29 March 2008

We were westbound on the Chile Chico road when we saw them.

We'd been through the rough stretch from town to the mine and the subsequent narrow, single lane portion that clings to the cliffs along the south side of Lago General Carrera with its stunning views.

The huge lake, deepest and second largest in the continent, is plopped down astride the Andes as if a challenge by God to the Chileans and the Argentines to share something amicably. I'm not sure how God would evaluate them on that score since, in typical Chilean – Argentine fashion, the lake has one name in Argentina, Lago Buenos Aires (literally, "good airs"), and another in Chile, the aforementioned Lago General Carrera.

Having grown up fishing on the commonly named lakes that straddle the United States and Canadian border, this seemed strange to me. It was as if Lake Superior was called Lake McKenzie north of the Canadian border or Lake Ontario was named Lake Jefferson south of the U.S. border. But, if nothing else, travel teaches us to work hard, every minute of every day, to view the world not as it is most comfortable for us and best fits our cultural norms, but as it is, where it is.

Consequently, I tried hard to envision a big red line across the lake's shimmering waters as we crossed the border. The best I could come up with was a mental image of signs floating on large rafts saying Welcome to the Land of Good Pizza facing Chile and Welcome to the Land of Amazing Fruits and Vegetables facing Argentina. It had been a while since lunch so this may have influenced my perceptions.

We were away from the water's edge, crossing a valley of erosion fill, flat as a skillet, when I saw the first of them. Too centered in the oncoming lane to be a car with a headlight out, I knew it was a bike from the beginning. At its closing speed it wasn't long before I could make out the details.

It was a silver KTM Adventure with tank panniers and Jesse bags. Two spare tires were strapped across the back. The bike had all the right hardware and all the right accessories, from the headlight to the taillight. The rider was wearing all the right gear, from his boots to his helmet. He was riding and was wearing everything an American heading out on their first big overseas ride would buy, if they could afford it, to clearly and without doubt communicate the message: Adventure Rider.

His helmet gave him away though. It was a dirt helmet with goggles. A dirt helmet was the right choice for a weekend with the guys in the mountains or a weeklong trip to a lonely piece of the American West. But, in my experience, it was not the right helmet for an extended, multi-week or multi-month overseas ride. Open face dirt helmets are open to water and dust. His helmet and goggles told me this guy was probably on his first big overseas ride. He was either masochistic or an international adventure rider rookie.

My alarm bells began to murmur, a soft tingling like a child's toy whose batteries were almost dead.

The lead rider was clearly Alpha Dog. I could see his eyes as he flashed by. They spoke of "The Mission." I saw in them that he would brook no delay, pander to no weakness, and coddle no weaklings. He was focused on one thing and one thing only, reaching the goal. The goal for that hour, the goal for that day, the goal for that week, they all led up to accomplishing The Mission. For Alpha Dog nothing would stand in the way of accomplishing The Mission.

I knew those eyes well. They had been my eyes on many a ride.

I checked out his bike as he approached and quickly passed us. It still looked new. All the pieces were there, nothing was visibly patched, nothing looked worn, the tank panniers were not even sun faded yet, and, most telling of all, there were no stickers of any type, anywhere. This bike had not been very far, possibly never even been down yet.

My alarm bells got a little bit louder, as if the kids father had taken the dying batteries out of the toy and spun them in their socket a few times to renew the contacts. My alarm bell sound was still dim, the beat slow, but louder.

A ways back, at the exact distance you'd expect for someone who had yet to learn a very important lesson, just where the dust from Alpha Dog was still obscuring the road, came Number Two. He was running too close to Alpha Dog, in the tail of Alpha Dog's dust cloud. He was too far back to pass but not back far enough to be clear of the dust and see the road or what was coming down it towards him. He was in no man's land, the border zone at the back of the lead bike's billowing dust cloud.

There is one rule for bikes in trailing dust: Partner, Pass or Clear. Partner means you ride just off the rear quarter of the lead bike, about two bike lengths back and off to the side, like a wing man. You are close enough that the dust is not on you and you can see the road ahead clearly. The two bike lengths separation gives the lead bike plenty of swing room to avoid hazards. Riding partner, in a fluid and ever shifting wing man formation, requires two riders of considerable experience and a commensurate amount of mutual trust.

My riding buddy, Bob Mueller, and I rode thousands of miles like that, charging hard down Baja, dancing back and forth across the trails, an unspoken mental telepathic channel open between us, signaling each other's moves. We never once hit each other, or ever really even came close, so I knew it was a viable option. Riding in partner position is a good choice if you are a good rider, but I wasn't sure Number Two was up to that, given his poor choice of location eating Alpha Dog's dust.

The second option, pass, means you grit your teeth and ride up through the dust and pass the bike in front of you. It takes judgment, timing, skill and a large component of dumb luck. It's not a strategy for long term survival as it's only a matter of time before you hit something in the dust cloud: a rock, a rut or an oncoming pickup truck. All are bad, some are fatal. It can be worth the risk in a race, but is not a choice on the list of options for a long ride, especially overseas, even for the best riders.

Malcolm Smith, one of the best off road riders who has ever lived, taught me that rule. He reinforced it on every ride I've ever been on with him, especially in dry, dusty areas. "Don't pass in the dust," he'd preach at breakfast.

One day, he showed up in a sling with a broken bone. "I broke my own rule," he admitted, smiling ruefully. "I passed in the dust." I always figured if the dust could bite Malcolm, it would easily kill me. As I rule, I don't pass in the dust.

The third option, clear, means you hang back as far as you need to in order to see the road clearly. If that means a few dozen bike lengths or a mile (1.6 kilometers), you do whatever it takes to ensure you can see the road ahead – clearly.

But, this guy, Number Two, wasn't doing any of these. He was riding in the rear, trailing edge of Alpha Dog's dust cloud. He wasn't going to partner, he wasn't going to pass and he wasn't going to clear. He was just going to ride along in the dust until something very bad happened.

My alarm bells popped up a level in volume and intensity, as if the kid's mom had found one old battery in the bottom of the junk drawer and put it into the toy's two battery capacity socket. It added just enough juice to crank up the volume and rapidity. My head was hammering now.

The third bike had enough sense to clear, he was well back of Number Two's dust cloud. I checked him out as he motored by. He looked tired, fatigued, like he was clinging to the bars, just holding on. His eyes were glazed, devoid of expression, locked in an internal conversation.

I knew that mental game well. It begins with "just until the day's destination," spirals down through "just until the next fuel stop," then rushes by "just until the next waypoint," and ends up as a repeated inward chant, like a hooded monk, "just make it through the next mile."

Rider Three approaching Photo by Stephanie Hackney

He was riding across some beautiful country, an Alpine valley, carpeted in green and studded with towering poplars shouting their fall colors, but saw none of it. All he saw was the back end of a boiling dust cloud, a rolling treadmill of teeth chattering, gray-brown gravel road and his GPS's "Distance to Next" number that tortured him with its glacially slow rate of decrement.

It was only late afternoon, not nearly late in the day enough for this guy to be in survival mode, desperately grasping the bars like that.

My alarm bells were in full klaxon mode now, as if the kid's dad had tapped into his secret stash of Energizer Alkaline AA's and the toy was at full song.

A few miles down the road, far into the distance, I saw a bike pulled over, tail box open. I lifted immediately, my #1 operative rule being, "Never pass a broken bike."

It was another KTM Adventure fitted out with all the right stuff. The rider, resplendent in his right stuff riding gear, was digging for something in the tail bag.

Nothing looked broken on the bike, but the rider had his helmet off. That is a very telling sign. Taking off your helmet is both a symbolic act and a momentum killer. It marks the end of a section, a break between chapters. Something was up with this guy.

I pulled a little past the bike so I could see the plate. I'd recognize that cursive script anywhere, even under a layer of dust on a lonely road in southern Chile. The bike was from California.

"Are you OK?" I asked.

"Oh, yea, I'm OK, everything is OK," he replied with resignation, his voice nearly lifeless.

My alarm bells were so loud now I had to consciously block them out.

My appearance and accent marked me as American more effectively than if I wore a neon sign on my head. American overlanders are exceedingly rare here, in the same category as hen's teeth and fabled cities of gold. Clearly, he didn't know that yet. He replied to me as if I was in a Chevy pickup and we were on a remote road in the Mohave Desert, in short, nothing special.

There was no doubt. These guys were pilgrims. They had no experience here. I was genuinely concerned for them now.

Wishing to learn a little more, to better gauge the situation, I tried to extend the conversation. I used the magic formula for generating conversation from any motorcyclist, I asked about his bike.

"How do you guys like these KTMs?" I asked.

They were all on identical KTMs with the same basic setup of standard issue adventure rider accessories. It looked like it might be a GroupThink ride to me, a dangerous state of affairs centered around common blind loyalty to a brand bordering on worship. GroupThink is benign when it's a bunch of Harley riders putting to the next ice cream shop, but it can be fatal out here.

"Oh, they are OK, but I sure wish mine worked better on this road. This washboard sucks!" he exclaimed.

I looked down at the bike. It was unscarred, a layer of dust covering the collection of right stuff adventure rider components. There were no aftermarket suspension component stickers or outward signs of suspension upgrade or customization for his weight and riding style. My guess was every suspension setting was still set on factory stock, even the rear spring pre-load.

"Thanks for stopping and asking," he added, regaining his composure a little.

"Oh, I always stop for California bikes," I replied, doing my best to inject some levity.

There was no discernable response. I tried again, laying down the universal generic opening card of conversation, "Where are you guys from?"

"We're all from San Francisco, the Bay Area," he replied.

He was using the code. It starts with San Francisco because that is a city nearly everybody in the world knows, and then it works through the amorphous term Bay Area, which can mean anything from Napa to Gilroy, down to the specific city. He didn't need to finish. I knew where he was headed.

I could see by his look, his haircut, his gear, his bike and the tone of the entire group what the story was. I'd spent a good portion of my last career with guys like these.

Everything about them, from Alpha Dog exuding "The Mission" out his pores to the thick layer of right stuff gear fire hosed onto the bikes and riders, advertised they were all hard charging, high technology guys from Silicon Valley. If I gave him the visual body language and auditory cues that demonstrated I was following his map, he would lead me from San Francisco down the 101 and 280 to Los Altos Hills.

"Oh, cool, fantastic, great area!" I enthused, trying to pump some positive energy into him.

Again, there was no discernable response. He was drained, nearly defeated, unable to rise to the conversation.

I probed again, direct to the point this time, “Where are you headed?”

“Ushuaia,” was his one word reply. One beat, two beats, then he added, “That is if I can ever get off this damn washboard. This road sucks!”

It has never been scientifically proven that time slows at moments of great stress and import. There is no empirical evidence to show that minutes turn to days, seconds to hours and milliseconds become so long you can contemplate the big questions of life. But, at that moment, they sure did for me.

Between “Ushuaia” and the damnation of the road my mind processed a lot of information.

I realized the bikes were pristine not because they had a fleet of guardian angels hovering over them or the world’s four best riders were on them, it was because they were fresh from passing through customs. And, that meant only one thing; these guys had just begun this ride. They’d shipped the bikes into Santiago, or, more likely, Puerto Montt. They were in their first few days.

I thought of the fact that we were, at that very moment, running north to stay ahead of the freeze line, with winter hard on our heels. I considered for a moment that these guys possibly never realized that when it was late spring on Sand Hill Road it was late fall in Patagonia.

I thought of the fact that nearly every national park, every site worth seeing, every hotel, every estancia, and, as they would soon discover just ahead in Chile Chico, nearly every restaurant, was closed for the season.

I thought of all the miles that lay between that spot and Ushuaia. I’d just driven every single one of them. I thought of the washboard, the potholes, the deep, deep gravel, the desolate nothingness that traumatized city folk like these guys and the winds, the indescribable, incomprehensible, blow a bike across the entire road, winds.

Before the last measurable decibel of the trailing sibilance of his “sucks!” damnation of the road faded I processed something even more important. I realized this guy was traumatized by the Chile Chico road not because it was so heavily washboarded, which it was. He was traumatized because this was his first real taste of it, his first sample of the cruel reality that this road wasn’t anything special. Down here, the Chile Chico road was just another road, just another hundred miles of spine compressing, frame cracking, no escape, washboard

At that moment I realized, with crystal clarity and total certainty, these guys had absolutely no idea what they were getting into.

And now I faced a choice.

I spent the first five months of 2006 researching our family histories. Along the way I discovered the typical interesting ancestors such as Native American Princesses and European royalty and historical facts, such as homesteads and Civil War service. But I also found more troubling and challenging discoveries, such as a great grandfather with a hidden, secret past; living relatives who wore an ethnic identity like a badge who were not purely that ethnic group; and in a friend’s family, a trail of intrigue, circumstance and similarity that led directly to membership by his grandfather and great uncle in a secret, criminal society. Family history, as it turned out, can be a very messy business.

The big question back in 2006, just as it was when I looked down on the downtrodden Tail End Charlie rider, was, “Do I tell the truth?” In these circumstances does telling the truth do more harm than good, destroying the very beliefs and convictions required for survival; or does the simple standard of “The truth is always the proper choice,” hold sway?

With the family histories, in nearly every case, I told the truth, or at least intimated it, or at a minimum planted the first few clues to the mystery for the affected to pursue as they saw fit.

I looked at the rider's face lifted up at me. It was screwed into a distorted visage reflecting overwhelming fear of the very things I knew to be certainty.

"The bad washboard only lasts a few more miles," I began. "The road is good along the cliffs until you get to the mine. It's bad, really bad, from there to town."

He nodded, grateful for some information regarding his immediate, desperate, future.

I paused. The canon of "Truth at all costs" pulled at me, tugging me towards purity and righteousness.

I took in the bike, with all the right accessories. I perused the new, not a stitch worn, riding gear. I looked at his eyes, narrow, wrinkled and troubled.

"It's a long ways to Ushuaia. It will get cold as you work your way south." I told him, looking directly into his eyes.

His eyes relaxed a little and then brightened slightly.

Through them I watched his thoughts,

> "The dream is still alive.
>
> I can make it.
>
> I can, we all can – we can do this.
>
> Even if it will be cold, we can make it.
>
> No, not can.
>
> We - will - make it."

He nodded. He sensed there was more. I could not deliver it. It would break him.

He and the others needed to learn those lessons on their own, mile by grueling mile.

They would learn, soon enough, the random cruelties and perfidy of the road to adventure. They would learn, soon enough, that if they overcame the challenges, that if they persevered, that if they survived, they would reap a bountiful and meaningful reward.

But all that lay ahead for them, past the washboard, past the cliff road, past the next waypoint.

My alarm bells ceased. They toy was switched off.

"Have a good ride. Watch out for the four wheelers." I signed off, clutching the Fuso into first.

He nodded and reached for his helmet. He was strong enough now to go on, at least to the next waypoint, probably the next fuel stop, maybe even the day's destination.

Possibly even Ushuaia.

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Douglas and Stephanie Hackney are on a two to three year global overland expedition. You can learn more about their travels at: http://www.hackneys.com/travel/index.htm

