

**Ballad of Norman**

By Kenn Hartmann

"We're off the map," said Norman as he folded the map and tucked it into his saddlebag. He pulled a compass from his pocket and leveled its beveled face. "Map, huh," I said and took a slow drag on an old stogie. "We're almost to TC, man."

"What we got to do is get on the highway and roll," said Norman. His idea was to skirt along the Mississippi River into Saint Paul. "The barges will shine their ever-loving lights on us riding the bluffs like scraggly rats on sickles." Streetlights flickered as we rolled up West 7th near the brewery to find Norman's friends, a gaggle he described as literary types. I agreed to the trip inspired by that description while never suspecting its accuracy and or lack of sense until arriving at the scene.

"Rather vague situation here Norman, what gives?" I said. "I asked that squirrely goof in the fedora for his credentials as a writer and he freaked out fierce."

"Maybe so," said Norman, "but what you really said was 'open up your wallet and let's see what you got' and you're right, he freaked out fierce."

"Well we should roll. This is a drag, not literary at all. The only inspired raiment is that goof's fedora and I'll snatch it off his dull head and slap him with it if he tries to recite that doggerel crap he calls poetry."

"I can't bring you anywhere," said Norman.

"Maybe I need to get out more often. Let's blow this joint, cross the river, hit Franklin. Go check out those other ones."

We found the other ones in a back room hung heavy with smoke, the music subdued and Otho said, "You remember that one right? I told her I wouldn't fuck her until I was drunk, mean drunk, so I lined the table with eight shots brimmed with whiskey, and bam, bam, bam, slammed them back and banged her like the Angel of Death beats its wings until she cried, 'Otho, Otho, you mean son of a bitch, I'm not seventeen!' Christ. Who would have thought? She had a brain aneurysm and died."

"Yeah, I remember," I said. "Who could forget the time you fucked a gal to death?"

Norman and I beat it back to Chicago. On the way my taillight burned out about the same time as Norman's headlight faded into oblivion. We barreled down 94 tight together, my bike up front shining forth, riding hard with Norman on my ass, his dimly lit taillight our lone hope of visibility from

behind. We rode like that for miles until a state trooper pulled us over near Stoughton and said, "Truckers are squawking about two unsafe vehicles that fit your descriptions."

"Feels good to be noticed," I said as the trooper checked me out, bobbing his flashlight and poking my bedroll. He turned his attention to Norman.

"Empty those saddle bags," he said. Norman complied, dumping the contents including a canvas kit on the side of the highway. "What's this? These sergeant pins," said the trooper, "on this first-aid kit."

I recognized the kit immediately. Norman had attached insignia pins to the flap. The last time I saw the kit was when Otho held it in his thick hands and stuffed it with chunks of hash the size of soap bars.

The trooper held the kit. "Where did you get these insignias?"

"I took them off a dead man," said Norman. The trooper handed the kit to Norman with instructions to follow him. He escorted us off the highway to an abandoned gas station and told us to stay off our bikes for the night. We watched his taillights disappear onto the highway.

"Hey Norman, we're off the map again."

"I'll check my compass."

"Please don't, let's cut to Whitewater, there's apt to be a literary soiree at the university, perchance upon a pair of sorority sisters on the periphery," I said, firing my sickle and finding solace in its heartening throb. "Like hell you took those off a dead man, you bought them at a surplus store on Madison."

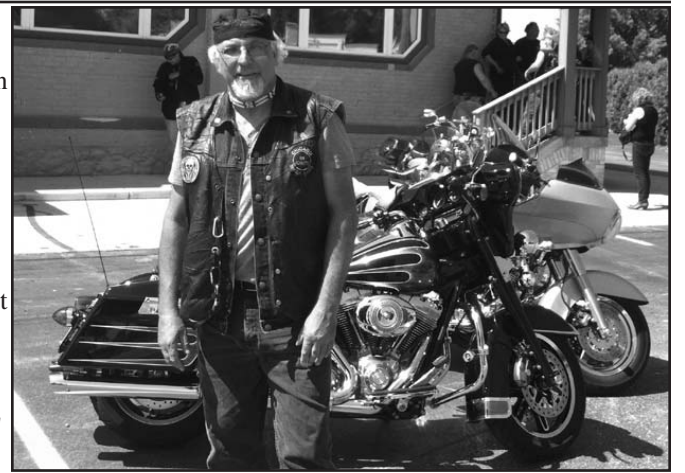
"I know. Almost cooked," said Norman. "Let's fade fast, kick up dust and roll."

We rolled through the night like a broken flashlight snaking into a deep deciduous dream.

-Kenn Hartmann

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**FROM THE DESK OF JOE WEIGEL:**

*PENNY AND I ARE USA BOXING OFFICIALS. A FEW YEARS AGO AT A CHICAGO WORLD BOXING TOURNAMENT, A JAPANESE MAN CAME OER TO ME. HE POINTED TO MY '94 BAGGER AND SAID: "AH, HOLLY DIVISON, VELLY IMPORTANT". TRANSLATION: "Wow. HARLEY I A BIG-TIME BIKE". ALSO, THIS JAPANESE GUY WAS 6'3" TALL AND DRANK EVERYBODY UNDER THE TABLE.*

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