

The Riddle of Steel

by Jason W. Stuart

"Two Dozen gleaming, stripped-down Harleys filled the parking lot of a bar called the El Adobe. The Angels were shouting, laughing and drinking beer—paying no attention to two teenaged boys who stood on the fringe of the crowd, looking scared. Finally, one of the boys spoke to a lean, bearded outlaw named Gut: "We like your bikes, man. They're really sharp." Gut glanced at him, then at the bikes. "I'm glad you like them," he said. "They're all we have." ' --Hunter Thompson, *Hell's Angels*, 1966

A good friend of mine asked to borrow my bike the other day. Wanted to take the wife out for a joy ride. It bothered them a little that it took me so long to decide (the better half of the day). He is one of my best friends, after all. And, with this nomad lifestyle I've fallen into (God bless the recession), I do find myself landing on his couch more nights than not. Not to mention he's a former rider himself. Recently sold his when the new baby got here. Same old story. So, it's not like he can't ride. Hell, he's probably logged more hours than I have. But, still. I pore over insurance documents, trying desperately to be sure of some retribution in the event of the unspeakable. The thought of it queers inside me, like being touched without permission. It sticks in the throat. I want to know that he gets it, what he's asked. It's one of those things that the more you think about it, the more it starts to drive you crazy. And, you'd really almost rather he asked to sleep with your girlfriend (because she was always going to leave you anyway). And, it's not even big iron. It's a little Honda 750. Spirit. Cobra pipes. Dropped back end. Stiletto grips. Custom paint. Side-mount plate. Working on making it a little bobber. She's my little doll. Not much, but she's all I got.

After long deliberation, including one conversation with my attorney, I finally relented and handed him the key. I trust him. About as much as I trust anyone.

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Some of you might be thinking I'm an asshole for being so stingy with it. I mean, it's just a bike, right? It's just a machine. An object. A thing. It's not that big a deal.

To hell with that.

To try to describe the relationship that exists between a man and his iron to someone who doesn't ride, or for whatever reason manages to ride and yet exist outside the meaning of it, is completely impossible. But, maybe there are other riders out there who know exactly what this feels like.

Another friend, a mom, recently aired a grievance regarding a mutual acquaintance (one of those academic types we have the misfortune of mingling with more oft than anyone should). The woman had asked about her new baby, asked her "what was it?" (meaning which sex) and what did they name "it." Almost any reasonable person, and especially any mother, immediately understands what is wrong here.

Try to imagine it: Someone just took that which you love most in the world, that born out of yourself, out of who and what you are down to the very core, that for which you labor, for which you strive, for which you wake in the morning glad to see, that which you mold and shape in your image, a perfect extension of yourself, that which bears the mark of your own personality, of your soul, even, and so trivialized it, so demeaned it, as to refer to simply as "it," like some common object of measurable value.

To hell with your blue book.

But, a bike isn't really like having a child. The bike doesn't crap all the time, whine and cry and moan and wake you all hours of the night. The bike always does as its told. Never talks back. Never stamps its foot in defiance. Doesn't go through the terrible-twos. Never turns tattle-tale in elementary school. Doesn't get sarcastic and "too cool" for you in junior high. The bike doesn't suddenly turn emo or goth. It never comes home with a copy of *Twilight* and wants to tell you all about it. The bike never sneaks out in its teens to go party with a bunch of dirtbags. Never goes off to college and has an

affair with a 40 year-old lit professor. The bike never grows up.
Never leaves home without you.

That's the riddle of steel.

My oldest brother rides. Heavy iron. Rode to California and picked up a Harley at a police auction. Seized in a drug bust. Bike was dismantled and sold in buckets and boxes. Bolted it together and rode it home to the real Southland. He knows the riddle of steel. He was the one who taught me.

There was an incident one day. He was outside working on the bike when he felt something splash off the bike and hit him. There was a stream of liquid ribboning through the air and landing on his gas tank. High in the thick oak tree above sat a garden snake, sunning itself on an outlying limb. It had just relieved itself. On the bike.

Rage boiled inside him, evaporating the wetness. The snake was high up in the branches. No ladder would easily reach it, and at 6'5" 300lbs, my brother is no nimble fox. First, he tried throwing objects to knock the evil thing from the limb, but it quickly evaded and went through a hole in the trunk, disappearing. This feat would take engineering. He got our cousin from nextdoor (also understands the riddle). My cousin had shimmied up the trunk and perched himself on the very same limb. Together they rigged a waterhose to the hole in the tree, filling the trunk with water to flush the demon out.. When the snake came back out its hole, my giant of a brother descended upon the creature, running it down, snatching it up by the neck. He gripped it and squeezed, pinching out its life.

Later, when recounting the story, our mother chastised him for taking the thing's life. She argued that it was just a simple garden snake; they do no harm. "No, Mama," he replied. "You don't understand. Anything that pisses on my motorcycle HAS to die."

That's the riddle of steel.

Lot of friends have dogs. Hell, everybody has dogs. I'm allergic. Tend to shy away. Most people either don't believe me or don't seem to give a shit about this. "Can't you, like, just take

medicine or something?" No. Not really. It's just something I live with. All these little yappy dogs everywhere I go. They whimper and whine and run up and beg for attention. They smell like, well, wet dog. They go around in their little outfits and their masters take them walking on the beach, or through the park, or downtown on errands. Hell, I've seen some people try to take them in stores and outside cafes.

I had a dog once (despite being allergic). It was a big husky named Silver. Inherited it from a friend who'd had to move out of state and couldn't keep him. Gorgeous dog. Thick silver mane (hence the name), ghost blue eyes. Never barked that I can remember (though he would growl at the drop of a hat at anything that moved wasn't me). Fine fella. Used to sit out on the porch with him evenings and drink beer, just hanging out. Like two dudes. We'd head off through the woods together, sort through a few trails. He'd jump in the truck with me and we'd head down the road. Great friend. In a way. Man's best, they say. Not exactly.

But, a bike isn't like a dog. It doesn't need any shots. Doesn't have to be spayed or neutered (hell no). If anything, the opposite of that. More virile. More potent. Bigger, faster, meaner, stronger, louder, scorching hot even standing still. A bike doesn't whimper at you when you leave the house. It doesn't act out in defiance and chew up your stereo or your boots. It absolutely never shits all over the place and tracks it around everywhere. A bike doesn't give you that shitty hang-dog look when it knows it's done something wrong. A bike never does anything wrong. It is a man's best friend, one that won't age 7 times faster than you. It won't up and die from heartworms or parvo. It doesn't become old and decrepit and blind in one eye. A bike, well-cared for, never dies. It becomes "classic", "vintage." A bike sticks with you to the end. It lives on past you, handed down to the next generation. Like another rider once put it, "We don't own these bikes. We just take care of them until we die."

That's the riddle of steel.

I take a lot of shit for my bike. I ride a Honda. 750. It ain't decked out with chrome, or raked out, nor sports the wide rear tire (which is stupid). Isn't all that bright and shiny. Didn't roll off some showroom floor with a pricetag upwards of 20k. In short, it ain't a Harley. This is supposed to somehow be a mark against my character, against my "true bikerness," or at least that's how I'm made to understand from those fortunate enough to spend that much on their steel. Some of these, I can respect. The man who works offshore, 80 hours a week, hard labor, welding and toting heavy tools around. Might die any given day on the job. Unsung. Unkempt. Unconcerned. He rode his way up the ladder. Got his first bike young, some 4 stroke 250 Yamaha, or so. Just to cut his teeth on. Then moved up to something bigger. Maybe a 600. But, always, he was aiming for that genuine American steel. He earned it. Lived the life till he got where he wanted to be. Thing is, this guy isn't likely to give me shit. Probably sees himself somewhere back down the line. No, it's some asshole doctor, just come off the green, out for a night cruise to meet up with his secretary. Decided to dust off the motorcycle, throw on some leather and a do-rag, sport the badass look (complete ensemble available at Nordstrom's for \$1799). Gives me the dirty stare if he sees my little bike out next to his raked-out joke with less than two thousand miles. "Why don't you ride a real man's bike?" he says, cockily, winking back at his blank-brained hopeful trophy for the night. These guys, they all saw the poster for Easy Rider somewhere (none of them, the movie itself), and decided to go out and buy the experience. To them, everything is a commodity, something they can buy and sell, or simply trash when they're done with it. This week, it's "let's play toughguy bikers!" Next week, maybe it's pirates, or ski-bums, or whatever. Flavor of the week fakes. They're all going green now, anyway, because some article in GQ or Maxim mentioned it was a trendy idea. They're sitting on their bikes outside the bar, checking their portfolios on their Blackberry Mobiles.

These men will never know the riddle of steel.

I love Harleys. Can't wait to get one. Probably build half of it myself. Rip off some parts. Bolt on new ones. Carve it and cut it till it sings the song I like. Same as I've done with my little horse I got. Make lemonade. This is part of it, working on it, building it up to what you want it to be. It is an extension of yourself. Like the old U.S. Marine Corps chant, the Rifleman's Creed, the Biker's Creed could be much the same:

This is my motorcycle. There are many like it, but this one is mine. My motorcycle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life. Without me, my motorcycle is useless. Without my motorcycle, I am useless. I must ride my motorcycle true. My motorcycle is human, even as I, because it is my life. Thus, I will learn it as a brother. I will learn its weaknesses, its strength, its parts, its accessories, its engine, and its movement. I will ever guard it against the ravages of weather and damage as I will ever guard my legs, my arms, my eyes and my heart against damage. I will keep my motorcycle clean and ready. We will become part of each other.

A lot of us will die on our bikes. This is a fact we live with. Many of us will get hurt or worse. Probably more than once. Most of us will go down. Every time we grip the throttle, we know we take our lives in our hands. It's a thing that takes getting used to. Not everyone can or should lead this life. There are others who know, some even better than we. Deep-divers. Soldiers in the field. Freedom fighters. Firemen. Even, the dreaded, cops. It's the romantic 19th Century outlaw mentality: To die with your boots on. It's Genesis, chapter 6: We live by the steel. We die by the steel. We accept this. We ride despite it.

We ride because we have to. Because something inside us compels us down that road, two wheels licking up the asphalt, pipes barking into the wind, sweat blowing off before it does its job, grease caking in our hands and elbows and knees. We ride because we don't know how not to. We ride to take us where we need to go. We ride to take us away. We ride just to say we rode.

We ride because we love it. And, we love our bikes. That's what keeps them, and us, on the road. Love. You can have all the technical knowledge in the world. You can know mechanics and engineering like the back of your hand. But, you take a bike out on the road that you don't love, you'll put it down sooner than later. It won't be right. One wrong wisp of wind and you're butt clenches tighter than you thought it could. A big rig blows past you doing 90 and moves you out of the lane, and you turn right around and Craigslist it that day. But, love keeps you in the saddle even in the rain. When it's freezing out. When there's no rational reason to take it out. It tells you when something's wrong. When a part's about to go bad. When the engine needs tweaking. Love holds you both together even when you should be falling apart.

I've been together with my share of lovers. Some good. Some not as much. It happens to the best of us, despite our best intentions. We all fall into it sooner or later, and over and over. It's hard-wired into us. The body wants what the body wants. And, that's really about as much as there is to it. It seems grand when you're high on that dopamine rush. Pheromones going nuts. Butterflies. All that shit. You can say you've seen those eyes made of seven oceans poured in by god, himself. A smile like an exploding sun. You carry on like children playing outside like there's no tomorrow (because there isn't). She dotes on you for a while. At first. Leaves you little love notes on your car window (the good ones do). Surprises you at work, sneaking off into the storage closet. Cooks the most excellent Cajun food. Keeps you warm at night. You laugh and you love and you lust and all it's all too good to be true (because it really is). And, there's nothing else like it in the world.

But, having a bike isn't like having a lover. A bike doesn't act like it likes you but starts criticizing your clothes, or your hair, or your car, or your apartment. A bike doesn't dismiss you when it's bored with you, or just too tired right now. A bike doesn't tell you it has a headache in order to blow you off. A bike never blows you off. A bike won't criticize you in front of friends or out in public, in fact, the opposite. The bike never complains you don't love it as much as

it loves you, that you don't treat it right, or like some other biker treats his. A bike never asks if it looks fat in this fender. A bike doesn't age. Doesn't sag. Doesn't lose its tone. It doesn't grow old. It's lines stay sharp and straight. It doesn't make you sleep elsewhere if it's mad at you. It doesn't get mad at you. The bike doesn't run off on you and get pregnant by someone else and try to tell you it's yours. A bike doesn't get pregnant with your child and steal it away from you, telling it lies about you, about how terrible you were. A bike doesn't make you choose between itself and a lover. Doesn't make you do endless chores and work on a house you'll never own. Doesn't redefine you according to some Norman Rockwell phony ideal, only to cheat on you later with, get this, some biker, because, "you're just not the man I fell in love with anymore." A bike never compares you to its previous riders. Never tells you how well they rode it. It doesn't tell you it would rather be with some fictional movie character, like a childish fool would. A bike doesn't constantly berate you over every single thing you do. It doesn't lie in wait, like some ghoul, ready to point out the slightest mistake, the smallest imperfection. It doesn't stand there with some gleaming maniacal satisfaction at your every failure. It doesn't build itself up by ripping you apart. It isn't defined by some unquenchable need to be better than you. A bike never looks you dead in the eye and tells you it loves you when it doesn't, and it never did.

A bike never tells you it loves you. It shows you with everything it does, everything it is. It shows its love every time it fires up and chomps at the bit, ready to go. It shows you its love every morning, when you look out your window and see it gleaming in the sun, just waiting. Your bike is with you always, through the good times and the bad. It's there when the sun shines bright and you ride to the beach. It's there with you in the dooming squall of a summer rain, 20 miles out of Tallahassee and limping in on the shoulder at 30 miles an hour, the rain so thick you can't see your hand in front of your face, both of you praying to the god of storms, who wields his own steel, that the cat-eye tail light is enough for the

cars behind you to see, both of you knowing it isn't. Your bike is with you when you go down. You go down together. A bike never lies.

That's the riddle of steel.

Ultimately, it is this entirely. It doesn't lie. It is the thing that you love the most, that you count on the most, that you believe in and hope for. It is as stated in the film that coins the phrase, *Conan, the Barbarian*. The movie opens with the forging of the steel. Then the father shows the son the steel, and explains to him its meaning:

Fire and wind come from the sky, from the gods of the sky.

But

Crom is your god, Crom and he lives in the earth. Once, giants lived in the Earth. And in the darkness of chaos, they fooled Crom, and they took from him the enigma of steel. Crom was angered. And the Earth shook. Fire and wind struck down these

giants, and they threw their bodies into the waters. But, in their

rage, the gods forgot the secret of steel and left it on the battlefield. We who found it are just men. Not gods. Not giants. Just men. The secret of steel has always carried with it a mystery.

You must learn its riddle. You must learn its discipline. For no one - no one in this world can you trust. Not men, not women,

not beasts. But, this:



This you can trust.

