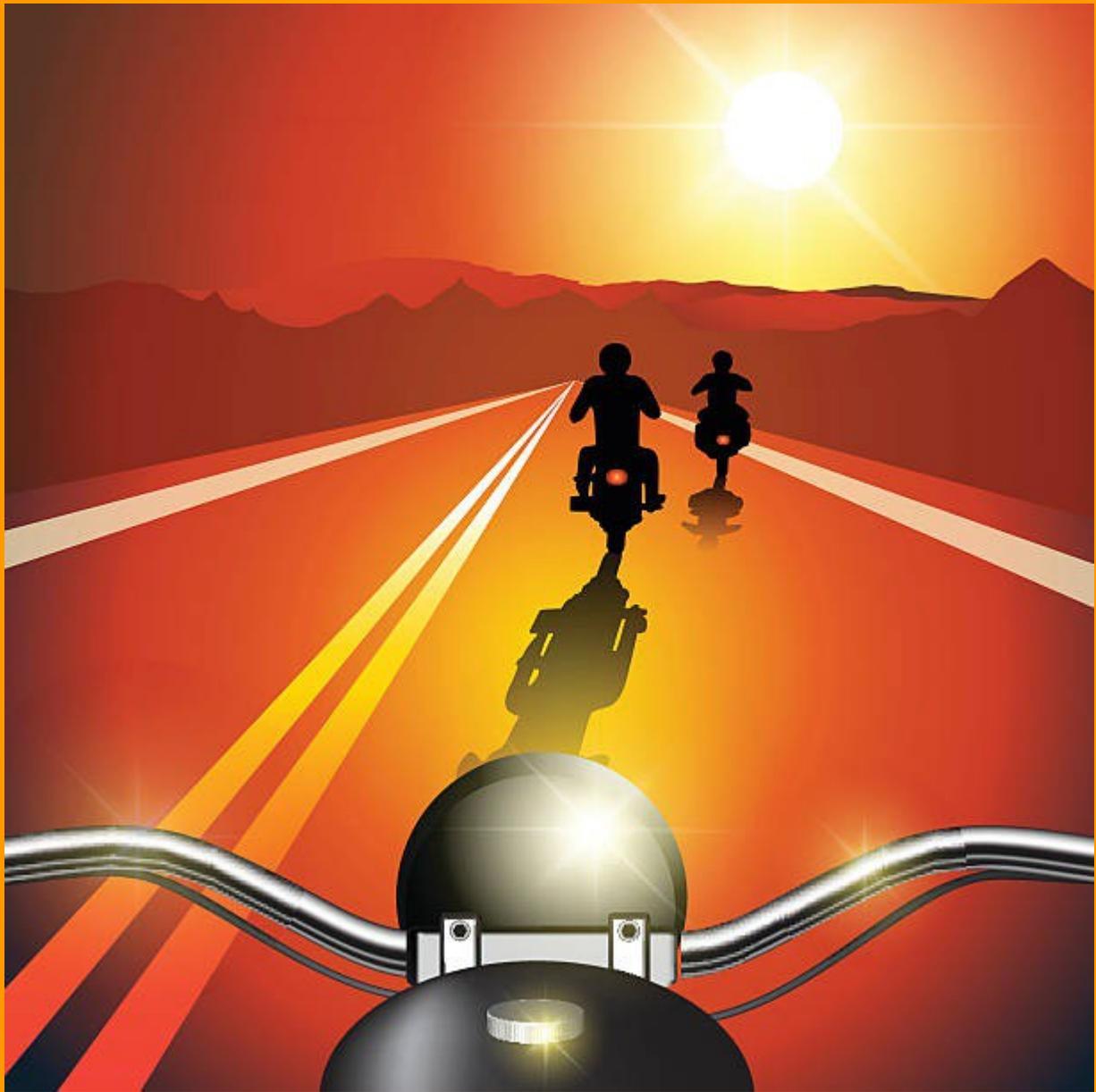


The Final Ride



Chris Phillips

We all seem to remember our “first” ride—whether it was four months ago or forty years ago. I remember going out to the high desert north of Los Angeles, to a dirt mecca named Jawbone. My friend and his family were dirt bike lovers, and regularly popped the home made box steel framed and plywood sided trailer behind their gently aged Chevy Caprice and lugged some older but still thumping singles out for a weekend of dune dashing fun.

One Saturday in seventh grade, we made the two hour super slab drone out to Jawbone, and unloaded the bikes. My ride, which fit my gangly twelve-year old frame well, was a 1977 Suzuki RM 125. Outfitted in canary yellow plastic and a faded sky-blue seat, this was the most incredible and terrifying device I had ever seen! Though a few berm dumps were indulged, in quick order I mastered the basics of motorcycle switch gear manipulation, and basic riding dynamics. I returned home that night exhausted, sand plastered to my sweaty skin, and a Cheshire Cat smile plastered to my gob.

It's easy to see why we remember our “first” rides—they forever changed our lives—like mighty dams alter the path of rivers. Yet, paradoxically, few—indeed, perhaps none—consider their “final” ride. While the memory of our first ride often softens with time into the rosy, life affirming events they are—the thought of not riding—of having our “final” ride can be a black abyss laden with stress and dread. Yet that day will come for all of us. The question is: how will you know when the time has come to hang up your leathers, list your bike for sale, and brace for a brave new frontier? In reality, there is no one litmus test to find that date (neither a magic 8 ball nor fortune cookie will help). There are, however, three broad reasons for considering the cessation of two-wheeled travel.

Physical Health. As we age, time be not kind to our bodies. Sure, skin sags and wrinkles infest our faces like miniature Grand Canyons (just looking into the mirror here for reference). Yet, those cosmetic changes have little bearing on our ability to safely and confidently ride. Still, as time saunters on, you may begin to lose core muscle strength. Indeed, after forty, most people begin losing muscle mass at a rate that may be alarming. Suddenly, that 900 lb. Gold Wing that you have confidently rocketed from coast-to-coast for decades, feels more like a lead Jenga puzzle—just waiting to fall over. Simply getting it upright off of the side stand may become too great an endeavor. Perhaps the thought of coming to a

stop on your bike and keeping it upright with a passenger onboard is simply not viable anymore. These are portents—signs that you may need to consider downsizing at a minimum, or stop riding altogether if your level of strength can lead you to a potentially dangerous situation.

Mental Health. Similar to our physical decline is our mental decline. I don't mean dementia or Alzheimer—though those are definitely ride ending conditions. More simple and predictable changes, such as slower reaction times, shorter duration of concentration, and forgetfulness can potentially force you to consider the end of your riding years. Not being in top mental condition can be fatal. Slow reaction times may mean not being able to recognize a braking situation early enough. Slowed reaction times may mean hitting a car instead of swerving to avoid it. Forgetting to put your side stand down, not secure your helmet to your head or not remembering to keep your ride on a maintenance schedule could be catastrophic.

Medicines. As we age, many of us will inevitably have to begin taking medications to keep both our physical and mental health in as peak shape as possible. Indeed, a daily regimen of blood pressure, aspirin and cholesterol is almost a given after fifty for many. But, though there are many benefits to these medications, many have side effects that can be downright dangerous. Some years back, my doctor place me on a blood pressure medication. I quickly noticed, to my dismay, that standing up too rapidly, caused me to feel dizzy and almost pass out—called a gray out. He quickly changed my dosage to avoid this side effect—but what if the side effects are endemic to the medication? What if sleepiness is listed as a side effect? Could the sudden onset of the need for sleep potentially put you in a dangerous position—yes! Imagine you develop diabetes and the need to control your blood sugar with insulin. The sudden spikes and dives of blood sugar—if not controlled—could cause complete loss of control of your bike.

In the end, is the end—the “final” ride. Most of us will simply spend one more Saturday morning on the couch than in the saddle, and realize too late that your “final” ride has already occurred. For others, the desire to ride is too strong, and we must ask a hard and deep question of ourselves: do we have the physical, mental, and medication awareness to realize when that day comes, and be wise

enough to whistle Happy Trails as we click that side stand down for the final time, and open a new door, while safely, and securely, closing the door on our riding careers?