

Gorse Hill

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The stifling heat struck him in the face as he entered The Pantry. The familiar babble of voices and dense cigarette smoke welcomed him, as it did every night after his long day shift at the brewery. The large group of young men, zipped into body hugging racing leathers, weaved excited hands through the air as they described high-speed manoeuvres whilst sipping from large, chipped mugs, filled with frothy coffee.

One turned and acknowledged the newcomer with a cheery wave.

‘Hey, Julian, where’ve y’been?’

Julian removed his helmet and placed it with the others piled on the blue gingham oilcloth that covered the table.

‘Held up Dave. Did a bit of overtime to help pay for the replacement bridge on the throttle slide.’

As he removed his gauntlets he gratefully accepted the steaming mug that was thrust into his chilled hands. He sat to the sound of creaking leather and carefully sipped the bitter, sweet liquid. The two riders he had joined laughed and pointed at the white moustache left on his upper lip.

‘Suits you Julian.’ Dave chuckled as Julian wiped the froth away.

Suddenly, the conversation level in the room dropped as the mighty Wurlitzer clacked noisily and a 45 fell onto the spinning turntable. The plaintive voice of Twinkle began to sing and an expectant sigh rippled around the café.

He said he wanted to be near me ... the thin adolescent voice wailed.

‘Who is it?’ Whispered the freckled faced rider sitting opposite to Julian who could only shrug in reply.

He said he never wanted to be out of my sight ...

Outside, a motorcycle engine roared into life. The gearshift was toed, clutch released and the bike was gone. Only a rapidly dwindling scream could be heard.

Julian looked around the café and saw a youth in a black tank suit staring intently at a stopwatch clutched in his hand.

Julian caught his eye and called out to him. ‘What’s he riding?’

‘Vincent Rapide.’ Was the tense reply. He returned to studying the face of his watch.

He rode into the night ... Twinkle’s amplified cry for help went on.

Julian turned to his friends. ‘Half a crown says he won’t do it.’

That was the cue and the whole room was once again filled with excited voices. Coins were hastily slapped down and the Gaggia hissed and ejected more shots of the dark, reddish-brown café crème.

I cried to him in fright, don’t do it, don’t do it, don’t do it ... She was nearing the end of the second verse.

The short, freckle faced rider in red leather jacket slammed a coin down in the centre of the table and stared pugnaciously at Julian.

‘The road’s pretty dry, I say he can do it.’

‘Give it a rest Brian. Do the Goss with that old bike. He’ll be lucky to average 75.’ The Goss was their pet name for that part of the A20 called Gorse Hill. They both fell silent as Twinkle rose in volume towards the last few bars of the music. Even the explosive sounds of the Gaggia ceased as the café hushed expectantly.

Please wait at the gate of heaven for me, Terry ... Terry ... Terry ...

The hiss of the needle on vinyl ended as the arm rose and the record was lifted and stored away for the next playing.

There was a collective sigh of disappointment and the café swiftly returned to normal. The distant sound of a wound-up engine could be heard rapidly increasing in volume to end in a screech of tyres, a sharp engine backfire and silence.

The café door was flung open with a crash against the metal floor stop and a figure blundered in wrenching a black and yellow striped helmet from his head. He froze on realising that the glittering jukebox was silent and then walked dejectedly across the room to his friends. The black tank suit held up the stopwatch and quietly said in a consolatory tone of voice. '79 Eric. That's not bad for your first run.'

The normal deafening conditions were restored in The Pantry and Julian and his friends resumed their graphic descriptions of great rides across Britain. They were all members of a group of motorcyclists affectionately known as ton-ups. They were a select band of riders who had exceeded one hundred miles per hour on public roads. Their greatest pleasure apart from the actual riding was talking about their machines. How they created firework displays with their metal foot rests on extreme cornering and centre-lining all the way to the Welsh border. This was the suicidal art of keeping the front tyre as close as possible to the white line in the middle of the road while passing and dodging oncoming traffic at high speed.

A cold chill swept across the café as the front door opened and closed behind a newcomer to The Pantry. Curious glances turned into surprised stares as the riders identified the late arrival as a young woman. She wore her rich chestnut hair in a French plait and on removing her coat she revealed a floral print skirt flaring over the sugar-starched petticoat from a tiny waist.

Julian involuntarily held his breath as she made her way to the Formica counter while Anne, the rotund, rosy-faced café owner, beamed a welcome. Julian couldn't hear what was being said but the girl laughed briefly and Anne smiled in response as she started pulling on the massive chrome levers. The espresso machine hissed and spat as she injected steam into the aluminium milk jug. The girl placed one and sixpence in Anne's open palm, nodded her thanks and turned to survey the occupants of the café. The head of every young man was turned in her direction as she searched for a suitable seat. As what she was looking for suddenly became apparent to the whole room there was an immediate scramble to clear seats and sweep leather jackets and helmets tumbling to the floor. Eager hands dusted seats with crumpled serviettes hastily snatched from glasses that stood with the ketchup bottles on each table.

The girl caught Julian's eye and smiled lightly before taking the proffered mug from Anne and strolling to his table. She walked with a delightful roll of the hips that made the cotton skirt swing rhythmically with each step. It also increased the flow of adrenalin within every male watching.

'May I sit here?' she inquired indicating the empty seat beside him. Julian nodded silently and slid his gauntlets off the table and onto his lap.

As she sat the stiff cotton rustled audibly and Julian found this strangely exciting. All the young men at the table stared silently at the stranger. Leaning across the table Dave gazed at the girl with approving eyes and commanded his tongue to untie and speak.

'I don't suppose you come here very often?'

She laughed lightly before replying in a silky, soft tone. 'I'm not a ton-up, if that's what you mean, but I do love bikes.'

Dave leant back in his chair with exaggerated casualness.

She used her spoon to raise froth to her full lips. 'My name is Angie and I'm looking for someone called Julian Woods. I was told he is the best in the Sevenoaks area.'

Dave gaped and leaned back even further before toppling backwards in an undignified manner. The whole room erupted with laughter.

'He doesn't usually do that. At least, not when he's on his bike. My name's Julian.' Julian half turned and held out his hand and was rewarded with a small but firm handshake that ended all too quickly.

'I've heard you've averaged over the ton on the run?' It was a casually delivered statement implying a question that required answering.

'On a dry road last Summer I averaged 101.' It was not gainfully delivered as a boast but as a quite statement of fact.

The girl leaned towards him and he caught faint echoes of lavender cologne. It was an aroma he associated with his late Grandmother rather than that of the young attractive girl sitting so close beside him.

'And tonight?'

'Much too damp tonight, the surface has hardly had a chance to dry.'

The girl seemed to draw away from him in disappointment and Julian felt an overwhelming desire to please this strange yet beautiful girl.

Brian coughed lightly, his blush-reddened face almost camouflaging his freckles. 'I think I'll give it a go, Julian, it should be dry enough by now.' His eyes remained adoringly fixed on Angie's face as he nervously stammered his intent.

'Don't be silly Brian. You've only got your old Beezer tonight and that couldn't average 50 on the run, and you know it.'

Julian glanced at his friend before standing and unzipping a side pocket. He took out a handful of silver coins and selected a solitary sixpence before returning the rest to his pocket. Dave frowned at the small coin held between Julian's thumb and forefinger.

'I was joking, don't do it tonight Julian.' He murmured warningly. 'It doesn't feel right.'

Julian ignored his Dave and turned to face the girl. 'Would you like me to do the run tonight?'

Her smile seemed to light up the room as she touched him lightly on the arm in an unspoken affirmative.

An expectant hush fell upon the café and even the ever-present layer of cigarette smoke, swirling in lazy spirals, seemed to slow as Julian weaved his way through the heaps of discarded leather clothing that cluttered his path to the Wurlitzer. Dave followed, gathering up Julian's helmet and gloves on the way. At the jukebox Julian took the helmet from his friend and buckled the wide leather strap under his chin. Julian held the coin high above his head to show the room that a run was about to begin and then gave it to Dave. He slipped on his gauntlets and pulled the flying goggles down, obscuring his pale blue eyes.

With a grave expression Dave shook his hand and watched Julian walk slowly towards the front door.

'The conditions aren't right for a high-speed run. It's downright bloody dangerous,' Dave shouted angrily at the girl.

She ignored him and watched Julian with barely disguised excitement. Julian was a popular customer at The Pantry and all the customers gave the thumbs-up sign

as he passed. Black tank suit made a fuss of resetting his stopwatch in preparation for the start as Dave inserted the coin, punched in the record code and waited for the vinyl to be selected and dropped on the turntable.

At the first note black tank suit pressed the button on his watch while Julian simultaneously sprinted for the door that was being held open for him by Anne who had a very anxious expression on her face.

Terry ... Terry ...

He said to me he wanted to be near me ...

Twinkle began her mournful plea for the second time that night and a shiver went down every spine. Outside, Julian mounted, started the Norton Dominator and twisted the throttle to clear any night moisture. The reassuring 600cc roar from the exhaust masked the satisfying clunk into first gear.

He said he never wanted to be out of my sight ...

With tyres squealing he pulled away from the café forecourt and accelerated away up Gorse Hill to the distant roundabout that marked the point of return.

But it's too late to give this boy my love tonight ...

He soon watched the needle pass 80 and then 90 as he rode the centre line. He had to top 125 as soon as possible so as to maintain the average. A truck bore down on him with headlights flaring and airhorns blaring as he calmly shifted his weight to lean to the left and then right so as to effortlessly weave his way past.

Please wait at the gate of heaven for me, Terry ...

As he flattened his body along the racing seat and over the fuel tank the needle slipped past 125. The steering had been specially locked down to give very little movement and he stiffened his wrists to ensure the bike remained unwaveringly dead centre of the road.

He rode into the night, accelerated his motorbike ...

He screamed past a fast moving Jaguar to the astonishment of its occupants and Julian disappeared into the blackness before the driver could react against the buffet of air.

I cried to him in fright, don't do it, don't do it, don't do it ...

Apart from the occasional eruption of steam from the espresso and Twinkle's desperate pleading the café remained silent. All eyes were fixed on the arm that swung slowly across the vinyl disc. The unwritten rules of the run were clear, the rider had to return and touch the Wurlitzer before the record finished and the arm started to rise in order to achieve an average of 100mph or more; the stopwatch ticked on in the damp palm of the black tank-suited youth.

The girl remained perfectly calm beneath the steady onslaught of Dave's aggressive stare. 'He'll make it,' she said quietly and took her mug to the counter for a refill.

He said to me you are the one I want to be with ...

A coin Brian had been nervously fiddling with slipped from his hand and heads spun towards the sharp sound as it struck the terracotta floor.

He said to me you are the one who my love I shall give ...

Saliva was whipped from the corners of Julian's mouth as he neared the roundabout at the top of the hill but he kept the throttle wound open until the last moment before breaking savagely.

The front fairing and small plexiglass screen provided little protection from the icy blast tearing at his face as he kicked through the gears. He leaned into the roundabout and threaded his way between the few family saloons to complete the circle.

One day he'll know how hard I prayed for him to live ...

He accelerated out of the roundabout and raced through the gears to scream down the Goss and leave angry car horns in his wake.

Please wait at the gate of Heaven for me, Terry ...

Julian flattened himself again as he twisted the throttle wide open and the speedometer spun.

He rode into the night, accelerated his motorbike ...

Within the reassuring glow of the instrument binnacle the red needle crept around the dial to hover on 130.

I cried to him in fright, don't do it, don't do it, don't do it ...

In the smog filled café the girl had returned to her seat opposite Dave and was stirring her coffee in a calm, unconcerned manner.

‘Where do you come from?’ Brian asked as he rose from retrieving the coin from the floor.

‘Just a short ride away.’

Brian was not satisfied with her answer and doggedly continued. ‘How did you know of Julian, had you met somewhere before?’

He said to me you are the one I want to be with ...

She shook her head briefly and her chestnut hair glinted beneath the stark neon lighting. ‘Not really.’ Then added. ‘By the time he arrived I’d already gone.’

Brian frowned at the ambiguity of her words.

He said to me you are the one who my love I shall give ...

The arm was nearing the end of its journey across the vinyl and the door became the object of many nervous glances.

‘Yet you like him?’

One day he’ll know how hard I prayed for him to live ...

‘I’ve loved him for a very long time.’

Please wait at the gate of Heaven for me, Terry ...

The door crashed open and Julian dashed across the room, arm extended to touch the Wurlitzer as the last words reverberated throughout the café.

Terry, Terry !

The bakelite arm lifted within the glass dome of the jukebox and the room went silent.

Anne wiped her hands on her coffee stained apron and walked around from behind the counter. She began to clap her hands and one by one everyone present began to applaud until the room was a riotous assembly of cheering, clapping and steel-tipped boots stamping into old lino.

Julian removed his helmet and triumphantly thumped it down on the table. He held his hand out to the young girl as she rose with eyes sparkling and cotton rustling to let his rough leather gauntlet enclose her delicate hand.

‘Congratulations,’ she whispered throatily as she offered him a drink from her mug. Julian took it swallowed the contents with an exaggerated flourish.

From the other side of the room the black tank suited youth waved his stopwatch in one hand and a sheet of roughly pencilled calculations in the other as he shouted the result across the café.

‘104! You did it at an average of 104 miles per hour!’

The room erupted with another thunderous roar of applause and jubilant cheering. Julian waved his acknowledgement and sat down beside the girl who snuggled up to him despite the iciness that radiated from his leathers. For the next fifty-five minutes he described his run to a spellbound audience. A few technically minded enthusiasts interrupted with numerous questions while the remainder were content to hang silently on every word.

Although Dave had never tried the Goss run he was deeply fascinated by the minute details of the approach to the roundabout yet puzzled by the sketchy description of the return run. Unable to contain his curiosity he put a hand on Julian’s arm.

‘When did you start to brake for the café approach?’ he asked. ‘We didn’t hear your engine.’

Julian waved a hand airily in the layer of cigarette smoke above their heads, dislodging his friend’s grip. ‘Later Dave, tell you later.’

With a sudden show of impatience Julian turned to Angie and taking her hand rose from his seat.

‘Okay Angie, where would you like to go?’

She laughed, jumped to her feet and towed Julian towards the door.

‘I’ll let you know when we’re on our way.’

A chorus of wolf whistles and risqué bantering filled the room as the door closed behind them. Anne glowered at each offender in turn until they were reduced to an embarrassed silence. Dave grabbed the discarded helmet and rushed after the couple. The cold night air assailed his nasal passages painfully as he peered into the darkness of the forecourt.

‘Your helmet Julian, you’ve forgotten your helmet,’ he called, but there was no reply. Dave glanced along the silent ranks of powerful bikes gleaming in the frosty moonlight but the Norton Dominator was nowhere to be seen even though he hadn’t heard the distinctive throaty roar of it leaving.

He shrugged and hurried back into the inviting, fuggy warmth of The Pantry.

It was a little later and everyone had tired of talking about Julian’s achievement when a police constable stepped into the smoky environment. His quick glance told him what he wanted to know and he went straight to the table where Dave and Brian were still discussing the strange disappearance of their friend.

‘Dave Saunders isn’t it?’ he asked unbuttoning a top pocket and retrieving a notebook. Dave looked up with suspicion clouding his features.

‘Course it is, Ron.’

‘I have reason to believe you know Julian Woods of 14 Wellington Street?’

Dave stood and an icy hand gripped his chest.

The constable continued in a dispassionate tone of voice. ‘Did he ride a Dominator 600, electric blue fairing, dropped bars and racing seat?’

‘C’mon Ron, you know he does, you know what we all ride, you’ve pulled us over enough times,’ he answered. ‘So, what’s happened to Julian.’

The policeman seemed to soften and he lightly placed his hand on Dave’s shoulder.

‘I’m sorry Dave but Julian was killed in a head-on collision with a large lorry on the A20 while centre-lining at high speed.’

Dave visibly whitened and collapsed down into his seat to the sound of many intakes of breath throughout the café. Whispering voices began to gabble their disbelief.

Brian leapt to his feet to confront the constable. ‘And what about Angie, what happened to her?’

The officer looked down at the young man with puzzlement creasing his forehead. ‘There was no sign of a pillion rider.’

‘But they left together only 5 minutes ago.’

The puzzlement intensified. 'You must be mistaken Brian, the accident I refer to happened nearly an hour ago.'

His stubby pencil made furious notes in his notebook before it was flipped closed with a finality that seemed to underline the seriousness of the situation.

'I only came in because I needed verification that Julian had been in the vicinity and that he had been riding the Dominator because, although I knew him well, there was very little left of the rider to aid identification.'

The officer patted Dave on the back in a vain effort to console the shocked youth and then he turned and left the café.

It was more than a week before the two friends met again in The Pantry where nothing had changed. The smog level was the same, drifting at head height making sitting down a lot easier on the lungs. The espresso machine still belched out never-ending shots of reviving caffeine to sounds more reminiscent of a railway marshalling yard than a café.

Anne was bustling around the tables, wiping up coffee spills and emptying the mounds of cigarette ash and butts into a plastic bucket when Mrs. Woods entered.

She was short and slight of build despite the thick overcoat to combat the Winter frost. Shy, brown eyes, shielded by thick glasses blinked in the stinging atmosphere as she purposely crossed the café to the makeshift bulletin board.

The felt covered plywood sheet was covered in scraps of hand scrawled notes that advertised various motorcycles, engine parts and ton-up parties. She took a sheet of paper from within her coat and reverently pinned it to the felt surface using two of the spare drawing pins.

Dave and Brian rose and sadly went to greet her as she turned from the board.

'Can we offer you a coffee, Mrs. Woods?' Dave asked.

The woman smiled briefly and touched Dave on the cheek. Her fingertips slid slowly down his face as though in fond farewell.

'Thank you, but not today Dave, maybe another time.'

At that moment a burst of cheering rose from a group of motorcyclists standing in the far corner by the Wurlitzer. One of the young men was strapping on a

bright red helmet as the machine dropped a record onto the turntable and the playing arm swept across to the start position. CLICK.

Terry, Terry ...

The rider rushed past the two friends, accidentally knocking against Mrs Woods in his haste to leave the café. A quick apology was flung back over a leather-clad shoulder as the door slammed open and he left.

Dave took Mrs Woods by the elbow to steady her.

He said to me he wanted to be near me ...

‘He seemed to be in a bit of a hurry?’ she said and without another word left the café. The friends wandered over to the bulletin board and silently read the sheet of paper their friend’s mother had placed there.

He said he never wanted to be out of my sight ...

It was a simple announcement that there would be a funeral service at St John’s Church.

But it’s too late to give this boy my love tonight ...

What was left of Julian was to be buried on Sunday.

Please wait at the gate of Heaven for me, Terry ...

The group of young men sitting by the jukebox slammed their half crown bets down on the table. Their mate was riding the Goss except it was no longer named Gorse Hill.

He rode into the night, accelerated his motorbike ...

That very morning the local council had renamed that part of the A20.

I cried to him in fright, don’t do it, don’t do it ...

It was now called Death Hill.

Don’t do it ...

--ooOoo--