

KICK START

by Lee MacDougall

I could tell something was going on because my sister had washed her hair and put it up in the cans. Debbie had always had great hair. It was blonde and shiny, like one of the Breck girls in my mother's magazines. She wore it just-past-shoulder length, parted in the middle, like most teenaged girls in 1966. To get the big loose curls she wanted for special occasions, she had read about using empty orange juice cans as curlers. *Remove both ends and clean very well.* She got her best results when she washed her hair, canned it, then let it dry like that overnight. I have no idea how she could sleep on the cans, but she did. She had also read that you had to make sacrifices for beauty.

The occasion was the arrival of Phil Dorenson. He wasn't her "boyfriend", but he was obviously interested. He and a friend had driven his 250 Yamaha motorcycle all the way to Toronto, and were now on their way back to his parents' place in South Porcupine. But they were stopping at our place on the way.

I was eight; my brother was twelve. We were only interested in the motorcycle. We knew that every kid on our street would be hoping for a ride on that bike.

They were supposed to arrive in the afternoon. It would be too late for lunch, but my mother said she would give them a snack if they were hungry. Debbie spent a lot of time changing her clothes, and cleaning our apartment. When she took the cans out, her hair was beautiful. The curls were big and bouncing, just like the girls in the pageants on television. She played the Beatles song "Got To Get You Into My Life" over and over while she waited.

I was alone, I took a ride

I didn't know what I would find there.

Obviously she had fantasies of riding off with Phil on the Yamaha. This was the summer of the Revolver album. Everyone had their favourite Beatle. Most people loved Paul, so I chose George. I had heard that he was left-handed, as I was, and that he had the same birthday as me. After a while I relented and switched to Paul, because whenever they were interviewed, George never said anything.

My sister and her friends used to play their records in Diane McGiddon's garage. She had a yellow record player, and if you set the arm that was supposed to hold the multiple 45's at the outside of the turntable, it would replay the record in a continuous loop. This was the only way to perfect dance moves that they'd seen on television, and to memorize lyrics. Eventually someone's mother would yell, "Change the damn song!" but we

usually didn't. I say we, because sometimes the teenagers would let us younger kids hang out with them. As a boy, I was handy when they were trying to figure out partner dancing. We knew the Frug, the Swim, the Pony, the Hitchhiker, the Twist, and used to do them all to every song. When my sister and her girlfriends were doing something grown-up, like practicing kissing, we would be told to get lost.

Debbie had met Phil at a summer Bible camp that his parents ran on a lake just north of Kirkland. Even though it was supposed to be a religious experience, it was still full of kids and hormones, so attractions happened. She had been going for years; first as a camper, then a junior counsellor, then a senior. That was when she noticed Phil. Or maybe he'd been there all along, and had just noticed her. Either way, he was coming to see her today, and she was buzzing.

We heard the Yamaha pull up from inside our apartment. We ran down to meet them just as they got off the bike, a little dazed from their long drive. We'd never seen Phil before, but figured he must be the one that Debbie hugged. His buddy was introduced as Gerry. Phil had brown wavy hair that just touched his jacket collar. It wasn't as long as the Beatles'. It was flattened from his motorcycle helmet, but he shook it to make it look natural again. He was wearing a worn brown leather jacket, and very tight blue jeans. And he had on running shoes, I guess because he figured leather boots would have been too "biker" for a good boy. He didn't look religious, but I could see why Debbie had a crush on him. He looked like one of the Herman's Hermits, or the cute guy from The Monkees. Not scary like the Rolling Stones, who my father said were hoods.

The neighbourhood kids started gathering around the motorcycle. None of us had ever seen a bike in real life before. Phil told us to be careful, and not to touch it.

"Some of the parts'll be pretty hot," he said.

We all knew he just didn't want us sitting on it or knocking it over, but we played along. Debbie asked Phil if he wanted a pop, and he and Gerry both said yes. I think they had to pee pretty badly, but the pop got them into our place without having to ask. My brother and I stayed outside guarding the bike. It was as if we felt some kind of ownership, because Phil was visiting our sister.

After about five minutes, I was dying to know what they were doing inside. I ran up the stairs, and when I slipped into the kitchen, my mother had laid out Freshie and sandwiches for everyone. She sat at the table with us, and asked the boys questions about their trip. Phil was pretty comfortable talking to an adult, which only made him seem cooler. My sister had put on her Simon and Garfunkel album, to show that she was cool too.

*Hello darkness my old friend,
I've come to talk with you again.*

This was music that she and my father fought over. Debbie played it in her bedroom, endlessly, until he yelled “Turn that crap off!” She would come out of her room and say “It’s not crap. It’s social comment.” That was a huge act of defiance on her part. From then on, whenever my father said anything about her music, she would throw the social protest thing at him, trying to justify her playing a song five hundred times in a row. Mother, on the other hand, liked most of the new music, and seemed just as excited as we were when someone young sang on the Ed Sullivan Show. Sometimes she would surprise us by knowing the words. My father was a classical music lover, so he thought rock and roll and folk music was garbage. Today my sister was playing it for Phil; as a gesture of her devotion to him, and to the cause.

*And the sign said the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls,
and tenement halls,*

Eventually Gerry said he’d better check the bike, and they took that as their opportunity to get going. My mother thanked them for dropping in, and they thanked her three times for the food. When we got outside, we could hear her singing along with the record as she cleaned up.

No one had mentioned anything about going for a ride. My sister had made us promise on pain of death not to ask. I followed them back out to the bike and looked at it longingly. A few kids were still there with my brother, and we could tell they had gotten the nerve to stand beside it and put their hands on the handlebars. There were a few awkward moments as Phil and Debbie said their goodbyes. South Porcupine was about seventy miles north of Kirkland, so their going out together wasn’t possible, but they were enjoying the drama of it.

While we waited, Gerry let me try on his helmet. My brother said I looked like the Martian from Bugs Bunny, but I didn’t care. When Phil saw me in it he asked if I wanted a ride. I looked to my sister, and she just smiled, and said, “Will he be all right?” She didn’t care about my safety; she just didn’t want to get heck if I fell off. Phil assured her I’d be fine, and said he’d just go around the block.

“You can be next,” he said, and he winked at her.

Phil asked Gerry to hold the back of the bike. He put his helmet on, then grabbed the handlebars and said to me, “Come on.” I was up on the seat in a flash. I didn’t know where to hang on, so I tried to reach the

curved bar behind me.

“Just a second,” said Phil. He slipped his leg over the seat, and slid back a bit toward me. I could smell the leather of his jacket, and the scent of gasoline it had picked up from the hours of riding. “Just let me get us goin’.” He stood up on the starter, his ass in the tight jeans rising before me. Then he pounced down with all his weight, and the engine kicked in. He gunned it a few times to make sure it was juiced, and all the kids took a step back. He put his feet down on the ground on either side of the bike, and turned back over his shoulder. “Hang on to me.”

I let go of the bar with one hand, and grabbed his jacket. Then I reached around him with my other arm, and embraced him from behind. I could feel his ribs through the leather. I turned my head sideways so I could get a bit closer, and felt my legs brush his. Then he yelled back to Gerry, “Okay!” And we were off.

The ride was danger - and fear - and a feeling of comfort - and knowing I would never forget it. And my heart pounding. And my arms around Phil. My chest against his back, my knees and thighs touching his. We didn't go very far. Just once around the block, and past our house. I didn't have the nerve to let go with one hand to wave at everyone as we passed. I was hoping that the kids in every house would look out at the sound of the bike, and see me on it.

I don't remember getting off. The next thing I knew my sister was hanging on to Phil as he roared off down the street, much faster than he had with me. When they came back they did the same fly-by of our house, but she waved. I was surprised she had put the helmet on her perfect hair. I guess she knew that sometimes you had to sacrifice beauty.

In a few minutes she was back on solid ground, and everyone had said goodbye. They had to get home before dark. Phil and Gerry waved one last time, and took off. Long after they made the corner, we could hear them revving up Prospect street. Then the whine of the engine faded to silence, and people started to wander off. My sister and I stood for a long time looking in the direction they had gone. From Diane McGiddon's garage, the Beach Boys floated out to envelope us.

*I may not always love you,
But long as there are stars above you
You never need to doubt it,
I'll make you so sure about it.
God only knows what I'd be without you.*