

Humans reckon they have the world all figured out. They flounce all over the planet thinking they're the only ones who can talk, the only ones who can feel. And if they make something, like a house or a cake, it can't possibly have a consciousness – except when they make a baby. When humans make a baby, their world stops, and everything else ceases to exist. Anyway, for me, these are the facts of life:

1. Humans don't understand everything. They understand a little piece of what this world really has going on.
2. Humans don't really understand themselves.
3. Everything around us is alive in one way or another. They may not be able to do all that much. It's not like a radiator can do algebra. But it *is* alive.

And me, I have a soul spark. Yeah, that's right. Sparks aren't just for fancy cars and trucks that turn into robots who save the world. But back to my soul-spark. Don't get me wrong, there aren't loads of sparks buzzing all over the world. Before this, I wasn't bubbling around the globe waiting on some higher purpose. I don't have delusions of grandeur. They're for humans...and cats. Soul sparks are created in a supply and demand kind of way. Something gets made which creates a soul spark that enters the object in question. And it's not like you have a choice...just like I didn't have a choice when my first "handler" decided to paint a naked lady on my tank.

Time for the big reveal. I'm a motorbike: a naked Suzuki Bandit GSF1200S. I used to have a little modesty, but my third handler tore off my fairing after he mishandled me on a hairpin bend and didn't want to pay for a re-spray. If you want an idea of what I looked like in my prime, in the early years of my soul spark, I was a beautiful blue; blindingly shiny with perfect curves.

My job in the way humans think of jobs, is to help my handler enjoy life. The good thing is, most of the time I get to enjoy what I do. Except when they're over-cautious. I'm built for speed and comfort. Those two things don't usually go together, but I wear them well. When handlers are cautious, I get bored. But it can go the other way too: they can be reckless show-offs, and their actions have a direct effect on my wellbeing. One minute, I'm all good, negotiating a tight left, and the next, I'm all upsided, skidding on the tarmac getting all mangled up and on my way to the garage for some much-needed TLC. That's if I'm lucky, and my handler recognises their limitations. Because sometimes, humans think they're better at stuff than they really are, and they start tinkering with shit they know nothing about. I'm a complicated machine and if you start playing around with that, I can only hope that you damn well know what you're doing. My final handler was a bit of a tinkerer and a cheapskate: that's how I ended up with a gun-gummed exhaust wrapped with a coke can. That was a particularly shameful time for me.

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Earlier, I mentioned my final handler. I thought she was my final handler. She rode me 'til my pistons hurt and my engine was on fire. Literally. And that's how I ended up here. Humans call it a junk yard, but for me it's a prison. Until this machine that holds my soul spark is properly destroyed, I'm trapped and can't do whatever it is soul sparks do when their machine is gone. I was dumped here eighteen months ago. For the first few months, humans would come and pull me out of the row, give me the once over...then put me back. Months later, they'd come with tools and take bits of my machine away with them, and I started losing weight at a pace an anorexic would have been proud of. How much more of a shadow of its glorious self does my machine have to become before I'm released? Turns out, I didn't have to worry about that just yet...

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The weather here is relentless, and it's rain-shy, which is great for me 'cause I don't do wet rides. I like the sun on my seat, warming the leather. This day was no different. It was hot, and the humans on the junk yard were oozing clear liquid. Not the red stuff I've seen handlers spill after they've made a bad decision on the road. This clear stuff never seems to be as much of a problem as the red version, but humans do moan a lot about it and make comments about other humans "stinking." The way they go on about it makes me thankful I don't have a sense of smell.

So, one of the humans always around the junk yard approached the row with a customer. He directed her to look at all the newer bikes. I've been around humans for nearing ten years now, and I'm pretty good at recognising the way they contort their face and what that means. The girl didn't seem interested in the new bikes. I saw it in her expression and felt my soul spark fire. They were about six bikes up from me before I could hear what was going on.

"That's about it, darlin'. If you don't like any of those bikes, I don't think we can help you." The thick Texan accent this guy had was something I'd gotten used to after moving from San Francisco with my second handler. The girl gestured further down the line toward me.

"What about all those?"

He laughed. "They're real project bikes, darlin', is this something for your boyfriend?"

I saw anger in the girl's face when she said, "Surprise, someone else writing me off." She stopped right in front of me. "I want this one." She pointed straight at me.

"That Bandit's done for, darlin', it'd cost you more in replacement parts than it would to buy a brand new ride."

Shut it, grease monkey. She wants me. Don't be putting her off.

"And it's no lightweight. If it's really for you, darlin', no offence – but you ain't got the build to carry it."

Did you just call me fat?

"How much?" The guy was doing all he could to put her off, but she wasn't having any of it. "If it's such a wreck, you probably don't want all that much for her."

So you see me as a her? Okay, I can roll with that. I've been she, he, and it before now, and it doesn't bother me. Humans are caught up on gender a lot more than soul sparks. It's simple: humans either have bits that make babies or bits that have babies. Your gender doesn't define you. If only they understood soul sparks.

"How old are you, anyway? Eighteen?"

What does her age matter, idiot?

"I'm twenty-two. How much do you want for her?"

He shook his head and sighed. "I just couldn't take money off a little lady like you for this hunk of junk. You can take it for free, but if you need any parts, you be sure to come on down here for 'em. I'll make sure you get a good price."

"Deal. What does she need, and what have you got?" I liked her already, and if she could put me back together for a final ride, we were going to get on just fine. They disappeared off down the rest of the row together, and I could feel the past eighteen months slipping away like rain off my soon-to-be polished tank.

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Though I hadn't been happy about the grease monkey's attempts to keep me in his prison, he was kind enough to pump up my old tyres before rolling me up a make-shift ramp onto my new handler's battered Chevy pick-up. I began to see a theme. I didn't care, though,

as she strapped me down nice and tight so I didn't move around much. The grease monkey loaded on box after box of parts, new and old. I saw callipers, a master cylinder, fork braces, and even handlebar switches. I was in for a treat. This girl was going to town on me.

My new handler parted with a hefty chunk of dollars she pulled from a canvas backpack and said good-bye to the junk yard guy. She climbed onto the back of her truck and patted my seat.

"You and me are going to be just fine," she whispered. "Nobody's telling us when we're done with, either. We'll show them, Bayley. We'll show them all." And she slipped her skinny frame through the back window, Daisy Duke-style, before chugging off down the dirt road to my comeback. *Bayley. Nice.*

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"You can't judge a book by its cover." It's a saying humans are fond of, and it's something I've heard said of me by more than a few humans looking me over. It was true of this girl, who had since told me her name was Booth. It's kind of ironic that humans are absolutely certain that inanimate objects aren't alive and yet, they happily chat to (and shout at) machines and the like. I don't know if Booth was a nickname or a real name, but it sounded cool. She *was* cool. And you couldn't know that just by looking at her. She was kind of funny looking, and her clothes didn't really seem to fit that well. She was scrawny and tall. I think her eyes were blue, but the light in the garage was never that great, so it was hard to tell. Her hair was a mousey-blonde. I recognise that colour, but I don't understand where it comes from. I've never seen a mouse with hair like a human or a human with mouse hair. Anyway, that's the colour hair she had when you could see it, because it spent most of the time bunched up and screwed under a ball cap. Until the day she shaved it all off, and there was nothing to scrunch under there. That was a decision she didn't consult me on, and it's good she didn't, 'cause I might have put her off it. Turns out, I would've been wrong 'cause she rocked it Sigourney Weaver style (one of my handlers kept me in his man den, so I watched a lot of movies). And she wasn't the kind of girl that got painted on tanks. It's not like she was bad looking, although I'm not a great judge of human beauty. I'd just seen a lot of guys and gals drool over a lot of girls that didn't look like my Booth looked. She was making me believe they were stupid for missing her.

Her looks didn't matter to me at all. This girl was great, and she knew what she was doing with my machine. She liked to talk too. All the time. If it wasn't to me, it was to a little machine she'd pick up, talk to, and put down. If I wasn't paying attention, sometimes I'd think she was chatting to me, and it didn't really make sense. But soon enough, I figured it out. I don't know what the little boxy thing was about, and since it never got added to me, I didn't care too much.

"Morning, Bayley. How d'ya like your new home?"

A damn sight more than the junk yard prison, I tell ya.

"Well, just in case you were worrying about me not knowing what the hell I'm doing, you should know that this was my dad's garage, and he taught me absolutely everything there is to know about motorbikes."

Not quite everything, Booth, but as long as you know what you're doing with my insides, that'll be fine and dandy with me.

"It's time to give those carbs a clean. Y'know, I think they're just stuck 'cause you've been sat in that junk yard so long. Seems to me you just need a little love, and you'll be up and running in no time."

Damn, girl, I really hope so. I've missed the wind in my grill.

“I reckon you’re not in such bad shape. A few new parts here and there; a lot of grease and oil, and you’ll be ready for our big adventure.”

I’m counting on you, Booth. I didn’t know what big adventure she was talking about, and it didn’t matter. It never mattered, as long as I was riding.

“I don’t care what they say, Bayley. They don’t get to tell me what to do. They don’t get to run my life. You’re the final piece in my plan to blowing this place.”

I was starting to get the impression Booth was suffering, and someone was responsible for it. Over the coming days, she’d shove her shirt sleeves up to keep them out of my way, and I could see marks on her arms, and bruises. Other times, she’d bend over and pull up suddenly, holding her stomach and grunting in pain.

The thing about being a soul spark in a machine is we have limited abilities. We can’t *help*. The longer we’re around, the more we learn about humans generally, and our handlers in particular. We see them get excited; laugh; cry; get angry; a whole range of emotions that, as soul sparks, we don’t *feel* as such. We learn to understand them and I guess we get protective about them. It doesn’t make sense to me, and I don’t know how or why it happens, but it just does. Sometimes it doesn’t. There have been handlers I couldn’t wait to get rid of, like the guy who painted my tank. But this girl; I wanted this girl to be my last big adventure, and I wanted the world to be a nicer place for her.

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So, my machine started off as a striking blue. I told you about the naked lady. My new paint job was a thing of beauty. It was the head of a bald eagle fading into a billowing stars and stripes flag. Booth had worked away for days just outside the garage, so I couldn’t really see what she was up to.

“Check this out, Bayley. Look what I’ve done for you!”

If I was a breathing-kind of alive, it would’ve taken my breath away.

That is the most beautiful tank I have ever seen, Booth. You are an artiste!

“I think maybe I could’ve been an artist, don’t you?” As she hefted the tank onto my frame, she winced. “Goddamn, that hurts.” She held her ribs and took some deep breaths. “Fucking bitch. Same place almost every time.”

It was the first time I’d heard Booth swear or refer to whoever was doing this to her. I couldn’t wait for her to finish me so we could get going. The sooner I could get her away from this place, the better.

She screwed my tank back on and polished her fingerprints away.

“That’s it for today, Bayley. Every time she sees me...always the same result. It fucks me up, and it ruins my day. I’m too tired to do anymore. I’m sorry.”

Don’t be sorry, Booth. You’re doing plenty for me. We’ll be away soon. I almost feel like my old self again, only better looking.

“You’re looking great, Booth. It’s only a matter of time before we’re done and out of here for good.”

I can’t wait.

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Booth had done everything she thought she needed to do. The boxes from the junk yard prison were empty, and I had the best paint job I’d ever seen on any machine on wheels. She’d got me started, but I was running rough and stalling. The carb overhaul hadn’t done the trick, so it looked like there was a problem with my air and fuel mix. This was not a job for

the novice. But my Booth, she was no novice, and I swear she could fine tune a bike from fifty yards.

She popped a hole in the blanking plug on the first carb and whipped out the pilot screw. Setting me going, she slowly turned the screw until I was idling nicely and the vacuum gauge was happy.

“One down, three to go, Bayley.”

This was a tricky job. I’d only had it done once before, but they managed to screw it right up, and I was off the road for weeks, waiting for them to scrape together the money to take me to a dealer and get it done properly. Somehow, this girl made it seem easy.

I feel better already. You are a genius.

“Told you my dad taught me well.”

I’d like to meet your dad.

“Shame you won’t ever meet him. He would’ve loved working on you. A Bandit was the first bike we ever stripped down and rebuilt together.”

Maybe that’s why you chose me.

“I think that could be what drew me to you back at the junk yard.”

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They were somehow the fastest and the shortest three weeks of my existence. I thought I was a wreck, and it was going to take Booth months to fix me up. Turns out the girl was a genius with tools and a spray can. There was a mirror in the garage, and it was like an episode straight from *Pimp my Ride* (again, I spent a lot of time in a handlers’ man den). If I suffered from vanity like humans, I wouldn’t have been able to look at myself when Booth first rolled me in there. Now, that was the only place I wanted to look. I was shiny brand new, and when she finally finished with me, I was purring.

“Our day’s finally here, Bayley. You and me against the world. No-one telling us what to do, and no more pain.”

I’ll be a great companion for this adventure, Booth. You can count on me. As long as you’ve aligned all my internal bits and put me back together in perfect order, that is.

“This was my dad’s, Bayley.” She pulled on a battered, old leather jacket. “Do you think if he was around, he could’ve protected me?”

I wish I could protect you, Booth. Suddenly I wanted to be a bike that turned into a robot that could squash whoever was causing her this much pain. But I guess I was doing the next best thing and taking her far away from it. This was a big country. We could take a swoop to any town, and she could make a fresh start. Whoever was bothering Booth here wouldn’t follow her. A bully always finds a new victim to pick on if one disappears or stands up to them.

She hoisted her canvas backpack. It didn’t look so full for a big adventure, but then if she was carrying the kind of cash she flashed to buy me, maybe she was going to buy herself a whole new wardrobe too.

It wasn’t long before we stopped off at those blue boxes that almost snaffle the arm of humans when they try to feed it. From her pocket, she pulled out the little black box she was always talking into when she wasn’t yacking to me, stuffed it in a brown envelope, and fed the stationary machine.

“Wouldn’t want to leave without saying goodbye to Mom, Bayley.”

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Damn, I'd missed this. I've heard humans say you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone. That's not the case for soul sparks. Every single moment of the eighteen months my machine was rusting away, memories of these kind of roads kept me warm. Smooth tarmac that stretches straight into the horizon for miles and miles. And not another soul (spark or human) to be seen. These are the kind of trips that seal a machine and its handler together for years. It doesn't matter what you believe about how this all came to be, you just have to admire it. This was one beautiful landscape.

We'd left the city, all stop-start-third gear if you're lucky, and hit the first gas station on the Interstate. A full tank should take us at least two-hundred miles, maybe more. She'd know that. As much as I loved these empty roads, they were often empty of gas vendors too, and there were few things worse than running out of gas in the middle of nowhere. And we were soon off the Interstate and *in* the middle of nowhere.

Booth soon proved she rode just as well as she could rebuild a machine. We were making pretty snake patterns down the road, just her hips gently swaying us from one side of the road to the other. She was singing like a banshee, wailing at the top of her voice. After three weeks of hearing and seeing her in so much pain, it was so good to see her like this. She pulled over to study a beat-up old map that she spread on my tank.

"Jeez, Bayley, there's no place on earth I feel as free as on top of a beautiful machine like you."

Ah, you know just how to flatter an old soul spark.

"I've been dreaming about getting away for so long, Bayley. I was kind of thinking it might never happen. Then I found you. I've never really been a big believer in fate, but you changed my mind."

I wish there was a way for us to really talk, Booth. I could tell you how you've changed my life too.

"And you, you were rusting away with no-one to love you. It's like it was meant to be." If I could have laughed, I would've. Who knew a human and a soul spark could be so much on the same wavelength?

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"This is it, Bayley. The big adventure."

I didn't understand. I thought we were already six-hundred miles into the big adventure. Now, we were just at the edge of a lake; a huge lake you couldn't see to the other side of. Bikes don't do lakes, unless they're aboard a floating boat thing.

I get it. We're going all around the lake. A mini-state tour. Great, I'm up for that.

"I reckon I've water-proofed you enough that we can get maybe half a mile across the lake bed."

What's that now? Across the what?

"And I've got a little insurance, in case I falter." She pulled out gaffer tape from her bag. It wasn't the bog-standard silver kind. It was flashy urban camouflage. She sat it on my tank while she put her bag back on. "Don't want to be leaving any clues."

The thing is with humans, you can mistake cool with crazy. It's an easy mistake to make. Someone's a little edgy, a little out there: it's exciting. Humans like that ride machines how they were built to be rode. But there's a line. Had Booth crossed it?

"Don't be scared, Bayley. I'm not. I've planned this for the best part of a year. Maybe you saw yourself going out in a blaze of glory underneath a gas tanker. I couldn't risk that. Too painful for Mom to have identify my charry mess."

I'm not sure I've thought about the end all that much. I was kind of hoping for a different adventure after you rescued me.

She wrapped the gaffer tape around her ankle and my foot peg. Then she started to wrap the gaffer tape around her left wrist and my handlebar, securing us together. She didn't bother tearing the rest off and just let the roll dangle.

"No clues, Bayley." She revved me up, turned us around, and headed back up the boat launch. Ah, she's just playing with me...but then she jammed the back brake and jerked the handlebars hard to the left. My back wheel swung around, and we were facing the lake again. I wondered where all the good Samaritans were that you see in all the movies where the heroine is just about to die.

Are you sure about this? I mean, you saved me from a slow, rotting death, and this might work for you. Humans don't fare so well under water, but I'm not sure if it'll release me.

"Bayley, come on. Every motorbike wants a rider who'll take them to the edge. This is forever. This is the kind of adventure a bike and their rider dream about."

She was either beginning to make sense or crazy was contagious. Whatever it was, it's not like I had any power to change the situation. So I let it be. She leaned down and kissed my tank.

"Thanks, Bayley. Let's go where no Bandit has been before."

That's a little cliché, but I'll work with it.

She pulled down her visor, and we headed into the lake. The boat launch was smooth, and we were both submerged in no time. I don't know how she'd "water-proofed" me, but it seemed to work for a little while. It was a great feeling. Weird. Different. But great. I was enjoying myself so much, I almost didn't feel us slowing down. Booth's hand had slipped off my throttle. She was still seated, and she didn't struggle. I don't know how she couldn't, but she didn't. It was peaceful. Almost relaxed. It just...was. And then she was gone. I couldn't *feel* her anymore, but she was around me, picking me up, and taking me out of the machine. And then...I was gone too.

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Recognising the writing, she tore open the package and took out the little black box from within it. She pressed play and heard her daughter's voice again:

"I hope you'll have got this before you worry too much. I had to post it this way to get a head start, because I know you would've tried to change my mind, and keep me at home. Mom, you did everything you possibly could've done for me, so know this wasn't your fault. Please don't blame yourself. This could've happened to anyone, and it does...all the time. It doesn't matter who you are; this vile disease doesn't care how old or young you are; how rich or poor; how nice or mean. We can't really do a damn thing about it.

"I didn't want you having to bury your daughter as well as your husband...my dad. So you won't find me. Ever. Please know that I love you. I love you with all my heart. But my heart was breaking a little at a time. Each time I saw your face when you picked me up from chemo, and you were trying to be brave about it. The sharp intake of breath you took before you helped me shave off my hair. Every time you held me while I was retching what felt like my intestines up through my throat. Each time you'd sing me to sleep, and I could hear your voice breaking with your pain. And it was me too. I'd reach over to do the simplest task, and my body would be wracked in agony. I was scared of the time that would come when I wouldn't be able to do anything for myself, and Mom, you know how independent I am. You always said I was just like dad.

"And when people ask, because they will, they can't help themselves: you can tell them it wasn't about strength or weakness, and it wasn't about me giving up. It's simple. I wanted to control something I had very little control over. I got to decide when I'm through, not some disease eating its way through me. And don't listen to those people who say life is

precious, and we shouldn't play God. I'm not angry. I'm not going to say, if there was a God, he wouldn't have let this happen. But if there is a God, didn't he give us free will? The ability to make decisions for ourselves? So, Mom, I grabbed a hold of my free will with both hands and a clear head while I still had it, and I took our pain away.

“Please know I wasn't alone either. I've done this with help. I made a connection, and it'll probably seem stupid to most people. But it wasn't to me, and at the end, my end, that's what mattered. You always taught me to be the best I could be, and this is no different, Mom. I've not taken pills or jumped off a bridge. You don't have to find me dead, and no-one else has to live with the vision of me landing on the hood of their car from a great height. Just know that it's over by my rules and on my timescale. And I did it doing something I love. Not everyone gets that luxury. Dad didn't. Plenty of people get to stick around much longer than I did, but they never really live. Mom, *I did*. I had a great life, and I thank you for every second of it. Never forget me, and never forget I love you.”