

# Sunset Over The Potomac

by Regan Ryder

It awoke, on its own, at 6:37am. Early enough to get the job done, it thought. Another night in this frigid/boiling hotel room with the too-soft pillows and the too-hard mattress. Another night of sore muscles and stiff back. Another night of no cell service and attempting to fall asleep rereading an old favorite book. Useless now, thanks to insomnia. It arose and showered, shaving mechanically, brushing its teeth mechanically.

By 7:02am, it had loaded its possessions back onto the motorcycle: a leather backpack full of clothes and electronic gear, fastened to the sissy bar with a fluorescent yellow bungee cord, and a rubber one. A mostly-empty cooler sat on the luggage shelf behind the seat, bound to its perch with a pre-made webbing of bungee, anchored by six hooks. Saddlebags were loaded with wet-weather gear, a spare helmet, antibacterial wipes, and tinted goggles.

By 7:21am, the motorcycle was fueled and heading west on I-66. Through the Bluetooth headset in the rider's matte black helmet, Ozzy Osbourne's "Under The Graveyard" played on single-song repeat. Eight miles later, it turned north onto I-81 and let that road carry the motorcycle its zig-zag way up the Shenandoah Valley.

In theory, the rider should have continued north, along I-81, into Maryland, thence to Pennsylvania, connected with I-76 eastbound at Carlisle, and proceeded home. The entire process should have taken about six hours, including extremely necessary stops to refresh and stretch aching muscles and twitching tendons.

But, at 9:13am, halfway through the slice of West Virginia, the rider exited, turning an expectation into vapor.

It was expected to return, somewhere in the dinner range, that evening, to a home with a waiting partner, a job with a waiting boss, to a slew of doctors and lawyers and creditors who awaited its money and its attention. But that expectation was ten hours away. No one would miss it for ten whole hours.

It had only pulled over once since it had pulled out of the gas station, and that was to switch the song to Death Angel's "Stagnant." In the parking lot of an old and seemingly-abandoned corporate complex, empty save for the single remaining security vehicle (unoccupied, of course), it had paced and raged and thought.

It thought too much, always had.

Returning to the bike, it had rolled out again to this new music, to the thing thrumming in its veins – in its very bones. Not so much listening to it, but dancing to it with its soul, the thrumming a pleasant counterpoint to the chorus of the song:

*Blank stares at the  
Blank walls drill a  
Deep hole in my empty soul*

And so, it exited, taking WV9 west, into the hills, up into the mountainous regions, past Martinsburg, away from Antietam Battlefield (so boring a place. "Here, lots of people shot each other. Nothing here now but an imitation rail fence, some rusted old cannons, and placards. And an empty field. Wasn't that worth the tour?"). Past

Hedgesville it rolled, the curving road a serpentine song of its own. It paused, momentarily, in Berkeley Springs: last bastion of cell phone signal and the site of formerly good days. Days when it had smiled at the thought of moving here, away from the rest of the world – only to find that this *was* the rest of the world; Jeebus gonna getcha ‘round the corner, Trump 2020 signs in every other window...rainbow inclusion stickers on the window of the defunct Chamber of Commerce storefront. Days when the idea of a mountain retreat was a good dream. Days before now, when there was no one to share that retreat with, no decent income to provide the hideaway, and no dream job to fuel the furnace in that hideaway. All gone, in a matter of weeks, imploded into ash like a fire burned too far down to support its own weight. At a stop light, it checked and found no messages. And so, it continued on.

Route 9 turned north for a few blocks, before making a left at a light whose green had burned out months ago and never been replaced. It wound steeply up a hillside before beginning to wind upward onto a mountain top, going west again.

At 11:08am, it pulled into a patch of gravel on the side of the road. Across the street from the former Panorama Diner – boarded and decaying – was the panorama itself: a cliff, at least a hundred feet high, stretching down to where the Potomac bent northward. There was a steel railing along the edge of the cliff, where the gravel met empty air; the obligatory Civil War information placard here spoke of a raid down into Maryland to disrupt train transit. It was faded with sun, bird droppings and neglect.

The rider cut the engine and flicked out the kickstand with its foot, taking a moment to breathe the claustrophobic air of a full-face helmet when the wind isn't moving over it. It levered the face plate up, undid the chin strap, turned off the Bluetooth, and removed the helmet. A piece of metal came loose, bounced through the gravel, disappearing into the dirt: an earring. The rider felt its loss but was not moved to search for it; waste of time, really. More accurately, waste of effort. Time was not a problem, effort was.

After a moment's deliberation, it set the helmet on the ground, beside the bike, which was clicking and popping with heat exchange from the chrome tail pipes. It had wanted a glorious sunset – that was part of the plan. Up until realizing that the sun would not magically set in the north, the plan had gone flawlessly. Of course, they were also about nine hours early to catch a sunset. But it would have to do. Nothing was perfect, especially not plans.

Shrugging, they shucked out of their protective gear: gloves stripped and dropped carelessly in the dirt, armored jacket draped over the luggage on the seat, careful not to let the arm melt on the tail pipe. The stifling head rag was also dropped to the ground, sweat-soaked and hated. Its loss showed the gleaming naked skull of the rider, mouth curled down in disapproval. Though what, precisely, it disapproved of was not immediately obvious. The world? The state of its own life? The sweat that ran freely into places it didn't belong? Probably all of them. All of them and more. A lifetime of disapproval, coming to this place, this time.

It told itself it was stalling. *Yes?* it responded to itself. *So what?*

But it went to a saddlebag and removed another handful of bungee cords. Three of them were the fluorescent yellow ones, with black plastic end hooks. One was a long, rubber one, with steel S-hooks for ends. And one was another of the six-pronged nets.

The rubber one made a few passes through the bottom of the rail, winding a few times for strength before being hooked solidly into place. The three yellow ones got chained, end-to-end, dropping the bottom below the sight line of anyone passing by.

It went back to the luggage and removed a pair of headphones from its gear, hooking them into its phone and changing the song yet again, this time to Ghost's "Life Eternal." Then, it stood, leaning against the rail, watching the river flow south, around the bend at the base of the cliff, and head east towards DC.

Its body felt numb, its brain jammed. It rather enjoyed the sensation: weeks of insomnia had produced a state rather like being drunk, without the stupid things one might say (and this one had, the night before) and the beer goggles, just the floaty feeling that nothing was real. This was a truism to the rider, a maxim as set in stone as anything Sun Tzu might have written in *The Art Of War*: nothing was real. Or, at least, nothing mattered, the difference indistinguishable to the true nihilist. The Universe didn't care whether the rider was a living, breathing human, or whether it was hung on a meat hook, its legs immolated, while it was slowly disembowelled by some malignant force. The Universe would merely shrug: same number of atoms.

Enough time had passed that they were getting hot. Sunburned, in fact. The back of their neck and the places on the tops of their wrists where their gloves and sleeves had not quite met were a rich, lobster red. They flicked their wrist with a fingernail and found a satisfying sting.

Gravel crunched behind them as a car rolled slowly to a stop. It took the driver a few moments to get out. The door made a pleasing *thump* closed that echoed off the old restaurant facade. The driver's steps – *crunch, crunch, crunch* – meandered over until he was leaning on the railing next to the motorcycle rider, staring into that same vista. The driver was wearing an uncomfortable-looking brown polyester uniform, yellow blazons on his shoulders. A wide-brimmed hat (which he'd removed at some point and hung limply from his fingers, dangling over the railing) and a pair of mirrored aviator shades completed the picture of the stereotypical backwoods policeman.

For a long time, neither of them said anything. The motorcycle rider had completely lost track of time once the bike had been switched off.

"Anything you wanna tell me?" asked the cop.

The rider's brain, already jammed with floaty, let that drift atop the internal waves until it crashed into something. It shook its head, *no*.

The cop nodded, waited a little while longer, then said, "I ain't looking to do more paperwork today."

The rider nodded.

The cop turned, so he was facing the restaurant and leaning on the steel fence. "Ain't looking to clean any messes up, either. Catching my drift?"

The pause was much longer this time. But another nod came.

The cop nodded. “Now, I ain’t leaving until I see you get back on that bike and head away from here. Back towards,” he looked at the license plate, “Pennsylvania.”

It didn’t know when the song had stopped, but it removed the headphones and picked up its detritus, putting it back on in a semblance of order – still ignoring the dropped earring. It started the bike, checked its functionality, and drove back east, back down the mountain, back to the Interstate. Back to its life.

The cop waited a good fifteen minutes to ensure the rider didn’t return. Then he went on about his patrol, more gravel crunching as he walked back to the car and rolled away.

In the hours between then and sunset, people driving past that outlook thought they caught the shadow of a person leaning against the steel fence. But they drove past too quickly to see it properly, and the people who stopped saw it not at all.

At 8:22pm, the thing calmly climbed the waist-high barrier and slid itself gently over. It lovingly slid down the length of cord to the bottom one. There, it wrapped the netting bungee around its head, as tightly as it could manage. It looped the bottom bungee into a circle, hooking it back to itself, putting its neck through the loop, with a bit of difficulty. Then, it simply let go, let gravity do what it did, gently pulling down.

A few seconds later, its tongue swelled and lolled out, its skin mottled, and it made noises to make a cat’s hairball sound like a symphony.

And, a second before its eyeballs burst, it shut its eyes and watched the blood-red sunset over the Potomac.