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DETOURS: Life, Death, and Divorce on the Road to Sturgis

By Richard La Plante.

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There is no mistaking the pity I hear in a woman's voice as she tries this belt with that bracelet and those pearls and laments how sad it is that nature keeps from us men the joy of accessorizing. Yet, as with so many accusations of the narrowness of male life, this one suffers a blind spot, at least it does for bikers.

Before setting out from the Hamptons on his motorcycle for a 2500-mile tour to Sturgis, S.D., Richard La Plante had been in constant consultation with Sheldon Coleman, founder of Big Dog Motorcycles in Wichita, Kans. In 1993, Coleman began Big Dog on a dream, the biker dream of building the perfect motorcycle. Start with just the frame, then add each desired aftermarket part: the artistic tank, the ideal saddlebags and on and on until that Platonic conception of your perfect ride exists.

La Plante's long-fantasized Silver Bike was complete, ready to ship, and would be waiting for him in Sturgis, as would half a million other riders at The West's largest annual bike rally.

The greatness of a motorcycle tour, though, doesn't lie in what's waiting at the end. It isn't about the destination but the ride, and the ride is about what is happening both outside and inside the rider.

Inside La Plante as he starts out lies clutter and turbulence. He's 53, recently divorced and recently remarried, with a two-and-a-half year-old son and another on the way, he's a writer suffering writer's block, and his family has just lost its home.

The open road offers the cure. It won't solve any of La Plante's problems, but it can reshape how he understands his life. Although he shares bits of his outer experience—the roads, motels, characters and weather—the real story goes on inside. No longer does he think “with the structured order that creates everyday reality. This is more a stream of consciousness, images from my past, the faces of people, lyrics to half-forgotten songs.... Right now, I'm tingling with life.”

He's able to reprioritize his values, no longer “thinking that I need more than I actually do: more time, more food, more money, more success...a wrinkle-free face, luxurious hair and washboard abs.” He sees a key metaphor in his faulty sense of direction: “Is this the way I live my life? Veering from highway to highway? What if I missed the main road 30 years ago and have continued to travel my life by detour?”

Not surprisingly, then, the finished ride finds him “knowing myself better than I did 2500 miles ago, understanding myself as a son, a husband, a father and a man. At peace.”

As La Plante traverses those miles, his tale digressing with the undulating flow that reflects a touring rider's mind, the question becomes: can he tell his biker readers anything new or help the non-bikers understand? Since we can understand only by riding, not reading, the latter question feels unfair. Nor will bikers see much new, as La Plante describes sensations of freedom and fresh air so well known as to sound clichéd.

What he does do is remind us why we ride. We know that physicians call our bikes donorcycles. We all understand why a biker friend of mine begins his latest book citing the Plains Indian phrase, "Today is a good day to die." La Plante, though, reminds us here that even though motorcycles can bring us prematurely to our end, it is only on two wheels on the open road that we feel most fully alive.

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