

HEY, HAVEN'T WE MET BEFORE?

RIDING A MOTORCYCLE is a great American pastime. Our culture is an unrepentant road-trip culture, but add the feeling of air rushing over your skin and whipping the ends of your hair, and it becomes an unmatched sense of freedom. Whatever your taste, there is a bike to match it—whether you want a fat, comfortable hog, a Gold Wing to cruise the countryside, a missile-shaped “crotch rocket” that liquefies your surroundings as you blow past the rest of the world, or a knobby, hard-working dirt bike for rougher terrain. Motorcycles are popular in every area of the country, rural or megametropolis, but the type of bike you observe in any location generally seems to fit its environment.

I have been fascinated with motorcycles since I was a young boy. I believe this captivation stems from when my Daddy was home on leave from one of his tours in Vietnam. Like many children of the '60s, I grew up going to drive-in movies. My father, not being one for most child-friendly cinema (he would not have been caught dead watching *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*), took us to the drive-in showing of a film that influenced my view of motorcycles forever, *Nam's Angels*.

In Mama's candy-apple red 1967 Mustang fastback with a Gulf Mosquito coil burning in the ashtray and the drive-in's weather-beaten speaker hooked on the window, my burly father sat in the front seat with my mother while I tried to ward off sleep in the rear, clad in my Underdog pajamas. Mama's trademark blonde do was whipped atop her head like a

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lemon meringue pie, and she would lean back ever-vigilantly to protect my innocence with her cover-my-eyes hand-block.

Why my father would have chosen this particular film is beyond me. I suspect it had not so much to do with Vietnam but with the recent infamy earned by the Hell's Angels at Altamont Speedway. My memories, though interrupted now and then by my mother's diligent hand covering, explode with images of bearded men in German combat helmets flying through the air and dropping grenades down the backs of their enemies. The bikes of *Nam's Angels* came to represent for me not something as trite as the modern vernacular of freedom, but at age six, of ultimate power.

In the peaceful Blue Ridge Mountains community where my family and I now live, we don't have to worry about wayward bikers looking for something to rebel against. Our motorcycle visitors represent something else. They are both the scourge of the locals as well as a modern gold rush. They drop a lot of money in these here hills, which helps sustain the local economy. But on the weekends, as I weave about the curving, undulating mountain roadways, which are difficult enough for the locals, I'm contending with high-performance crotch rockets regularly whizzing by at dizzying speeds. If I pull into a roadside convenience store, I'll find the same leather-clad bikers gassing up and stocking up on Doritos. As they blow past me again later, I think (and maybe even shout out), "Damn kids!" But upon closer examination, I realize the rider who just left me in the dust is gray-haired, old enough to draw social security, and driving a \$25,000 BMW model. Damn baby boomers.

When I see a dirt biker dodging through urban sprawl, it seems out of place, just as much as a knuckleheaded Harley driver traversing a cow pasture. Such was the case one sunny spring afternoon in 1990 along the neutral ground of West Esplanade Avenue in Metairie, Louisiana. A young man had been putting on quite a show of his dirt-biking prowess. He had flown past the congested rows of suburban homes along the narrow, grassy area most others in this country call a median—that little strip of ground dividing opposing lanes—and he had soon drawn the attention of the neighborhood children. They had watched in amazement as the daredevil had passed by in a blur.

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The area where he'd been riding his bike is referred to by native New Orleanians as neutral ground because, at the height of ethnic violence at the turn of the twentieth century, the Irish and Italian gangs could pass safely and without incident on these grassy areas separating the local streets. Originally, the French and the Spanish used these areas when they attempted to peacefully do business with each other, but the concept held true later for the gangs too. So this corridor of détente became known as neutral ground. Unfortunately for the group of five children viewing the one-man show that day, the neutral ground became a gruesome reminder of what havoc weed and high speed could generate.

The young dirt-bike rider had popped wheelie after wheelie, but when his front tire had touched down one final time, a steel support cable for the local electrical lines was there too. He had actually accelerated toward the line, witnesses later said, and had shown no sign of slowing down. When his front tire passed beneath the cable, the driver's neck had been at an unlucky height and made contact with the cable. His body's forward motion was temporarily halted, of course, but the cable had sliced his head from his shoulders.

When I arrived at the scene, the group of children was standing to one side being questioned by police. One child excitedly related what had happened.

"First, the motorcycle flipped through the air. Then his body, with blood coming from his neck. And then his head was in the air right behind his body."

I shuddered.

After assessing the scene, I noted that the bike, torso, and head were all positioned in the order that the children had stated, all in linear relation, as if they had been neatly placed to underscore that one child's memory. Surprisingly often, Death possesses a symmetry the living can never imitate. And it always speaks the truth.

At the time of my arrival, the young man had not yet been identified. After documenting the scene, I searched his clothes and found marijuana and his wallet. The home address on his Louisiana driver's license was just blocks away from the accident scene, so I gathered up a deputy sheriff and went to inform his family.

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The home was like any typical New Orleans suburban dwelling, with a boat in the driveway and a live oak in the front yard. I knocked on a side door until someone finally came, a middle-aged woman in a housedress. As she stood in the doorway wiping her hands on her apron, I thought about how what I was going to say would forever alter everything for her. I stepped into her home, my badge in hand, and told her that we needed to sit down. She walked backwards toward her family room, begging me to tell her why I was there. When I related the details of her son's death, she screamed. Her husband appeared on the stairway then and, after hearing the news repeated, he too screamed and collapsed to the floor as if he'd been sucker punched.

I sat on their sectional sofa reciting what they would need to do next in order to take care of their boy's body. After years of giving these notifications, I knew what I was saying was bouncing off them like rain on a rooftop. The deputy and I left our business cards, delivering our obligatory speech about if there was anything we could do to help . . . as if anything we could do would erase these moments.

I never got used to making next-of-kin notifications. During my first weekend as an investigator, I had to make three within forty-eight hours. I stayed drunk on mescal for the next forty-eight hours after that. I am of the belief that every time an investigator makes a notification, he loses a little piece of himself. Think about ripping the heart out of a total stranger every few days of your life. No one can understand what that feels like. After a death, the families of victims move on, one way or another, but I face the next patch of sorrow and leave yet another little piece of myself behind.

Later that same year, on one cool autumn evening—that is, as cool as any evening can be in New Orleans when it rains—I was summoned to the Alamo Motel on Airline Highway. An off-duty deputy sheriff from an adjacent jurisdiction had barricaded himself in his motel room. When I arrived, I found the usual group of investigators and city officials crowded onto the outside landing of the motel. The room's door had been kicked in. The bed's mattress had been propped up against the window as a barricade. Just prior to the police forcing their way into the room, the deputy had shot himself.

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Our investigation revealed that the decedent had been involved in the illicit use of steroids, and the pathologist would later postulate that they may have impaired his judgment and possibly contributed to him taking his own life. There were no prior indications in his record that he would have been inclined to do something like this, but he'd managed it with his own Beretta 9mm service weapon.

Since this was a law-enforcement official, we took extra care in processing the scene, but our final task was to find his family. As I dug through his personal effects, I came across his black leather badge case, much like my own, which contained his driver's license.

New Orleans, prior to Katrina, had been a big city. As I drove through the dark, with rain peppering my windshield, I thought about what I would say. I commonly performed this set of mental stretching exercises, but as I moved through the neighborhoods nearer his home address, I realized my exercises would be unnecessary. I saw the same boat in the driveway, the same live oak in the front yard. I felt the bile rise in my throat.

I parked my car and got out, but my feet felt as if they were screwed to the ground. Early in my career, when I had been particularly disheartened about the emotional weight of my occupation, I had asked my grandmother Pearl for advice. Having dealt with death many times in her life, she had suggested that I "pretend it's not happening." As I balanced on the threshold of this family's home, I thought for once my grandmother had been wrong about something. This was really happening. There was no use in pretending. My guts were too twisted and my nerves were too raw to imagine otherwise. I had no other choice but to go ahead and complete the process of destroying these people once more. Like a wrecking ball crashing down on a tilting structure, I knew I would obliterate them.

I felt Death there alongside me, laughing. I knocked on the door and quickly drew the illumination of outdoor spotlights. The mother stood before me in the doorway. The terror that crept across her face made me feel like some horrible beast from Greek mythology. Immediately she began to scream and cry out, "NO, NO, NO, NO!" Her husband appeared behind his wife and looked at me as if I had just physically assaulted her. I felt as if I had. Again, I produced my badge and said that I needed to talk to them.

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I don't believe they heard a single word I said as I robotically related the circumstances of their only remaining son's death.

As I slammed my car into drive with tears streaming down my face, the only thing I could think about was the absurd odds of this, that within a five-month span of time I would have to go to the same home in a city of a million people to deliver the same kind of news. Two more people now were aching inside their home, cursing such random, hapless fate. *What are the odds . . . ?*