

PRE LOVED

Or, why used can be so much better than new.

MY GIRLFRIEND RECENTLY SAID, “LET’S get a dirt bike.”
“Woohoo!” I said. Then, “Wait, why do you want a dirt bike?”

The motives, according to her, were a string of recent events. 1. *Deep Impact*, the movie: remember the scene where the two kids escape the tsunami caused by the meteor impact with the Earth? 2. The newspaper coverage of traffic jams of people trying to get out of the way of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. 3. We live in the East Bay of San Francisco in a low-lying area only a few miles from a bunch of major fault lines, with the potential for still more post-disaster traffic jams.

Of course, it may have been none of these reasons. She is an aesthete, after all, and her choice to Netflix the fabulous film *On Any Sunday* was probably the major influence, however subconscious. It’s a 1971 documentary on dirt bike racing bankrolled by, and starring, Steve McQueen, produced by the same filmmaker who made the cult surf classic *Endless Summer*. We both loved the movie, particularly the simple beauty of dirt biking before advertising and logos made every amateur look like a lime green advertisement for extreme sports drinks.

One of the most beautiful aspects of *On Any Sunday* is the footage of trials-riding legend Malcolm Smith participating in an amazing motorcycling marathon. A multiday event where the rider was expected to ride the same bike, all components included, across a long and tortuous route including the mountains and roads and mud and dirt and deserts of Spain —

sort of a dirt-bike Tour de France. The only person allowed to fix the bike during the ride is the rider himself, right down to changing his own tire. As the ride is a time trial, one must complete each section within a given time period, including repairs, so it pays equally to be an awesome rider and a talented and intuitive repairman. What a refreshing format: a competition for renaissance men, people who understood their machinery as much as having the testosterone to ride it fastest. I would love to have seen the fencing-wire and duct-tape solutions that got the winning machines over the finish line. I say winning machines because the race was not for first place, since anyone who finished with original bike within the time limit got a medal.

I could see why my girlfriend might have been seduced, but I was still suspicious. I broached the subject with one of my dear friends. “A dirt bike?” he said. “Your girlfriend is suggesting you buy a dirt bike?! Don’t worry about the motives, just say yes, yes, yes!”

I started looking at dirt bikes online. I had to filter my search by cubic engine capacity as much as by space for two riders and the aesthetic requirements of my lady, because after all, if you are going to escape the apocalypse, you must escape it in style. I wanted something I could fix with minimal tools and equipment — this ruled out an awful lot of the newer bikes, which were too expensive anyway, and many of the older bikes, which were terribly troublesome looking. Eventually, we found the Bultaco, which, it so happens, is a Spanish machine whose heyday was in the 1970s. I quickly found one nearby on Craig’s List (craigslist.org). On the web, I also found a plethora of sites about passionate Bultaco hobbyists, a good sign I’d find community support and hints on keeping the machine alive. Although the last manual was printed 20 years ago, I’d still be able to train myself in the finer arts of Bultaco-owning.

Buying anything secondhand, particularly a 30-year-old machine *designed* to be abused, is always risky. I fully expected to be buying it from a 30-year-old hooligan who’d thrashed and beaten it and was now disposing of it. I was delighted, therefore, upon approaching the Cupertino driveway to see



The Bultaco's glory days were also the heyday of engineering renaissance-men.

a middle-aged man mounted atop this machine with the confidence and man-machine respect of Malcom Smith; he was having a little “goodbye ride,” likely reminiscing, before we arrived. I was even more delighted when I entered his workshop. It was the epitome of the phrase “a place for every tool, and every tool in its place.” This was a bike that had been nurtured and nourished and loved by an artisan.

Curiously, an old ambulance sat in the driveway alongside a new Mustang and vintage kit car. While I discussed the fine points of oil changing and the reserve fuel tank of my girlfriend’s new Bultaco with Tom, she found out from Tom’s wife that he was a keen competitive amateur motorcyclist, and that he had converted the ambulance so it was both bike transport and mobile workshop. Legend has it he was known as the only rider to *arrive* at races in an ambulance.

Tom’s expertise with bikes extended to less tricked-out transports as well: I was happy to learn the two-tie-down trick for loading a dirt bike in the back of a pickup (one to each side of the handlebar, compressing the front suspension and locking down the front wheel — the rear then doesn’t need tying). While adding this arcane detail to my repertoire, I asked knowingly, “You’re an engineer?” To which he acknowledged, “Yup.” Sometimes a word has

curiously high bandwidth; this one signaled that he knew I too was an engineer and that I’d care for his machine as he had, not polishing it to a shine, but rather developing a symbiosis, understanding the rattles and what they mean before they develop into more terminal mechanical problems.

So now I have another old machine in my care. It will require periodic tuning (and yay for me, periodic

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“test” riding) to make sure it is ready should the big wave or crack in the ground ever come. I choose to believe the disasters are unlikely and that now I’ll get to spend the odd “any Sunday” tuning the carburetor and riding around the block imagining myself in Spain in a man-machine marathon.

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