

LAST REQUEST

Sammy and I met about 30 years ago up at the Interstate 95 rest area east of Baxter State Park. I was leaning against a picnic table a few feet from my Harley, drinking a Coke and staring at the view of the low mountains and vast forests spread out around me.

I was thinking about the time my wife Donna suggested we buy a camp up near the park and how I had balked at the idea, telling her it was impractical. As I stood there, thinking that if I could bring Donna back, I would buy her as many camps in whatever places she wanted, I heard the telltale guttural roar of a Harley slowing down. I turned and saw Sammy pull his three-year-old 1971 FX 1200 Super Glide Sportster into the rest area. His wife Janice sat behind him, her arms wrapped around his waist. Decked out in matching black leather from head to toe, they were both helmetless, ours being one of the few states where people remain free to choose whether to wear a helmet or not. It probably goes back to our libertarian traditions and our being so close to New Hampshire. “Live Free or Die,” they say.

Closely eyeing me and my bike, Sammy smoothly edged his Sportster into the space beside me. In those days, I was riding a vintage 1966 Electra-Glide Shovelhead, and I kept it pristine,

only taking it out for special rides on perfect days of cloudless skies. That Harley was like a child to me and it felt good when another Harley freak noticed it and appreciated it. Sammy killed his engine and let out a brief low whistle.

“Nice bike,” Sammy said, as Janice deftly dismounted, swinging her right leg up and over Sammy’s head. While Sammy admired my bike, I admired Janice’s long blonde hair. She caught my eyes on her and smiled, clearly appreciating my admiration as much as I was enjoying Sammy’s. As she walked away toward the rest room, the bright sun glistening off her pants, I looked at her tall, thinly curved body and felt a stab of lonely desire. Sammy got off his bike and came closer to mine.

“Looks brand-new. You maintain it yourself?” he asked.

“Yep.”

He crouched down for a closer look.

The sun harshly reflected off the chrome and Sammy kept his sunglasses on. From my angle, I could see the crow’s-feet around his eyes, the skin there a touch less tan than his face.

“You got a fine ride as well,” I said, gesturing towards his Harley.

“Aah, she’s all right for putt-puttin’ around. But this here’s a real machine. A beauty.”

“Thanks,” I said, tossing my empty Coke can into a trash barrel next to the picnic table.

We talked a bit more about my bike, Sammy asking and me answer-



Jan Stamm

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BY PHILLIP BUCKLEY

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ing. Janice came back with a couple of sodas and handed one to Sammy. He took a long drink from it, then set it down on the curb, pulled out a pack of Camels and offered me one. We lit our cigarettes and smoked, looking out at the view.

“Is that Katahdin there?” Janice asked, pointing to a mountain to our left.

“The rocky one, yep,” Sammy said, and then, looking at me, “Y’ever been up there?”

“Before my wife died, we made a few trips to the top. It was more her thing but I went along.”

“Twelve hours of hiking, right? Was it worth it?”

I paused, then said, “Absolutely.”

With that, we all turned back to the view. In the silence, an occasional car or rig zoomed by, briefly disturbing the tranquility of the middle of nowhere. Finally, we started to talk about where we were heading that day. This was the end of my trip, my turn-around point, but they were going to his cousin Mark’s place another 70 miles north. After we finished our cigarettes and prepared to part ways, he asked me if I knew of any older classic Harleys for sale.

“You mean already restored or needin’ work?” I asked.

“Needin’ work, I guess. That’s half the fun.”

“Well, then, yeah, I know of a few.”

“I’ve been thinking about gettin’ one. How can I get a hold of you?” he asked.

I fished in my jacket pockets and dug out a folded old invoice with my letterhead on it. “Here’s my number. Just give me a call,” I said, handing Sammy the creased paper.

“Bricklayer, huh?” Sammy said, studying the invoice. “Maybe we’ve worked on some of the same jobs.” He walked over to his Harley and pulled out a baseball cap and tossed it to me. I read the front: Sammy Snyder and Daughters, Carpentry .

It turned out we knew a lot of the same people. Not surprising since we were both in the building business and lived only about 50 miles from each other. As we

talked, Janice started fidgeting and Sammy got on his bike, walking it back out of the parking space. Janice climbed on and we all said our goodbyes. Sammy started his bike and they chugged out of the lot, heading north on the empty highway. I watched as they disappeared from view around a distant curve, the pounding purr of his Harley ricocheting off the rocky gray cliffs.

That evening, I ate some cold leftover sausage pizza at home and sat out on my front porch. The heat bugs were in a frenzy. When darkness came, it was still hot and muggy, a real summer night, and my beer sweated in my hand. I decided to hit the sack on the early side but I had trouble getting to sleep on account of the heat. The night air was heavy with moisture but it wouldn’t rain. I had all the windows open, but hardly a breeze was blowing. After a couple of hours of tossing, I heard a Harley coming down the street. As it neared, the bike slowed and became quiet, passed my house, then turned and came back, snarling and pacing in front of my house like a caged panther. I got up and went into the hallway to look outside. By the muddled light of the street lamps, I could see a bike going back and forth but that was all. I threw on my pants and went downstairs.

The bike was just turning around again when I got out onto the porch. It was Sammy and Janice. They slowly passed again, Sammy nodding to me as they went by. Behind him, Janice held a candlestick above her head like the Olympic torch, three flames struggling to flicker over the light breeze of the bike. When they turned and got back to the front of the house, Sammy pulled his bike gently over the curb and onto my front walk. I could see his white smile and when I walked down the steps, I saw a look in his eyes, that devilish look that I would come to know and love so well.

“How about a picnic?” he said.

That night we stayed up until two, picnicking over candlelight at the table on my front porch. We drank wine and beer and ate and ate from the bag of goodies they had stashed in their saddlebags. Turns out, Sammy’s dad had been a cook and Sammy’s greatest love, after his

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wife, kids and Harley, was food. That night, they brought a roasted chicken, cheese, bread, potato salad, and a blueberry pie. We talked, Sammy telling stories about his dad, about how he and Janice had met, and the latest exploits and achievements of their four daughters. After we ate, I took them out back to show them my workshop and some of my woodcarvings. We sat in lawn chairs, gazing up at the sky packed full of dusty summer stars.

That's how a 20-plus-year friendship started. And over that time, Sammy never ceased to surprise and amaze me. Sure, he made some mistakes — he admitted as much. He'd had an affair that nearly cost him Janice. He was too strict with his daughters, once grounding Shelly, his youngest, for the whole summer because she got a B-minus in English. And he made their social lives pretty hard too. One Saturday night, when he found his eldest daughter Samantha (she was 14 at the time) kissing a boy on the couch, he forced the boy to strip and then drove him to the center of town and left him there, naked. But on the day of his funeral, Samantha spoke for the girls when she said that they had been blessed to have had a truly loving father.

When Sammy was diagnosed with lung cancer, no one thought it would actually beat him. He seemed so full of life, almost immortal. When he lost his hair due to the chemo and radiation, he took to wearing a bright red bandana. He kept riding his bike, only stopping when he was too weak to kick-start it. Then I started taking him out on the back of my bike, taking him wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted.

When I got word from Janice that he'd died, I rode over to their place and sat up with her all night. I helped her take care of things at the funeral home, called people to deliver the news, and tried to do what I could. It was then that I learned that Sammy had named me administrator of his estate, wanting to spare Janice the trouble. In his papers, I found a letter to me, a goodbye of sorts and one last request, a request that would have to wait until after his funeral to be carried out.

The funeral was about what I'd expected — a simple service. The funeral home was packed. I spoke after Samantha and told the story about that first summer night on my front porch. A couple of guys Sammy worked with also got up, big men in tears. What struck me most was that Dr. Chason, Sammy's last doctor, a man who had seen countless patients die of cancer, not only showed up but had asked to speak. He told us about how Sammy, even on his deathbed, had always asked him about his life and family. He told us how one day, after he'd happened to tell Sammy about his allergic son's impossible wish to have a dog, Sammy had shown up for treatment carrying a perfectly carved wooden dog, a gift he had made for the doctor's son.

At the cemetery, we gathered around the small tomb that was designed to hold Sammy's ashes. Janice spoke, placing a few of Sammy's loves into the tomb: a picture of Janice and the girls, an antique carpenter's plane, a miniature Harley, and a bottle of wine. Coming to the final item, a pack of Camels, she paused and looked up at the sky.

"These killed you, Sammy," she said, holding the pack tightly above her head. "I wanted you to quit, tried to get you to. But you didn't want to. And I didn't want you to change. I love you just the way you are, Sammy."

A couple of days later, I went over to Sammy's house to carry out his last request. Sammy's house was another of his pride and joys. As a carpenter, Sammy had designed and built the whole thing. But as a finish carpenter, the interior was what he was most proud of. The master bedroom had been an anniversary present for Janice. It was on the second floor, with a huge picture window with a view of the ocean in the distance. Handmade furniture, some of it made by Sammy, some of it antique, filled every corner. The moldings and woodwork were elaborate and the hardwood floor flawless and shining like an ice rink after the Zamboni passes. The focal point of the room was a queen-size

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wrought-iron bed piled high with pillows and comforters. The bed was raised like a throne so that you could see the ocean from it. Above the bed were three skylights open to the stars.

On my way to Sammy's, I had stopped at Urban's Hardware to buy a couple gallons of their best interior white paint. Sammy had specified white. When I got to the house, Janice was there, ready to lend a hand. Before the funeral, I had told her about what Sammy had asked me to do and she had laughed and said, "God, I love that crazy man." We went up to the bedroom and covered the furniture with dropcloths. Janice turned on some music and it rang out through the small speakers Sammy had installed in the corners of their room. Sammy loved to play opera on his bike's cassette player and we once rode out to Sturgis and cruised down the main street, Verdi blaring and turning heads.

After the room was ready, I opened the cans of paint and poured them into a five-gallon bucket. I got out some brushes and rollers and roller pans. Janice

brought in the urn with Sammy's remains and she stood next to me, firmly hugging the urn. I looked at her and smiled a little, unsure how we should feel. She smiled back, closing her eyes to keep back the tears, and handed me the urn. I opened it and looked in — just ashes. I tipped the urn over the bucket and some light wispy ashes floated down into the paint. I stirred it, the ashes turning the white slightly gray. I added the rest of the ashes, deepening the color. Then we stood up and went to work, covering the walls, ceiling, and woodwork with two coats of gray paint flecked with black pieces of Sammy Snyder.

When we had finished, we went out onto the small balcony off of the bedroom. It was cold and cloudy. The sky was gray and the ocean the color of slate. We sat there, in wooden chairs Sammy had made, listened to Sammy's cassette and drank some of Sammy's favorite red wine. Janice's fingers touched mine and she took my hand. I felt a few raindrops and I looked down at the dark gray spots they left on my forearm. ■

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