

A LIVING IN THE COUNTRY
SHORT TALE

**ROAD
RASH**



HARTLEY STEVENS

Road Rash

A Living-In-The-Country Short

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By

Hartley Stevens

I bought my first motorcycle when I was in third grade.

You say, “You mean, your *parents* bought you a motorcycle. What *terrible* parents they must have been.”

But no, we bought it ourselves. My brother Rex and me. We lived on a farm, we worked, we saved our money. A Yamaha, Enduro-60. Still, to this day, no object has ever given me so many adventures, so many euphoric moments—and so many minutes of pain.

A couple of years later, at the ripe old age of ten, I purchased another motorcycle all on my own. I gave over my equity in the old bike to Rex. He eventually killed the little beast.

Our story begins during the summer between my sophomore and junior years of high-school. After work, every day on the farm, my football coach expected that we come to the gym and lift weights. It was a requirement, but I secretly loved it.

My Uncle Ron loaned me his street bike. A huge, fat-seated Honda 550 to make the drive every day from the farm to the gym. The bike was used, but glorious. I savored each and every moment spent burning up pavement.

Three weeks prior to school resuming, football practice began. My dad didn't need me to work on the farm during this time and practice was happening three times per day. My Uncle Ron let me to keep the bike.

One fine day I was riding home after an errand for my Mama. I flipped on the blinker and prepared to gracefully turn into the drive fronting our home. At the time we lived in town.

Behind me I heard a scorching screech of tires and burned rubber. Right before the drunk lady in the Ford F-150 plowed into the rear of my bike, I remember looking over my shoulder and seeing one gigantic headlight—then, the impact sending me through the windshield of the bike. I still recall the smells of burned rubber, oil and spilled gasoline.

Being young, I believed I was invincible. I never cared or even thought about safety clothing. I was wearing a helmet—it was mandatory back in the day. I was also wearing, after-practice gym clothes. Cotton shorts, a tank-top and flip-flops.

After impact, I skin-surfed along the newly-poured stretch of asphalt on my front, then turning on my side, then onto my back. After that my mind's a blank until I found myself laying in the ditch on the side of the road.

I woke to intense pain. No surprise there. But the pain was coming from my Mama coarsely kneading all of the bleeding parts of my anatomy. She was crying and shrieking, but also rubbing damaged skin with her hands and a large roll of paper towels she'd brought from the kitchen—where she saw it all happen.

I pushed her hands to a rippling boil developing on my thigh. “I’m cramping Mama—rub here, *hard*.”

She complied.

The first on the scene, young EMT, spoke to her with authority. “Ma’am, you need to step away. That knot on his leg is likely a broken femur. You don’t want to go making it worse.”

I passed out again.

The next thing I knew, I was being wheeled down the road on a stretcher or gurney or *whatever* they called the rolling beds used for delivering the dying.

The hospital was literally across the street. I could throw a baseball from my yard to it. Evidently an ambulance couldn’t be dispatched to an accident so *close* to the hospital and the decision was made to just strap me in and wheel me down the road to the emergency entrance.

I remember my Mama furiously slapping away the hands of the EMT’s, nurses and doctors as she ran down the road, gloriously massaging the cramps in my legs.

When I woke again, a tall, thin nurse was removing a thermometer from parts unknown. Half-cheery, she said, as she held a plastic cup, “We need a urine sample.”

Screw that. I was dying here. “Can’t... maybe later.”

She leaned close to the bed. “Hooneeey... there, there. I know you’re hurting something awful. But we need a sample to rule out internal bleeding. Let’s just move you a bit, so you can pee in the cup.”

I was a super-respectful boy. I’d been scared by my Daddy into the idea that to disrespect your elders was a quick ticket to hell. But, just at this moment—damn that. “*No*, I can’t.”

She recoiled somewhat, but wore the hint of a quaint grin. “No problemo, honey, we’ll just give you a catheter.”

I’m sure I was on good drugs. I was hazy, yet still feeling enormous pain. But in my addled mind, I’d just *asserted* myself. No peeing, not tonight. Maybe tomorrow. I was seventeen, the king of the known American world.

She clicked her tongue, turned to a nearby cabinet and began fumbling about.

I was sloshy, delirious. Happy and sad at the same time. Yet, still I was a smart boy who heard the danger signs.

“What’s a catheter?”

She wheeled around holding a translucent garden hose in her hand. “I’m going to *insert—*”

She said, *insert*.

“I’m going to insert this little, bitty hose into your penis. Push it down into your bladder—”

I sprang from the bed and grabbed the plastic cup from her hand.

Two days later it was confirmed. I’d suffered mild internal trauma, a slight concussion—which was wasn’t my first, according to the CAT-Scan—and serious abrasions to almost half my body. They decided I should be treated as a burn victim.

Translation, I was banged up, but good. The bad part was the road-rash. I’d skied down the highway for too long and on too many edges of my body.

Everyone visited. The team, the grands, the extended family, the whole damn town. Everything passed happily in a drug-filled haze. Languid... I came to know and love the term. I groped the chest of female class-mates as they leaned over my bed. I made acquaintances, not carnal, but damn close to it, with the candy-stripers. Maybe *one* was a little on carnal side.

Day three began with a visit from the doctor in charge of the entire hospital. Several staff accompanied him, gathering around my bed. Doctor-Boss, said, “You’re a fine, strong man, my

boy. We've been given the chance to put somebody being treated here on the cover of a national magazine. Your mother and father have given their permission. In return, the hospital will assume all costs of your treatment. But we need your consent as well."

In my drug-addled state, I understood some of what he was saying. I understood, 'Magazine Cover', I understood *that*.

"Mama said yes?"

Doctor Boss smiled. "Yes, she did."

"What do I have to do?"

"Nothing of any consequence, my boy. You need only lean back, relax and have photo's taken with the nurses and doctors."

"And there will be no cost to my family for my treatment?"

"None."

"Any payment for me?"

Doctor-Boss bent his caterpillar eyebrows. "Well, like what?"

"I wrecked my uncle's bike. I'm sure it's totaled."

Doctor-Boss squinted his face. "How about five hundred bucks for your *uncle's* bike?"

"Where do I sign?"

Signature complete, the Doc and staff retreated. Over his shoulder, Doctor-Boss said, "Of course, we'll need to get you cleaned up for the photo shoot."

I nodded, “Of course.” I didn’t really *think* about that.

Two hours later as I was finishing a newly-found habit called ‘The Days of Our Lives’, a humming, a *soothing* humming, preceded the appearance of a three-hundred pound burned marshmallow in a nurse’s uniform. Her name was Nurse Philomena Dardy. I’ll never forget.

“Oh child, you got the baddest case of road-rash. You poor dear. Nurse Mina is gonna fix you right up.”

Finally some serious sympathy. “I’m scraped up pretty good.”

“Yes, you are child—yes, you are. I hear you an important member of the football team. My nephew Harold plays on the team with you.”

I smiled. “I know Harold, been playing together for the last few years, basketball too.”

In truth, Harold Dardy was an asshole. He was bigger than me, mostly because he’d failed two grades. He was the kind of anus who always ran his mouth, always had too much to say. I’d fixed that one day on the football practice field.

In class, around the common areas of campus, he’d always been a bully. He picked and prodded verbally, especially with me for some reason. But, on the football field, words didn’t matter so much. During a practice tackling drill, one meant to separate the men from the boys, I’d humiliated him—eleven times in a row. The coaches loved it and shouted insults. The team

loved it, they were sick to death of his constant smack. I loved it, too. He ran the ball and I buried my face in his sternum, the ball erupted and I grabbed it up. He ran his mouth, the coaches said, 'Do it again'. He ran, and I crushed him again, I recovered the ball and while he was running his mouth I tossed it back into his face mask. He lunged at me and I tried to run my helmet through his ribs. Much jolly laughing and taunting was in the background. After ten such encounters, he was broken. He was never the same after that.

Nurse Mina continued humming deep hypnotic notes as she moved equipment around the room. "Harold says they call you 'Spot' on the basketball team, see'in you the only white boy who plays the basketball. Well, that just seems mean. The TV people would be down here with big cameras and a hateful story to tell if it was a lily-white team of boys with only one black. No sir, doesn't sit right with me."

Oooh, I liked her a lot. She understood my reverse racism issues. "Thank you, Nurse Mina."

"How 'bout a bath? I know you been laying here dirty since practice days ago. And that nasty slide on the asphalt has gotten your skin all burned up. You want a bath?"

My face bloomed like a summer sunflower. "More than anything."

"Okay then, sugar. Let's get you out'a that there bed and into a wheelchair. I already got the water running in a tub down the hall. It's nice and hot, not too hot, but I also got some good suds in the water what'll get all the infection out."

That sounded like heaven on a stick. At the time, I was a healthy young buck. Nearly six-feet tall around a hundred-ninety pounds. The promise of a bath was so enticing I felt I could walk. “I can walk.”

She shook her large head. “No, no, no. I’m sure you could, but the hospital’s got policies. We gots to get you in a chair and roll you down to the bath. By the way, I hear you gonna be some kind a celebrity for us here at the country hospital. Gonna put you on the cover of a national magazine.”

Shucks. “Yes ma’am.”

Nurse Mina rolled the chair over next to the bed. I’d been lying on top, but now sat upright. I was wearing a pair of nylon boxers, bandages and absolutely nothing else.

She pushed the chair close, laced my arm around her shoulder and boosted me into the chair. I wheezed with the pain from my internal core.

“Oh, I know, I know how it must hurt. All busted up inside, but they said you didn’t break a single bone. You one healthy farm boy.”

It was a short ride in the wheelchair. I could smell the bath, hear the running water. I couldn’t wait to get clean. And, by God, I didn’t want any showerhead beating the remaining skin off my body. I’d always hated baths, but now this was just the thing.

She hummed the entire way. So soothing. She pushed the chair into a tiled room where a giant, ceramic tub was brimming to the edge with bubbles. The smell was sharp with Betazine soap, yet still very pleasant from my point of view.

She braked the wheels on the chair. The comfort of stability warmed me. She locked the door of the tiled room. Even the door was tiled. That seemed *odd*.

“Alright, sweet bean, let’s get you in the water. Stand up.”

I saw the look on her face. She wanted me to stand and bare the goods. Shuck my remaining fabric of dignity. She was female—and old, by my standards.

I’d had sex... once... already. That didn’t help this situation. “I can get myself into the tub, Nurse Mina.”

“Oh no, honey love. We gots to do this thing together.”

The sound of the locking door came crashing back. There hadn’t been any humming for a while.

“Nurse Mina...”

“I’ve seen it all already, baby. You ain’t got nothing Mina hasn’t seen before.” She began humming again, but it was a lower bass like she was remembering something *bad* from her past.

I became a toddler extreme. Embarrassed by his turtle head and jelly-beans. “Nurse Mina...”

“Just shuck your drawers, we’ll get you in the fluffy tub.”

I looked to the closed door—and into her eyes. I creased the waist band of my sporty shorts and let them drop to the floor.

With a hand on my wavering elbow, she guided me into the tub. My one sexual experience before had been in complete darkness, on a fallow road, next to a train track. This was the first woman who'd seen me in all my luscious glory. I was withered and ashamed as I limply sunk into the tub.

At first there was the sting of water, hot water, meeting injured flesh. Then I settled in letting the soap do its business. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad. I flushed and harbored against the cold ceramic.

Nurse Philomena Dardy, my angel of light in a painful, troubling world, turned and checked the lock. She began singing something I'd never heard. Soulful, yes, but bound in pain.

“Alright, super-star, football hero. I need to wash you.”

Fluffy bubbles enveloped my face. I was getting over the shame of being nekkid.

“I can do it myself, Nurse Mina.” Sounding even to my ears like a three-year old.

The humming and singing never stopped. She just inserted rhythm into biblical verses. She held on high a sponge. A normal, if not larger version of what a sane person would wash the car with. My Mama had one like it—I'd seen it during the limited trespass I'd done against her bath and bedroom. A Loofah.

“No honey, we gonna do this together.”

Some pleading crept in. “I'd *really* rather do it myself.”

“I know you would sugar, I know.”

Severe road-rash is similar to burns and I had them all over my body. My hands, elbows, shoulders, back, hips, knees, ankles and feet—everything had bright strawberry gashes through levels of skin and tissue.

She began by lightly cascading the sponge around the areas of my skin which hadn't been damaged. The sting of the soapy water had some bite to it, but the washing felt pretty good. She'd ask me turn this way, then that way, move a bit to the edge or hold an arm or leg a certain way. Very courteous, pleasant.

“Now, honey child, we going to have to wash those nasty sores. Gots to get all the dirt and grime out'a there and scrub up the edges to get the healthy cells working again.”

I only heard the words *scrub the sores*. “I don't know about that, Nurse Mina. Maybe we should wait a day or two? These sores are mighty tender.”

“You got a pretty big one here on your shoulder, let's start there.”

“Nurse Mina—”

With a giant, calloused, catcher's mitt-sized hand, she grabbed my upper arm where there were no burns. She tightened the vice, then began to scrub at my damaged shoulder wound, with some serious elbow grease.

I howled. Screamed and tried to pull away. She hummed louder and clamped down harder with her hand. I tried to writhe away, kicking at the edges of the tub. Water sloshed over the side, soaking her. She hummed and scrubbed.

After what seemed several hours, but was only a couple of minutes, she wheeled me around in the tub. Pausing in her humming, Nurse Mina said, “Now let's get that other

shoulder.” She clamped down on the other arm and began scraping away at my raw shoulder with a cheese grater. It *couldn't* have been a sponge.

“Noooo. I can't take it... no more... *pleeease...*”

She spun me around again, my slick butt offering no traction. She grabbed the back of my neck in the vice-hand and began scrubbing everywhere else. The bubbles were gone. The water was a deep crimson. She hummed and scrubbed, scrubbed and hummed.

I screamed.

She released me from her grasp around my neck, reached over and poured white liquid all over the sponge.

“That's about it for your upper body, sugar. Let's get busy, downtown.”

She was bigger than me, at least heavier, but I was an athlete. Surely I was stronger.

“No! No way in hell. This is over, I'm not doing this anymore.” I began to get up.

Lightening quick, she grabbed one thigh and held me firm against the tub bottom. Then came the humming, then came the sandpaper sponge—then came the screaming.

My brain flicked over into the red of panic mode. I was really going to have to fight this woman. I reached up and grabbed at her lapel collar. She flicked my hand away and resumed. I pushed back against her chest, she didn't even budge. I grit my teeth and lunged forward to push her off me. I missed, but caught some of her hair.

And her head came off.

Not really, it was her wig. We both paused in shock as a wet tarantula the size of a mop-head floated on the bloody water.

There was no more humming. Her lips peeled back as she touched her bald head. She grabbed the tarantula, flung it towards a sink and *really* went to town.

I was punching, slapping, biting—anything to get out of that tub. All to no avail. She used her forearm against my throat, she slipped a knee over the edge of the tub and weighed in on my solar plexus with all of her three-hundred pounds. If there was any water left, I'd have drowned. She scrubbed harder and used more of the burning soap.

My only thought was, *Please bring back the humming.*

When she finally stopped scrubbing, she sat back and I could see the tendrils of sweat dripping down her face. Now I understood why the whole room was tiled. Bloody water had completely painted the walls. It looked like a horror movie.

She turned and fumbled in the cabinet beneath the sink. She placed a ball cap on her bald head. And, just like that she started humming again.

“Okay baby, I know I know. Now stand up and let Nurse Mina rinse you off.”

Naked, trembling, teeth chattering, I got my feet under me and stood in the tub. I didn't even attempt to cover myself.

She sprayed me with the shower head. It felt like the high-power rinse at a carwash.

She covered me in a long, paper robe. Blooms of blood exploded all over the surface of the fabric. She settled me, still quivering, into a wheelchair and rolled me back to my room, where a clean, crisp *skinny* nurse waited to re-bandage all my wounds.

Nurse Mina helped me from the wheelchair, rubbed my head and caressed my face. “My, what a pretty boy, strong too. I hope we got all that infection cleared out. I’ll come back to check in a couple of days.”

My eyes drilled her with laser hate.

She said, “I’ll tell Harold that you said ‘hello’.”

And with that, she turned and hummed herself down the hallway.

The End

Before You Go...

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