

ABOUT MOTORCYCLES

By Frederick Seidel

My father was a hunchback. He had an accident on his bicycle when he was a child, which ended with his falling into a coal cellar, a fall of thirty feet from the sidewalk. There was an irony in this in that his family was in the coal business and he himself became the coal baron of the large industrial city where he lived, the foremost city in America for making shoes and beer. He had been an athletic daredevil of a kid, and he stayed athletic despite his injury. He was also a stoic. When the accident happened, and he fell to the stone floor far below, he lay there for hours, twelve years old, and then picked himself up, with a broken back, somehow got back up to the street, and walked across the city to his house, where he told no one what had happened. He walked with a broken back all the way home, where the only person who noticed that something was wrong with him was his older brother. He was made to go to a doctor, who put him in bed and put him in a tight corset, a torture cham-

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ber my father refused to wear. So the story went. My father never talked about the accident, not once. His refusal to keep the corset on, so the story goes, resulted in his hunch and his stunted growth. He had the large fine hands of a tall man, and a large handsome head, on his shortened body. He remained a gifted athlete, as I said, excelling at handball and golf, quick hands, good eyes, fast of foot. I used to marvel at the dozens of custom-made suits he had, which stylishly disguised the hunch. Once, when I was in Paris, eighteen years old, and

tempted to buy a motorcycle, but needing money from home to do so, my uncle who had heard about this pleaded with me not to. My father, he said, would never bring it up, but his childhood accident would mean he would be terribly concerned for me. The bike I was thinking of buying belonged to a friend. Before I could buy it, I crashed on it, riding as a passenger behind my friend, with a beautiful girl squeezed in between us, three on a bike, a Triumph, going far too fast, all of us drunk, around Place de la Concorde, and slipping out of control on the wet cobbles at 4:00 A.M. Pardner, don't get on a motorcycle with drink in you.

I. ROBIN'S-EGG-BLUE CHOPPER AND SANDY MOON

I rode an Italian road-racing bicycle in New York City in 1966 that when I wasn't riding it hung on two spikes driven into the front hall whitewashed brick wall of my house on East 93rd Street. Tom Avenia, an Italian in Harlem, an Italian American in unwelcoming Harlem, sold me the bike, an all-chrome Fréjus. His shop was the shop for serious bicycles. I bought the

Fréjus for its beauty. I rode it to sit on beauty and go fast. But it didn't go fast enough. And the drivers in New York were dangerous. They weren't used to bicycles sharing the street with them and didn't always like it and sometimes made it clear with their cars that they didn't like it by aiming for you. My beautiful Fréjus was swift, but the streets were pocked with potholes and the cars were unfriendly. To go fast on two wheels was the point. To go fast on two wheels is the point of life, isn't it? So I began to think about going even faster.

There was a Harley-Davidson motorcycle dealer in the East 70s that I came on one day. Harleys back then were brutal crude things. Even the Harley Sportster, their relatively athletic, relatively slender sport bike, was mechanically a Neanderthal, but in any case the Sportster didn't count because the only motorcycle that mattered was the big guy, the great big, full-dress, traditional highway Harley with saddlebags and maybe pompons, lots of chrome, a dumb throbbing thug of an engine, outdated technology, the bike America rode (along with the recently discontinued Indian), the America that rode motorcycles, that is. These dogs were called "hogs," terrible motorcycles. The police rode them, rednecks rode them, white-trash working-class meatheads rode them. Their thick squat bulk was the opposite of the elegance of the Fréjus. But there was something about their lack of refinement that was appealing, a manly he-man of a bike. The dealership went perfectly with the motorcycle. It was a small garage space, not especially clean, staffed by gruff iconic American tough guys who were also madly in love with Harley-Davidson motorcycles. I walked in off the street and began a lifelong obsession with motorcycles.

The mechanics worked in a small area behind where the new bikes were displayed. In that small space, on a raised dais, as if on an altar, was a motorcycle the mechanics were building out of the chassis and motor of another motorcycle. It was what was called a chopper, in this case a chopped-down police Harley, a big hog stripped of its bulges and made chaste and svelte and

simple—and with the fenders and tank painted an astonishingly pretty, entirely unexpected robin's-egg blue. I trembled with desire.

After months of waiting for the mechanics to finish their baby-blue prize, my baby-blue love, which I had bought in advance of its being finished, after



endless visits to watch it happening, or not happening, as was more often the case, the bike was mine. Only I had never ridden a motorcycle.

I had a friend named Johnny Greco who was the squash pro at the University Club who had a friend named Bobby Collins. Greco was a dark-haired wiry fist of lower-class energy whom I knew from Elaine's, the chic place he and I both went to regularly, both of us particular friends of Elaine herself. Greco claimed he knew how to ride but he did not have a motorcycle license so could not instruct me. It turned out that Greco, the great athlete, couldn't ride at all and in fact flunked the driving part of the motorcycle-license test, which he decided to take some time later. With me looking on (I had my license by then), he wobbled and put his foot down and didn't make it between the pylons, a miserable humiliation on a lovely, bright sunny day. Johnny told me heroic stories about Collins, a construction worker worshipped by the men who worked with

him, a great oak of a man, a man among men, fabulous, charismatic, immensely strong, and an experienced licensed motorcyclist who would be happy to show me how.

Collins, the construction worker, turned out to be a curly-haired, smilingly courteous man with interesting political views and gentle good manners. We were all the same age, around thirty, but Collins had been a laborer for more than ten years already. We met and went to pick up the motorcycle. Collins was awed. The bike really was stunning. Collins started it up and I climbed aboard behind him and rode as a passenger over the river to the derelict industrial area in Queens where I was going to receive my lesson. Greco followed in his car. I knew what to do on a motorcycle. I knew what lever did what. I knew how to start it and how to stop it. I set off and when I wanted to slow to a stop I accelerated instead and couldn't remember where the brakes were until quite a ways down the road.

Every morning I rode down the FDR Drive in those last halcyon helmetless days before the new state helmet law took effect (requiring you to wear one) to the office I had taken in a building south of Foley Square where my then brother-in-law Frank Conroy also had an office and so did Norman Mailer, writers among the private detectives. Day after day, the same two cops in a cop car turned on their lights and their siren to stop me, once the helmet-law warning period was over, telling me each time that the next time I would get a ticket. I took measures to avoid them, would speed up or slow down, or hide between lanes of cars, and they would catch me anyway. All this was done with great good cheer. I liked the wind in my hair and the city around and above my naked pate, and I liked these cops and our game, and they understood completely.

The most beautiful woman in the world was a woman named Clare Peplow, who was the companion of Michelangelo Antonioni at that time. She was in New York, on her way to

the filming of *Zabriskie Point* out West. I was smitten and wanted to show off and offered to take her for a ride on my motorcycle, which I kept just outside the house chained to an iron grill. It looked wonderful there. A motorcycle in front and a bicycle to greet you on the wall in the front hall. Such a beautiful day! Such a beautiful woman! Such a beautiful blue motorcycle! I couldn't start it. It had a kick-starter. Electric starters were years away. It was easy to get the drill wrong, to jump on the kick start at the wrong phase, and do it again, and flood the motor, and have to wait, and jump again and again, and I got it wrong. It could break your leg. It could wear you down. It could make you look like a fool. I looked like a fool. I sweat over it to this day. Finally, we got going and went for a beautiful blue ride.

There was no ignition key for my motorcycle, no lock. You flipped an on/off switch, kick-started it, and vroom-vroom. For that matter, there was no speedometer and there were no rearview mirrors. It was made that way by the mechanics, all on purpose, of course, part of their ideal of simplicity, very little chrome, everything for the look, and the less to look at, the better. The less bulging out at you, the less intruding on your eye, the more you would see the line and the beauty. In those days, you could still get away with having no rearview mirrors. The federal laws governing these things were not yet in place. I never left the unlockable motorcycle for long on the street and never out of my sight. One day I parked it on the sidewalk in front of the house beside the iron grill that was attached to the house but without chaining it. Broad daylight. A middle-aged man wearing a suit was seen by various neighbors riding down the street on my blue chopped Harley into history, while I sat inside reading Rilke. The neighbors said it was very odd to see a man in a suit riding a big Harley, but then it was my motorcycle, so of course! I never saw the bike again.

There was a girl with a small, wedge-shaped cat face and the deliri-

um body of L'il Abner's Daisy Mae who came to Elaine's in those early days. She had an extraordinary name. Sandy Moon. She had a boyfriend who was a male hustler and who drove a chocolate-colored Rolls that belonged to his rich, much older male lover. Sandy Moon had a Harley, a full-dress enormous hog. My chopper was gone, but her hog was there, between her legs, her curly hair flowing down, her breasts like the breasts in one of the paintings in the Ajanta Caves. She overwhelmed the motorcycle and overjoyed the streets of New York.

By now I had moved on to other motorcycles, a very fast Honda 750 and then a Suzuki 250cc two-stroke, the latter a spry, light, dangerous thing that my friend Jeremy Chisholm had won in a poker game. Chisholm was terrified of it and begged me to take it off his hands. My first bikes



were all of the sit-up kind, comfortable for riding around town or on the highway. You sit up as you do on a normal nonracing bicycle. The other kind of motorcycle is one with abbreviated handlebars—called clip-ons—high-set footrests, and a seat mounted rather far back, behind a longish gas tank, so that when you ride you assume the posture of a jockey on a

racehorse when he leans down low and gets his face close to his horse's neck. You ride this kind of motorcycle with your weight on your arms and wrists, your back a bit curved, not the most restful position. Serious sport bikes and all racebikes are set up this way, though in addition racebikes are *monoposto*, a single seat with room for only one person, the racer himself. I bought an English sport bike called a Rickman Metisse. The word *métisse* means mix or mixture or mongrel in French. This bike was a mix but not a mongrel, not if the word "mongrel" suggests ratty ugliness. It had a dazzling nickel-plated frame made of hollow Reynolds 531 tubing, which held the oil for the engine. The engine was a Triumph 650 Bonneville. When the engine was warm, the oil got hot and the oil-holding frame got *very* hot. Another, graver problem was that the bike would suddenly go dead and stop. Infamous English electrics! The faulty alternator repeatedly tested out as perfectly healthy, only it wasn't. I would ride out over the George Washington Bridge to get to the Palisades Parkway along the Hudson, and ride fast, and ride faster and faster, and suddenly the thing would die, the battery flat. In Dumont, New Jersey, not far away, was Amol Motorcycles, a BMW dealership run by a family of German origin, quite severe even if they were also honest and helpful. I would get a ride to a pay phone and call them, and they would arrive, yet again, to rescue me and my Metisse. These German Americans were reserved, but their top salesman was not the least Teutonic. Ebullient Freddy Simone was some Italian-American combination of sweet and determined and kind and funny and knowledgeable and wild. Or maybe that isn't Italian-American but was just Freddy. Of course he loved motorcycles, but he loved cars even more and owned a monstrously powerful Lamborghini Miura. He died in it early one fine weekend morning at the age of twenty-five, roaring down a narrow street in a nearby town and suddenly confronting a car that had gone

through a red light crossing the intersection. Simone, ever the gentleman, veered off to the side to save the other person. Simone, who roared around on little streets at horrific speeds, knew that driving a racecar was asking for death. Simone loved life.

I remember that when I bought the just released four-cylinder Honda 750 from Amol, I was told by all of them to be very careful because of the power of the thing. They would say, This is a new dimension of performance in a street bike. Be careful. It can pull your arms out of their sockets! Every new motorcycle has elicited a warning that the bike is almost too much to handle. Watch out for how quickly it accelerates. It accelerates so smoothly you won't know how fast you're going, so watch it. I keep waiting for the motorcycle that really does go fast almost too quickly, that does seem ready to pull your arms out of their sockets. But so far, each bike has seemed like a bike, thrilling and absolutely fine. One wants to go faster.

I committed to the kind of motorcycle you crouch down on to ride, getting your face and shoulders out of the airstream behind a shell of streamlining around the front and sides of the bike, which is called a fairing. I crouched down to go faster. I leaned on my arms and wrists. I twisted the throttle to go faster. My ideal was a racebike on the street, the late Freddy Simone's Miura in bike form.

Years later, many years later, I dropped by Amol. The place seemed strange. The old man had died. One of the sons, the tough impenetrable one with brainless blue eyes and white-blond hair, a strange man always, suddenly blurted out to me that he had been in prison till just recently. He stared at me wildly.

II. MV AGUSTA

In the early Seventies, New York crashed and burned. I got tied up, tortured, and robbed by a Vietnam veteran who wanted to kill me more than he wanted to rob me. His frightened accomplice didn't know what he

wanted. I survived, ready to buy a gun and shoot Harlem to death, and knowing my thoughts were not steady, I moved to Westchester and a friend's empty house and more motorcycle magazines, and in one found an article saying that the famous MV Agusta motorcycle company of Varese, Italy, whose racebikes won all the international Grand Prix races, would never make a replica of their racebike for



the general public, despite the hints the company was dropping in the press that they might. The parent company, Agusta Aeronautiche, was the Bell helicopter licensee for Europe, and vastly rich from that. The two brothers who owned the company, Counts Corrado and Domenico Agusta, raced thoroughbred motorcycles the way other rich men raced thoroughbred horses, for the sport and glory, and the pleasure. Domenico, the elder, was devout and dour. Corrado was dashing and a devil who had small dogs with him always and many girlfriends. When I began to spend a lot of time in Milan—the Varese factory was forty-five minutes away—I would see Corrado at a table at a charming restaurant outdoors in a palace courtyard, called Don Lisander, a dog or two and a girl or two having lunch with him. Twenty-five years later, I would meet in New York, and

get to know, the American blonde he loved for years, who lived with him and held him in her arms as he died.

I wrote to Corrado from America, proposing that he allow the race department to make a bike for me. Back came a courteous letter, explaining that that would not be possible. I replied, suggesting it should be possible.

It would be an adventure worth undertaking, for me, of course, but also for the firm. Back came Corrado's reply that he was willing to consider the idea. The idea was every motorcycle enthusiast's idea, to get the factory to take a 500cc racebike and adapt it for the street, detune the engine a little but leave it fierce, add lights, and so forth. A racer for the street!

I sat there in Bedford, New York, writing charming and I hoped interesting and eventually persuasive letters to Corrado Agusta, receiving occasional replies that I later found out were being written by Agusta's chief secretary, or, as we say nowadays, his executive assistant, a marvelous-looking, very intelligent girl who, as I would discover, drove faster in her car than anybody ought to on a public road,

brilliant behind the wheel, expert and terrifying on country roads at night, respected by all the race mechanics and the actual professional racers. I remember one enchanted evening being taken to a country restaurant facing the Ticino River, near Cascina Costa, a splendid restaurant, a splendid evening, her boyfriend, Mario Ceriani, and her and one of the mechanics and me in the little car, and I remember, after all the wine, how stupefyingly fast she drove on the tiny roads in the dark. I used to call Corrado every now and again, in those days when calling Europe was quite expensive, and I would be passed on to this girl, Francesca. We would chat in English, very pleasant. I would be told not to give up hope.

Then one day I got a call from Italy from Mario Ceriani, explaining that he was the chief helicopter test pilot for Agusta Aeronautiche. He told me that Francesca (who, I would learn, was his

mistress, and years later became his wife) had spoken to him about my wish for a motorcycle. He thought he had a proposal that might interest me. It was to take the new four-cylinder 750cc engine MV Agusta had created and use it as the basis for a supersport motorcycle the race-shop mechanics would make for me. The only catch was that the 750 engine was shaft-drive, instead of chain-drive, and the shaft meant added weight, which you don't want, and maybe meant compromises in the handling of the bike. A racebike would be chain-driven for sure, and MV obviously did not want a bike carrying their name to be raced by anyone not them. But the race-team mechanics could make the engine hot, could tune it so that it was powerful enough to make up for the shaft-drive. The bike would be plenty and have plenty. The race mechanics would be moonlighting, of course, working at night after their regular long work hours, and on weekends. No one could be told about it, least of all the fierce unforgiving Albert Magni, who ran the race department. No price was set. We would find out what it would cost as we went along. But if I wanted to do it, I would have to send some money immediately. It started like that.

The bike arrived at JFK in a beautifully crafted wooden crate and was trucked up to the house of a friend in Vermont. It was made ready, I was ready, and I eased away, blipping the throttle, megaphoning the same tremendous, explosive, baritone four-stroke MV voice, so loud it could be heard miles away, and though there were complaints, State Trooper Stone, laconic Vermont granite, sympathized with the bike, maybe because it was so lovely to look at, and told me to try to keep the revs down, but knew I wouldn't.

I loved the motorcycle with a mad passion, the way it looked, the way it sounded, so much so that after a summer of riding it in Vermont, I had it brought down to New York so I could keep it in my apartment. It was an accomplishment to get it into the freight elevator it was too long for. To fit, it

had to be lifted in front, stood on end just a bit. Then out into the hall on my floor, tires squeaking on the tiles, and into the front hall of my apartment, where I displayed it on a center stand. There is something childish about all this, or at least of childhood.



The need or wish to have the thing near, so you can look at it, live near it, live with it, and in this case smell it, because even with the gas tank emptied, there persisted the smell of gas, a delicious smell, and the smell of the castor-based racing oil, so distinct a smell. I loved this motorcycle because it had grown up with me, it had come into being with me and because of me. It was mine. It was me. At the airport, when I peeked into the crate, it was love, as if I were looking at a prize puppy I had had sent to me from the breeder. Like a child who ought to be asleep because it is past his bedtime, or it is the middle of the night, I would get out of bed to go have a look at my friend, at this thing. I was eight years old.

It makes me think of the photographs of Stradivarius, Guarnerius, and Amati violins from the Wurlitzer Collection that I had on the walls of my childhood bedroom, thirty color photographs of the backs, bellies, and scrolls. I found out about the collection, found out how to write to the curator,

and to my astonishment was rewarded with this trove of careful, clinical, precise photographs of these beloved treasures, these sacred objects. Violins preceded motorcycles. I played the violin. I swooned with sensual pleasure when I contemplated the beauty of individual violins. And I had the deepest reverence for the best violins. Only the best for me. Always I wanted The Best. I was still eight years old.

There was a radio show. What was the man's name? The man whose show it was told a story every week. He had an extraordinarily mellifluous voice. He told the stories very affectingly. There was great drama in the telling. One week he told the story of Antonio Stradivari. The emphasis was on the mystery of how the instruments were constructed. What was it that gave them their almost magical qualities of sound? No one could replicate a Strad. People had tried. I was entranced. I could not own a Strad. I would be frightened to. I did not even play the violin. (Not yet; I would play later.) That didn't stop me.

I would wake in the middle of the night and go up front to check on my motorcycle like a man going out to the stable to check on his racehorse. I would smell it in the dark. I would stare at it. All the great years of MV racers, the years of a record number of Grand Prix victories, had featured bikes with rounded tails. My bike had the tail of the new racers, the latest, and it was angular, it was squared off, and the back end of it rose slightly. At first I had hated the design. It was not the same as the past great racers. It looked different. Now I was crazy about it. I thought it was brilliant. I was obsessed. I was in love. I would get on the bike, held steady by its center stand, put my feet on the pegs, and crouch over the gas tank, leaning down low, in the silence, in the perfume of castor oil. I was an ancient king mounting a stuffed favorite deceased horse in the silence of his craziness.

On the lyrical state highways of Vermont I blatted and roared, up and down through the gears, at eighty, at

a hundred and something, at much more than a hundred and something miles an hour. The motorcycle had a relatively long wheelbase and felt absolutely solid in a straight line, despite the shaft-drive, and steady enough in a turn, but not quick to turn and right itself. The bike was rather heavy, not deft and flickable, but it was wonderful to look at, wonderful to be on, wonderful to ride, a source of pride. The sound it made was magnificent. The feeling was of riding a powerful musical instrument. The hills echoed and the valleys lit up with my song. You used to be able to say of a motorcycle that it was on song when it was going full tilt in perfect tune and at the right revs just at the redline, the rpm limit for the motor. I was on song. I felt in tune, in love, so proud. It was late summer, almost fall. Pride goeth before the fall. Then I fell.

I was rounding a turn on the MV at considerable speed when I had the only serious accident I have ever had. Years before, I had jumped the Triumph Metisse off the top of a rise, knowing I would land in sand, and curious to see if I could do it and keep going, but I was prepared to crash, and I crashed. That didn't count. I may have been going eighty miles an hour on the MV when I realized I would not make it around the turn. I had a choice: I could throw the bike down on the highway or aim for the unplowed field straight ahead of me, as the road curved to the left. I chose the field and shot off the road and rode across the field with the bike upright, and then I hit a ditch, going quite fast still, and crashed. I was furious, embarrassed, outraged. My first act was to get the bike upright and try to start it. A passing state trooper was flagged down by someone who had seen me go off the road. The trooper was rushing a kidney-dialysis machine to another part of Vermont where it was needed in an emergency, and he certainly did not want to be held up, but when he looked at me he decided he had better get me to the nearby Ellsworth Clinic in Chester, where, when I walked in, I

saw the blood drain from the face of the receptionist as she looked at me, and heard her insist to the trooper that I be rushed to Springfield Hospital. She obviously thought I had done terrible damage to myself and was about to go into shock. The trooper sped to Springfield with lights whirling and siren whooping. This same trooper was killed six months later in a high-speed crash. It turned out he had been reprimanded several times for his risk-addicted driving. At the hospital it was determined that I had broken three ribs, that was all.

I had to explain this mortifying event to myself and to the world. When the wrecked motorcycle was examined, it was apparent that there was something not right about the foot pedal that operated the rear brake. The pedal swung loose, meaning it could move down from its position at rest but also it could move up—not normal, not desirable—and it was possible, perhaps likely, that this



had been the state of affairs before the crash. A Vermont motorcycle dealer named Peter Pickett had driven down to JFK in his small red open-bed truck to pick up the MV after it cleared customs, and had taken it to Peru, Vermont, where my friend Jill Fox lived and where I spent a great deal of

time. The crate was unloaded, opened, and set aside to be saved, it was so good-looking in its own right. The motorcycle, pretty much ready to be ridden, nevertheless had to be gone over to make sure everything was in order. I examined the front end while the back portion of the bike was checked by an experienced rider and sometime mechanic who lived in the village, not exactly a friend but someone friendly and eager to play a part. My immediate thought after crashing was that it couldn't have been my fault, certainly couldn't have been the result of my taking the wrong line in attempting to go through the corner, certainly couldn't have been a case of not leaning the bike into the turn sufficiently because of the speed I was traveling, couldn't have been the speed I was traveling stopping me from correctly managing the bike, couldn't have been . . . and so forth. So it had to have been the consequence of the adjustments made to the rear brake pedal by the fellow who checked out the rear of the motorcycle. It suddenly was apparent that the lever controlling the rear brake had been set up in a manner that applied the brake when the pedal was pressed down, as is normal, or when the pedal swung up, when downward pressure was applied or when no pressure was applied, and the pedal was for whatever reason forced up, as when rounding a corner at great speed the centrifugal force pushed the lever up . . . and the back brake was applied without my foot touching the brake pedal. I believed this theory. I propounded it to all, grunting with pain from my broken ribs. I offer the theory to you now, dear reader. Believe me, that is how it happened. The brake was applied without my touching the pedal, the rear wheel locked, I felt it lock, felt that I could not possibly get around the turn, without knowing what exactly was the matter, and decided to go straight, into the field I saw there, straight ahead of me, and did so, dragging the locked rear wheel . . . and riding, if that is the right word, through the field might have made it to a safe upright stop if I had not come

up against a ditch, almost a canal, too wide for the dead weight of the motorcycle to cross, and then BAM.

For days, for months, I replayed the scene, explaining to myself what had happened, excusing myself. Anything to avoid thinking I had been an incompetent. And there is something else in this. There is a way in which feigning nearness to death risks death. Faking it at all well imitates real danger too faithfully and brings danger. I had gone into the turn too fast. I had not made it around the turn. I started playing down the danger I had put myself in and at the same time playing it up. Motorcycling is full of bravado and posing and the nearness of death. You pretend to be calmly, even coldly focused, when you ride, eyes everywhere, eyes on the job and immune to thoughts about risk. That is how one describes riding these fast motorcycles, except of course there is in addition the pleasure. You are riding beauty and you are riding speed and you are riding death. And it is a pleasure. But you offer yourself as a dashing devotee. You realize you are performing the role of yourself, and may be maimed out of existence as part of the act, as part of the character you are playing.

The bike went back to Italy and returned, having had its bent and wounded parts rebuilt at great expense, with the latest disc brakes off the racing bike added. Again it was trucked to Vermont. It looked so glamorous. I rode it once, just to do it, like getting back on a horse that has thrown you. Eventually the MV was put on display at Luigi Chinetti's Ferrari dealership in Greenwich, Connecticut, and was bought by a visiting English rare-car dealer to add jazz and romance to his personal collection.

I had another shaft-drive bike at the time, the classic BMW 750cc opposed-cylinder twin, with its sober and good-looking black bodywork with white pinstripes. It was a touring bike, very comfortable and reliable, the latest version of the design in a long line of opposed twins the company had made. I rode it around Vermont, and then one day, with my young son behind me as my

passenger, riding on a dirt road, I descended a very steep hill to get to the paved county road and went into a slide, a barely controlled slide down the hillside in the dirt, which I managed like a motocross racer, or a skier, touching the brakes once or twice only, and lightly, and driving safely away. That little hill thrill chill did it. Once home, I was ready to sell the bike and stop motorcycling for good.

III. THE MONSTER

The point is if you are afraid you ought not to be doing it. Anything that would interrupt your vigilance has to be vaporized before it begins. You aren't afraid. It doesn't occur to you to be. You have to be free to float free into a state of mind in which you are in a trance of attentiveness. Once you give fear the right to exist, you better stop riding. I took flying lessons with the thought that I would rather die doing something safer than motorcycling. Years had passed, and I was at



East Hampton Airport. Flying was a way of not motorcycling. I went up with my instructor, Michael Stutt, just to get up in the air, for the feeling of it, and not really with the idea that I would go on to get a license and start taking little trips with luggage to destinations. I had no destination. I wanted to fly. Sometimes I would stop by

the airport and on the spur of the moment we would go up in the four-seat Cessna for a jaunt in the air, for the fifteen minutes he had before his next lesson with someone. I would have expected to suffer from claustrophobia in the two-seater we switched to when the larger plane was removed for the mandated servicing at whatever number of hours. On the contrary, the small plane fit more perfectly, felt the perfect size. It was like flying around in a Volkswagen Beetle. Handy. Practical. Even charming. But, having said that, I have to say in addition that I never was able to love any of the aircraft. I was not able to love the equipment, which was always a central part of the pleasure of motorcycling, the machine turned into a fetish, made into a love object. Jet fighters certainly thrill, but they don't count because you can't fly in them, you can't get up close. Whereas with the small plane you take lessons in, you get very close, because you have to do an inspection of it before each flight

and after, using your eyes and even your fingers, at least in the way Stutt taught his students to carry out the inspection. The only propeller airplanes I would have asked to give me their autograph, so to speak, were the aerobatics planes, the tiny Pitts Special, an old-fashioned-looking biplane still very much used in aerobatics competition, and the Russian Sukhoi, superb winner in the international meets. I really wanted to go up in an aerobatics plane but never did, despite an invitation to from a local enthusiast and competitor. I flew in my unremarkable Cessna and waited for a moment of enchantment. The moment came on a beautiful summer day when I flew to Montauk Point at the end of Long Island and turned to fly back, and ran into a headwind, a very considerable headwind. The flight was smooth, too smooth. Stutt asked me: "Notice anything?" I did. We weren't moving. The sea down there to the left was blue and stayed still. The tiny rectangles of the enormous beach houses didn't move. The blue sky didn't move. We were being held in place at this altitude by the headwind. The moment

was enchanting. I realized I was getting ready to return to the high-risk action of motorcycles.

Unlike MV Agusta, the Ducati Motorcycle Company of Bologna, Italy, had always sold its motorcycles to the public. The street bikes were treasured, brilliant Italian products, meaning *designed*, designed with love and verve, bikes that went fast with style. Any citizen could buy a Ducati racebike and go racing, if he or she had the money and the racing credentials. The company had made single-cylinder motors, but it was the twin-cylinder engine Ducati was famous for, which came with a system of valve actuation called desmodromic, in which the engine's valves are opened and closed by the action of cams rather than springs. The advantage was supposed to be greater reliability. The bikes were light, handled well, went fast, looked great.

Claudio Castiglioni, a very rich and very colorful Italian industrialist, owned Ducati. From a modest background, and, as with Corrado and Domenico Agusta, one of a pair of brothers who worked as a team and at the same time had separate business interests and responsibilities, Claudio was a Medici prince with a swashbuckling Medici prince attitude toward his company and toward his chief motorcycle designer, a man of genius named Massimo Tamburini. Castiglioni lavished love and money—enormous, one might even say ruinous, amounts of money—on Tamburini's creative work, and Tamburini rewarded his confidence and largesse with the great motorcycle design of the last thirty years, the Ducati 916. The other motorcycle Claudio's Ducati Company produced, which was an enormous success and helped pay the bills for the 916, was the Monster. It was designed by an Argentine named Miguel Galuzzi. I was about to own one.

It had been so many years since I had ridden that I had no idea what it would feel like. Would it be like getting back on a bicycle after a lifetime of not, and riding away, because once you learn you know how to forever? I

was waiting in Port Jefferson, Long Island, for a Monster to arrive on the ferry from a Ducati dealer in Connecticut called Motofixx, one of those dealership names. Joel Metter, the owner, was a large shapeless man who



looked as if he ought to be in any other business than selling motorcycles. There is a population of people associated with motorcycles who shouldn't be, if appearances matter. I dare say I am one of them. This category includes a whole range of prosperous middle-aged and older businessmen who decide late in life to buy a big Harley-Davidson, or maybe even a Ducati. But Harley cruisers are the favorite for these boys, who, so the story endlessly goes, bring the bike out of their three-car garage (or out of their living room) once a year and take it for a brief spin. These riders older than forty grow in number every year and make a disproportionate contribution to the year's tally of motorcycle fatalities. Furthermore, and here is a surprise, more of the dead from motorcycle accidents who are found to have high levels of alcohol in their blood come from that older-than-forty group, still more from the older-than-fifty, than from the younger riders who die in accidents. The young die sober, the old fools drink and ride and goodbye. Here was the

ferry slipping in to port, and here was the bike riding toward me, a chunk of red trouble, smirking, with a Metter employee aboard, ready to turn it over to a sixty-year-old guy. In fact, the Monster was a birthday present. A Monster for the monster.

The Monster was a colt, spirited, frisky, only it was a colt already broken in and trained, willing to do anything asked of it. Forget about the colt comparison. The Monster was the Monster, quick, agile, a great deal of fun, good-looking, and not enough motorcycle. I loved my Monster but kept thinking about the 916. The 916 became my obsession. The Monster spurred me around Sag Harbor, Long Island, red brio and Italian modernity in the distinguished streets of the old village. I shot down Route 114 to East Hampton and on out to Amagansett, or, going the other way, to Shelter Island, another ferry ride. The bike felt springy but not exactly secure. It had the short-coupled alertness and responsiveness that did not go with having, so to speak, its feet firmly planted. And there was also a funny feeling associated with riding upright, with longer handlebars and no fairing. Years before, actually when I first rode, long handlebars and the upright riding position had given me the feeling of being better able to control the bike, in contrast to riding with clip-ons and high footrests. Now I felt much more secure and precise riding in a hunched-over racebike position. Maybe there is or was a metaphor here: I felt exposed and vulnerable out in the open air on my Monster and much more safe when crouching behind a fairing, hidden from view. I took it out for a gallop once a day at least, and every few days would top off the gas in the handsome tank. There was a warning light to indicate when the gas was low, which of course never came on because the gas was never low. Then one afternoon, as I was returning home, sooner than I had planned because the sky had darkened and it suddenly looked as if it were going to pour, the motorcycle stopped dead. It couldn't be the gas. I could see there was gas in the

tank. It wasn't likely to be an electric problem. The starter cranked the engine over, but it wouldn't start. The lights worked. I pushed the bike for twenty minutes to get it back to my house. But maybe it was the gas. My God, I had run out of gas with gas in the tank. I went with a jerrican to a nearby gas station and brought back eau de vie for the bike and poured it in. And the bike started right up. Days later, riding on the street just past the same gas station, it happened again. The bike died. I pushed the bike into the station, got some gas, and it started up. I loved my Monster the way Robert Frost loved trees. I was reminded of the story of someone arriving to interview Frost and finding the great poet whipping a tree. The swinger of birches had a whip in his hand and was whipping the poor tree. It turned out the shape-ly gas tank was defective and after gas had been consumed and the gas level in the tank had lowered by a certain amount the tank was not allowing the vital gas to reach where it needed to reach to supply the engine with the necessary food and drink. I loved my Monster, but I longed for a 916.

IV. MOTO POETA

It is 17° Fahrenheit today, and snowing, the cars with their lights on at noon, a frost of breath in front of my mortal mouth as I samba down Broadway in the autumn of my life, in the winter, seventy-two years old, and the owner of five motorcycles, not the weather for motorcycles, at my age or any age, two of them at the moment in their East Coast heated winter quarters at Fast by Ferracci outside Philadelphia, in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, and three of them in Alvarado, Texas, outside Dallas, at Advanced Motorsports. *Samba!*

And yes, one of my motorcycles is a 916, my much loved, rather special 916 SPS, one of fifty brought into the country in 1997 for homologation purposes (with RACE ONLY stamped in big print across the Certificate of Manufacture, meaning illegal to ride it on the street), fifty bikes having been, at the time, the required num-

ber of examples to qualify the bike for racing in the Superbike class. I entrusted my SPS to Fast by Ferracci, which had imported it, and specifically to Eraldo Ferracci, for enhancements that would make it lighter and faster. In addition, Eraldo took the



engine apart, tweaked it, breathed on it, and bored it out to produce more horses. I adore this motorcycle, with its magnesium swing arm and titanium exhaust system. My one disappointment was that when I changed the exhaust system from the original to more open pipes that gave a bit more power, the bike lost the harsh brash sound that caused a neighbor in Sag Harbor to run around a hedge to plead with me please to, please to—but he couldn't complete his thought. The SPS is fast, and I have ridden it at warping speeds on the old highway to Montauk, one section of which features steeply rippling up-and-down hills, so you have to be careful not to fly. Airborne is for airplanes. Then the road flattens. Your mind bends and steadies and you go fast.

Recently, about to turn seventy-three, I have been thinking again about slow. I always liked airplanes that flew low and slow. I envied a sporty young man I knew in Sagaponack, Long Island, who flew a vintage high-

wing Piper Cub he owned just for the lazy pleasure of being up there in the Hamptons air, but who, to make a little extra money, pulled advertising banners behind his low-and-slow back and forth above the beach. What a good way to spend an afternoon. He crashed now and then, but never mind. He crashed lightly! He was never hurt, repaired his old plane, and flew back up into the blue.

And another kind of slow: I have always admired the beauty of the wooden sculling boats made by Graeme King in Putney, Vermont—slow by comparison with motorcycles. I am talking about the racing singles, for a single rower, the really tippy, really narrow slivers, furiously powered, gracefully powered, by long slender oars. I revere King's work, the severe gorgeousness of these needles that go slow. They go fast, but they are slow. They fly through the water slowly, they whiz, stroke by stroke. King says that to find the rowing fluency you have to row almost without knowing you are rowing, you have to be in a state of dreaminess. He also says there are no words to describe this

state. There is an ascetic, Brancusi aesthetic in the simplicity of the perfection of these boats and the loveliness of their wood. They are violins. Fifteen years ago, I went to a rowing school in Florida to learn how to row a racing single so I could row a King. I was no good at it. And here I am, thinking about rowing a King single, fifteen years later. And I am again thinking about riding a bicycle. Easier to get your bicycle to a street so you can ride than to get your racing shell to a river so you can row. But I don't know. The King shell is so beautiful. Twenty-six feet long and it only weighs thirty-one pounds. There are small sport airplanes nowadays, for a pilot and one passenger, almost ultralights, wonderful simple contemporary designs, such as the CTSW, but they are less beautiful and a lot more expensive than one of Graeme King's slow flyers.

My friend Paolo Ciabatti manages World Superbike racing for the Flamini brothers, who own the com-

pany based in Rome that owns the franchise for Superbike racing around the world. Ciabatti, before he joined the Flamini outfit, was director of Superbike racing at Ducati, which won the championship year after year. He is an extraordinarily interesting and civilized man, who by his manner and his distinguished looks could have been, and perhaps should have been, a diplomat. God knows, Italy could do with a distinguished public servant. Ciabatti is a very unexpected sort of person for the world of motorcycles, which features excellent men and more than a few splendid women, but certainly no one else as polished and literate and aquiline and well-spoken as Ciabatti. I got to know him when Claudio Domenicali, the president of Ducati Corse, the separate Ducati company that handles all aspects of the racing program, that designs and builds the factory racers and runs the factory teams that race them, told me that Ducati Corse was willing to build a racer with lights and a horn for me if Paolo agreed to it. The recurring dream—a racer with lights and a horn! It took a long time for Paolo to agree, and when he finally did so, it was reluctantly and with considerable skepticism that the motorcycle could be ridden on the street without blowing up.

Here I go again! The Ducati Corse mechanics and engineers work incredibly long hours developing and building the factory-team bikes. They do only that, they are specialists, and they naturally wondered why in God's name they were being asked to divert hours and days and weeks of their time to building this motorcycle for a private customer. It had never been done before. But I was a friend of the president of the parent company and I was a poet! The mechanics and engineers were satisfied with this justification and in time were actually quite proud to be undertaking this special project, which was dubbed "Moto Poeta." Poet Motorcycle. Only in Italy!

This was a genuine factory Superbike racer but with lights and a horn, something they had never done before—oh, had I already said that?—and would never do again.

And two years later, after the nearly two years it took to build, I still have not ridden it.

Even the recession/depression hasn't stopped the mad energy of construction in Dallas. Hey, this is Texas! In a trash part of Dallas that could be its SoHo in the making, where art galleries are starting up, Advanced Motorsports has a stylish downtown store. I go from the sixth floor of the Book Depository on Dealey Plaza, from which Lee Harvey Oswald fired his shots, to Italian motorcycles on display that go fast. You see how eerily close Kennedy was, in his open presidential limousine, to the window where Oswald crouched, and how slow the limousine had to go to get around the excruciating corkscrew turn right there beneath the window, right here. Forty-five years flash by! The Dallas Advanced Motorsports store is full of speed and life.

But it's the original Advanced Motorsports store in Alvarado, an hour away, that matters to me, modest, straightforward, dead serious, out in the raw Texas landscape (but a landscape about to be developed, of course), great down-home barbecue nearby. The shop looks normal but it houses the rarest and the swiftest, along with the normal bikes, and it's here my beasts wait in their cages, ready to pounce: my Ducati Supermono, my Ducati Desmosedici RR—and the one and only Moto Poeta, my Ducati 999 FO5 Superbike with lights and a horn . . . and miniature starter motor and lightweight tiny battery, there in case the racebike crashes in a race but without incapacitating damage, so it can be started again by the rider out on the circuit to get back in the race. Normally, at the beginning of a race, a racebike would be started by a mechanic with a motor-driven roller. For street riding, I would start the bike with the starter motor, working off the battery. You only get one shot at it, maybe two, before the battery is flat.

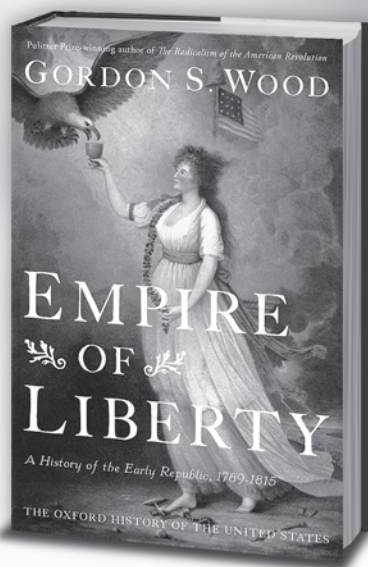
Jeff Nash, the owner of Advanced Motorsports and one of the exemplary people in motorcycling, is a New Zealander, is modest, is straightforward, is soft-spoken, is a man of hon-

or in a world that hasn't so many, and is a very successful motorcycle racer and businessman. He is an expert on motorcycle setup; that is to say, making the adjustments, such as dialing in the suspension, as the expression goes, and getting the geometry of the bike right, that will allow a particular motorcycle to handle and perform to its utmost with a particular rider on a given track or in a given circumstance. He is probably the finest Ducati dealer in America for sport bikes and racers, and certainly a man Ducati Corse trusts. It was decided in Bologna that Jeff was the best man to handle the complicated matter of getting Moto Poeta into the United States.

I am walking across the floor at Advanced Motorsports in Alvarado when I remember an evening in Daytona, Florida, a few years ago during Bikeweek, having dinner at the Red Lobster in Daytona Beach with the then president of Ducati, my friend Federico Minoli, and the assorted talkative members of the Rome Ducati Club, who have traveled all the way from Italy for the big Superbike race. The word has leaked out to the colorfully gesticulative club members that awaiting me at the factory in Bologna is a racer that has been built for me by the racing department, with a discreet small headlight and a brake light and tiny unobtrusive turn signals, to make it look street legal, that I am going to ride, or try to ride, on the street, an FO5 Superbike capable of one hundred ninety miles an hour. The group is impressed, the group is dazzled. Even I am dazzled as I confirm that the story is true and describe the bike to them. I am asked to list the motorcycles I own. First, a Ducati 916 SPS, bored out to 1025cc by Eraldo Ferracci. What a lovely thing to ride! Next, there is the MV Agusta 750cc F-4 Oro, one of only three hundred made. One Ducatista exclaims, "The most beautiful motorcycle ever! The only problem it has is that it's not a Ducati!" Then there is a special rarity, my Ducati Supermono, a single-cylinder racebike. Only sixty-seven of them were made. Mine is number 007! A girl

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who is part of the group cries out in heavily accented English, literally cries out, “Oh, no! That is my all-time favorite, that is the most wonderful of all things! Oh yes! And you have one? Oh no!” And finally (the Desmosedici RR did not exist yet) there is the Superbike, the factory racebike waiting for me at the factory. That same Superbike, no longer at the factory but still unriden, looks over at me without a smile from across the Advanced Motorsport display room.

The petite Ducati Supermono is the raving beauty among these bikes, maybe among all bikes ever. It was designed in his youth by the South African Pierre Terblanche, an acolyte of the genius who designed the 916, the great Massimo Tamburini. Terblanche had also, recently, designed the 999, not a happy result in terms of its looks—at least with regard to the street bike—even if in terms of function it is a fine motorcycle. The 999 factory *racebike*, on the other hand, looks like what it does. It races, that’s what it does, that’s all it does, and as a consequence it is both more svelte and more dangerous and more majestic in appearance. These number designations, by the way, always refer to the size of the engine measured in cubic centimeters. The Supermono is an entirely and shockingly beautiful little thing, painted Ducati racing red with splashes of mustard yellow on the sides of the tail—the Venus of motorcycles! I had asked Nash on the phone before coming down from New York to prepare the Supermono so it could be started up while I was there. I wanted to hear the sound it made. I had never heard its music. It has no starter motor, so it has to be started with an external device. When the moment comes, Nash guides a starter caddy over to the rear wheel, starts the starter caddy, and presses its spinning roller against the Supermono’s rear tire, which is up in the air because the bike is on a center stand—and bending over to put the bike in third gear, he then releases the motorcycle’s clutch. BAM! The bike snorts and barks into life, and roars and roars. Heart-stopping stuff!

I go over to the Desmosedici RR, the second in my triumvirate. This is a replica of the Ducati 990cc MotoGP bike. There are two categories of motorcycle racing: MotoGP, in which the motorcycles cost at least a million dollars each to make, each one built from scratch to race on the MotoGP circuits and sharing no parts with production bikes (for sale to the public); and Superbike, in which the racers are in appearance (with some exceptions) quite like the bikes sold in a shop, even if the insides are expensively special and different, rather like NASCAR—though, with a rules change a year ago, less different now than they were when my Superbike was made.

The noise the RR makes when it’s fired up is shattering—explosively sharp and crackling each time the throttle is blipped, and loud enough to hurt. The mechanics wear full-coverage headphones to protect their hearing when they tune the RR. After a minute of deafening blast the engine is shut down, and the sudden silence in the room pulses. I am feeling youthfully old. I feel like going one hundred ninety miles an hour. But it’s too cold outside to ride. I have the thought that these three motorcycles will surely be my last motorcycles.

Nash and I walk over to Moto Poeta. It poses for us on its black racing slicks, tires only for racing that have no tread and are amazingly sticky once they are warm—but when they are cold, and until they are warm, are as slippery as ice to ride on. Hello, Moto Poeta. I never noticed before that its red paint job is darker than the normal Ducati red, I suppose because it is one of a kind. It has a license plate but no insurance. After all these months of trying, no company will insure it. So it’s still toxically illegal on the road. I am looking at a metaphor for my ambition to be toxically illegal as I ride into the sunset.

No key, of course. This is a racer! (With lights and a horn!) Flip the switch to the ON position. Scroll through the menu on the display. WARM UP. Then TEST. Then RACE. Select WARM UP. Press the start button.

But it won’t start. The battery is dead. ■