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ZEN



AND

THE ART OF
MOTORCYCLE
MAINTENANCE

AN INQUIRY INTO VALUES

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HarperTorch

An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers

Special thanks should go to Stuart Cohen, who provided an office to write it in, and Mrs. Abigail Kenyon, for critical help with the early chapters.



HARPERTORCH

An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

10 East 53rd Street

New York, New York 10022-5299

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Cover illustration by Paul Bacon

ISBN-13: 978-0-06-058946-2


ISBN-10: 0-06-058946-9

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First HarperTorch paperback printing: May 2006

First HarperPerennial Modern Classics paperback printing: August 2005

First Quill paperback edition: May 1999


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Printed in the United States of America

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

1



I can see by my watch, without taking my hand from the left grip of the cycle, that it is eight-thirty in the morning. The wind, even at sixty miles an hour, is warm and humid. When it's this hot and muggy at eight-thirty, I'm wondering what it's going to be like in the afternoon.

In the wind are pungent odors from the marshes by the road. We are in an area of the Central Plains filled with thousands of duck hunting sloughs, heading northwest from Minneapolis toward the Dakotas. This highway is an old concrete two-laner that hasn't had much traffic since a four-laner went in parallel to it several years ago. When we pass a marsh the air suddenly becomes cooler. Then, when we are past, it suddenly warms up again.

I'm happy to be riding back into this country. It is a kind of nowhere, famous for nothing at all and has an appeal because of just that. Tensions disappear along old roads like this. We bump along the beat-up con-

crete between the cattails and stretches of meadow and then more cattails and marsh grass. Here and there is a stretch of open water and if you look closely you can see wild ducks at the edge of the cattails. And turtles. . . . There's a red-winged blackbird.

I whack Chris's knee and point to it.

"What!" he hollers.

"Blackbird!"

He says something I don't hear. "What?" I holler back.

He grabs the back of my helmet and hollers up, "I've seen *lots* of those, Dad!"

"Oh!" I holler back. Then I nod. At age eleven you don't get very impressed with red-winged blackbirds.

You have to get older for that. For me this is all mixed with memories that he doesn't have. Cold mornings long ago when the marsh grass had turned brown and cattails were waving in the northwest wind. The pungent smell then was from muck stirred up by hip boots while we were getting in position for the sun to come up and the duck season to open. Or winters when the sloughs were frozen over and dead and I could walk across the ice and snow between the dead cattails and see nothing but grey skies and dead things and cold. The blackbirds were gone then. But now in July they're back and everything is at its alivest and every foot of these sloughs is humming and cricking and buzzing and chirping, a whole community of millions of living things living out their lives in a kind of benign continuum.

You see things vacationing on a motorcycle in a way that is completely different from any other. In a car you're always in a compartment, and because you're

used to it you don't realize that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You're a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame.

On a cycle the frame is gone. You're completely in contact with it all. You're *in* the scene, not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming. That concrete whizzing by five inches below your foot is the real thing, the same stuff you walk on, it's right there, so blurred you can't focus on it, yet you can put your foot down and touch it anytime, and the whole thing, the whole experience, is never removed from immediate consciousness.

Chris and I are traveling to Montana with some friends riding up ahead, and maybe headed farther than that. Plans are deliberately indefinite, more to travel than to arrive anywhere. We are just vacationing. Secondary roads are preferred. Paved county roads are the best, state highways are next. Freeways are the worst. We want to make good time, but for us now this is measured with emphasis on "good" rather than "time" and when you make that shift in emphasis the whole approach changes. Twisting hilly roads are long in terms of seconds but are much more enjoyable on a cycle where you bank into turns and don't get swung from side to side in any compartment. Roads with little traffic are more enjoyable, as well as safer. Roads free of drive-ins and billboards are better, roads where groves and meadows and orchards and lawns come almost to the shoulder, where kids wave to you when you ride by, where people look from their porches to see who it is, where when you stop to ask directions or information the answer tends to be longer than you

want rather than short, where people ask where you're from and how long you've been riding.

It was some years ago that my wife and I and our friends first began to catch on to these roads. We took them once in a while for variety or for a shortcut to another main highway, and each time the scenery was grand and we left the road with a feeling of relaxation and enjoyment. We did this time after time before realizing what should have been obvious: these roads are truly different from the main ones. The whole pace of life and personality of the people who live along them are different. They're not going anywhere. They're not too busy to be courteous. The hereness and newness of things is something they know all about. It's the others, the ones who moved to the cities years ago and their lost offspring, who have all but forgotten it. The discovery was a real find.

I've wondered why it took us so long to catch on. We saw it and yet we didn't see it. Or rather we were trained *not* to see it. Conned, perhaps, into thinking that the real action was metropolitan and all this was just boring hinterland. It was a puzzling thing. The truth knocks on the door and you say, "Go away, I'm looking for the truth," and so it goes away. Puzzling.

But once we caught on, of course, nothing could keep us off these roads, weekends, evenings, vacations. We have become real secondary-road motorcycle buffs and found there are things you learn as you go.

We have learned how to spot the good ones on a map, for example. If the line wiggles, that's good. That means hills. If it appears to be the main route from a town to a city, that's bad. The best ones always connect nowhere with nowhere and have an alternate that gets

you there quicker. If you are going northeast from a large town you never go straight out of town for any long distance. You go out and then start jogging north, then east, then north again, and soon you are on a secondary route that only the local people use.

The main skill is to keep from getting lost. Since the roads are used only by local people who know them by sight nobody complains if the junctions aren't posted. And often they aren't. When they are it's usually a small sign hiding unobtrusively in the weeds and that's all. County road-sign makers seldom tell you twice. If you miss that sign in the weeds that's *your* problem, not theirs. Moreover, you discover that the highway maps are often inaccurate about county roads. And from time to time you find your "county road" takes you onto a two-rutter and then a single rutter and then into a pasture and stops, or else it takes you into some farmer's backyard.

So we navigate mostly by dead reckoning, and deduction from what clues we find. I keep a compass in one pocket for overcast days when the sun doesn't show directions and have the map mounted in a special carrier on top of the gas tank where I can keep track of miles from the last junction and know what to look for. With those tools and a lack of pressure to "get somewhere" it works out fine and we just about have America all to ourselves.

On Labor Day and Memorial Day weekends we travel for miles on these roads without seeing another vehicle, then cross a federal highway and look at cars strung bumper to bumper to the horizon. Scowling faces inside. Kids crying in the back seat. I keep wishing there were some way to tell them something but

they scowl and appear to be in a hurry, and there isn't. . . .

I have seen these marshes a thousand times, yet each time they're new. It's wrong to call them benign. You could just as well call them cruel and senseless, they are all of those things, but the *reality* of them overwhelms halfway conceptions. There! A huge flock of red-winged blackbirds ascends from nests in the cattails, startled by our sound. I swat Chris's knee a second time . . . then I remember he has seen them before.

"What?" he hollers again.

"Nothing."

"Well, *what?*"

"Just checking to see if you're still there," I holler, and nothing more is said.

Unless you're fond of hollering you don't make great conversations on a running cycle. Instead you spend your time being aware of things and meditating on them. On sights and sounds, on the mood of the weather and things remembered, on the machine and the countryside you're in, thinking about things at great leisure and length without being hurried and without feeling you're losing time.

What I would like to do is use the time that is coming now to talk about some things that have come to mind. We're in such a hurry most of the time we never get much chance to talk. The result is a kind of endless day-to-day shallowness, a monotony that leaves a person wondering years later where all the time went and sorry that it's all gone. Now that we do have some time, and know it, I would like to use the time to talk in some depth about things that seem important.

What is in mind is a sort of Chautauqua—that's the

only name I can think of for it—like the traveling tent-show Chautauquas that used to move across America, *this* America, the one that we are now in, an old-time series of popular talks intended to edify and entertain, improve the mind and bring culture and enlightenment to the ears and thoughts of the hearer. The Chautauquas were pushed aside by faster-paced radio, movies and TV, and it seems to me the change was not entirely an improvement. Perhaps because of these changes the stream of national consciousness moves faster now, and is broader, but it seems to run less deep. The old channels cannot contain it and in its search for new ones there seems to be growing havoc and destruction along its banks. In this Chautauqua I would like not to cut any new channels of consciousness but simply dig deeper into old ones that have become silted in with the debris of thoughts grown stale and platitudes too often repeated. “What’s new?” is an interesting and broadening eternal question, but one which, if pursued exclusively, results only in an endless parade of trivia and fashion, the silt of tomorrow. I would like, instead, to be concerned with the question “What is best?”, a question which cuts deeply rather than broadly, a question whose answers tend to move the silt downstream. There are eras of human history in which the channels of thought have been too deeply cut and no change was possible, and nothing new ever happened, and “best” was a matter of dogma, but that is not the situation now. Now the stream of our common consciousness seems to be obliterating its own banks, losing its central direction and purpose, flooding the lowlands, disconnecting and isolating the highlands and to no particular pur-

pose other than the wasteful fulfillment of its own internal momentum. Some channel deepening seems called for.

Up ahead the other riders, John Sutherland and his wife, Sylvia, have pulled into a roadside picnic area. It's time to stretch. As I pull my machine beside them Sylvia is taking her helmet off and shaking her hair loose, while John puts his BMW up on the stand. Nothing is said. We have been on so many trips together we know from a glance how one another feels. Right now we are just quiet and looking around.

The picnic benches are abandoned at this hour of the morning. We have the whole place to ourselves. John goes across the grass to a cast-iron pump and starts pumping water to drink. Chris wanders down through some trees beyond a grassy knoll to a small stream. I am just staring around.

After a while Sylvia sits down on the wooden picnic bench and straightens out her legs, lifting one at a time slowly without looking up. Long silences mean gloom for her, and I comment on it. She looks up and then looks down again.

"It was all those people in the cars coming the other way," she says. "The first one looked so sad. And then the next one looked exactly the same way, and then the next one and the next one, they were all the same."

"They were just commuting to work."

She perceives well but there was nothing unnatural about it. "Well, you know, *work*," I repeat. "Monday morning. Half asleep. Who goes to work Monday morning with a grin?"

"It's just that they looked so *lost*," she says. "Like

they were all dead. Like a funeral procession.” Then she puts both feet down and leaves them there.

I see what she is saying, but logically it doesn’t go anywhere. You work to live and that’s what they are doing. “I was watching swamps,” I say.

After a while she looks up and says, “What did you see?”

“There was a whole flock of red-winged blackbirds. They rose up suddenly when we went by.”

“Oh.”

“I was happy to see them again. They tie things together, thoughts and such. You know?”

She thinks for a while and then, with the trees behind her a deep green, she smiles. She understands a peculiar language which has nothing to do with what you are saying. A daughter.

“Yes,” she says. “They’re beautiful.”

“Watch for them,” I say.

“All right.”

John appears and checks the gear on the cycle. He adjusts some of the ropes and then opens the saddlebag and starts rummaging through. He sets some things on the ground. “If you ever need any rope, don’t hesitate,” he says. “God, I think I’ve got about *five* times what I need here.”

“Not yet,” I answer.

“Matches?” he says, still rummaging. “Sunburn lotion, combs, shoelaces . . . *shoelaces*? What do we need shoelaces for?”

“Let’s not start *that*,” Sylvia says. They look at each other deadpan and then both look over at me.

“Shoelaces can break anytime,” I say solemnly. They smile, but not at each other.

Chris soon appears and it is time to go. While he gets ready and climbs on, they pull out and Sylvia waves. We are on the highway again, and I watch them gain distance up ahead.

The Chautauqua that is in mind for this trip was inspired by these two many months ago and perhaps, although I don't know, is related to a certain undercurrent of disharmony between them.

Disharmony I suppose is common enough in any marriage, but in their case it seems more tragic. To me, anyway.

It's not a personality clash between them; it's something else, for which neither is to blame, but for which neither has any solution, and for which I'm not sure I have any solution either, just ideas.

The ideas began with what seemed to be a minor difference of opinion between John and me on a matter of small importance: how much one should maintain one's own motorcycle. It seems natural and normal to me to make use of the small tool kits and instruction booklets supplied with each machine, and keep it tuned and adjusted myself. John demurs. He prefers to let a competent mechanic take care of these things so that they are done right. Neither viewpoint is unusual, and this minor difference would never have become magnified if we didn't spend so much time riding together and sitting in country roadhouses drinking beer and talking about whatever comes to mind. What comes to mind, usually, is whatever we've been thinking about in the half hour or forty-five minutes since we last talked to each other. When it's roads or weather or people or old memories or what's in the