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Short Story
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Stroze's Ride

It was a dead of summer night in 1973, hot and black and thick as oil too long in the crankcase. The Oak Room's refrigeration felt sluggish as the Yankees and Tigers looked on the tube, playing listlessly, as though already asleep.

Gene Strohzer had a couple of beers with Artie and Lurch and left after Munson struck out with two men on. He pressed home through the soup and flaring glow bugs, his head pounding in the dark the way distant artillery registered when you'd been in country too long. Tottenville, home sweet home: bad for the sinuses, bad for the head.

His bungalow hunkered in the shade of a massive chestnut thick with the thrilling of cicadas. He let himself in and let the screen slap shut, not bothering with the eye-hook. The only things worth taking were outside, anyway, and everyone in town knew his MegaBug and the black Kawasaki Suicide Machine. Stroze tore off his T-shirt, work boots, socks, sucked back two aspirin and a spotty glass of water, and flopped back on his unmade bed.

He lay in the dark for some time before he realized he was listening. Home sounds, no war in them: Crickets, peepers, damn cicadas, rooting

raccoons and possums, undersea whoosh of distant cars, boats purring somewhere out in Raritan Bay. He re-examined the cars he'd worked on today, the problems awaiting tomorrow, pinned to the damp bed, wriggling like one of Eliot Keane's bugs before old BugBoy put it out for good. Stroze considered hitting him up for some chloroform, but he'd probably have to track the dude through the swamps around Bald Paulie's shack, a place he'd avoided since returning from Nam.

The images swam in a grey kaleidoscope, critters, bugs, cars, BugBoy, hootch, swamp, critters again, the tunnel, garage, car, bike.... The bike image made him feel free and cool, but he couldn't follow it long enough to make it a dream. It kept coming back to Artie's garage on a glorious day spent in the bowels of Annie Lindner's goddamn Dart.

And then a mosquito started needling in his ear. That tore it. Stroze leaped to his feet, grabbed the bike's keys, and ran out to the garage.

Gene Strohzer's garage was better appointed and secured than his bungalow. The tools were ordered on the pegboard and bench, the parts in labelled bins, no non-essential clutter at all. The Kawasaki 900 Suicide Machine's tank glowed like a black scarab on the chrome and black tube frame, a light 500cc frame really, bearing almost as much power as a Volksie Beetle.

Stroze rattled the key in and switched it, gripped the bars and jumped the starter with his bare instep. A waking blast, then a sustained, throaty roar banished the silence. His head hurt so bad the noise didn't matter, but that monster pulse between his legs did wonders for his body. He curled his toes around the kickstand and pulled it up, then wheeled around and took off, out of Tottenville Place, out of Satterlee, right on Amboy Road, into the night.

The throttle pulled him harder with every twist, every ratchet up of the gearshift pushed the thick night at him faster and faster so it threatened to choke him, but he kept cranking it up through the turns of Amboy Road till somewhere just below Pleasant Plains the murk seemed to break and Stroze was arrowing through the sleeping town at 80.

The few cars he encountered disappeared with a flick of the throttle, and he was alone again on the dim road with intermittent lights engulfed in the tree canopy, the tach and speedometer dials calmly bearing witness. But as the close green tube of Amboy Road curled through Huguenot he picked up a red and white strobing in his mirrors.

Flash: barefoot, bare-chested, no helmet, no license, speeding.

Stroze, he thought with a burst of clarity, this is your life.

He opened the bike up all the way, taking wide Richmond Avenue through an amber light, too fast to turn and there were more cherry tops closing in from there anyway. The Kawasaki was clocking better than 120 across the Eltingville flats, the cops definitely losing ground. Then he looked up from his mirror as a cop car shot from a side street right across his path. Without thinking, Stroze swerved left across the cruiser's wake then smoothly pulled the bike back under him. Just before he ducked through the first curves approaching Great Kills the mirrors blinked cruisers passing the guy he'd dodged, and then he was into Great Kills Town.

Through the exhilaration, Stroze began to think. Three or four cops chasing, and more where that came from. At least one more in Great Kills. How to lose them?

First: get off main roads. He backed off the throttle and started downshifting hard before cranking down a sharp right, and there barely

scooted out of the path of an onrushing cop car whose siren he'd somehow missed. Stroze heard the squeal and spin behind him, more rubber shrieking as he ducked left into the first side street he found.

Already the wind was thick with sirens. They sounded pissed. Stroze wasn't as much concerned for himself as for his bike. He offered a kind of prayer to his machine: As long as you're between my legs, baby, we can ride out of anything. He ripped a right and then left again on another dim street, heading further away from home.

Suddenly he was totally clear. The cops would eventually close off the roads. So get off the roads. He knew Great Kills Park blindfolded. There was a cut-through across the divided Boulevard at Bay Terrace, just a few blocks ahead. Already he could see the red winking off the house fronts ahead, red as the blood scent in his nose. The cops were closing, but Stroze sheared right on Bay Terrace and kicked up to high gear.

He could see the dark screen of the park across the garish Boulevard, could hear the sirens on either side. It was slow-mo superfast, like a dream, and like a dream there was no going back, just a path and a small gap in a dark chain-link fence ahead. Now the trees flashed warning and the sirens were hammering right on him, but Stroze blew across the wide Boulevard before they could block the park, down a pine gully path and up on momentum alone, pressed right to the handlebars as the bike shot the gap in the fence and flew onto the ballfield.

Stroze pulled back to land, wrestled through the front wheel chop, and killed the lights. Immediately he split for the beach road. There was no time to lose. Once the cops cleared their cobwebs they would know there was just one possible road that might cross his. If they got to the beach road first...

But way down in his belly was a glow that said, No chance. Against Stroze and his Suicide Machine? With a head start? On familiar trails no Heatmobile could track?

He was across the ballfield and into the wide, sandy trail to the beach road, the path silvery with ebbing moonlight. It was cooler here, a bit of bay salt in the air, a clear perfect night marred only by the sirens on the Boulevard. The beach road crossed just ahead, and beyond that two-lane blacktop a sandy margin and the mouth of the trail he sought.

Stroze laughed, and felt the wind sweep it back with his hair. Beats tossing in bed, eh, Strohzer? He shot across the beach road and the flat margin, into the narrow trail, howling with laughter the cops were far too far away to catch.

The Kawasaki was no trail bike, but for a chopper it was light enough to handle all right on the dry swamp trails, trails so narrow the reed husks flicked his knuckles like rustling ghosts in the moonlight. The reeds were way over his head, so Stroze took his time and picked his way by the map in his head. His nose told him when he was nearing the Oakwood sewage treatment plant, which meant he was nearing the water, which meant that the trail should branch left to a plank bridge across the creek that separated Great Kills from Fox Beach. Once across that creek he had plenty of options, but the fact remained that a half-naked man on a motorcycle would attract attention wherever he went. Particularly tonight.

So the only option was Dobby's Bar. Chance was that old George Smyte was tending bar there. Better chance that Zorch or another of the Radicals was running the pool table. At least someone would buy him a beer.

His inner charts told him he should be near the creek. Stroze stopped, and flicked the light on and off. He was there, all right. The bridge, however, was not. Stroze killed the motor and launched a full clip of curses. Some morons playing chase must have dismantled the bridge to get away. The planks were on the other side of a six foot width of black, scummy creek water.

Stroze dismounted. He waited for his eyes to re-adjust to the swamp light. The sounds of insects and more elite vermin populated the gloom with menace that clutched at his bowels and throat, soundtrack of a waiting long ago and far away. A waiting that exploded, left him wearing the entrails of Sgt. Joe Braun all the long night of desperate combat muffled by trilling in his ears. He shook himself clear, saw the water and the opposite bank, then backed down the trail to get a running start. No 'Banzai,' boy. Quiet. Go.

At the point of takeoff his bare foot stubbed on something sharp and so yielded a burst of golden pain but not the lift he'd hoped for. His other heel sank into the muck of the far bank, but he grabbed and scrambled so quickly that no other part of him got so much as damp. Adrenaline helped him to snatch up and drop the thick ten-foot planks across the creek in nothing flat. He walked the Suicide Machine across and a good ways further so as not to trod swamp muck on the pegs, stopping to wipe his hands, arms and feet with handfuls of marsh grass.

Once he remounted and woke the Kawasaki he saw a dull phosphorescence above the reed heads, the end of a gravelled street. Stroze throttled the bike down to a purr and swung right, along a narrow lane between dark files of bungalows relieved here and there by TV-glow windows. The lane ended at a hummocked wasteland posted for the sewage treatment

plant on the right. To the left, inside the bare crook of the road's turning, was the sparsely-parked lot and solitary citadel of Dobby's Bar.

Stroze pulled up at the shed on the beach side of the elevated shanty, and wheeled the bike to the inner shadow of the dumpster. The shed, armory of kegs and cases, was built off the side of a twelve foot cinderblock foundation. Though red ramshackle clapboard and tarpaper on top, Dobby's would stand through any conceivable flood. Raw concrete steps rose sharply left-to-right across the bar's front, a good six feet wide but no railings at all, just a sand pit below the platform for irregular exits.

Stroze had nearly reached the summit when a human projectile butted open the heavy plank door and hurtled into the pit. The doorway was filled by the massive person who did the launching. New guy.

"Go home and sleep it off, Chucky," he said. Then he caught a glimpse of Stroze two steps below. "Yeah?"

Stroze offered his best wired grin.

"Comin' in to take a load off," he said.

The bouncer glanced a dismissive summary.

"Not like that," he pronounced. "Get yourself shoes and a shirt."

"Well," Stroze figured, calculating the mass before him against his own, "if I could just use the phone..."

"Put somethin' on your feet," the bouncer said, "and we'll talk."

The door closed before Stroze could even peek in. He started to steam. He'd just outrun the whole Police Department. No asshole bouncer was gonna cool the Stroze. Not at a dive like this.

At the thought of dive, Stroze reflexively looked down. Chucky was snoring peacefully in the pit. His splayed legs offered a pair of moccasin-type loafers, on closer inspection a pretty good match for Stroze.

"A deal's a deal," Stroze said as he opened the door and walked in.

The bouncer grunted from his stool at the near loop of the bar and jerked a thumb to the pay phone next to the door.

Stroze scanned the dim room for a friendly face. Looked like Beach hitters around the pool table, scoring each other out in harsh rounds of laughs. The reverse L of the bar was half populated, small knots of locals, a few loners staring at the backbar through two-shot boilermakers, all men. The bartender, a tall, stooped older man, was turned away toward the sink at the other end. The bartender might turn around and be George Smyte, his boss Artie's best pal. But meanwhile, the bouncer was not going to wait much longer for Stroze to grab the phone.

Call Artie? Bad idea to get the boss out of bed. Artie would appreciate the story as long as he wasn't inconvenienced. And Lurch was undoubtedly in the road house on Route 32 just over the Outerbridge to see his siren, Mamba Mama. Netta?

He picked up the phone, and practiced sweet-talking on the operator who placed the collect call to the McVay residence. Given the chaos of that three-ring household, he stood at least an even chance of talking to somebody helpful. Though Netta herself, in that respect, would probably be his last choice.

A young voice picked up the other end and said "H'lo?"

The operator explained that she had a collect call for Donette McVay from Gene Strohzer, and asked if the charges would be accepted.

"Stroze? Cool, sure."

It was Des, an old card sharp in a fourteen-year-old body. Stroze was in luck so far.

"Des," Stroze said, "don't get Netta just yet. I have a story for you, and a question."

"Okay," Des said in a barrage of crunchy snacking. "Shoot."

Stroze gave him a fast-forward highlight film of the evening's ride, looking frequently to the bartender, who always seemed to be talking to someone in the back. Stroze kept his voice below the third or tenth repetition of "Ramblin' Man" on the jukebox, so he no longer had the bouncer's undivided attention, though he had a feeling he could get it back easily enough.

"Anyway, I'm holed up at Dobby's trying to figure out how to get home," he concluded, and held his breath.

"Where's Dobby's?" Des asked.

"Fox Beach."

"Wherezat?"

Des knew the local bars because his father and elder brothers of age toured the taverns of Tottenville. But the boy only knew the lands ranged by his Stingray bicycle.

"North of Great Kills Park," Stroze informed him.

"Oh. So, cool." More crunching. "What's the question?"

"Ah, I gotta get back, with every cop on the Island lookin' for me. I was wondering, if Dennis is around, say, if you guys could come around with the pickup and a tarp..."

The bartender had ducked out. For the moment, at least, Stroze was at the kid's mercy.

"Dennis is out," Des said. "But Dwight's around."

Dennis McVay at 17 was a lot steadier and more discreet than his older brother Dwight, who happened to be Artie's gas jockey, but Stroze could hardly be choosy about his McVays right then.

"Great," he said. "He might even know where Dobby's is. Could you--"

Noise on the other side, somewhere between The Three Stooges and the Richmondtown Militia bayonet show.

"What?" Des screamed just off-phone. "Joey." He returned to Stroze. "I told Mom I'm talkin' to my friend Joey. It's cool. Now..." and the sound in his silence was mental gears whirring, "I can help you."

"You can? Great--"

"Yeah. I just have a couple of questions."

The bartender had not returned, and the natives were getting restless. The bouncer half rose to tell them to ease up. With a sinking feeling in his gut, Stroze said, "Shoot."

Des's voice dropped to a near whisper.

"Did you fuck my sister?"

"Des! Man, I can't answer that--"

"Well, it's been nice talkin' to ya--"

"Hold on. Hold on." Stroze swallowed hard. If Netta got wind of this, he would need a long stretch in jail to recover. "Just between us, fry in hell if you welsh."

"Fry in hell," Des cooed.

"We had... relations," Stroze choked out.

"Cool," Des said. "How didya do it? I mean, what did she do-- is she good?"

Stroze looked at the receiver, then glanced back toward the bar. Like a ruddy beacon of salvation, George Smyte parked the wing gate and stepped into the barlight.

"Des," Stroze said, "I gotta go."

He hung up and waved.

"Hey, George!"

The big old bear looked up, his thick grey brows arched like caterpillars.

"Hey, Bud," responded George, who called everybody Bud till he could remember their names, and possibly instead of doing so. He sauntered over, so smoothly that his long, heavy body seemed to float above the boards. "What brings ya down this neck o' the woods?"

"Well..." Stroze began, and he stepped up to the bar and commenced to tell his tale. The bouncer shrugged. A draft appeared in front of Stroze at about the point where the first cop car appeared behind him. The click of pool balls stopped as the chase was joined at Richmond Avenue. Another beer showed up where he cut behind the roadblock, and when he looked up the whole population of Dobby's was gathered about the sound of his voice. They listened in eager, respectful silence that erupted into whoops as he shot across the Boulevard and through the gap in the fence to Great Kills Park. More beers appeared. By the time he pulled up at Dobby's for his chat with the bouncer, Carl, Stroze was reeling with celebration. He showed off the shoes. He talked bikes with all comers, allowing the balls of your Harleys but praising the raw speed of the Kawasaki. And as George finished up the post-story rush, Stroze managed to have a word with him.

"Heard you went t'th' City t'day, George," Stroze said, a bit thickly by this point.

George waved him off.

"As John Wayne said, 'A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.' It was all right, though. I was in and out of Manhattan before you could say 'Jackie Robinson'."

Stroze basked in the glow of this good old fella.

"Whatsit like over there?" he asked.

George looked surprised again.

"Gone halfway around the world, an' ya never been?"

Stroze shook his head.

"Ahh, it's crowded, for one thing. Dirty. Smelly. Everybody rushing." George shook his head again. "Unless you're getting rich there, I don't recommend it." George's brown eyes twinkled deep in the shadows of his brows. "Meanwhile, we gotta get you home."

Stroze perked up. Oh yeah.

"What's the plan, George?"

"Hm," George said, as though he hadn't figured it out already. "First, you sober up. Eat the pretzels; I'll get you coffee. After we close up, you drive my car -- carefully, now. And I'll ride your bike."

"I didn't know you rode, George," Stroze said, genuinely surprised.

"Dispatch rider Corporal George Smyte, Headquarters Company, Second Battalion, First Infantry Division, at your service. It's been a while, Bud, but you never forget."

"Where?"

"Korea mostly. Caught the end of the Big One." George's eyes seemed to look off that way in time and space.

Stroze turned a pretzel in the bar light.

"How'd it go?"

George dropped his gaze to Stroze.

"Heh, had it okay. Rode in and out of a few scrapes, but I wasn't on the line." He munched a pretzel thoughtfully. "You boys got a pretty raw deal."

Stroze shrugged.

"I'm here."

Outside, an hour later, the night had finally thinned to a cool velvet. The dude in the pit had apparently wandered off barefoot. George traded Stroze the keys to his Olds Cutlass for the Kawasaki.

"You need a helmet," Stroze said without irony.

"And you need a shirt," George grinned back. "Open the trunk, Bud."

The trunk lid popped and lit a miniature attic. George plucked a bleached shammy shirt and handed it to Stroze.

"That'll do for you," he said. Then he began rummaging among the nether boxes and milk cartons until, with a clicking of buckles, he fished out an Army helmet with a chin-strap and liner, Korean War vintage.

"What'd'ya ride?" Stroze asked.

"Had a Harley 740 WLA hard tail," George said, gazing at the old tureen. "Was a beast. Got to scoot around on an Indian once, Colonel Blazzard's. Baby blue, like his Jeep." He shook his head, and set the lined helmet firmly upon it. "I'm ready."

At which point they were distracted by the thrum of a Plymouth 318 cubic inch V8 prowling toward them. Stroze jumped for the car. George cinched his chin strap and mounted up.

"Let's go," he said, kicking the starter just as Stroze switched on the Olds. They set off briskly into the narrow gully of the parallel street before the

police cruiser reached the parking lot. George rode ahead, a strange figure on a strange perspective of the Suicide Machine, while Stroze, even with all the power windows open, felt surrounded by domesticity in the sensible Smyte sedan. His throat locked even though he was expecting the headlights that appeared in the rearview just before they made Mill Road. At least they weren't rushing on him. Ahead, George took a right on Mill, stopped, and waved him up.

"Go straight to my house," George said. "I'll meetcha."

At which the old soldier roared off on the Suicide Machine for parts unknown.

For his part, Stroze tooled sedately along by the light of the car eyes in the mirror. He made a left, barely breathing hard enough to qualify as life till the cruiser slid across behind him and continued on. He finally relaxed enough to let himself feel the car, its numb but responsive steering, hard accelerator with a fair passing gear if you punched it, tight front disk brakes, the Six running smooth and clean with a little rotten egg exhaust on the decel going left onto the Boulevard. Stroze braced again passing the entrance to Great Kills Park. A couple of cruisers flanked the entrance, but this car didn't even register on radar. Stroze was invisible. And George lived this way, had since Stroze was a kid.

A female voice popped into his head.

"I've always depended on the kindness of stuh-*rayn*-juhs," Vivien Leigh/Blanche DuBois in the one movie he and Netta both loved, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Netta, who'd turned him on to the flick, thought Blanche and Stella were pussies, but that didn't cool her major hots for Marlon/Stanley, and, in a favorite game, Stroze. But it was only a game. Stroze could do

Stanley all right, but once they'd had their fun Netta was Netta again, tough as nails and ready to prove it.

Stroze sighed to clear his head and reached for the radio. AM only, natch. George's sound was the easy listening side of light jazz. Nat Cole's rough silk phrasing of "Unforgettable" over a somnolent arrangement. Stroze wished he could sing like that, and wondered if that was what Netta had wanted. You're slipping, Stroze, backward down the rollercoaster. It was over, way over. Damn that little rat Des for reminding him.

But Des had only picked up the phone. He, Stroze, now rolling camouflaged down the Boulevard at a steady 40, had called, and to be honest about it, had thought about calling before.

Stroze realized he needed a smoke. He'd copped a Winston back at Dobby's, but his pack of 'Boros was at home. The hell with it. He was across Richmond Avenue without incident, without even thinking about it as he passed. Hardly any cars out at all, three o'clock on a Monday night. Stroze had a strong urge to pull over, walk, wait for something that might explain these changes to him, but he found that the steady flow had him, with Peggy Lee's scratchy I-could-give-a-shit declamation of "Fever" and a loping bass/traps backup jogging along, and he knew he wouldn't stop until the Boulevard did, at Satterlee Street, just before the Billopp House, and that it would take an act of will not to keep going even then, across Conference House Park to the waiting mysteries of Raritan Bay.

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