

## Biker Babe

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My brother rides a Harley. I have never understood the charm of mounting a ton of metal and settling tender flesh inches away from a hot, vibrating engine. I am not attracted to the notion of riding fast over hard asphalt while flirting with other moving vehicles in some raunchy road dance, weaving in and out like an oversized metallic needle threading down a thin ribbon of road. But I also have a hard time understanding why someone would want to cover their skin with anything that can't be washed off with soap and water, much less the notion of paying someone to poke needles into you, oozing colored dye.

His left arm is covered with tattoos; his entire body is a canvas. Eventually this artistic asymmetry will be remedied as future designs leap across the great divide of his trunk and begin to climb up his other arm. He tells me each tattoo has special significance: they are fleshy painted monuments of defining moments in his life. For a man of few words, I suppose this is his way of writing down the story of his life. In my college communications class, a fellow student simply stood up and took off his shirt when it came time to deliver: he was covered in tattoos. We read his body like a book, as he stood there—exposed from the waist up—explaining the significance of each tattoo. Some languages seem to have a curious relationship with pain; enduring some degree of suffering lends greater importance to what is being communicated. For my brother the needle seems appropriate. There was a time when he jabbed a needle into his veins everyday. We lost him for fifteen years that way.

I love my brother. Our paths diverged a long time ago when I left the farm, and he stayed behind. I seemed destined to wander far beyond the horizon of what was familiar on our California farm. My brother was always content to remain close to home. Years later, after his wife died, his world shrunk all the way down to the square footage of his bedroom: cable T.V., candles, stereo, the waterbed that had survived all their moving during twenty-five years of marriage, artifacts of a once-shared life. But despite our divergent



experiences into adulthood, we still shared a secretly acknowledged experience of alienation, often expressed in solidarity, when a family vote needed to be cast.

Now he wants to take me for a ride on his Harley. I wear raw silk; he wears leather. We both wear helmets. I climb onto the black leather seat and fling my arms around his waist, wondering where in the world to put my feet. There's a sticker on the lower edge of his helmet, two inches away from my face: it reads *Low Rider*—and in small print—*Help for Injured Motorcyclists* with an 800 number listed below. I do not find this comforting. He kicks back the stand and slowly turns the hulk around. While he's revving up the engine, I am reminded of why the recorded sound of a Harley carries its own special copyright.

"Lean into the curve," he says, grinning at me through the rear view mirror. The bike roars and hugs the road, weaving in and out around a mountain pass. Try as I might, my instincts move me in the opposite direction. I cannot lean into the curve. I do not trust this leaning mass of metal. If I lean into the curve my weight may cause this craft to keel over. Hard road is not as forgiving as water; I am a water baby. The wind whips my eyes shut and will not let me breathe. I am nowhere near being one with the road. It horrifies me to think how closely I am courting death as a red convertible pulls out in front of us and we swerve to miss it. The driver is talking on a cell phone. I have yet to see a Harley rider talking on a cell phone while cruising down the highway. The incongruence of such a thing amuses me.

My brother gives me a brief lesson on trust: riders choose carefully who they ride beside in close proximity at high speed. It is considered an honor of sorts to be chosen. When two riders share the same lane on a road, you can bet they are very good friends. I recall reading somewhere that in ancient times, sleeping in the presence of another was also considered to be a sign of trust. An enemy might slay you in your sleep. One must be careful to choose metaphors appropriately; sleeping on a Harley going seventy miles an hour next to another rider would not signify trust under any circumstances.

Exiting the 41 Highway, we come up alongside another biker at the stop sign. The two riders acknowledge each other with stoic nods before moving on. As we circle halfway around Bass Lake, I absorb the last golden shafts of sunlight dappling through the pine trees, while the sun drops slowly behind



a western rise. We cruise by lake revelers packing up for the day—red skinned and wind blown. Arriving at a roadside café, proudly bearing the reputation for the best hamburgers and fries north of Fresno, the engine stops. I am overcome by an inexplicable need to wipe cobwebs off my face. But there are no cobwebs. My brother laughs and tells me it's only the vibration of the bike; my facial nerves are rattled. I swipe again at imaginary cobwebs and try to regain my land legs while wobbling towards the wooden screen door of the café—now emitting the dubious aroma of a backwoods' fry grill. We slip into a booth and a waitress brings us a menu with a ketchup stain in the upper corner and two glasses of ice water. The walls are plastered with posters of past and future country western music events. I observe that take-out food and worms for fishing may be ordered from the same cashier in the corner. Hopefully, the paper bags never get confused.

My brother and I chat about his work while waiting for two of the famous burgers to come off the grill. He drives an elementary school bus. I am told the kindergartners call him "Mr. Tim." He stands about six feet tall and weighs roughly two hundred pounds. His long, graying hair is generally pulled back into a ponytail. The only uniform he wears is a black t-shirt with sleeves rolled up to reveal tattoos. If "Mr. Tim" happens to enter the playground during recess, hordes of little three-feet tall humans surround him fearlessly, clutching onto his hands and pulling at the leather key chain hanging from his belt loop. His patience is infinite. He has a particular following of a few young children who started out too scared to come to school; if the route goes well and time allows he'll walk them to class. The older kids want him in their class group pictures. He crouches on one knee, while twenty-five elementary students line up in rows behind him. Kids are generally intuitive about who they can trust. One of his tattoos is a school bus. He tells me the story of a little girl who once rode his bus. She was not very popular: overweight, self-conscious, and no doubt the brunt of many unkind jokes and snickers. My brother befriended her. Every day when she climbed on the bus she slid into the seat directly behind him. One day she brought him a gift: a picture of a magic school bus. He had it tattooed on his arm just to let her know how special she was. As I listen to him talk, I wonder about how much incongruity surrounds me daily. Good hearts come wrapped in a variety of packages. Where should I be looking if I really want to discover who someone



is? Maybe I should ask them to tell me about their tattoos.

I climb back onto the black leather seat. A motorcycle is considered to be a recreational form of transportation; my Ford Escort is not. Both modes of transportation get you from point A to point B. However, when I'm traveling in my car I have an illusion of safety: surrounded by a protective shield of metal, and the psychological comfort of a visual barrier between me and other motorists. I realize how self-conscious I am as we wait idling at a stoplight. Perhaps in order to "re-create" we have to release our inhibitions and allow ourselves to be more vulnerable. It's a stretch, I know. But I'm still exploring the intrigue of the motorcycle. It's a risky way to travel and a very different psychological experience of personal space. It occurs to me that biker-babes are a bold and fearless lot—riding tandem with their biker-men.

Cruising at 30 miles per hour seems the perfect speed. I can breathe again and look through eyes wide open instead of tiny slits. The lake is off to the left; the racing shadow of bike and riders are reflected off the mountainside on our right. The air has cooled down. I breathe in deeply the earthy scent of nature that has been fermenting in the sun throughout the day. For a moment, I let go the tight clutch around my brother waist and spread my arms open wide like a fledgling bird. The wind whips under my arms causing them to flutter. Something catches in my heart. Could this be the feel of freedom?

My brother's wife Barbie was a biker-babe; they rode everywhere together. I don't recall ever seeing them apart in twenty-five years of marriage. Over the course of seven years, he was her witness to a very slow and painful death from bone cancer. On really bad days, they would go on short bike rides. On good days, they would take the long meandering roads through the mountains and head down to the lake for a fleeting glimpse of "the remains of the day." On many nights, my brother would stay up until dawn taking care of her—then head off in the morning for a full day of work. On weekends he cut firewood for extra money. Viktor Frankl, in *Man's Search For Meaning*, has suggested that one of the ways we can discover meaning in life is by "the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering." One of the kindest things we can do for those who suffer is not avert our eyes; suffering becomes even more intolerable when there are no witnesses. And to be a witness does not necessarily mean offering advice, or pretending to understand what cannot be truly understood, except through experience. What a witness offers the sufferer is

the assurance, “you are not alone.” The day Barbie died, my brother pushed his Harley up beneath their bedroom window where she lay. He started up the engine and revved up the motor. It was the sound of re-creation. It was the last sound she heard. Her tombstone bears the same words my brother has tattooed on his arm: Gone riding.

I don't suspect that I will ever be a biker-babe. But my attitude has changed. Whenever I see a biker out on the freeway or alongside me stopped at a stoplight—I think of my brother. And if we happen to make eye contact, I offer a stoic nod—and a smile. I imagine what it feels like to be a free spirit in this world. And I remember how it felt to have the wind beneath my outstretched arms causing them to flutter up and down like a fledgling bird.