

Electricscooterland

by Brian Joseph Davis

1.

“You don't ever want to go to the Ihop on Grand,” Len announced with a chop of his hand. “It's a franchise. Those franchise goofs can do whatever they want. No respect for the brand. When I went there I thought it was okay. It's closer to my house. But then I looks at my bill and have to tell the girl, ‘I always get the Smokehouse combo. It's\$6.40 with my senior's discount, which isn't here.’ And you know what she says to me? ‘You don't look like a senior.’ Me. A 72-year-old man So she comes back with a form that says the customer requested the senior's discount and would I please sign. I ain't signing that!”

“Don't sign that,” I parroted.

“So I leave my \$6.40 and never go back.”

Len pushed his half-eaten Smokehouse combo away and zipped up his blue track jacket, covering the tufts of white hair escaping his shirt collar. “I like this one,” he said tapping the table, “but it's cold in here. They do that in the spring. Too cheap to turn the heat on.” He looked back up at me. “What are you, buddy?”

Recently disabled, I thought to myself. I rubbed my leg, tapped my steel knee cap. It was still foreign to me. But Len clarified his question: “Thirty-nine? Forty?”

“Forty. You're good Len.”

“Best 4-wheel electric scooter dealer in the state.”

Len stood up, grasping the banquette and plucking his cane in one unified motion. I took my straight-arm crutches and fell into them like a failed trust exercise. Our waitress ran over and steadied me. "Need some help to the door, hon?" she cooed. "Thanks, but I'll manage."

As Len and I hobbled and lurched to the door he leaned in, shoulder close. "You idiot. She was rubbing her tsistskehs in your face. A few more feet and you would have got her number." I laughed as Len held the door open for me. "You're laughing because you think it's over. So a car fell on your legs while you were making nine bucks an hour to change oil. Big deal. Those crutches on you are better than a bank full of retirement bonds. Seriously, you get a little more gray I'll introduce you to some guys I know. They only cruise the Alzheimer fun-run circuit for guilt-ridden daughters. So easy."

Outside, we wobbled in front of our rides in silence. Len's was a cherry red Shoprider Sprinter XL4. He obviously junked the original electrical for a Sento 54t engine and a nitrous oxide injection system done up to look like an oxygen tank. Everything was street-illegal save for the wicker basket. Top speed with the nitrous: probably a mean 28 mph.

I sat down on my stock blue Sunrunner 44 and snapped in my crutches. Top speed: 5 mph. Len sat down on the Sprinter, opened the throttle and pushed a hidden kick-starter. His scooter purred. "Life breaks us, buddy, but there's always this." Len ripped the throttle again, sending a rattle through his hollow body and up to his oversized polarized sunglasses.

"You know, I've got a thing with some of my preferred clientele. You're a little young but we need more mechanics. You should come by tonight. Estelle's making kugel."

One week ago I purchased the Sunrunner at Len's shop. Every day

since, I rode past the ihop looking for Len, waiting for an in, a wave of familiarity to take me away from daytime tv and dreams of lawsuits I couldn't afford.

2.

"We don't get a lot of crips like you," Len laughed as I struggled out of my scooter. "You'll be our token for the night."

The ride to the empty lot in the city's west end took me two lonely hours and one battery change. A stock scooter was all Medicaid would pay for.

"Give me your hand," he half laughed, reaching out as I finished making my way onto the ground. "Let's walk like a couple of young bucks for a while."

The lot was a fenced-in concrete slab that was at least five acres in length. "Old GM plant," Len told me, "Best run in the city until you hit some I-beams about half way down. We call it MidLife Crisis Point. Of course, nothing like this one track that the Mormons control on the Bonneville flats. Pristine lake bed, but only Mormons allowed. Not even real fucking elders."

Though the races were still an hour away, the scooters began arriving. Machines that blended into the background of any street only a few hours before, draped with plastic bags and novelty flags, now took on the gleam of chariots in the midnight sodium vapor light. Neon detailing was switched on. Headlamps were polished.

Pictures of grandchildren were handed around along with bottles of malt liquor. A group of Latino men were testing out hydraulics that bounced their scooters up and down. One was cut so low its frame showered sparks as a driver fishtailed it. "I'll take some heat for having you around," Len warned as we walked the pits and old

clouded eyes stared me down. “We're mostly hip cases here. Some diabetes and gout. The problem is, when you're as young as you are, old timers just think you're a druggie. Incidentally, I can score some morphine off a friend of mine with bowel—”

“It's all right. But I'm going to sit down for the concert,” I said as I fell back into my scooter. “Sure are some nasty machines here, Lenny.”

“Should be. They're all mine. Look.” Len cocked his head towards the gates, “Competition is here.”

Driving in a diamond formation was a group of Chinese senior citizens. They all wheezed down to breaking, save the scooter in the front, which continued on towards us. The driver—in golf coat, baseball cap, and lap blanket—hit the brakes only an inch in front of Len, who put his arms on the handlebars and pushed feebly. “Ready to get your ass smeared on the track, Chen Chi-Li? Just like I did to you in St. Petersburg.”

“Len,” Chen Chi Li drawled out. “Stick to the mahjong. Like the other old ladies.”

Len struck his cane against Chen Chi Li's front bumper. “All right. Either we race now or you turn your Golden Tech around, and go back to Casino-Rama, where your son thinks you are.”

Chen Chi Li stared at Len, let out a low chortle, and backed his scooter away.

3.

I lined up on along the racetrack, a big gap between myself and the pit crews. At the starting line, Len, Chen Chi Li, and a second stringer named Barry primped and adjusted their scooters. A man as old as a twisted branch and in a pale blue cardigan shuffled on a

walker out in front of the racers. He held a white hanky in his hand, ready to start the race. "Does your mother know you're out this late?" came a woman's voice behind my ear.

I turned around, almost speechless in front of a shock of silver white hair, pale skin, and wide, sly lips. "Does Lauren Bacall know you're going to put her out of business?" I replied. The flirt startled her and she backed her scooter away with a short zoom sound. She brushed her hair and I saw a diamond earring that matched the necklace that ran across her black blouse.

"You're a little young to be running with this crowd, aren't you?" she said, composing herself.

"You're a little too showroom to be running with this crowd, aren't you?"

"I believe the boys are starting to play," she said, pointing to the racetrack.

At the starting line, the scooters revved. The starter took his hanky, blew his nose in it. He looked at what came out before remembering his job, saying, "Oh, okay." The starter held the hanky aloft again.

"I didn't even hear your scooter come up behind me," I said to her.

"Well, my husband—Leonard—maintains a machine very well. My name's Estelle and you are the new mechanic, I assume." We shook hands. "Pretty skin for a mechanic. Sure you're not a Harvard boy?"

The hanky dropped and the electric scooters tore out, first at five, then 10, and then 15 miles per hour, flickering under the lamps like a yellowed filmstrip. Estelle could feign boredom with the races but she couldn't hide her smile as Len, his white hair and polar fleece jacket blowing in the air, shot out almost to the lead, just behind

Barry. Yet as Len was reaching for his nitrous release, Barry let go of his handlebars, clutched his chest and threw his head back. His scooter weaved. Chen Chi Li went off to the side, driving safely into the spin. Len sideswiped Barry's motorized cadaver at 15 miles per hour. It was almost dangerous. Estelle grabbed my leg. She gasped. I winced and I liked it. That was outright dangerous.

Everyone on the sidelines wheeled out. Chen Chi Li was searching for his hat. Len got out of his scooter and looked down at Barry.

"Heart disease is the number one killer in America and the moron misses his meds again," he lamented as Estelle minced out of her scooter and grabbed him.

"You stupid man," she said, nuzzling her face into his neck. I zoomed over to Len's scooter. Front right tire flat. Axle maybe cracked. I ran my hand over the front—definite filler and paint job needed.

Len shouted, "Guess my new mechanic is going to come by tomorrow and show his stuff? Do me a favor, kid. Hitch that wreck to the back of Estelle's scooter for me. My arms are killing me."

"What about Barry?"

"What about him? He was 76 years old. Died like a damn Apache out there." Len rubbed his wrinkled face. "You ever see the inside of a rest home?" Estelle turned Len away while he was still talking.

"Some of the boys'll drop Barry off at a bus stop. Don't worry—worst that'll happen is an op-ed about seniors and public transit."

4.

My Sunrunner pushed through the morning rain as I drove over to Len's house while rivulets of water dripped down my poncho. Len's house was a ranch style at the end of a suburban cul du sac. As I whizzed up to the covered front porch I saw Estelle draped against the door in a robe, hair pulled back, holding a glass of prune

juice—a ghost fox.

“You missed him. I finally got him to go to the doctor's about his arm. The old fool.” I stood in the rain with all my weight on the crutches. She beckoned with her hand. “It's okay. You can hang out with the boss's wife.”

Inside I sat down on the plastic covered couch, my soaked body sliding around. “Now I know why Len did that to our furniture,” she quipped before floating into another room. She came back with a towel. I grabbed the towel but she wouldn't let go. We tugged and giggled. We dropped it on the orange shag carpet. The house was museum quality 1970s.

“I'm 25 years older than you. Old enough to be—”

“Old enough to have been my young irresponsible mother,” I finished. “Times change, Estelle, women's expectations of themselves are different. You can't use the mother argument unless you're 30 to 40 years older these days.”

“You seem well practiced at flattering older ladies.”

“I'm just a fast learner,” I replied before my knee spasmed with pain and I flew back on the couch with a crinkling plastic sound. Estelle turned around towards the bathroom, “I'll get you some naproxen.”

She came back with two pills and water. She sat down next to me and took my leg carefully across her lap. “You move pretty good for someone who drives a scooter,” I said.

“My mornings are better. But I was lucky. My doctors only refinished my hip socket—not a total replacement. But Len,” she said with a sigh. “Len is more like one of his machines now, the way they work on him.”

“What about that guy Barry? A man dies and you two treat it like your Azeala just didn't make it.”

Estelle rubbed my leg. “At this age, it is about the same. Do you know what his last name was? It was White.”

“Funny.”

“And he was checking the mail 50 times a day by last week. Sometimes in the middle of the night.”

I felt the medication working and the tension around my knee go down. I sat up and the couched plastic screamed. “You're a little too smart for us gear heads.”

“I was a dancer. Modern, actually. I opened The Kitchen in New York in '71. My performance was about the table of the elements. Iron was represented by a forward digging motion.” Estelle glared straight ahead and moved her hands like she was clawing air dirt and we both laughed. “Everything else, I forget. Helium might have been a slow rise with shaking hands—anyway, darling, a dancer's joints are dead by 40. I moved out here with my sister and taught at the college. After the surgery, I started saving my pills up, waiting for the night when I just couldn't take it anymore, but then I met Len.”

Len, owner of Electricscooterland. All health insurance plans honored.

“He promised me mobility and freedom.” Her finger traced my leg and she repeated in a whisper, “And freedom.”

I put my hand up to her face, brushed it with my knuckles and moved it around her neck. I brought Estelle towards me. I kissed her

mouth and the thin skin of her face. I pulled open her sash and slid my hands under her robe. Her body was like paper on top of me.

She pulled back and took down my pants. I winced. "Take this leg," I wheezed, pointing to my scarred left knee, "and move it straight out."

Estelle did, and smiled. "I have to be on top of you." She pointed a finger to a faded scar on her left hip, "and this leg has to stay straight."

She straddled me and together we were a perfect match of broken pieces of flesh and cobalt. We moved in waves of couch plastic crinkling and clicking.

5.

Len came back into the house and found me drinking coffee in his Barcalounger, my leg floating at full extension. At the same moment Estelle walked into the living room with Windex and paper towel in hand to wipe away my ass and thigh-shaped condensation from the couch. We all stood there, knowing, before Len said, "I'm going out to the garage before humidity hits 100. Coming, Buddy?" Out in Len's garage the last of the rain ran down the open door. After we finished putting the new front axle on, Len pushed a button, his hand trembling with a slight palsy, and the hydraulic lift let his scooter down. I wobbled over to the tub of Fast Orange, brought the plunger down, and whipped the grease and grit into a citrus froth.

Len looked adoringly at his scooter, "I'll have to bring it into the paint shop next week but let's test her."

"Around the block?" I asked.

"You kids waste every day don't you? Might as well make an Ihop

run. You can take Estelle's ride." Len paused, swallowed and clenched his jaw. "If you think you can handle it. It's got a Kaishon 500W. Not as much torque as mine but it'll let you keep up, if I play nice."

In the driveway I sat down on Estelle's scooter and caught her scent—rose, cough drops, and expensive leather. I brushed the steering column lightly with my knuckles. Len revved his engine and circled around me. "Come on," he winked. "Let's do street." Len tore out and I followed close behind, his glass pack muffler shredding my ears. We left the cul-de-sac, Len taking sharp weaves like a child with a new bike, speeding up anytime I would get close. We turned down Grand and past the franchise Ihop run by goofs, Len surging his scooter and cutting off a car exiting the parking lot. I spun around the car close enough I could've slapped the hood.

Len let loose on an open stretch of the road, making it up to 30 miles per hour. I pushed Estelle's scooter as fast as it could go. Len was still ahead. The good Ihop was off the next left but Len veered right, towards an expressway onramp. I floored the accelerator but Len's machine was too fast. He turned onto the ramp, right against the traffic. I stopped and watched, my eyes following in shock as Len and his scooter drove, between lanes, against the cars honking and pulling over to the side of an overpass.

Len raised one arm up into the air, fist clenched, and threw his head back. Cars continued to pull over for him in an impromptu game of chicken. I watched until his heat blurred-Shoprider disappeared into a vanishing point of freedom and mobility.

