

CHANCE AND DELIVERANCE

I want a road stretching out before me.

I want a Radio in my ear.

I want a full tank of absolution.

No Fear.

Lyrics to the song "No Fear" -Terri Clark

July 1st, 2000 began innocently enough- just another motorcycle vacation. As usual there were four of us- Laveta and I, together with our soul mates of many years, Jim and Carol.



Stopping for gas on I-90, East of Butte, Montana.

We'd planned on riding to the annual "Wing Ding", a Honda Gold Wing rally in Billings Montana. The four of us had attended the same event two years before and it had been a fun trip.

Together, over the years we had logged a great many miles on two wheels: Washington, Oregon, Idaho Utah, Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, California, Alberta, and British Columbia. From Prince George to Albuquerque- from the Little Big Horn to the Coast Redwoods- most of the time, the four of us on two bikes, we journeyed in formation like geese on migration, alighting at day's end with stiff joints and tired bottoms, to evening meals accompanied with wine, laughter and friendship. A shower and bed, then up at dawn, the smell of coffee blending with that of early morning desert, or pine, or sea breeze. Always trying to stay off

freeways, we'd wind our way through small towns and rural America on two lane roads, punctuated by occasional long stretches seemingly empty except for the highway itself.

Returning from Albuquerque back in 1994, I remember stopping for a break in Nevada on a lonely US-50, the highway stretching from horizon to horizon, seemingly without a beginning or end... a rigid, black ribbon, linking two infinities.

Off to the North, a hawk circled lazily, riding thermals in a desiccated sky. The only sound was that of the wind and the ticking noise of cooling engines radiating their heat into desert air. A curious amnesia enveloped my world of home, work and TV, replaced now by the beckoning road and the lure of the next horizon. Surrendering to the spell, I became that day, nearly one with the motorcycle and the road- seduced by the promise of adventure, the song of the engine, the rhythm, motion, speed and freedom of a road without end... Amen.



US-50 in Nevada, returning from Albuquerque to Tacoma

Riding is about as close as you can come to flying- without filing a flight plan and leaving the ground, a congruence of both danger and delight, a sensation hard to find elsewhere. But there are

risks, so as a prudent adventurer (a dialectic some say matches my personality) I'd always perform a mechanical check on the bike and trailer before pulling out. The Gold Wing weights in at about 830 lbs. empty- fully fueled, loaded with gear and with Laveta and I topside, more like 1250. Add another 200 or so for the trailer and that's about 1450 pounds going down the highway at 70 mph.

The tires, on the evening before the trip were nearly new, air pressures at maximum for a full load, the oil clean, breaks in good condition, nothing worn or loose, paint waxed and chrome shining.

The "Wing" has a receiver hitch, just like a pickup truck. So I slid the hitch bar into the receiver, inserted the shear pin and carefully clipped on the hairspring keeper, attached the trailer to the hitch, hooked up the trailer lights and loaded up. Fully loaded, the trailer safety chains seemed to be a little to long. They weren't dragging and I had used them at that length for years- but that evening they just looked a little long. So I got out the hacksaw and removed a link, about one inch, from each chain. Didn't look much different than before, but it mollified my uneasiness.

The vehicles were now joined and I stepped back to admire their union. Motorcycles are beautiful, though potentially dangerous objects- a frightening, irresistible beauty. Their emotionless, mechanical souls whisper soundless words of temptation... a poetry of risk.

Under the fluorescent lights of the garage the Wing appeared a steed for the new millennium- steel, aluminum, polymer and programmable logic, welded together- a pure, austere, quiescent power awaiting the dawn.

The following morning under damp gray Northwest skies, I pushed the weighty combination out of the garage. Laveta meanwhile, made the rounds of the house, making sure that we hadn't forgotten anything- a job I'm incapable of doing, as I always forget something, or so I'm told.

Inserting the key, I turned it all the way. The engine surged into life, six cylinders seemingly impatient to be underway. As the RPM dropped back to idle, we donned our leathers and helmets, mounted our iron horse and plugged our headsets into the intercom, radio and tape deck. I set the CB to channel 31, the channel Jim and I have used for years. Pulling out into the roadway, I glanced

in the mirror and watched as our powerless companion followed obediently behind.

A few blocks later we pulled into our friend's driveway and added more luggage to the trailer's burden. Then the four of us, two motorcycles and one trailer set out from Tacoma, on the shores of Puget Sound, for a destination two mountain ranges, a desert and nearly a thousand miles to the East.

That first day was clouded with few sun breaks. We rode North, up I-5 to Highway 18 and on to the town of Sultan and the intersection with US-2, the last coast-to-coast highway (as apposed to freeway) in America. There we turned our handlebars east and into the Cascade Range. Mt Index, with it's over three thousand foot sheer walls guards the entrance. Skirting its feet northward we wove our way East towards Stevens Pass, enjoying the sensual pleasure of using the tread on the sides of our tires. Near the pass, clouds descend to the roadway and a light rain splattered our windshields. We twisted our way eastwards, descending slowly, Douglas Fir transforming imperceptibly to pine and then scrub. Escaping the mountains through a narrow valley bisected by the Wenatchee River tumbling down to the little town of Leavenworth, where we stopped for the night.



Leavenworth Photo: J. Drake

Leavenworth is a Bavarian village in central Washington State. Nestled in an alpine vale that opens eastward into apple country-

it's a sort of municipal theme park for shoppers. After an early dinner at the local brew-pub, Jim and I tagged along invisibly, while Laveta and Carol shopped with tireless energy and superhuman endurance. That evening the girls assembled picture puzzles in the mezzanine library of the Hotel while the weather outside worsened.

It was pouring rain the next morning when we pulled out, heading for Wenatchee and the bridge over the Columbia. Our raingear kept us dry but is a real pain to put on or remove. In less than an hour we crossed the river and began the steep climb out of the gorge. The trees have been mostly left behind. Without the irrigation provided by the Grand Coulee dam this land would be a desert. Even so, the farmland was beautiful, and by the standards of Puget Sound- empty.



Into the storm on US-2, Washington State

Later that morning, we stopped in the middle of nowhere, between weather fronts, dry for the moment but threatened on all sides. It was worth a picture and I framed Laveta, Carol and Jim in the front of some nasty looking clouds. Although mid-morning, the running lights on the bikes gleamed brightly in the gloom. On our way again, we finally collided with the oncoming downpour just outside of the little town of Creston.

Taking shelter in the Alibi pub provided time for lunch and a chance to dry off. The locals were friendly but looked at us like we were crazy- I wonder why? By the time we had finished eating, the Sun had come out and streets were drying fast. We continued heading East towards Spokane, where we meet up with more rain, road work and heavy traffic. Turning onto Interstate 90 we

headed for Coeur d'Alene. The Idaho border greets with yet more rain! Tired and sodden we pulled in to a "Motel 6" for the night.



Alibi Pub in Creston WA

Monday morning. It was raining as we pulled out, but it lightened quickly. And while we didn't really get wet again, we didn't seem to dry off either. East of town are some of the most beautiful miles of the trip. Mountain, lake, sky and a freeway bridge that arcs across forested mountainsides- must be one of the most beautiful sections of four-lane in the world. We ended our short easy day through mountains to Missoula, where the girls "discover" their first Cracker Barrel restaurant.

The next day, started at a cold 39 degrees (this is July?). The girls plugged their electric vests, which they've placed under their leather jackets, into the Wing's electrical systems and were soon toasty.

That reminded me of another trip, to Banff-Jasper National Park, at the foot of the Athabasca glacier. It was so cold that people getting out of their cars to take pictures, quickly rushed back to the warmth of their vehicles. After stopping for photos Jim and I had looked back to see Laveta and Carol holding their electrical plugs in their pleading hands, entreating us to get back on the Wings, so they could warm up!

But today the temperature warmed quickly. Dry and sunny! We normally stay off the Interstates, but I-90 in Montana is a pleasure. Good road, light, fast traffic. Our wings devour the miles on another easy day. One of the most beautiful parts of the trip is through the inter-

mountain west. The Rockies and the high plains were a mesmerizing blend of light and shadows from occasional, non-threatening clouds. While beautiful in summer this country must be brutal in winter. Crossing the Continental Divide just East of Butte, we kept riding until we reached Bozeman, where we stopped for the night. Pulling out in the morning with the sun on our faces, we worked our way out of the Rockies and headed for Billings on the edge of the Great Plains. The highway descended in fast, sweeping curves.

While passing a car and with the blur of the guard rails in my peripheral vision, I felt rather than saw, the flicker of a passing shadow, like that of a speeding bird eclipsing the sun and a light but uncertain "thunk" as I slipped back into the right lane. And then, reflected by the guard rail, a tinkling sound. What the hell could that be? It was hard to hear, but it followed us. Could it be a loose trailer chain dragging? Jim and Carol were ahead of us about hundred yards, so I called them up on the CB and asked them to drop back alongside to see if anything was amiss. As soon as he looked, Jim said to pull over as soon as possible. I gently decelerated from 75 miles an hour and worked the bike and trailer onto the shoulder.

What I saw when we dismounted was the kind of thing that leaves you shaking days afterwards. Somehow the keeper on the trailer hitch shear pin had come off and the pin had worked its way out. The hitch bar had then pulled, about 5 inches... nearly all the way out of the receiver, and was within a half inch of falling out completely! The only thing holding the hitch on the Wing was the safety-chains. The electrical cord for the trailer lights wasn't long enough for this "new longer hitch", and the connector had pulled loose and fallen to the pavement. It was the trailer light electrical connector scraping the pavement that caused the tinkling sound that Laveta and I had heard reflected in the guard rails. Had the trailer chains been an inch longer, the hitch would have pulled all the way out of the receiver and fallen to the roadway- but the trailer would have remained attached to the bike by the chains. I would have likely slowed down, causing the trailer and hitch to move forward into the rapidly rotating rear tire-ramming it upward- probably jamming it. A loss of control would have likely ensued. The 1500 pounds of bike, trailer, Laveta and I would rapidly

disarrange at 75 miles an hour on a mountain highway in south central Montana.

The four of us stood there on the roadway shoulder, staring incredulously at what possibly, for Laveta and I, a second chance as living beings on this planet. How could the keeper have come off? Did someone remove it while it was parked in the motel parking lot the previous night? Regaining composure, Jim and I disconnected the hitch completely- that was easy! Then, from out from his saddle bags Jim produced a 1/2 inch Allen wrench, long enough to replace the shear pin. Everything reassembled, and the wrench wired in place. We arrived in Billings about three hours later... and a few years older.

On "Wing Ding" week, Billings seems to have more motorcycles than cars. The whole town turns out a friendly welcome. The rally at the fairgrounds is always a fun thing and the girls always buy some new pins for their hats. They have pins for every state, park and rally they've ridden to or through.



Carol and Laveta(wearing their hats) at the rally

The next day Jim and I rode to an Eagle Hardware in Billings and bought a 9/16 stainless steel shoulder bolt with two locking castle nuts. The hitch is now a permanent part of the bike.

Later that evening, after having dinner at the Billings Sheraton where we were staying (we're not tent people) I stared out of the restaurant window, 20 stories above the street, and thought big thoughts. You know, *big*- like karma, life, death and the space between stars. A "close encounter of the terminal kind" tends to elicit thoughts like that. Self awareness, I had to reminded myself... is only a temporary condition.

The waitress brought my coffee and smiled, though I hardly noticed. Fate and I seemed to be (at least temporally) on good terms, and our deliverance however impermanent was certainly appreciated. Even so- fate, I imagined, was out there still, waiting in the shadowy corners of possibility like an opportunistic predator.

It was eerie, how the fabric of reality, tightly woven from threads of quantum randomness, chaos and eternity, emerged from time's unthinking loom as a richly variegated tapestry of life, love and dreams. And it was downright unnerving (and a little frightening) to realize how the confluence of minor events, just plain bad luck, could unravel the weavings of a lifetime!

As Laveta and Carol and Jim talked, my ruminations began slowly dissolving into the present. Turning the coffee cup in my hands, I enjoyed its warmth in the coolness of the air conditioned hotel. Our journey through life seemed to resemble that Nevada highway. We're all travelers on a road between two infinities.

Yes, it felt very good to be alive, and in one piece, and in working condition. It had been close, so very close- just a few heartbeats away from oblivion. What really struck me though, was that back in Tacoma, on the evening before we left, I had shortened the chains one link- about one inch, the difference perhaps between life and death. I had shortened the chains without premonition. Yet, had I failed to do so, Laveta and I might now be on our way back to Tacoma as freight in a cargo hold. We had rolled the dice, and won the toss, which gave us the time and space to play again. Someday, I mused, fate would step out from the shadows, in the form perhaps, of a bridge abutment, a heart attack, a malignant tumor, or as the slow slide into the mental oblivion of Alzheimer's. But I do know with absolute certainty- it won't be in the form of a loose shear pin.

The sky was clear and the sun setting in Billings, but there were storm clouds to the Northwest. Struck from the side, they ignited the sky. Beautiful, but ephemeral things, clouds. I quickly took some photos, got a refill on the coffee and rejoined the conversation.



From the 20th floor restaurant of the Sheraton Billings

July warmth would finally arrive. The ride home would be enjoyable with sunny skies. The day to day normalcy of living would return.



The four of us in Leavenworth on the way home

The "Wing" is hibernating now in the garage, its metallic soul asleep under dust covers, digital memories of time and function preserved by the trickle of electrons from a battery charger. The siren song of the road, softened now by winter rain to just a murmur, awaits a new season and a new road.

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