



Highway 84

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Late Sunday afternoon I went on a bike ride - a hobby I had just taken up again. It was only my third ride for the year, but also the third one within a week! I promise, it was not to get away from a screaming baby, our two week-old Anton is an angel in that regard - at least so far. I also do not believe it had anything to do with Lance Armstrong's inspiring performance, winning the Tour de France that day a record 7th time. My theory is that subconsciously I started doing something for my own health - after all, witnessing the birth of one's child does occasionally have the effect on fathers to remind them of their own mortality. Rejecting the concept of coincidences, however, lends itself to a new theory why I started biking again: the same principle that guided Douglas Adams' private investigator Dirk Gently from the Holistic Detective Agency to simply be wherever he needed to be to solve the mysteries he was involved in. Perhaps I just needed to be somewhere at a certain time... well I was.

About 2 hours into my bike ride through the Santa Cruz Mountains I was ready to head home and turned from Skyline Boulevard onto Highway 84. That intersection is in the town of Sky Londa - a tiny town, with a population roughly proportional to the amount of money I was able to spend monthly during my college years on books, shelter, and food - in exactly that order.

A book should some day be written about Highway 84, perhaps somewhat analogous to the song about Telegraph Road, only that the Dire Straits explore how Telegraph Road changes, traveling through time, while on Highway 84 you can witness extreme diversity at a given instance in time without requiring H.G. Wells' technology.

Highway 84 starts at the Pacific Ocean near the Pacific Coast Highway (Highway 1) and the town of San Gregorio - next stop Hawaii - well, that is the opposite direction, though. It works its way up to the ridge of the Santa Cruz mountains, Skyline Boulevard, then descends on a steep, windy, and shady path past old redwood trees toward the town of Woodside - the stretch that is featured in my story - before it yields to urbanization all around, crossing El Camino Real, spanning the San Francisco Bay in form of the Dumbarton Bridge (the bridge featured in "Harold and Maude"), winding its way through Nilas Canyon along side the historic railway, and over the Hills through Livermore past its (in)famous National Laboratories. The road probably continues from there into the Sierra Nevada, but I have not yet traveled on it past Livermore. At least Highway 84 was not named after the trees that were cut down to make space for it, too often a tell tale sign of urbanization - yes, I know, I live on Oak Lane and there are no oak trees around.

Shortly after turning onto Highway 84, in its first major left curve, I noticed something odd in the corner of my eyes - two motorcycles pushed against the right safety railing - in a place where you would *not* park your Harley Davidson if you cared about it - and every Harley owner I have met cares deeply about their machine. Somewhat reluctantly defying the fun effects of gravity, I slowed down and saw a big guy in a black leather biker outfit bending over

another person, leaning still against the railing, legs stretched out half way onto the road, eyes closed, head leaning to the side. Neither of them were wearing their helmets anymore. I got off my bike and saw the blood - plenty of it.

Now, in one of my prior lives I worked for a few years as an EMT in Germany. It is quite interesting how that line of work teaches you some useful skills you never forget, such as taking control in situations where most people freak out. I stepped off my bike and got the first biker and a second person (a former Stanford nurse as I found out later) who appeared out of nowhere to help me lift the injured man across the safety railing off the road.

We cut the right leg of his Jeans open and stopped the bleeding of his leg. During our treatment of his most obvious injuries and a more careful search for further injuries, the man came to. His name was Sam, he was 53, and remembered what had happened. Sam must have passed out after he or his buddy had taken off Sam's helmet. I cannot comment on the theory that not all tough looking bikers are good at seeing their own blood run, but the thought this might be true did cross my mind. Apparently, Sam had lost control of his bike in the curve and had slid along the safety railing, hitting some of the wooden posts with his right leg. I was not about to relay to him how much better he looked after this accident than some other accident victims I had seen in similar circumstances, and how much more intact for that matter. Telling such stories to accident victims while they are being tended to is generally not a good idea. It was also interesting to see that Sam seemed to care more about his cut up Jeans than the fact that you could see parts of his skeleton without an X-Ray machine or the fact that he would have to pay a hefty deductible for having his Harley fixed. He was actually mad at me for cutting up his Jeans! After all, he said, he had had these Jeans for some 20 years! Well, it seems the time had finally come for the nanomorts to get to them, his bike, but not quite him.

Once I had the situation under control and the patient stable, I had a free hand to call 911 on my cell phone. After holding for some 6 minutes (*six* - I am not kidding!) for an operator who, even after 3 repetitions (and the reason was not the quality of the cell phone connection) had problems sorting out what I meant by "Send me one ambulance. We have a motorcycle accident with one seriously injured person in stable condition. We are on Highway 84, half a mile east of the intersection Highway 84 and Highway 35", I noticed a police car pull up, so I gave up and hung up. This was not the first occasion where I found that the 911 system in America is seriously broken. At least one of the onlookers in the many cars that had driven by without stopping had apparently been on hold on 911 before me and not given up. The officer was a lot more receptive to my report and got an ambulance dispatched, plus a couple of fire trucks that I saw heading up the mountain later while I was already on my way down. I am not sure what they were for - perhaps one of the onlookers had overheard Sam say he needed a joint now - an idea I made sure he put right out of his mind and the lighter right into his pocket again: an injured man, stretched out on top of dry leaves in a forest, smoking a joint while waiting for his ambulance to arrive - indeed, we are in Northern California, I though...

By the time the ambulance pulled in we had a couple more people helping and I took off - It was starting to get dark by that time and I still had some 10 miles to bike home. Sam's friend shook my hand and thanked me profoundly, tears in his eyes. I got a good look at the banged up Harley that I thought, in time, will bring tears to Sam's eyes.

So, was it a coincidence that I came by there just in time to move an unconscious person off a busy highway and stop some major bleeding? I tend to think the Stanford nurse who was right there with us would accomplished about the same thing and it would not have been too late for Sam to regain consciousness to get upset over his cut up Jeans or to accidentally set fire to a few redwood trees wanting to smoke weed. And for proof, well, I do not have a photo, but judging by the itching on my leg I am starting to wonder if perhaps I was kneeling in some poison oak while attending to Sam's injuries. Once that is in full bloom I can send that photo - yet, I probably won't.