

A Harley, a Stetson and a red Thai Chilli

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INTRODUCTION

Jed Cantrell worked on the production line at Ford's subsidiary factory in Dearborn Michigan in The United States, which he had done since he left high school. He was a tall stocky man with blue eyes, shoulder-length wavy brown hair and he sported a cowboy style mustache with a goaty beard. He walked with a swagger that suggested, 'don't mess with me or I'll kill ya', which had got him into trouble a few times with the hard men at the factory. When he was seventeen he was somewhat drunk at a wild party where, he had sex with a fifteen year-old getting her pregnant. Her father forced him to marry her, which was a better deal than a prison sentence for having sex with an underage girl, and so he agreed to the 'shot gun wedding' although, as it happened, he didn't like her very much when he was sober. As a result, they split up after a major row three years later. He had many girlfriends after that however nothing serious, and he stayed single living on his own without having any contact with his daughter, because her mother wouldn't let him see her, although she was happy to take the ten dollars a-month maintenance payments from him.

His favourite TV program series was the 'Dukes of Hazard', just before Ford stopped manufacturing the full power 'Mustang' he bought one on the company's purchasing plans, spreading the repayments for the car over an affordable nine years. He paid his friend, who worked on the nightshift in Ford's paint-shop, a small amount of money and a few beers to re-spray the car in the same colours and limerick as 'Luke's' car, 'The General Lee' from the TV series.

Jed could usually be found on his day off shooting pool for a few bucks in a bar, which was situated adjacent to the apartment block where he lived. He didn't smoke or drink a lot of beer however he was partial to a glass or so of 'boot-leg' Bourbon Whisky. His front teeth were missing after having had a pool-cue smashed across his face by a sore loser, who accused him of cheating, one lazy

drunken Sunday afternoon over a ten dollar game.

For his holidays he would put on his cowboy clothes and drive the 'General Lee' to Nashville Tennessee. He had spent a lot of money several years ago on a pair of replica ivory handled Silver Colt 45 pistols with matching white and black leather holsters. When he got back to his apartment after buying them it was raining heavily, and he stepped into a deep puddle as he got out of his car. There was a gap in the sole of his right cowboy boot that let water from the puddle get inside the boot, soaking his sock. On entering his apartment he pulled off his boots and socks. Then he unwrapped the box containing his new toys. Frantically he fastened the holsters loosely around his hips and put on his old tattered cowboy hat, and then, in front of the full body length mirror that was fastened to the wall in his bedroom next to his life size poster of 'Billy the Kid' from the movie 'Wild boys from the west', he started to play cowboys with his pistols. Spinning them one at a time around his 'trigger' fingers, as he pretended to be 'Mat Dillon' saying in a western drawl, "I'll fill ya with lead Mister, don't mess with the Dillon," the heavy piece of iron-ware revolving at speed precariously around his left finger, slipped off it landing painfully on his right foot breaking three bones in his foot and two of his toes, fortunately for Jed the bones didn't mend properly resulting in him walking with a limp, and so, he failed the military medical, because of that, he wasn't conscripted into the Vietnam War.

CHAPTER ONE: THE JAPANESE INVASION

The Japanese may well have lost the war in the South Pacific, but wouldn't you hold your hands up and cry 'uncle' if someone dropped two Atomic bombs in your back yard? However the argument being that this actually saved millions of American, British and Japanese lives, therefore we shall leave it at that as this book isn't about the politics or ethics of war.

After the end of the 2nd World War in Europe, Britain set about the task of rebuilding its cities and infrastructure, switching its factories from arms manufacture to producing cars, motorcycles and domestic appliances. The British economy grew and grew, but the whole world should have been watching and taking notice, which it didn't, of what was about to happen on a small island in the Irish Sea, where the Isle of Man TT Races take place.

In the June of 1954 Mr. Honda showed up on the island with one of his trusted advisors, having travelled halfway around the world to see it. The races at the time were mainly dominated by the Italians, with MV Agusta and Ducati fielding works teams. British motorcycles from Norton, BSA, and Triumph were also strong competitors for the coveted 'Tourist Trophy', as a win on the Island boosted sales figures dramatically. The question being at the time was, "Did Mr. Honda visit there that year just to watch the racing?"..., of course he didn't..., he took photograph after photograph of the best motorcycle technology that Europe had to offer.

He returned to his factory in Japan with his data where he opened his Honda Road Racing Research and Development Team facility, employing the best engineers that Japan's universities had to offer. It was his dream to have one of his motorcycles win the trophy, and start exporting motorcycles to Europe on the back of the advertisement that such a win might bring.

Four years later, he returned to the Isle of Man with some of his best motorcycles, accompanied by Japanese riders, however they

didn't win any races, but finished high enough to return to Japan with the accredited Team Prize.

In 1961, he came back, resulting in Honda dominated the 125cc and 250cc races, which should have set off alarm bells ringing in every European motorcycle manufacturer's board room, but it didn't, and the Japanese invasion of technology had begun. Ship load after ship load of cheap, reliable, stylish and fuel efficient motorcycles were unloaded at ports in England and Holland, flooding the European market, resulting almost in the total destruction of British motorcycle manufacture, with only Triumph desperately holding on to a token share of the American market with their 650cc Bonneville. It is somewhat ironic that an Englishman named 'Mike Hailwood' victoriously rode Honda manufactured motorcycles, claiming many wins at the TT, increasing Honda's popularity in his home country fueling the demise of British built bikes.

It wasn't just Mr. Honda who had his eyes set on the European Market, as Yamaha, Suzuki and Kawasaki were only a few years out-of-touch, and followed closely behind in his footsteps. The range of motorcycles that were on offer was vast from these oriental manufactures, from 50 cc, 'take me to the shops' step through mopeds all the way up to 750 cc four and two stroke multi-cylinder thorough-breeds'. Barry Sheen riding a Suzuki three cylinder 750 cc two stroke screamed it through the checkered flags on the Grand Prix circuits, resulting in him taking the world crown, boosting the sale world wide of Suzuki motorcycles, as he did so. Unfortunately for some enthusiasts the engines in these 'race-proven' machines were further advanced than the mass-produced cheaper to manufacture frames that they were fitted in, resulting in some difficult to deal with, "Oh shit I'm going to crash", handling characteristics. One particular machine in the 1970's was a classic example of scaring its rider to death, and that was Kawasaki's three cylinder two stroke, the infamous KH 750 MK1 which had an invisible hinge in the centre of its frame. It was so bad that

it coined the name, ‘The Widow Maker’, by British motorcycle enthusiasts as many of their friends’ names entered the obituary column in the local newspapers.

It wasn’t just the bad handling characteristics of these, ‘the Worlds first super bikes’ as Kawasaki unveiled its awesome 900 cc Z1, that caused European riders to go sliding down the road on their posteriors. Japan’s biggest tyre manufacturer was Bridgestone, at the time, and they produced tyres that suited Japan’s weather and climate only, but also the open disk brakes that had been developed and fitted to the front-end of most of the fastest models, didn’t function properly when exposed to the bad weather conditions in Northern Europe. When complaints were made, particularly from the relatives of European riders who were lying in hospital with their legs in traction and plaster, after suffering an accident from not being able to stop when it rained, reached Mr. Honda’s ears, he commented saying, “What..., they ride their motorcycles in the rain?” Which was a ridiculous thing to say actually to the world’s press, as his victorious racing team on the IOM had done so many times in the past, so where did they get their tyres from? You’ve guessed it..., British made Dunlop!

People might think that these early problems would have put riders off from buying Japanese motorcycles in England, but with large posters of Mike Hailwood, Mike Grant, Joey Dunlop and Barry Sheen pinned on the walls’ of a million teenagers’ bedrooms..., how could it?

OK, I know what’s on your mind as you’re thinking, “What has all this got to do with Jed Cantrell and his life working on a Ford production line in Michigan, and his pair of Ivory handled Colt 45’s?” Well stop being as impatient, because I am about to get to that point in a few more paragraphs.

Mr. Honda was beside himself with pride and delight with the honors bestowed upon him by the Japanese chamber of commerce

for export excellence, and all of this, obviously boosted his bank account balance, plus raising his confidence and ego beyond the stars. His earlier dreams of winning the IOM TT fulfilled, to be further enhanced with wins on the Grande Prix Circuits, he set about dreaming some more... , resulting in Honda producing their first car. It was a small city run-a-bout with an air-cooled 500 cc power plant, which was based on his motorcycle engine development. It was exported to Europe however because of its small size and bright orange colour initially it was laughed at, however it gradually obtained a cult following in England because of its incredible fuel economy and reliability. It turned out to be a better cheaper option than Reliant's 700 cc fiberglass bodied unstable three-wheeler and Fiat's 'rust bucket' that was built only to last just one year, the 600 cc Panda. In the city of Coventry which was the heartland of the British car industry the management board rooms at Rover, Austin, MG, Morris, Triumph, Wolseley, Oxford, Hillman and Healey all scoffing at Honda's attempt to produce a car, and failed to heed the warnings that were clearly visible in the headlines of the national newspapers.

Honda, Nissan and Suzuki were all doing well exporting cheap cars to Europe with the emphasis being on fuel economy. Mr. Honda was quick to realise the importance of that for his own home market, when he told his design team, some years prior, to come up with a range of cheap economic step through motorcycles resulting in the birth of the C50, C70, and C90 range. Millions of them were sold across Asia with India, at first, being the main market place, and Honda's wealth climbed up a few more steps.

Mr. Toyota watched patiently behind the scenes with his own dreams and ambitions.

America, with its huge oil fields in Texas, on the other hand were mainly producing large capacity high powered gas guzzling limousines, well..., gasoline was cheap, so fuel economy wasn't considered to be an important aspect when designing cars for their home market. However dropping millions of bombs from B52

bombers in the skies over North Vietnam costs money, and someone has to pay for it, so the taxes on fuel were gradually raised.

“OK.... OK Reader..., I’ll get to my point shortly.”

Mr. Honda started exporting cars to America, and this rocked the main players in Detroit as Honda started to take a large portion of the American market. The American Congress tried to block the import of cars from Japan with the introduction of high import taxation, however Mr. Honda saw a loophole and he opened his own factory in North America in 1982, producing his own cars on American soil to avoid the import duty. It wasn’t long before the Honda Accord was the top selling car, Nissan followed suit.

“See where I’m coming from?”

The invasion of Japanese technology across the world intensified as Mitsubishi, Sony, Toshiba, and many other ‘name brands’ became household words. The American domestic car market crumbled under the rapid spiraling demand from American citizens for cheap economic personal transport. Almost as the mist floats without a sound over the top of Mount Fuji, Mr. Toyota quietly opened car production plants across Europe, England and America knocking Honda off their top spot with the incredible Toyota Camry.

“So what does all this mean to Jed,” I can hear you asking again as you read on, therefore I shall tell you...