

Washington, D.C.

8.27.97 Room at the Inn

When Mike and I rolled into my driveway this morning at 0905, Bud, my ex-female cat, wandered over to the car. She's seventeen this month. Occasionally she exhibits some signs of advancing age, though not nearly as obviously as I've begun to do in the last four days. This idea of shoving a rental car from checkpoint to checkpoint seemed like a good idea once. As we left Chicago last Monday, it didn't take long for us to realize --- an hour maybe --- that it indeed was one of the most massively ridiculous ideas either Mike or I had ever devised.

The long-suffering Susan, my significant other for so long that the memory of man runneth not to the contrary, came to the front door with the usual relief in her eyes. She's not a fan of big rides, especially ones I take. She and Mike hugged. I just sat down, stone weary. Bud looked at me, probably wondering if I'd brought her something to eat from Maine. A crab leg possibly? Part of a fish?

"We saw something this morning," I began, "that would have brought real tears to your eyes. It was at one of the service areas at the northern end of the Jersey Turnpike."

"Was anyone hurt?" she asked. It's always her first thought when motorcycles are mentioned.

"Not in any real medical sense," I said. "I think they were beyond what we think of as true physical pain."

It was an archetypical Iron Butt tableau. Mike spotted them first as we rolled into the parking lot.

"There are a couple of our guys," he said, pointing to a dimly lit area.

I looked. Then I saw them, two people flat on their backs on the sidewalk, lying about fifty feet apart. Their motorcycles, a Gold Wing and a BMW K-bike, rested on their sidestands a few feet from each owner. One of the riders had folded his left leg across his upraised right knee, almost as if he were relaxing calmly in a chair, except that he was supine on a concrete sidewalk, his hands lying on his chest, his helmet still strapped on, stretched out in a service area of the NJ Turnpike at five minutes after four in the morning, sound asleep. I've slept on the side of the road before, but I don't think I ever looked quite so professional while I did it.

"It's Morris," Mike said.

It was. I grinned at Kruemcke's quiet body. Maybe for once I could gain some ground on him.

The other rider looked dead. His legs lay straight out, not bent like Morris'. His hands were also folded neatly upon his chest, the way morticians arrange the dearly departed. And he too was wearing his helmet, though a leather jacket had been thrown across his face, as if he had been in a catastrophic accident and the ambulance had not yet arrived. I walked to the back of his BMW. A Florida plate. I looked up at Mike.

"Asa McFadden," he said quietly.

Right. The guy who'd made it from Key West to Prudhoe Bay in under a week.

"I have to take a picture of this," I whispered to Mike. Why I whispered I'm not sure. Tractor-trailers thudded by on the nearby turnpike, jarring the earth as they passed.

I unlocked the car. Instantly all hell broke loose. The horn began blasting away intermittently, headlights popping on and off. Somehow I'd tripped the alarm on the rental car. For forty or fifty seconds we desperately tried to halt the racket. Finally Mike did something with the door lock and the din stopped. I was stricken with unbearable embarrassment of having awakened two people who needed sleep more desperately than I did. Slowly I turned to look at them.

Neither had moved a millimeter.

"You see these guys here," I said, "and you see some homeless guy wobbling down the street. And you wonder if there's any metaphysical difference between them."

"Homeless guys don't own \$14,000 motorcycles," Mike said, heading for the bathroom.

For five minutes I looked at Morris' inert form. I've known him for a long time, have slept on his couch often, have gone to dinner with him and his wife a dozen times, and have written a story about his "project bike," a motorcycle so aerodynamically perfect that it delivers better than 100 miles/gallon at 60 mph. I've seen him in many different ways, but I'd never seen him quite so vulnerable.

Suddenly he moved. The left ankle came off the raised right knee, planted itself flat on the sidewalk, and the whole body shuddered slightly. Morris, a bear-like human except shorter, was coming out of hibernation. I was transfixed by this scene from rawest nature that was reeling out before me. He sat up, then saw me.

"Well. Hi," he said. No surprise or shock. It was almost as if he had been expecting me.

Yuppies call it a power nap. Long riders call it the Iron Butt Hotel. No one can ride forever. You have to sleep. And when you wake up in Room 42 of the Iron Butt Motel, you're liable to see anything. Morris knows that. They all know it.

The Oddball Files: Part A ----- Mary Sue Johnson, a truck-driving teamster for Roadway Express, wanted to run the 1991 Iron Butt on her Harley but Jan Cutler, the rallymaster that year, told her to go away. "Insufficient experience," Jan said. Mary Sue's not that large a woman, but I wouldn't want her angry at me. She applied again in 1995 and was accepted. She finished respectably. Then she got serious. When her Harley was stolen the day before the start of the "8/48" last year, an event requiring the contestant to touch the contiguous states in eight days or less, she immediately bought a big BMW, headed into the sunset, and returned in third place overall. That's faster than I did it ten years ago by about three days. She is currently in a six-way tie for eleventh place after the Maine checkpoint, along with Ron Major, the winner of the '91 rally that Mary Sue wasn't good enough to run.

----- A rider rolled up to the start line in Chicago. Safety-pinned to the left lapel of his Aerostich jacket was a 5" x 2" sign enclosed in weather-proof plastic: RECEIPT PLEASE. "That," I thought, "is a guy who knows what he's doing." A receipt on the Iron Butt, any receipt, is a ticket to ride. It proves you were somewhere. Receipts are the ultimate currency in this strange and twisted land, and you ask for one everywhere you go. But if this rider forgets to ask, a cashier seeing that sign walk in isn't likely to forget too.

----- One of the riders coming in to the checkpoint in Maine handed his gas receipts and other papers to Mike. Then he showed Mike another piece of paper with a National Park Service passport stamp imprinted upon it.

"There aren't any bonuses on this leg that require you to get a passport stamp," Mike said.

"It's the Martin van Buren birthplace site," the fellow said.

"But it's not a bonus location," Mike repeated.

"I know," the guy said, "but I needed it for the passport hunt."

"You have time to do that on this rally?" Mike asked.

The guy just laughed. A lot of riders are running around the country this year getting passport stamps at national parks, monuments, and historic sites. It was Kneebone's idea, a better one than driving a rental car from checkpoint to checkpoint on the Iron Butt Rally.

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<http://www.ironbutt.com>