

Crackin' Up - Chapter 1

I Got What It Takes

Friday the fifth of February 1971 was a day I thought would never come. There was nothing special about the date, but now, at last, I could ride my Lambretta. Twelve months of scrimping and saving to buy it, then another three months of hard work rebuilding the machine, and I was ready to hit the road, so to speak.

I sat outside my parents' bungalow for several minutes, with the scooter's engine ticking over, while I tried to build up courage for that first ride. Just go for it Kenny, I finally told myself. I took a deep breath, twisted open the Lambretta's throttle with my right hand, and released the clutch lever gently with my left. The scooter responded immediately, its engine sending a puff of blue smoke into the air as the exhaust expelled unburned oil.

I swayed a little as I lifted my feet from the ground and settled them onto the floorboards of the scooter. 'Watch what you're doing,' I murmured to myself. Didn't want to fall off in the first few yards. I soon got my balance though; I'd cycled many miles on paper rounds and that helped.

I squeezed the clutch lever once more and turned the left twistgrip into second. The mark on the handlebars lined up fine. I was glad about that. It had been a right fiddle of a job to set up the gear-change cables; the tiny grub screws that

gripped them were hard to undo and, until now, I'd not been sure if I had got them right.

The Lambretta picked up speed as I changed up to the next gear. The junction at the end of the road was approaching fast. It had only taken seconds to reach it; walking from home to call at the corner shop, or to the nearby bus stop, would normally take me five or six minutes. I closed the throttle and listened appreciatively as the scooter's engine noise changed from a throaty roar to a loud popping. My friends had told me to knock the circular baffle out of my new exhaust, but I had been a bit reluctant to do it as the chromed megaphone had cost me nearly half my wages. Then I had thought what the hell, and hammered a bar into the narrow end of the metal trumpet, ripping away the baffle's welds. Now, I was glad that I had; the Lammy sounded like a proper scooter.

As I slowed for the junction, I wondered whether to give a hand signal for the right turn, then decided against it; better get used to riding the scooter before I let go of the handlebars. Soon, I was accelerating along the main road, away from the town centre. I had wondered, briefly, whether to go into town, but, having bunked off work early, thought I'd better stay clear, in case my boss, Beresford, saw me.

Strands of hair began to whip at my face as the scooter's speed increased. It needed cutting. Either that or buy a hat. Only sissies wore a crash helmet. Perhaps I could get a bob hat, or a beret, like some other scooterists wore. My fingers began to freeze as the cold air rushed past. I ought to have put gloves on too, but had been too excited to think about them. My ears were cold as well, but the sheer exhilaration of the scooter's speed soon made me forget any discomfort.

The Lambretta was everything that I had dreamed it would be. It was only a TV175, but I could never have afforded an SX, or one of the new GP 200's; it had been hard enough to raise the money for this machine. The scooter was one that a friend of my father used to travel to work on. The man had

only wanted fifty quid for it, but I'd been forced to sell my bicycle to boost my savings. I had asked my father to loan me the money, I'd even tried to get my mother to sway the old man, but it had been hopeless.

'If you need owt for college – I'll pay for it,' my father had said, 'but not for one of those damned things. You'll only end up killing yourself. Then I'll have to face your mother!'

Luckily for me, the scooter was still for sale by the time I had saved enough.

'I'll throw in the helmet for free,' my father's friend said, when I tried to knock a bit off the asking price.

'That's no good to me,' I laughed, when he produced a white Kangol helmet, complete with side flaps and peak on the front, from his shed. It was the sort that AA Patrolmen or old duffers wore. 'I wouldn't be seen dead in that!' I told him.

'It's supposed to save you from getting killed,' he grinned. 'You can have it if you want – but I'm not letting the bike go for less. It's cheap enough.'

He was right, and if I'd told him to forget it, it would have taken me months to save for another machine. I shook hands on the deal, then pushed the scooter home.

It had been a non-runner then, but now, with a rebuilt engine, it was fast, very fast. The icy wind made tears stream down my face, but I was too much of a novice to lift my hand and wipe them away. I laughed as the needle on the speedo swung towards the end of the scale; I was doing sixty and yet the engine still had power to spare. Fast enough for now I decided, at least until it was run in. And until I was a better rider. I closed the throttle and allowed the Lambretta to lose speed, dropping my feet to the road as it came to a halt. I touched the ground too soon, and nearly fell off as the surface of the road snatched at the soles of my shoes. That was close I told myself, thankful that I'd not gone into town on my first run; what a prat I'd have looked

if I'd done that in front of my mates. I waited for a gap in the traffic, then swung the scooter towards home.

The near spill had dented my confidence a bit, so I kept my speed lower and began to practise gear changes. By the time I reached the edge of town I had regained my composure though, and decided I would have a ride along the High Street, just the once, to see if anyone I knew was there; Beresford would not expect to see me on a scooter anyway.

I pulled up at a crossroads, where the road to Manchester blocked my progress, and waited.

A car drew up behind. I sensed that it was close, too close in fact. I cast a glance into the mirror clipped to my handlebars. It was the first time I had used it, and I would not have dared do that if I'd not been at a standstill. Behind me was an old Ford Anglia, painted black and fitted with tinted windows. It belonged to a greaser bastard called Roger Webster; I had often seen him racing the car through town. I looked along the road. No chance of moving off yet. I glanced at the mirror again.

Webster stuck his head out of the driver's window and glared at me. 'Get that fucking hairdryer out of the way, Roberts,' he yelled.

I debated whether to have a go at him. I wasn't scared of Webster, but knew that his mate, Skunk Martin, was usually in the car. Sometimes they were four up. I couldn't see inside the vehicle, but decided that Webster wouldn't be so cocky if he was on his own. Four against one were not very good odds.

'Knock him off, Rog!' a girl's voice screamed from within the car.

That was why Webster was acting hard; he wanted to show off in front of his slag of a girlfriend, Linda Rider. Everyone called her "Easy Rider" when the biker film came out, but she had earned the nickname from about the age of thirteen. It was rumoured that almost every man and boy in

town had been through her. I was pretty sure the story was true; I had been one of them myself, after school one night.

Webster revved the Anglia's engine, then nudged the car forwards until its front bumper was almost touching the Lambretta's numberplate. I checked the main road again. I still couldn't go as a truck was thundering down the hill towards the crossroads.

I heard someone shout and looked back over my shoulder. Yes, Skunk was there too; he poked his head out of the passenger side window. 'Shift the fucking thing, you Mod ponce,' he screamed at me.

I was no Mod, had sometimes fought with them in fact, but now was not the time to argue the point with the greasers. The car crept forwards again. I winced as my numberplate buckled under the pressure. Any more, and the rear body and mudguard would be damaged as well; perhaps even the side panels would get bent. I cursed as I thought of the time I'd spent sanding then painting the bodywork. Brush paint looked crappy, so I'd sprayed the scooter with aerosols of metallic blue. They had cost me another small fortune, as each can only covered a small area, but the finish was brilliant. Now Webster was going to wreck it. One more inch and I'd have the bastard!

The Anglia's exhaust growled as Webster shoved the car at the scooter again. I was just about to pull the Lambretta onto its stand, when I realised that it was rolling forwards into the path of the truck! I lifted my foot onto the floorboards and stamped on the brake pedal. The rear wheel locked but then began to slide across the tarmac as Webster continued pushing. I heard the truck driver sound his horn as my scooter suddenly appeared in front of him.

Webster would give in soon; he wouldn't want to kill me, just frighten me. The Anglia inched forwards. I glanced at the truck. It was almost on me. Suddenly, the lorry driver hit his brakes. A cloud of smoke filled the air as the vehicle's rear wheels began to skip along the road. As if in slow

motion, I saw the driver struggling for control as the tyres lost their hold. He was not going to be able to stop in time. I glanced the other way. There was a bus approaching. The lorry driver had a choice, hit me and my scooter or the oncoming bus. I suddenly knew which it would be. My bladder almost emptied as I imagined the heavy wheels crushing me into the road. I wrenched the throttle wide open and the Lambretta leapt forwards, its rear tyre spinning as it fought for grip. Then I was hurtling across the junction, swaying from side to side, my feet scraping on the tarmac.

The truck skidded past behind me, but the bus driver blared his horn as my Lambretta sprinted across in front of him. The sudden noise startled me, making me lose my concentration. The front wheel of my scooter hit the kerb on the opposite corner of the junction, bouncing me off the padded seat, but, thankfully, I managed to regain control again and bumped back onto the road.

I snicked the scooter into second gear and cruised towards the market square, taking deep breaths as I rode, trying to calm my nerves. The roar of an engine made me look in the mirror again. The Anglia was coming up fast. Webster was leaning out of the window, his black hair waving in the slipstream. He was shouting something. I couldn't make it out, but wasn't going to stop to find out what he was saying either. I opened the throttle and went up another gear. Damn! There was a zebra crossing ahead. Several people were already part way across. I couldn't stop else Webster would have me. I swerved around the amazed pedestrians. One man shook his fist at me as my scooter whizzed past him; a woman had to drag a pushchair out of my path.

'Sorry,' I mouthed, as I sped on, praying they'd not taken my number; I hadn't had enough money to get the Lambretta's road tax or insurance yet. When I looked back I saw they were too busy arguing with Webster, who was gesturing for them to move out of his way.

Soon, though, the Ford was behind me again. I swerved

the scooter down a side street. A squeal of tyres and Webster was there once more. The gap closed, the Anglia almost touching my scooter. I looked ahead and saw another junction coming up. Mustn't stop I told myself. I slowed the scooter, but only slightly, then leaned it into the corner. As I sped out into the other road, I realised that a car was coming. It braked sharply as I hurtled out in front of it, the driver sounding his horn at me. I heard Webster blast his own horn, wanting the car out of his path. The stationary car gave me a short respite, but then, in my mirror, I saw the Anglia circle around the other vehicle.

Despite the cold, I felt sweat trickle down the side of my ribs. My jaw began to ache and I realised that I was clenching my teeth tightly together. 'Please God, don't let him catch me,' I breathed, as the Anglia roared closer again.

Now I was in the market square. Thankfully it wasn't Market Day, else I'd have been blocked in by stalls and hordes of empty-headed shoppers.

Then I saw a way of escape. At the side of the greengrocers, halfway up the square, was a covered passageway. It led to a cobbled yard behind the Market Hall. It was wide enough for a car but had stone bollards across the entrance, so that only people on foot could use it. I also knew that the greengrocer stacked boxes of fruit and bags of potatoes and things in the alley, using it as a handy store for his goods. Webster wouldn't be able to follow me there. I rattled across the cobbles, then steered the scooter's forks past the stone posts.

The grocer had just prised the lid off a long wooden box, but was forced to step into it, squashing green bananas underfoot, as my Lambretta screamed past him.

'Bloody idiot,' the man yelled, as I struggled to recover my balance.

I ignored the shopkeeper, and peered back through the mirror, beyond him. The black Anglia screeched to a halt, inches from the bollards, and Webster and Martin leapt out.

As I turned the corner at the end of the passageway, I saw them get back into the car. They would know that I'd only one other exit from the yard, and would be trying to get there before I did. I swerved around parked cars and just made it out of the narrow street before the greasers trapped me.

Opposite me, another alleyway gave access to the rear yards of some terraced houses. It was wide enough for the Anglia, but only just. I raced into it, guessing that Webster wouldn't like driving at speed in its narrow confines. A service alley led off to my left, to the front of the terrace. I turned into it. The scooter's exhaust echoed back at me as I sped between the high garden walls, almost scraping the handlebars on the brickwork. I shot out into another street, then turned towards home. It would take Webster several minutes to get to this spot, even if the greaser figured out where I had gone to.

Would the greengrocer call the police? I could imagine him on the telephone right now. 'Yes, officer. Young hooligan on a scooter. Long fair hair. Blue eyes. Wearing one of them denim jackets. And jeans too. Looked a bit like Charlie Roberts' boy.'

My parents often shopped at the greengrocers, and several times I'd been with them. I just hoped that it had all happened so fast that he'd not been able to recognise me. Then again, after seeing Webster and his mate, he may realise that I was being chased, and that it was not my fault.

I decided to go home, hide up for a bit. Then I had a better idea; I'd see if my mate Floyd was in. The two of us could go looking for Webster and Martin; the greasers might not be so brave then.

I had known Floyd since he was about twelve years old. We had both gone to the same school, Westside Secondary Modern. On my first day there, my father had given me a lift in the little Fiat he owned. At break time, several lads had gathered around me.

‘Your dad’s got a car has he?’ one of them, who I found out later was called Eddie Duncan, sneered as he swaggered towards me, then began to push me across the playground.

He was about a year older than me, about three or four inches taller, and in the next class at school. A big flabby youth with light brown hair, a moon face, wide mouth, and thick rubbery lips. His breath smelt too.

‘Suppose you think you’re better than us do you, you Southern ponce?’ he growled, prodding at my ribs with his stubby fingers.

I was puzzled. OK, we had moved North but not that far; I had never thought of myself as being a Southerner. ‘What do you mean? I was born in Rugby,’ I said angrily. I had the feeling though, that wherever I’d come from, Tyneside, or Liverpool, or even the same town as Duncan, he’d still have been after me.

‘Anyway, my father’s only just bought the car. He needs it for work.’ I told him. My old man was on the Gas Board. He’d just been promoted to a supervisor, and was overseeing much of the work being done to fix customers up with Natural Gas. His new job had meant us moving home. After much searching, my parents had found a small bungalow near to the school where they’d enrolled me. When I explained where I lived, I found out that my home was close to Duncan’s.

‘So you live in that big place on the corner of Derby Street,’ Duncan scowled, then spat on the tarmac. ‘Told you he thinks he’s somebody,’ he said to the others.

I’d never pictured our bungalow as being big and was just about to say so, when the bell to signal the end of break sounded. It gave me a reprieve.

Duncan was waiting, with three of his mates, when I made my way home across the recreation ground. They surrounded me. Duncan glared at me, foxy brown eyes below hooded lids burning into mine. I wasn’t very tall, and he must have thought he was going to have fun with me. My

father, a former Royal Marine Commando and veteran of the Korean War, had taught me, his only son, how to box. I soon put the skills he'd shown me, as well as a few unorthodox ones I'd learned since, to good use. I gave Duncan a black eye. The others ran off.

Apart from the odd jibe, Duncan had left me alone after that, but it was a long time before I made any friends at school. Any boy who tried to team up with me was warned off by Duncan and his cronies. Because of the house move, I had left behind all my friends from Primary School.

Then, about a year later, Floyd Edmonds joined the class. His black skin made him a target for Duncan's taunts. Me, I was relieved that they had found someone else to have a go at. I ignored their bullying of Floyd. I thought that, being almost six feet tall and still growing, he should be able to fight his own battles.

The other boys would stuff a milk carton into Floyd's satchel then thump it, soaking his books with the stuff, or toss his satchel onto the school roof, or steal his pumps before the sports lesson, so that Floyd would be told off by the PE Master. They bullied Floyd in the schoolyard, rolling him into puddles on the tarmac, or sometimes into the mud of the nearby playing field. On it went, day after day, month after month, and I wondered why Floyd never retaliated. I often saw tears in his eyes.

One day, as I was leaving school, I heard a crowd of boys jeering and laughing, next to the bus shelter on the main road. Curious, I walked that way. Several of Duncan's mates had Floyd on the ground again; they were kicking him. Duncan had hold of a young black girl's hair and was tugging at it, making the girl scream with pain.

'Bet the little piccaninny drops her knickers for you,' Duncan shouted, as he dragged the girl behind him. 'You niggers is all the same. Perhaps she'll drop 'em for me too.'

'Leave her alone!' Floyd yelled.

'Yeah, leave the girl alone,' I said as I came up behind

Duncan, making him turn in surprise.

'Keep out of this Roberts. We've got to teach these black bastards a lesson.'

'And I'll teach a yellow bastard a lesson in a minute,' I growled, 'unless you let go of her.'

Duncan stood watching me, saying nothing. Then he shrugged. 'No use us fighting,' he said as he released the girl. 'We should stick together against the darkies.' He wiped his hands on his trousers, as if he had soiled them on the girl's hair.

'And him,' I said, nodding towards Floyd.

'Don't cross us,' Duncan scowled, 'else we'll be after you again.'

As I stepped towards them, the other boys let go of Floyd.

Duncan looked as if he was about to have another go at me, but turned away when I met his stare.

'You'll regret this, nigger lover,' Duncan yelled back as the gang sauntered away.

I ignored him and bent down to help Floyd to his feet.

'You didn't have to interfere,' Floyd muttered. 'I can take care of myself.'

'Yeah. Looked like you could,' I grinned.

Floyd brushed the dust from his blazer. The sleeve was almost torn off. 'Shit! I'll be in trouble again,' he cursed under his breath.

'Thank you for helping,' the girl smiled at me.

She was a year or two younger than me I guessed, but was about my height. She had a round face but with high cheekbones and a pointed chin. Her hair, a dark reddish-brown, was pulled back into a tight ponytail. She had full lips, which would have given some girls a petulant look, but somehow they made her look sexy. She had the same snub nose as Floyd. Perhaps she was related?

Floyd confirmed my thoughts. 'This is Cheryl, my sister.'

I put my hand forward to shake hers, then realised that was being a bit formal. I stood there awkwardly for a

moment, staring into her amber eyes. Cheryl saved me further embarrassment by hugging me briefly. I could smell a fragrance of lemon on her neck.

As she turned to help her brother gather up his schoolbooks, I wondered why Duncan and everyone, me included, called them blacks. Cheryl's skin, like Floyd's, was the colour of strong coffee. Cheryl had nice legs too I noticed, when her grey pleated skirt rode up her thighs as she crouched to grab at a loose piece of paper. She was a bit young now, but would be a cracker in a few years.

Just then, Cheryl looked over her shoulder at me, as if she'd read my thoughts. I reddened then stepped onto another slip of paper before it blew away.

'Thanks, Kenny,' Floyd said as he took it from me and stuffed it into his satchel.

Floyd was taller than his sister, more rangy, his face was longer, his eyes a darker brown, but he had the same broad smile as her. This was probably the first time I had seen anything other than sadness on his face; but then again, he'd not had much to be happy about at school so far.

'They'll be after you too now,' Floyd said as we walked towards home.

I told him not to worry. 'If we stick together we can see them off.'

Since that day, we'd stood shoulder to shoulder against Duncan's bullying and, apart from the odd catcall, he didn't bother us much. When we left school, Duncan spoke to us, and we to him, as if none of it had ever happened. Floyd had remained my friend, and we'd even started work at the same garage.

Now, still shaken, I made my way to the street where Floyd lived, slowing then looking along each road before I turned in to it, expecting to see the Anglia waiting there. I made it though, without seeing Webster again.

Floyd came out of the house, pulling his jacket on, when he heard the sound of the scooter. 'You finished it,' he

beamed, circling around the Lambretta.

I pulled the scooter on to its stand, then switched off the ignition. As the engine shuddered to a standstill, I told Floyd of my run in with Webster.

'Let's get the bastard,' he growled, then told me to wait. He ran down the entryway that led to the backyard of his parents' house. He returned, moments later, with a claw hammer tucked underneath his jacket. 'See if Webster likes this through his screen,' he laughed, as he stepped over the pillion seat behind me.

We set off. It took me several minutes to find my balance again, as Floyd didn't lean with the machine when I cornered. Soon, though, we both got the hang of it, and we cruised the streets searching for Webster's car. It would be easy to spot, as there were no other black Anglia's in the town. There was no sign of it though, even in the road where Webster lived.

We went through the market square. Webster wasn't there either.

'That copper's watching us,' Floyd said, tapping my shoulder then pointing to a policeman standing at the corner of the square, next to Woolworths.

I wondered if someone had reported me earlier. 'We'd better get out of here,' I called back. 'Don't want to get done for carrying a passenger.' Although I had ignored most of the legal requirements for my scooter, I had applied for my provisional licence. Neither of us had passed the bike test though, and I wasn't supposed to have Floyd on the back.

The copper would probably do me for not having any "L" Plates as well; I hadn't wanted to stick any onto the Lambretta's paintwork.

'L – Let's go home,' Floyd stammered. 'I'm frozen.'

I nodded. I was getting cold too. Webster would keep.

I'd find him on his own one day, and then . . .