

Washington, D.C.

9.8.97 The Concrete River

James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, one of the most imaginative, incomprehensible books ever written, begins: "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs." The first word is not capitalized; it isn't even a word. It is, however, pure Joyce.

And it is the story, more than 600 pages in the telling, of a single night in a man's semi-wakeful sleep, a stream-of-consciousness technique that the author developed and that has never been duplicated. Entire master's theses have been devoted to the first sentence in the book alone. Yet I have known college professors of English literature who have never been able to read the book in its entirety. It took Joyce eighteen years to write it.

At times it may have seemed to the men and women who have just completed this year's Iron Butt Rally that their journey throughout the length and breadth of the United States was as long as Joyce's unending river. Certainly few competitive events demand so much of the contestant, and fewer still exact such terrible consequences for a momentary failure of mind or body. Riding a motorcycle is not easy; riding one under the conditions that these riders faced is an order of magnitude beyond arduous.

One rider, Ron Major, died. His friends were quick to say that when death came, he, a former winner of the rally and of many other endurance events, was doing something that he loved, engaged in an activity that defined his very existence. No one who does not ride a motorcycle can understand that.

I can. I watched my mother's active brain and body inexorably drained and crushed by Alzheimer's disease and a final stroke. Compared to ravages sustained by that tortured lady, Ron's death was merciful. I would take it in the blink of an eye. I would even pray for it, given the multitude of ends that are indisputably worse.

If a bike doesn't kill you, it inevitably will hurt you, scar you, or maim you. That's what it does. In that sense it's just like a court of appeals. It doesn't care if you're innocent. That's not its job. My left wrist doesn't work properly; my right leg is a cosmetic disaster area. And part of me doesn't care about that any more than the bike does. When I can ride again comfortably, I will. And if I can't ride comfortably, I'll ride uncomfortably for as long as I can. That's what I do.

Seventy-eight riders started. Sixty-one finished. Most of them never were mentioned in any reports of the progress of the rally, primarily because they didn't do anything exceptionally heroic or inept. They collectively rode more than 622,000 miles in eleven days, the average rider doing 830 miles each day. You ride that distance for just four days on the Iron Butt and you've already surpassed what the average American rider will do in a year.

When they come home, the riders will be heroes in their local clubs. Two members of my club, Elsie Smith and Gary Harris, finished 28th and 29th. They were never a threat to win the rally. But when Elsie rode up to our monthly meeting yesterday on her bug-stained K100, those of us in the parking lot gave her a standing ovation. She just blushed. Having done something that few of her fellow motorcyclists could even contemplate, much less carry out, all she could do was blush. It isn't the win that matters for most; it's the ride. That's what they do.

This was the eighth Iron Butt, one that will be remembered not for its skillful administration, nor for the extraordinary talent of the participants, nor for the incredible stamina and perseverance of the winner, Rick Morrison, a BMW rider from Seattle, nor even for the ultimate failure of Canadian Peter Hoogeveen, the Flying Dutchman of endurance motorcycling, condemned to ride forever through the night only to finish second again and again and yet again. This rally will be known as the one in which the legend, Ron Major, died.

So the safety Nazis will predictably begin to swarm, the righteous moto press will shout angry, scornful words at Iron Butt Association president Mike Kneebone, a man who with a smile accurately describes himself as "the nicest guy who ever lived," and many of the mourners at Ron's funeral tomorrow will wonder why this ever had to be. Forgotten will be the millions of miles traveled by riders in past rallies. Overlooked will be the stunning fact that no accident involving a contestant has ever involved anyone not associated with the event. Unremembered, at least for those painful moments during which a bike procession crawls through a cemetery in southern California tomorrow, will be the simple truth that for a motorcyclist the ride is its own end, meaning, and justification --- even a ride with a small but finite mathematical possibility of terminating the rider's life.

I tire thinking of it. I need a nap.

In that eerie twilight of semi-consciousness just before sleep takes over, I occasionally see headlights in my mind's eye, illuminating the black highway ahead as Mike and I hurry to the next checkpoint in our rental car, struggling to arrive before the riders do. It's an imprint the brain is used to after repeated thousand-mile days. The headlight beam seems to be searching for a path through the darkness. The ribbon of road unwinds at a speed that is too rapid to be comfortable. I have to shake my head to get rid of the image.

To one degree or another, all the riders in this rally will see their bikes' headlights scratching through the blackness as they fall asleep in the peaceful, quiet nights after the contest has ended, the road passing eight inches below their feet, the wind whistling past their helmets, the heat and the cold straining to weave through their clothes. For what has seemed measureless miles, these sensations have been so ingrained in their minds that it is small wonder that as they drift away the road is the last thing they see.

Riverrun. Roadrun. They will awake tomorrow and wait for the day they can do it all over again, recirculating like Joyce's timeless, endless river.

Bob Higdon