

**Bike on the Ike**

By Kenn Hartmann

I love the Ike, in ways profound and immeasurable like riders love a setting sun on Highway 1 between Big Sur and Carmel, or throttle twisting and down-shifting on the Dragon's Tail out of Deals Gap, or disappearing into twilight dark fringe of Sedona on Oak Creek Canyon to Flagstaff, all scenic, beautiful tourist destinations, but never the Ike, not for the feint of heart, that urban stretch cut through the western corridor of Chicago like a bloody swath of dull miserable knife, never would a tourist come to Chicago to ride the Ike for pleasure, my most treasured piece of asphalt anywhere, in fact most folks complain, grow frustrated at traffic jams, the rush hour carnage during the commute, the dangerous intensity of City of Big Shoulders and rude awakenings, but there my loyal readers, does my soul sing on two wheels. Perhaps it's in my DNA, my dad's corridor, that took him to live in the suburbs and work in the city, he compared it to Indy and always referred to it under its original name, 'the Congress' as it was known before it became the Dwight D Eisenhower, 'the Ike' in honor of the 34th president who envisioned interstates as a quick way to evacuate civilian populations out of cities and move in military machinery in the event of foreign invasion, whatever the Overlord's original plan is now the perfect place to ply the pavement straddling a hot pulsating engine, a playground for the unreal squeal of two wheels.



I stood outside the Roscoe Company on the 35 hundred block of West Harrison which parallels the southern rim of the Ike, this was the late 1960's, remembered by the media as a turbulent decade, for me it was my high school years, and the only turbulence was with my father. There was no special animosity, nothing harrowing, it's just that he was always testing me, and I didn't test well, usually intentionally failing, saying 'fuck it' which pissed him off, since he never used the f-word around me and I had freely used it around him since the second grade. When he worked though, he was an artist and a joy to be around. He had a side job installing a gas line for the dryers at Roscoe, an industrial Laundromat for uniforms and work clothes. He had me cutting and threading pipe and as I prepared the metal for a weld, he'd say, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." I overheard bits and pieces of the usual bullshit that factory workers tend to spout when expressing their worldview, which is just a synthesized version of the bullshit spouted by television, newspapers and the government. The West Side had erupted in flames and violence after Martin Luther King's death and everybody wondered where it all ends. I had finished packing tools in the Chevy wagon and clasped my fingers on the chain link fence and stared down at the Congress, never a lull, just endless motion and progress.

A teenage black kid on a bicycle asked, "Got money?" I say, what you got for me? "No, give me money, man." No money, bro, nice bike tho'. Not that it was, it being homemade, torn to shreds, wobbly mismatched tires, junkyard special, no one would covet such a contraption thus safe from street theft. "What are you doing here?" Waiting for my dad, he's inside. "Want to see me pop a wheelie?" Do I have a choice? He lifted the tire, raised up in the saddle and that was it. A couple bikers looking like Jimi Hendrix with froes and bandanas rode eastbound on panhead choppers, revving and goofing, the kid said, 'they back from Nam.' Perhaps the dream of riding that stretch was spawned there and then. A couple white guys on Triumphs blasted westbound and I said, 'maybe they headed to Nam.'

The road is not level with surroundings; the swath is cut deep below the cityscape, the asphalt corridor is like a river with banks rising on each side, pressed to edges of the bank are the crowded cluster of dwellings and factories. All that going and coming, everyday shit, work-a-day world of Sweet Home, all the escapes, get-a-ways, break downs, crashes, out of gas, overheated, frozen tundra winter wonderland, a half of century of travel. I think back in the day, Randy Johnson on his chopped Triumph and I on my Sporty, avoiding potholes on a downtown party quest and club scene bar-hop, the blind drunk rage and stone cold sober grim motorcycle shake, for no other reason than sheer urban joy. I think of my encounter with the Duke of 290, the mad demon of the Ike, Nikita Finkle, a salesman at Illinois Harley in Countryside, watching the blur, the strange rush of mechanical wind as he roars by like a desperate wave in the night. Or on my morning commute, there's Gennaro Sepe on his Harley, his hair greased and unflappable as he blasts westbound to work at Wildfire Harley and I'm headed east. How many times have I encountered other riders and I'm not waving out of courtesy but because I know them personally? I love the Ike. I know most of my readers like country roads. When I get on my sickle, I'm not sightseeing. My eyes are on the road; wending through congestion and pinball machine-like cell phone texting bastards replicating a life and death arcade game, the stakes are high. I love the Ike, but that's just me brothers and sisters of the open road, that's just me.

Kenn Hartmann

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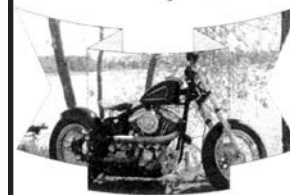
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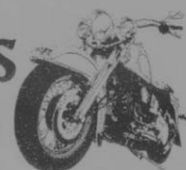
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