

Throttle Therapy

- 2004; the year I learned freedom has two wheels and a clutch

My aunt Jean, grandma Mary's sister-in-law, had a house over the hill from BJ's. It was a couple miles up and over Buck Hollow past Hayrake. I spent almost as much time there as I did at Grandma Mary's. Aunt Jean's kids all had problems. Jack was her son and his was the bottle—like most of the people I knew. Eventually, though, he got into harder things. When he was being eaten alive by his addiction, BJ brought me with a trailer.

Jack and BJ worked at the factory together. Jack even set BJ and Verm up on a blind date. There was always a go-fast toy at Aunt Jean's. Jack had a four-wheeler, and BJ usually did too. That day, we walked through the house like it was a white-trash estate sale. Nobody was dead—but Jack needed money for booze, smokes, rocks, or maybe bail. We loaded a trailer with all kinds of shit.

When I thought we were done, BJ and Jack kept talking. I kept wandering. The garage had a dirt floor and only a big blue-glow streetlight for lighting. That's where I saw it. A dirt bike, leaned against a bench—covered in dust, birdshit, and dreams. Steam-powered, for all I knew. I also found a chainsaw half-buried in the mud.

I was fourteen. We had no money. I got what I worked for. So when Jack said I could have the chainsaw, I didn't ask BJ—I just thanked Jack and walked off proud. That saw meant I could cut firewood whenever BJ wanted. A day of peace, earned with sweat.

But I wanted that bike.

BJ told me to help him load it. My heart stopped. We were taking the bike? I ended up trading the chainsaw for that busted relic. That was the beginning of my escape plan—the bones of my purple rocket. A 1974 Honda XL100 (KO submodel, if anyone cares). Still mine. Still waiting for the day I pass it to my daughters.

I worked on that pile from day one. Tangled wires. Dead ignition. A mess of parts that nobody believed in. But it was mine. I hyper-focused, tracing wires, sitting on it just to dream. I got the ignition system to spark. BJ was proud. He said I could fix any wiring problem. Problem was, it had a bent valve and needed a rebuild.

BJ helped a little. His friend Eddie helped more. But I rebuilt that engine myself.

The first ride? We pop-started it. BJ towed me with a nylon strap behind his ATV. I didn't know what a clutch was. Popped it, engine roared, throttle opened, and I rode right into the back of the four-wheeler. BJ laughed so hard. He told me later that he had bought it for \$40 because he saw how much I wanted it. He said I earned it.

We rattle-canned the fenders candy purple. Rattle-canning something is redneck for spray painting it. The fuel tank got something special: it got painted plum crazy purple. BJ had it leftover from a 60's Power Wagon project and he let me have some. I called it the purple rocket. Rode the wheels off that thing. I rode it on the hill by the Mark Twain House in Elmira, at Eddie's, everywhere. I was fast, reckless, wild—but free. No one could catch me.

Until the night I tried to really escape.

Bud, BJ's father, was in town. BJ got volatile when his father visited. Life turned into a dog and pony show. The house, the family, and life needed to be perfect when Grandpa Bud rolled in. That night, I snuck out, coasted the rocket down the road, and started it in the dark. No headlight. I wasn't afraid. I was free.

I ran out of gas a few miles from Corning.

I pushed that bike three miles down the road. There was a 24-hour gas station right off the highway that was salvation. Then Johnny Law, a county sheriff, pulled up. I tried to explain—BJ, the punishment, the danger. He didn't listen. He said he knew my mom from high school. Somehow, in his mind, he was doing me a favor. He had it in his power to listen and be my rescuer or he could ignore me and throw me back at the wolves. He said not arresting me was a favor. In his eyes this was a favor, and he was helping me out. He wasn't.

Verm showed up. We loaded the bike in the truck. The Purple Rocket tossed in the bed of the truck like it was just as worthless to the adults as it was the day I put it on the trailer. She drove home and never once asked why I ran.

I paid the price the next day.

Later, there was another uniform—one who made it personal. He didn't show up that night. He showed up after. Again and again. When I was just trying to survive—living in cars, hiding in chaos—he found time. Always had time for me.

He wasn't a savior. He was a reminder. That I was alone. That I'd stay that way.

Later came the RM250—Carl's two-stroke beast. A monster. Raw power. It terrified me. But it was controlled chaos. It scared me in a way I could manage. It gave me strength.

Two-stroke engines function at peak efficiency when the engine hits a rotational speed that every component is tuned to live in. At idle it sounds like it's trying rip itself to pieces. It sounds terrible until you hit the powerband. When everything lines up the beast comes alive. Two-strokes were never built to idle. They burn loud and hot. I found my rhythm on that animal. I learned what's inside of me the first time I found myself riding the pipe. I wasn't safe on the RM250, but even with that untamed insanity between my legs I was still safer than I was ever going to be at home.

Two wheels were rebellion. BJ rode four. I rode two. I swore anything he could do, I'd do with two less wheels. That bike wasn't just a ride—it was a vow. A lifeline. A legacy.

Almost every rider I've met isn't chasing speed, they're chasing stillness. Not the absence of motion. The right motion. The kind that syncs with your soul and burns off everything that doesn't belong. The purple rocket wasn't just a bike. It was my exodus. My rebellion. I didn't have the words for it then—but I wasn't chasing speed. I was chasing stillness.

Not the kind where the world stops. The kind where I do. Where the engine drowns out the voices and the machine gives me one clean rhythm to sync to. Riding isn't a hobby, it's resuscitation. And that dirt, that wind, that hum? That's the sound of coming back to life.

And someday, Madison and Mackenzie will know that when I give them the rocket, I'm handing them the first real piece of freedom I ever earned.