

IN THE TURNS

THINGS THAT COUNT

by Adrian S. Palmer

Let me introduce myself. My name is Adrian Palmer. I am 5'6" tall, balding, have a pot belly, and teach English. But don't get your hopes up. Although you Ducati freaks have been raised on a diet of Cook Neilson's heady prose ("a chassis as whimsical as a Lithuanian flute solo"¹) you are not likely to find it here. Not all of us English teachers are creative writers.² But so much for the disclaimers, and on to the story.

Several months ago, I was lucky enough to be sent to Florida for a convention of teachers of English to speakers of other languages. Since there wasn't much going on the day I arrived, I decided to pay a call on Joel Eliel, the guy who has made it possible for you all to be reading these words. \$15 and a 30 minute taxi ride took me from Miami Beach, home of the country's most churlish hotel and restaurant personnel, to Ft. Lauderdale, where people smile and actually try to make life pleasant for you. I planned to spend the afternoon talking with Joel, whom I imagined to be a Scandinavian type, working in his basement, surrounded by a pile of correspondence from DIOC members, and harassed by a nagging wife in curlers whom he - groveling³ and pleading - would manage to get to leave us alone for a while to talk about Things That Count.

As some of you know by now, this picture of our spiritual leader (and his life style) is not entirely accurate. But this is not the appropriate forum to discuss personalities. Anyway, I don't want to spoil the fun of other DIOC members who may have a chance to find out The Truth for themselves.

Joel and I spent an afternoon in a place which shall, for a number of reasons, go unnamed, talking about Ducatis and Ducati owners. We got to discussing why people own Ducatis and why they are so intensely partisan. I must, however, confess that much of our conversation strayed into the world of metaphor, not, unfortunately, in the lofty music-arts-literature world of Cook "a photograph to Steichen"⁴ Neilson, but, rather down at the level where I suspect most of us (yes, even you who are reading these words) have settled - either for lack of the drive necessary to feel comfortable in the higher realms or simply because we are common people whose ambitions in life do not extend much beyond satisfying our most elementary needs. What I am having so much trouble saying is that Joel and I didn't do anything more elevated than compare motorcycles to women.

But why should I be so defensive about this? The analogy we came up with may be prosaic, but it seems to fit pretty darn well. It has us comparing a Ducati to a BMW as a high-strung young mistress compares to a blase society woman.⁵ Now, because most of us probably have not had experience with either type of female - or else if we do have (or are having - for those of you who allow the present progressive with middle verbs) a current source of information in this area, we are unlikely to be in a position to admit it - prudence leads me to continue from here on in the subjunctive.

So let us imagine what it would be like to be involved with the female analogue of a BMW. Age? First of all, not too young - remember the years of development that has gone into the BMW. Experience? You bet, and a wide range of experience indeed: Like the J.C. Penny Fashion models in the T.V. commercial, she looks like she has seen it all and done it all. Nothing can dent her concrete ego. On the outside, at least, she is perfect - a completely finished product.

However, a wide variety of life's experiences have taken their toll of our hypothetical well-bred society woman. A steady diet of rich food, expensive booze, 100mm cigarettes, and coping have weakened her substructure and slowed her responses. Though it would not be apparent to the casual observer, those more intimately acquainted with her would know that she relied more and more on cosmetics to cover up an ever increasing lack of firmness underne⁶h. And it is common knowledge that in an ideal woman (as in an ideal motorcycle, much to the dismay of the BMW pilots at Daytona) certain parts have just got to be firm. But even if we were to move from the crass, physical world into the less tangible, but ultimately more permanent world of the mind, we might find that all is not well here either. A psychoanalyst would find it difficult to penetrate the defenses of her Super Ego to release her Id. Doesn't this woman ever react?

But let's leave our would-be society woman in the competent hands of her shrink and turn our attention to her counterpart in this improbable proportion - our hypothetical mistress. An eye-stopper? But of course. And it goes without saying that she is firm where it counts. However, unlike her sophisticated counterpart, she might have certain flaws - but nothing which one couldn't correct with love and patience. She would, perhaps, have trouble applying her cosmetics properly. And one might expect her temper (think wiring) to be short from time to time.

Leaving form - where on a gross level our would-be mistress clearly wins overall, though on a discrete-point level she comes out second-best - and turning to function, it is a different story altogether. For this is the domain where our hypothetical mistress excels. After all, she only has to do one thing (well...maybe two). I'll have to admit here that Joel proved more imaginative (and by virtue of his tender years, less inhibited) than I did in specifying exactly what these functions might entail. I prefer not to expose my ignorance and lack of imagination in public - particularly not to an international, not to mention worldly, audience.

But back to Ft. Lauderdale and reality. Joel and I tossed around the idea of writing a whimsical piece of fiction on the above theme (roughly, society sophisticate versus hot-young-stuff) without letting it be known until the end of the piece that the real debate was about motorcycles (cute, huh?). But I pointed out, sagely, that no one reading the DIOC Newsletter (except, possibly, personal friends of Joel) would be so naive as to think that an entire article would be devoted to women, and it would be better to play it straight with the readers - and I have, you'll have to admit. So that's what I will continue to do from here on - simply, to recount my own experience with motorcycles. Initially, with motorcycles in general and, ultimately, with Ducatis.

Back in the early 60's, I was spending most of my time in school around academic types. One day, it occurred to me that my circle of friends was fairly limited and that one way of expanding this circle was to buy a motorcycle - something that I had had on my mind since I was a kid whose parents, though tolerant, were not THAT tolerant. Financially independent and of legal age, I gave in to my own, and every normal boy's, wish and bought a cycle - one of the first Yamaha 5-speeds with a hot engine and a wretched, flaccid suspension. As a first motorcycle, it was an exciting but frustrating machine that ran like crazy for only about 500 miles before it detonated itself into shrapnel (I had ordered it with a high compression head and mixed the gas with Shell X-100 motor oil - a brew which, apparently, did not agree with the Yamaha).

After two top-end rebuilds, I traded in the Yamaha on a BMW R-50 (now, all I cared about after that damn Yamaha was dependability) which I later upgraded to an R-69S when some of my thirst for performance returned. I rode the BMW for five years, and though I didn't stop to think about it at the time, I now realize that I rode less and less as the years passed. Finally, maturity got to me. I got married and made arrangements for me and my wife to go abroad for a different kind of kicks. I sold the BMW thinking that I was lucky to have ridden cycles for nearly 10 years without killing myself.

My first impression of Bangkok, where we settled down, simply confirmed my feelings about cycling and vulnerability. No one in his right mind would risk life and limb to ride a motorcycle in that traffic. But an occasional late-night stolen moment of pleasure on a Honda borrowed from a Peace-Corps friend kept the old fires burning. So, when we moved upcountry where even the same rode cycles, I bought a Honda S-90. Sounds small, but in Thailand, a 90 is a medium sized cycle and a 175 is a BIG machine.

Now, some of you Ducati lovers will find what I am about to say heretical, but by now you know that I am a decent, candid sort of guy who would not want to let you down by distorting the truth just for the sake of a good story. So I'll get this off my chest and into the open right here and now. I really liked that little Honda. It took me into villages, on trips along jungle trails which skirted U.S. airbases, and through rice paddies to visit community development projects that my New Zealand buddies were working on. And when, about six months later, the local Honda dealer got in a shipment of 125-SL's, the trail bike bug had bitten me good and I traded in the 90. The 125 served me well for the next two years. My family, which had by then grown to three, found that it met all of our needs which, admittedly fell somewhat short of the transportation requirements of a family of commuters (is there any other kind?) in L.A. Well, to wind up this episode, I'll just