

HELLO MOTO!

BY Stephanie Lim

I left my heart in San Francisco. I never thought I could love someone like Betsy. She was dangerous. She was fast. She was irritable, loud, and a little high-maintenance. But she was also 25 years old and beautiful, so I could forgive her these things. Most importantly, we traveled together well – so well that after a while, I couldn't imagine going anywhere without her. Going places with Betsy was infinitely more fun than going alone.

A lot of people didn't like Betsy. Even though she made me incredibly happy, they thought she was likely to get me killed and they begged me to get rid of her. I'm not going to lie, we had some frightening moments. But I can honestly say it was never Betsy's fault. After all, she was just a motorcycle.

If you're like my parents, you equate motorcycle ownership with organ donation. Statistically, you'd have a point. Per vehicle miles traveled, a person is about 20 times more likely to die on a motorcycle than in a car.¹ If you're even more like my parents, this is the figure you cite at the end of every conversation. Of course, you are also 21 times more likely to die on a horse than on a motorcycle, and I didn't see them trying to pull me off Old Thunder in summer camp.² However, horses are moody creatures – literally – which enters another risk variable into the equation. Motorcycles and cars don't have this kind of unpredictability, where human error is the leading cause of accidents. In the motorcycle world, the humans making the errors are usually the riders themselves. It's not the motorcycles that are dangerous – it's the *motorcyclists*.

In the past decade, rider demographic trends have begun to reflect an unfortunate blend of inexperience, poor judgment, and increasing engine size, coupled with more recreational use. More and more, older men (90 percent of motorcyclists are men) are purchasing extremely powerful motorcycles as recreational vehicles. These guys are inexperienced, aging baby boomers crashing overkill cruisers into highway dividers after a long Sunday spent knocking back pitchers at some rural roadhouse. And this isn't just an unsupported burn against wannabe bikers. More than half of all motorcycle fatalities are single-vehicle collisions with a fixed object; more than half of all fatalities occur on rural roads; and



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72 percent of new members to the ever-popular boomer vehicular suicide club (40 percent of fatalities and rising) are drunk when they join.³ Apparently, the new way to end your mid-life crisis is to buy an expensive chrome coffin, and drive it, tanked, into a tree.⁴ Automobile drivers are not much different in terms of drunk driving, with the only difference being that drunk automobile drivers are much more likely to kill others in the process of killing themselves.

I don't want to see motorcycling become as outmoded as horseback riding, and it's not accurate to say that motorcycles—and bicycles and horses—are dangerous without examining the nature of these fatality rates. Certain people will find ways to kill themselves no matter how they travel.

So, if you're considering upgrading to two-wheeled travel, don't let the statistics get you down. The best two ways to stay alive and upright are to (1) not be a drunken idiot, and (2) to encourage as many people as you can to join you, making the streets safer for everyone, including pedestrians. And if joining the two-wheeled revolution for green's sake isn't enough, consider all the glorious moments of smug superiority that are so hard to come by in congested urban environments. That smug

feeling comes when you fly free through the toll plaza and weave through Bay Bridge traffic in rush hour traffic, when you hear people sighing as they insert their credit card at the gas pump as you get change back from your ten-dollar fill, when you can keep an eye on your sweet ride parked directly in front of the café while your buddies run up breathlessly from the spot they found a half-mile away after circling the neighborhood for hours, and, best of all, when someone you hardly know asks for a ride home and you say, sweetly, "Got a helmet?"

REFERENCES

- ¹ "Motor Vehicle Crash Fatality Counts and Estimates of People Injured for 2006." National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Sept. 2007.
- ² Horseback Riding Riskier than Motorbikes: Study. CBC News. Sept. 24. 2007.
- ³ "Fatal Single-Vehicle Motorcycle Crashes." National Center for Statistics and Analysis, Oct. 2001.
- ⁴ "Motorcycle Deaths Reflect Change in Rider Demographics." Insurance Times. Aug. 20. 2002. Vol. XXI No. 17.