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The Rider and The Darkness

“When you reach the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on”.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

The driver rubbed his eyes. Was that a light coming straight at him on his side of the road? All this rain made it hard to tell. Fourteen years on this route and he'd never seen weather like it. All thirty two tires whined at him from the wet road below. Sheets of water slammed into the big Kenworth hood and then, lifted by the wind, smacked straight into the windshield. The wipers were fighting to keep up. He had definitely seen a light... but now it was gone.

There it was again! A single light and coming way too fast on his side of the road. Still half a mile away but coming straight at him. Fear and adrenaline pulled him wide awake. He threw the switch on the engine brake and touched his foot to the big pedal but it was already too late. If he stood on it like he needed to, the massive truck would swerve, jack-knife and easily roll. Forty ton of logs airborne. Not good. It wouldn't be just the maniac on the bike who died.

Five hundred yards and it was still coming. He cursed in fright at the light, his thoughts threatening to red line. He gripped the wheel in panic with one hand but managed enough sense to feather the trailer brake with the other.

Three hundred yards: Fright was now terror and he screamed at the light, yet he could hardly hear himself; the roar of the exhaust stacks drowned him out as the engine brake slammed against the pistons of the big Cummins diesel.

One hundred yards: Everything changed to slow motion. The roaring

engine brakes seemed to fade out of hearing, the pandemonium of noise and panic in the cab switched to quiet and calm. It was as though the monster rig began to glide swiftly and silently to embrace the bike that rushed toward it. Like in movie crash scenes, he had time to think clear intelligent thoughts in his last horrible seconds. Then he saw them... or did he?

This was the end, certainly for the bike, but probably him too. When the bike smacked into the big Kenworth nose, the truck would swerve, just for a split second, but that would be enough with this load. The trailer, unaware of the danger, would push straight on and force the truck to roll.

It amazed him that he had time to think it all through. Maybe he'd hit the rider already and they were both now dead and looking calmly down as the truck and bike embraced hard and rolled down the road together.

Then he saw them again. What he saw answered his question, he must be dead. Two spirit men, he could see right through them. They came running from the passenger's side of the road.

Out of the field they came, leapt over the fence as one and rushed straight out into the path of the truck toward the bike. They were illuminated for a single moment in the headlights and then disappeared below the truck's monstrous hood at the same time as the rider and the bike. And then came impact...



Except it didn't. Instead, in a single fluid moment, the two wraiths grabbed the rider and the bike, and then he saw them all disappear down the side of the truck.

Reality returned and with one last great roar of protest from the exhausts, the big rig shuddered, shook and hissed to a halt. Clouds of mist and steam rose from the tires and brakes, and were caught in the sidelights.

He became aware of his hands, white-knuckled, gripping the wheel. He went to pat the dash and whisper "Good on ya, girl," but his arms wouldn't obey, they were trembling involuntarily like he'd seen a ghost.

Rain was still coming down in sheets. He was wide awake and breathless. The two spirit men; he thought he'd seen them in the last split seconds, but they had to be a figment of his imagination. He'd

either dreamed the suicidal approach of the bike, or he and the rider really were now dead, floating in calm silence above blood and steel and fire below.

He pinched himself. It hurt. Did it hurt after death? He glanced instinctively out at his big wing mirror. There! A single tail light, a bike, and disappearing fast on its own side of the road.

More lights coming. A bike, two, no... three of them. They were coming fast and he didn't have a chance of avoiding these ones, he was sitting stock-still in the middle of the road. But they shot past on their side, three more just like the rider he'd somehow missed. Their horns blared as they disappeared into the night behind him.

He must have dreamed the whole horrible thing. Falling asleep at the wheel was a driver's worst nightmare. He flicked off the Jakes brake, slightly engaged the clutch and started shifting gears – there was a pull-off area about a mile up ahead. He'd get that far at least, and then take a breather, collect himself, or something.

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Highway Thirty Two. Dark. Raining hard. The rider gripped the bars of the monstrous bike as it roared back out onto the wet road. He had stopped for a moment to let the others catch up. He'd been riding too fast for this weather, knew he was, but didn't care. A death wish? Probably.

As soon as he'd got a glimpse of the other's headlights in his mirror he twisted the throttle. Too much power, the rear wheel fishtailed, the bike swerving and bucking as it arced back out onto the wet road. He hadn't expected that, his response must have been instinctive though, he'd eased back ever so slightly on the throttle and the bike had straightened up.

Nearly two and a half liters of animal power and close to half a ton of motorcycle. The tank on this thing felt half as wide again as all the Harleys he'd owned. This bike, a Triumph Rocket, was a lot bigger and way too fast for him but you only live once, or die... it could go either way on a night like this.

The wind was howling, and this rain... he loved riding rainy roads, it made him feel tough and young again, but he'd never seen it like this. Big thick sheets of icy water knocked him back in the saddle, threatened to tear his hands from the bars. Hard to believe, but the massive bike

groaned under each new slam of water.

He was only an hour and a bit out from home but already drenched with two more to go before they pulled in for the night. They had a deadline to keep, others to meet on the road. His riding gear, the best money could buy, was nothing against this rain; and he was nothing against the dark Shadow voices that urged him to give up on the promise. A pipe-dream more like. The Voice kept assuring him a mending would come, but it was years now and there was no sign of it. Did he really keep hearing that extravagant promise, or was it just a figment of his imagination?

The impact on those closest to him had been huge and mending seemed impossible. The dark voices told him it would never happen, they screamed it loud and carved it in blinding neon on the underside of his eyelids when he tried to sleep. He heard them every waking hour, and when alone in his helmet it was worst.

When he rounded the next bend he saw the road was clear so he let the bike drift into the oncoming lane. A safety measure. It meant he wouldn't have to turn as sharply into the wet corner.

Then he saw the truck come into view at the other end of the straight. He was still on the wrong side of the road, about to ease back across the slippery white lines into his lane, but he thought twice. He could just keep riding on this side, what would it be? Twenty seconds? Thirty at the most and it would be over. The truck would swallow him whole and silence forever the darkness on the inside, no more screaming voices.

A picture dropped happily into his mind. He embraced it and when he did, it blocked out the cold wet reality of the truck racing toward him. It was a memory of them both, on the farm together, feeding calves with the kids, it was a long time ago but he could still feel the sun and laughter. Where had that all gone?

His mates, still a way behind, sensed the change. Even at this distance the silhouette of him against the truck's glare made it plain. He'd shifted the set of his shoulders... he'd seen the truck and was going to ride straight at it. With hearts in mouths they watched him ride right into its mouth without flinching, never hesitating, never wavering.

And then the dark voices crashed into his mind again in gleeful chorus. "She never loved you, she'll never come back!" They sounded for all the world like a massive truck with engine brakes full on.

Damnation! Lights!! Big lights coming straight at him. The truck. One hundred yards away and only split seconds to impact. There was

nowhere to go. Everything switched to slow motion. He saw the truck in the last few yards before it engulfed him. Way too late to swerve. Sad really. He watched himself from above, saw his foot come down hard on the tarmac, saw himself put the two wheeled monster into an impossible slide and realized too late that he didn't want to die.

It was like a jerky video of what happens in an accident. He wondered whether there'd be room for him and the bike to slide together underneath the truck. He saw the enormous Kenworth grill as it readied to swallow him, then he squeezed his eyes shut, shouted sorry to her and the kids and waited for impact... then came peace.

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He opened his eyes gingerly, it seemed only a second since he'd hit the truck. He felt no pain which made sense; there was no pain here. He looked about, excited but a little afraid. Would there be angels? He thought he sensed some but there didn't seem to be any about.

He wasn't ready for what he saw. He was astride a bike, easily as big as the one he'd just left, and flying past... what? A truck? In the afterlife? It didn't feel right, and it was night, he thought the sun never stopped shining here. The weather didn't fit the picture either, biting cold and rain, in fact it was coming down in sheets.

The bike he sat astride was rushing headlong down the road and demanding his attention. It felt good. In fact, it felt just like his own, almost as though he'd ridden straight through the grill of that truck into heaven.

He was pretty sure it didn't happen like that. Humans had spirits but bikes didn't. Was there more to this heaven thing than he realized, or was this hell?? Maybe the Shadow voices were right with their angry God stories? Maybe God really did torture people in hell, although it didn't feel very hot.

He wondered if he was in shock but couldn't imagine that happening when you were dead. He did what they did in the movies, tried to pinch himself to see if he was alive or dead but his wet gloves and thick riding gear made it impossible so he punched himself instead. He certainly felt alive, felt stupid for questioning it, but how could he have lived after crashing into the truck? There was no way.

Maybe he'd dreamed it, nodded off for a moment? He rewound the whole thing, from rounding the bend on the wrong side, to the sunny

picture that had popped into his head while he was still in the path of the truck. The warm happy memory of her and the kids on the farm, and then suddenly being face to face with the fifty ton monster with nowhere to go but the grave.

He felt guilty now that he'd embraced the picture like a doorway to death. Something had convinced him that holding it in his mind would allow him to ride unawares through the grill of the oncoming truck and into a better life – but now he felt a fool for grabbing at the opportunity, guilty that he'd copped out.

The thoughts were all too big, so he just rode on.

Was he alive or dead? A ridiculous question but he kept asking it all the same. One moment he felt stupid for it – the next unsure. Every time the thought of the truck swallowing him whole replayed in his mind, he realized again he was unsure.

This didn't feel like another life, it felt cold and wet like the last one. He was almost sure he recognized the road, still heading south down the Western Bypass to Lake Taupō and the mountains. But not completely sure. The dark and the rain made it hard to determine. And what had happened with the truck was too big, too many things unexplained.

He thought of his kids. Imagined the horror of being woken in the night by the police and hearing your father had died on a wet lonely road on some crazy motorcycle ride with his mates.

The tarmac was now rivers of water in his headlight and on every wet bend he held the bike to his side of the road, urging it away from its natural desire to go wide.

He wiped his visor furiously every few seconds. His helmet, normally a warm dry refuge even in the worst rain, was beginning to leak, icy rivulets creeping across the top of his scalp. Damn it, the vents were leaking. He fumbled them shut, but his visor instantly fogged.

He banged them open again and rode on pretending death had never interested him. Castigated himself, then realized with a start that he hadn't meant to entertain death at all, remembered how that sunny picture had dropped into his mind in a seductive way when he'd come wide around that bend and the whole of him had felt so desperately tired of life.

Maybe it hadn't been a good picture after all, maybe it had come from somewhere sinister - an opiate administered by dark voices to woo him to give up and embrace death?

Anger swelled up from deep inside him and he swore out loud in his

helmet. He could tell it pushed those voices back, so he did it again, this time a full throated roar. It pushed them even further away. The source of that picture had been the Darkness, he was sure of it now. The living, breathing Darkness. In truth, he didn't know if they breathed, but they *were* alive, he was certain of that much. Dark menacing things that sent people mad. In his living hell since Annie had gone, he had come face to face with them so often.

He was feeling more and more alive, and less and less dead. And then the sign – he breathed a sigh of relief - unless there was a Tūrangi in the afterlife, he was definitely alive, and the lakeside town was only a few minutes away. He must be at least forty five minutes from the scene of his accident, except it hadn't been an accident, he was sure of that now and he certainly wasn't dead!

What happened next confirmed it. He jammed his boot down hard on the gears, cutting back his speed for the descent down into Tūrangi and his foot slipped from the wet pedal. He pulled it back in fear the moment before it hit the road, the fright surging through his body. Definitely alive!



He loved pulling in from a dark wet night to a brightly lit gas station. It made him feel like a trail hardened cowboy pulling in at a saloon. And this one was one of his favorites because just about every vehicle on the forecourt was either on its way to or from the infamous Desert Road; a wild, treacherous and often icy stretch. It was only forty miles, but it demanded respect. It wound through the forests at the feet of two of the North Island's biggest mountains – Ngāuruhoe, (the mountain that Lord of the Rings fans knew as Mount Doom), and Tongariro its sister. And then, up at its highest point, the road pushed through the frozen desert that bordered Ruapehu, the largest Mountain of them all. The name meant 'exploding noise', named by the Māori for its thunderous eruptions.

On a night like this, a bike always drew looks of admiration and awe from the other drivers, even from the truckers who had their own challenges through that road. 'Must be darned cold out there, mate,' they'd call out to him, or 'I'd love a bike like that but not on a night like this!' The fleeting camaraderie was a kick he loved. So it cut right across the mood when his mate Eric pulled in on the other side of the

pump. He could feel his eyes boring holes in him from behind his visor. Eric shared his love of these cold night gas station stops but was clearly not in the mood tonight.

The rider was instantly defensive. “What??” he mouthed at Eric, then realized the gesture was wasted until he pulled his helmet off.

He unclipped the chin strap and see-sawed the snug wet dome off his head and tried to think what he’d done to upset his mate. Normally Eric was especially hard to annoy. In fact, the only times he’d ever felt the sting of displeasure was when he’d passed dangerously or given the bird to some slow driver who Eric had judged as innocent.

The truck! Of course. If he’d seen that then he was done. Eric didn’t like to show much affection, but the rider knew he liked him. Hey, he liked him back, but now Eric was angry. He could see it in his eyes when he took his helmet off, shook his head in disgust, and strode purposefully toward him.

The rider, normally aggressive and quick to argue, cringed back into himself as Eric approached. “What, mate?” Although he already knew it had to be the truck.

“What??” spluttered Eric. “What?? Look at me, Jack! What were you up to?” He shook his head, obviously unsure where to start. “What was that about, mate? Riding at that truck like that. You were dancing with death. Go on, admit it!”

Jack went to answer, but Eric cut him off. “If you’re going to pull a stunt like that, I mean ever again, count me out. I’ve invested too much in this friendship, listened to you rabbit on about your busted marriage and what you reckon Upstairs says about you and Annie. I’ve listened to it again and again, and call me mad, but I’ve even found myself thinking you might be right! And now this?!”

“No need to get upset, mate, I mean...” Jack ran out of steam and went silent, embarrassed. Eric shook his head again in disgust. “I mean it, Jack, are you in this or out? Make up your mind, because if you’re out, you ride alone. From now on... oh to heck with it, I’m so damned angry!” and with that he turned on his heels and strode into the gas station looking ready for a fight.

Jack watched him go. He felt like punching his mate and hugging him at the same time. No one talked to him like that and yet Eric just had, and it felt good. Felt like he cared. Right now, he wasn’t sure why right now was important, but he knew he needed to feel cared for in this moment.