



The Razor's edge

Three hundred miles the hard way, from Murphys, California, north and up over the snowy Sierras at Monitor Pass, down US395 to Lee Vining and then east along the southern shore of Mono Lake on oh-so-lonely Highway 120. My venerable Blue bike—for all the performance paranoia I had going into this caper that I wrote about here last month—is running like a champ. Across the basin and range expanses of Highway 6 to woebegone and extensively boarded-up Tonopah. The one in the song. The sun's falling fast like it's been knocked off a ladder as I cruise up the main—and virtually only—street in town looking over the prospective lodgings. I run out of town quickly, whip a U, and head back the other direction, having settled on the Tonopah Motel. It's a leisurely gambol, and the Blue bike burbles contentedly, and all is right with the world. And then... nothing. No burble. No dash lights. The Blue bike has died.

Nothing, that is, except a sharp and pronounced "Clack!" emitting at short intervals from beneath the saddle. That would be the sickening sound of a circuit breaker tripping, resetting, tripping, resetting, and I'm tripping too at this point as I roll Blue to the curb and commence a hasty unpacking of gear, pulling off everything between me and the battery; off come the tent and duffel, the saddlebag lid and then the saddlebag. I unpack the saddlebag to get to the tool pouches inconveniently stashed at the bottom (for weight distribution), and out comes the screwdriver, then off comes the side cover, out comes the 10mm wrench and all the while the circuit breaker's clacking ominously. I disconnect the negative terminal and then there's silence. And here I am crouched on the sidewalk of Tonopah, my gear strewn helter-skelter about me, and my brain playing a medley of dire thoughts. I touch the cable to the terminal and get a monster spark and another loud "Clack!" and the verdict is undeniable. A dead short in the system—that most elusive and agonizing of all failures. Surely I'm doomed, here. The short could be virtually anywhere in the system. The mind boggles at the challenge and I find myself wondering if an old friend in Reno still has his pickup truck.

The right tool for the job

The most important tool you can pack with you on the road, the tool that is essential to any and all roadside troubleshooting and repair is Occam's Razor—but it only works if you use it. Occam's Razor is not a razor in the ordinary sense. You can't shave your face or other regions with it, or strip wire or cut zip ties. It's a razor in the sense that it's used to cut away possibilities and distractions when trying to explain an occurrence or solve a problem. Occam's Razor is a centuries-old thinking tool that posits that the simplest solution to any puzzler—the solution that requires the fewest assumptions—is generally the correct one. If, for example, your bike won't start because you're getting no juice from the battery, there are a number of different possible reasons. It could be because you're a rotten sonuvabitch and your karma has finally caught up with you. Or it could mean that your stator is fried and the bike hasn't been charging. Or it could be that the battery's bad and hasn't been taking a charge. It could be a faulty starter or kill switch. It could be any of these things, but you'll save yourself a lot of futzing around with a voltmeter or a psychic if the first tool out of the bag is Occam's Razor. It will tell you that the simplest and thus the likeliest cause is a loose battery connection.

Or another more accessible example is when you come home after ostensibly working late and the wife smells unfamiliar perfume all over you. Sure, she could jump to the far-fetched conclusion that you're fresh from a creepy extramarital assignation and didn't even have the common decency to wash off the telltale scent, but isn't the much simpler and more likely explanation that you were shopping for jewelry for her at Macy's and got misted by some careless bimbo trying out fragrances at the cosmetic counter which she knows good and damn well is right

next to the jewelry counter? Well, isn't it? See what I'm saying? (You might want to clip this out and keep it handy, it's pretty good. And keep a pair of nice earrings on the bike for the coup de grace.)

Meanwhile, back in Tonopah

Defeated mentally, and overwhelmed by the enormity of my plight, I tuck the cable well away from the battery terminal and prepare to repack and push the Blue bike to a motel to consider my painful options, feeling about as bleak as it gets. Maybe it was all those hours and miles in the mountains and desert that had me in such an addle state but suddenly it passes, and in a moment of clarity I remember Occam's Razor. I crouch down again, and starting with the simplest possible explanation for the failure, I examine the most exposed and vulnerable wire in the system, tracing the lead back from the ignition breaker to the regulator. And there I discover that it has quietly and inconspicuously cozied up against the front motor mount and heated to the point of melting the insulation. It pulls away with barely a tug. A touch of the cable to the battery terminal now brings no spark or clack. I switch on the ignition and get lights. I'm a genius.

But why did this happen right here in Tonopah—in the only town within miles and miles of desolation—and not out in the middle of that desolation where there's no shade or shelter or shoulder on the road? Why not while I was passing a truck on a narrow winding mountain pass? Sure, it could be that once I dropped down from windy highway speed to hot downtown trawling speed the temperature of the motor mount finally reached the melting point of plastic insulation. But isn't the simpler and likelier explanation that the road gods are smiling, as always, upon the Blue bike?

It's all right here in the diaries.



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