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Houdini's Road Trip

by **D. Naegele**

It was a beautiful day in the foothills of the Adirondack Mountains of upstate NY. Barneveld was alive with activity as the village started it's day. The diner was just opening and the other merchants were rolling out their wares to display them on the sidewalk. The hardware store rolled out wheelbarrows, a rack of gardening tools, and a couple of bicycles. The smells were various and sundry. Walking past the grocery store, you could smell the melons and fresh bananas, as well as the fresh ground coffee from the grinder on the counter by the checkout. The bakery had been busy since the wee hours of the morning, making fresh donuts and cookies for the morning rush and the smells were nothing short of heavenly.

I rolled the bike out of the garage, and looked it over. I oiled the chain and made sure the tires were not low on air, checked to be sure I had all my riding gear, windbreaker, comfortable shoes, and goggles. I walked around the corner to the bakery and bought two chocolate chip cookies which I put in my wind breaker pocket for a snack along the road. A fresh chocolate chip cookie was only a nickel in those days in the early 50's. Andy the baker inquired as to my parents health, as he finished putting several loaves of freshly baked rye bread through the slicer on the back counter. He bagged my cookies, and wished me well, as he pushed down the keys on the old cash register, and dropped my dime in the drawer.

It was a wonderful day, and I could not wait to be on the road with the wind in my face and the smells of nature in my nostrils.

I rolled out of town slowly, not attracting any attention, and as soon as I cleared the bridge over the Cincinnati Creek, I opened it up and cruised along at comfortable rate, with the smell of all I passed by wafting up my nose. I could smell the fresh mown hay at Doc's farm as his hired man mowed the alfalfa that he would bale for his horses. The horses stood with their heads over the fence, and I stopped long enough to give each of the three a carrot that I had brought along just for that purpose. They nickered their approval and leaned their heads closer as I scratched between their ears and rubbed under their chins.

From Doc's farm onward the terrain changed, and the road curved through the conifers where the smell would remind one of a fresh cut Christmas tree. I sped along, sweeping through the curves with no regard for personal safety, although a crash at that speed would surely have meant a bad case of road rash at the very least.

I passed by Coleman's house just as Red was pulling from the driveway with his dumptruck, ready to start his long day of trucking, after staying up late into the night to replace the brake shoes on the truck. A quick wave and a toot of the air horn, and he was but a fading vision in my rear view mirror.

Now came the favorite part of the journey. The limestone tunnel that passes under the railroad tracks. I blew the horn all the way through the tunnel from one end to the other, and listened to it echo off the tunnel walls. The tunnel was cool and damp, as well as dark. It was a one lane road, and I was glad to get through without meeting a car coming from the other direction.

From here on, it was a straight shot to Rt 28 and the Trenton Falls turnoff. I pushed it faster and leaned low over the handlebars as I rolled past houses and barns, fields and ponds. The wind had my hair streaming behind me and the bugs stung my face as they hit my cheeks.

As I approached the Trenton Falls turnoff, I slowed to a crawl, checked for traffic coming off of Rt 28, and then I swept into the corner and turned onto the Trenton Falls Road for the final straight run into the Hamlet of Trenton Falls.

The sun was bright and the breeze and the mist coming off the West Canada Creek from the water rushing over the dam was cool and refreshing. I could

have sat all day and listened to the cars clatter over the wooden plank floor of the bridge. I could have watched the fly fishermen all day, plying their skills, letting out more and more line, until you wouldn't think that they could possibly handle another foot. I watched as it floated so gracefully back, into a loop and forward again, like a slow moving bullwhip, only to lay out delicately on the surface of the water, like a winged insect, ripe for the picking by the brook trout lurking below.

I could have lingered there all day and simply soaked up the sounds and smells of nature, but I needed to move on. I wanted to stop and see my Aunt Mary and Uncle Ralph for a few minutes before heading back.

Uncle Ralph was on the porch when I wheeled into the yard, threw my kickstand down, and took off my windbreaker. He looked really surprised to see me, and called for Aunt Mary to come on out. The spring on the screen door creaked as she poked her head out the door and immediately looked shocked at the sight of me standing there in all my glory.

It was almost lunch time, so they invited me in for a sandwich, some lemonade and a few cookies. Uncle Ralph excused himself and walked next door to use the telephone, as they didn't have one of their own. When he came back, he and I retired to the parlor to discuss the NY Yankees and baseball.

It is not long before my father knocked on the front door. He was visibly upset and told me to grab my jacket and come with him. As we went down off the porch, he grabbed my 20 inch bicycle with training wheels under one arm and put it into the trunk of the car. It was the last time I would see that bicycle for several months. It seems that when I did not come into the house for a few minutes, my mom looked outside to see if I was still riding up and down our block. When I was nowhere in sight she went looking. I was nowhere to be found in the whole village of Barneveld. Mom and Dad had mounted a search with some teen aged neighbor boys, checking all the places that I frequented, such as friend's houses, the creek bridge where I used to throw stones into the creek at the suckers (never in several years did I manage to hit one), the playground and the ball field.

That was the day that I gained my nickname of "Houdini", the only kid in the neighborhood who could disappear in a moment and reappear miles away. I learned that day that it was unacceptable for a

5 year old to take to the highways on such a road trip, and I soon learned that such actions had consequences. I didn't see my bike again for several months. It was taken to grandma's house and locked in their shed. I was grounded to a one block radius of our house and could no longer go to feed the horses or throw stones into the creek. Had I read any history at that age, I most likely would have wondered if Magellan had been grounded for his ventures into unknown territory. It was a horrible hobble to place on the legs of a young stallion ready to gallop into the sunset at a moments notice.

I kept that name for many years. I was always known for my independence, and I could always manage a disappearing act when I wanted to do something that was not in the book of acceptable activity by which my mom ruled our life as kids. I left the power mower running once while I sneaked away to buy a soda and chips at the local gas station, only to find my mother standing next to the mower with her hands on her hips when I returned.

Houdini has aged, and the adventures are no longer trips of rebellion against rules or discipline. Houdini now disappears to places almost "psalm like". Houdini disappears from home, taking his significant other with him, and re-appears next to calm and tranquil waters, to unfold their lawn chairs on lush green grass or on a cushion of pine needles, with a fire crackling and the coffee pot bubbling.

A disappearing act doesn't have to be instantaneous, with a flash of light and a puff of smoke. "Houdini" now disappears unobtrusively, and appears quietly and tranquilly in places far from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. He no longer has enough hair for the wind to blow through, and his face is leathery and dry, so the bugs would not sting as badly, but he still travels the back roads to places like Trenton Falls, and the foothills of the Adirondacks is still his favorite place in the whole wide world.

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