking off in a fractional heartbeat. Tears streamed down my face through the gunsmoke as the gang gasped as one. Whoa, this was a nasty little unit, especially with tracer-rounds in the dark!

A few six-packs and pain pills further, we swerved down the South Point road and into some trees near a cinder cone, circling up in the red desert at its base. I was joking about taking my pain pills before I got hurt as we wrapped the det cord around a fallen tree at the edge of the forest. Herod held the AK-47 and J. D. stood in silence with the M-3 while I rigged a cap on this high-velocity plastique wire that went off at about a mile-per-second.

Saturated in the mystique of our weapons and gripped by a mood we'd created, the snicker Reese couldn't contain put me back with Little Giant and the pieces of arms and legs in that inky river. So I let her rip. We all got bowled over, and spent the next hour picking splinters out of our butts. I remember laughing 'til I fell in fine shards of firewood flickering across a smokey moon...and that smell again of victory, death, and life in the moment.

Around the fire, our machines cast long shadows into the

darkness beyond. Silence and a few stories, the passing of a joint or the broken mirror, the crackling fire, and a shared wonder filled the night. J. D. joked how he'd stolen his girl, Mad Maggie, from a former employee "a piece at a time," sending him out to the north forty while dabbling in some of the "ol in-out" with her in the clubhouse dungeon. Herod belly-laughed his account of falling into a bonfire at the Bass Lake run with the Angels, and how much they'd appreciate our methods of collecting firewood, "Har, har, har!"

The drag race J. D. and I worked ourselves into a few weeks later served as contrast to that happy time in our little band's evolution...as it became a duel of death for reasons unclear to both of us. In some mysterious invitation to self-destruct beyond honor or challenge it became a matter of "the edge," and the line was drawn there only...no turning back would do. Like games of "chicken" in Jimmy Dean's day we raced against an unseen force for no particular prize and beyond all reason.

The snake-like turns above the ocean crashing below represented a finality beyond reproach, and at a hundred-miles-an-hour the cliffs whirred and rocks echoed. Sideways the giant machines screamed, throttles locked open and great motors churning out endless momentum...as far as you wanna go, pal, or further. Then the smoke as he slid ahead of me, a fine oil coating my glasses. Jeezuz, he's destroying his machine!

Standing on my pegs, I could see him grinning back with no concern for what might come around a turn in his lane. "He's gonna take me there too, that's all he knows...over the edge, muthafukka...all he's ever known!" I wondered for a micro-second, "If I let off, will he acknowledge? No way, push him 'til he blows his motor before a tour bus picks him up for a hood ornament."

I trailed him across the face of extinction for what it's worth 'til his pistons came out between his legs. Then we lay laughing in the middle of the road amidst the molten remains, in a fraternal bond only crossing that line can bestow on men. We are knights knighted, honorary survivors from death's altar, and only he and I know it happened.

It hardly mattered...more and more I remembered less and less. I didn't appear drunk to anyone, not even the cops, and after one particularly bad night found I'd piled my '56 Mercury into a wall at a hundred miles an hour. All I had was a vague flash of the girl giving me head, a power pole, and a turn that shouldn't have been there...then we were banking off a rock wall, spiralling through the air like a rifled bullet, and blowing all four tires as we landed in a burst of fire.

I couldn't believe it! I'd never had an accident...but now they were beginning to escalate into a worsening series as I refused to admit their existence. The level of violence and anger was building, and after each venture out there I'd

need to ask what happened. This was really starting to piss me off...to have to find out from others if I was having a good time. Who was operating out there? What mode of automatic pilot was this I ran on?

I was determined to find out, but scene after scene went down as the "screw" came out about halfway into an inebriant dream. Reminiscent of the night with Omar and the yak turds, I'd have to backtrack to find I'd had twenty-two white Russians before being 86'ed from a bar, or punched an off-duty cop, or who knows what else.

One particular affront came in a Visa bill for a six-hundred dollar dinner I couldn't recall at all. It seems I'd been the perfect gentleman, ordering one of everything on the menu for fourteen of us, and carrying on with such an air of control that no one realized I wasn't really there. Minute by minute it was growing faster now. I was slowly but surely coming unglued at the seams. Secretly, to myself, I began to pray for deliverance...