

Sidetracked

**HONEY, We
Need to Talk!**

Text: Bill Dragoo Illustration: Gane Diers

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” my wife asked as she led me down the aisle of a ma and pa grocery store in Northern California. We were exploring the epicenter of the 1849 Gold Rush with a group of brisk riding friends. The morning had been spent on a twisted entanglement of dirt and narrow paved roads through the mountains. It would be a stretch to say we had been riding conservatively. Trepidation mounted as we moved out of earshot of my pals and any semblance of protection they might have offered. It felt like one of those dreams where you are drawn ever deeper beneath the waves by some unknown creature with tentacles. You can see the boat above, but it can't be reached and no one can hear you scream.

My wife is normally quite calm and supportive of my riding. Even on our honeymoon, after riling two-up across Italy on a Ducati Multistrada, dipping into turns and passing with aplomb, as is the custom there, she said, “Tomorrow I will get my head around this,” following her admission of being far from her comfort zone. I knew then that I had picked a winner. So when she wanted to have “the talk,” I was made to wonder what I had done to place myself in such peril. But deep down inside, I knew.

Once before, I had received an icy glare and the warning, “If I die doing this, I will kill you.” This warning followed a spirited sparring with a good rider on an Indian Chief. We were aboard my Harley-Davidson Dyna Sport on a winding stretch of pavement near Mena, AR. I knew she meant it and I promised then to be more cognizant of the inertial sensations she was subjected to on back while I was engaging in an overzealous surge of youthful exuberance. I promised to take it easy.

In all fairness to myself, as a charter pilot, I was usually conscious of the importance of helping my passengers enjoy the ride without fear. I would pride myself on being smooth on the controls and keeping bank angles reasonable for those who might be frightened in a small airplane. I was not oblivious to the effects of my antics on those who trusted me to fly.

Yet the urge and opportunity to show off can be a powerful elixir. Consequently, such displays of bliss and vinegar had a lot to do with my wife eventually taking up the reins of her own machine; one on which she had complete control over throttle and brakes. Nevertheless she will still occasionally ride with me as we explore backroads in search of some forgotten byway or historical artifact relating to a story she might be researching.



More recently, as we were retracing the trail of Comanche Chief Quannah Parker, I felt a sharp smack on the helmet. It happened far from traffic or obstruction amid a field of wind generators in southwestern Oklahoma, just as the front wheel touched down from what I was certain had been a perfectly choreographed wheelie. I thought for a moment that I had hit a large bird, but no, it was my wife, emphatically expressing her opinion. Her administrations were sufficient at the time and no further repercussions were suffered that trip. We sometimes need reminders, and a spunky pillion is just the person to deliver them.

To be honest, today's session in the grocery store aisle might have originated this morning as we were chasing our friends through gold country. There had been one incident I had hoped she hadn't noticed. A long mud hole had inhibited my willingness to slow or turn for fear of falling, so I took a precautionary trip off the dirt road ... into the very large crater of a volcano. Mercifully, it was extinct and had a nice layer of slippery wet grass on a surprisingly steep slope. We came to rest several hundred yards from the point where we had exited the road, gratefully still on our wheels. She dismounted without a word and walked back to the top while I made several attempts to return to the road with less than optimal traction. I finally crested the lip where my patient wife waited. Her benign look at the time belied what was to come.

There among the Spam and Pork & Beans, my gentle partner placed her hand on my arm, looked me straight in the eyes, and informed me in the most believable fashion, “If you ever expect me to ride on the back with you again, you *will* slow down.”

To this very day I have complied with her request. **RR**