2017

The Summer of '69

John Price

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive

Part of the Fiction Commons, and the Nonfiction Commons

© The Author(s)

Downloaded from
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/mighty_pen_archive/13
By the end of my junior year at Penn State, in 1969, it was obvious I needed a bigger motorcycle. The Honda 90 I had bought the previous summer just wasn’t big enough or fast enough. Unfortunately, I had no money, so my goal that summer was to save enough to trade up before school started. I worked at a beer and sandwich place called the Pizza Pub that summer for the princely wage of $1.50 an hour. The only way I managed to save any money towards a new bike was to work a lot of overtime, which at time and a half, bumped up my hourly rate to $2.25. Of course, working the extra hours eliminated my social life.

Our restaurant’s large gravel parking lot abutted that of a seedy café called the Dog House. I believe they stayed open all night, because when we closed at 2:00 a.m. there would often be a few old Harley-Davidsons and a hot rod or two still parked in their lot. The patrons at that time of night were what I would refer to as “unsavory.” Mostly, they sat in the shadows alongside the place, drinking beer or wine from bottles hidden in paper sacks, talking and chain-smoking cigarettes. I never got the feeling that any of them held jobs.

One Friday night, after closing at 2:30 a.m., I was unable to start my Honda 90. After kicking the damned starter lever until I got a leg cramp, I still couldn’t get it running. I could see cigarette ends glowing in the dark over at the Dog House, and heard derisive laughter as some of the scooter trash there watched me trying to get my puny bike fired up. I finally gave up, walked it out to the paved road, and push started it in second gear. The little engine coughed, sputtered, and finally came to life. I made a U-turn and rode past the Dog House at about 25 mph.

Confused at seeing sparks coming up off the road just ahead of me, I looked toward the Dog House and saw four greasy looking characters throwing rocks at me. I twisted the throttle grip so hard I nearly wrung off the end of the handlebar. As much as I was dying to flip these
assholes off, I realized that they would just climb on their Harleys, ride me down, and beat me to death. So I demurred.

Saturday morning I rode straight to the Honda dealer and swapped the 90 (along with most of my hard-earned cash) for a used 305 Scrambler, which had a top end of 95 mph versus the anemic 50 mph for the 90. I vowed to avoid a repeat of the humiliation I had suffered at the hands of that bunch of Dog House losers.

My father was irritated that I hadn’t got over my infatuation with motorcycles, and not at all happy to see me on a larger model. He issued a stern warning that the first night I woke him up riding home late from work, I would have to find somewhere else to park the bike. To avoid banishment, my routine became to accelerate up the block, shut off the ignition 50 yards from home, and drift the rest of the way to our driveway on a steep downhill pitch. I parked the bike behind the house and quietly let myself in.

My motorcycles were a statement of my independence against a controlling father. I hadn’t even been able to get my driver’s license until I was in college, and with no car I needed some sort of transportation. Bikes were relatively cheap, easy on gas, and not required to be insured.

By the end of the first week of August, I decided to take a week off and head for the Jersey Shore. The 305 was large and fast enough to make the trip. There was a tall sissy bar mounted behind the seat perfect to lash on my old Boy Scout pack full of clothes. My parents, who were not happy when I bought the larger bike, tried to discourage me from taking the trip, but I would not be dissuaded. This was the first time I had ever planned my own vacation and had the means with which to make it happen. My dad shook his head in disgust as I left; I was disappointing him yet again.
When I was younger we spent a few weeks during summers at Ocean City, NJ, but it was a family oriented town with no bars, so I headed for Cape May, which had a reputation for being a summertime college hang-out. I had shot my wad on the new bike, so this was, by necessity, a low budget trip. I arrived at Cape May late, but still in time to chug a few cheap draft beers before the bars closed. Later I figured I’d sleep on the beach, but saw signs indicating that was a serious no-no. I finally tucked in beneath one set of wooden stairs that led down to the beach from the bulkhead above the high-tide line. Technically I was still on the beach, but I was out of sight. After a fitful night, listening to the surf pounding the sandy beach, I watched the sun peeking above the Atlantic Ocean, ready to begin my second day of vacation. I was a little chilly, but none the less inspired, watching the start of a new day. The clean smell of the salt air and the sounds of the gulls screaming above dominated my senses.

Luck was with me when I met a guy at a bar that evening who had an entire rental house to himself, and offered to let me crash there for a couple of days. A frat dude from Rutgers, his chapter had rented the place for the entire summer but everyone else had left the previous weekend. I’ll never forget the ridiculous amount of destruction that had been wrought upon that sad little bungalow. Broken furniture, beer and liquor bottles, and trash were strewn randomly around the common spaces and every wall in the house had holes punched through the dry-wall. I was nervous about even staying there because, eventually, the landlord was going to do an inspection, and I didn’t want to end up in jail. I did help the frat guy clean up some of the mess, making several trips to the dumpster with trash bags full of empty bottles and pizza boxes. I nearly hooked up with a couple of girls while staying there, but something always seemed to come up and nothing panned out. While rounding second base with one pretty young lady at her apartment, and hoping to get lucky later, my fortunes were rudely reversed when her roommate
came home early and burst into tears about a date that had gone horribly wrong. Not surprisingly, I got the heave-ho as my girl consoled her roomie saying, “Men are all pigs.”

After a couple of days, I decided to push north and rode into familiar territory, Ocean City, NJ. The town had a ban on bars so I had to ride off the island to even buy a drink. I lucked into a beer special, three quart bottles of ice-cold Iron City lager for only $1.00. One of my buddies worked at the brewery that made the stuff, and this was what I normally drank at home, so I was all over that deal. In those days, I could down three quarts of suds in a little over an hour so, even during August, the last quart was still cool when I polished it off.

Money was already getting tight, so I was living on Nathan’s hot dogs on the boardwalk. Smothered in sauerkraut, with spicy yellow mustard slathered on, those little gems were just 15 cents apiece, and I ordered them by the half-dozen.

I spent a couple of nights at the bars and then rode back across the bridge. Afterwards, I either walked or sat on the boardwalk till near dawn. Then would get a few hours of sleep on the beach, just after sunrise, when it was legal. With my week off nearly over, I decided to ride further north to Island Heights, where my father’s cousin Chet lived. As a child, I had spent a lot of time fishing and swimming there and had fond memories of the place. It turned out Chet was remodeling his 90-year-old home and needed help. He offered three dollars an hour plus room and board, which was a hell of a lot better deal than I had back in Pittsburgh, and I wouldn’t have my dad on my ass. I spent much of the next two weeks sawing the bottoms off doors, spackling, sanding, scraping, and painting.

Chet was a hard-core party guy, and once we stayed up all night drinking beer and playing poker. At dawn we got bushel baskets and long handled crab nets and went crabbing. Working our way along the bulkheads, pilings and docks, we scraped up crabs by the dozen from
their resting places. By mid-morning we had nearly two bushels and called it a day. After a couple of hours of much needed sleep, I spent the afternoon steaming crabs for a seafood party Chet hosted every fall.

One afternoon Chet got a call that there was a major perch run on Toms River. We grabbed a couple of his fishing rods and sprinted down to the town dock that projected 150 yards out into the brackish river. Chet soon sent his son home for a wheelbarrow as the yellow perch began to pile up on the dock. For over two hours we hauled them in as fast as we could rebait and get our lines back into the water. Suddenly, the perch bite ended and we started catching nothing but eels. The day was over. There were well over 100 pounds of fish in the rusty wheelbarrow, and I struggled to push it up the steep hill from the dock back to Chet’s house. After a couple of hours filleting fish and draining can after can of cold Rheingold, we enjoyed a memorable al fresco dinner of fried perch, hush puppies, and homemade coleslaw.

Chet’s younger brother, David, also lived in Island Heights, but only during the summer when he stayed at his parent’s home. During the school year he was a college professor at the University of Southern Mississippi. A ruthless entrepreneur, David ran a vending machine and ice-delivery business he named Donald Duck Enterprises. He had a virtual monopoly, servicing customers along the boardwalk at Seaside Heights, just across Toms River from Island Heights. This was a seasonal business, but the rumor was David made more money during three months in the summer than he did during the rest of the year as an academic. Donald Duck Enterprises was a cash operation, and I have no doubt the IRS got a thorough screwing every year when David filed his taxes. I found out that, two years after my visit, a couple of goodfellows from north Jersey made him an offer he couldn’t refuse for the business. Rather than risk getting whacked, he sold out.
David’s routine was to work in New Jersey until the final day before fall semester classes began, and then make a marathon drive to Hattiesburg, where he taught. Two days before his departure he asked if I would clean and detail his white MGB for $20. The deal got even sweeter when he told me anything I found in the car was mine to keep. Before I started to vacuum the interior I carefully searched under the seats and on the floor in the back, pocketing more than $15 in change and nine packs of cigarettes in 15 minutes. After vacuuming thoroughly, I carefully washed the convertible, wiped it dry, waxed it, and took it up the road to top off the gas tank. On the way, I somehow managed to turn on the windshield wipers and hadn’t a clue as to how to turn them off. I drove around town for half an hour on a beautiful sunny day with the wipers making that annoying sound they make on a dry windshield. I finally spotted a cute girl in another MG at a traffic light and she told me where the switch was. What a relief to stop that screeching noise. David paid me the promised $20 and reimbursed me for the gas. He seemed surprised when I told him about the money and cigarettes I had found, but didn’t renege on our deal.

Labor Day weekend was upon me, my one-week vacation having ballooned into a three-week soiree. My senior year would be starting soon and it was time to head back to Pittsburgh. After I thanked Chet and his wife for their hospitality, he handed me the last of my wages, shook my hand, and I headed west.

I quickly realized I had a problem when I could maintain only about 45 mph on the two-lane road headed toward Philly. The reason was a sustained west wind of 40 mph, and that was the direction home. No sign of rain, just a brutal, unrelenting gale that constantly tried to rip my hands off the controls and force me back on the seat as it buffeted me. Unless you have ridden a motorcycle straight into a stiff wind, you have no idea how fatiguing it is, and how much you
want to slow down or even stop, simply to get a rest. I hadn’t brought along a jacket or gloves on my trip, and didn’t own any rain gear. As the temperature dropped, I pulled over to put on a second T-shirt and the only long-sleeved shirt I had brought, over top of the threadbare sweatshirt I was wearing.

West of Philadelphia, just before entering the Pennsylvania Turnpike, I stopped for a sandwich and a beer. It had clouded up considerably and cooled off even more. There was one hell of a cold front blowing in, and I wasn’t dressed for it. At best, I had over six more hours of difficult riding ahead of me to get home. The cold rain began soon after I entered the Turnpike. Thank God, the wind had abated somewhat, but riding was still a challenge with the stinging rain lashing my face. I was soaked to the skin in less than a half hour, and shivering as I watched the odometer crawling slowly upward, every mile a small victory. Unable to maintain the posted speed limit, I dreaded seeing a semi gaining on me, knowing I would first be blown sideways by the air ahead of the tractor and then catch the wave of spray off the trailer, obscuring my vision. Every time a pick-up truck drove by I visualized my bike stowed safely in the back while I sat in the warm, dry, cab and the radio blared rock-and-roll. Then another semi would roll by and rudely slap me back into reality. Once it got dark I was doubly screwed. The bike headlight provided only marginal illumination on a dry night, but in the rain and on the wet pavement, it was barely visible.

At one point, I was so cold and wet I had the thought that I would happily trade my bike up for a fucking bus ticket. It’s amazing what you think about when you are truly miserable. Shivering, and feeling rather sorry for myself, I finally stopped at one of the rest areas along the Turnpike. My fingers were so numb and clumsy while fueling up that I dropped the gas cap.
It was warm and well lit in the main building. After using the rest room and cleaning my glasses, I found a warm air vent and sat directly in front of it, trying to stop shivering. With at least another four hours to go, I dreaded getting back onto the road.

Finally, reluctantly, I headed back out to my bike. The wind had dropped out and the rain slowed somewhat, but once underway the wind blowing across my wet clothes had my teeth chattering. Finally, reaching the tunnels through the Allegheny Mountains, I knew I was over halfway home. After another rest stop to restore my circulation and morale, thankfully, my attitude changed. This was an ordeal, but I began to think of it as an adventure, and that somehow made the discomfort more bearable. I slowly ground up the remaining hundred miles on the Turnpike and stopped at the service plaza just before my exit; my final opportunity to warm up before the last 30-mile leg of the trip. By now, the leading edge of the front was over 250 miles behind me and the rain had stopped, but I was still soaked to the bone and the temperature was in the mid-fifties. I had no gloves and my hands were like claws. They had been numb for so long I couldn’t even straighten my fingers.

As I was leaving after warming up, I noticed a gap in the fence at the back edge of the parking lot. The workers at the plaza parked on the other side of the fence to avoid paying tolls to drive to and from work. The gap in the fence was too narrow to allow even a small car to pass, but it was plenty wide enough to ride my bike through. I folded my soggy toll ticket in half and shoved it into the back pocket of my soaked jeans before taking the illegal exit from the Turnpike. It was one small victory after a day of getting the shit kicked out of me by wind and water. It’s difficult to smile when you are shivering, but I tried.

I was on my home turf now, and forty-five minutes later I rolled into the driveway shivering, sore, and exhausted, but glad to be home. I was relieved to find that my parents were
not awake to greet me. My dad would have had something to say about my lack of planning had he seen me dripping wet and shivering uncontrollably. At least I avoided that lecture.

After peeling off my sodden clothes, I stood in a scalding hot shower for a long time as the sensation slowly returned to my hands and feet. I had survived the great adventure with no permanent damage, and slept dreamlessly until mid-morning the following day.

When questioned about the trip, I gave my parents the sanitized version of the ride back, stressing the adventure idea more than the ordeal it was. By taking my first motorcycle trip I had worked my way out from under my dad’s thumb just a bit, and although he would never admit it, I like to think he gained a little respect for me.