

## Larkins

Every day one summer on Larkin Hill it rained a little...who said, "right as rain" what was right about rain. Rain made you wet, it made you miserable...not right.

We had borrowed the tent from Gemma's grandfather, "who had this last time Baden Powell?" I quipped. I assumed she would slap me playfully on the arm like she normally did, but I waited in vain. I remembered the tents we had browsed in the Argos catalogue the ones that were more suitable for a modern shaped couple like ourselves and not the khaki triangular army regulation ones that made us look like extras from Dad's Army.

There was really only room for one in the tent, which I thought was odd. If there was two of us on one of many of our regular visits to the hill why didn't we have a bigger one? My father had sold the caravan we normally borrowed for some quick cash. I overheard him tell mum that Peter wouldn't mind, of course I wouldn't mind as long as Gemma didn't. The damp sweet stench from the tent's interior brought back memories of my scouting expeditions. Even twenty odd years ago Lark Hill (as we referred to it then) was always the camper's choice. Did it rain that summer, the summer that seemed like centuries ago the summer I was a boy? I tried to remember, but all I could recall was a full sun and the smell of burnt sausages. Is that why we...I liked the place so much? To enable the past to come alive?

"Does it leak?" I asked Gemma knowing it would, "because it wouldn't be the same without a nice big leaky tent," I added pretending it was going to be great fun getting soaked at three in the morning.

I studied the ground around our pitch for Mags my trustee motorcycle in case we were in need of an emergency bed and breakfast if the light but frequent rain didn't let up. How strange, I thought, the bike was nowhere to be seen...did we bus it or hitch?

"Guess we slummed it then this time eh?" I asked Gemma, hoping my jokey voice masked a vague feeling of apprehension. Gemma smiled serenely while looking out over the vast valley. The fact we didn't have plan B in place hadn't entered her head.

A single magpie landed at her feet to finish off the remnants of crisp. "One for sorrow...we need two for joy," I quipped, but she remained as static as a statue, nothing seemed to hassle her today, or any other day these days...quite often, especially lately I felt she was as unpredictable as the weather on the hill.

I watched as on cue the spotless sky become spoiled by navy black clouds that burst open like dead squids bleeding their ink and blinding the sun. Gemma ran into the tent for shelter.

"Wait for Petey!" I shouted like a bit of a wimp. I watched as she rummaged through her haversack and took out some candles, and what looked like cuttings from a newspaper.

"Watch you don't burn the bloody place down," I said laughing, "I don't think gramps will be pleased if we commit arson." She didn't laugh, just another stony silence. 'Was I getting the chuck?' I wondered, is that what this was all about? An elaborate plan just to give me the heave ho. "Nothing travels faster than the speed of light" I said, "with the possible exception of bad news, which obeys its own special laws."

"Well at least we'll get a heat," I added watching anxiously for her shoulders to rise and then fall, a predictable sign that she would break into laughter and we would end up embracing. But there was nothing.

As she lights each of the candles I hear her crying softly. "It's not all bad," I shout playfully as I hear the patter of the rain against the roof stop abruptly and watch a chink of sunlight force its way in through a gash in the canvas. Then my eyes wander down to the cuttings and photographs Gemma has taken with the candles. Why was my missing motorcycle on the front page of the local rag...and where the hell did they get hold of a photograph of me smiling like a baboon in the scouts? A more recent one had taken up a quarter of the page.

'Am I missing?' I thought...I'm missing and mags is missing and...I stopped...a chill like a wicked spell soaked through me as I read the headline, "local man...Peter Clark...most unfortunate...family and friends...Tribute..."

Outside the rain grows heavier. I hear the wings of the little magpie flap in a frantic attempt to fly away and escape. This year on Larkin hill it will rain a little, every day.