

## Breakdown at Blanford

We pulled into the service area, The Blanford Service Area, to be more precise, caught about twenty miles in between Exit 2 and Exit 3 on the Mass Pike, which is also I-90 West, a road that runs all the way to San Francisco. I topped the gas tank off and Kate went inside the travel center. I pulled the bike over to a parking place so we could combine our luggage and shrink it down some. It was boiling hot on the asphalt. Kate emerged with two bottles of water. Her face was fresh to me. Studying it, I got this giddy feeling that she was all mine until Chicago. She had nowhere to go but back to me and the bike.

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It was a good feeling. I didn't have anywhere else to go either, and that was an even better feeling. Clarity. She caught me staring at her as she walked towards me and she gave me the finger. Kate's really beautiful. Part of my good feeling was the result of knowing I was allowed to look at her all I wanted. I didn't have to snatch glances at her or hide the interest in my eyes when she looked at me. She sat down on the curb to eat a bag of Doritos.

"I starved," she said. "Haven't eaten a thing."

"Nutritious," I said.

Kate's vegetarian.

"Okay," she said, "Ranked in order, would you rather be an Ewok, a Smurf, a Gummy Bear, or a Snork?"

She was trying to bust up the awkwardness. It wasn't terrible awkwardness, but we were both having trouble letting words out of our mouths. I wanted tell her right out that I knew why she'd come with me, but I could not figure out how to say that so I'd gotten quiet.

"Snork?" I asked.

We were the exact same age and had watched the same cartoons.

"They're like underwater Smurfs."

"I know," I said. "And Gummy Bears from the cartoons, right?"

"Yeah."

"I loved that show. It's underrated cause it's named after a candy. Toadwart was a deep character."

Toadwart was a troll but he was a runt so he was an outcast. By nature trolls were supposed to eat gummie bears, but Toadwart was always bailing them out of trouble. Only problem was sometimes he turned on them too. He was caught in the middle and no one liked him. Generally I don't like arbitrary answers to hypothetical questions. But Kate made me feel like the question was important to whether she liked me or not. It was part of a tryout and I wanted to do well.

"Gummy Bear, Smurf, Ewok, Snork," I said, confident I was right.

"You like the forest more than the ocean?"

"Yes."

“Why don’t you like Snorks?”

Gummy Bears were a legendary race entrusted with magic, the last of a dying breed. Smurfs lived a secret quiet life now and again threatened by disaster, like medieval farmers. Ewoks were a tribe, powerless in a world of technology but brave and true. I just don’t like that they were midgets that looked like Norwich terriers. And Snorks were just an ABC knock-off on the Smurfs with a corny theme song. “Snork along, let’s snork a happy song.” Snork this.

She waved the back of her hand at me and nibbled the corner of a Dorito.

“I like Snorks. They’re carefree.”

I liked the game. It was like being with my older sister. She always made up imaginary worlds for me to play in. We used to play school and she would relish giving me Ds. I liked getting them because I was too young to know what they meant and they seemed to make her happy. My sister’s four years older than me and my best friend. When she went to college our house was dysfunctional so she never came home. I felt abandoned by her but as an inexpressive teenage boy I couldn’t tell her that. We got over it one day when I was in college and we were on a vacation together in Normandy.

“I feel like if I wasn’t your sister, you wouldn’t even like me,” she told me.

I cried so hard I couldn’t breathe and then I told her how I felt like she’d abandoned me and that mom had abandoned me too. It was the first time since puberty I’d ever told anyone how I really felt about anything and the first time I’d cried in front of my family since my parents told us they were splitting up.

I finished untying the pack from the backrest while Kate munched away. It took about five minutes just to get all those knots loose. I had sweat dripping off my nose when I was done. I went inside to piss and she combined our stuff. She’s neat. When I came back out she had the bag re-packed and tidy. It didn’t even look like it had gotten any bigger.

“You should always roll your clothes up if you’re trying to squeeze,” she said very seriously.

I started to tie the bag back on the bike, sweating the whole time, and it took forever. I could tell she was getting impatient. I was getting fed up with my monkey-rigged operation. The trouble with starting late in the day on a road trip is that the sands of the hourglass hit you one by one like water torture. I finally got the bag tied to the backrest, climbed on, put my headphones in, and my goggles and helmet on. Then Kate hopped on, put her headphones in, her helmet on, and pressed play. When our brains were connected to the four white strands of the I-pod phones, I hit the start button on the bike and it was dead. I mean deader than dead. No sound, no lights, no nothing. I checked to see if the run switch was on or off. On. I turned the key back and forth. I hit the start button again. Nothing. I shook my head. Tried again. The music was blaring in my ears so I had to kind of tear the helmet off and the earphones out in order to think. Kate noticed. She turned off the music and got off the bike.

“No power,” I said, sounding calm. “I don’t know why.”

Maintenance deferred. Kate sat down on the curb and didn’t say anything. I tried the bike again.

“Nothing,” I said. “It’s dead.”

I got off the bike and kind of walked around it, searching for some

manifest clue as to why the bike had turned on me. Machines donâ€™t betray with a kiss. They just plain quit and then sit there and stare at you dumb. You can ask them anything and they wonâ€™t answer. I took my leather jacket off and chucked it on the curb with my helmet and then I knelt down beside the bike and stared up into its mysterious belly. Wires, lines, cables. Whatâ€™s the difference? Valves, housings, pipes, cylinders. I took the side panels off and removed the random assortment of tools I kept in my tank bag. I didnâ€™t know what I was doing. I got everything laid out in front of me and realized there wasnâ€™t anything I knew how to do. I had a comprehensive mechanics manual and I took that out. The easiest thing seemed to be to check the fuses. It took about two seconds. The fuses were fine. It gave me some confidence to know that I had done something.

â€œThe fuses are OK,â€• I said to Kate.

I donâ€™t know if she heard. I looked up and I saw that the trucker who had been filling the gas wells up had finished and was replacing the covers. I walked over to him. He wore a grey jumpsuit, smoked eyeglasses, and hair parted and slicked like a 50s dad.

â€œYou donâ€™t know anything about bikes do you?â€• I asked.

â€œNot really. Whatsa matter?â€•

â€œNo power.â€•

â€œWhat kind of battery you got?â€•

I didnâ€™t know. He couldnâ€™t help. Itâ€™s a 12-volt by the way. I just didnâ€™t know then. Most mechanical questions have simple answers that you either know or donâ€™t know. It doesnâ€™t help you to not know. I sat down next to Kate.

â€œIs that it?â€• she laughed. â€œDo I have to go home now?â€•

â€œNah ah,â€• I said. â€œEvery trip has its setbacks.â€•

She hugged me.

â€œI donâ€™t want to go home,â€• she said.

There was a hint of despair in her voice. The trip meant something to her beyond spontaneous adventure; she was running from something. One of the things Iâ€™d already learned about Kate is that she lets herself out in bursts. Kirsten took me aside before I left. We didnâ€™t usually talk that much alone and she almost never initiated it if we did, so I was kind of surprised. Kirsten is one of those people who says what she means. Sometimes itâ€™s embarrassing.

â€œKate is a really good traveler,â€• she told me. â€œWe drove all night to Graceland one weekend. Itâ€™s still the best road trip Iâ€™ve ever taken. Sheâ€™s very caring and she sees beauty in everything.â€•

I didnâ€™t want Kate to go home before she had the chance to show me some of that beauty, especially not because I was a fuck-up who couldnâ€™t deal with his own bike. I was trying to get out from under the feeling of being a person whoâ€™d been in school 25 years out of 30 and still wasnâ€™t totally confident I could do anything well. Sitting on the curb with a broken bike without having any idea how to fix it, I felt the distance between education and know-how. It made me feel pretty fucking worthless.

I got up, walked back over to the bike, and knelt down. I tugged at the connections to the battery. They were secure. I stared at the bike

wishing it could speak to me. The sweat rolled off of my forehead, down my nose, and onto my lips where I sucked the drops off and waited for a revelation. It was a power struggle, like you have with a horse, and my girl was watching. I had to win.

About that time two Harleys pulled up with the characteristic rumble of their v-twins. On the backs of the two big Harleys were two big Harley dudes with beards and two big Harley women with wide jeans. I was kind of wary of Harley people. What would they want with a hippie E-Z Rider with a little Honda? Only about a quarter of Harley people will wave to non-Harley people when they pass by on their bikes as opposed to about three-quarters of non-Harley riders. It turns out that there are bikekeys and there are Harley Riders. Some Harley Riders are bikekeys and some are just kind of scenesters who wear black leather and ride nice motorcycles called Harley-Davidsons. The difference is the value system. Bikekeys believe in breaking free. Harley Riders join a club.

“How’s it going?” I said.

“Riding,” the bigger guy said.

“You guys know much about bikes?” I asked.

“More n a little and not everything,” the guy said. “What’s the problem?”

I told him there was no power.

“What do you mean by power?” he asked.

Good question, my Div School brain thought.

“Electricity,” I said.

“Hold on and I’ll come take a look.”

I went back over to the bike. After they had consulted their women, the two guys ambled over. They were from Wisconsin. Harley-Davidson motorcycles are made in Milwaukee. Both of the men had huge guts. They were real nice but kind of gruff. They stood back and gestured with their hands what they wanted me to do. One of the guys, I’ll call him Boss, delivered step by step instructions as I took the battery out. There was no fluid left in it.

We filled the cells back up with distilled water and I put the battery back in. I kept turning the nuts the wrong way. Finally Boss said, “Left is always loose, son.”

I cut my hand when the wrench slipped as I housed the battery and blood coursed out of my thumb, which was streaked with oil. It made me feel Christian to bleed as I worked to correct the errors of my ways. I put the side panels back on the bike. When everything was all set, the guys made ready to give me a bump start. Boss grabbed the handlebars of the bike and shifted it into second gear and then I climbed on.

“When we yell, you pop that clutch and rev it up good, hear?” Boss said.

I nodded, nervous I would fuck it up somehow. They pushed me about twenty feet, running as fast as they could move their tight Wranglers and their ample flanks.

“Pop it,” they both yelled. “Pop the sucker.”

I popped the clutch and the bike started with a sputter and then a growl. I heard their hot-dangs ringing behind me. I rode around the truck part of the service area in a couple of proud circles and then

pulled back in front of them. They puffed their chests out.

“That oughtta do her,” Boss said. “But your battery’s probably crapped. Ride somewhere you can get a new one in the morning and grab a hotel room.”

I thanked them and waved and then drove around in another circle. Nothing like overcoming disaster to give you a taste of euphoria. I pulled the bike up at the sidewalk and left it running and Kate came over with our pack laughing.

“Those guys were awesome,” she said. “I’ve never talked to a real biker before.”

I could tell by how happy she was that she’d been more worried than she showed. It was really fucking hot out there and the prospect of being stuck with the pavement, the gas fumes, and the motor tourists was a real fucking bummer. I left the bike running and started to tie the pack back on. I’d wrapped the climbing rope around about three times when it stalled out again. I pressed the start button and the bike sputtered sadly. Dead again. The Boss and JR were just getting back on their Harleys ready to ride out into the great wide open with their sweethearts. They probably had a good 4th of July plan that included a lot of beer, some sausage, and some sex.

Boss glanced up at me as he revved up, but he pretended he didn’t see me standing there helpless again. I watched them back their bikes out of their parking spaces, and when Boss looked up to make his turn, I waved. He stopped the bike and killed it. His wife craned her neck around to see what had happened and I saw him indicate me with his chin. Boss and JR got off slowly and ambled back over to us. I was grateful. We gave the bump start another shot but it didn’t work, and it looked like it might kill them both to try any harder.

“Pop her, pop her, pop the motherfucker!”

They were huffing and cursing and sweating. The bike wouldn’t turn over.

“Thanks for your help fellas,” I said. “You did what you could. Have a happy 4th.”

They grimaced and headed back to their ladies and rolled out. Kate looked crestfallen. I was devastated. Did I mention it was hot? It was like a hundred and the heat rose off the asphalt in waves. My face was already sunburnt and I felt a kind of general heat halo around my head as I tried to think about our options. I looked at Kate, so small now, her shoulders slumped desperately. I knew she was thinking it was all crashing down on us. Our romantic ride turned into a half-assed nightmare. She wanted me to take her away from everything quickly and confidently. She wanted a man to break her life up with a hammer because she was waste deep in concrete and could not move. It wasn’t happening. Don’t get on a bike with a dude who can’t fix a bike, she was thinking. A prep school boy. Never fuck around with prep school boys, they’re never as good as they look.

I didn’t know what was wrong with the bike. After I bought it from Bill I even took it to the shop before I left and they detailed me for \$300 and said everything was straight. Before Boss left he said:

“I think your battery just took a shit on you little brother.”

It felt like it. I went inside to call the highway transit authority for whatever official help was available. The girl at the counter was talking to her co-worker about another co-worker who was dating a guy she had the dirt on. I didn’t want to break into the conversation, but I went ahead and asked her to call the transit authority for me. She stared at me like I’d committed a crime when I first interrupted, but

warmed up when she saw my leather jacket and the painted helmet under my arm. She called the transit authority and told me theyâ€™d send a truck around but that it could be forty minutes cause they were busy. I went back out to the bike. Kate got her art supplies out and started to draw and listen to music in the shade. I walked out front into the sun and sat down to wait for the transit guy. After about forty minutes, one of their yellow trucks drove straight by me, not even ten feet away. I swear the guy looked over at me, too, just before he sped up and disappeared down the official access road. I went back inside and asked the girl to call again. This time she looked me up and down pretty good, but she called again. I went back outside and waited. Kate came over a couple of times to check up on me. She was bummed out, but very sweet, worried that I was melting down.

â€œYou alright?â€• she asked, her voice soft.

She put the back of her hand against my cheek. I didnâ€™t know she had that side. I thought she might get bitchy if shit didnâ€™t go her way. Kateâ€™s an indy kid and I generally mistrust them. Indy kids usually grow up in the suburbs and they live very safe lives that are designed to look edgy. They are averse to risk and hardship both. They have steady jobs that pay very little but ask even less. They live their lives metaphorically. Every small decision has big consequences. A real everyday disaster, though, like breaking down on a motorcycle on the 4th of July, can, for the average indy kid, become a beacon of doom. The fact that Kate hadnâ€™t freaked out yet, confirmed what I initially thought about herâ€”her scene was her uniform but not her identity. When the bike broke, she decided we were stuck in it together. She could just as well have flipped out and told her boyfriend to come get her. Iâ€™m sure the thought crossed her mind. We were only two hours away from her home.