

## Ride

The mug made a soft clink as it touched the metal table. Chris turned and smiled at the waitress, young, blonde and probably just finished school, she was too young for him but he enjoyed laying on the charm, never missing a chance to practice. He stretched back in the chair, feeling the sun on his face and the subdued bustle of the Saturday morning crowd. Like all of these little tourist towns it would get quiet after lunch but by then he would be long gone.

He shifted his gaze to the motorcycle backed in against the curb in front of him, taking in the sight of his pride and joy. It had absorbed countless hours and nearly every spare dollar he owned but it had been worth it. This was his first trip of any distance from his home in the city, two hours on a warm day, the road quiet and free of patrol cars. Once or twice he had let the machine have its head and it had not disappointed, it may officially be classified as vintage but it still performed.

“Haven’t seen one of those in ages, is it yours?” The voice came from the footpath behind him and he groaned inwardly. He had long since got over the dubious pleasure of entertaining every old fart who wanted to tell him about the bike he had ridden as a youngster, how it had been the fastest BSA (or Triumph or Ariel) ever built and the daring deeds performed on it. The only thing worse was the self styled expert who would take it upon himself to point out the non original bits, or that the paint was not correct for that year or how valuable it would have been if he had not modified it. Chris turned in his chair just enough to get a look at the speaker and was not surprised to see a slightly built man in his late sixties. This one was perhaps a bit scruffier than the usual assailant, the uncombed grey hair to his collar and the short beard (also grey) lending him a faintly wild man look. Oiled stained jeans and engineer’s boots completed the picture. His hands were shoved deep into his pockets and there were faded tattoos on the forearms. This one would be a dyed in the wool British bike nut and he’s going to spend the next hour telling me how Jap bikes like mine could never cut it against the real thing thought Chris.

“Kawasaki 750,” said the old bloke, providing the answer to the question that Chris had been anticipating. “What year is it?” he continued.

“Most of it is ’72,” Chris told him. “I used the best bits from whatever I could find.”

“Build it yourself did you?”

“Pretty much,” Chris replied. “Some of the machining I had to send out and a mate helped with the paint but yeah, it’s more or less my own work.” He rarely boasted but he always felt a twinge of pride when someone asked if he done the restoration himself.

The old guy nodded. “Didn’t have that much to do with the Jap stuff,” he announced. Here we go thought Chris, here comes the sermon on the mount.

“They did some good stuff though,” said the old bloke, “and the big two strokes like yours would go like shit off a stick.”

Chris could feel himself warming to his new companion. Against his better judgement he asked, “You ride?”

“Yeah, still got a Norton, one of the early Commandos.” He scuffed his boot and added, “Like your bike, bits and pieces from different years.”

“How’s it go?”

“When it’s all working it goes like the clappers, none of me mates had anything that would touch it.” He gave a rueful grin. “But you know what Pommy bikes are like, if you don’t keep the maintenance up then you spend half the time parked at the side of the road.”

Chris nodded and smiled, perhaps the old bloke wasn’t so bad.

“Surprised to see a young bloke like you on an old machine like that though, most of them that come through here are on the latest rockets. They’re quick but they don’t do a lot for me.”

Chris glanced back at his own bike with its metal flake purple paint, the sparse but shining chrome, the individual touches like the low handlebars and the performance exhaust pipes.

“Maybe I should have been born a bit earlier, I would have enjoyed the bikes of the 70’s.”

“Do you know the roads up here?” the old guy asked.

Chris shook his head. “Nah, I’ve only been up from the city a couple of times and I’ve always used the main road.”

“If you’ve got time you might want to give the Old Valley Road a run. It wont be far out of you way and it’s gotta be the best bike road here.” He paused as if gauging Chris’s interest. “When you get to the end of the main street go straight over the cross road instead of turning onto the highway. You’ve got a bit of a straight before you hit the hills and then there’s nearly thirty kays of good winding road.” He smiled, “And all the coppers will be over near the footy this arvo, you’ll have it all to yourself.”

The suggestion had prompted Chris to check his watch as a polite way of making a departure.

“I might take you up on that,” he said as he stood, pulling up the zip on his blue motorcycle jacket. The old bloke watched as Chris lifted his helmet from the bike’s mirror and pulled it onto his head, slipping his hands into his gloves last of all. The key was already in the ignition and to his pleasure the engine fired on the first kick, settling down to idle with the jam-tin rattle so typical of the big two strokes. He nodded at the old biker before tapping the gear lever into first, a few more revs and then pulled out onto the street. He got a brief glance of the old bloke in his mirror, standing on the kerb, hands still in his pockets.

The big Kawasaki trundled along, exhausts popping and crackling, a motor not really built to idle. Chris wriggled around to adjust his position, the low bars weren’t comfortable at this speed but then he hadn’t built the bike for commuting either. The street finished at a crossroad intersection, to each side the main drag that would take him directly home, ahead a narrower but straight road leading to a line of hills in the distance. Old Valley Road the guy had called it. He sat for a moment, undecided, the vibrations of the idling engine running up through his body. He caught movement on the other side of the intersection and looked to see three boys, all primary school age, watching him. One of them waved and punched the air, an unmistakable gesture. Chris grinned, felt something in him lift and soar high. His foot pushed the lever into gear, the revs came up slightly and the bike started rolling forwards. He found second and slammed the throttle open. There was a roar from the intakes as the motor gulped for air, the exhaust note exploded into a banshee wail and the big bike rocketed across the intersection, the front wheel clawing at the sky. He leaned forward onto the bars in a futile effort to hold the wheel down, already in third and looking for fourth. He got a last fleeting glimpse of the boys jumping and whooping with excitement then his eyes were focusing on the road and the hills, now hurtling towards him at an insane pace.

He slid back on the seat, making room to get his body low over the tank. The speedo sat just in front of his visor but he didn't need to see it, he could tell from the vibration that he was well beyond one hundred and sixty kilometres an hour, the bike still pulling hard. A hundred metres ahead he could see the road lift into the incline before curving into a series of bends as it worked its way up the hill. A quick touch of the brakes, a downshift into fourth and a fistful of power had him tracking into the first bend, the howl of the exhausts taking a deeper note as the bike started to climb. One turn flowed into another, rider and machine in perfect unison, a grin of savage joy on his face. The road straightened out just before the crest and he wound the throttle against the stop, letting the bike have its head. The exhaust faded, drowned by the roar of the wind battering at his helmet. He was now on the very limits of control, one slip, one small mistake would catapult him into the next life but he couldn't back off, the thrill was too addictive. From somewhere behind he heard the engine note change, deeper, heavier. He risked a quick glance at his mirror and with a start realised that he was not alone.

Motorcycles, a swag of them closing in behind him. He risked a sidelong look as the first of the pack eased alongside, a big old single from the 1950s, the rider crouched low over the silver tank, feet well back on rear-set pegs. The bellow from its open exhaust washed around him as it pulled ahead and the next bike came alongside. He could recognise this one, a Norton 750 from the early 70's. The rider turned his head and Chris got a quick glimpse of a short grey beard beneath the goggles and open helmet. As it eased ahead he could see grey hair on the collar of the faded leather jacket. Next was another familiar machine, an old Honda 750, the distinctive howl of its four cylinder motor turning at full revs replacing the thunder of the Norton. He couldn't see the rider's face, like his own it was hidden behind the visor of the helmet. The Honda drew ahead and Chris could hear a much different note, the deep thud of a bigger, slower revving engine, a Harley perhaps. He risked another glance, a long low machine, much older than the rest, faded red paint and ancient girder forks. With a start he realised he was looking at an Indian, 1940's vintage at best, the rider of this one dressed in a dirty army greatcoat and a leather flying helmet, a pair of aviator goggles completing the ensemble. Something flickered across the back of Chris's mind, the Indian shouldn't be able to go this fast but as quick as the thought had surfaced it was dismissed, lost in the sheer joy of the moment. The Indian kept station

alongside, the fuzzy images of more bikes dancing in his mirrors but they stayed where they were, holding him to the middle of the pack.

The road dipped into a cutting and they thundered through, the noise rolling back over them, amplified by the high steep walls. The pace didn't ease as they swept into a series of long bends, the big Indian tucked in close alongside, the heavy beat of its motor clear over the Kawasaki's wail. They were climbing again now, angling up towards the ridge, a phalanx of speed and noise locked into their own little world. Chris could see the crest ahead and every instinct shouted at him to slow down, the far side an unknown but the other riders maintained the pace, those behind pushing him to hold his speed. Reassured by their confidence he kept the throttle open and as one they burst over the brow of the hill.

Into a wall of thick fog stretching across the road like a curtain, nothing visible behind it.

Knuckles white with panic Chris clamped down on the brakes, the forks diving as the tyres bit into the bitumen, the bike squirreling at the edge of control. He gave no thought to the riders behind him or the risk of getting rear-ended. They would have to take their own chances. The machines in front simply vanished from sight into the grey mist. The Kawasaki had barely lost speed before it speared into the fog. Chris had the briefest moment to register the impact and then there was nothing but darkness.



James leaned back in his chair to let the waitress reach across for the empty mug and plate. His elbow nudged at the helmet on the table next to him and it crossed his mind that he would have to leave soon.

“That your bike?” The voice came from the footpath behind him and he turned to see a man of about his own age, fair hair, average build and dressed in faded jeans and a blue motorcycle jacket.

“Yep,” James replied. The bike was the focus of his life, a Moto Guzzi Le Mans, built as only the Italians could. It was loud, temperamental and fast, perfect for a day's quick ride to clear the cobwebs from his head.

“What is it, an 850 or a 1000?” asked the guy on the footpath.

“Started as an 850 but I built it to the full one litre.” said James. The guy was obviously interested so he asked, “What about you, do you ride?”

“Oh yeah,” the other man nodded. “I’ve got an old 750 Kawasaki, one of the two stoke triples. Rebuilt it myself. Goes like crazy, a real speed machine.”

There was a brief pause, both enjoying the momentary company of a like minded soul.

“Do you know the roads around here?” the one on the footpath asked.

“Not really, this is my first run up here,” said James.

The other’s eyes seemed to focus into the distance. “You might want to try the Old Valley Road,” he said. “Be a hell of a ride on a bike like that.”

James grinned at him. “Might just do that,” he said as he lifted his helmet from the table.

“How do I find it?”