

TOP OF FLAT CLOUD COUNTRY

By Latif Gardez 17/2/2012 (Copyright 2012)

I sat at the cross roads on a broken down wall, just along from the Manor Comprehensive school. I waited and listened.

It was Saturday. I got up and stood, looking around me. There was nothing else to do. Hitting the lamppost with a stick; I waited. It must have been, oh I don't know, ten o'clock in the morning. I waited; following a pair of Crows with my eyes as they flew down and hopped along the pavement towards me. Their eyes glinted in the strange opaque light, heads turning side to side. They were studying me, rather than the other way round. It was blank the colour of the sky, like used bath-water solid as cream; hanging over me lending the day a brooding intensity. I kept after the lamppost with my stick, listening for a sound...

Every now and then I would look along the length of the wall towards the school. I didn't mind being this close, it was Saturday and I was free of it; of them. Suddenly a car would drive past and I'd get a look from the driver as if to say 'what are you up to?' – The Crows hopped closer: they were to feature in my life from then on. I rolled my head and looked away; hit the post a good thwack! And then Vernon turned up on his push-bike with the cow-horn handlebars and the big off road scrambling tires.

"Alright...?" He murmured as he rode past me. Then speeding up he hit the back brake letting the bike slide in the dust, and turned around peddling hard, back to where I was standing. "Got a smoke?" I asked. The Crows had gone. He looked up and down the empty road. It was ten thirty in the morning and as dead as time.

"Yeah, here.." He said handing me a Woodbine and a box of matches. Everything is a test. I looked up and down the road and then cupping my hands lit the cigarette, keeping it hidden in my palm, in case anyone drove past.

"What are you up to then?" He said rocking back and forward on his bike.

"Don't know...just hanging about.." I replied taking short drags on my cigarette. "There's a 'Jalopy' race over Bisley way this afternoon..." He said. I gave the post a good thwack again. "Yeah?...when's my bike gonna be ready?" I said showing my frustration. He laughed at that. Vernon was older than me, being thirteen; I was only ten.

"Oh yeah, that bike – well it's almost done, you got the money?" Suddenly he pulled a 'wheelie' and went off up the street for twenty yards or so, turned and came back.
King Of The Road.

"I could get the money, if I asked my mum – today!"



"Well, I suppose I could get it done – `bout lunchtime, but I need some cash!"

"Yeah! No problem, I can get the cash – then we can go to that `Jalopy' race..." I looked pleadingly "Ok" He muttered, in a matter of fact kind of way.

"It's got Cow-Hangers like yours – hasn't it?" I asked, feeling the excitement rise inside me at the prospect of finally having my own scrambling push-bike to go off road with.

"Yeah the same shape only not as good as mine, coz mine are alloy, like for racing" He said smugly.

"Wow! Great I can't...."

And then I heard it. The high-end guttural whine of a four stroke, four cylinder Honda, race-tuned engine coming up the long shallow hill from Bisley. Snapping through the gears and then decelerating as he came to the cross roads, where we were standing. It was SNUDGER. Jessy James, Wild Bill Hickcock, and Billy The Kid, all rolled into one on a motorbike!

Banking round the corner like Mike Hailwood, he pulled up in front of us, coming to a halt and then revving the engine for a couple of seconds to clean out the carbs; making sure we got the right impression. Vernon's attitude change completely when The Snudge appeared. He suddenly became – me! The young kid, dying for a ride on that bike!

"Alright Snudge...?" He said with an eagerness that lightened his voice to a soft tenor. The Snudge leaned back on the beautiful bike, unzipped his leather jacket, pulled down the red polka-dot scarf, pushed his goggles up onto the pudding-bowl helmet and grinned.

"How are you Vern – got a smoke?" He mumbled like Doc Holiday at the card table, slow and easy.

"Yeah sure...!" Vernon responded jumping to it.

Then Snudge turned his sapphire gaze on me. Paused a moment, as if trying to remember something. "Alright Steve?" He purred whilst flicking a cigarette into his mouth and striking a match on the zip of his jacket.

"Yeah, great thanks Snudge!" I said slightly stunned that he remembered me at all.

"Going over Bisley this afternoon Snudge?" Vernon asked, trying to look as cool as his hero.

"Nah...there's a Grass-Track meeting up Slad-Valley way, I think I'll try that..." He said languidly in that west country burr, squinting against the glare of the low, opaque, light.

They started talking about something but I wasn't listening. I was looking at the bike.

Chrome clip-on handle bars, chrome twin-Daytona exhaust, black and red racing tank and seat, and a silver and red race-faring. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, a dead spitting image of the bike that Mike `the bike' Hailwood had won the `Isle Of Man TT' on the



year before. A real Cafe- racer. "...yeah alright, I'll see you there then" I heard Snudge say, as their conversation faded back into my consciousness. I stood there with my mouth open a little staring at the bike, dreaming of Road Racing at the Isle Of Man TT. Snudge turned and looked at me, calm as time.

"So, you want a lift then Steve?"

I think I actually pointed at myself before saying yes. Vernon looked grumpy but he had his push-bike.

"Shall I come round after lunch then?" I asked. Vernon looked at me, resigned.

"Yeah ok, after lunch"

"Come on, get on!" He kicked the bike into life, producing a wonderful baritone roar. I leant forward and yelled in his ear. "Can we go round that way to the bus shelter?" He just nodded his head back and told me to hang on to the little belts on the side of his jacket: I didn't have a helmet, so he'd take it easy...right? He pulled up the red polka-dot scarf, dropped the goggles into place, looked once over his shoulder at me and then shouted "Hang on!"

The engine revved and I felt the bike click into first gear and then we were off! All the way up to the limiter on the revs. As we came to the first right hander, passing my school, he changed down three gears and cranked the bike over so my knees were almost touching the ground. I hung on watching the road getting closer and closer and then we were upright again, a quick burst of speed down to the graveyard and around the tight right handed hair-pin and along the back straight, [as I thought of it] past the church hall to the village green which was in the shape of a inverted triangle. I thought he would take the first right, up towards the bus shelter and the pointy end of the triangle, but instead he screamed on down past the pub and took the second right hander, very tight, I could feel the back sliding as we powered out of the turn! I was scared and thrilled all at the same time. When we got to the top of the hill he stopped, put his foot down.

"Where do you live Steve?" I pointed down the little lane we had stopped right next to. "Just here" He nodded again and off we went like the wind. I screamed out over the roar of the engine "The Pine Trees in the garden!" We over-took Vernon on his push-bike as he lived next door to me. As we came to my house I tapped him on the shoulder. He slowed and pulled into our front yard. I got off the bike with the adrenaline pumping through me, but no nerves, just pure joy! The thrill of Speed!

"Hello.." I looked round to see my mum standing there.

"Hi mum, this is Snudge – he gave me a lift on his bike!"



“Hello Snudge” She said calm as you like. It was strange, Snudge suddenly seemed shy, almost sheepish. “Hello” He said nodding, his head looking down at the petrol tank. “Do you want to come in for a cup of tea Snudge?” I asked with the exhilaration of discovery

you can only feel when you are ten years old.

“Ah no thanks, better be on my way – maybe I’ll see you later at the grass track meeting...” He said trying not to look at my mother. My life would never be that simple or innocent again.

“Yeah, the grass track meeting, that sounds great!”

“Right...bye then...” He said nodding at my mum. She smiled at him, raising her hand to shield her eyes from the glare. He clicked the bike into gear and vanished in a high pitched roar, leaving the slight aroma of four-star gasoline hanging in the air.

My mum stood outside the kitchen door smoking a cigarette, her arms folded.

“Did you see that bike mum? It’s so beautiful! I got to get a motor-bike!” I split the word up.

“Don’t you think you’re a bit young for a motorbike dear?” She said with that far away look in her eyes, which meant she was saying one thing and thinking of something else entirely.

“I am not too young! Mike Hailwood had his first motorbike when he was only six!”

“Well Mike Hailwood’s mother probably had a lot more money than we have...” She held up her hand as I started to protest. “...anyway even Mike Hailwood like to have lunch so go and wash your hands Steven “

“Yeah ok “ I said bobbing down the little path that led to the kitchen door. As I passed her she ruffled my hair. “Hey!” I said dodging away.

“Your uncle Donald, my little brother, he was very keen on motorbikes “ She said dreamily.

“There you see! It runs in the family, I have to get one now!” I bobbed into the kitchen. She laughed and ruffled my hair again only this time I didn’t dodge out of the way. Ricky Mead had a BSA Bantam 125cc and he was looking to sell it for five pounds. I’d seen him riding it on his dad’s farm, down the end of the lane. I started dreaming and went to find a copy of the Motorcycle News.

THE END

