

# FLAMING IGUANAS



ERIKA  
LOPEZ

ILLUSTRATED

★ An *All-Girl* Road Novel Thing ★

from Erika Lopez, Flaming Iguanas  
(NY: Scribners/Simon+Schuster, 1997).



Magdalena and I are gonna cross America on two motorcycles. We're gonna be so fucking cool, mirrors and windows will break when we pass by. We'll have our own hardcore theme music that makes us throw our heads back and bite the sky, and women wearing pink foam curlers in passing RVs will desire us and we'll slowly turn to them at seventy-five miles an hour and mouth "hello" back. Bugs may stick to my burgundy lipstick, but I'll just spit them back and they'll look all the prettier for it.

Yeah / coool. Two party bags of drugstore ice on motorcycles. The sun wouldn't dare melt us because it would be a big, huge, major mistake.

We're gonna ride from armpit to armpit across the chest of America, joyride full-throttle down the crack of Tennessee's ass. Bite a Grand Teton and

goose Amarillo, Texas.

Bypass Florida altogether because you get old there like real fast.

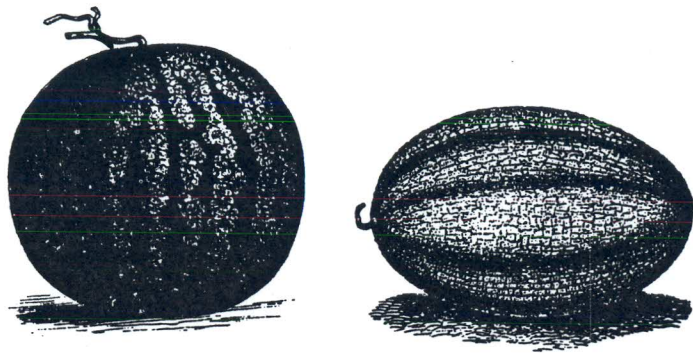
Sloppy-kiss the greasy lips of Louisiana.

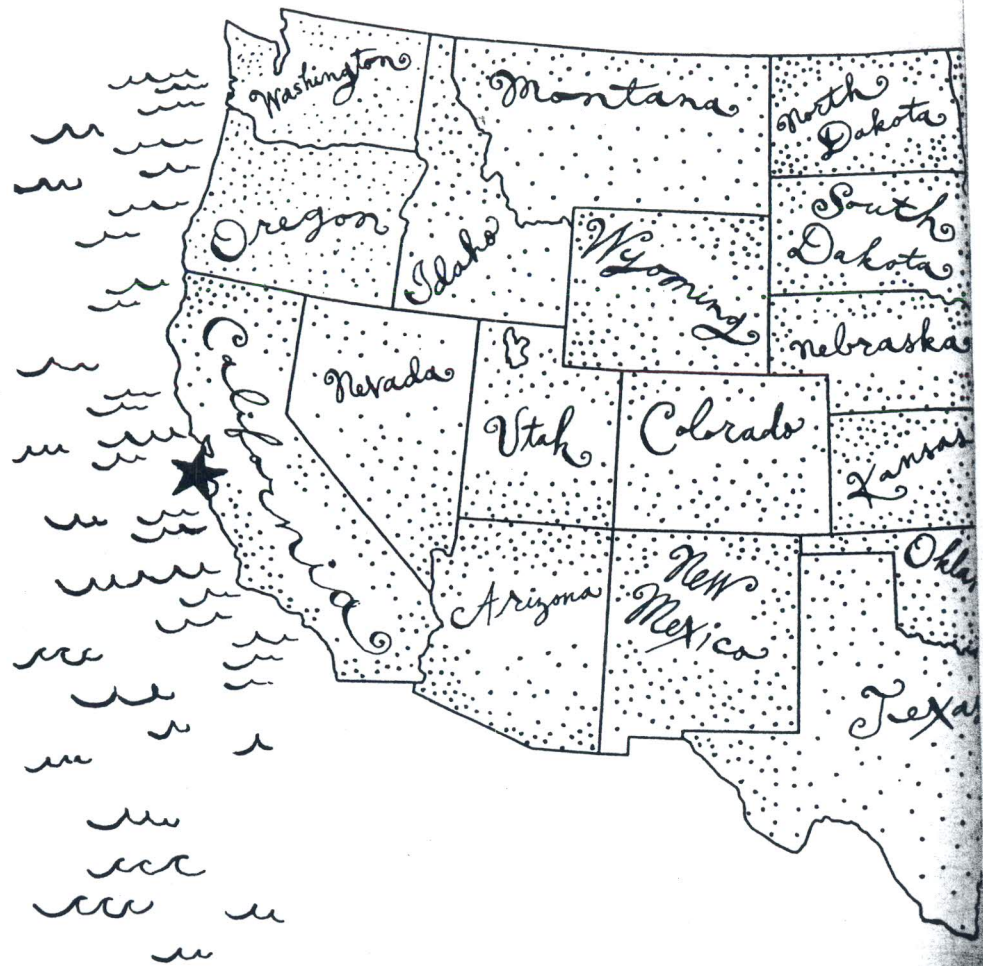
Caress the cool, clean underside of a butcherblock from a slaughterhouse somewhere in Montana.

Hey, there are a zillion ways to say you're going cross-country and Hallmark has a card just for you.

We'll be riding the cheapest motorcycles we can find / stopping every forty-five minutes for gas. Truck stop waitresses will wink and jam dollar bills in our happy little beautifully tanned fists, but we'll whisper "no thanks," because we don't need it / we'll live off the fumes from our estrogen.

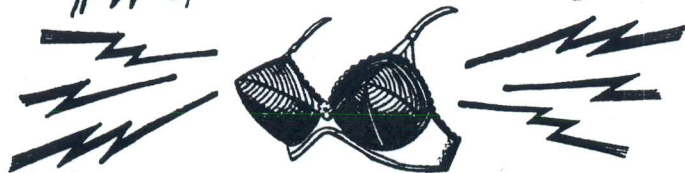
And we'll be spitting out mango pits like fucking bullets if anyone says anything about our huge Latin American breasts.







## Chapter One How I Met Magdalena Perez



I met Magdalena a few months ago when I accidentally ran over her cat in front of my apartment. I wanted to learn how to ride a motorcycle, so my biker friend Kelly and I rented a Vespa scooter. Kelly had a motorcycle, but it was brand new and she didn't want me banging it up.

So there I was after an hour of riding around the block, zipping around the corner at twenty miles an hour while thinking how I was gonna be a biker chick, the coolest pit tootsie in the world, looking at how good my silver rings looked on my right hand. . . the hand that controlled the throttle. . . so I ended up going a little too fast / and the faster I went the more I panicked.

It wasn't some sort of cocky, big gaping vagina thing to speed on a Vespa in front of my neighbors, no—it was more like a vicious panic-throttle-faster circle. And what came first?—panic or the egg? I didn't know, but then there was a cat darting out from underneath a 1972 Impala on blocks right next to me, and

bam went the cat on my big green rental sign under the headlight. \$49.95 A DAY/10 BUCKS AN HOUR. U-SCOOT RENTALS and a little bit o' blood-red on green is just like Christmas. Just like Christmas with the family.

But I hadn't been worried about running over neighborhood children or people's pets, because I didn't know you could run over anything on a Vespa. / I thought things like cats and children ran over you.



Chapter Twelve  
Less Than a Week  
Before We Go, and I Still  
Don't Know How to Actually Ride  
a Motorcycle and I Don't  
Even HAVE a  
motorcycle.

WISH I'D  
WORN PANTIES.



Chapter Thirteen  
But, Damn, I Look So Good in My  
Biker Jacket, I Point to  
myself in the mirror and Say  
THINGS like, "HEY baby...  
YEAH, I'm TALKIN' to you."



Clutch? First, second, third, and fourth? What was everyone talking about?

Many times I leaned over the railing from the third-floor landing and thought of just tossing myself over. Splat. just like that. But figured with my luck. I'd end up with some kind of horrid literary Ethan Frome lesson; end up a screaming vegetable salad, and die with old yellowing plastic dusty things in my house. instead of landing with a simple broken leg.

All those bony-nosed literary academics and critics in the sky would be creaming their pants over this kind of irony. Someone who thought she was

leader of the pack—and ha!—you are now a vegetable! The proud Madame Bovary stabbed in the temple with scissors! Miss Haversham in a stinky yellow wedding dress for no apparent reason! Michael Jackson with all that money and rhythm and a skin disease! Ha!

I looked across the street, and saw I was quickly losing alpha dog status: Magdalena had gone out and gotten herself a shiny pink vinyl motorcycle jacket, and her brother had fixed up his chopper for her.

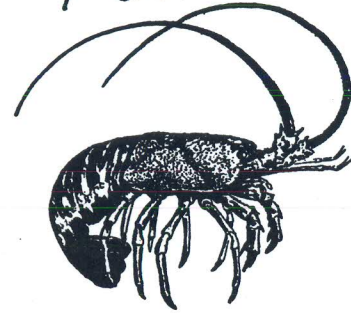
I rolled my own cigarette because it was a helluva lot cheaper, not because it looked cooler, and I thought for a minute. I thought about the Vespa and ironic Ethan Frome. And then ironic lung cancer.

I flicked the cigarette between two parked cars and went inside to eat a lot of ice cream.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*Even Though She Vomited,  
I THINK She Had a Good  
Time*



Some guy gave his drug dealer a motorcycle because he couldn't come up with the cash.

Then the drug dealer put a sign for 500 bucks on the bike, and a guy named Ivan Leibowitz saw the sign and gave him 500 bucks.

My friend Ivan got a motorcycle so he could ride around feeling the cold spots under the trees with his long-haired girlfriend. They were real sweet for each other, but Ivan learned there are no love guarantees when his girlfriend left



him to try other people out. She was looking for bodice-ripping romantic high theater like Madame Bovary. She just didn't get it that when someone asks you how your day was, and actually cares about the answer, that it doesn't get much better than that.

So Ivan let his motorcycle gather cobwebs and leaves in his backyard until I took a cab over to see if he knew of any hundred-dollar bikes for sale, or if I could borrow his for a little trip cross-country.



He opened the door in a tattered red flannel bathrobe and sneakers. His normally long brown braids looked more like dreadlocks, and he held a bowl of Cap'n Crunch to his chest in a translucent blue Tupperware bowl. He said, here, take it and have a blast, and he jammed the keys and the pink title in my hand, shuffled backward and shut the door.

I stood out in his front yard, realizing I didn't know how to ride the motorcycle back over the bridge to my house. I had a highway to go on and everything.

So I knocked on the door and asked Ivan to teach me how to ride so I could get home.

Poor guy. He spent three hours teaching me how to shift into gear, and every time he even touched the bike to help me lift it off the ground, he broke into tears.

By the time I felt ready to go, there were a whole bunch of dead bugs in his congealed Cap'n Crunch. I felt guilty about that, but he waved me away and said don't worry about it.

I took the long way back home. A whole bunch of pothole roads with speed bumps so I could avoid the highway. We only lived seven or eight miles apart, and it only should've taken twenty minutes with traffic, but it took me quite a few hours. I won't even say how long. Just that I didn't do real well with turns or stopping without stalling, so I kept wiping out. And now I know what motorcycle jackets are really for.

I pulled up right below C-cup's window and started honking. I didn't put my feet down fast enough so I fell over. She came down, helped me pick up the bike, and asked if I would really be ready to leave tomorrow. I said sure, of course, and I started to roll a cigarette because if I lived long enough to get cancer, I'd be lucky.

## Chapter Fifteen

COME ON, YOU NEVER WANT  
TO TALK ABOUT HOW YOU'RE  
GOING TO DIE



I plan on getting cancer now so I won't be surprised when I get it later. With all the crap in our food, water, and air, I think it's the new way of dying "naturally." Thoughts of getting hit by trucks and cancer inspire me to have a good time now. I'm not gonna go through the chemotherapy microwave because it'll just come back later and I'll have to go through the whole thing again of telling everyone how sick I am and saying good-bye to them.



## chapter Sixteen

### THE BIG DAY



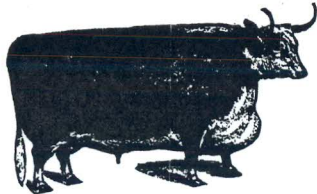
It turned out to be the kind of day where I would've rather been at home wearing slippers and screaming at children outside my window. Perhaps I gave myself far too much credit for summoning the strength to throw my terry-cloth slippers under the bed and walk out the door, but I didn't care. We all have our mountains.

On our way out of Philadelphia, C-cup was doing real well keeping up with the speed limit, and I think I was going as fast as 15 mph over the Commodore Barry Bridge. I don't know for sure because I don't have a working speedometer. Wimps who went into four-wheel drive over speed bumps in

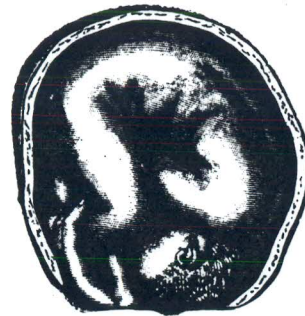
their Jeep Cherokees and Isuzu Troopers passed me, shaking their fists. I was terrified and embarrassed, belting out "God Bless America" to calm myself for the first hour I was on the bridge, before I realized, *shit. I'm gonna be pressured into making one dumb move into an oncoming truck, so this Isuzu clown on his car phone can get to his office a little faster? I'll crash and my life will be fucked up, while he gets back on his phone to boss people around who make more money than I ever will. All for a few minutes?—*

"Fuck you! You ride this goddamned thing!" was as clever as I could get with death humping me. I'd try to run them off the bridge as if I were in a movie, but at fifteen miles an hour, you can't even scratch the paint.

C-cup was waiting for me at a 7-11 on the other side, leaning against her bike and looking at her watch.



We drove for another two hours before I wanted to stop in a small rural town in Pennsylvania where there were a lot of cows and Amish people. It was drizzling, and we'd seen a billboard for a happy family campground a few miles away. I was hunched over in the fetal position, getting an ulcer because I



couldn't ride faster than maybe twenty-five miles an hour, so we followed the billboard's directions and pulled into a tacky theme-park campground.

We saw professional families walking from their cars in descending order of height, and we were scared. There were ten foot tall wooden statues of smiling Amish people lining the entrance and all it took was one look for us to turn around and get back on the main road. I didn't know how to do a nice little turn, so I had to go around the entire parking lot to turn around. I was a little embarrassed because up ahead, C-cup had to pull over and wait for me. She was looking at her watch again and I knew she was the alpha dog again.

No one waved flags or admired us biker chicks from the sidelines as we rode out of this little Amish town. / And thank God. The only ones who looked at us were the kids on the sidewalks when we screamed as their toys flew in front of our bikes. And the only thing I was spitting out of my chapped lips was my hair, all sticky with bug guts and a little rain.

The only theme music playing in my music-video life was the theme to *Sesame Street*. What happened to the cool, laid-back part of riding? My heart stopped every time I had to come to a complete stop or turn a corner.

*Sesame Street* and death. My thoughts fuck each other badly, and the muppets suffer for it: *Big Bird's too old and too fat to get out of his chair, living in some old five floor walk-up in New York. Grouchy, drinking Diet Pepsi, screaming at Maria with maggots between his rotting Big Bird toes. He was a diabetic, dontcha know? But Maria's not there. She spends her free time leaving anonymous messages on Rita Moreno's answering machine, and Oscar the Grouch is swallowing shoelaces and begging for money on a bed of nails with Robert Crumb's brother on the streets of San Francisco. In the late afternoon, they molest mannequins in Chinatown and pay for cheese burritos in dimes. . .*

We ended up driving another three hours because the next campground marked on our map was farther than we thought, so it was ten o'clock when we pulled in. But there was a big gate that was shut and locked, and a brown wooden sign in yellow letters that said, NO CAMPING. We just straddled our bikes with the engines still running, and looked at it for about fifteen minutes.

Some headlights started coming toward us in the dark, and a Camaro pulled up to the fence. A young guy got out, said "hello" and unlocked the fence.

I was too depressed to say anything, so C-cup asked, "Uh, do you know where we can camp?"

He put his hands on his hips and thought, "Hmmm. Well, you can't camp here. I work here and it's closed now."

"We just need a place to sleep."

"Well, I think there's an RV campground about thirty miles north of here."

*Thirty miles?* At my top speed of twenty-five miles an hour—with six or seven cigarette and bathroom breaks—it'd be morning by the time we got there. I dropped my helmet head on my handlebars and wanted to go home. Concentrating on the gaping hole where my speedometer was supposed to be, I started sending the Camaro guy telepathic suggestions. . . *Let us camp here anyway. . . let us camp here anyway. . .*

"Okay," C-cup pulled her map from under the bungee cords on her gas tank and asked him what town it was in. He answered her, and we started to back our bikes up with our feet.

Damn. Fuck. Cripes.

"Good luck," he waved.

"Thanks," we yelled back under our helmets.

C-cup's foot slipped in the gravel and her bike fell down and she jumped off. He came over to help her pick the bike up and after it was back up, he wiped his hands on his pants and asked, "Are you just looking for a place to camp? Just a place to put up a tent? Because, well. . . if you are, there's a big field in front of my house, and uh, you could just set up your tent there. . ."

I jumped on it before C-cup could even hesitate. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

We introduced ourselves and followed his faded maroon Camaro home. I wondered if this would turn out to be a cheap and wild sexual experience. A man in a '78 Camaro, two chicks on bikes. Hey, I'd gone to high school in New Jersey, and it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure we had the makings of a Bruce Springsteen song.

I wanted my hair high and stiff, just like I wanted my Camaro boss. . .

Oh, baby, we were born to run.

I'd forgotten what it was like to sleep totally outside, and being a romantic, I wanted to fall asleep looking at the stars. No-nonsense C-cup promptly fell asleep in the tent, and I felt safe with her three feet away and our host fifty yards away in his house.

I snuggled into my cozy down sleeping bag, but the zipper wouldn't work. That was okay. I tucked both sides under me and looked up at the sky. / A huge clear sky of stars. The trees at the edges of my eyes became the size of frozen broccoli, the crickets became the heartbeat of the planet and so I started feeling sleepy like a little embryo in a down sleeping bag.

Then I realized I had to take off my glasses, but I was too tired to move. I couldn't fall asleep without breaking them—but what if I decided ahead of time not to turn over?—No. You can't make promises like that in West Virginia, so I woke up all over again to take them off and then the sky was blurry. Fine. I'd just go to sleep then.

At three in the morning I woke up freezing, wet with dew. The edges of my sleeping bag were soaked and I was totally wet. Now feeling like a very cold embryo, I walked over to the tent in the fetal position and started whining. C-cup had to wake up and move over.

## Chapter Seventeen

### No Matter How Beautiful You Are, Your Pee Smells Bad



Ah, the romance of ignorance. . . sometimes you only see what you want to see in someone, and it works until you leave the bar or until you learn their last name.

After a couple of days on the road with her telling me about the crap inside her belly button, bragging about how much dandruff she could scratch into her lap, and still wearing the same jeans she'd peed in the second night we camped out because she forgot that when you squat, you also have to push your pants forward, toward your knees, it was all I could do to say, "Here, uh, you can have the tent to yourself. . . yeah, I'll just sleep on that rock over there. No, really. . . I don't even like shelter that much."

I could've ignored all that very well and continued to sleep on rocks or moldy picnic tables. I could've even ignored the fact that she was the kind of girl to take a good time in a choke hold and pin it to the mat until it cried for mercy. But she wanted to ride ten miles above the speed limit on a straight superhighway and go twelve hours a day so we could get across America as quickly as possible. She had only two definite agendas: one was to at least pass by a Route-66 sign; and the other was to buy a hunting knife. Then she could go home satisfied.

Every minute had to be totally planned out with the map wedged in her waistband, and her hands on her hips like a German Girl Scout.



What had happened to the fluffy velvet Puerto Rican C-cup? Had I left her behind for this new over-achieving bitch girl in a pink jacket who didn't know how to squat and clear her pants?

anted to wear white cotton dresses, pick daisies in a field, sing heterosexual songs to every cow, and have my picture taken in front of America's post offices.

was willing to flex on the white dress and the heterosexual folk songs, but when she got allergies from riding open-faced behind cars, and started sneezing my face while we were sleeping in the tent without covering her mouth, that was it. I could actually smell the spit in her sneezes and the honeymoon fell off the desk like a little guinea pig, so I gave her her name back.

Magdalena." I said, "why don't we go inside the drugstore and look for a funnel so you can uh, pee easier."

She said okay, but they didn't have anything except a catheter. I said why can't you use that? She said fuck you.

Things were getting tense.

One afternoon when we were taking a slower route through some town, for I think I must've been able to comfortably handle 40 mph by this time, a guy in a family van jumped out of his driver's seat at the red light and ran up to me waving his arms. "You dropped something a few miles back!"

I lifted up the visor on my helmet. "What?" And I could barely hear above the sounds of engines around me and cars crossing in the other direction.

"You dropped something from your bike back there!"

"Oh shit. I did?"

"Yeah!"

"How far back did you say?"

"A few miles!"

"What?" The cars in the other direction had thinned to a stop and people were revving their engines so we'd move. I didn't care. I'd dropped something off the back of my bike and they all had trunks, so they'd better chill out, dammit.

He pointed behind us. "A few miles!" and backed into his family van. I waved thanks and he nodded.

Magdalena was in front of me and couldn't really hear anything, so I motioned for her to pull over at a gas station.

She inched up beside me and lifted up her helmet: "What's wrong?"

I was looking at the back of my bike trying to figure out what was gone.

"That guy saw something fall off my bike a few miles back." My sleeping bag, tent, saddlebags. . . were all there. What was missing?

"Okay, let's go back and look—"

Then it hit me like a smack on the side of my head: "—My mother's mess kit!"

Magdalena put down her visor and started to walk her bike back. "All right, let's go and—"

"—*Not my mother's mess kit.*" And I put my bike in gear and rode right back into traffic and started scanning the road like a visual vacuum cleaner.

My mother's aluminum mess kit had been around since I was a little kid, and I remembered washing burned pancake batter off the pans in streams when I was little. The older she got, the more she was into mauve wicker tables with glass tops and the less she went camping. So it was like a passing of the aluminum Alzheimer's torch when she washed the entire set up and handed it to me the morning Magdalena and I were leaving:

"Now, remember to rub the outside of the pans with a bar of soap so it'll be easy to wash the soot off from the campfire."



That mess kit was love, it was my lucky clam, and it was somewhere splattered on the street. I rode on and on, faster and faster. I saw nothing but a cruel country stretched out before me without my talisman, and Magdalena stopped following me somewhere along the way. I knew I might have to move into town and search for this mess kit for the rest of my life.





the sides of the road were too clean. Nothing like tinfoil balls had even ed me out. I'd backtracked about five miles, and turned around in a gas ion, despondent. It was gone, and I'd have to go back and tell Magdalena. Was making sure it was safe to pull out and go back, when a big blue pickup ck pulled alongside me, and a guy leaned out and asked, "Hey, you lookin' that mess kit you dropped a little while ago?"

ooked up at them and said "Yes!"

imon, follow us. We put it inside this house we're working on."

had no idea what they meant, but followed them back a couple of miles on the in road. I waved when I saw Magdalena parked at an old firehouse on the le, and she got back on her bike and caught up with me. We turned off the in road, and down a bunch of little muddy dirt roads before we stopped in ont of a house skeleton on a muddy hill in a tiny, brand-new neighborhood.

he driver got out of the truck, ran into the house skeleton and back out with y mess kit. He handed it to me, waved "bye," and climbed back in the ckup and drove off.

Wow." I held the dented ball of my mess kit in front of me, and looked up at Magdalena. "That was amazing." It was the kind of thing that brought a urry Vaseline mist to my eyes and made the world seem so sweet.

Magdalena wasn't smiling. Her lips were tight and she was looking at the muddy, unpaved driveway through her helmet. "Never do that again."

"What?" I got off my bike to stretch and put the mess kit back on the back.

"Just ride on without communicating with me."

"What was there to tell?" I wrapped a bungee cord through one of the major handles on the mess kit that was like a ring of Saturn. "You saw me, you decided to pull over."

"Because we had already gone three miles."

"So?"

"The guy at the stoplight told you you dropped something a few miles back." She pushed down her kickstand and swung her leg over the seat. "A few miles is three."

"What's your point?"

Magdalena stood a little straighter and put her hands on her hips. "You decided to go more than three miles on your own without consulting me. We could've been separated."

I hooked one end of a bungee cord to something and stood up. "Magdalena, you knew exactly where I was. You wanted to pull over. I went on because it's a matter of timing." I gestured at the house skeleton. "And as you can see, it was perfect."

With this much time together off our bikes, it wasn't long before we started to look at each other with contempt. She looked down at her biker boot, kicked mud, and calmly looked up at me through the tension like it was my chance to come apologize, and I was too amazed to fall on the ground and start giggling from the stress of hating her.

I reached into my pocket and came out with a little cobalt blue bottle with the name "Mister Whiskers" crossed out and "Snowball" written above it. I took one last look at it and tossed it to her.

I put the MP helmet I got for three bucks back on my head, threw my leg over my bike, pointed to myself and said, "I'm the one who hit your cat." I started the bike up and took off.

I prayed I wouldn't wipe out in the mud and fuck up this exit.

I felt a crashing punch to my head and I lost my balance. I let go of the bike and fell in the mud. Shards of blue glass were everywhere and I looked back at Magdalena. She straightened out her gloves, put on her helmet, got on her

bike, lifted the visor, and yelled a bunch of stuff I couldn't understand. Californian stuff about being karmically tied to her cat, and that one day I'd pay.

Magdalena revved her engine and took off with mud flying behind her wheel, and she hairpinned out of there with her dirty belly button and flaky scalp.

