



## MOUNTAIN MAN

Banking a curve peppered with loose gravel while passing an eighteen wheeler in the Smoky Mountains during a rainstorm at sunset is not my idea of fun on a motorcycle. But damn, it sure is life affirming.

I had been riding since six that morning and at present, dusk was upon me. Wet and tired, it was time to set up camp. But after a particularly long day such as this, coupled with the remnants of the recently departed precipitation, I opted for finer accouterments—a bed, a shower and room service if I can snake it.

Asheville, North Carolina. A big little town in the Blue Ridge Mtns. Surely these fine folks would be able to accommodate my minimal needs. Oddly enough, however, there were no rooms available at any of the overnite establishments I had encountered. (I stopped at half a dozen.) Hard to believe, what with their spacious lots and so few cars. Then again, I wasn't in a car.

So on I rode.

Not nearly enough hours, or miles, to put her out of my head. But it was a start. I spent the last two weeks selling or giving away

most of my stuff. And what I couldn't, I left at the apartment. Said goodbye to what few friends remained and hit the road.

I thought it was great when Bridget got accepted to that art school in Chicago—one of the best. But big cities make for big changes in young folks. And we were no exception. The parties were different. Our friends were different. Everyday language used in casual conversation was different. Soon we were passing unnoticed by the other. Orbits spinning elliptically out of sync. Bombarded by asteroids out of our control, the relationship disintegrated.

By ten o'clock, I was leaning and winding thru a twisty two-laner somewhere in the Blue Ridge. (Not the best time for a scenic ride on the Parkway.) I figured I could always bed down in the woods, wet as they were. But then, just as I was coming off the fourth turn at Daytona, the Chimney Rock Chalet threw the checkered flag.

Ahhh—sleep.

Certainly one of your finer motels—in Chimney Rock, that is. Actually, it makes the Bates Motel look like the Holiday Inn. But the Chimney Rock Chalet, Norman or no, was where I was to spend the nite. I threw my bag on the bed, checked the shower for Norman's mother and crossed the lot to belly up to the bar.

“How bout a burger and a cold one?”

I was hungry and thirsty. And this is exactly what I needed after fifteen hours on the road. But as the barkeep swung around, with his lazy eye still focused on the TV and his good one staring me down, I realized this wasn't Cecil fixin to ask me if I wanted that in a frosty mug with some spicy wedges on the side.

“Hey Gordon. D'ya hear that?”

An overgrown, greasy hillbilly stood sweating over the grill. “I heard it.” Good ol' Carolina juices oozed from his pores dripping ever so succulently onto the bloody mass of meat searing beneath his watchful eye.

“So whadya think. You feel like it?” questioned his genetically challenged twin.

Gordon fixed his gaze directly at me. “Grill’s closed.” And he flashed me a not-so-toothy grin that would’ve made any NHL player jealous.

So much for Darwin in the Appalachians.

“Alright... How bout that beer.”

As the slinger of suds tended to my drink, I noticed the Raggedy Old Andy at the end of the bar; a ghost of a man with a silver mane and beard to match wearing jeans and a work shirt well past their prime. Was he there all along? Or did he slide in during my tête à tête with the Mutant Brothers.

“Whiskey. And one for the kid.”

Andy had spoken.

“Thank you, sir.” Then turning to the Mental Giant slaving before me, “Skip the beer.”

Jethro heaved a disgusted look at me. Well, with the good one, anyway. And guzzled the half-poured mug.

I offered the next round, but Andy wouldn’t hear of it. In fact, we drank all nite on that tab, and he wouldn’t take a dime.

Turns out ol’ Andy’s real name was actually Tom—Thomas Argyle. Grew up in upstate New York. Skipped the war, dropped some acid, joined one of the last remaining communes in New England during the 70s, then fell in love. But the 70s led to the 80s and with the 80s came cocaine. Rich boy nose candy proliferated every grid of the yuppie scene. And for a relatively young, up and coming Wall Street broker, it was accessible and affordable.

Life was Grand. Two Beemers in the garage, upturned collars on the kids, sweaters draped across shoulders at a tennis match on Long Island. The American dream with money to Blow.

Till October of ’87 and the bottom dropped out. It was the worst crash since Black Tuesday. And the Argyle’s were hit hard. Life was no longer Grand. Especially not for Julie—Tom’s wife. She

had grown quite attached to the fast paced fast lane material medley that pervaded her world.

She missed her fix, her shit. She missed her life. On Christmas morning, she didn't miss. The rest of the family awoke to Mommy's brains splattered across the ornaments and gifts. Merry fuck-in Christmas.

A crazy old snaggletooth and her daughter sat at a corner table in the bar staring at us with wide slithering eyes. I didn't know Tom in his pre-mountain days, but I think it's safe to say he'd let himself go a little bit. And I wasn't winning any awards that evening myself. Pretty much rode hard and just plain put away. But the schoolgirls stole glances and giggled sporadically as Thomas continued his story.

He freaked out. I mean, who wouldn't. It's not every Christmas you find your presents wrapped in the contents of your wife's head. He couldn't deal. He took off. Grandma and Grandpa took the kids and raised them as their own. Tom called his mother a few years ago; the children have adjusted quite well.

Thomas started walking the Appalachian Trail and somehow ended up in the Blue Ridge Mtns. He's been here ever since. A simple man with a simple life. He never sold his stocks, and his portfolio rebounded nicely. And someday he'd like to find the courage to go back home.

I forget who it is said you can never go home. Maybe you can't. Maybe home's no longer the way you remember it. Maybe it never was. Memories take a lot of twists and turns over the years. Sometimes we make them better. Sometimes not. Hell, I don't even know where to call home these days, anyway. But for those who do, maybe a homecoming wouldn't be as bad as they think.

I returned from the can just as Tom was closing the door. I followed him outside, but he had already disappeared into the nite.

"Thanks for the drinks, Thomas," I said to the dark. "I hope you find your Strength."

We were both travelers on the Road to Peace. And I, for one, needed some sleep.

“Lose your friend?” came the slurred proposition from behind.

Unfortunately, others did not have the keen sense to pick up on that.

“How bout some female company? Double your pleasure.”

Soberly, I turned to face them.

“Thank you for the offer, ma’am. But I’m not sure I have the strength nor the alcoholic blood level necessary to fully satisfy you both and still forget about the experience completely in the morning. So... good nite ladies.”

The torrent of profanity squawked incessantly as I crossed the lot to my room. I could feel Jethro and his vultures following every step. That nite I slept with knife in hand. It was a sound sleep.