

James Hein

Professor McCauley

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Riding the Dragon

The landscape becomes a blur of deciduous tree mixing with luscious evergreen pines as we climb into the Great Smokey Mountains flies past my tinted motorcycle visor. While riding a motorcycle is fun, you should always follow the speed limits. An oddly warm day in the middle of May even for the higher elevations. I am thankful for my all black hoodie soaking up some of the sun rays as they poke through the trees casting shadows across the road. Ahead of me, rides a tall lanky man some would best describe him as a string bean, six foot two, 185 pounds soaking wet. He looks slightly too tall for his silver and black Yamaha FZ6r, a fast sports bike style motorcycle. Hunter is a very handsome, charismatic guy, intellectual and able to hold a conversation with just about anyone. I have known Hunter now for about four years having been stationed together in the Marine Corps. We decided to finally take our “guy’s trip” due to the fact my wife was going to Maine for our soon to be born son’s baby shower. Even though Hunter is a very smart man, he can tend to let speed get the best of him. I’m trying to keep up with Hunter, but I can feel every pothole and bump in the road. Unlike Hunter’s motorcycle mine is an all-black Kawasaki Ninja 250 nearly one third the size of his. What mine lacks in power, it makes up in handling capabilities.

As we crest a hill we get a glimpse of the beginning of the real adventure. Our destination was a small diner with a parking lot filled with motorcycles of all makes and models. Both of us become more excited, it has been a long drive from Camp Lejeune, North Carolina to The Tail of the Dragon, a mountainous road that lies between North Carolina and Tennessee which contains 318 turns in just over eleven short miles of constant switch backs. Pulling into the diner parking lot we circle around it twice. Once just in awe at the sheer number of motorcycles in one location. Realizing we should probably park to get some food, we find two spots next to each other. Killing our engines, we both take our helmets off. Hunter's black hair is a matted black mess. He looks at me with his large black fuzzy caterpillars he calls eyebrows and his "up to no good grin", "Man did you see that guy in the racing leathers?" Hunter asks before I can even get my helmet off. "I can't wait to see if the Dragon lives up to its name", he said still smiling. That kind of smile that you can see a twinkle of mischievous trouble brewing. I pull my helmet off my shaggy brown hair, matted from hours in a helmet. Thankful to be able to stretch our legs we take in the sights and sounds. Deep rumbles of Harleys mixed with the higher pitched crotch rockets taking off up towards the Dragon. Everywhere you look its constant motion, people getting on bikes, getting off, unpacking, loading, or even just doing the normal tourist photoshoot. While walking to the diner I look at license plates. I saw North and South Dakota as well as quite a few Kentucky. I even saw a pair that had California plates! People coming from all over the country just to ride the historic Dragon. We notice the contrast among riders themselves, some are daily or weekend riders like myself and Hunter, while others are

more hardcore, wearing the full racing leathers used to prevent road rash in case of an accident.

With the smell of gas and the mixture of pine trees and the previous night's rain beginning to evaporate, I noticed the faint smell of French fries, my stomach does too as it rumbles to remind me that we hadn't eaten since we hit the road earlier that morning. Hunter and I make our way into the diner, what you could expect from a biker bar who tried to serve happy meals. Biker memorabilia all over the walls and bar stools facing the road to watch drivers ride past. We find two seats, I shrug off my backpack while Hunter goes to order his food, we are both a little cautious of leaving our stuff unattended. "Hey, James you can go order." Hunter calls as he's walking back to our table. I walk up to the ordering window and an old lady roughly 50 or so with graying hair, but welcoming southern smile asks what I'll have. "One double bacon burger, oh and no tomato please." I said. After I pay and rejoin Hunter we continue to discuss the riding plan. Talking between bites of probably one of the greasiest yet juiciest burger I've ever eaten, we decided to try and take the Dragon four times. Hunter leading to the end and back, and then I would lead to the end and back. After we scavenge through the overpriced gift shop, I buy a black hoodie and a keychain, we walk past a giant metal dragon made of old motorcycle parts on our way our bikes. Settling on our bikes we make our way out to the main road. Turning right we are immediately faced with "Wheelie Hill", where minutes before saw biker after biker pop a wheelie while flying up the hill. I was way too nervous to even attempt it. However, I did give my bike a lot more gas than I normally would to coax it up the steep incline. Hunter took off like a rocket ahead of me. Gaining speed, we hit the first turn, which speed limit was 25, way too

fast. Slamming on my brakes I felt my stomach fly up into my throat. "Made it all the way here and wreck on the first turn, my wife is going to kill me" I thought to myself.

Maintaining control Hunter and I both safely made it through the first few turns. On our right is the incline of the mountain side, to our left was a steep drop off continuing down the mountain. I fall a little farther behind Hunter, taking the turns and accelerating out his bike over powers mine. Rounding turn 13 Hunter took it a little too fast, and had to swing wide to make it into the next turn. Unfortunately, Hunter went too steep into the turn and hit the gravel along the side of the road. Adrenaline kicked in, and with it the slow-motion effect. As I saw one of my best friends fight to gain control and lose he swerved into the ditch. I saw it coming so I slammed on my brakes to be able to jump off my bike. The smell of burning rubber from Hunter hitting his breaks as well as my own tires filled the air. Dirt flew out onto the road and Hunter disappeared under his bike. I Shut my bike off as quickly as I can, and run to where he was expecting the worst. Luckily for him, he crashed on the uphill side into the ditch so his motorcycle landed on top of his leg. Struggling to lift his bike, again its three times the size of mine, enough so he can slide from underneath. Propping his bike along the ditch and making sure it was shut off so there wouldn't be a fire as well as a wreck. I check on Hunter, who to my surprise was already working to get on his feet. Even with his helmet on I could hear him swearing up a storm as he checked his bloody leg, madder at himself for wrecking his brand-new motorcycle then in pain. I was ecstatic seeing him up and walking, after badgering him till he assured me he was ok but after seeing the amount of blood we both agreed it would be best to go to the nearest hospital.

Five stitches later, a lot of jokes about poor driving skills and one phone call to my wife to let her know everything was alright. We look at his scuffed-up motorcycle helmet and a somber moment sets in. The jokes and laughter would have never happened if Hunter had fallen on the other side of the road. All because the urge for speed and the thrill of the engine roaring. After that moment in the hospital sitting with Hunter, I vowed to drive safer and within the speed limit. To this day I am thankful Hunter made a full recovery. Now if he learned his lesson or not, he tends to be stubborn, but I feel it was a reality check for him as well.