

Sidetracked

BLIND SPOTS

Text and Photography: Bill Dragoo

Travel with friends is sometimes tough. Sooner or later, patience wears thin and things are said that we often regret. When it happens, it's next to impossible to look in the mirror.

I pulled the nozzle from my new 1972 Honda XL250 and handed it to Norm. He held it vertically so as not to spill the gasoline and tipped it into the tank on his identical machine. While he was busy, I folded out my kickstarter and gave it a stab with my boot. The motor sprang to life. He frowned at me through the clear, flat shield on his open-faced helmet. "It's your turn to buy," I pronounced, as I snicked the Motosport into gear.

"You're an SOB," I heard, in a deadpan voice, as I rolled out of the gas station, and I'm almost certain he flipped me off as I rode away.

I rode slowly so he could catch up, knowing he eventually would. This was a typical routine between us when we traveled. He had just pulled the same trick on me at the previous fill-up. Gas was 32 cents per gallon and I was in no mood to be ripped off. It never occurred to me that I might have had some influence on his attitude.

I always wondered why Norm was such a jerk all the time, but we had so much in common that, like brothers, we were almost inseparable. As far as I was concerned, I was the nice guy and he was the butthead.



Norm was Oklahoma State Motocross Champion in the 125 Expert class and I struggled to stay in his dust, but swore one day I would beat him. I eventually earned his respect to a degree on the motocross track, but he was always a bit aloof and mildly scornful. Once while practicing, he cut under me on a jump and I refused to yield, landing my CZ 125 in his lap, smashing my expansion chamber shut and almost breaking his arms. The race was the next day. Norm and I worked late into the night to slice open the pipe, heat and straighten it, and weld it back together so I could race.

He was two years older than me and I always looked up to him, despite his putting me down. He would wander off sometimes during the summer and I wouldn't see or hear from him for months. Out of the blue, he would show up at my doorstep with stories about living in a cave near hot springs in the Rocky Mountains or traveling to Nova Scotia on his Honda CB500. If I left the room, he would sometimes disappear again for weeks. I envied his free spirit.

I purchased an antique airplane, a 1947 Stinson Voyager, when I was 19. Norm and I took off that summer and flew out west, landing in the desert to camp and at small airports to buy fuel. Stopping for fuel in Las Vegas, I ordered him to get out and hold the wing to prevent the high winds from blowing us upside down while taxiing. Norm did as he was told, holding the

wing even as the wind lifted him off the ground ... until his hat blew off. I saw him consider running after it and yelled, "I'll buy you a new hat!" He held on until we could tie down, saving the airplane. I never bought him a replacement that I recall.

We shared a pup tent at a campground in Colorado one summer. We both needed showers and Norm went first. When he returned, I asked him if he would loan me his towel ... I had failed to bring my own. He refused and I let it all out, explaining how selfish he was before stomping off to the showers. My T-shirt was all I had to dry off with, and I was sore when I got back to the tent. Neither of us spoke for at least an hour, but I had plenty of arguments going through my mind. Suddenly, Norm broke the silence and said, "You just think you're so damned perfect."

"I was just about to tell you the same thing," I retorted, and we both busted out laughing uncontrollably. It was the comic relief we needed, and at that moment I realized I was as much to blame as my best friend for "HIS attitude."

We all have blind spots. I've had plenty of opportunities since then to assess my own contribution to conflicts that arise on road trips and elsewhere. Little did Norm know he was helping train me for life. I'll have to tell him thanks when he comes back from wherever he is. **RR**