

Moon Over the Downs - excerpt

by Shaun Belcher

Each drip off the corrugated plastic sheeting made a tinny sound that he could hear from deep within the damp sleeping bag and layers of blankets where he was trying to sleep. He could picture the 1953 Coronation picture tray (each royal face worn to a rusted halo) where it lay propped against the side of the caravan under the makeshift porch. He saw each drop collect in his mind's eye as it hovered on the broken edge and then fell from the cracked sheet. It was too cold to get up and do anything about it so he pulled the blanket back and in the dark caught a glimpse of the VHS recorder's timer a blurry phosphorous lime green glow. 3.12. He groaned and mumbled a curse about February weather groaned again and was gone. Sliding in his dream back to the childhood garden behind the biscuit factory...crumbs of comfort on a crimson tablecloth...sugar in a bowl...iced gems...ants...blankness

The mangy mongrel from the next door caravan woke him up with a wheezing bark more like its owner's cough at 7 a.m. From deep in the damp cocoon he could hear it dragging at its lead as the postman's footsteps on the gravel path and the swish of his tyres trundled off to the far caravans. Some muffled words, a banging door and silence again. The cold had seeped into his sleeping bag and through the sagging and wrinkled skin to his bones. He stayed wedged inside the dark cocoon not wanting to freeze his head even more in the brittle light. Then the old sod next door started turning over his old Rover's engine for what seemed like eternity before it sprang into a half-life of churning rusted pistons and oil leaks. It crunched off across the gravel road and onto the tarmac road that ran by the river and was soon a faint hum on the edge of silence.

7.10 blinked repeatedly from the recorder as he finally peeped one eye out from the sleeping bag. A cloud of steam marked his breath as it rose up to cloud the inside of the frosted and dirty window above his head. God he hated February. Ice that formed on the inside of the windows would puddle on the sills before dripping in grey lines down the walls. Still sleeping in his coat for warmth he slowly shed his covers like a butterfly emerging from its caterpillar skin. He tottered half upright and half awake-half asleep on the edge of the sagging bed and fumbled instinctively for where his lighter and Rizla papers were. It took ten minutes for his frozen fingers to roll the meagre tobacco into something like a decent 'rolly' that crackled as lit it. Yellow fingers shook as he brought it up to his mouth. February ...Jesus wept ..another winter like this and he wouldn't see the next one and no tours, no money in the overdrawn account..he was living on borrowed time..he knew it...they'd turn up one day and find him frozen to the inside of the caravan and have to chip the ice from his eyes....maybe even carry him out stiffer than that guitar case propped against the door to stop some bastard getting in at night....he grimaced licked spit from his fingers and hacked his first clean breath of the morning deep into his lungs...so deep it hurt...

