

Moods of Future Joys
from England to South Africa by bike,
the beginning of a journey round the world

Alastair Humphreys

for my vast support team of strangers, who became friends

*"All that you are experiencing now
Will become moods of future joys,
So bless it all."*

- Ben Okri

“What, after all, was a travel book? That young Italian had started it all in the 13th Century, and had given the telling of tall tales from foreign parts its subsequent respectability. On the whole it had not changed much since Polo’s time: a man or a woman sets off for foreign parts ignorant of both the language and geography of the place, with an out-of-date map and borrowed phrase book, preys shamelessly for as long as the family trust fund will allow on the hospitality of the native people, and returns home to hastily record his or her first impressions in a semi-fictional collection of descriptions that affirm the prejudices of the day. Then, reminded of the mediocrity of the experiences described and to ease the risk of any intellectual burden on the microscopic attention span of the reader, he or she retrospectively invents a “quest” around which the narrative can be twisted in every direction except towards the truth, fits it tidily with invented dialogues, speculative history, sweeping inaccuracies, mistranslations, verbose accounts of having braved hazards endured daily by ordinary local people without complaint, portrays as revelation long lists of trivial facts known to every local schoolchild, and bludgeons the original spirit of the endeavour in an attempt to appear erudite with the academic verbiage of out-of-print encyclopaedias, disguising all the while the discomfort of being at sea in an alien culture by resorting to the quirky, condescending humour that its couch-bound audience will think of as funny. The result? Only a confirmation of what everybody already knows: better to stay at home.” - Jason Elliott.

Foreword

Sir Ranulph Fiennes, OBE

Alastair Humphreys' expedition was out of the ordinary.

In today's world of dashing up Everest in less than a day, sailing round the world in ten weeks, and best-selling books about three month motorbike rides, Alastair's journey stands out as amazing. It was probably the first great adventure of the new Millennium.

Alastair's journey was an old-fashioned expedition: long, lonely, low-budget and spontaneous. It was a life on the road rather than a whirlwind break from home.

An expedition lasting four years requires tremendous persistence, flexibility and self-discipline. To cycle, mostly alone, so many thousands of miles down the lonely roads of some of the world's wildest regions demands great strength and toughness-mental as well as physical.

When Alastair's carefully prepared plans to ride through Central Asia to Australia collapsed, he would have been forgiven had he shrugged his shoulders at the tough luck, given up and returned home to have a go at something else. But to change his route so drastically, to turn spontaneously and ride instead through the Middle East and Africa showed enormous determination, lateral thinking and a love for life and for adventure.

He aimed high, minimised his risks as best he could, and then leapt in with enthusiasm, trusting to the general good nature of mankind to help him through.

The reward was an impressive circumnavigation of the planet crossing five continents. What a journey! Alastair certainly did not take easy options on his journey (a winter in Siberia, a summer in the desert of Turkmenistan are examples) and this of course made success all the sweeter.

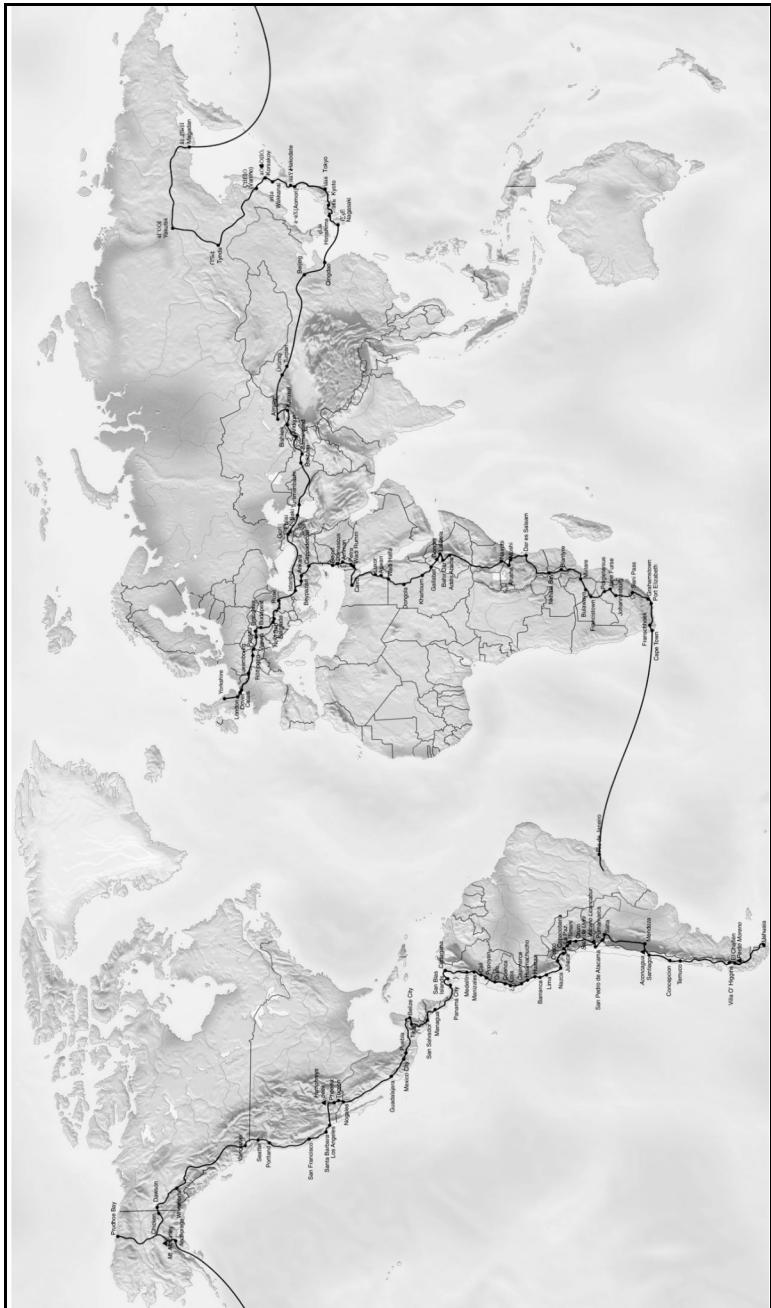
Alastair set himself a ferocious challenge, an old-fashioned quest, and got on his bike to see how hard he could push himself,

what he could endure, how far he could go. He must be proud of pulling it off, against the odds and against the doubts of so many.

I am sure Alastair learned a great deal, about the world, about himself, during the often lonely weeks and months and years of hard work. This expedition demonstrated that all things are possible if you work hard enough to achieve them. I would like to congratulate Alastair on his impressive accomplishment and wish him the very best of luck with his future exploits.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ran Tanna".

October 2006



The route from Yorkshire to Cape Town



Prologue

If you're not hurting you're not riding hard enough.

If you're not hungry you've eaten too much.

If you're not cold you're carrying too many clothes.

If you know you will succeed it's too easy.

Days are long on the road. Pack up and pedal into the dawn. Ride until sunset. It's easy to kill time but you can kill distance only by riding. Roads roll on forever, linking and connecting and reaching so far ahead that to think about the end is to think of something that feels impossible. So settle for today, for earning the small distance that the day's long hours will allow you. Roads drenched with rain, stinging hail, pulsing heat, slick ice, buffeted by winds on loose gravel, deep sand, tangled rocks, thick snow. Roads of smooth tarmac down mountainsides on sunny days with warm tailwinds and scenes of impossible beauty. Roads furious with traffic through grim slums, bland scrub, concrete jungles, polluted industrial wastelands. Monotony in motion. Roads too hard and too long that break you, expose you, scorn you and would laugh at you if they cared. Roads too hard and too long that you pick yourself up from, have a word with yourself, and make it to an end you once doubted. Roads you have never ridden to places you have never seen and people you have never met. Days end. A different sunset, a different resting point, a different perspective. A little less road waits for you tomorrow. A little more road lies behind you.

Choose your road. Ride it well.

Stage 1: “What am I doing here?”

“Who am I? Why am I here?”

- Admiral James Stockdale

I am holding a tangle of bike spokes in one hand, a box of rough red wine in the other, and my back is braced against the tent wall as it bucks and thrashes against the punishment of the storm. The beam from my head torch is the only light. Wet canvas flaps and cracks around my face. Puddles are growing on the floor and everything is soaked. The sour wine is half-finished but my attempts to completely re-build my back wheel -beaten and broken on the rock-strewn tracks- are not nearly so advanced despite a whole day working hunched in the gloom of the tent as the gale screams and pummels down the craggy mountains. Frustration boils: at my inadequate lightweight tools, at the cramped workspace, at my own incompetence, at the weather, at the brutally wearing roads. I still have so far to ride. “What am I doing here?” I try to remember.

My head thumps and darkness encroaches at the edges of my blurring vision. I am dehydrated and the sun is ferocious. I know that I must find water and shade but I know also that I must ride faster and have no time to stop. Paranoid police checkpoints have not yet noticed that I have forged the visa dates in my passport to allow me to reach the border before my visa expires, but the implications of getting caught frighten me. I feel weak and nauseous. But I have no alternative except to keep riding as hard as I can along this mind-numbing desert road past god only knows how many more checkpoints to the border. “What am I doing here?” I curse.

After squatting with diarrhoea above a ditch of raw sewage I climb weakly back onto the road, busy with traffic and pedestrians. The humid air stinks of fumes and rubbish and sewage and people living cramped together in makeshift shelters of corrugated metal and cardboard. I ride shakily along the frighteningly busy road, swerving round potholes and cars and donkey carts. I am anxious to be out of the slum before nightfall,

to find a safe hiding spot -away from staring eyes- where I will lie soaked in sweat listening to the whine of mosquitoes until morning. Then I will get back on the bike and do it all again. I have been doing this for so long. What the hell am I doing here?

And yet, whenever I asked the question, I always knew, deep inside, that the answer was perfectly clear.

Stage 2: “*The Single Step*”

“The longest journey starts with a single step”
- Lao Tse

It was an exciting time of life, finishing University and the world all before me. I was at the junction of a number of paths, unable to see far ahead but with a hazy picture of where each path may begin to take me. Knowing how way leads on to way I knew I would never come back. It was time to choose my road. “The years thunder by, the dreams of youth grow dim where they lie caked in dust on the shelves of patience. Before we know it, the tomb is sealed.” So I chose to leave everything that I was familiar with, everything that I knew and loved and enjoyed. I turned down a good job offer. I chose to leave my friends and family and girlfriend and country. I decided to let go of everything that makes a life normal, secure and conventionally happy. Like the movie poster blu-tacked to the wall in my student halls, I chose not to “choose a big television, choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments, choose a starter home, choose sitting on the couch watching mind-numbing, spirit-crushing game shows.” I chose something else. I was tremendously excited by life and I didn’t think that I would find it where I was. I knew that leaving would be hard, but, like Candide, “I should like to know which is worse, to be raped a hundred times by negro pirates, to have a buttock cut off, to run the gauntlet among the Bulgarians, to be whipped and flogged in an auto-da-fé, to be dissected, to row in a galley, in short to endure all the miseries through which we have passed, or to remain here doing nothing?”

It is a greedy, ungrateful risk to give up all that makes you happy in the hope that you can find better. You risk not finding it. You risk finding it and then never being satisfied again, yearning always for more. But I was looking for experiences that nothing, not the dimming light of old age nor financial ruin, could take away from me. Uncertain travel held an appeal for me, a lure magic, an intoxicating release from conventional bonds, a chance for self-testing and self-discovery, and the rushing joy of being alive that I rarely felt at home.

I chose to leave everything behind: the wasted opportunities, the shiny things I had spent money on, the ironing board and the expectations of conventional living: the race to get a bigger house, bigger car, bigger gravestone. I would have no home, no appointments, no deadlines, no career, no beautiful possessions, no weekend hobbies, no mortgage, no bills, no commute. I would have everything I wanted.

I wanted to raise my arms and stare in wonder over waves of hazy blue mountains. I wanted to wake in my sleeping bag in the desert as the sun rose between my toes. To shiver in a frost rimed tent is to truly appreciate the next warm duvet. A parched desert teaches deep gratitude for running water. Clarion calls to be alive and to treasure life. On the road you learn to appreciate a simplification of life. There is no need to upgrade your phone, no porcelain ornaments, no need to look good to impress, no boring small talk.

This is the road that I decided to travel, yet another Englishman off on a journey. So there are lions and mud huts and narrow escapes and blood-red sunsets and snow-capped peaks. But really this is the story of a young person alone. Alone on a bicycle in the world. What prompted me, above anything else, to write this book was the depressingly rapid realisation that I am no Superman, no chisel-jawed Victorian explorer, no larger-than-life climber of Everest. I cried a lot, I was scared a lot and I wanted to quit most of the time. If I had known at the start of the journey all that I knew by the end, there is no way I would have dared even to begin.

My plans started small but rapidly snowballed. I thought that I would like to cycle to India. “But maybe then I should just keep going to Australia? And if I made it as far as Oz I might as well go to South America...” And so it went on until the day dawned when I realised that I was going to have to try to cycle round the planet.

At University I spent most of my time dreaming of, saving for and reading about adventure. It was only in my final year that I started to develop any concrete plans. I became too busy planning my ride to do much studying. Maps and globes filled my small bedsit. The possibilities were endless and this led to countless hours of happy, unproductive daydreaming. ‘Operation HQ’ was established in Borders Bookshop on Broad Street, Oxford, a fine

establishment where reading the books whilst drinking coffee with no intention of actually making a purchase seemed to be actively encouraged. Leaving the café I would quietly fold down page corners so that I could resume my research on my next visit.

A sofa and a coffee are the finest travel companions one can have. Armchair travel is often more exciting than the real thing and always more comfortable. The only limit is your imagination. Don Quixote said that you can “journey all over the universe in a map, without the expense and fatigue, without the inconveniences of heat, cold, hunger and thirst.” Reading is cheaper than the real thing (though not when in hardback perhaps) and considerably more convenient. You can skip the boring parts, savour the good bits, laugh in the face of danger and drop ice cubes down the vest of fear. Sir, Madam, I applaud your choice!

This happy daydreaming would have been all very well if I had kept it to myself. My travels were little more than a dream in the dusty recesses of my mind. But the moment I began expounding my plans over any number of reassuringly expensive pints of *Stella Artois* in the pubs of Oxford I was trapped. Make a tall claim to a friend and, no matter how successfully the beer helps him forgive and forget his own nocturnal indiscretions, he will pitilessly remind you of your own boasts until eventually there is no escape. So, word got out, and gradually the idle dream became hectic reality. Then I was offered a job that interested me. I sat down and wrote a letter thanking them for their offer but saying that, unfortunately, I could not accept the position because I was going to cycle round the world. Writing that letter was the moment that I realised, with a cocktail of incredulous excitement and fear in my stomach, that I was actually going to do it.

The months before departure were exciting. I attended an Expedition Planning Seminar in the hallowed rooms of the Royal Geographical Society and this gave me the confidence to take myself and my idea seriously. I absorbed book after book about great journeys and adventures and the men and women who had pulled them off. I marveled at their accomplishments and wondered whether I could do anything remotely similar. There was only one way I would ever know.

I pored over maps and searched the internet for information. I spent ages trying to compile a sensible kit list. From *Three Men in a Boat* I learned that I must not take the things I could do with, but

only the things I could not do without. That still seemed to be an awful lot of things to fit into four small panniers. Pages and pages of notepads filled with my scrawl: optimal times of the year to be in northern Australia, addresses in remote lands of unwitting friends of friends who had been offered to me as contacts, wars and monsoons to avoid, ambitious brainwaves on how to secure sponsorship, exclamating lists of things that still needed to be done (Dentist! Passport photos! Bottom bracket! Money!), financial calculations on how long I could make my £7000 of hoarded Student Loans last, insurance queries, equipment wish lists and visa information. On and on they went. I didn't really have enough money, but that surely could not be an excuse not to go.

I decided to ride the length of the three great landmasses on Earth: Eurasia, the Americas and Africa, joining them together to complete a circumnavigation. I would ride from my home to Australia, then from Alaska down to Patagonia and finally back home from Cape Town via West Africa and Gibraltar. I guessed that it would take me about three years. I thought that I would probably fly across the oceans. I decided to support the charity '*Hope and Homes for Children*' through my journey, raising publicity and funds for them. I cobbled together a website and I began hunting for sponsorship. I couldn't believe how much needed to be done. By the time I actually began riding, I felt that the toughest stage would already be over.

I thrived on people's astonishment when they heard of my plans. Never mind that I had not yet ridden a single mile: people were impressed. But many friends hinted that I was being overambitious and that a shorter trip was more realistic. Potential sponsors did not feel that I was a risk worth backing: why not tackle a single continent and enjoy greater odds of succeeding? One bicycle company responded to me with uninhibited disbelief, "*Do you think we just got off the banana boat?! Of course we are not going to give you a bike for such a ridiculous idea. Go get a job if you want a bike.*" But I was determined: I wanted bigger, further and harder than anybody else could take or imagine. I wanted something so hard that I would surely fail unless I poured every drop of my being into it. My head alternated between being up in the clouds and up my own backside.

Saying *adieu* to my girlfriend was brutal. I had spent the four happiest years of my life with Sarah. But I had no interest in an office career and Sarah was too sensible to want to cycle the world, and so compromise never seemed possible for either of us. It was inevitable that a crunch time would arrive. While I tried to scrimp and save and plan for my journey and Sarah leaped into the racing currents of the career world we slowly drifted apart without me really realizing. It was only when the moment of goodbye arrived that I realised how huge a part of my life she was and just how deeply I loved her. Crying uncontrollably I tried to reassure myself that my anguish was a good sign of my commitment to my journey, but that was rubbish. I was throwing away the best days of my life with my best friend for a bloody bike ride. I had never in my life been as lonely as when I watched her drive away for the last time.

And so my journey begins. The bags are packed, my head is shaved (a ‘new beginning’ type thing) and I can think of no convincing excuse to back out. I am trapped on a runaway train that I set in motion myself but now am powerless to stop or jump off. I don’t want to do this. I wake up feeling physically sick with fear. I can’t do this. I roll out of my bed for the last time, open my curtains for the last time and look at my beautiful view of the Yorkshire Dales for the last time. I realise that if I take stock of all these ‘last times’ then I will be in floods of tears before I even make it downstairs (for the last time). I have to do this. I focus all my efforts on keeping smiling for the sake of my parents. Everything seems surreal. Is this really happening to me? I don’t have to do this, do I? I stuff a tin-foiled pack of sandwiches into my panniers as if I was heading out on a jolly day trip, awkwardly wheel my heavy, cumbersome bike -named Rita- out of the garage, wait for Dad to ask the neighbour to take a final photo of the family, hug everyone goodbye and then I am off. As easy as that. I have crossed my first border: from being a person dreaming of his big journey to somebody who is on his journey.

But the start is inauspicious. After 50 metres my mother yells at me for forgetting my helmet and I have to trudge back to the garage for it. I then realise that, despite the months of research into mountain roads of the Andes and Sudanese border crossings I have no idea which road to take out of my village. So I guess. I guess wrong and my father shouts and points me right.

Finally I round the corner and my home is gone. Then it all hits me. Months of mounting pressure and denial explode inside me and I burst into tears. I have just left from my front door to try to cycle around the planet. I have left behind everyone that I love. If I was a brave man I would turn around right now, go home, and admit that it was all too frightening. Instead I keep pedaling. What on earth are you doing, Al? You bloody idiot. It is one of the worst moments of my life.

Stage 3: “Foolish preparation”

“How often is happiness destroyed by preparation, foolish preparation?”

- Jane Austen

I looked over at the clock on the wall. My eyes took a moment to adjust, peering over the umbrella of lamplight on my table into the darkness of the sitting room. 3am. In just a few hours scores of ragged cries would burst over the silent city from a forest of minarets, calling the faithful to prayer and announcing a new morning to Istanbul. My eyes stung, my belly was queasy with exhaustion but I was not ready for bed yet. I sighed and reached out mechanically for the coffee pot. I poured the final cup, cold by now, and paused, elbow out, while the slow sludge of coffee grounds slid into my mug. In the morning I had to make the biggest decision since the ride began two months ago. A lot had happened since then, and now a lot was about to change.

The atrocities of September 11th had struck as I rode through the peaceful, rain-sodden countryside of Germany. In the confused aftermath of the attacks all my careful planning and preparation had been swatted aside. The shockwaves and repercussions of the terrorist strikes and the outbreak of war in Afghanistan had made my planned route across Asia potentially very dangerous. None of this helped my state of mind which had already plumbed new depths of loneliness when I began the journey. I was deeply upset by my separation from Sarah, homesick, and struck at last by the awesome enormity of the task I had set myself. I felt completely overwhelmed. In those early weeks, as I tried to get my head around my new lifestyle, I also had to struggle with learning how to cram everything into my panniers, how to find campsites, how to put up my new tent and use my new stove and how to choose a route away from the main roads without getting horribly lost. And I had to get fit as well: each night my legs would be wobbly and my bum sore and my whole body ached as I woke each morning in strange, lumpy fields across northern Europe. As I followed the Danube east I wanted nothing more than to be curled up on my sofa at home and to never do anything irresponsible again. My diary filled with anxious scrawling confusion as I tried to wrestle

with the new world order and its implications for my ride in a newly frightened and divided world. I swooped between surrender and determination, caution and recklessness.

In my passport were visa stamps for Iran and Pakistan, all unintelligible, exotic curled calligraphy, splendid coats-of-arms and hasty signatures. In my panniers were an enormous puffy down jacket and sleeping bag to help me through a winter in the mountains of Central Asia, and in my heart were the smooth curves of the Sydney Opera House, that gleaming bay and the impossibly distant end of this road. Everything had been pointing east, east towards the sunrise that was now fast-approaching as I toyed with my cold coffee.

I had been in Istanbul for a week, at the home of Caroline and Gurkan, friends of a friend, and a welcome oasis of relaxed hospitality. That morning I had been finger-painting on the balcony with their young son, Eren, staring anxiously out over the Bosphorus at the far shore: Asia. I now heard Alara, their year old daughter, cry briefly in the bedroom then quieten to sleep once more. The previous day we had watched in delight as she took her first ever wobbly, momentous footsteps. I could little imagine then that the next time I saw her she would be a precocious, bilingual, piano playing, bike riding five year old, and I would have completed a loop of the planet. I drained the cold coffee and grimaced. I had distilled my future down to a rather sorry looking list of options and I read over them for what felt like the millionth time. Sick of indecision, I had decided to make my choice in the morning.

LIST OF POSSIBILITIES

1. Ride through Afghanistan. “Operation Certain Death” perhaps. But good for adventure.
2. Continue east to Iran/Pakistan. The ideal option. I have the visas and gear and have done the research. Conflict/resentments may spill over from Afghanistan. Could get to the cricket [Pakistan vs England].
3. North through Russia/the ‘Stans. Still cycling eastwards. Too cold. Crazy bureaucracy. May get to the World Cup [in Japan and South Korea, Summer 2002]

4. Turn right for Africa. Amusing option. Sudan and DR Congo may cause problems. Not very sensible- equipment, visas etc. Have done no research on Africa.

5. Overfly the hotspots to India and continue from there. Maintains Eastward progress but the ‘chain’ is broken.

6. Fly to the States, do the Americas then Australia and Asia. Expensive. Will probably omit Africa from the journey. Shortens overall route (a good and a bad point).

7. Just go home.

Only the final option held much appeal. I made my decision. I decided to go to bed.

Stage 4: “Turn Right for Africa”

“Cycling is like church: many attend, but few understand.”

- Jim Burlant

In the morning I left my bike in the house and joined the mayhem of Istanbul on foot, burying into the scrum, winding ever deeper and further from the tourist markets’ slick multilingual sales patter, sweet at first, cloying later, nauseating by Day 2. Memories fly at me now like a photo album scattered over the floor, retaining a clarity that comes from it being my first exposure to a world so different to the one I had left behind. Market stalls packed tight together, humanity filling the gaps and huge barrows of fruit or pistachio nuts being maneuvered impossibly through it all by perspiring, shouting men; streets of shiny bath taps, streets of rugs (“Hello, my friend! I give you special price!”); streets of pirated music cassettes; sacks of spices and herbs seeping their scents; precarious pyramids of pomegranates to be squeezed into juice; old men ceremoniously sipping from glasses of amber tea, smoking apple-scented water-pipes and frowning at their backgammon boards. Sausage stalls and giant blocks of cheese and silver wet fish plucked from the Golden Horn of the Bosphorus. Old sunken-eyed ladies hunched in layers of blankets sold saucers of grain to feed frenzied squabbles of pigeons -bringers of good luck- at the entrance to the New Mosque, an Istanbul youngster at a mere four centuries old.

Suddenly a commotion! Stop thief! Cries from an open air clothes stall and a flurry in the crowd as the stall keeper yelled his anger and the exposed man sprinted away, barging people aside. An instant lynch mob spontaneously charged after the thief, men giving chase down the hill, hurdling obstacles with shopping bags flying, others sticking out impeding feet to try and trip the crook, an old woman swinging her stick. The spontaneity of the chase, unthinkable at home, was thrilling and I gave a cheer when they collared their man. The thief, hopelessly outnumbered (I did feel a twinge of British sympathy for the underdog), was roughly dragged through the jeering crowd towards the already arriving policemen. And then normality returned. I saw this thief-catching

excitement three times in two days and thoroughly enjoyed it each time.

Wandering disorientated and enchanted I grazed on snacks from street stalls, lured by scents, colours and the imploring eyes of salesmen. Sweet cups of tea, stuffed vine leaves, walnut pastries, sticky sweets and kebabs. Vendors stood on every street with slowly revolving spits of lamb and chicken. The proprietors of smoky roast chestnut stalls tried to make one final sale as they packed up for the night. The crowds flowed around them and their shouts. By the waterfront at Eminonu rows of lamplit fish sandwich grills competed for your attention, steam and smoke billowing from the grilling fish and bright green chilies. Gentle waves splashed up the sea walls and ferries ploughed back and forth. Looking over the Bosphorus towards the far shore and Asia I felt an almost magnetic pull despite my angst. Four years of dreaming and nine months of planning: preparing to cycle round the world had been intense. But things had then settled down into a simple life on the road. I had been pedalling towards Australia. I was ready for a savage winter. I was looking forward to the crowds of India. All the unique charms and frustrations of Asia awaited and I had been as ready as I could ever be.

However September 11th had complicated things. My nationality became much more of an issue. Countries around the world were having to pick teams and choose whether they were “with us or against us” in the new ‘War on Terror’. This filtered down to little me in the form of places that I could, or could not, ride through. Doors were being slammed shut all around me as nations chose sides. All my planning was of no use now. I had never even glanced before at the possibility of doing what I was now about to do. I wished that I could talk it over with Sarah, but I knew that if I called her the sound of her voice would be the final straw that would push me to quit.

Istanbul, “the still point of the turning world” was a good place to choose my new direction. I finally decided not to risk riding east to Pakistan knowing that I may be turned back at the border. I decided that only a madman would ride north through Russia in winter. There was only one direction left open - south. And in this way my decision was made. I walked out of the Syrian Consulate with a new stamp in my passport. Instead of continuing straight ahead towards Sydney I was on my way south to Cape Town. I was turning right for Africa.

Australia would have to wait. I was now heading to Africa with visas for Pakistan and Iran, clothes for a Central Asian winter and a big map of Asia. I was not particularly well prepared. Would I make it? Could I make it? Who would I meet? What would I see? The terrifying uncertainty of everything was intoxicating. On the way back to the house I succumbed to a kebab vendor's smiling persuasiveness. I walked over to a bench to eat, study my new visa and take a few deep breaths. My ride was back on track.

The kebab seller came over to me and gestured to ask whether he could sit down. I shuffled along the bench to make space and he sat down. In his hand was his large carving knife.

“Deutsch?” he asked.

“England.”

“Ah, Michael Owen!” he beamed, twisting his shoulders and wiggling his portly legs to imitate the footballer weaving his way through the opposition. The international language of football.

I laughed and took a bite of kebab, giving an appreciative “mmm!” as I chewed. He patted his round belly approvingly and gave me a thumbs up. My enjoyment of his kebab had evidently sealed our friendship. He stuck out his hand to shake, introducing himself as Erden. I told him I was ‘Alex’, for few nationalities could manage to pronounce the brevity of ‘Al’ or the more unusual ‘Alastair’.

“Alex... England...” he mused, hands on knees, nodding his head and looking out over the park. “Meesees Thatcher... The Beat-les... Lady Dee-aana...”

I nodded and chewed, well used to hearing these ambassadors for Britain.

As if suddenly remembering all that was happening in the world at that time, Erden poked my knee and turned to look at me, his face concerned beneath his fake Adidas cap.

“Bin Laden... BOOM! George Bush... BOOM!” He brandished his knife like a conductor’s baton to emphasise the explosions, shaking his head with disapproval. “Afghanistan... BOOM! Tony Blair... BOOM!”

And then he laughed again.

My kebab now finished, I showed Erden the new Syrian visa in my passport. I motioned, my hands pedaling, that I was going to cycle to Syria. He found this very funny and reached to give my quads a good squeeze, checking I was up to the task. At that moment a new customer approached his stall. Erden jumped up

and jogged back along the pavement, his carving knife slicing the air. Suddenly thinking of something he turned back to me and called out “Alex! Alex! Syria... BOOM! Ha! Ha!”

Shish kebabs

Ingredients:

1 cup plain yoghurt
¼ cup olive oil
2 cloves chopped garlic
1 teaspoon red pepper flakes
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon black pepper
1½ pounds shoulder of lamb, cut into 1-inch cubes (include some fatty pieces)
8 tomatoes
12 peppers
pita bread

Method:

Mix the yoghurt, oil, garlic, pepper flakes, salt, and pepper in a bowl. Add the lamb and coat thoroughly. Cover and let marinate, in the refrigerator, for twenty four hours. Preheat the grill to high. Thread the lamb onto the thin skewers, alternating lean and fatty pieces. Thread the vegetables onto skewers. Oil the grill grate, then add the kebabs, turning until the vegetables are blistered and the lamb is browned and done to taste. Stuff pitas with the lamb and blistered vegetables.

Stage 5: “Morning”

“A man is a success if he gets up in the morning and goes to bed at night and in between does what he wants to do.”

- Bob Dylan

Mornings come peacefully on the road. I wake slowly with the daylight, turning in my sleeping bag, adjusting the bundle of clothes that act as my pillow and dozing once or twice until my head is clear and ready to begin the day. I lie still and listen to the sounds outside my tent- sometimes birdsong, sometimes whooshing vehicles, sometimes water, sometimes silence. I unzip the tent door and feel the fresh air on my face. I check the weather and the wind: strong winds can seriously spoil my day. I climb out of the tent, barefoot, and stretch and scratch and yawn. I wander a few paces from the tent to pee, and decide if I want coffee or not. I have no idea what time it is, but I slept so early that I feel fresh even though the sun has not yet risen. I pour water from one of my bottles into my pan and light my stove. While the water heats I pack away the tent and sleeping bag and clip my panniers back onto the bike. My movements are slick and precise. Everything lives in its own place and my packing routine is briskly efficient. I am ready to move again. The water boils and I sit cross-legged on the ground and make coffee. I stir in a mound of sugar, and spread jam on a few pieces of bread with my spoon. While I eat I study my maps, write my diary or read my book. I pack away my stove, lick my spoon clean and shake the dregs from my mug. I brush my teeth, pull on my socks, shoes and shirt and push my bike out from my concealed campsite back onto the road. A square of crumpled grass is the only thing I have left behind. I pull on my riding mitts. I straddle my bike, reset the daily mileage total on my bike computer and start riding. I have been awake for about twenty minutes. The campsite is far behind by the time the sun finally breaks above the horizon. A new day has begun.

Stage 6: “War and terror?”

“The habit of persistence is the habit of victory.”

- Herbert Kaufman

The ride through Turkey was beautiful with varied landscapes and unstinting friendly generosity. I climbed mountains of sharp grey flint where fragrant pine trees grew and jays and woodpeckers and hoopoes flittered. Scattered amongst the dark green pines the deciduous trees enjoyed their extravagant autumnal riot of colour. Everywhere I looked was a perfect campsite, tempting me to stop riding and pitch camp early. People gave me bread and cheese, yoghurt and walnuts and strangers welcomed me to stay in their homes.

I slept close to the centre of Ankara, surrounded by tower blocks and highways but it was dark so I thought nobody would notice my tent. Four teenage boys found me, puffing feverishly on plastic bags of solvent. They shook the tent and woke me demanding money, alcohol, cigarettes and, tragically, the glue from my puncture kit. Wide-eyed and desperate, they frightened me. I cannot remember their faces now, only the plastic bags inflating and emptying rhythmically and their desperation. I was resigned to having to fight but was trying to calm them when a short stocky man came out of a nearby garage and yelled at the kids to clear off. The boys sprinted away into the night. The man was working the night shift and he suggested that I move my tent over to the garage so that he could keep an eye on me while I slept. I had a lot to learn.

The rock formations at Cappadocia are one of Turkey’s jewels. Accordingly they are blighted with travel agencies urging tourists to, “Come on our tour to non-commercial, traditional villages”, “Camp for a night and see genuine dervish dancers.” But the scenery of eroded rocks and valleys and manmade cave dwellings around Goreme was extraordinary. I wandered up surreal canyons, alone in this early winter off-season time, winding up and down through mazes of contorted, beautifully coloured rock growing ever more lost. Huge rock phalluses of eroded rock, euphemistically dubbed “fairy chimneys”, giant mushrooms,

haystacks, waves, pyramids, cake icing all in whites, greys, pinks, reds and greens.

There were scores of cave dwellings and underground churches carved out of the rock, some dating back to Biblical times. In one early church I sat by the hewn altar admiring the roof paintings that had half-survived aeons of earthquakes and weathering. They felt all the more mystical for their faintness, the link between the ancient artist and modern me was so tenuous, and yet, and yet, that link still was there. A chap called Baz was obviously not as impressed as me for he had scrawled his name on top of Jesus being borne on the donkey.

At that time of year, tourists were few and the gift stall salesmen became lethargic like winter wasps. A bored onyx salesman described to me the idiosyncrasies of different nationalities. French people bought his products, Americans made a lot of noise but no action, the Japanese were too busy gazing down the alternative reality of their viewfinders whilst the English politely said “No thanks” and claimed to have no money. Politely then I pleaded lack of cash and moved on.

I rode on past snowy peaks and camped near Mount Tarsus, looking back at the mountains pink in the setting sun. The farmer whose field I was camping in came over to say hello and satisfy his curiosity about me. Ahmet was fiercely tanned and sported a fine moustache, a navy blazer and flip-flops. He shook my hand, gestured that I was welcome, and sat down in the grass to watch me set up my tent. He enjoyed my little camping stove that I made tea with and he politely filtered the tea leaves with his luxuriant moustache. I walked across a couple of fields with Ahmet to his home, a large open-backed trailer roofed with tight plastic sheeting. Inside was cosy, clean and simply organized -bed, stove, food, and lamp- similar things to what I carried on the bike. He cooked sausage and eggs and we sat on the floor drinking tea together and eating, enjoying the companionship despite the lack of common language.

Nearing the Mediterranean coast I turned into an angry headwind towards Adana. A middle-aged English cyclist and hat collector, Adrian, on holiday in Turkey, warned me, “Sorry to piss on your oil painting, mate, but there’s some big bastard hills ahead!” I hit them in a beautiful sunset as I climbed out of Antakya and Hasiye. The winding road out of town was a real snoggers’ paradise and I cursed all the happy couples as I rode

past alone wondering where I would sleep that night and what I would eat. Questions I had to answer many hundreds of times more before I got back to my own bed. I cooked a pan of spaghetti and onion behind a wall in a field of heavy red soil clods. Another campsite, another full belly, another day ridden. Another snog-free day.

I was pedalling again at dawn. A calm and grey dawn of birds singing and smoke rising straight from the chimneys of small stone homes. Farmers were just arriving in their red-brown fields, walking beside donkeys laden with bundles of firewood. Through sandstone outcrops, small orchards, slight hills and a warm sun I, curious and nervous, was about to enter the Middle East.

“We are not demanders of war and terror - but we will defend ourselves against war and terror” shouted the banner at the border post. Ever since the British Embassy in Istanbul had ‘strongly advised me’ not to enter Syria I had been growing increasingly nervous. For my whole life the Middle East had been headline news back home, with endless images of uncompromising, dogmatic hatred beamed daily into my living room. In recent years terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists worldwide had further overshadowed the vast majority of decent, genuine Muslims in the consciousness of the West. Considering myself to be a rational, open-minded, intelligent person, I was surprised now to realize how much my mind had filled subconsciously with preconceptions and prejudices about the Middle East. As war in Afghanistan escalated in retribution for the murders of September 11th, I realized that, irrationally or not, I was very scared about riding alone through the Middle East.

I was cycling in trousers for the first time in deference to Islamic sensitivities and the annoying flapping helped remind me that all this was new. In the first village I rode through children were streaming down the road from school towards home and lunch. They looked like any school kids in the world: running and shouting or scuffing along slowly, hand-in-hand girls whispering and gossiping, boys chucking someone’s bag into a tree. It was all very normal except for their school uniform: the children were dressed in green military uniforms, complete with epaulettes of rank for the seniors. Toy soldiers and hostile welcome banners: what was this place? And, more importantly, what the hell was *I* doing here, an infidel on a bicycle?

The road was punctuated with large billboard pictures of three men staring down suspiciously, like Big Brother: the recently deceased President and his two sons. The sinister pictures showed them in a variety of guises: stern no-nonsense statesmen in suits, relaxed casual-clothed humane figures, battle fatigues (defending against terror presumably) and chillin' out dudes in massive aviator sunglasses. As I rode further into Syria I grew increasingly nervous.

The road down towards the Mediterranean coast was hilly but I hardly noticed; there was much on my mind. I stopped for apricot jam sandwiches at the top of a long dusty hill. I knew that Muslims ate with their right hand only, but did that apply to me as well, alone on a hilltop? My left hand had some jam on it: could I lick it? I had not had to worry about these matters in Turkey, with its moderate, pragmatic approach to Islam. But were things different here? And should I say I was a Christian, because I wasn't, but I was more than anything else. And what about September 11th? Bush or Bin Laden? I didn't like either of them. Oh well; if I cycled really fast and put in massive miles every day I should be able to get out of this country pretty quick...

I was still in this frame of mind when evening came. I needed to find somewhere to sleep. But I didn't feel comfortable camping wild, I never considered hotels and I was too scared to knock on somebody's door and ask permission to camp. But if I wouldn't camp and I was unwilling to trust anybody then I was in for a long night. I couldn't just pedal non-stop to Africa. As the sun was setting I rode past an orange farm and, as a reluctant afterthought, decided to turn back to it, asking myself, like Dr Pepper, "What's the worst that can happen?" The house was run down, with glass missing from windowpanes and warped doors reluctant to either open or close. Chickens ran round the dirt yard, and apparently, the house too, for as I rounded the corner a lady wearing a headscarf was chasing two out of the door with a broom. She stopped in surprise when she noticed me. With much miming (and nervously pounding heart) I explained myself. The lady (who I never spoke to again) smiled and gestured me inside. There was very little dialogue for much of my ride, but so much can be communicated without language.

Inside, the walls were flaking and the only furniture was an old television on a flimsy green table. On the wall was a framed swirl of Koranic calligraphy. Sitting on blankets on the floor of the

sitting room and concentrating hard on the noisy television were an old man, a skinny boy of about fifteen and two men about my age, one clean shaven and one heavily bearded. Their faces were nut brown and their eyes dark and friendly. They stood to shake my hand, sat me down and made me welcome, laughing with surprise at my arrival and nipping outside to see my bike. They sent the lady off to make tea. So far, so good, I thought. Maybe they won't kill me just yet.

They still hadn't killed me after several communal plates of food had been devoured by us all with very un-British haste. (Mental note: seems as though eating is with the right hand but don't worry too much about tearing bread etc. with both hands). A low round table was rolled out and covered with newspaper. We all sat around it (except for the wife who ate somewhere else) and ate from communal bowls at very high speed. Soup, chicken, yoghurt, salad, bread and spinach quickly disappeared. Then the old man crushed me at chess and I tried in vain to claim a long day's ride as an excuse. I began to learn a few words of Arabic and I explained my trip with charades, drawings and maps, making another mental note to get an explanatory letter about my journey translated into Arabic as soon as possible. These 'magic letters' came to be an invaluable aid on my ride, helping with hospitality, friendship, suspicious police and even, on one occasion, an armed hold-up. The family sought my opinion on what I thought I should feed their stupidly grinning guard dog to make him a bit tougher and a little less friendly. One of the men looked a bit like Osama bin Laden (although it would probably be more honest to say that he was an Arab and he had a beard: sufficient for me on my paranoid, ignorant first day in the Middle East to label him a Bin Laden look-alike) and he began doing a comical impression of him, bouncing around the room shooting imaginary Brits and Americans. We all laughed together. Their opinion of the September 11th attacks seemed to be that, whilst the arrogance of America definitely needed addressing, this had been an evil way of making a statement.

We watched the news on TV, a fuzz of dreadful filming, droning monologues and lots of propaganda. When a clip of the late President was shown the family seemed genuinely upset. But still they did not kill me and I soon learned that Syria is by no means a 'dry' country as we polished off a bottle of Arak, anise-flavoured and strong, toasting what for all of us had been a very random,

unexpected, but entertaining evening. I slept that night alongside the other young men on a pile of woolly blankets on the floor. They settled themselves into comfortable positions with little grunts and coughs after locking the door and turning off the light. Outside, fields of orange trees surrounded the house and the guard dog chased chickens and wagged his tail. In the morning I left my new friends with a gift of a huge bag of oranges. The horrors of the Middle East? Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

Feeling much more relaxed I rode on to the Lebanon border at Lattakya past laden orchards and wiry olive groves. One of the Lebanese border guards was very fat. I joked with the armed guards that when I began cycling I too had been that large. They all found this hilarious, except fat boy. He was not amused. So I left quickly before he could get his hands on my passport. Away from the border I lay back on a warm verge of long grass and stared blankly around. To my right was the blue sea, to my left snowy mountains. The call to prayer carried to me from a nearby village.

In one village I stopped to ask for water at the smartest house, the only two-storey building, with ornate metal gates. There was no fence, but the gates were nice. I walked round the locked gates and knocked on the door. I was invited inside by a stern looking man. I got a shock when he took off his red and white *kiffiyeh*: I wasn't expecting a skinhead-with-quiff hairstyle. His wife had gold teeth and small blue facial tattoos. I helped their young daughter with her English homework whilst her Dad roasted coffee beans in a pan with a handle about a metre long. I smiled at them over my coffee cup, refilled my bottles with thanks and rode on.

As dusk settled a massive hill appeared. Fortunately so too did a very slow cement lorry and as it passed me I managed to dash after it and grab hold panting for a smoky tow up the hill. Weary after riding 95 miles and emboldened after yesterday's kindness I knocked on the first door I saw at the top, an Old People's home, to ask permission to camp. The door was answered by Monsieur Tignet. Although he was aged about 80 he seemed to be running the home rather than staying in it. He waved me inside without hesitation, offering me a bed for the night.

Monsieur Tignet was a hunched, slow yet cheerful soul. Originally from Toulouse, he had been living in Lebanon for the past 25 years. His eyebrows reached in jubilant bushiness for the

stars. His damp eyes shone and I felt that the spectacles that dangled round his neck would have been better employed perched on the end of his nose. His mind was faster than his shuffling slippered feet. We drank strong coffee and he reminisced about his own bike rides, proud to have once climbed Switzerland's famous St. Bernard Pass. He was miles away from me now, a young man touring the sun-drenched France and Switzerland of his mind, panniers packed with bread, salami and fruit picked from the trees. This became a common feature on my ride. So many people I met had some sort of cycling experience to share with me. All would begin modestly, "it's nothing like yours, but I went on a bike trip once..." And then they would be off, vivid memories flowing off the tongue as they recalled adventures and mishaps, enormous appetites and favourite campsites, examples of hospitality and huge hills conquered. They were all wrong though: their trips *were* like mine. Our memories were the same, our lives had been enriched in the same way by the purity and freedom of a long bike ride. I never met anybody who regretted doing a ride. But I met many who regretted not having done one.

My French coped, more or less, with Monsieur Tignet's extraordinarily long tales. But my glass of red wine was hauling down my eyelids, hammering my brain to sleep after the long day's ride. But Monsieur Tignet was bursting with stories and there was no way I could let my tiredness stop him from enjoying a ride that he would never ride for real again. He had been very vague on the matter, and changed the subject, but I gathered that his departure from France had been rather swift, and a return unlikely.

I zipped along the squalid seashore towards the skyscrapers and noise of Beirut. The road was lined with grotty tower blocks, neglected for many years. The traffic became quite fun once I immersed myself in the madness combining recklessness and angry gesticulations with apologetic shrugs and appeasing smiles. There were tented shanty camps of refugee Palestinians lining the roads and many Syrians looking for work. One sagging tarpaulin household on the roadside had wooden crates outside for seats. The family watched the roaring traffic from this 'veranda' beneath the shade of a Haagen-Dazs parasol. Amongst the noise and fumes on the central reservation of the motorway a barefoot boy wearing dirty baggy trousers and a black and white *kiffiyeh* tended his

grubby sheep, unperturbed by the frantic 21st Century all around him.

Beirut sprawled for miles but the hub of the city was squashed tight between the sea and the mountains. Burger King, McDonalds, Pizza Hut, neon signs in English and French, Mercedes' and BMW's: the trappings of a big city all piled on top of each other. I asked directions from a series of policemen mounted on Harley Davidsons who helped to point me gradually closer to the street I was searching for. I was due to make a presentation at a school and so I was fortunate to be able to stay with one of the teachers, Raymond, in his apartment high on one of Beirut's hills. Raymond was from Sierra Leone with Lebanese parents. Forced to abandon his successful beach restaurant in Sierra Leone and flee the country overnight when anarchy erupted, he had spent the last five years teaching physics in Beirut.

I had first been invited to give a talk at the International School in Istanbul. Afterwards the Principal suggested that I contact other similar schools along my route. So I emailed schools in the next few countries along my route and some were bold enough to take the risk of inviting a wandering unemployed stranger into their expensive schools to tell stories of determined career avoidance to their pupils. Fortunately it is easy to entertain children with tales of eating bizarre animals, sleeping in absurd locations and forfeiting showers for week upon week so my slideshows were enjoyed, and references followed. These talks raised some money for '*Hope and Homes for Children*' as well as helping me find places to stay and new friends in cities around the world. By the end of my journey I had given approximately 300 slideshows to many thousands of children.

I accompanied Raymond to the Lebanese American University to watch Macbeth. The Scottish play in Beirut. Roquefort and red wine last night. This ride was getting surreal. Like the rest of Beirut, the theatre was full of beautiful girls. My life felt so much simpler when I was out on the road and able to forget about women for a while. The play began to much whooping and cheering from the audience and I turned my attention to the stage. Even when the actors began to speak the noise levels didn't drop much and two men had to walk up and down the aisles shushing everyone. For the first few minutes I thought that the play was in Arabic. "Nice twist," I thought. But then I caught an English word and gradually realised that the play was actually in English after

all, but that the actors could not pronounce a single word. The play was a contemporary interpretation and all the players looked like neo-Nazis. Except for Macbeth: he had a horrible ponytail. Lady Macbeth could act a bit but everyone else was awful. The show degenerated into high farce. The audience became a crowd. Every entrance and exit was greeted with a riot of applause. The poor players strutted and fretted their hour upon the stage and Macbeth delivered his lines louder and louder and faster and faster in a permanent, hunched-over, agonised rage. Come the emotional “tomorrow and tomorrow” soliloquy (delivered at top speed, top volume and flat on his back, looking up at the roof) I was crying with laughter to the last syllable, kneeling on the floor and holding my stomach. The cast received a roaring standing ovation at the end. I woke the next morning with sore stomach muscles from too much laughing. Macbeth will be forever entwined in my mind with Beirut.

I went with Raymond to eat at the home of some Jehovah’s Witnesses he knew from Sierra Leone. I sat next to twenty-year-old Ronald who had just spent a year in prison. As Jehovah’s Witnesses will not bear arms he had refused to do his National Service duty and so had been sent to jail. I admired his conviction. Every time his mother bustled past the table bearing plates of food she would fondly ruffle his hair. They were nice people and the food was great so I stuffed a bread roll in each ear to dampen the preaching and just enjoyed the fabulous mix of Lebanese and spicy West African cooking.

Spinach Plasas (Sierra Leone)

Ingredients:

- 2 bunches chopped spinach
- 500g chopped smoked fish
- 2 onions
- 100g peanut butter
- 3 cups water
- 1 cups palm oil
- 2 very hot peppers
- 500g chuck beef

Method:

Put the meat, water, onion, palm oil, salt and pepper in a pan and cook uncovered for 1 hour on medium heat. Add the other ingredients, stir, cover and simmer for a further 10 minutes. Serve with rice.

I left Raymond's house to stay with an American couple, Art and Sandy, at the American International College in Beirut. Art was the Principal and he had invited me to talk to his school. Art had pedaled all the way across the USA when he was fifty so he understood my ride. He has promised himself he will do it again, into the headwind next time, when he is sixty. Art urged me to break it all down into manageable chunks and targets rather than quivering in the shadow of the vastness of the entirety. If I did that then the whole absurd project could begin to look more feasible: Get to Cairo, into Sudan, out of Sudan, into Kenya, Cape Town. Little by little, slowly, slowly...

Shops were selling Christmas paraphernalia for Lebanon's sizeable Christian community. One shop had lines of novelty Bin Laden masks alongside the Santa hats. I went to the legendary Pepé's restaurant beside the small harbour in Biblos, the oldest continuously inhabited town on Earth. Before the war Pepé's was one of *the* places to be seen at in the Mediterranean and the walls were lined with hundreds of photos of film stars and glamorous people who had eaten there; Marlon Brando, Brigitte Bardot. As their menu claims, "Lebanon without Pepé's is like spending your honeymoon with a eunuch."

I met Aimee, a Lebanese teacher at the American School. She told me her memories of the war, of her windows being sandbagged and playing cards for hours in the basement bomb shelter. For a whole year she did not go to school. She was grateful now to have been too young to register all the terror. The whole city was ravaged during the 17 years of civil war but this is nothing new for Beirut, described by Nadia Tueni as "one thousand times dead and one thousand times born again." Beirut had now been renovated in style once again. After the war there was a compulsory sale of property in the city centre so that the renovation project would not be hampered by somebody's stubbornly grotty little corner shop. The streets now were wide, spotless and gleaming. Streetlights bathed the pedestrian areas in

warm, safe light. Bored soldiers ambled, rifles swinging like handbags, looking like all the other strollers. It was a beautiful city, full of hope for a peaceful, prosperous future.

We walked together along the Corniche, a pedestrian strip along the seashore popular with joggers and middle-aged power walkers wearing sun visors, jewellery and full make-up. A jogger passed dressed in baggy Arabic dress with his anorak hood up and brogues on his feet. An old man fishing with a simple cane plucked two fish from the sea. His hi-tech rivals pretended not to notice. The low sun shone warmly on the mountains, the mountains that I would have to cross to get to Damascus. I pushed away thoughts of riding, of the vast distance that lay ahead of me, and the futility of continuing at all given my certain conviction that I would not be able to finish what I had begun. It was a welcome respite to laugh away a lazy weekend with an attractive woman. The knowledge that I could be doing that every weekend if I had stayed at home wrestled in my head with all the precious memories and experiences I had relished so far on the road.

The month of Ramadan began with festivities and a holiday mood. For a lunar month Muslims would not (or should not) eat or drink between dawn and dusk. I feared being very hungry for a month, but infidels as well as those on a journey are not expected to participate so I was well exempted. The reality of modern Ramadan is that food consumption actually increases during the month (“Try now the new Ramadan specials!” suggested the posters in Dunkin’ Donuts) because of the enormous fast-breaking feasts, known as *iftars*, that every family enjoys together at sunset. Later, mosques are packed for the evening prayers and a worshipful overflow crowds the pavements. A soft rumble, like waves on a gravel shore, rolls round as thousands kneel and stand as one, united in prayer, or *salah*. It is a wonderful season to be in a Muslim country.

Throughout Ramadan I made a concerted effort to be off the roads before sunset. Cycling around that time was foolhardy as every Muslim was driving home half-crazed with hunger and *nothing* was going to get in his way. The ubiquitous sociable generosity of the Middle East that I was fast discovering seemed even greater during Ramadan and people were even more eager than usual to welcome me into their homes to share their *iftar*. I had quickly come to trust, respect and like the people in the Middle East and my prejudices and fears had evaporated. At *iftar*

families sit expectantly around laden tables waiting Pavlov-like for the signal from the local mosque that is the official adjudicator of the time of sunset. The signal given, the feast begins! And what a feast. There are starters that would easily make a meal in themselves: salads, olives, *houmous*, *baba ghannouche*, soft bread, crispy bread, vine leaves stuffed with rice, *tabouleh*, cream cheese, dates, lentil soup, apricot juice. And then come the main courses - *kebbeh*, chicken stew and more. Sickly pasties, tea and coffee would completely finish me off. Without a doubt the greatest eating of my journey so far was at those *iftars*.

Baba Ghannouche

Ingredients:

4 large aubergines
3 cloves garlic
2 tablespoons tahini
4 tablespoons lemon juice
salt and pepper
olive oil
chopped parsley

Method:

Bake the aubergine until it is well cooked and the skin is blackened. Douse with cold water, peel and chop into small pieces. Mash garlic and salt to paste. Add aubergine and mush to a smooth consistency with the tahini and lemon juice. Serve in a bowl with olive oil and parsley on top.

27th November 2001 meant that I was A Quarter Of A Century Old. More than a third of my allotted lifespan gone and there I was sat on my arse in Beirut too scared to ride on towards Africa and too scared to go home. I spent the day feeling uneasy about how much I wanted to do in life and how little time was left. Twenty-five. Twenty-five. Twenty-five! However I said it, I didn't like it. I explained to Art and Sandy how much I feared getting ready to hit the road again, how nervous and upset I became each time I severed my fragile new roots. Sandy played me a song called 'Pre-Road Downs' and reassured me that I was

not alone. In the evening I went with Art down to the local Ping-Pong club and lost heavily. It was time to start riding again.

Navigating out of Beirut was difficult. “Is this the way to Damascus?” I kept asking.

“Damascus is in Syria, this is Lebanon. It is too far to cycle. The mountains are too big. It is not possible for you,” came the replies.

“Just tell me the damn way,” I wanted to snap back.

Throughout the world my requests for directions were hampered by people telling me that the nearby place in question was too far to cycle to.

The road climbed for hours, up above the fumes of Beirut, past a peace memorial of a tower of military tanks embedded in concrete, high above the sea into the rocky mountains towards the ski slopes and famous cedar trees. There were many soldiers on the road and at every roadblock the officers used their authority to stop me and ask me what I was doing simply to satisfy their curiosity. Posters of the weasels from Syria abounded: the presence of Syria was never far away in Lebanon, especially in these wild heights.

In the town of Baalbek I put my tent up alongside some of the most spectacular Roman temples on Earth. It was a stunning campsite. I read that they were “temples where blood sacrifices, wine orgies and free love were means of experiencing oneness with the Gods.” It sounded a lot better than my Sunday school. The temple of Bacchus was the best preserved: from the outside it looked brand new. The temple of Jupiter is vast, greater even than anything built in Rome. Close by is ‘Hajar-al-Habla’, the largest building block in the world. Weighing 1200 tonnes, 24 times more than those of Stonehenge, 40,000 men were needed to shift it. The Romans had intended to build the momma of all temples using this size of brick. Sadly it was only moved a short distance before somebody with some common-sense put a stop to the silliness. It is an unbelievable example of ambition, optimism and biting off more than you can chew. But, if you don’t try you’ll never know. Today the brick lies wonky and un-used in an old quarry. There is a superstition that touching it aids fertility. The prospect of years sitting on a hard bicycle saddle prompted me to go and give it a big hug.

The temple of Bacchus was etched with old graffiti such as ‘PJ Tawil et fils 1882’. I was just the latest in the long chain of

hundreds of years of worshippers, travellers and gawpers on my way through the Fertile Crescent. The sun was setting and the day was turning to cold evening. I sat on a fallen column to write my diary. The vast stone columns turned a soft apricot shade in the sunset while the dirty town below was air-brushed away by winter mist. The mountains around were covered in clean snow. The red sun had set. The sky was pale lilac and the colour seeped now from the temples leaving black silhouettes against the sky. My peace was accentuated by the far-off cries from the mosques as the town settled down to break their fast. I felt like the only person left in the world. Solitude. I was once again at peace with myself and with my ride. I had no inkling of how fast that would all change.

My jubilant mood was dampened however when I climbed into my tent and realised that I had stupidly left my sleeping mat and sleeping bag back down in Beirut. I cursed myself and the thought of the freezing night ahead. I remembered now that when I packed my bags to leave Beirut I had been pleased with how compact everything had looked. I must have left the sleeping bag in the basement of Art and Sandy's house where it had been hanging to air. I put on every scrap of clothing I had, put my feet inside one pannier, my head in another and lay down on top of the other two on the cold tent floor to wait for morning. I could have moved to a nearby £1 hotel but that never occurred to me as an option, so fiercely was I budgeting. As a consolation treat I allowed myself the final two squares of a bar of chocolate that I had hoarded since Belgrade. I was frozen and tired by morning. I used a section of Roman column as a breakfast table, brewing up welcome cups of coffee and feeling the warmth ooze back into my bones.

I certainly did not fancy another cold night but I could not return to Beirut as my visa was fast expiring. So I decided to push on forwards instead. I crossed the border back to Syria and after a very hard, fast ride, arrived in Damascus. I was supposed to be staying with Fari, a friend of someone I had met in Beirut. The prospect of being able to stay with a nice family was now even sweeter than usual. I asked a teenager on the street for directions and he offered to phone Fari's house for me. Unfortunately she was not yet home so Tarek invited me to his own house for *iftar*. Throughout the meal Tarek's father told me of the "Satanic evil" of the Western press, he explained that the Holocaust did not actually happen and revealed to me that the September 11th attacks

(and everything else it seemed, including Waterloo and the French and Russian Revolutions) were the fault of the Jews. After the pleasant food and unpleasant rantings I rode deep into Damascus in the dark towards Fari's house. I asked for directions at a florists and the man there kindly phoned Fari for me. She told him that she was going out later on so it was not convenient for me to go round to her house. My weariness amazed me, I was branded on my feet and now I had no one to meet. It was late but the florist patiently helped me, writing directions in Arabic to the cheapest migrant workers' hostel he knew.

And so I rode several miles back the way I came. I had ridden a long way that day, I had not slept much the night before and now I was riding through the potholed, dark streets of a strange city. I had no idea where I was going as I could not read the Arabic directions on my scrap of paper. All that I could do was stop at every junction, show the directions to somebody and follow the direction of their pointing arm. An hour later I made it to the hostel, shattered and scared. It was a complete dump. But at least it was cheap and safe. It had been a long, long day. The price was clearly signed as £2, but for me it was £3. I began to protest but I suddenly felt hot tears welling. So I meekly handed over my money and locked myself and my bike into the room at the end of a dark corridor next to the stinking, flooded communal toilet. I flopped down onto the brown itchy blanket on the creaking wire bed and crumpled into tears and, eventually, exhausted sleep.

Stage 7: “Self-chosen Pain”

“And a woman spoke, saying, “Tell us of Pain.”

And he said:

Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.

Even as the stone of the fruit must break, that its heart may stand in the sun,

So must you know pain...

Much of your pain is self-chosen.”

- Khalil Gibran

I was warm, I was safe and I had nothing to do all day. It was mid-morning and I was still in bed. It should have been a relaxing, lazy rest. But, as I lay in bed, I found myself sliding slowly into tears once again, beginning with a frown, then brimming eyes, a fat rolling tear and finally full flowing crying. For the whole day in that windowless, filthy room, I cried my eyes out. Every move I made was slow and deliberate for fear of breaking up completely. It was not just crying; it was gut wrenching, shoulder heaving, uncontrollable sobbing. My whole body ached. It was the surfacing, like an angry pus-filled boil, of a festering subconscious knowledge that I had been denying for a long time.

I was not going to make it round the world. I could not stick it out. I had bitten off more than I could chew. It was too hard. I was not up to it. I was going to fail. It was my dream life and I didn’t want it.

I had been riding for three months and it felt like a hell of a long time. Thousands of miles of sweat and lactic acid; hauling myself and my gear across fourteen countries. I could not believe how far I had pedaled. And yet the world map made a mockery of my efforts: England to Damascus was a laughable fraction of what I had set out to do. I had so far to go. I was no way near. I had no chance. Sooner or later, I realized, I was going to fail.

What was most likely to end my resistance was not hardship, or one horrific experience, but the wild bucking of emotions. I had seen beautiful places and met great people, but I had also been afraid and lonely and exhausted. During those days in Damascus, I was absolutely on the brink of riding out to the airport to jack it all

in and return home. I have never been so low in my life. It was the closest I ever came to surrendering. As Graham Greene said, despair is the price one pays for setting oneself an impossible aim.

Steadily but relentlessly since I left home the amplitudes of the peaks and troughs of my emotions had been growing ever greater and the time between them decreasing. The suddenness with which I crashed down or bounced up was alarming. It was so different from my ordinary home life where the waves of emotion had rippled like a canal boat's. Nowadays they leaped up and crashed down, higher and higher, lower and lower. Delirious highs howling with joy at the sky. Numbing lows of forsaken desolation on empty, endless roads. I had no experience of how to cope with this. I had not prepared for this. Faster and faster they went, like a cartoon machine, whirring and smoking and racing and flashing and beeping, ever quicker and louder, ever higher and lower, until its inevitable conclusion: the spectacular explosion. This seesawing could not go on for much longer.

The cycling was nothing: that was relatively easy once the muscles had tightened to their tasks. It was the mind games that were breaking me. And at the centre of them all was Sarah. I was aware that I was perhaps using her as a focus or as a representation of my other insecurities and anxieties but, despite that proviso, I still felt that if I had never met Sarah then I would be having a ball now. But, as the old song croons, "I have kissed you, so I'll miss you." My life on the road had all the components I had yearned for back home: risk, adventure, uncertainty, challenge and variety. But in return for devil-may-care freedom I had bartered security, friendship, human contact, familiarity, and love. It had taken signing the pact for me to understand what I had given up.

I had so many pictures of Sarah in my mind, haloed by memory, of times of pure and simple happiness. Her delighted excitement opening presents; her brow frowning in concentration at her desk; wrapped up warm in my scarf on Castle Hill in Edinburgh, her nose cold and her cheeks and eyes glowing... And here I was lying on my own in a shit-hole Syrian dormitory and Sarah was at home eating takeaway alone in front of the TV. What the hell had I done?

And yet, because I had chosen to leave Sarah, surely this ride was as important to me as she was. That was a startling realisation.

I knew that missing Sarah was partly the personification of being scared by the prospect of Africa. Sudan was gnawing at my subconscious: visas, war, deserts. The poverty of Ethiopia. The crime-ridden Kenyan capital. All these things awaited. They were all beyond my realm of experience.

“How did I have the audacity and arrogance to think that I could pedal through Africa?” I asked myself over and over, clutching for answers. “How could I have committed myself to years of this madness, of being the odd one out, of knowing no-one or nowhere?”

I was torn: if I succeeded at this journey it would be a big achievement. I would have seen and done fantastic things. I thought that I would be genuinely happy and satisfied. Certainly my life would be enriched. If I quit and went home, I would have Sarah. (I was too self-absorbed at the time to reflect in terms of what would be the best for both of us. It was all just about me, me, me.)

I had tried my best, but it had just been too difficult for me. Only my pride was unable to accept that I had failed. Only conceit forbid me to fly home. To escape was so easy (the modern traveller’s shameful secret): a quick ride to the airport, crack out the Visa card and that would be it: back home in time for tea. But, despite how upset I had repeatedly been, despite how easy escape was, despite it all, I did *not* go to the airport. Surely this meant that I *did* want to be there. I wanted to scream with frustration. I felt as though I was trapped on an endless rollercoaster.

I tried to focus on why I wanted to continue, hoping to highlight the positives. I had always felt that if I ever found something better to do with my life than riding round the world then I would do it: I did not begin the ride solely with the purpose of reaching the end. But I had not yet thought of (and still haven’t) anything more exciting and rewarding to replace it. I knew that if I quit that I was likely to regret it one day. I thought of how frustrated I had been with life in England, how eager to get away from comfortable complacency. I thought of all the experiences I would miss by going home. I was lucky. The stars had aligned, the combination locks had clicked crisply into place, the roulette ball had danced and bounced and fallen right: I had an ambition and I had the opportunity to pursue it. It was now or never for my dream of many years. Was I going to give that up? I appreciated the words of Charlotte Bronte who wrote, “it is a very strange

sensation to inexperienced youth to feel itself quite alone in the world, cut adrift from every connection, uncertain whether the port to which it is bound can be reached, and prevented by many impediments from returning to that it has quitted. The charm of adventure sweetens that sensation, the glow of pride warms it: but then the throb of fear disturbs it..."

I needed to learn to become less uptight, less consumed by money, less be-devilled by how many miles I covered each day, less obsessed with reaching my next sanctuary. I was going to cycle through Africa. I would encounter beauty and I would meet good people. If I was weary: rest. If I was afraid: leave. If night was falling: sleep. If I was hungry: eat. I did not need to make it even harder on myself by a constant determination not to take the easy option. Searching for yourself you will always find demons. I was trying to be a free man, grasping for talismans. Right then I was not sick, scared or in danger. I was in a hotel, my bike still worked and I still had money. What would I be like when things became tough? I needed to get positive. The Sufi poet Hafiz wrote, "Though the way is full of perils, and the goal far out of sight, There is no road to which there is no end: do not despair."

My diary that night: "Lessons learned today: Don't make big decisions when tired, lonely, hungry, frightened, ill or at night."

Next day I rode slowly into Damascus to explore the market, or *souk*. It was Friday, the day off in Syria, so the *souk* was calm and quiet, just what I needed. The ancient empty streets were too dead for dreaming; dark and gloomy. The balconies of the first floor crookedly overhung the streets, almost touching each other. Aromatic spices filled the air. I wandered slowly and aimlessly. I felt very fragile. A tiny, waist-high arched door led into the peaceful courtyard of a black-and-white striped mosque. I took off my flip-flops and the marble floor was cool on my bare feet as I looked around. In the market some stalls worked by candlelight, others were highlighted in a shaft of sunlight or plugged in to dodgy overhead wires. Merchants sat rearranging their wares, haggling with customers, sipping steaming glasses of tea or staring quietly. I chose some dried apricots and wondered how the man would be able to leave his cubicle to serve me: he seemed to be trapped in there, hemmed in for eternity behind his ancient sacks

of wrinkly fruit. But above his head was a length of rope and, like Tarzan in a turban, he swung lithely out onto the pavement and grinned at my surprise. There was little light in the winding *souk* because of a black tin roof. But in parts the roof was becoming tatty, with rust eating tiny holes. Dots of sunlight shafted through. On one street the ceiling was peppered with used tea bags hurled up against the roof where they had stuck. The string and paper tabs from the tea bag trembled with the breeze. They reminded me of school where a solitary strand of spaghetti had dangled undisturbed from the canteen ceiling for years.

The confusing spider's web of narrow streets still reflected the old Roman plans. Straight Street runs from a high-arched ancient city gate right through the heart of the *souk*. It is mentioned in the Bible in the story of Paul: "And the Lord said to Ananias: "Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul." Today, amid the gentle hum of traders, little felt to have changed. Much though *had* changed in the spiritual lives of the Damascans in that time. This is best reflected by the Great Umayyad Mosque which has served time as temple, church and mosque. I sat quietly outside the mosque, one of my favourite, and one of Islam's earliest when the religion first burst from the Arabian peninsula. An old man with a long white beard read his Koran beside me. A quiet group of women waited outside the mosque, draped from head to toe in black. Only their eyes showed, huge, deep brown and kohl framed, firing my imagination into all sorts of inappropriate, un-Koranic scenarios. Men stood around talking, separate from the women, colourful in their red and white *kiffiyehs*. They shouted at each other, smoked, and did a lot of hacking and spitting. I wondered if it was perhaps time I started purifying my water. The call to prayer sung out and everyone except me shuffled into the courtyard to wash their feet at the long rows of taps before heading into the mosque to pray. Alone, I drank in the stillness of a devout Muslim city during the Friday lunchtime prayers.

Fari phoned the hostel and invited me for *iftar*. She was American-Syrian and her husband Saadalla was Syrian. They were affluent and well-groomed, clearly did not often encounter scruffbags like me, and did not look as though they intended to make it a habit. It was very kind of Fari to invite me, as she was not in the least bit interested in me and hurried to switch on the TV as soon her maids appeared to clear the dinner plates. I

remember the news that day for they announced the death of George Harrison, the Beatle. Saadalla was nice, well educated and charming, but he too believed that September 11th was the work of the FBI or the Israelis. Everyone I met in Damascus seemed to think this and scoffed at my doubts. In turn I worried at the indoctrinated, unquestioning mindset of many Muslims.

The food was delicious and, as usual at *iftar*, more than we could ever eat. Their son wasn't hungry though as his friend had just brought him back a Big Mac all the way from Beirut. (Things like McDonalds, Coca-Cola and ATM's do not exist in Syria.) "Cold but delicious!" was his verdict.

After dinner Saadalla helped me solve the case of the missing sleeping bag. About 200km, some big mountains and an international border now stood between me and my sleep. We emailed Art and Sandy and asked them to send the sleeping bag in a taxi. It sounded like a very dodgy plan but Saadalla saw no problem with it. "*Inshallah*, God willing, no problem." I had to trust his judgement. I left their plush apartment and massive telly and cycled back through the rain to the stinking hostel to twiddle my thumbs.

I rode back to their house the next evening to collect my sleeping bag which had actually arrived. Rain fell in floods and waves rose from beneath cars and crashed their tented tons on me cartoon style, but I was relieved and grateful to Fari and Saadalla that I had a sleeping bag once more.

One of the many appeals of traveling by bike is that you arrive gradually. There is none of the shock you experience when you roll your trolley out of an air-conditioned airport and into the sudden sweating chaos of the Developing World. The heat! The noise! The smell! The crowding clamour of men eager to carry your bags, to find you a taxi, to find you a hotel and to con you while you are soft and naive. On a bike, however, you experience the proximity or the distance between people and places that accounts for the way they interact, or do not interact, and consequently the way that the very history of our planet has unfurled. You appreciate the world as a single, gradually morphing blend rather than the separate, isolated communities that air travel and television suggest. This was very apparent to me: I was in Damascus, one of the most ancient cities on earth and yet I kept forgetting the fact. I felt that spice markets and hooting taxis

and bushy moustaches and kebab stalls and historic heaving streets and noisy mosque loudspeakers were all quite normal. It showed how ideal Rita was for slipping me gradually into different environments and allowing me to see the world as one single entity.

I returned to the *souk* in the old town. It was a new morning, the rain had stopped, the sun was out and I was damn well going to cheer up. I changed some dollars (involving melodramatic hushed negotiations with an old man in his grocery store), bought some provisions, and dragged myself out of my torpor. I tried to stop my endless worrying about how little money I had by blowing a little bit of it. By saving my Student Loans, I had accrued a total fortune of £7000. It was going to be tough to make that last for the duration of the ride, but it was all that I had so it had to last. I bought two kebabs and felt much happier having some tasty food inside me.

I studied a painting of the *souk* in an art shop. I liked it but I wondered why the artist had included all the ugly telephone wires in his painting. Later when I saw an idealised painting of the *souk*, complete with camels wandering around, I realised why. We need not be ashamed of travelling in a modern era, and part of the charm of Damascus today is the blend of the old and the new, so why not have some seriously dangerous wiring in your paintings?

I woke up quite happy, solid in the acceptance that I may not manage to finish the journey. I had worked through my sudden, frightening mental collapse, thought hard about its causes, effect and remedies and felt that I had a better idea now of my capabilities, my limits, and my motivations. I would just do my best and try to accept when I had reached the point when I had had enough. I would try to do what I felt to be the right thing, not what I felt other people would want me to do. I packed up the bike and began pottering slowly through Syria towards Jordan. I did a lot of thinking even though I kept trying not to. I was trying to be positive as I rode, trying to think of only one day at a time. I sang very loudly in an attempt to get my mojo back.

I camped on earth the colour of mediocre chocolate cake in a newly ploughed field. The bright pink clouds paled to silver as the sun disappeared. The mosque nearby (there was always a mosque nearby) signalled sunset and *iftar* began. The roads were empty:

people's bellies were being filled. I was happy to be alone. In the fading light I sat outside my tent and read Christina Rossetti:

*"Better by far you should forget and smile,
Than that you should remember and be sad."*

Stage 8: “Camping”

*“There lives and there leaps in me
A love of the lowly things of earth,
And a passion to be free.
To pitch my tent with no prosy plan,
To range and to change at will,
To mock at the mastership of man,
To seek Adventure’s thrill,
Carefree to be, as a bird that sings,
To go my own sweet way.”*

- Robert Service

When I told people that I slept rough at night they are often horrified at the perceived dangers. Wild animals, psychopaths, lumpy ground and a lack of showers and toilets are all given as good reasons to book into a hotel. Even people happy to camp wild at home baulk at the thought of doing it in far-flung lands. Whenever I ride with new people I notice their hesitation and lack of confidence in choosing a place to shelter for the night. Perhaps there is some vestige of animal instinct that urges us to caution when we are asleep and defenceless. Perhaps our vivid imaginations scare us with ghosts and monsters and murderers. I remember well the first time I camped alone, behind a hedge in a muddy field not far from Calais. I read The Times that I had carried from the ferry, ate a Pot Noodle and jumped at the slightest gust of wind or cracking twig. But familiarity breeds contentment and I quickly began mastering the arts of wild camping. I came to love sleeping rough and free and I never tired of it, though it was frequently hard work and stressful.

At times I miss the simplicity of turning a key in a lock and opening the door to a safe home, warm and dry, with a shower, and a table and chair, and a light to read by, a fridge full of food, running water, and a comfortable bed waiting. Every time I camp it is in a place I have never been before. I have to search for a site and set up the camp. Every day there is an element of risk and many questions to answer. Shall I stop early to savour a beautiful campsite or squeeze out as many miles as possible? If I am close to a town should I hold steady for the night before I reach it, or

push on and get past it before stopping? Is the town small enough to get past before darkness falls? Are there likely to be safe hiding spots on the other side, or should I just take what I can find now? Do I have chores to do in the town in the morning or do I want to get past now so that I can maximize tomorrow's distance, unhindered by negotiating my way through a new city? Is this area safe enough to camp wherever I feel like? Or must I hide well or even wait until I have the cover of darkness before camping? How remote is the land? Will I be discovered if I camp here? Do I need to hide under a bridge or in a forest? Should I ask permission to camp? It's safer and more interesting to do that, but do I have the energy tonight to explain my life yet again to strangers? Do I have the strength to ride fast until darkness or would I rather loaf early with a book, popcorn and a cup of tea? Do I have enough food and water to stop? If not I just have to keep riding until I find some.

I set myself daily targets, choosing a time or a distance or a hilltop that has to be gained before I allow myself to begin looking for a campsite. I am an expert now at seeking out a place to sleep, weighing up the many variables in split seconds as I ride along, knowing that a comfortable, safe, un-detected sleep depends on a good decision. I look for places out of sight of people and buildings and the road and away from dogs that pick my scent and bark all night. I look for good cover: hills, dead ground, trees, hedges or walls. I look for flat land, grassy or sandy and free of thorns. Running water is an irresistible luxury for the chance to swim and wash. I look for paths or tracks that lead away from the road and noisy traffic. Some nights are paradise, others nothing more than a place to lay my head for a few hours in safety, like a fugitive on the run: between the rows in a cornfield, a steep hillside, a ditch, under a motorway bridge, a rubbish dump, a drainage pipe, a central reservation, an abandoned building.

Upon spotting a potential campsite I have to decide in a moment whether to bother braking and checking it out, or whether to continue further in the hope of finding something better. If I choose to stop I leave the bike and walk to check out the site. If it is OK I then wait, whenever possible, for there to be no vehicles passing on the road so that I am completely unseen and then I wheel the bike from the road and into my latest hide-out. Finally I lie down and relax. Another day is done.

Stage 9: “Hues of Youth”

“Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go.”

- TS Eliot

Approaching the Jordanian border I tried to spend my final Syrian coins. I ate at a pancake stall with an appetizing view of a butcher hanging a camel’s bloody head and neck on a hook. The pancake seller, smiling, refused my money, as did the man I tried to buy a block of dates in treacle from. The man I bought a cake from would not take my money either. In the end I gave up and changed my Syrian Pounds for Jordanian Dinar in a hardware shop. I thought back to the British Embassy in Istanbul warning me of the perils of Syria. I reflected on the perils of preconceptions.

As I left Syria the border guards were watching ‘Home and Away’. In no-man’s land three random men with rifles blocked the road and would not let me continue. I had no idea what they wanted. They argued amongst themselves for a few minutes before walking away up the road. I shrugged and pedaled on into Jordan.

I waited in Amman for ten days for two friends to arrive. Simon and Arno had been at Oxford with me and now decided to join me for a Christmas bike ride. I set to work trying to secure a tricky Sudanese visa. To travel overland to South Africa you must cross either Sudan, Angola, or the Democratic Republic of Congo. A barrier of instability, danger and corruption blocking the way down the toughest of all continents. It was an unpleasant selection. Like voting for government, you hold your nose when you choose. Of the three, only Sudan was currently giving out visas with any semblance of regularity. Having already had my route across Asia severed, Sudan was now my only chance of getting through Africa and keeping my journey alive. I had to get that visa. It was my only hope. It is horrible to have your hopes resting on somebody else’s whim, especially the whim of a bored, under-paid minion of an oppressive regime. I applied for the visa in Amman because if I was rejected I could still travel on to Cairo and try once more. It would give me another chance.

The time spent waiting in Amman passed swiftly as I met lots of interesting people. There was festive Merry Making and Calorie Cramming all round. I enjoyed several *iftars* with Jordanian families fasting for Ramadan, and Christmas dinners with ex-pat families. I was invited to the ‘British Ball’ at a swanky hotel and hastily managed to borrow a dinner jacket and a pair of shoes. I chatted with the ambassador and felt very out of place as waiters glided round with trays of champagne. But I filled up on the buffet Dinner, tucked into the free bar with gusto and then escaped the dance floor to go on a little adventure. Up fire escapes and ladders I managed to climb onto the roof of the hotel, high above Amman. Amman is not a beautiful city; there is too much cheap concrete and hasty building for that. In sixty years of population growth, Bedouin urbanisation and incoming Palestinian refugees, the population has multiplied 60-fold. But from my night-time rooftop perch the illuminated concrete boxes rolling over Amman’s seven hills were beautiful.

The champagne caught up with me. I woke, in total darkness, sitting on a toilet with my pants round my ankles. I had absolutely no idea where I was. I felt my way out of the cubicle and stumbled round until I found the exit. As the toilet door opened the bright morning sunlight that filled the foyer of the hotel reminded me with a rush of embarrassment where I was. The party was over. Worse than my fast-emerging hangover was the foolish feeling that I had been fast asleep on a toilet as the party ended and everybody went home. I dashed out of the hotel, eyes down, and walked across Amman in my dinner jacket, nursing my head and cringing at how my hosts were going to laugh when I got back to their house. So I was very relieved when I arrived and saw John fast asleep at the steering wheel of his car, still in his dinner jacket. I sneaked past him and into the house. Everyone was still asleep. I had got away with it! I took a quick shower and headed out into the garden with a book and cup of tea, ready to tease John and his wife for stumbling home hours after I had returned home early for a good night’s sleep... Having nothing deeper than temporary friendships for four years was hard, and it meant that I rarely felt able to completely let my guard down and neglect courtesy and politeness and tact. The times then when I did make swift and comfortable friendships with families that I stayed with were therefore very precious to me.

In a street café I sat on a low stool, smoked a *nargileh* waterpipe and played backgammon with a wise old man whose parents had given up their traditional nomadic desert life to come and live in the city when he was a boy. He bought me glasses of tea. In return he had the pleasure of winning several games of backgammon. He threw the dice, one red, one green, onto the board of black wood and pale mother of pearl (“All the four colours of our flag,” he observed, exhaling a sweet plume of apple smoke above my head). He spoke of backgammon as being a philosophy for life: it is black and white and you have no choice over what is dealt for you, or over what other people do to you. But the choice that you do have is how to best play your own pieces in order to make all you possibly can of what you have been dealt.

My own dice came up trumps. When I had applied for my Sudanese visa my hopes for success had been miserably low. Sudan had only recently begun issuing visas and travellers’ tales abounded of repeated, unpredictable refusals. I had been nervous when I dropped off my passport at the embassy. It was crucial for me to get that visa but I was pessimistic, almost angry, as I filled in the required pages of paper work. It seemed pointless. I fully expected some power-happy, paranoid, good-for-nothing, paperclip shuffling bureaucrat to reject me without a thought or a care. To my massive surprise though, my dice fell well and my application was accepted at the first attempt. The man at the barred window who handed me back my passport was surprised as he received the full force of my enthusiastic handshaking and thanks. He was not even Sudanese. My excitement was measured though: now I had no reason to bail out. I had the visa, now I had to tackle Sudan. I was scared as well as excited. It was slow and stuttering perhaps, but I was still moving.

My friends arrived. Simon, a keen sailor from Devon, had never really cycled before. He had emailed me to tell me of his rather unorthodox preparations. “Al: I am in pain! Please don’t tell anyone! Someone advised me to shave my bum to make cycling less painful. But now I am sitting on hundreds of tiny, deadly needles of stubble. Please advise...” And Arno the Frenchman had told me that he was planning on cycling out to Heathrow Airport with a 6ft bike-storage cardboard box under his arm.

Somehow though this duo found their way to Amman and we pedaled out of town together. I was so excited to have company

again and I chattered non-stop. Past the crude Palestinian shanty towns, past the sheep bleating on fetid piles of rubbish and the flapping, scavenging birds, out into the brown countryside past motionless staring shepherds and running children, past Mount Nebo, from where Moses gazed on the Promised Land. We whizzed on down to the lowest point on Earth and bobbed and floated and giggled in the salty soup of the Dead Sea, 400 metres below sea level. We then donned fluffy white dressing gowns and gloated in the luxurious hospitality of the 5-star Dead Sea Spa Resort that I had been offered by the manager at the British Ball. Freshly shampoo'd and blow-dried the three rugged adventurers left to camp on the seashore.

Across the tranquil waters lay the less tranquil West Bank. So, when, in the night, Jordanian soldiers found our campsite, they were not happy and moved us on to go sleep elsewhere. We moved our tents a few hundred metres from the shore. Being Jordanians though they could not help but be friendly and so they first let us peer through their night-vision goggles. The west bank showed up in a creepy grainy-green light. Were the equally paranoid soldiers over there squinting back at us, I wondered?

It was an easy ride along the shore of the Dead Sea. The land was arid, cliffs striped with reds and creams. Saltpans gleamed. Sheer gorges and *wadis* (ravines or valleys, dry except occasionally in the rainy season) folded back from the shore. Whenever we stopped flies descended on us. The ride back up from the world's lowest spot was predictably hard, a 1400m winding climb up to the highway at Tafila. Simon was shattered by this huge climb, not surprising given that the only training he had done so far was to freewheel down to the lowest point on the planet and complain about his buttocks.

We ran out of water. Simon was on the verge of 'hitting the wall' when we came across a truck full of water watering some roadside plants. We had barely seen a plant for two days, were desperate for water, and now we came across a tanker watering flowers in the desert! It was a bizarre coincidence and we gratefully refilled our bottles. The workers boiled tea for us on a small fire of twigs, as did every Jordanian given half a chance. As we drank tea they used some very vivid charades to demonstrate a) what they would like to do to the Israelis, and b) what they would like to do to their wives.

We continued down the rolling King's Highway, the same road on which the Israelites had been refused permission to pass in the Bible. Except for a few olive groves the land was virtually barren. Shepherd boys sat squinting at us as their goats foraged the flinty slopes. Outcrops of rocks, *jebels*, were red and rough and in the distance smoky blue mountains faded smoothly into the desert floor. The mountain tops were clear against the sky but their bases merged together into one endless string of peaks, seeming to run across all Arabia.

We met an Irish conceptual artist at a roadside tea house. He was in Jordan on an assignment. With a disposable camera he was to take 24 photographs of Arabs writing Arabic greetings on postcards of London and mailing them to another artist in London. The art? Sending a postcard of a place you have never been, to a country you have never seen to a man you have never met, in a language he will not understand. "Ingenious," I lied.

Christmas morning dawned over the staggeringly lovely gorge of Wadi Dana that drops a vertical mile down towards the Dead Sea. Birds circled in the sky below us as we ate *felafel* sandwiches for breakfast. They only cost 10p each and so, as it was Christmas, we treated ourselves to three each. Our bikes were wrapped in tinsel, we were wearing Santa hats and, as we pedaled along the crisp, cool King's Highway we sang carols at the top of our voices. Local Muslims laughed as we passed. "Merry Christmas!", "Papa Noel!", "Happy New Year!", even "Happy Birthday!" they cried.

Corned beef and tomato puree sandwiches made a sumptuous Christmas Dinner: at least we three hungry cyclists were genuinely appreciative of all we ate that day. In the afternoon we sought shade in the company of a Bedouin family. We drank hot, sweet tea from delicate glasses sitting in the shade of their tent, reviving the senses and forging friendships. The old Bedouin man swapped his red and white *kiffiyeh* for Arno's Santa hat.

We arrived in Petra before sunset, hot and tired. Secretly Simon had heroically lugged a Christmas pudding and a bottle of port all the way from England. No wonder he had been tired! We celebrated Christmas in style.

"The hues of youth upon a brow of woe, which Man deemed old two thousand years ago. Match me such a marvel save in Eastern clime: a rose-red city half as old as time." So wrote John William

Burgen as he described Petra. The ‘lost’ city’s staggeringly ambitious carved rock structures were re-discovered by Europeans only in 1812 when Johann Burckhardt bravely disguised himself as an Arab and persuaded a local to guide him down the tight winding canyon, or *siq*, that leads into Petra, claiming that he wanted to sacrifice a sheep there. Today Petra was every bit as beautiful as I had hoped since first watching Indiana Jones’ Last Crusade.

Petra provoked ambition and far-sightedness. Projects that had taken several lifetimes to complete mocked the triviality of our modern lifestyles that demand instant gratification. It gave me renewed strength. I could make it to Cape Town.

I was reading TE Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and so was thrilled to spend three days in the vast natural amphitheatre of Wadi Rum, a magnificent swathe of blushing desert hemmed in by towering ramparts of rock. I imagined Lawrence and bands of vengeful Arabs, mounted on camels and armed to the teeth, riding silently up that valley, a “processional way greater than imagination”, where I now sat and read Lawrence describe, “our little caravan grew self-conscious, and fell dead quiet, afraid and ashamed to flaunt its smallness in the presence of the stupendous hills.”

The silent timelessness of Wadi Rumm reminded me of my own minute insignificance. Lying on the valley floor the black stillness was so absolute that I could literally hear myself blink. Rush hour felt a long way away and risibly irrelevant. Perhaps overwhelmed with the Big Questions of Life, we shattered the heavy silence by charging through the darkness doing noisy aeroplane impressions. We cooked marshmallows on the camping stove and smoked and choked on the pipe that Arno had given me for Christmas, claiming that no Englishman could aspire towards being a famous explorer without a pipe.

The mountainous road, basic food and rough campsites took their toll on my friends and they were both relieved when we reached the Red Sea at Aqaba. I was glad, a little cruelly, to see how hard they found the ride. Welcome to my world, boys! But their company had been invaluable. Riding and chatting through the miles or drinking cups of sweet tea at sunset beside our tents they had given me a valuable present: I had rediscovered laughter. Hopefully, in return, their time on the road had reminded them that you only know your strength once you start to take the strain.

To avoid a troublesome Israeli visa stamp we took the short ferry hop from Aqaba to Nuweiba in Egypt. If I entered Israel I would be barred from many Islamic countries that I hoped to ride through and I did not want to risk the old trick of getting the stamps put on a loose piece of paper. We fell asleep on the ferry and woke as we arrived in Egypt. Soon I was alone again, and all of Africa now awaited.

Stage 10: “No, I don’t want a camel ride!”

“Denial ain’t just a river in Egypt.”
- Mark Twain

I had almost decided that Africa would be too much to deal with by myself and that Yorkshire to Cairo was quite far enough for me to be able to go home with my head held high when a group called *Cycle to the Summit* emailed me. They were riding to the Earth Summit in Johannesburg and asked if I would like to join the three of them. I had almost decided that Sudan was an insurmountably frightening prospect when Pedro, a Swiss cyclist with a squint and a big smile hove into view. He had just ridden from Sudan to Egypt and he reassured me about what lay ahead. These two welcome arrivals at such timely moments felt like a small miracle. Whilst God was in this good mood I asked if he would also send me a beautiful blonde.

I began the New Year riding across the Sinai peninsula to Cairo, battling remorseless headwinds that infuriated me by day and blew down my tent at night. Hailstones stung as I rode through the desert beside two men on camels. They moved on the sand and I rode on the long carpet of tarmac laid out before me. Water bottles froze solid inside my tent. The wind slowed me so much that I ran out of food. A man in a petrol station gave me some dry bread and two onions to keep me going.

The sun set as I lay on my belly. The wind had calmed after three hard days. I had hidden behind an oil-refinery to camp out of sight of the road and was anxious for the sun to set and the welcome safety blanket of darkness to descend before anybody spotted me and booted me out. The Red Sea stayed copper blue even as the sun set. The mountains of Sinai blushed purple behind. The next time I would see the sun set over the sea would be in Cape Town. After the sun set the Gulf was alight with lights and burning gas, the darkening sky a livid red bruise. My father had sailed up this Gulf a few decades earlier with the Merchant Navy and I enjoyed imagining him being here. Before I began my ride I had never paid much attention to my Dad’s own adventures. I had

been grateful for his encouragement to follow my own path and his belief in the value of travel, but I had never really connected his slides and his anecdotes with real, tangible experiences around the globe. Now though, as I began to see some of the world through my own eyes, his experiences became more vivid to me.

Arriving in Cairo without a map guaranteed that I was soon totally lost amongst the mad chaos of the traffic. I wound past mosques, markets, leafy side-streets, neat squares, squalid poverty, smart hotels and the City of the Dead where thousands have made their home in a cemetery amongst the graves and tombs. I was almost hit by a black Mercedes as I swerved past a slow donkey cart laden with carrots. Just as I was thinking that the traffic was too crazy for bikes a ghostly baker cycled past me with an enormous pile of fresh bread balanced on a tray on his head. He was covered from head to foot in flour.

Night began to fall as I reached the banks of the Nile and rode upstream. The Nile, Leigh Hunt mused, “flows through old hushed Egypt and its sands, like some grave mighty thought threading a dream.” I was surprised how narrow the World’s longest river was. We would be together now for a long time, all the way to Ethiopia. With a squeeze of excitement I saw the tops of the pyramids across the city as dusk settled down. From the Yorkshire Dales to the pyramids! In a leafy neighbourhood I was gripped by stomach cramps. I leapt a high fence into what turned out to be the dark garden of a swanky riverside restaurant, dropped my pants then leaped back over the fence before any diners saw me or someone nicked Rita. I raced on through the constant stream of cars, only some of which had their headlights on, until, exhausted and wind-burned and surprised to have survived Cairo’s traffic, I arrived at Will and Kathleen Stacey’s house, the Principals of Cairo American College, sat down with a Coke in one hand, a beer in the other and fell asleep.

Cairo was a cauldron of history and amazement. The pyramids were certainly spectacular but spoiled for me by the endless people trying to sell me tacky stuff. It is not a new scourge. Back in 1866 Mark Twain had a similar experience, “We suffered torture that no pen can describe from the hungry appeals for *baksheesh*.” And William Makepeace Thackeray howled, “The importunity of these ruffians is a ludicrous annoyance to which a traveller must submit.” Camel rides, T-Shirts, “where you from? England? Lovely Jubbly, tally ho, have a shifty...” cried the

salesmen. The only T-Shirt that tempted me bore the slogan “NO, I do not want a F***ing Camel Ride!” Disappointing also was the discovery that Cairo has grown so huge that lying just beyond the National Geographic views of the pyramids are rows of grubby KFC’s and concrete sprawl. I had to struggle to grasp a sense of wonder.

I sat down and replied to the *Cycle to the Summit* team, having decided not to join them riding down to South Africa. I had decided that although riding with three other people would be much more fun, much safer and much easier, I wanted to at least try to make it on my own. Perhaps it is as Erma Bombeck wrote, that, “Dreams have only one owner at a time. That’s why dreamers are lonely.” I wanted to find out whether I was up to it. I would not be able to immerse myself so completely in African life if I was with three other foreigners. And, as Lawrence wrote, “it was a part of pride with Englishmen to hug solitude; ourselves finding ourselves to be remarkable, when there was no competition present.” Throughout my journey ran the constant thread of the self-imposed rules I set myself, the standards by which my quest had to stand up to my own harsh self-scrutiny. In some ways my whole journey was strangely contrived and artificial, yet its difficulty sometimes felt even larger by being arbitrary and self-chosen. A man climbing Everest has a clear set of obstacles to overcome to accomplish an obvious goal: he must cope with cold and danger, and if he does not hurry then his body will weaken and he will fail or die. Get to the top. Get back down. Job done. A yachtswoman sailing alone round the world is aware that she has a finite supply of food and a clear pre-chosen route she must complete. For me things were less clear. There were no prizes, awards, trophies or records at stake. My route and journey would be as hard or as easy, as long or as short as I chose to make it. I was competing only with myself. I had to set myself a problem and then solve it. It is hard to motivate yourself to build a high brick wall when you know that you have then to climb over it. It is a strange person too who bangs his head ever harder against that brick wall because he knows that the harder he bangs the sweeter the stopping will feel.

In the weird, artificial world of carefree westerners seeking fulfillment through pointless physical challenges there is a yearning to push the boundaries, to seek satisfaction through

overcoming ever-greater self-imposed hardships. Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay were the first to climb Everest and live to tell the tale. It was a spectacular achievement. Years later Messner and Habeler struggled to the summit without supplemental oxygen. It was a phenomenally difficult thing to do, yet was their ascent any ‘better’ than Hillary and Tenzing’s? Equally, was it any ‘worse’ because they were not the first to summit? Does primacy matter more than personal primacy? If Messner and Habeler are to be applauded for the ‘purity’ of their achievement should they not have climbed the peak stark naked? However, if we acknowledge that artificial aids, such as clothes, tents and crampons are acceptable, then should we not applaud equally Maurice Wilson’s plan to crash his plane into the flank of the mountain and then simply stroll on up to the summit?

This was the type of debate I had regularly with myself as I pondered the ‘rules’ of my own private challenge. How pure was my ride to be? It was an infinitesimally graded scale, without any correct answers, with countless variables to consider. The ride was important to me, to my future, to my self-confidence, to all the hard work I had gone through to get to this point. And yet, I was always wryly aware that it was only a bike ride. It didn’t really *matter*. So what if I came home, or rode with some other people, or wildly wasted £1 in a hedonistic Coca-Cola blow out or took a bus one day. It was only a bloody bike ride!

But I sent off the email anyway, adding that I hoped that we would meet somewhere so that we could ride together for a few weeks.

After Cairo I had to cycle south along the coast. The police said that I was not allowed to cycle beside the Nile because of ‘security concerns’. I was disappointed: the Nile Valley was the beating heart of Egypt and to not ride it would be to miss out on so much. And so it proved. My memories of Egypt are now isolated and bipolar: limited to Cairo in the North and the southern Upper Nile towns of Luxor and Aswan. I never got a proper feel for Egypt. The Red Sea coast was a half-finished, half-hearted, building site, just rows of unfinished apartment blocks and hotels with empty windows staring blankly like fish in a market.

Past Hurghada I cut back inland to Luxor. At the first police checkpoint I was stopped. After the shootings of foreign tourists several years before, the Egyptians were still paranoid about their

tourism industry. Despite my full repertoire of pleading, smiling, yelling, crying and bribing they were adamant; I could ride no further and I had to hitch a ride with the daily armed convoy. Like many things I was to encounter in developing regions of the world, this convoy defied any rational answer to the question “why?” I trained myself over the next years to not ask officials “why?” as the answer was usually exasperating. With every wealthy foreign tourist now travelling together in a close convoy at a set time each day it is hard to imagine an easier or juicier target for terrorists. Sadly I heaved my bike onto the back of a lorry and hitched a ride to Luxor. My dream of cycling every inch of the world was broken. The perfect purity of the ride was over. I felt gutted. I would have to settle for a less satisfying goal of “cycling every inch of the world that was not impeded by a stubborn policeman.” I was then annoyed at myself by how much I enjoyed travelling in the back of the lorry, enjoying the cool breeze and the bright sunshine and the fast effortless miles as I read my book.

But I really was disappointed and so, when they eventually let me out of the lorry, I tried to ride away through the next checkpoint. The soldiers waved at me to stop but I just smiled and waved back, playing the dumb foreigner role for all it was worth. They did not have a vehicle so I thought I might get away with it. They started shouting so I pedaled like crazy. Passing cars were honking me to stop. I played dumb and waved at them too, hammering at the pedals. My freedom lasted a couple of miles before a minibus commandeered by the soldiers swerved in front of me. They were not amused. The soldiers made me take another ride into Luxor itself in a police truck. They then tried to charge me for the ride until I exploded in indignation and they let me off.

The Nile valley was lush green, the sky the deep blue of a late summer’s afternoon in England. Swallows dipped the waters and I wondered whether any of them would be visiting my village that summer. Egypt had not inspired me. I was tired of people trying to rip me off every day. I had even found myself looking forward to Sudan but now Egypt was in danger of winning my affections. Luxor soon stopped that, the Nile making a pretty backdrop to Japanese tourists swathed in Egyptian *galibayahs* and a thumping headache of annoying vendors....

“Hello, my friend! Where you from? Stop one minute, can I ask you a question? Just look! No hassle! You wanna taxi ride-

felucca ride-horse ride-motor boat ride-drugs ride? You wanna buy waterpipe-t-shirt-galibayah-spices-carpets-genuine antiques-carvings-hashish? Very cheap price! Just for you! Maybe tomorrow? No hassle! My friend, why are you ignoring me?"

Aswan was welcome after Luxor. It was a proper town, filled with normal people and not just the tourist industry. After switching off all my senses in Luxor to cope with the tackiness and hassle I was able in Aswan to be re-amazed by the clothes, the headwear, the leaking pipes and drains, the smells, the wailing but passionate music, the squalor of street-side butchers and fishmongers, the piles of spices and mounds of blue indigo, used for millennia for dying cotton. The land border between Egypt and Sudan has been closed for years so I had to wait for the weekly ferry across Lake Nasser, the largest artificial lake in world, past the extraordinary temples of Abu Simbel -physically relocated in the 1960's when Lake Nasser was formed- and into Sudan.

I killed the time in pavement cafés, drinking glass after glass of tea, smoking waterpipes for hours and thinking about Sudan. I emailed friends and family and checked football scores on the internet. I sat by the river watching the graceful *feluccas*, wooden sailing boats with white sails like birds wings. The sails fluttered slowly as the boats tacked through the wind. Unsure which was worse when trying to sleep, an uncomfortable bed, mosquitoes, close proximity to a late night disco, even closer proximity to a mosque's very early wake-up call or a flock of cockerels outside, I played safe and got them all. The only consolation to the hostel was a beautiful Turkish girl with almond eyes as fiercely luminous as a cat's that mesmerised me and rolled round my mind for many miles to come.

I bought a pile of flat bread from the baker's oven on the street. Scalding hot in my hands I juggled my way back to the hostel. I was nervous and excited. The ferry left today. This was make or break time. I had long felt that if I could make it through Sudan I could make it through Africa and if I could make it through Africa I could make it through anything. I packed up my bags and cycled slowly to the port.

Stage 11: “Packing”

“Every increased possession loads us with new weariness.”

- John Ruskin

Everything I own is in these faded bags I carry on my bike. I could list every single one of my possessions. I have to carry them all, all day, wherever I go. I need everything that I own. I no longer have any underwear. You don’t need underwear. I have four waterproof panniers -two red, two black- that clip on racks alongside the wheels of my bike. On top of the rear rack I carry a spare tyre and my tent, sleeping bag and tiny camping mattress in a blue waterproof canoeing bag held down by a pair of elastic bungee cords. At least, it used to be waterproof. Like most of my well-worn things, it has seen better days and has been repaired with duct tape, one of my most invaluable possessions.

In one pannier I carry my clothes, more or less of them depending on the climate. I ride in the same clothes every day and have a cleaner t-shirt and trousers for my days off. To protect myself from the sun and to look as little of a freak as possible, I ride in trousers and a long-sleeved shirt. The other clothes serve as a pillow when I camp. Another pannier carries my cooking gear: stove, petrol bottle, mug, pan, a plastic plate that doubles as a chopping board and pan lid, spoon, food and water. The front right pannier, the easiest to access, holds the things I use regularly during the day: map, diary, camera, music, reading book, pump and basic tools. The final pannier, my ‘pannier of doom’ is loaded with stuff I rarely use but still need to haul around with me. This is the weight I begrudge the most and I am always looking for ways to cut it down. It includes my battery charger, documents, first aid kit, longer term spare parts that I know I will need before I next reach a bike shop, such as chains, derailleurs, brake blocks, bottom brackets and spokes. There are also usually a couple of spare books in there, for that is my biggest weakness. Finally I have a small bag that clips to the handlebar. This holds things that I need to be able to access while I am actually riding: sunglasses, gloves, hat, suncream, lyspsyl and snacks.

The focusing effect of having to carry all of my belongings helped me to keep my life as uncluttered as possible for four

years. Except when loaded with several days of food and water, or extreme cold weather equipment, I was able to pick up every single thing that I owned in the world and carry it. I really valued coming to appreciate how few things we really need to survive in life, and discovering that I actually enjoyed the simplicity of not owning much.

Stage 12: “Laughing with Allah”

“God made the Sudan and then He laughed!”

- Sudanese proverb

On the shore of Lake Nasser the boat loading was farcically disorganised. Sweating workers yelled at each other, heaved loads around and got in each other's way for hour after hot hour. The gangplanks and jetty were packed solid with sacks waiting to be loaded. Heavy sacks were dumped on top of boxes of soft fruit, rainbows of stacked plastic chairs were jumbled amongst split bags of sugar. Someone had raided an industrial sized box of chocolate wafers. The irate captain stormed about, clouting workers round the head as they strained and shouted amongst the never-shrinking mountain of cargo on the dock. Watching such incompetence it was hard to imagine that those men do this exact same thing every single week yet have never thought to introduce any method into the madness. This was another unhelpful train of thought -like asking ‘why?’- that never failed to irritate me in the developing world.

Somehow I heaved Rita through the scrum and seized possession of a small strip of bare deck. It was to be my home for the next twenty four hours, plus however long we were delayed whilst the weekly debate of how best to convey a sack through a door raged on and the sailors continued to shout at the television screen on the dock showing the African Nations football tournament. I was ready to defend my space from encroaching piles of cargo and the fat man who I suspected of having been raiding the chocolate wafers. If I should die in the crush, think only this of me...

Below deck the steel ship was noisy and crowded with extremely dark-skinned Sudanese people, very different to the Arabic Egyptians. There were high cheek-boned women in bright robes and men in white robes with tribal scars. Already the toilet floors were covered in shit. We hadn't even set sail yet. The inviting blue Nile water became ever less so as people chucked rubbish, empty boxes and used nappies overboard.

The sun set. Night fell. The moon rose. And eventually the tumult and the shouting died; the captain and his ship could

depart. It was 9.30pm. We were only six and a half hours late. I was pleased: I had anticipated far worse. Amongst the old suitcases and cardboard boxes tied with string, squashed hot families sprawled comatose, shrieking, playing dominos, sleeping, eating, stretching, scratching. The temperature and the stench rose. Food was served in the galley by a filthy man, his apron shiny with grease, fag ash sprinkling from his cigarette into the food like an Italian chef lovingly seasoning with oregano. His vast belly was a testimony to never having to eat his own vile cooking. A cheap tin tray was banged down on the counter and the dirty man scooped onto it a handful of grey chopped tomatoes, a handful of grey boiled beans, a grey egg and half a (surprisingly orange) orange. Ladies and Gentlemen, dinner is served. I climbed back on deck to escape the heat and noise and stench. Ahead of me lay a land that was a refuge of terrorists, where the government had, until recently, kept all tourists away while civil war raged and government ethnic cleansing raced on unchecked. But I was no longer scared. I had overcome the nervous inertia of anxious waiting and so the toughest part had been achieved already. I was in motion now. With the simple purity of Newtonian physics, I would stay in motion until acted upon by external forces. I was on my way. The night sky was beautiful. Egypt was only a memory now. Come on, Sudan; let's see what you've got.

I was excited as the ferry docked in Sudan. I felt that the next few weeks would determine the rest of the journey: could I cross the desert, would I make it safely through this unstable nation? My questions would soon be answered one way or the other. As Frederic Manning said, "one must try: one is not bound to succeed." After completing a sheaf of disembarkation paperwork I pedaled through the sand from the customs point to the village of Wadi Halfa and found a place to camp.

That evening most villagers were clustered outside a café around a tiny television to watch a football match between Brazil and Saudi Arabia. Loyalties seemed torn between cheering their Islamic brothers or supporting the inevitable victors. The air was warm and still and the conversation around the café sounded loud and unnatural surrounded by the stillness of the desert. At a street stall I ate *felafel* and what was described to me as "Kentucky Fried Fish." I began trying, with the help of my map and the *felafel* chef, to establish where I could re-supply with water in the desert ahead.

But, before I could begin to ride I had to pass through more immigration checks, register with the police and obtain a permit to travel. This all involved being waved vaguely in the direction of many different identical little offices in search of many different identical little stamps, signatures, counter stamps, confirmatory signatures, payments, stapling and bewildered expressions.

I knew that this bureaucratic labyrinth would take a long time to negotiate so I began my quest early in the morning. “Come back at 12.30 when there is electricity so that we can photocopy your passport,” they told me at the first small office. From there I went to the tiny bank and found that it had closed for the day at 12.30. I returned the next morning, filled in a form, and then went to customs where I had to buy a pink folder to hold all the forms and complete three additional forms. One of these forms was an application for a travel permit. The others were a test of patience. The holder of a travel permit “must report to police HQ within twenty four hours of arrival in any town to discuss the programme of his visit,” I discovered. Already frustrated by the bureaucracy I ignored this demand throughout Sudan and nobody ever cared. I moved on to the ‘Aliens’ building where I was required to buy another pink folder at the small window. But first I had to find the officer: he was in a nearby café. The next form required the purchase of an extra stamp. The price was clearly labelled as 300 Dinar (75p), but I had to pay 400 (£1). The man at the desk shrugged at my protests, as if to say, “Look: I have the stamps. You need a stamp. You either pay the extra money or you don’t get a stamp. Simple, mate. Frankly, I don’t really care which you do, just so long as you realize that I am holding all the aces. And the stamps.” He had a very expressive shrug.

In another office much careful stapling and gluing was required before moving to an office where I sought out a signature. Successful, I then proceeded to another office for a stamp and two more forms (which the official kindly yet excruciatingly slowly completed for me). He had run out of stamps. I paid 7100 Dinar and was sent to a different office for the stamp. They required 200 more. I returned to the office of the Big Cheese. He sent me into a scrum at a small window. I gave 100 Dinar to the face at the window and returned to the office. I had no idea what I was paying for anymore. They passed me on to another man. He was praying. I waited. Then the Big Cheese began to pray. The other man returned. Was this to be the elusive final stamp I was

searching for...? He stamped the stamp. No, it was not the end. On to another office and another signature. Back to the previous office. There the folders were carefully filed in a big black filing cabinet where nobody would ever look at them again. And at long last the policeman turned to me with a smile. I had made it to the end of the maze! I had a permit to travel as far as Khartoum and I was registered to be in Wadi Halfa. After hours of bureaucratic pinball I was free to properly enter Sudan.

Exhausted, I climbed a small hill to watch the sunset. The blue waters of man-made Lake Nasser seemed an invasion in this end-of-the-world, needle-in-a-haystack, middle-of-nowhere kind of place, bringing colour, a ferry and a weekly splash of activity into the silence of the desert. Wadi Halfa was a sandy settlement with no paths or roads, no trees, no colours, no contours. It was featureless like snowfall. Which route would I take across the desert? Around the village was a tangle of tracks but I could not see any leading south out of town past the low rocky hills. Wadi Halfa is an odd place to have on a list of my world 'highlights': a few clusters of square, drab, single-storied dwellings. But it is a highlight because it was the most remote place I had ever been to at the time and making it there gave me a boost of much-needed confidence. I paused to remember and to thank all the people who had, over the years, got me to that small hill in a torpid backwater at the northern tip of the largest country in Africa.

By happy coincidence the *Cycle to the Summit* (C2S) team, complete with a new-found fourth member had been on the same ferry as me and I decided to ride for a while with them. I worried that by not tackling the desert alone I was taking the easy way out, but in the end I decided that the pleasure of having company was more important at the moment than my constant instinct to make life difficult for myself. The desert would still be hot and sandy, if a little more crowded.

Ruth, the only woman of the team, had come up with the idea of cycling to the Earth Summit in Johannesburg, the World Summit on Sustainable Development, in order to raise the profile of Water Aid, an international charity dedicated to helping people escape the stranglehold of poverty and disease caused by living without safe water and sanitation. Ruth was tough and intelligent and her Irish burr reminded me of a young Dervla Murphy. Toby was the organisational driving force and the mouthpiece for the project.

An entertaining, relaxed character, he did not enjoy cycling very much. Paul was several years older than the rest of us. Quiet and good-natured he was a good mechanic, a fan of big engines, and the only cyclist I have ever met with a 6ft yoga mat strapped to the back of his bike. He often disappeared in villages to examine water pumps and old cars. Owy, an Australian, was the new-found fourth member of the team. Working in a Thai restaurant in Edinburgh he had seen an advert that the team had posted after the original fourth man had quit to go back to his girlfriend after just a few weeks riding. So Owy had packed his bags and flown to Cairo to have a crack at riding through Africa. An appalling dancer and a lively soul, Owy and I amused ourselves with events like desert follow-my-leader on the bikes and long jump competitions in the readily available sand.

The C2S team's professional looking solar panels, laptop computer and sponsored bikes were evidence of good preparation that reminded me of the broken promises and merry-go-round certain people and companies had led me on before I started. Their attempts at cooking or putting up tents, however, were decidedly amateur and made me feel better about my shabby equipment. They traveled slow and easy, took at least two hours to pack up in the mornings, rode slowly and ate well. Their magnificent lunchtime picnics of tuna and cheese and chocolate made a depressing contrast to my bread and jam diet. Jam yesterday and jam tomorrow and jam today as well. Alice in Wonderland would have been jealous but I was sick of it. Bread and jam every day then pasta with a stock cube for dinner. My culinary highlights were a new box of stock cubes or a new flavour of jam. Their way of travel was very different my militaristic, ascetic masochism, and I welcomed the chance to calm down and relax.

We began wobbling and bouncing our way across the sand towards Khartoum. The track was rutted like a washboard, an infuriating feature of dirt roads common whenever vehicles drive on soft dirt surfaces. Our bikes were heavy with water and food gathered from Wadi Halfa's few tiny market stalls. A final police checkpoint looked at our travel permits, checked that we had sufficient food and water and then released us out into the desert. I thought of WC Fields crossing a desert in more civilized days, "It took us a week to cross the desert. Things got so bad we had to drink water."

Before long my backside was bruised, my spine felt compressed by several inches and my neck was whip-lashed by the corrugated ‘road’. I had never experienced anything like it before. When the rattling became too much I would venture off into the sand in search of smoother ground. But when the bike hit soft sand my legs span wildly as the tyres skidded and I slewed uncontrollably searching for traction. Direction of travel became entirely random and less important than simply keeping moving, because once you stopped you could not easily get started again and had to walk with the bike until you reached firm ground once again.

When the sand was too deep to ride we pushed our heavy bikes laden with three days supply of food and water. Even pushing the bike was sometimes too hard and then we had to pull the loads instead. Arse-first was a ludicrous way to be crossing a continent. We were drenched with sweat and our heads thumped with the heat. It was every man for him or her-self as we searched for terrain that was rideable. Spinning wildly away from the impassable soft sand we would all careen off in our own directions searching for elusive patches of firm black gravel. We ended up fanning out so far that one day we lost Toby and Owy in the broken landscape of rock-pile hillocks and dunes and the interwoven trails, tyre tracks, donkey tracks, camel tracks, footprints and flip flop tracks that wove all over the land around the occasional villages that punctuated our way. Occasionally small buses passed, roaring and straining at the sand, their engines protesting desperately, hordes of passengers clinging to the sides and roof. Away from the villages we would see nothing all the way to the horizon, perhaps just a few bushes to take a bearing on or an occasional hint of Nile green shimmering away to the right. We had to haul ourselves over low dunes, my trousers tearing and shoes filling with sand. We varied enormously in our relative speeds and at times would all be out of sight of one another for hours on end. Edward Gibbon wrote that he was “never less alone than when completely alone.” He had clearly never hauled a bike through miles of shimmering virgin sand, alone as far as the horizon in every direction, over a flat and featureless brown-pink blancmange dusted with chocolate shards of hard black rock. The blood roared through my head and stars danced on my eyeballs. Even my singing failed to break the sense of silence.

For two punishing weeks we dragged and pushed the bikes in 45C heat. The dawns and dusks were a refreshing relief from the massive punching power of the daytime sun. Unable to wash we were permanently grimed with sweat and sand and I was smiling wildly. Rivulets of sweat ran white stripes down our dirty faces and our clothes were crusty and ringed with salt. It was physically gruelling but I was in my element at last. Teaching Biology in Oxford seemed a wonderfully long way away. This was all that I left home for.

At night a hot wind blew, shaking the scraps of vegetation that hugged the small waterholes where camels roared their strangled, bubbling cries and we slept. I lay on my back in the sand, my blistered lips cracked into a smile. The stars looked more exotic through the mosquito net hanging down over me from my bicycle and for the first time on the journey I saw the Southern Cross, my favourite constellation. The bottom half of the world was no longer so far away. The ground was scattered with stones that glowed in the dark if you knocked them together. Barefoot in the desert of Sudan, I was so happy. At first light I would watch the day arrive over the Nile as the bag of night burst and gold spilled over the world. On Valentine's Day I woke at sunrise. There was no postman bearing gifts from secret admirers. Even 6000 miles from home some things did not change.

We rode past a memorial to the British soldiers killed in the Anglo-Egyptian campaign of the 1880's. As I stood before the smashed plinth I marveled at how far from home they had been and wondered what those young soldiers would have thought of this harsh land as they fought and died for Queen and country.

One night we camped on a wide scenic bend of the Nile. My yearning to jump in and swim was slightly outweighed by my fear of crocodiles. Toby, braver, dumber, or more hygienic than me, took his chances and survived. Swallows dipped the water and a flock of roosting birds made a racket in the haven of an acacia tree. Across the river a village was singing and dancing to the rhythmic beating of drums. After dark I went with Owy and Toby down to the riverbank to try and spot crocs with our torches. A couple of loud splashes sent us scampering back to our camp, eyes like golf balls.

We would reach a village every two or three days, small clusters of huts with cheerful, colourfully painted doors. Arriving we

would often see a hanging animal skin filled with water: a symbolic welcoming gesture as water is so important for desert travellers. Islamic hospitality is always generous. Rather than sharing things as Christians are supposed to do, Muslims are taught to give everything away. Add on the traditional hospitality of desert peoples and you arrive at the incredible generosity of the Sudanese. In El Kandak a man invited us into his home for breakfast. This sort of spontaneous kindness was almost a daily occurrence. But this family were holding a wedding feast in their home that very afternoon yet seemed remarkably relaxed about five filthy foreigners descending on their home just a few hours before the wedding began. Back home a wedding morning would mean high panic, but the Sudanese are wonderfully lacking in agitation. They fed us meat on top of a pile of rice on top of a pile of soggy bread and we gratefully stuffed it into our mouths with our fingers. All around us women worked feverishly at preparing the wedding feast. The man, Mohammed, left the wedding arrangements in the capable hands of his womenfolk and took us to see the stately police building built by the British in 1902 and a crumbling mud-walled fortress where we amused ourselves by locking Toby in the jail.

The village of Abri felt like an Eden on the riverbank because the market sold fresh fruit and vegetables. Owy, struck by constipation for days, was particularly delighted. The vegetable stall was shaded by a large green tree that trembled in the breeze, seeds shaking in their long pods. Two ladies leaned on the stall, relaxed, their hair wrapped in crimson cloth. There were pyramids of tomatoes and potatoes and bunches of carrots tied together with their bushy hair of greenery. A fruit we ate regularly in Sudan, but never learned the name of, always had to be cut in half before eating so that you could blow away the tiny flies that lived in the middle.

I loved riding through the villages, between whitewashed walls on the single sandy street, corners smoothed by age and carefree workmanship. The only reminder that this was the 21st Century was the constant flap-flap sound of the water pumps down at the river pumping water to irrigate the small vegetable fields. Men and women would laugh and wave kindly at us. Children shouted, “How-are-you? How-are-you? What-is-your-name? What-is-your-name?” yet understood not a word of our replies. In one village

school we heard a class singing, “Everyday I wash my face. Everyday I clean my nose...”

The bicycles of Sudan put mine to shame with their splendid decorations: frames striped with coloured electrical tape and a cornucopia of aerials, bells, laser beam noise machines, wing mirrors (at least 4), large mud flaps (mud? Sudan?) with flourishes of dangly stuff and jangling Pepsi caps, strips of cardboard against the spokes to produce a motorcycle sound effect, frilly things in the wheels, tassels on the seats and often a huge chrome headlamp (Broken). They were normally ridden by small boys who could barely straddle the crossbar let alone sit on the saddle.

Arriving in Sudan it had taken less than a day for my fears about Sudan and its people to evaporate and I felt perfectly at ease in the country. They were the friendliest, kindest people that I had ever met, filled with warmth and laughter. Invitations for tea and gifts of dates were never-ending, spontaneous, and genuine. The old sage who said that “God made the Sudan and then He laughed!” meant it as a slight but I saw a Sudan full of laughter.

The mid-day heat was unbearable so we would find excuses to delay, chatting for hours in villages until late afternoon, lingering over sweet tea in the mottled shade of woven grass awnings. The others would intrigue the ever-present crowds with their video camera and solar panels and water filters. I never liked playing the role of Fascinating Rich Foreign Person and usually took great pains to highlight the similarities in our lives rather than the differences. But digital cameras were far more fun to the villagers of northern Sudan than my philosophies and I relished the peace and quiet when everybody ignored me. Often though children would creep to my side and watch in quiet fascination as I wrote in my diary. Writing in a funny alphabet and from *left to right* across the page! We were equally mesmerized by each other’s lives.

One day we were sitting at a shaded table in a village café with our huge pile of purchased bread in front of us. A passing man must have thought we were selling bread because he came and asked how much the bread cost. Joking, I showed him a banknote that was double the normal bread price. He shrugged, took out his money, paid me, and walked away with a bag of our bread. Everyone in the café roared with laughter, delighted that the

foreigners, the *cawadja*, had made such a profitable start to their business.

Old men, dressed in white robes and turbans, played dominoes in the shade, their faces lined like the sun-baked earth. I had never thought of dominoes as a noisy sport, but in Sudan it verged on full contact, the pieces slammed down hard amongst much yelling, shouting and hand waving. The women seemed more confident and less like second-class citizens in Sudan than in other Islamic nations and at one water pump we enjoyed an amusing conversation with a group of women about the state of our hygiene, our filthy faces and torn clothes. Despite the language barrier the message was clear: we were revolting.

After days and days of desert quiet arriving in the small town of Dongola was unsettling: out of silence into crowds in white robes and turbans, visions of noisy ghosts. Small donkeys were the main means of transport, bearing heavy loads and fat men. There were some taxis and they carried brightly painted shovels on their roofs for digging themselves out of deep sand. At a tea stall a dark young woman was swathed in indigo blue, ceremonial scars framing her beautiful white eyes. She looked at me and through me, her haughty dignity and poise challenging me, forcing me to lower my eyes and break her gaze that bored deep into my mind. She presided proudly over her small tea stall, her henna tattooed hands gracefully working from her billowing robes. She worked methodically and carefully: rinse the small glasses, add a large spoonful of sugar to each, fan the coals deftly, glowing red bright beneath her hands, add a scoop of tea leaves to a small plastic sieve then half fill each glass from the kettle through the sieve, the chestnut liquid misting the tops of the glasses as tiny jewels of condensation ran back down into the dark sweet tea. The second half of the glass was filled with hot water, a money-saving dilution encountered regularly. The whole simple process was laced with splendour and grace. She had no change and so my change was received in the form of another cup of tea. I paid for the tea, the price negotiated between us by drawing Arabic numerals with our fingers in the sugar bowl. The deal sealed, I dug my spoon into the sugar.

Sometimes I fear that I claim things to be tough when perhaps it was just me being feeble. So I was able to derive some grim

satisfaction when the frame of Rita snapped after a bruising stretch of ferocious rocky riding. I wiggled the jagged steel tubing masochistically like a wobbly tooth, waved goodbye to the others and then started walking. I walked hard, thinking through the options available to me. I was potentially in big difficulties. Fortunately though I reached the village of Delgo and with a bit of miming and acting tried to find a welder. But the welder was away in Khartoum. I kept walking and in the next village found Mohammed, a bed maker, cookie maker and welder. He was thrilled at the chance to help me out. I did not dare to watch as he casually set to work with his welding torch (shielding his eyes against the flare only with his hand), so I shared tea on the ground with Mohammed's children. Unfortunately bike metal is far thinner than bed metal and Mohammed began by blasting a large hole in the frame. He gasped the Arabic version of "woops!" He managed to patch up the hole and fixed on a splint for good measure too. Afterwards he loaded me with cookies, refused payment for the welding and waved me off with a smile. I could not believe how easy it had all been! I rode away at top speed, bursting with relief. By following their tyre tracks I caught the others up at their evening camp by the river. The welding was crude, but it held for a couple of days before it broke again, and I was able to continue on to Khartoum by pausing every few days for the weld to be re-welded. The break looked ever more like a big blob of silver bubble gum, but it held.

Eventually we reached the oft-dreamed of tarmac road that would sweep us in three easy days into Khartoum where I would leave the others. A car stopped ahead of us and out climbed four very fat men. One of them was wearing aftershave. It smelt giddily strong and clean after three weeks without taking a shower surrounded by four other nearly as grotty friends. The men gave us four litres of iced water and two litres of 7-Up. My clothes were held together with duct tape and safety pins and my back was black with flies. I appreciated their generosity.

Eager to reach Khartoum and rest, Toby, Owy and I rode on into the night. We rode bare-chested in the warm night beneath an amazing display of shooting stars with a large moon high above us. We reached Khartoum as the yolk-like sun began sliding up into the frying pan sky. We had made it! We strode into Khartoum's five star hotel as Toby had heard a rumour that they

would serve you beer if you asked confidently enough. He even put on his clean shirt to ask. Unfortunately there was no beer, but they did give us a free fruit juice when we explained our ride. We sat, stinking, at the gleaming bar and toasted each other. The desert crossing I had been so anxious about was behind me now.

My clothes were festering and torn to shreds. My bike had snapped. I was sick of mouldy bread and jam. I longed to hear music once more. "It is necessary to be cut off from civilization and all that it means to enable you to realise fully the power music has to recall the past, or the depths of meaning in it to soothe the present and give hope for the future" wrote Cherry Garrard. But even as my kind host from the International School in Khartoum tactfully pointed me towards the shower I could feel the relief of success. As the dust and sweat pooled around my feet in the shower I thought of the warmth and grace of a charming people, the privilege of silent sunrises over the Nile and the satisfaction of lying on my back in the hot sand, sun baked and filthy, a cracked smile on my grubby face in the gritty desert wind.

Heaven in Sudan came in the form of a swimming pool, to dive in and glide through the pale blue quiet with the cool swilling in my ears and eyes. I felt my body and my mind unwinding and relaxing with relief at having made it through to Khartoum so comfortably. I wrestled with bureaucracy, scrummaging through farcically chaotic offices to extend my Sudanese visa and paying lots of money and sitting for many hours in the Ethiopian embassy applying for a visa (the time passing less painfully thanks to the latest Harry Potter book I had borrowed). For the Ethiopians, my British passport was insufficient proof that I was actually British. I had to take my British passport to the British embassy where they glanced at it, typed on a piece of paper, "Alastair Humphreys is British", or something equally insightful, and charged me 40 quid.

I left a note there for a man who, I had been told, could find you a beer in Khartoum. Alcohol had been banned by President Numeiry in 1983 and all alcohol stocks ceremoniously dumped in the Nile. Correspondingly invitations were jealously guarded for the evenings at the embassy bar, known as the Pickwick Club, but I managed to wangle one. Boddingtons beer and darts in a mock pub felt very odd in the heat, but in a country where beer was hard to find I made sure to make the most of it. At closing time I was hauled along to another party at the home of a British oil

executive. His three-storey mansion was flowing with booze and hazy with pot smoke and patrolled by five live-in prostitutes dressed in Gucci. But the real excitement was the news that somebody had just returned from Kenya with a box of fresh mushrooms, unavailable in Sudan. I had not realized that I had been missing mushrooms until I smelt them cooking. But then I eagerly joined the salivating throng jostling around the sizzling frying pan. The oil man chatted with me about my journey and invited me to stay in his mansion -on-tap whores and all- for as long as I wanted, but I politely declined. Decadent extravagance, fun though it was, felt uncomfortable after the simple circumstances of all the kind Sudanese people I had met.

The contrasts of the people that I met on my ride was fascinating. One of the many special experiences of travelling by bike is that you are in complete contact with the world you ride through. I wanted to try to experience the world as the people I met experienced it. In poor regions I ate simple food and drank water from wells. And in rich places I ate lobster and enjoyed it equally. You do not present a threatening image on a bicycle; people are less likely to be intimidated by you than they are to be intrigued, amused, pitying and welcoming. So I stayed with scores of families round the world, strangers who invited me into their home and became friends. The variety was staggering. Mud huts and mansions united by similar human feelings. I always worried about being a nuisance or a bore or a leech. (It was very reassuring whenever a family I stayed with ‘passed me on’ to another friend elsewhere in the world). But, and I cringe a little even now in case I am wrong, people seemed to enjoy a random visitor passing through their lives. We tend to think of the world as being a selfish and unfriendly place and forget that in reality it is only a collection of ordinary individuals just like us. The inherent goodness of almost everybody I met was the overwhelmingly dominant impression I took away from my ride round our world. That, and the random events that led to me meeting so many strangers and becoming their friend was one of the biggest enjoyments of my journey.

I met a very strong woman in Khartoum, and listened with horrified awe and respect to her story. Like so many, Rebecca had suffered in the atrocious war in the south of Sudan. After her village was destroyed by government forces she had walked for 75 days with her young children in the hope of finding a better life in

Khartoum. Upon reaching the capital she built a new home with her own hands, but the government soon knocked it down. Her husband abandoned her and was later thrown into prison so Rebecca had been sleeping on the street with her children. But she had recently found a new small plot of land and was beginning once again to rebuild her home and her life. Like so many in Africa she was a woman of substance and her good-humoured heroism and courage made me feel very spoiled and self-pitying.

In a similar vein I was eager to meet the people working in Sudan with '*Hope and Homes for Children*', the charity I was supporting. I went to visit some of their small family homes in Khartoum. Giggling and shielding their faces behind freshly scrubbed hands six small boys stood in a group to sing a song for me. The boys were part of a family now, hence the embarrassment of performance, the clean faces, enforced best behaviour and uncomfortable Sunday clothes. But these irritations were trivial because they had a family now.

'*Hope and Homes for Children*' work to find orphaned or abandoned children an ordinary family home and to give them as normal a life as possible, helping them to catch up with their school work and to learn trades and skills, relevant and realistic, that will allow them to become independent adults. A year ago these children were on the streets, victims and survivors of the decades of mayhem in the south. They had been rounded up by the government and dumped in one of the camps for Internally Displaced People, their parents just another of the two million people who had disappeared or been killed in the conflict. Alone in the world the children had received scant education, inadequate food and shelter and little love or personal attention for most of their short lives. Now '*Hope and Homes for Children*' has worked to provide them with as normal an upbringing as possible, taking them from the shocking government camps and placing them in small foster families. It is nothing fancy or extravagant, it is just a childhood. Now, with a home, school, stability and a family, these children have the chance to re-start their lives. I knew that it was supposed to be me who was helping them, but as I shook their small hands and looked into their shy eyes it was with a feeling of "you are amazing. I will strive towards your strength, guts, hope, courage and laughter." A beginning with no schooling, home or

parents is out of my comprehension and I drew so much strength and resolve from them.

My three weeks in Khartoum were busy whilst I waited for my visa. I taught PE for a week at the American School, during which time I valiantly, yet vainly, tried to bring cricket into the lives of the Sudanese and ex-pat American children. I had lunch with an Englishman called Edmund who had recently bought a camel. I went to a wedding between a French man and a Dinka woman. Amidst much drumming, ululating and brandishing of feathered canes and, inexplicably, a string-less badminton racket, long speeches were made, the essence of which appeared to be that the groom should not dare even consider getting divorced, that the Sudanese should be given French visas more easily, and attempts to convince the family of the Dinka woman that marrying a Frenchman was not a *complete* disgrace. I met a Sudanese soap opera star and got his autograph. I arranged for Specialized to replace my broken bike and I persuaded my friend Rob to come and join me for ten days riding in Ethiopia.

Stage 13: “Miles not Smiles”

“That which does not kill us, makes us stronger.”

- slogan for the Egyptian Beer, *Stella*

I smiled and waved, promised that I would be careful, rang my little bell and then pedaled out of the lives of my new friends' and towards someone else's. Rounding that first corner, I would be a stranger once more. Nobody would know my name and I would know no-one. I went through my now traditional routine of crying, feeling sorry for myself, wanting to go home and then cheering up and enjoying being free once more and wondering what adventures the next stage would hold.

It did not take long to leave Khartoum, but by the time I was on the open road I was already drenched in warm, salty sweat. My long-sleeved blue shirt and baggy grey cotton trousers darkened. After crossing the desert it was a joy to be back on tarmac, to glide out of town and be able to look around rather than having to concentrate on the ground in front of me. But joy is relative and this joy was relatively small. I was on a mission now. I had to hurry to be in Gondar in the mountains of northern Ethiopia in time to meet my friend Rob. So I had to put in some serious distance: I aimed for 200km a day for the first few days. It was too hot to be hammering down a monotonous black stripe of tarmac over wilting yellow plains. My thermometer had a fit, raced off the top of the scale (50C) and refused to come back down. Ahead of me on the road, enticing me cruelly, was a shining silver pool. Delicious cool waters gleaming. The torture of mirages. A grimy lorry rose silently from the shallows, growing larger as it approached until it careered past with a careless battering of furnace hot wind and a lungful of oily smoke and desert grit. In the heavy heat the black fumes sagged onto the soft tarmac.

At sunset I crossed the Blue Nile (not very blue actually). I would not see her again until Ethiopia. Two flashing white skeins of birds skimmed in ‘V’ formations above the water, silver green in the calm evening light. Fretting and calling they urged each other on in a headlong hurry to somewhere. I left the river and rode on through the cooling night until finally my bike computer ticked over to 200km for the day. I pulled off the road and lay

down heavily beside my bike on the grey sand, too tired to even unpack my sleeping bag. I woke chilled before dawn. “Too hot, too cold; seems I’m never bloody happy”, I pondered as I sleepily got back on the bike. The temperature rose with the sun and soon my face set into its daily grimace of pain, wind, heat and intrinsic ugliness. Even my teeth were hot and my eyeballs felt as though they were cooking. The water in my bottles was horribly hot.

Around each small settlement were colourful plastic bag fields, waving gaily in the wind. Africa is facing a plague of flapping plastic. Every purchase you make comes in a plastic bag, multicoloured and flimsy. Discarded carelessly they blow on the breeze until they snag on scruffy thorns and bushes where they will struggle and squirm for eternity. I stopped to buy bread from a small, gloomy shop. An old calendar was stuck skewed on the rough, unpainted wall with toenail-yellow sticky tape, alongside a lurid green and gold excerpt from the Koran. My eyes took time to focus in the cool gloom. Large sacks of sugar, salt and *chai* were flopped in one dusty corner beside a scoop and a battered set of weighing scales. The store keeper greeted me warmly, expressed the usual surprise at my appearance and waddled outside into the white light to poke and fiddle with my bike. Like every male in Africa he displayed his virility and mechanical prowess by thumbing the pressure of my tyres. He nodded approvingly at their firmness. Eventually he remembered to sell me some bread. Declining the proffered plastic bags I limbo danced with my awkward load from shop to bike, spilling a steady trail behind me. A consolation of buying old, stale bread is that dropping it on the ground does not make it much less palatable.

Small whirlwinds were whipping through the village. Plastic bags and grey sand whistled along and the men’s white robes leapt up in Mexican waves. Turbans flapped into disarray. The land was completely flat, and the arrow straight road seemed intent on dropping off the end of the world. Apart from the occasional lorry, the world was silent. I rode steadily onwards.

At regular police checkpoints my passport was carefully scrutinised. I had gone to great effort to acquire my travel permit and a photography permit (which warned, openly, that photographing “examples of poverty or anything that reflects badly on the government is absolutely forbidden.”) Yet nobody ever checked them. The novelty of a foreign passport intrigued them instead. The policemen clearly had no idea what they were

looking at and were unable to read the Latin alphabet let alone understand English. Often they held the passport upside down or back to front, effecting airs of power before eventually asking me what country I was from. Then they laboriously filled in vast, dog-eared ledgers with arbitrary pieces of information that would never be looked at again, asking me to add my profession and signature. My CV through Sudan was colourful: Al Humphreys; pigeon fancier, fireman, TV weather man and pedalo vendor.

There were few distractions except checkpoints and wondering where the next well would be. The road was hard, hot and boring, three things sure to induce self-pity and question my motivation. When I couldn't bear the heat any more I would cling to the smallest scrap of shade and rest. I lay under a leafless bush amongst dried goat droppings and a snake skeleton. The hard, cracked earth dug into my back. The air was completely still and fiercely hot. Flies danced over my face. I couldn't summon the energy to waft them away. Never had I known heat like this. The ground was even too hot to sit on for long. I used my sun hat as a pillow and snatched some sleep before the irritating flies persuaded me to ride on. I had to reach Gondar by Saturday.

The philosophy of those days was miles not smiles. I was ahead of schedule but it took a toll on me and I very nearly cheated. The road was so hot and so boring. Nothing to help pass the time. Just me and my head. An untrustworthy combination. Every movement a trial. I thought I couldn't ride anymore. I knew I couldn't think anymore. Dry, shimmering plains. Scrawny goats. Clattering trucks. Liquid horizon: pale earth meets white sky. Overhead strong blue round massive sun. Sky too big and empty for just one person. Can't ignore that sun. Remorseless. Sky so quiet. Empty. Expressionless. Grass huts. People's homes. Life and normality for them. Too hard for me. Truckers' *chai* stops. On and on and on. Sun too big, too bright, too hot. Headwind brutal. Only 7mph. Damn. Must ride faster. Head pounding protest. Must drink more. Water hot as bath water. Horrible. Can't keep eyes open any more. Need to sleep. Must keep going. Always a little further. Too hot, too hard, too pointless...

Drivers kept stopping their lorries and offering me lifts because riding this fiery road was ridiculous. Maybe I should just have admitted defeat. I had argued this with myself so many times before and had no more urge to keep proving myself to myself.

My head was thumping with dehydration. Why not take a lift? I must be mad. No-one would know. (Except me, except me...) Or, sod it, why didn't I just tell everyone I'd taken a lift. I didn't care what people thought anymore. Not that anyone would care. Would skipping a few hundred kilometres make any difference to anything? I hated everyone that drove past unappreciative of their vehicles. I hated everyone sitting comfortably in England at that moment unappreciative of their comfort. And I sneered at myself for being too stubborn to end this madness. I began this whole ridiculous affair because I wanted a challenge that I would fail unless I worked extremely hard at it. But now I *knew* that I could cross mountains or deserts. I *knew* that I could survive alone in strange countries and situations. I knew that I could handle the grinding routine of the road, the endless foraging for food and water, the daily search for shelter, the constant concerns of safety and dangerous roads, the permits and banks and visas, and the total dependence on the mercy of strangers. I knew that I *could* do it. I just didn't know whether I *wanted* to keep doing it. If I knew that I could do it was there any point in actually doing it? So I cried my way through the emptiness. At least it kept my eyeballs cool.

These eternal mental battles and emotional see-sawing helped pass the time as I watched the kilometres creep beneath my wheels and the sun move tortuously slowly towards the horizon and relief. The sun would set and the day would end. Then I would lie back on the sand and unwind. I got into the habit of choosing my favourite moment of each day and reflecting on the lessons I had learned. I also thought of the thing that I was most looking forward to about the next day. It helped to fall asleep with positive thoughts. It was an amazing privilege to be alone in the desert in Sudan at night. The sunsets burned with such clarity, welcoming me to the cool relief of the dark night and the beautiful stars. I had tested myself that day and I had passed the test. I had not cheated. I started thinking that maybe it wasn't so bad after all... And then my alarm clock would wake me. I would pack and eat in the dark and be back on the road again before the first greying of the dawn. Miles not smiles.

Unlike me, Sudanese hospitality showed no sign of relenting. A group of lorry drivers sitting at a rest stop motioned for me to stop

and invited me to share their evening meal. We sat on the ground in the lee of an overloaded lorry. They were bound for Khartoum piled high with scrap metal. By day there may also be as many as forty passengers clinging on top of the piles, hitching a ride between villages. The tyres of the lorry we were next to were bald and gouged, there was only one door and no windscreen. But this was a fine Sudanese lorry because the horn was working, which Ahmed proudly confirmed with a deafening rendition of 'Greensleeves' as he departed. No self-respecting Sudanese driver would ever sally forth on a journey without a novelty horn and an excessive number of passengers. Doors and tyres are as unimportant to them as little red breakdown triangles and tins of travel sweets are to us.

The men had weathered, creased faces and magnificent moustaches. Their huge bellies were a testimony to a vigorous exercise routine of eating lots, laughing loudly, driving very fast, and hearty handshakes. Their *galibayahs* were filthy, but before eating they washed their hands meticulously, taking turns to pour water from a jug over each other's hands. We sat on the ground, sharing *fuul* from a communal bowl. Shards of raw red onion added much-needed flavour to the grey mush of beans flaccid below a thick coat of yellow oil. We ripped hunks of bread to scoop up the soft beans, tipping our heads back to help sticky handfuls into our mouths. I joined in happily with the right handed eating, left handed backslapping, and full-mouthed laughter. Discussion centred round why farmers in England do not use camels. I struggled for answers. And which tribe was I from? I plumped for 'Yorkshire'. After dinner they climbed back into their cabs, hooted their farewells, shouted "*Maa-salaama!*" and drove on towards Khartoum. And I cycled on down my moonlit road towards Ethiopia.

Cycling at night in the Sudan is like visiting a casino, fun but foolhardy. The potholes were a trivial risk compared to all the vehicles that drive without headlights. Only wimps drive with headlights in the Sudan. Headlights are only used to dazzle on-comers, to express anger that the on-comer had not noticed their pitch black, high speed approach and to scare the life out of Englishmen on bicycles. As fast as possible I covered the necessary miles and left the road for the safety of my sleeping bag.

Fuul

Ingredients:

Fava beans
Olive oil
Lemon juice
Salt & pepper

Method:

Mash the beans as you heat them. When hot and thoroughly mashed add lemon juice, olive oil and seasoning to taste. Sprinkle with red onion.

Eat with hot unleavened bread.

The road continued on towards Eritrea but I turned right onto a tiny dirt track towards Ethiopia. The riding was good, a weaving path of warm sand meandering through occasional villages of simple huts, ladies pounding maize in huge mortars, sturdy baobab trees and immaculately swept earth in mosaics of rainbow sweeps. Each village water pump was a colourful and noisy blossom of skirts and plastic containers and shrieks of hilarity and gossip. Water was scarce and long queues wound from the central pump; colourful snakes of plastic buckets and dark jovial women wrapped in swathes of bright fabric. From skinny little girls to sensuously elegant, curvy young women to seriously big mommas, bulks of bum and boob and boisterous noise. Collecting water seemed to be an enjoyed part of the women's daily routine, or at least an accepted burden they made the best of. They had time to themselves, away from their men who were usually busy sitting beneath a shady tree doing bugger all. The women did not hurry and the squeals and roars of belly laughter and gossip suggested that their lives would be infinitely duller with the arrival of the kitchen tap. "How many taps do we have at home?" I asked myself in amazement. Amazement because I had never really appreciated what a ludicrous number we had, but also amazement that my time-passing activities stooped as low as tap counting (other favourite cerebral exercises included pizza planning, devising fantasy football teams and, if time was short, reminiscing on girls successfully wooed). What was stranger, that it no longer seemed abnormal to me for entire villages to have to queue at a

single water pump in the 21st Century, or that where I came from everybody had near-infinite supplies of water quite literally on tap?

In front of me in the queue a girl was filling an oil drum on a wobbly wooden donkey cart. It was about three days ride from here to the border so I decided to carry 15 litres of water and gamble that I would find additional small settlements on the way to supplement it. Once at the front of the queue I pumped water for a lady while she held her bucket beneath the spout and then she returned the favour for me. I leaned on the long, clanking lever and the water gulped out with each pump. It was hard work. My arm muscles protested, my back ached and the sun was unsympathetic. Throughout Africa my pumping provoked hilarity. I questioned my technique. I questioned my stamina. I didn't know what I was doing wrong. People at home laugh at my dancing. That is understandable. But here I did not understand it-my rhythm was flawless! The comedy though was just the dirty white guy with a bicycle who had ridden unexpectedly into their world. The white people the villagers normally saw raced past in air-conditioned aid agency Landcruisers drinking bottled water or cold Pepsi. White people do not queue at village pumps.

I treated myself in a market to *felafel* sandwiches and spicy sauce. As I waited for the small balls spitting and sizzling in the hot oil I looked around the market. It was very dirty and very poor, even by Sudanese standards. The haphazard paths between the dusty kiosks were almost too narrow for my bike to pass through. The market was a labyrinth of rickety stalls made from sticks, cardboard and plastic sheets. I watched as people bought a single cigarette or half a loaf of bread or a single banana. Arguments erupted over the smallest of coins. It was microeconomics on a minuscule scale. If you sell one of your five bananas you can then buy a piece of bread for tonight. There can be no planning for tomorrow when every cent you own must be spent to eat today.

I was much taller than everyone pushing past me. People stared at me as always. I could not blame them: I was a filthy and unusual sight. External differences can seem so vast that it becomes easy to believe that people are different. But spend time drinking tea or pumping water or cycling along together and you quickly remember that there are no insurmountable differences at

all. Hopes, fears and a sense of humour are among the great constants of us all.

As I rode out of town some kids threw stones at me. Usually when that happened I would stop and rationally reprimand them or point it out to a nearby adult who would then usually give them a glorious and definitive smack round the head. But in this barbarous heat I stopped in my tracks and, on the verge of tears, started screaming abuse at the little boys. This merely led to an even larger volley of stones and much laughter. Having stones hurled at you purely because you are different is an unsettling experience. But even so my reaction startled me. What was happening to me? I had had stones thrown at me before. I had had tough stretches of road before. Why was I becoming so edgy and so vulnerable? I felt that I was losing control again. I was scaring myself. I tried to tell myself that there are no bad experiences, only lessons. And I imagined what my mates would say if they saw me being reduced to tears by a handful of scrawny little eight year olds. Ridiculed, amused, and with things back in perspective, I pedaled on.

I was alone in classic African savannah. No more road, just tracks of deep hot sand rolling their way around contours, rocks and bushes. Pitch black birds with crimson breasts and flowing tails shrilled. Small villages of round mud huts with thatched roofs erupted in excitement as I rode through, scattering chickens and pulling crowds of running, whooping, lovely children. This was Africa at last! Old men sat in the sun, wrinkled and wise as elephants, smoking tight cigarettes, playing slow games with white pebbles in the warm dust and putting the world to rights. They watched me pass and raised dignified arms in greeting and moral support. Everyone waved at me and I always returned the gesture. But in the heat this extra effort felt very, very hard. I struggled to do more than limply lift an arm off the handlebar. My fingers remained hooked like a claw and my shoulders stayed hunched. Tough guys may tattoo ‘LOVE’ and ‘HATE’ across their knuckles, but I was too hot and tired for such passionate emotions and settled for optimistically writing ‘COLD BEER’ on my cycling mitts. I hoped that they would have beer in Ethiopia.

I saw a lean-to shelter of coarse grass and two tiny homemade benches serving as a coffee house. I gratefully flopped from my bike into the meagre shade. The few customers shuffled along the bench to make room for me (or perhaps to move away from the

sweaty newcomer?) I smiled a greeting. The men jabbered their greetings and shook my hand in welcome. A lady sat on the ground beside a small mound of glowing charcoal. Her hair was covered in a bright red cloth and her broken-toothed smile added years to her age. Around her lay an assortment of small plastic bags. I sniffed and poked them, spices, ground coffee, ginger, sugar. She fanned the coals with a square of cardboard and filled a jug from a big black kettle of stewing coffee. I was given a battered little jug holding enough coffee for about ten tiny cupfuls. My cup was the size of a shot glass, filled to the brim with sugar and topped up with just a few drops of coffee. I looked at the sweet sludge in my cup with surprise. The customers laughed at me. They showed me that you sipped the syrupy coffee from the top of the cup then topped up the cup from your jug. This meant that every cupful had more coffee and less sugar until the final hit was just pure, bitter coffee. It was black and thick and the cardamon struck my throat. The strong aftertaste glowed around my lips and the caffeine fooled me into thinking how great it would be to just jump back on the good ol' bike and get riding again. So I did. I left this small experience buzzing from both the caffeine and from the reminder that this was why I was on the road, for the innocuous, normal, everyday things like drinking coffee. Because, on the road, nothing is 'normal' or 'everyday'. I was different there, so afloat that I did not even know how to drink coffee properly. When things were not going well this lack of foundation was frightening. But when things were good this was the whole essence of why I chose to travel.

The hills of Ethiopia emerged ahead. At yet another roadblock I asked the policeman whether the dire road conditions improved further ahead. He replied, "No, but don't worry: it will be good in two years time." Not much use to me as my teeth rattled inside my skull. The next checkpoint was manned by boy soldiers, dressed in flip-flops and tattered T-shirts, with combs stuck in their hair and grenade launchers hanging from their slender shoulders. Watching them strut around was unsettling as they posed with their lethal hardware, their innocence masked behind a wall of aggression. I checked with one of the kids that I was still on the right path. His geography of far-off places was unusual. He said, "This is road to Ethiopia, then is USA." Further away than just down the road is utterly irrelevant to most people on the planet. I wondered which exotic far-off land had made his grenade launcher.

After a couple more days I arrived in Gallabat, the border village. It was a sleepy gathering of huts, unlikely ever to become headline news. Listless dogs wandered with taut ribs and swollen swaying teats. Flies fretted on their eyes and open sores. After the bureaucratic battle I had had to fight to get into the Sudan I was daunted by the prospect of having to do it all again to leave. The big difference though was that I was now so fond of the country, I trusted the people and saw their obsession with irrelevant pieces of paper, arbitrary stamps and meaningless signatures more as an endearing foible than a sinister, secret-police-type pain in the backside. As with everything in Sudan, I was to be pleasantly surprised. Whilst the border formalities took place I sat on the officer's desk in his thatched mud hut with garish floral blankets on the walls. He added a few details at random to yet another vast ledger, rummaged around in his pal's desk drawer to find a stamp for my passport and then I was on my way. I was in and out in five minutes. It was fast, relaxed, easy and free. The customs officer was having a nap so I didn't bother with that stage. It seemed a shame to disturb him.

I was reluctant to leave Sudan and made excuses to potter around the village for a while. The immigration officer took me to breakfast. He didn't seem overly concerned about leaving his post unmanned. The chances that there would be an impatient, tutting queue awaiting his return were pretty slim. We ate *felafel* ("my last ever?" I wondered nostalgically) whilst a comforting fug of incense burned on the coals to keep the flies away. Finally I finished my last mouthful and mustered up the resolve to leave.

I thought back to arriving in Sudan uneasy and scared with my head full of preconceptions. I had been convinced that I would be robbed and thought I'd possibly get shot too. But I had now crossed Africa's largest nation and learned so much. Sudan had huge problems, amongst them an awful government, a horrific civil war, hunger, drought and terrible poverty. Yet, despite being poor, the Sudanese people that I met were happy. They had dignity and self-respect and were happy with what little they had. And they had an abundance of friends, family and faith. They were the kindest, most cheerful, hospitable and welcoming people that I had ever met. I pedaled through the village towards Ethiopia with a smile on my face.

Stage 14: “A beautiful place to be born?”

*“The world is a beautiful place
to be born into,
if you don’t mind some people
dying
all the time,
or maybe only starving,
some of the time,
which isn’t half so bad,
if it isn’t you.”*
- Lawrence Ferlinghetti

“Everybody must get stoned”
- Bob Dylan

How can two sides of one village be so different? One hundred metres from Sudan and I had left behind Islam and North Africa and was into the continent’s heart. The buildings, people and attitudes all felt different. The red dirt road was busy with pedestrians. Barefoot people and donkeys easily outnumbered the few fume-spewing, rattling vehicles. Women walked shaded beneath golf umbrellas, a strange sight in the African sun. Men bore a stout staff across their shoulders, their hands hooked over it like wings. In Sudan the ladies flowed in colourful loose robes and men with bushy moustaches glided around in white *galibayahs*. In Ethiopia the men wore tight little shorts and tattered T-shirts, repaired many times, with a blanket draped over their willowy shoulders. Many wore Leonardo di Caprio T-shirts, presumably a well-meaning bulk foreign aid donation. Some women’s dresses were made from old UN and USAID¹ grain sacks, others wore bright robes swathed tightly round the body, breasts and neck with their slender arms uncovered. Many were strikingly beautiful. Kids were everywhere, running all around me and laughing and shouting “You! You! You!” as I passed. Most of the children wore rags. A few were naked save for crucifixes or necklaces made

¹ US Agency for International Development

from things they had found on the road; keys, nuts and bolts. Some were bald, many had Mohican hairdos. The youngest ones ran screaming from my camera. The older ones demanded to be snapped. Everyone was crazy. I loved it.

I stopped, tired, in the next village, about twenty miles down the track. I was beckoned over to a small mud house for coffee. Gratefully I accepted and joined a few men on the end of a low bench outside the door. A crowd huddled around me, staring. Everything felt so different from Sudan. I didn't even know the word for 'hello' in Amharic yet. I smiled and attempted to make a connection. They stared in silence making no attempt to communicate. The women had crude blue crosses tattooed on their foreheads and symbols on their knuckles and hands. Then one lady handed me a small baby to hold and everybody smiled. She joked that I should take him with me, take him back home. I looked into his enormous shining brown eyes and imagined how different his life would be in Britain. There would certainly be less time to sit and enjoy coffee with friends.

A girl was sitting in the doorway on a spread of grass, grinding freshly roasted coffee beans in a mortar. The coffee was served black in small china cups, person by person, in decreasing order of age. When I returned the baby, gave my thanks for the delicious coffee and left the village a crowd of kids ran around me, laughing and shouting incessantly "YOU! YOU! YOU!" Their novelty was fading. It was baking hot. The road was atrocious. I ignored them. They kept up the mayhem for several miles before I eventually bored them into surrender by resolutely ignoring them and not giving them any sweets.

At sunset I hid away from the road in the rocky, bush-strewn mountains. I brewed a cup of tea while I watched monkeys foraging. In each new country it took a while for me to pick up the vibes and to get a feel for how safe I was. I always began very cautiously and built up to my preferred levels of pragmatic recklessness. Minimise risk, cover your back, plan well, then roll the dice. Think carefully and prepare mentally for every potential crisis and then relax and leap in with both feet. I had found a well hidden but rocky campsite behind a small cluster of thorny trees. I did not use my torch. I was tired and could only summon the energy to cook popcorn for dinner and was even concerned that the noise of the popcorn may give away my position. Occasional heavy lorries laboured past up the steep, bumpy track. Later a

family walked past babbling loudly to one another. I sat quietly in the dark and listened to the strange sounds of their language trying to imagine what they may be talking about. I kept still until they passed and then rolled out my sleeping bag on the least rocky patch I could find. “I’m in Ethiopia!” I smiled as I fell through my nerves and excitement into sleep.

Northern Ethiopia took me along a boulder strewn, dusty track climbing steadily up into the craggy mountains. The mountains were the largest I had yet encountered. Even in bottom gear I could not pedal up some of the gradients and my arms ached as I pushed my way up the hills, my feet struggling for grip in the dust. With crunching gears, spinning wheels and straining engines, battered buses heaved and skidded past me, drowning me in dust. From speakers on the roof pumped the jaunty, yearning music of Ethiopia, the trumpets, percussion and racing cascades of rising and falling passionate female vocals. The road was always busy with pedestrians. Ladies carried heavy ceramic water urns roped to their backs or baskets of cow dung on their heads, fuel for cooking. People would bow a greeting as I called out my new-learned hello, “*tadiyas!*” Many men rode heavy black iron bicycles and one almost crashed spectacularly as he tried to bow to me whilst racing down a gravel track.

I passed through small villages of wood, mud and wattle homes thatched with grass. There was little empty space in Ethiopia. Amongst the clusters of homes would be a tiny shop but their shelves were virtually empty. Stale cardboard-flavoured biscuits, batteries, a rusting tin or two of fish paste, combs, blocks of hard soap and candles sat beneath layers of dust. My diet was determined by availability rather than choice. I even ate the packet of sweets that I had hoarded all the way from France.

And crowds of kids gathered everywhere I went staring at me with unabashed astonishment. After several days of being the focus of the freak show I began losing my patience with the children and they rapidly became a real nuisance. Some children wondered whether I was Chinese as Chinese road engineers had once worked here. I have never before been mistaken for a Chinaman. And, of all the words in the English language, how had they come to know only “you” and “money”? Children, smaller and skinnier than they should have been, tried to pull things off my bike as they ran around me and shouted and jeered and aggressively demanded money. They pushed me up hills, which

was great, but they were always trying to grab things as they ran. I could not allow my bike out of my sight for a moment, and had to look over my shoulder constantly as I rode.

“YOU-YOU-YOU!” they taunted, like a Chinese drip torture.

“Shut up, or fuck off” I replied, eloquently.

“YOU-YOU-YOU-YOU!” they howled louder.

Adults looked on amused when children threw stones at me. In one village howls of encouraging laughter followed a boy as he ran beside me trying to jam a stick in my spokes. I sprayed him in the face with my water bottle, feeling proud of my self-restraint. Crowds of gawpers would gather whenever I stopped, staring and making jokes about the ‘*ferenji*’. I could not hide. Thomas Stevens, the grand-daddy of long distance bike riders, once had occasion to rant in Turkey “as I mount, the mob grows fairly wild and riotous with excitement... rushing up behind and giving the bicycle smart pushes forward in their eagerness to see it go faster, and more than one stone comes bounding along the street, wantonly flung by some young savage unable to contain himself.” 150 years later in Ethiopia, I knew how he felt. Rimbaud was perhaps the first traveler in Ethiopia to utter the question, “What am I doing here?” When Evelyn Waugh was in Ethiopia he wrote, “Most of the time I thought about how awful the next day would be.”

What struck me most was that there seemed to be no notion amongst the adults that all this was not gracious behaviour. It was all so different to Sudan. It is rare in the world to encounter begging in rural areas (except where tourism has previously ventured) but in Ethiopia people demanded cash everywhere I went. A man, sucking on a cigarette, pushed through a crowd in front of me and demanded bread. His look of arrogant, righteous expectation infuriated me and I stuck two fingers up at him. “No, no,” he assured me, he only required one loaf from me, not two.

People seemed to have lost the desire and urgency and dignity required to sort their problems out themselves. There was a reek of dependence. Ethiopia was the poorest country I had visited and it was hard to imagine that changing. Of course, I was in Ethiopia for only a few weeks so it is reckless and naïve of me to generalize, but I could not ignore that the atmosphere and attitude felt very different to elsewhere. The huge input of unquestioning, unconditional aid by Western countries (generalised in the minds of locals as being ‘white people’) seemed to have bred a

generation of Ethiopians who wanted to be rich, but didn't want (or feel the need?) to put in the effort to help themselves. Why work hard to manage the village water supply carefully when someone will give you bags of grain for nothing?

I felt in Ethiopia that I was a mere mobile cash point and too many people felt that they had a right to be bankrolled by me. I did not feel as though I was regarded as a fellow human being. I could not make contact. I decided, and continued this around the world, to give no money to individuals; to give only my time and smiles. As the days ground by I longed to be alone, to have some space, but people would even follow to watch me taking a shit.

People everywhere, shouting for money, palms outstretched, laughing at me, jeering. When HW Tilman cycled in Africa he commented that, "my popularity as a public spectacle was at its height... It sounds merely funny now, but at the time it nearly drove me frantic; possibly my sense of humour was becoming a little blunted now that I had acted the part of a travelling circus for so long." It sounds whining and feeble now, but at the time it felt so hard to be permanently at the centre of their entertainment. "Money! Money! Money!" How did tiny children know to run at me demanding like that? In the 1970's Ted Simon rode a motorbike round the world and wrote about his experiences in his book *Jupiter's Travels*. He wrote: "in Ethiopia for once I allowed myself the luxury of a generalization. Two words described them all for me. Fucked up!"

People were hungry. They had nothing. No money, no work, no hope. So what did they see? A tourist cruising through their lives, taking photos, looking all around in grim fascination, a white boy from the wealthy west passing through their world on a hugely laden, shiny bicycle carrying, no doubt, an incredible wedge of money. This is the worst aspect of being a tourist, that, as Jim Caird wrote, you become "an ugly, empty thing, a stupid thing, a piece of rubbish pausing here and there to gaze at this and that, and it will never occur to you that the people who inhabit the place in which you have just paused cannot stand you." It is to their credit that nobody in Ethiopia just kicked the shit out of me and took all my money. Tiny mud homes and large, struggling families; whips cracking the hot air above oxen hauling wooden ploughs across dry, shallow soil; barren land hoed by skinny children; empty shops and empty eyes. I had seen an 1841 lithograph of an Ethiopian ploughing scene. And nothing had

changed today. Nothing except that early visitor's praise of the Ethiopians' "scrupulous politeness towards strangers." The initial friendly people who had invited me for coffee seemed like an anomaly now.

Overwhelmed by the loneliness of crowds, I stopped riding and sat down on the dirt track. I hid my tears behind my sunglasses and big hat as the inevitable crowd gathered around, emerging from nowhere to buzz around me, prowling, frolicking, probing, sniggering, provoking. In the midst of these crowds I felt isolated, out of my depth, out of control and alone. My ride felt shallow and indulgent.

But salvation came along in the form of Peter, the local teacher. Seeing me amongst the crowd he picked me up and took me to his home, a small mud hut beside the two-room school. I could sleep on his floor, he said in good English. He shooed away the gawping gathering outside his door and I began to unwind. I was keen to talk properly with somebody in Ethiopia, to connect with somebody and to learn about their life. Peter's wife and child lived away in Gondar with her parents so he only saw them every few weeks. The government had not paid his pittance of a salary for three months yet he was still working. He taught a primary education to the 150 children in each class -one class in the morning, the other in the afternoon- with no textbooks or equipment. In each class the pupils ranged in age from 8 to 20. The students only came to school when their family could spare them from ploughing or tending livestock so attendance was rarely continuous. Some had to walk 20km to school and then back home again afterwards.

Peter talked about his country, the beautiful mountains and greedy politicians. He talked about the vicious famine that brought Ethiopia to the attention of all kids my age in England in 1984. We gave our pocket money and then turned shocked and embarrassed away from the TV as we tucked into our fish fingers and baked beans. Six months after the Ethiopian government had appealed for international assistance the unforgettable images of the famine burst on to our television screens and Western governments began to act. Michael Buerk from the BBC spoke of a "Biblical famine, now, in the 20th Century... the closest thing to hell on Earth... death is all around." That year Europe had a record harvest with huge stockpiles of surplus grain. The Ethiopian government's relief coordination was incompetent and

food aid was diverted away from famine victims to feed troops fighting a twenty year civil war. 8 million people were at risk and, while the UK public gave £5 million in three days, government response to the Marxist country was still low-key. By December, spurred by Bob Geldof's furious efforts, the Western public had donated more than £100m but the Ethiopian government continued to divert aid supplies to its troops. More than a million people died in that famine. Now I was being hosted by a man the same age as me who had lived through it. I sat beside him on his bed and listened to him tell me about the brother and sister he lost that year.

The hut was lit by stubs of candles and shadows flickered on the dark grass roof above us. The walls were papered with newspaper. The furnishing was a single bed, a wooden chair and school desk, a bowl on the mud floor holding plates, mugs and cutlery and a couple of books on a shelf. I loved the Amharic script in his books, beautiful and unintelligible to me with letters like chicken wishbones. Peter was teaching himself extra mathematics in the evenings to improve his teaching skills. Strips of raw meat hung drying from lines under the roof. Peter saw England as a land of incredible wealth. He had heard that in the West people even left food outside to feed wild birds. Was this true? He found it hard to accept that there were homeless people and beggars in England. However he absolutely refused to believe me when I told him that most of them were white. "Impossible!" he declared. He could not even imagine a poor white person.

We sat side-by-side and ate *injera* and a spoonful of boiled cabbage with our hands. It was the Easter fasting period in Ethiopia during which no meat is eaten. As large as a family pizza and flat as a pancake, *injera* is served with every meal in Ethiopia. It is a pancake-like bread made from teff, a fine millet flour. It serves as bread, tablecloth, plate, cutlery and napkin all in one. "It is cool, moist and rubbery, less like a crepe than an old damp bathmat," wrote Theroux. *Injera* has the complexion of a pasty acne-scared office worker or the face mask of an alien in a very cheap horror show, the texture of a whoopee cushion and the taste of sour silage. It's an acquired taste.

After dinner we blew out the candles: we both had an early start the next day. I hoped to reach Gondar and Peter had another busy, unpaid day at school. I slept on the floor, reassured that you will

find kind people anywhere in the world and reminded of the steep learning curve of travel that I was on.

The final 10 kilometres up the hill into Gondar was on a paved road, a nice surprise. It even had a white line painted on it. I managed to grab hold of the back of a lorry (most lorries in Ethiopia had thorn bushes dangling off the back to deter this) which dragged me up the last climb, filling my lungs with fumes and stretching my arm.

I sat on the pavement in the centre of Gondar and used my spoon to spread jam on my last piece of bread. I licked my spoon to clean it. A staring man told me in broken English that in his culture it was rude to lick a spoon like that. I replied that in my culture it was rude to throw rocks, shout at people, try to pull things from their bikes and hassle people for money. To my surprise he agreed and sympathised with me. So I wiped my spoon on my trousers instead.

Gondar, the former capital of Ethiopia, was a pretty town, sliding down a hillside of dark forest. A 17th Century church, whose ceiling was painted with Ethiopian-looking cherubs, sheltered in the trees above the town. There were quiet cafés in the central plaza, cake shops selling colourful but tasteless sponges and enough people for me to be slightly less conspicuous. There were even one or two other tourists. People seemed busier and had less time to stare at me. A crazy man threw rocks at everyone, not just me, and chased people down the street. There were beggars on every street, shockingly thin or brutally disfigured. A child approached me with no hands: he had picked up a landmine. Blind people prodded their way across the busy streets. A tug at my ankle came from a man with no legs or arms and just tiny hands. In Ethiopia my callow naivety was being brutally revealed. I was a tree with shallow roots, a boat with a paltry keel and the winds of Ethiopia were merciless.

I found myself the cheapest hotel in town in which to wait for Rob to arrive. The 30p room was so small that my bike barely fitted inside and the unpainted walls were stained with grime and squashed mosquitoes. There was no window, chair, table or lightshade. The grey blanket on the sagged, grey mattress looked revolting, bedbug heaven. The ceiling was lower than head height and the communal pit toilet was across the dirt yard in a bamboo structure the size of a large dog kennel. I had to almost crawl in, squat amongst the used toilet paper (torn strips of newspaper

actually) that covered the mud floor, use my torch to assist with aiming at the shit-framed hole and get out again, all within the span of one single breath as I was definitely not going to breathe inside there. Still, if you search out the cheapest hovel in town what do you expect?

While I waited for Rob I wanted to try *tej*. *Tej* is Ethiopian mead and I found an unmarked *tej* bar after a little acting on the street saw me pointed in the right direction. My impressions of a buzzing bee, a man glugging liquid, and a man rolling across the decks of joyful inebriation had done the trick. *Tej* looks like orange juice and is served in glass flasks, called *berele*, resembling those used in chemistry experiments. It tastes like sharp, fizzy honey. The bar was dark, with wood shavings on the floor. Apricot light shafted through gaps in the walls and dust motes twirled in the beams. Old men wrapped in white robes leaned on their sticks and smoked hard. The air droned with idle conversation. Nobody minded that I was in their bar. It felt wonderful to be ignored.

That night the crazy old bat running the hovel locked me into my room and for the first time on the trip I fell ill. I could not get out of the room. Fortunately there was a green plastic bowl in the room. It filled ever higher with my vomit. *Tej* tasted better going down than coming back up. After each retching heave I looked anxiously to see how much space remained in the bowl. The night dragged endlessly. I crossed my legs and fought the gripping stomach cramps: the bowl was too full to surrender to that need! I flew from the room as soon as the bolt was drawn back from my door at sunrise. I felt frail but much better as I emerged gasping for breath from the horrible toilet.

I sat in the plaza, read my book and wrote my diary whilst I waited for Rob. I knew that I needed to make no effort to rendezvous. Word would arrive through an unusual intelligence network of 10-year-old boys. Gondar had a fledgling tourist market, just enough to keep a cluster of young boys busy making life easier for the handful of tourists, organising, advising, guiding, running errands, shooing away other touts. At first they got on my nerves, pestering me all the time. But I found one boy, by the name of Million, who impressed me. His English was fantastic (his father was a teacher), he had procured a small suit from somewhere, he was bright and polite, and he knew everything. I promised him I'd buy him a cake if he brought Rob to me. The next morning Rob

landed at the small local airport from Addis and took a taxi into Gondar. Conspicuously new to Ethiopia (clean clothes, smiling at the “you, you, you”-ing kids), Million found him in a flash. Rob wondered who this precocious chap was, but his description of me convinced Rob that Million did know me. I would never have bought the little bugger his Coke and cake if I had known that I was described as “...very dirty and staying in the cheapest hotel that is not for tourists.”

It was so good to see Rob again. Friends since school, we were at Edinburgh University together and he was currently at Oxford taking the same teaching degree that I had done. We had shared many adventures. I blamed Rob for everything that I was doing now. During a very tedious Statistics lecture back in the first year at University I had been woken by Rob leaning forward and passing a note down to me, along the lines of, “Can you travel Karakorams in June?” That summer we cycled the Karakoram Highway from Pakistan over the mountains to China and I was hooked.

Now we laughed and joked and my illness was fast forgotten as we filled each other in on our respective adventures of the last six months. Rob had brought along the new bike to replace Rita that I had organized by email whilst in Khartoum and also a bag of goodies including a Cadbury’s Crème Egg for Easter, English newspapers and a letter from Sarah. I decided to save that for later. It was lovely to see Rob, but it also brought instability back into my life with news from home racing through my thoughts once again.

The streets of Gondar were packed: a bike race had been organized in celebration of National Tuberculosis Day. There was one race for motorbikes and one for bicycles. The cyclists rode old shopping bikes but had squeezed into the tightest clothes possible to try to look like professional riders. One man was wearing football boots, another had squeezed into what could only possibly have been his wife’s tights. The crowd was boisterous and only a narrow strip of road remained clear between the cheering masses. There were only three contestants in the motorbike race but they were not deterred and it was a noisy battle, raucously egged on to ever more reckless cornering by the howling supporters.

The morning after watching the race we cycled out of town early. I was happy to leave my hovel but the bedbugs were sad to

see me go. Venus gleamed in the East. The mountain air was fresh and the sun had not quite risen as we freewheeled down the hillside in the yellow dawn light. Watching Rob riding ahead of me the contrast amused me. His clothes were clean and intact, his bike swooshed silently (he was riding my new bike and I would continue on the battered and welded Rita until Rob went home) and he was whizzing along with enthusiasm. He highlighted to me my own physical and mental state. I tried to see Ethiopia through his eyes: yesterday he had been in London and now it was huts and men with spears and hunger and poverty and scorching heat and rutted roads. By coming so gradually to Africa from England - mile by mile, day by day, town by town- everything seemed quite normal to me. I needed to remind myself not to lose my wonder.

A steep, steep climb and our clothes darkened, soaked with sweat. At the top we lay in some shade and looked down to the shining disc of Lake Tana on the horizon, still a few days ride ahead. A pick-up truck full of soldiers drove past in a great balloon of dust. Casually wielding armfuls of big guns, and tough-looking in fake RayBan glasses, they had all shoved wads of pink toilet paper up their noses to keep out the dust.

Even riding in a pair the children did not relent. They mobbed us as we rode, laughing, shouting, chasing, pulling our bikes, chucking stones. Village after village this went on and I would rant to Rob about how annoying they were. Rob was still in the finding everything exotic and fascinating phase of travelling so I felt like a real grumpy old sod. It seemed to me though that I got pelted by more stones than Rob because he always rode ahead of me and so, after him, the children had time to prepare themselves for my arrival. I decided to put my theory to the test and raced ahead of Rob as we approached one village. For additional spice I shouted and snarled at every kid that came chased me. After the village I paused to admire my handiwork. Rob is the calmest, most decent person I know so I was delighted to hear him shouting and swearing back in the village. If even Rob was losing his temper then things must be maddening.

I challenged myself not to get mad at the kids. I failed. Exasperated, I told one lot, "Sudan children good, Ethiopia children bad." They found this hilarious and chased me down the road shouting "Ethiopia bad! Ethiopia bad!" But when later we camped behind a small hill and a small group of children discovered us they just stared silently from a few metres away.

They were shy, quiet and curious and I tried to reassure them with a smile. Everything we did or said seemed to them to be mesmerisingly extraordinary. They could not have been more surprised if we had flapped our arms and flown away. Rob offered them tea but they giggled and squirmed and declined. Our arrival was such an exciting surprise that they did not quite know what to make of us. I wished in Ethiopia, more than ever, that I was not hindered by language barriers. The children had no TV, games, books, homework or computers to pass the time so they were content instead to gawp at us for a couple of hours. It was no less mindless than television, I suppose. Eventually, as night fell, the children melted away homewards. How I wish I could have understood their excited chatter as they ran across the fields towards their home.

Rob cooked dinner, I pointed out the constellations I had learned over the last months and he told me of his classroom traumas back in Oxford. We were only about 30 km from Lake Tana, and hoped to reach the lake just after breakfast. I looked forward to days off with the passion of an office worker. We had been climbing solidly for a few days and were now high in a land of rolling grassland and clusters of trees. Our lips were cracked and sore and the dusty road had been tough going. Lake Tana was somewhere on our right, somewhere between us and where the sun had set. Ibises flew overhead, their long bills reaching towards Lake Tana for the night, urging themselves onward with their noisy chorus of “haa-haa-haa-haa.” We rolled out our sleeping bags on the hard, broken earth.

The hills of Ethiopia were tough; straight, hard pulls or long winding hairpins up out of the parched lands into dark, fragrant forests as green as home. Only three or four gears still worked on my bike and I often had to get off and push. The downhills were not much of a consolation as I nursed my battered bike with feeble brakes down the rough gravel. Rob had no such worries though on my nice new bike and he descended like a wildman past columns of sheer rock jutting hundreds of feet up into the sky. Nearby Mount Wehni, a formidable black thumb of rock, was once a cliff-top prison for princes who were heirs to the Emperor until their time came to rule. Keeping the princes imprisoned up there protected the Emperor from potential coups. Rob raced on, gear bouncing from his bike as he disappeared towards the horizon in rolling balloons of dust. He was so much faster than me that when

I eventually caught him up, after gathering up all his spilled possessions, he was lying under a tree and reading. "Hello," he said, looking up absent-mindedly from the pages, clearly wondering what had taken me so long.

Rob cheered as we rode into Bahir Dar down wide boulevards of palm trees and jacaranda to the pretty lakeshore. Lake Tana, the largest lake in Ethiopia, is the source of the Blue Nile so it was a big landmark for me. I had ridden the longest river. From here the Nile slides out on its long journey, mirror smooth and gentle, accelerating and exploding and thundering over the massive Blue Nile Falls in a smoking cloud of rainbow-ringend rage, unstoppable, endless, churning until the surging torrent calms once more to a firm glide down past Abu Simbel glowing silent and bronze in the rising sun and the peaceful islands and graceful sails of the *feluccas* at Aswan and all the way back to the dirty clamour of Cairo towards the Mediterranean Sea and, at long last, the end of its journey. I leapt into the lake in all my clothes to give them a bit of a swill. Lake Tana was rife with bilharzia but I had already decided to ignore that. So many lovely African swimspots have bilharzia and I preferred, foolishly perhaps, to let my liver play host to a few worms rather than miss out on rare swimming opportunities. There were crocodiles in the lake too so I made certain to always keep on the shore side of the more meaty and appetising Rob. I could not swim faster than a crocodile but perhaps I could swim faster than Rob. We pitched the tent on the shore amongst trees and bushes of extravagant yellow and red blossom. Above us pelicans and hornbills wheeled. Cormorants swooped and large birds of prey circled the heights. It was truly beautiful and there was not a child in sight. The silence hung in tangible enormity around me, the stillness and peace like a vast protective shield.

We locked the bikes in a hotel and, on April Fool's morning, hitch-hiked towards the village of Lalibela, high on a lofty escarpment in the central highlands, where 13th Century monolithic cave churches, hewn down into the bedrock, stand proudly as one of the many Eighth Wonders of the World. It took us two days and many different bouncy rides to get there, clinging to the roof of lorries grinding up through the mountains, sitting in the back of crowded pick-ups, arriving late in dark villages and sleeping in basic roadhouses. In one village we walked into the innocuous sounding 'Bingo Club Bar' but beat a hasty retreat

when we saw that the only occupants were a cluster of bored prostitutes. The bingo call of “two fat ladies!” would have had unpleasant consequences in that village brothel.

We waited in a market for an onward bus. A man was selling bundles of sheep’s wool in units equal to the weight of an old car battery. An old woman sold sandals made from tyres. A honey seller blew on a smouldering pile of charcoal to deter the bees with the smoke. We bought some honey and the man psyched himself up, washing his hands vigorously and rubbing them quickly together before plunging his right hand deep into his sticky bucket, thick with bees, and scooping out a handful of honey which he scraped into a jar for us. The market was on a spur of a hill jutting out into the sky. Brown land fell away below us and down, down to the faint valley floor far below. Across the valley and high above us were the crisp blue outlines of mountains beneath the clear sky studded with little puffs of cloud. Samuel Johnson described the Giant’s Causeway as “worth seeing, but not worth going to see.” The churches of Lalibela were certainly worth seeing, but they were even more worth going to see.

Back at Lake Tana I loaded up ‘Rita I’ for the final time, feeling a little guilty at how eager I was to trade her in for the younger, sexier ‘Rita II’. Such are men. ‘Rita II’ was exactly the same as Number 1, a direct swap from Specialized, and another mid-range steel mountain bike, with tyres and racks suitable for long-distance riding. Its major plus point was that it had fully-functioning brakes, gears and wheels; things that I had come to regard as quite a luxury. Rob and I had only a few more days together before he had to go back to work, to walk into his classroom clean-shaven, smart and responsible and ask his pupils whether they had had a nice holiday. He had to get to Addis Ababa to catch his flight and it was a long ride. We had no time to spare and so reluctantly left the warm waters of Lake Tana and got back onto the road, pedaling fast south out of Bahir Dar.

Ethiopia is cut roughly in two by the 250 mile gorge of the looping Blue Nile, a spectacular mile-deep canyon of similar proportions to the Grand Canyon. We had to cross it. The road wound and folded down into the bowels of the gorge, far warmer than up on the lip, crossed the river, and then the climb began up the other side. I felt as though I was trapped in an Escher lithograph as the hairpins wound onwards and upwards. Up and up we climbed. We continued pushing the bikes up the gorge for

three hours after dark, drank from a muddy trickle beside the road and lay down to sleep, too tired to bother hiding. Sometime later we were woken by a truck. It stopped close to us and we heard the door being thrown open. We were in the full glare of the headlights. The driver approached us in the beams. His gun was silhouetted on his shoulder. Reaching us he stopped, looked at us, turned and then walked back to the truck. His curiosity satisfied, he drove on, never saying a word. I was very relieved to see him go, whoever he was. We had been repeatedly warned about the dangers of bandits on the roads after dark. Sunrise saw us already on the move again, pushing our bikes up to the lip of the enormous canyon.

Ethiopia grew greener and more fertile down in the south, bursting with fecundity. I felt that only corruption, mismanagement and poor infrastructure could leave people starving and malnourished there. I was in raptures at the sights, sounds and smells that accompany vegetation. It had been a long ride through the arid lands of Turkey, the Middle East and Sudan. I crushed some grass in my hand and inhaled the wonderful fresh aroma: the smell of home! TE Lawrence also raved about the freshness of England from the arid sterility of the desert, “was it merely that long ago we had seen fresh grass growing in the spring?”

In many ways Ethiopia is unique. Looks, culture, religion, language, food, drink, music. Different to Muslim North Africa, different to Bantu Southern Africa, Ethiopia more or less managed to escape the European Scramble for Africa. Ethiopia has its own calendar, roughly seven years behind the Gregorian Calendar. When we were in Ethiopia it was still 1994. Telling the time was done differently too: 1 o’clock means one hour after sunrise. The months are also out of sync with our own which means, as Rob pointed out, that the song “Do they know it’s Christmas time at all?” is actually probably quite right in assuming that they did not.

We had cut it very fine for Rob’s flight and were having to pedal like mad to make it on time, rushing along past hobbled donkeys and the carcasses of derelict tanks that littered the highway to the capital. We longed for tarmac. The road jarred our bones and bikes, drained our strength and slowed us dramatically. It was a huge relief and surprise then when we suddenly purred onto tarmac, funded by the EU, that whisked us quickly on towards Addis. The paved road was terrifying though. Combining rusting

vehicles, inexperienced drivers, donkeys and pedestrians with a smooth, high-speed road was a recipe for slaughter.

On our final night together we were preparing dinner in our tent quite a way off the road when some vehicles stopped and we heard people get out and begin walking towards us. We sat still in the darkness. The sound of a rifle bolt being snapped back froze my blood and for some reason I started whispering frantically at Rob, “Quick, quick: keep chopping the avocado! Look innocent!” Rob humoured me and chopped furiously. Crunching through the dry grass came six silhouettes of approaching men. I offered a tentative greeting and, as they approached the tent, the men lowered their guns. Thankfully the men were roadworkers and they were even more relieved than we were once we had seen each other properly. They had thought that we were actually bandits setting up an ambush on the road. We offered them some avocado (“Yes, in our country we always chop it that finely”), they wished us a good journey and returned to their vehicle. Beneath an extraordinary electric storm we celebrated our ride with the miniature Christmas pudding that I had been saving since Jordan for a special occasion.

Our first view of Addis Ababa came suddenly as we let go of a truck that we had been hanging on to up a big hill. We crested the hill and there it was, spreading low amongst the hills. From wide central avenues and tower blocks the city spread outwards into the surrounding hills, the tiny huts blurred in the still morning air by smoke from countless cooking fires. We toasted our arrival in the city with St. George’s beer, on tap for 10p. The bar insisted that you bought your beer two at a time which seemed like a clever sales tactic. As we clinked our four glasses in a toast Rob, filthy, scrawny and absolutely exhausted, looked truly as though he had been immersed in the madness of Ethiopia. Back home it would take him weeks to recover, both physically and mentally from the hard riding, tough moral and aid issues, and the gauntlet of passing amongst the Ethiopian people. I still had half of Ethiopia to cross. I couldn’t wait to reach Kenya.

Doro Wot (Red Chicken Stew) and Injera

Doro Wot

Ingredients

2kg skinned chicken drumsticks or thighs
4 finely chopped large onions
3 chopped cloves of garlic
1 cup vegetable oil
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon shredded ginger
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup Ethiopian Berbere spice (or crush plenty of chili, garlic and salt with some wine vinegar and lemon juice)
enough paprika to make a deep red colour for the sauce
2 cardamon pods
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon cumin
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup water

Method

In a large casserole simmer the onion and garlic with vegetable oil until they are lightly brown. Add the spices and paprika, adding a little water as needed to avoid sticking. Add the chicken and simmer for about 20 minutes. Add the other ingredients and serve hot with *injera*.

Injera

Ingredients

400g self rising flour
200g teff flour
100g corn flour
water

Method

Mix the ingredients in a large bowl adding water to make a batter of medium thickness. Cover the bowl and leave it to ferment for 24 hours at room temperature.

Cook like large pancakes in a hot frying pan. Allow to cool before serving.

I was kindly invited for a drink at the Sheraton Hotel in Addis Ababa by some English friends of friends. The opulent luxury of

one of Africa's top hotels was staggering and my memories of that evening now are uncomfortable. I cannot deny enjoying the cold beer, or the oil paintings, or the sofas, or the dazzling toilets which would have been nicer to sleep in than most of the homes I had seen in Ethiopia, or the massive illuminated water fountains that danced in time to the strains of the Ode to Joy and Rule Britannia. But out of sight on the other side of the high security fence were rusty slums and people who had to queue to collect unclean water in buckets. The hotel boasted some of the 'largest and most prestigious banqueting facilities in Africa', 'elegant guestrooms' and an 'extraordinary selection of fine restaurants'. Heated swimming pools played underwater music. It was promoted as being ideal for foreigners who were in Addis for work with the UN or NGO's. It was obscene. In my experience there had been a direct correlation riding through Ethiopia between the villages that had notice-boards saying "this village kindly helped by such-and-such a charity" and the villages where I was treated rudely. And now, on top of that, to sit in such expensive luxury designed for the very people who were supposed to be helping poor Ethiopians, The Mrs. Jellyby's and Mr. Quayle's, left me feeling deeply uneasy. My time in Ethiopia left me very confused about the complicated issues involved in foreign aid.

My confusion continues today -the journey over- sitting in Starbucks in Central London waiting for a meeting. I am the only scruffy person. All around me suits are staring at sleek laptops and pearls and pashminas discuss documents. A woman sips from a mug as big as her head and makes a correction on her page. A yuppie toys with a brownie as he listens on his mobile phone. Big decisions take place. Choose your coffee, Americano, Mocha, Macchiato. Choose the size. Choose extra espresso shots. Choose syrups, soy milk, whipped cream. Oh, and a muffin too please. On the wall are stylish photographs of coffee beans, lush plantations, gushing water pumps, smiling workers and a lovely looking grass hut which I recognized immediately as being from southern Ethiopia. As I sipped my Fairtrade coffee and read the captions about how Starbucks is helping communities in Ethiopia I thought of the reality of that idyllic hut beneath a bright blue sky, so far from the rush and rain of London. I thought of the clouds of flies, the foul smoke of cooking fires, the struggle for food, the brutally hard work of survival for that over-stretched family. A combo of

caffeine and the Foofighters thumping in my headphones is not conducive to calm, mellow reflection. Suddenly I want to shout with rage, a frustrated, impotent anger at the injustice of it all. I do not want to shriek at the uncaring, affluent customers around me (after all, it is my own swanky little iPod and expensive coffee that has got me all worked up). Nor am I furious at the enormous corporation milking their slender social responsibility activities to boost their trendy image (a £50,000 donation to improve the water supply in Ethiopia may be pennies for Starbucks, but at least they do something. Whether that something is to help or whether it is to patronize and create dependence is debate for a few espressos later). What infuriates me is the unfairness. I am looking back now from the other side of the fence. I have got out. I could always get out. Get out whenever I wanted. I can hop back and forth as it suits me. I could sleep in my bed at home tonight, and one of Starbuck's quaint, charming, disease-ridden, verminous grass huts tomorrow. I have the choice. An accident of birth has made it all so easy for me, so hard for them. What can I do? What must I do? What can they do? What must they do? Does drinking Fairtrade coffee achieve anything more than giving me a buzz to rant and a brief salve to my conscience? My coffee costs more than a coffee picker's daily income. What is Fair about that?

Back in Addis I visited the Embassies of Rwanda and Angola to investigate the feasibility of acquiring visas. The Angolans refused me, and I only wanted to go to Rwanda if I could get through to the Democratic Republic of Congo. I could not find a DRC embassy in Addis so I postponed my enquiries until Nairobi.

The *Cycle to the Summit* team were in Addis. I knew that the Kenyan police would not allow me to ride the first stretch of Kenya alone because of marauding gangs of Somali bandits, but I hoped that perhaps they would treat a group of five more leniently. I decided then to ride with them to the border. The south of Ethiopia promised to be a beautiful ride and we whizzed out of Addis on a smooth paved road past massive charity Landcruisers with plenty of empty seats, laden pedestrians trying in vain to hitch rides, a dead hyena, singing bee-eater birds with bright breasts and sharp beaks, old priests sitting beneath umbrellas and collecting alms and a young boy who was trying to sell a single egg to the passing traffic. Boys standing by the road sold watermelons, bananas, avocados, pineapples, papaya and

sugarcane and we gorged as we cycled. The fruit was totally localized- you could never buy a papaya in a pineapple village.

The villages of small, round homes with conical thatched roofs looked attractive amongst the lush green trees, hills and coffee plantations. Smoke from cooking fires seeped through the grass roofs. Most of the people seemed generally more polite and amiable than the northern folk. Some days it felt like being in the London marathon, so enthusiastic was the cheering and clapping in every village we passed through. Villages smelled pungently of sweat, smoke and spicy food. The women also glossed their hair with clarified butter which reeked. Children's teeth were brown and stained, apparently from the local water, although I cannot imagine that the endless sugarcane sticks helped much.

The enormous crowds of staring people did not relent and outside one café we counted 200 people gawping at us. We were not doing anything remotely interesting: we were all fully clothed. The owner of the café came to our rescue, hurling buckets of water over the crowd and wielding a stick to drive them away. One man emerged from the crowd to speak to us. "I love England people." He said. That made a nice change from the usual opener of "Give me money." But he continued, "I love England people: they promise and they give you something." I left Toby to deal with him and turned to chat with Ruth.

Almost as annoying as the staring crowds were the flies. I constantly waved one hand over my food when I ate to try to keep them away. The children were less fussy than me and barely flinched as flies walked across their faces, supping from cold sores and runny noses. Everyone's backs were covered with them. I thought of the ancient Pharaohs who used to have servants standing in the corner of the room covered in milk especially to draw the flies away from them.

Qat has been popular around the horn of Africa for centuries, and I was interested to try this legal drug. Toby and I chewed some one day as we rode, stuffing a wad of the crispy leaves into our cheeks until they softened to a soggy pulp. I had read of effects similar to smoking joints after a few espressos but it just tasted nasty and didn't seem to have much effect. On a long straight we managed to grab hold of the back of one of the few lorries that was not protected with branches of thorns by swerving out in front of it so that it was forced to brake and slow down. We could then grab hold of the back as it passed. We sped ahead of

the others gleefully, chewing on our *qat* all the while. All was going wonderfully until Toby leaned round the back of the lorry to have a look at the road ahead and crashed smack into a roadside wheelbarrow of oranges. It was a spectacular collision. Fortunately nobody was hurt. Toby, the orange salesman and I howled with laughter as we dashed around gathering up the strewn fruit. It was fabulous to laugh and joke with an Ethiopian as I hated the siege mentality of them-versus-me that had welled up and festered in me in recent weeks. Being fairly certain that I spotted a dog copulating with an unconcerned sheep later that afternoon made me question whether perhaps the *qat* was actually a lot stronger than I had assumed. We later gave away our bunch of *qat*, the size of a decent bunch of flowers, to a grateful, and already stoned, old man.

Beyond the beautiful birdlife -hornbills, pelicans, storks- of Lake Awassa was the village of Shashemene where devoted Rastafarians from round the world have gathered to live and worship on land donated by the Emperor Haile Selassie (formerly known as Ras Tafari) to assist Rastafarians who wished to return to the motherland. One white Canadian Rasta, clearly devoted in his worship of ganja, was a source of much entertainment to the village's children who chased his stoned and stumbling dreadlocked form down the street shouting over and over, "Haile Selassie is dead!" It made a change from "You! You! You!" I suppose.

Dawns were thickly misted until the sun rose high and the mist faded away into the trees. At the top of a mountain the shadow of a soaring vulture circled us as we rode and we met a man called Alemayo. He was wearing a long red scarf and carrying a *krar*, an instrument similar to a lyre. We danced to his impromptu performance of jazzy, funky music, five whites shaking our asses as best we could on a quiet hilltop road. We were put in our place by the fabulous pulsating, wiggling rhythm of the local children who had inevitably gathered by now. They laughed at us and showed us how to dance properly.

The land was a deep rich red, scattered with tall termite mounds and acacias. The villages were increasingly chilled out and peaceful, the locals independent and busy with their own lives. It was lovely riding. Suddenly in one village scores of children chased us, shouting a whole Christmas list of demands, "Give me money!" "Give me pen!" "Give me sweets!" "Give me bicycle!"

(the last chap was *very* optimistic!) and trying to pull things off our bikes. At the end of the village was a huge banner saying, “This Village helped by so-and-so charity.” I had seen enough.

On the final afternoon a battering storm exploded out of a dark sky, the rain fizzing on the road, bouncing and rushing in spontaneous red torrents. We rode jubilant, soaked, shouting, laughing and marveling at the ferocious power of the natural world, singing at the top of our voices. Racing on out of the back of the storm we continued to pedal on in the sunshine as fast as we could. The border was just a few hours away. We rode faster and faster. Our clothes dried quickly, the road steamed and the world smelt so clean and fresh. I felt as though I was going to explode with life. Ethiopia. What a place. Fascinating. Infuriating. Proud. Grovelling. Distinctive. Desperate. Dramatic...

As the Kenya border approached I was delighted to be getting out of Ethiopia. I have never sworn at so many people in one country (thank goodness my words were not understood, though presumably the sentiment often was). Yet I also knew that the country had been one of the most important of my journey. Ethiopia had opened my eyes to issues of aid and poverty and exposed me to questions I had never before been forced to address. Above all, Ethiopia had opened my eyes wider to myself. I reflected, with enormous shame, of how in one unbearably obnoxious village I had had the urge to take out some money and burn it in front of everybody. What kind of a sick thought was that? How had my mind been driven to that? Ethiopia was an extraordinary place that I had not been strong enough to deal with. I used to think that I had all the answers. Now, 7500 miles from home, I realized that I only had questions.

Stage 15: “Golden Joys”

“I speak of Africa and golden joys.”

- William Shakespeare (Henry IV)

If generalizations have any substance at all, it is possible to break the world down into regions that are broadly similar. They may be similar in language, or looks, or culture, religion, history, personality, diet, mindset or way of life. Once I started to understand how a region worked my life became far simpler. I could develop routines that simplified my days, spending less time working out whether I needed to haggle for bananas or if the price was fixed, learn where were the easy places to stop and ask for water, find people I could entrust with my bike while I shopped in markets, cheap places to buy food, safe places to seek shelter at night. I would get a feel for how safe the drivers generally were; how hard I needed to concentrate on the traffic. I understood whether people were generally honest, or generally liable to rip me off. Everything became easier once I got the hang of a region. I had ridden through Western Europe, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and Ethiopia (which I am unable to bracket with anywhere else I have ridden!), and now I entered sub-Saharan Africa. There were many similarities from here down to Cape Town. Indeed, if you say ‘Africa’ to somebody, the instant images that they will conjure are probably images of the Africa that I rode from Kenya to the Cape. Animals, AIDS, savannah, sunsets, Maasai, Zulu...

The Middle East and Sudan had felt as though they would hold huge difficulties yet they turned out well. Ethiopia had been harder than I expected. But I had never worried about East and Southern Africa and I felt myself relax more than I had in months. Many more people could speak English in this region and I had also spent time before in southern Africa. I knew what to expect. I felt that I already knew much of what I needed to help get me through.

To my dismay though, the Kenyan border police forbid even our large group from traveling without an armed guard. Five bicycle pumps made better self-defence weapons than just one, but the police would not budge. We loaded our bikes onto a truck with

disgust. This was becoming too regular for my liking. At the Isiolo checkpoint, past the alleged wild gangs of marauding Somali bandits, the armed convoy broke up and I could ride on alone towards Nairobi.

I was looking for a fresh start in Kenya, a new era of happiness, enquiry and adventure, to rebuild after Ethiopia my wanderlust and belief in the decentness and warmth of Africa. Kenya's reputation did not suggest that this was particularly likely. Nairobi, the capital, is known as Nai-robbery, and as I rode through Nanyuki children in English football shirts fired the finger at me and shouted "Fuck off *mzungu* [white man]!" with cockney accents. The British Army trains at Nanyuki and British culture seemed to have rubbed effortlessly from the squaddies onto the locals.

Some people in the countryside -Samburu, Rendille, Boran and Turkana- wore European clothes and fake Manchester United shirts abounded. I was saddened to see this, not because their traditions were being ousted by western nylon, but because of their terrible choice of football club. I felt a real thrill though at the Samburu people I met who were dressed in their traditional red check cloth, wearing countless loops of bead necklaces and elaborate beaded earrings. Stupidly, I felt excited that these were *real* people, not just images on the TV. Real humans, fleshed out in solid skin, muscle and bone. Lungs sucking and puffing air, hearts thumping and coursing blood, haemoglobin clutching oxygen and surging through miles of tangled capillary. People with tales of life and charged with hopes and worry. Coughs, itches, aches, dreams. Men and women. Pasts and futures. The feel of their warm, calloused hands, the sounds of their speech, the sweet smell of sweat and cooking fires. On the road my senses filled out the photographs and prose of all the books and magazines which in themselves had fired me to travel, propelled me out of England's greyness to see for myself whether people like the Samburu really did exist in wonderful, singing, dancing, three dimensional full colour.

The bleached skies, the shiny dark torsos, the whirring flight of heavy beetles, the balance of a spear I held and pretended to take aim... It was all so distant from my training grounds sitting hunched over a book on rocking trains, rattling and squeaking, my reading interrupted by "all tickets, please!" and "we are sorry to announce the delay of..." and "hello, darling, I'm just calling to

say that my train has been delayed again.” Looking dully out of rain-streaked windows at commuter pay-and-display carparks dotted with puddles and fenced with chainlink tangled by brown brambles and rubbish, at muddy football pitches and industrial parks, handkerchief gardens behind terraced homes and lead-grey skies, rough territorial fencing between allotment plots squeezed between railway and roads jammed to a stop with traffic, pavements black with trodden leaves, piles of burst bin liners dropped from bridges, identical cul-de-sacs individualised by their satellite dishes, mini-roundabouts, sallow strip lights illuminating hunched shoulders in offices noosed with Disney ties... To read there of the semi-nomadic Samburu, or of Kyrgyz shepherds tending herds on high alpine pastures was a thrilling escape from my normality, and yet it never quite felt real. There was always a sliver of my brain that could not quite equate it all with normal people like me. I needed to see for myself. I needed to shake their hand.

Africa had much more in store for me. The Swahili word ‘safari’ means ‘journey’ and my own safari still had far to go as I talked and laughed with people so splendidly uncrushed by British Rail. Relaxed men leaning on spears, bare-breasted women swathed in bands of beads with close-cropped hair, and large hoops in their ear lobes. I wonder whether they found a skinny white guy arriving on a bike from the rainy lands of the north to be as striking.

I was cycling on the left-hand side of the road for the first time since Dover after a disorganised changing-over-to-driving-on-the-other-side-of-the-road area at the Ethiopia-Kenya border. Scrubland bloomed into rolling green fields, hedgerows, sheep, cloudy skies and red phone boxes. I was amongst signs in English, tourist touts hassling you to buy carvings of animals, white people, British soldiers, decent cars, and even a cashpoint. My senses were racing at so much novelty. The main street in Nanyuki looked like a throwback to the 1950’s: no chain stores, no flashy advertising, just a row of individually owned stores fronted with wooden verandas like the Wild West, yet still so prosperous compared with Ethiopia. Grocers, hardware shops, stationers, liquor stores. I enjoyed being able to read shop signs again, “We sell sugar, rice, cement,” and, oddly, “Dust for sale.” Schools proclaimed cheery choruses of catchy mixed-metaphor slogans,

“Through discipline, hard work and diligence, the little angels of today will grow into the new trees of the world.” My favourite early impression of Kenya were the cafés where I discovered plates of sausage and chips and mugs of sweet, milky tea as an alternative to *ugali*, the ground maize staple of sub-Saharan Africa that looked like mashed potato and tasted of nothing. Sausage and chips became my staple road food in Kenya. What a great country! I hadn’t had a sausage in months. Not a sausage.

Ugali

Ingredients

Corn flour

Water

Method

Boil a pan of water. Slowly stir in cornflour over a low heat until it is as thick as mashed potato. Continue stirring for about three minutes. Serve immediately with meat or vegetable stew or sauce.

At dawn I rode across the equator and into the southern hemisphere. The day was slowly pinking above the stark and rugged Mount Kenya. I paused at the World War II cemetery for Allied soldiers at Nyeri, stunned that the Europeans’ madness had spread as far as these tropical mountain flanks.

Past the flame trees of Thika I rode up a winding country lane through bushy coffee plantations past stunning gabled homes to a friend’s house. Justin had been at University with me and he had arranged for me to visit his grandparents as he was still living in the UK. Their home reminded me of the opening words of Karen Blixen’s *Out of Africa*, “I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills. The Equator runs across these highlands, a hundred miles to the North, and the farm lay at an altitude of over 6000ft. In the daytime you felt that you had got high up, near to the sun, but the early mornings and evenings were limpid and restful, and the nights were cold. In the Highlands you woke up in the morning and thought: Here I am, where I ought to be, therefore here I belong.”

Justin’s family was my first experience of a different side to life in Africa, the white tribes of Africa, wealthy and influential

groups in the history of the continent. Justin's friendly grandparents, dressed in khaki shorts with matching pulled-up socks, greeted me warmly with the clipped accent of white Africans. I walked in amazement across the wide lawns into the enormous house. Polished wooden floors reflected softly the light from driftwood lamps. Sweeping open plan rooms walled with bookshelves, comfortable sofas that I could barely wait to loaf on, ebony carvings of African art framing the fireplace. It was a stunning home. Had I really been laughing with spear-bearing herders that morning? And, more importantly, was that really bacon I could smell from the kitchen?

The next day I was alone in the house. I snuggled onto one of the sofas and picked up a book called *It's not about the bike* by a cyclist called Lance Armstrong. I knew nothing about him, or the Tour de France. I read the book in a single sitting. A man who has it all is almost killed by cancer. He recovers to not only compete in, but to actually win the Tour de France, the toughest race on Earth. It was a staggering story; too improbable for fiction and a red-hot cattle prod for anyone thinking their hurdles were high or their days hard. It was a lesson in choosing from our two options, "to give up or to fight like hell." I read the book several more times during my journey, bought it often as a present for people and became a committed Lance groupie. He impressed me, shamed me and inspired me often along the road. "Lives of great men all remind us we can make our lives sublime, and departing, leave behind us footprints on the sands of time."

In Kenya I began to feel, for the first time, that I was getting closer to breaking the magnetic field of England, the luring pull back towards all that I had chosen to leave behind. I had cried my way to Kenya, agonising over whether I had made the right choice by leaving Sarah and starting this ride. I had missed her and longed to phone, yet knew that the sound of her voice would have pushed me straight to the nearest airport. I had woken in the desert nights -pitch black, cool and silent- convinced that I had heard her voice or felt her beside me. But there was never anybody there. Not a day had gone by when I had not questioned what I was doing. In some ways my wonderful adventure had been the worst eight months of my life. It had certainly been the saddest and the loneliest. But we both knew that I had had to go away; I needed to do it. Now, in Kenya, I tried to turn my daydreams forwards to

thoughts of the excitement and challenges of the Americas and Asia that lay in wait for me.

I rode, robbery free, into Nairobi where I met a concentration of fascinating characters unmatched anywhere else on my ride. I ended up staying three weeks. Ewart Grogan, the first person to traverse the length of Africa (to impress a girl, of course) wrote of “the men who dared to stand clear and crisp above the trivial vapours of the age.” Nairobi was full of them, people “who traveled a short while towards the sun, and left the vivid air signed with their honour.” I felt like a Spirograph as I went round and round and round, never quite knowing where I was headed or who I would meet next, or what they would dazzle me with: tales of lifetimes in wild places from artists, authors, soldiers, hunters, charmers and taunting beauties. Round and round in unpredictable twists and lunges and yet when you stop and look you see a beautiful shape that all makes sense. The group of friends, and the friends of those friends, and their friends, that I stumbled into in Nairobi was a tingling rush of mad people, who lived and laughed and loved with the fizzing energy of a roman candle. I met no boring people, endured no dull dinners of painfully unimaginative questioning. Bacon sizzled and champagne popped high on the lip of the Great Rift Valley for a memorable breakfast with one family, again friends of friends, who were particularly kind to me in Nairobi. I met a man who had flown a tiny plane to New Zealand, someone organising a relay race around the world, a camel expert, an artist who climbed Kilimajaro carrying a mop to paint her canvases with, a casino gambler, a woman who crossed Sudan on a camel, colonial lion-hunter types and a charming chap who almost punched my lights out for beating him at pool. These people did not exist; they lived.

A pair of amusing and mad middle-aged women decided they should find me a girl. After much entertaining and bitchy gossip about the relative charms, availabilities and dimensions of Nairobi’s youth they settled on one name. I was whisked off on an immediate and painfully contrived shopping expedition to purchase, urgently, a milk jug from the unsuspecting victim’s shop. And so followed the world’s first ever attempt at matchmaking in the midst of a pottery shop. Memorable, hilarious, embarrassing and totally unsuccessful. The woman was beautiful, really beautiful. Bicycles, T-shirts (grubby) and flip-flops were a

non-starter. It was probably just as well: I found out later that her boyfriend (who owned a jet and a ranch) had a tendency to beat the crap out of anyone who so much as bought a milk jug from his girl. Somebody had gone recently to his father to complain about his endless boorish behaviour. Father promptly punched the visitor.

This comfortable lifestyle I was so relishing left me feeling pains of guilt and a kind of dishonesty whenever I passed in a car through Nairobi's slum areas. Drivers locked the doors and I looked out feeling a sense of betrayal. Most of my time in Africa was amongst people who lived lives far poorer, materially, than my own, yet I normally felt comfortable and at ease when I was on my bike. Now, in a nice air-conditioned car, I felt uncomfortable because, no matter how hard I tried to pretend otherwise, I was well aware of the privilege that I could always escape from my self-imposed life of poverty whenever it became too difficult.

Planning adventures is much more fun than actually undertaking them: lying on the floor poring over maps, dunking cookies in mugs of steaming tea, lost in happy, heroic daydreams. I was planning to cycle through the Democratic Republic of Congo. Generally speaking, countries with 'Democratic' in their title are not very. I had to find out the feasibility of such a route through regions ruined by war. Calling the embassy was frustrating and chaotic, for I was repeatedly redirected by the switchboard to a local bookshop who seemed well accustomed to this. Eventually I got through to someone at the embassy who said that I must come along in person for a visa interview. Everyone else in Kenya told me that I would be a fool to ride where war had already cost 4 million lives. I trekked down to the DRC embassy for my interview and was told straight away that I would not be given a visa for the east of the country. Perhaps it was actually somebody in the bookshop who had told me to go to the embassy in person just so that I would leave them alone. DRC was off the plan and the relief I felt told me that this decision was probably wise.

Beryl Markham (the first woman to fly across the Atlantic) described the Muthaiga Club in her book *West with the Night*, "Its broad lounge, its bar, its dining room -none so elaborately furnished as to make a rough-handed hunter pause at its door, nor yet so dowdy as to make a diamond pendant swing ill at ease-were rooms in which the people who made the Africa I knew danced and talked and laughed, hour after hour." I was in this

ultimate symbol of Colonialism as a guest of the fun family I stayed with in Karen, the affluent suburb of Nairobi named for Karen Blixen. With us was Kuki Gallmann, author of *I Dreamed of Africa*, her autobiography, the film part of which she was played by Kim Basinger. I argued amicably with her over the correct quotation for her book title. Later she invited me to visit her home, far from the nearest road.

The view from her friend's tiny plane was thrilling as we rose above Nairobi and flew out into the bush towards her house. Up, above the sprawling confusion of mud paths and rusting tin roofs of slums squashed intimately close against large homes with pretty lawns and tall security fences. Low, over the striped regularity of verdant coffee and tea plantations that nestled the hidden roofs of secret gems like the Heath's home in Ruiru. The shadow of the plane leaped and jerked across the folds of the earth below us. Mount Kenya stood clear in the sunshine as I looked around the plane. There was not much to look at. It was tiny, old, and an alarmingly large proportion of the plane was made from wood or held with duct tape. The pilot, Eric, was aged about 60, dressed in khaki and armed with an iron handshake. The joystick rested nonchalantly between his knees. He dozed as we flew, waking when the plane wobbled and calmly re-adjusting the controls. As we passed above animals he became more animated, banking and circling low above a shuffling herd of elephants and pointing out the lolloping, rocking run of giraffe alarmed by the plane. Flying directly above a line of wildebeest it was easy to recognize them from their neat wildebeest-shaped shadows flat on the ground. Soon we were approaching Kuki's home, with no other building visible in any direction, and bumping down on the rough grassy landing strip and taxiing right to her front door where we were greeted by Kuki's six Alsatian dogs. Number 7, I was told, had sadly become leopard food just last week.

I spent a special few days on Kuki's 100,000 acre Ol Ari Nyiro ranch that is dedicated to cultural, educational and environmental research. I walked for hours with Eric to inspect beehives made from hollow logs jammed in high tree forks or to check the water level in dams, walking quietly and listening carefully. We stood still to let elephant and buffalo pass by and turned back from one path when a lion roared ahead. I accompanied the anti-poaching unit tracking the footprints of a man and an elephant up dramatic ridges, steep gorges and open savannah, across valleys and plains.

The local tribe, the Pokot, prove their manliness in no uncertain way by spearing elephants by hand. Excellent for impressing girls, less so for impressing conservationists. When heavy rain wiped away the tracks we had been following we were forced to give up the chase. We hiked back to base and piled into an open-backed jeep to visit the local chief and discuss this latest clash of interests. We had to stop often to leap out and slash through bushes with machetes and push the vehicle through sucking mud. It was a couple of hours before we arrived in the village, a cluster of remote huts and people standing idle. After negotiations with the chief, which the frustrated wardens told me would achieve nothing (compared to the National Police policy of shooting poachers on sight), we raced back towards the ranch to try and beat the rainstorm that we could see brewing on the horizon.

I was surprised, on the plane back to Nairobi, at a sudden pulsing of vivid snapshots racing into my mind. They were not, as I might have expected, visions of wild Africa. Instead they were a fairly random collection of innocuous moments from my ride. A roundabout in Syria, swimming in the Danube, Istanbul's grand bazaar, a derelict factory in Romania, buying lentils in Slovakia, camping in a rainy forest, the neat number plates of Luxembourg, the motor bikers who wished me good luck as I disembarked in Calais, the Red Sea at sunset, cold fog and mud in Serbia (or was it Turkey), juggling firesticks in Jordan, the church in Eztergom, Hungary, camping in an almond grove in Bulgaria... I could not explain or predict these occasional surfacings of totally random memories from the millions that my ride was generating.

It really was time to ride again. Kenya was full of people who had come for a fortnight and stayed a lifetime. That was going to happen to me unless I escaped soon. I said my reluctant goodbyes and pedaled south. It was midday and the sun was on my back. This confused me as I was so used to riding towards the noon sun, until I remembered that I was in the southern hemisphere now where the noon sun is in the north. A man beside the road out of Nairobi was selling second hand toilets. At least he had something to sit on whilst waiting for a customer. "Long safari?" he asked, simply, as I passed. "Long safari," I replied.

Stage 16: “Africa as I had hoped”

“People are about as happy as they decide that they are going to be.”

- Abraham Lincoln.

Through southern Kenya and Tanzania I grew nervous about wild camping. Normally I simply pulled off the road where nobody could see me, but I had started to worry about wild animals. Hearing the sawing huff and puff of a leopard one dark night instantly persuaded me to get back in the habit of spending nights in villages.

The good-humoured Maasai never minded me pitching my tent in their villages once I had asked permission from the chief. They took pride in caring for me. I pitched my tent outside the huts on the immaculately swept earth then showed the inevitable curious crowd how I put up my tent, how I cooked and so on. The universal exclamation of surprise in Africa is a high pitched, drawn out “*eeeh!*!” and most things I did triggered shrill choruses of “*eeeh!*” and laughter. The elasticated tent poles, the inflatable camping mattress, the penknife, the petrol stove... The routine of my life was new and entertaining for them. I would invite the small children to have a go in my tent but they were always too shy until one tiny brave soul would pick up the courage to try it for size. Chaos erupted as, of course, all of them then wanted a go.

I felt completely at ease in these most un-English of settings. The World Cup was only a week away and I was excited, but nobody there knew anything about it. We had so little in common. The language barrier was frustrating but entertaining as I tried to decipher and answer questions through charades and drawings. My inflatable globe helped explain my route and a letter that I had had translated into Swahili explained the reasons for my ride. My maps excited and confused everyone and it was fun to watch men arguing about where they were on the map. Most had never used a map and had no idea how to read them. At times in Africa I made the mistake of thinking that because I could not communicate with someone that they were stupid. (Of course the stupidity was actually mine for not speaking their language). But I never felt this

in the cheerful homesteads of the Maasai where communication always felt possible.

The Maasai men were incredibly vain, primping and preening and strutting with all the confidence of the King's Road. They were fascinated by my blond straight hair whilst I was equally intrigued by the size of the holes in their earlobes. I hope that if I return one day to Tanzania I will find a few villages where the fashion amongst men is no longer for dyed red hair, but rather a straight blond effect. I enjoyed my evenings with the Maasai. They had too much dignity and self-sufficiency to care, or at least to ask, about my wealth and were happy simply for me to be spending an evening with them.

As night fell the boys returned to the villages from the savannah with the cattle herds. The sun set, quickly and fiercely, and thorn bushes were pulled into a barricade around the villages to protect the people and the cattle in their wooden pens from wild animals. Children bounced and scampered all around, occasionally cuffed with good humour if they were too noisy. Babies cried with terror when they saw me and their mothers laughed as they comforted them. Women crouched over smoky cooking fires, using cow dung for fuel, and men sat outside their huts and chatted. The huts were made of mud, sticks, grass and cow dung and urine. Some of the men had dyed red hair and big holes in their ears. Women, with shaved heads, wore earrings dangling like chandeliers with mini-spears hanging at the bottom of them. One evening an absolutely beautiful woman, Esupat, took me round her village, showing me the snorting cattle, the piles of skinny firewood, her friends and her family and all the small details of her life. She was taller than me and as she smiled down at me wild Flashman thoughts burst through my brain of jacking in my ride, marrying Esupat, and becoming a warrior. Instead we returned to my bike and I set up my tent which everyone, as always, found very funny. If the Maasai had a *Discovery Channel*, I would be on it. Esupat's little sister brought me a low stool and a cup of milky tea and then fled, giggling. The evenings ended early; there were no lights or even lanterns in the villages so I would be in my tent early, falling asleep to the dull clunking of cowbells.

There is a jubilation at feeling like the only person in the world, cycling carefree down a cool road at dawn. It was good to be free. I felt lucky to have the time to lie back on the earth watching

clouds metamorphose in the sky, to watch ants enjoying my breadcrumbs, to listen to the wind in the yellow grass and feel it fresh on my sweat. I saw a snake get run over by a car. Its mouth was wide but silent as its body writhed and flipped, red blood splashing onto the tarmac. Plains stretched ahead towards Mount Meru, seductively and tantalisingly glimpsed through the clouds. Kilimanjaro was stubbornly buried beneath the duvet of the rainy season. I knew it was there, I knew what it looked like but I gazed hopefully at nothing but clouds. Instead I saw some Marabou storks, possibly the ugliest bird on earth. Their heads are pink and stubbly, like a sunburned and almost bald old man. Their beaks are drab and enormous. They stand an imposing 150cm tall with a vast wingspan. A pink sac hangs from their throat. I imagined a conversation amongst birds, “Excuse me, mister, you appear to have something dangly and grotesque stuck on your chin...” “Oh, it’s part of your face, is it? I am sorry.”

The road towards Arusha climbed gradually, too gently to see the gradient but enough to feel it. I kept stopping to check my brakes, sure that something was rubbing and slowing me down. A signpost told me that Arusha was exactly halfway between Cairo and Cape Town. I stayed there with Jo, a primary school teacher from England, and spoke at her school. She, for some reason, had a giant bird outfit at home that needed to be returned to the school. She decided to cycle into school wearing the costume. I followed behind the giant bird, crying with laughter as we rode into town. I was fascinated to watch the reaction of locals to a huge bird cycling through their town: nobody batted an eyelid. It confirmed my theory that they thought that foreigners were completely weird and that nothing could surprise them anymore.

Jo’s husband, Ben, was a bush safari pilot. He told me of a fellow pilot who had been trying to leave his job but his boss would not allow him to leave. So, prior to taking a group on a safari, he sat himself anonymously in the back of the plane with all the other passengers. When people started to grumble about the pilot being late, the pilot stood up declaring, “Geez, it can’t be that hard!” jumped into the cockpit, fiddled with the controls and took off. The screaming, terrified passengers did not appreciate the joke and the pilot quickly found himself without his job, exactly as he had hoped.

Dirty children stared at me or, unaware of my passing, continued playing football with bound balls of rags. Men sat around in contorted postures of idleness. I saw, more than once, a man asleep in a wheelbarrow, a brilliantly symbolic gesture. I camped one night, with the permission of Mr Ngoma, the teacher, outside a school. I was woken early surrounded by a giggling mass of young children who squealed and whooped as I danced for them before packing up my tent and waving goodbye. On the road ladies, graceful and poised, carried huge bunches of bananas balanced on their heads and babies strapped to their backs. Their arms swung slowly and their big bums wiggled in colourful dresses, called *khangas*. One woman, empty handed, walked with her handbag perched on her head. A teenaged girl carried an enormous bundle of sugarcane on her head and I stopped to ask her if I could have a try. I could barely lift the pile on to my head and, once there, it felt like it was crushing my skull. I stumbled a couple of paces before giving up. Children walked to school with their book in a plastic bag and an old oil bottle swinging from a string containing their water for the day.

I always liked to camp under the full moon and try to remember where I had been for each full moon of my ride. A couple of days ride from the coast I sat at dusk in a small hollow, studying my World Cup schedule until the herder boys homeward plodded their weary way, shooing and shouting at their bony cattle, throwing pebbles at the stragglers. They left the world to darkness and to me and I wheeled my bike away from the road and rolled out my sleeping bag as my tenth full moon rose and silhouetted Meru and Kilimanjaro.

The elaborately painted buses in Tanzania with slogans such as 'Yo Boyz', 'God be with us', and 'Born to Die' did nothing to change my perception that they were little more than lethal death traps driven by nutters. Within one hour I saw buses decorated with portraits of Bill Clinton, Saddam Hussein and Kofi Annan. I felt sure there was some sort of coded message in this high speed, smoky triumvirate. (Elsewhere I saw the Queen and also a smiling Alex Ferguson carrying the red briefcase of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.)

Lunatic mini-bus taxis, *dala dalas*, raced the streets, swerving round roundabouts (known amusingly as *keep-a-lefty's*) crammed full with passengers. There was always room for one more, and the drivers swerved to a halt whenever someone flagged them

down. This was normally about once every ten seconds. While the new passenger squeezed himself inside, the driver floored the accelerator, pushing back into the traffic and overtaking everything possible before slamming on his brakes again to pick up yet another person a hundred yards down the road. You could get on or off whenever you wanted to, so long as the driver heard you above his thumping music. The driver always had a buddy who collected fares and shouted and whistled for business from his macho position standing in the open doorway and leaning out over the road. I had numerous, near death close shaves with *dala dalas*.

The road was also busy with cyclists and as our paths crossed I was kept busy dinging my greetings on my bell and giving the cheery thumbs-up greeting that seems to die out in England once you grow too old to give thumbs-up signs to lorry drivers out of the back window of the school bus and progress to showing your bottom instead. Men wrapped in red robes clutching spears whizzed past. My bell was put to shame by the Tanzanians', who often modified them so that, when pressed, a lever would rub on the rim of the wheel making a continuous ringing sound. Flasher characters fitted battery-powered horns to their bikes and I followed behind one chap who, oblivious of my presence, kept playing over and over his horn that played the Happy Birthday tune. The bikes were laden with firewood, bananas or drums of water. Many also carried a passenger. The bicycle is the most efficient mode of transport ever invented, environmentally friendly and cheap. A bicycle does the equivalent of 3000 miles per gallon, is more efficient than a gazelle or an eagle and can carry ten times its own weight, something that no aeroplane can manage. They are simple and cheap and really improve the standard of living in rural Africa.

The World Cup, at last, was only hours away. France, the World Champions, were playing Senegal, the African lions, in the opening match of the competition. I said goodbye to the latest village that had looked after me, memorable for the children's homemade wooden bicycles, and pedaled quickly to find a town with a television where I could watch the football. Each village I reached told me that the next village would have a television. But none of them did. After four years waiting I was going to miss the

match. I was desperate and so, with only two hours to go until kick-off, I cheated.

You may want to stop reading now and demand a refund for this book that claims that I cycled to South Africa. Because I did not. I cheated. I stuck out my thumb, a pick-up stopped, I thanked the driver, hurled my bike in the back, and whizzed -entirely voluntarily- 60 miles to Dar Es Salaam. I had no excuse and no regrets. A game of football was more important to me than sixty miles of flat scrubland. I never did it again, but once is enough.

Five minutes before kick off I was cycling, panic rising once more, up and down the streets of Dar Es Salaam trying to find a television. “Television? Football?” I kept asking. Fortunately everyone understood those two words and pointed me in the right direction. I spotted a little board with ‘France-Senegal’ scrawled on it. Relieved, I pushed my bike through into a scruffy little backroom bar and flopped, sweat-soaked, onto a chair. Welcome to The Greatest Show on Earth.

Twelve people were sitting in silence round a small television screen on pink plastic chairs in the courtyard at the back of the *shebeen*, or drinking den. I bought a Pepsi and sat down. The screen was half obscured by bright sunlight. One supporter spoke English and checked that I was going to be supporting Senegal. Of course, I told him. The referee blew his whistle and the game began, a momentous game in which the African nation, in their first ever World Cup, defeated the reigning World champions.

Early in the second half of the match the phone rang behind the bar. The call was for me. Surprised, I walked to the bar. Who could possibly want to speak to me in a random African boozer? Nobody I had ever known knew where I was.

“Hello?” I asked.

“My friend,” spoke an African man with a deep, rolling voice. “After the game you will be beaten and robbed. Stay behind for ten minutes before you leave in order to be safe.”

Before I could speak again he hung up.

I returned to my seat beside my bike and looked around. Everyone was watching the game. Nobody was doing anything unusual or looking at me. What the hell was going on?

I didn’t want to leap up and panic. But I didn’t want to hang around either. Who on earth was that on the phone? (I found a moment to be amused that I was not going to be robbed until the game was actually over: “Police are today looking for a dangerous

gang of robbers. They are all believed to be keen football fans...") I started to wonder whether the caller was actually trying to make me stay behind so that I could be mugged then. I had to get out of there, to the safety of the public street. I looked around the courtyard, searching for escape routes if things suddenly kicked off. I could probably leap onto that table and then up onto the roof, but where then? I would just have to take my chances.

I drank my Pepsi, watched the game and tried not to let on that I had been tipped off. I was scared stiff. With ten minutes of the game remaining I stood up as calmly as I could and wheeled my bike towards the exit. My whole body was tensed and expecting the scrape of chairs as I was rushed and grabbed and punched. Here we go. Oh fuckity, shitting, bloody, fuckity, fuckity, fuck. I was ready to kick and bite and scratch or to run- hopefully to run. But nobody moved from the television and, after sauntering out the door, I jumped onto my bike and pedaled like I had never pedaled before. I didn't care where I was going, I was just going. I stood on the pedals and thrashed them round and round as I raced down the road, snatching glances back over my shoulder. After a few minutes the lactic acid started to bite and I slowed down, certain by now that nobody was following me and I was safe again. It was a strange and inexplicable incident.

With shaking legs I rode slowly through the city to find the International School where I had been invited to stay in return for talking to the children. I stayed with Shannon MacLachlan, a music teacher from Vancouver and tried vainly to enthuse her about the soccer. Staying with complete strangers for a week or more, I always worried that as soon as I left they would dance a jig of delight that I was gone. So I was happy, two years later, when I rode through Canada, to be invited by Shannon to stay once again.

The next morning saw me, just before kick off in the Ireland-Cameroon match, cycling round the mansions of the embassy district beside the softly lapping Indian Ocean and the palm trees and trying, once again, to find a television. Paradise is no place to watch football. I found a bar just in time in a backstreet district. It was 9.30am and the beer was flowing. Men were tearing at hunks of chewy goat gristle, the ever popular *nyama choma*, and cheering the game. Across the bottom of the screen scrolled a message "If you are watching this outside Mozambique it is an illegal broadcast." Nobody cared. Street kids who earned pennies cleaning shoes stood in the doorway with their brushes and

watched the match. A man translated the newspaper headlines of yesterday's match for me: "Goooooal! Senegal brave, France like a tomato." When Cameroon scored the street children danced and cheered. There was a sense of solidarity for all the African teams that is not found in Europe.

The setting for watching England's matches was rather different. I went with some ex-pats to the smart Sheraton Hotel which, extraordinarily and foolishly, was offering free beer to English football supporters courtesy of British Airways. I planned to leave Dar and get back on the bike the morning after the England-Argentina match. But the free beer and David Beckham's penalty winner combined to hit me with a monster hangover. I went to the beach with Shannon instead and resolved to leave the next morning.

Riding through Tanzania was exactly how I had hoped that riding in Africa would be. Friendly people, scary animals, magnificent landscapes, ferocious sunsets and a jovial, shambolic atmosphere. The road wound past forested hills, meadows of white flowers, clusters of aloes, outcrops of rock and many baobab trees. The iconic baobab tree, with its vast, stubby water-storing trunks and mesh of thin, root-like branches is known as the 'upside-down tree'. A Bushman myth explains how God, at the beginning of time, gave a tree to each animal to plant. The hyena, last in line, was so annoyed at the weird-looking baobab he received that he planted it upside-down in disgust.

In the Mikumi National Park a sign warned, "DANGER. Wild Animals next 50km." This was the only road towards Malawi so I had to continue. It was perhaps the only 50km of Africa where I was not sharing the road with other cyclists and pedestrians. That morning a Maasai man had done superb impressions for me of all the animals that I may encounter in Mikumi. Foolishly I reassured myself that if I pedaled fast I would be OK. A lorry stopped and the driver wound down his window,

"Hey, *mzungu*, are you a crazy man?! Come in my lorry. This place is no good for a bicycle!"

"I know," I smiled, "but I am riding very fast."

"*Mzungu*," he shook his head, "the *simba* [lion] is very, *very* fast!"

And he drove on.

50km later I was out of puff. Fortunately I had not seen any lions, and I had enjoyed the not-so-scary giraffes, zebras, warthogs, baboons and impala. I rested in a café, enjoying a cup of tea and a chapatti in the company of Christopher, a 54 year old English-speaking Maasai. He was decked out in full Maasai regalia and his knobkerry club rested against my knee. His cup of tea was too hot to drink and so he poured some into his saucer to cool and then slurped it from there, exactly as my Latin teacher used to do at school. From the seat of a bicycle the world felt painfully large and yet the more of it I saw the more I was amazed at its smallness and similarities.

The road wound up precariously towards a forested horizon. I swept down hills clutching my sunhat, and struggled up the hills cursing my fast disintegrating gears that jumped and slipped. Several lorries now knew me along this road as they passed back and forth from Dar Es Salaam to the interior. They beeped and waved whenever they passed, picking up my resolve a little each time.

For a week or so every village I passed through had a new, pristine mosque, by far the smartest building in the village. One man told me they nicknamed them ‘Osama Mosques’ as they had been funded by Saudi Arabia. I was disappointed when the man said that he would have liked to invite me to his home but that I would be unable to eat African food as it was not good enough for white people. I rode on and camped alone and ate old bread and jam.

Dawn was cold and dewy, to my surprise, and I realised that I must have climbed quite high as I put my socks on my hands to act as gloves. I preferred cold toes to cold fingers. I was having bike problems again. Four spokes had broken so my back wheel was very buckled but the tool I needed to replace them had also broken. Ahead of me stood a purple wall of mountains and as I climbed towards them my wheel finally buckled to the point where it would no longer rotate. For a couple of hours I tried to improvise repairs before summoning the motivation to hitchhike back into Mbeya to try to find a solution there.

After walking round from red herring to red herring I was directed towards a garage on the edge of town. My hopes were not high so I was surprised and excited when a mechanic watched my charade explaining the problem, walked to the back of the garage and returned with a wheel that would fit on my bike. It even had

five gears: good news as I thought of the ridge of peaks that still awaited. Perhaps relief was etched too obvious on my face because the garage fixed a high price for the wheel and, even after haggling, I still had to pay £20, a whole month's living budget. The wheel was poor quality so I strapped my original wheel onto the back of the bike, hoped that I could get a replacement spoke tool from England, and hitchhiked back to the spot where the wheel had broken.

I had planned to take up an invitation to stay on a tea plantation that night but wasting most of the day fixing my wheel had left me with a long way still to ride. But I was in a grump at the broken tool and at paying so much for a rubbish wheel. So I set about climbing hard to the 2500m pass as the sun set. My back brake did not fit on my new wheel so I slowed myself with my feet on the downhills. The air was deliciously cool. Rice fields changed colour with the breeze like rubbing velvet. Trees and crops reminded me of home: peas, potatoes, cabbage. I pedaled on into the darkness that falls so suddenly near the equator, my senses tingling with awareness of the hazards in the darkness, of potholes on the steep descents, of badly-lit vehicles and of the ease with which I could be followed and robbed. I pedaled fast through villages and lines of roadside food stalls. I smelt barbecuing corn cobs and sour maize beer. Naked light bulbs and cooking fires gave glimpses of evening routine. At about 9 o'clock I reached the sign for the Wakulima Tea Company and rode down a dirt track to find David, who I had met in Dar.

Before I knew it I was waking up in bed beneath a fat duvet, looking out of the window over acres and acres of squat tea bushes as the fragile morning mist hazed the blue hills that rolled down to Lake Malawi. My breath condensed in the highland air and I decided that a couple more hours sleep felt like an excellent idea.

When I eventually got out of bed David had long since gone to work on the tea estate. I was happy to sit at the kitchen table, catch up my diary, watch the World Cup and read my book. There was an old record player in the living room and I felt that here I had a good excuse to play some Dire Straits, if indeed an excuse is ever needed, "These mist covered mountains are a home now for me... There's so many different worlds, So many different suns. And we have just one world, but we live in different ones..."

A muddy haul through the tea plantations and a thrilling twenty mile swooping downhill took me into Malawi, country number 20

and the first free border crossing since Europe. Malawi is a small, slender country flanked by Lake Malawi. Following independence in the 1960's, Dr. Kamuzu Banda became President for Life of the country. Malawi's first multi-party elections were then not held until 1994. Corruption, over-population, poverty and AIDS are severely testing the resolve of a people with a reputation as the friendliest in Africa. Life expectancy in Malawi was falling steadily: it was now less than 40 years.

Haggling with a black market moneychanger at the border I thought that I had achieved the impossible and actually succeeded in ripping *him* off. As I argued with him and the price fell I thought that I had out-Heroded Herod and I rode into Malawi very pleased with myself. It was a couple of hours later that it dawned on me that I had in fact got my ratios the wrong way round and had actually haggled myself out of a few extra dollars. The moneychanger must have been too confused by my stupidity to have seized the initiative to really press home his advantage. In Malawi I hit the well-worn backpacker trail. Hostels boasted pizzas, milkshakes and banana pancakes and weary *mzungu* faces whizzed past daily on buses. I celebrated the expansion in culinary options in my usual way, with more jam sandwiches, sticks of sugarcane and occasional treats of *ugali* (called *nsima* in Malawi) or rice and beans in roadside stalls.

In order to find a television for the England-Brazil match I pushed ahead to the large town of Mzuzu where I could be sure of finding one. For three days I rode fast all day and for a couple of hours into the night, slept beside my bike in roadside bushes, rose at 4am and was off again, riding into the dawn, thinking of how few sunrises I was ever conscious to relish back home. If England failed to beat Brazil, it certainly was not going to be because of a lack of commitment by me! I made it to Mzuzu in driving rain with ten minutes to spare. The match was a disaster, England surrendered feebly, their World Cup was over, and I had four more years to wait for the next attempt. I hoped that I would be home by then.

I was on my way to talk at Kamuzu Academy, an intriguing school out in the bush founded by the former President Kamuzu Banda in the style of an English Public school. Pupils, the children of wealthy government officials or bright children on scholarships, studied the British Curriculum, including Latin and Greek, and wore uniforms and straw boaters as they walked the cloistered

courtyards. The school, known as the ‘Eton of Africa’, was incongruous enough in itself but, surrounded by villages of destitute people, it was absolutely extraordinary. Built in the village of the dictator’s birth the school, with its chapel, ornamental lake, Olympic-sized swimming pool and golf course consumed almost the entire education budget for all of Malawi. With Banda’s death the school was forced to adapt, becoming a private, fee-paying enterprise. I was curious to discover whether Kamuzu Academy struck me as an example of what could be achieved in an increasingly desperate continent, or as another demonstration of Africa’s leaders’ capacity for corruption and money-wasting. I was so tired of endless examples of the latter that I was glad to manhandle and squeeze the Eton of Africa into the former category in my mind.

I rode beside a wide, inviting river that had almost run its course. Downstream I could see Lake Malawi, deep blue and demanding to be swum in. Out of the far shore rose steep, rough mountains, bluer than the sky but lighter than the lake. A stripe of thin white cloud hung halfway up them. I camped in a sugarcane field by the lake and the sun set smoking a delicious blend of Malawi gold.

Neat, thatched cottages stood in swept bare clearings alongside small plots of vegetables. The bark of rubber trees was scored in spirals and streams of the white rubber sap oozed down the trees and was collected in cut-off Coke bottles. I steadily ate peanuts as I rode, spitting out the shells. Patient ladies sat beside the road selling little piles of tiny fish from the critically overfished lake. At dusk heavy dugout canoes would take to the water, using large paraffin lamps to lure fish to the surface. The canoes worked in groups of three, one carrying the lamp and two other canoes circling with their net. They worked until moonrise when they returned to shore with their catch. The fishermen spent their days carving canoes with axes, drying fish on long tables and mending their nets. Lots of them called out “Give me money” but with smiling faces that expressed hope rather than expectance. After Ethiopia they did not faze me in the slightest!

People driving back to Lilongwe from Lake Malawi kept their purchases and their car fresh by hanging their fish on string from the wing mirrors. Roadside treats included boiled mice on sticks and plucked baby birds. I disappointed myself by being too squeamish to take advantage of these extremely cheap dinner-

party-conversation-enhancing foodstuffs. It was Montaigne who observed that, “every man calls barbarous that to which he is not accustomed.”

Suddenly there were men standing across the road demanding me to stop. Barefoot and wearing rags they wore bags on their heads like balaclavas and brandished bows and arrows. Trouble.

I smiled, waved hello, and pedaled like hell as I closed the gap between me and them. No way was I stopping. I burst through their line and they started chasing me. I smiled and waved even more and pedaled in terror until they gave up the chase. About an hour later exactly the same thing happened again and as I put on a sprint and scattered the men aside I saw people in a nearby roadside café laughing at my fright. I braked and pulled up to the café. They explained to me that the gangs were only out to collect cash for parties on Malawi Day, Independence Day, on July 6th and that it was all just good-natured fun. A man handed me a Pepsi to apologise for their laughter and I soon saw the funny side of it all. I suppose that I felt as a Malawian would were he to be accosted in England, early November, by a bunch of boys with something resembling a corpse in a wheelbarrow, demanding cash before hurling the effigy onto a roaring fire.

Fly Burgers. Lake Malawi

One meal that I could not sample in Malawi as I was there at the wrong time was fly burgers. At the new moon vast clouds of flies hatch from the lake and as they pass over the shore it is easy to swat huge numbers of the flies with damp wicker baskets.

Ingredients:

Chaoborus edulis Malawian Lake Flies

Banana Leaves

Chopped Tomato and Onion

Salt

Method:

Mix the flies, tomato, onion and salt together. Pat the mixture into a burger shaped patty between your hands. Wrap each burger in a banana leaf and cook on a smoky fire. Serve with *nsima* (see recipe above for *ugali* above).

Stage 17: “No time for romance”

*“There’s lots of pretty girls in Mozambique,
And plenty time for good romance.
And everybody likes to stop and speak,
To give the special one you seek a chance,
Or maybe say hello with just a glance.”*

- Bob Dylan

Having joined me at Christmas back in Jordan, my friend Arno now flew to Lilongwe to ride with me for his summer holiday. He brought the freewheel tool I needed to repair my wheel as well as chocolate and other goodies. In a hardware store in Lilongwe the Indian owner kindly gave me a new front derailleur that I needed. But after hours of faffing it still did not work. Free it may have been, crap it certainly was. It looked as though I would have to continue changing gear with an old toothbrush until I reached South Africa, reaching down as I pedaled and using the toothbrush to push the chain from gear to gear. Arno was amused by this. I told him that *schadenfreude* was a German word, that it was therefore unbecoming for a Frenchman and that we English certainly did not feel the need for such a word. He was still amused. “Bloody Frenchman,” I cursed loudly as he sped past me. He turned around, grinned and gave me his best Gallic shrug. He was going to ride with me to Botswana. It was good to see him again.

The road towards Mozambique shrank to no more than a sandy footpath through the bush. The border at Vila Nova de Frontera was just a shell of ruined buildings, a run-down reminder of the days of Portuguese control, days of electricity, running water, paved roads and a workable infrastructure. It was the first and only border crossing in the world where anyone tried to make me pay a bribe. The scruffy, unpleasant looking officer invented a fee that Arno and I must pay. Smiling politely, we refused. Scowling, he ordered us to pay. Smiling politely, we refused. A game that could have continued for quite some time... Eventually he realised that he had picked the wrong opponents. He angrily stamped our passports and gestured us to leave. He seemed amazed to have found two foreigners who were not flush with easy cash. I had

considerably more time than money and I would have sat there all day, smiling angelically until I wore him down. Outside the police gates a loitering money changer tried to rip us off by a factor of 100. Did we really look that stupid? I spoke Spanish in a Russian accent to him in an attempt to speak Portuguese. Perhaps, listening to my ‘Portuguese’, he figured that we did.

Mozambique had been a Portugese colony until it became independent in 1975 after a ten year conflict. The last decades have been tough. When the Portugese fled the country was left in a terrible state. A single example of the chaos: of Mozambique’s 500 doctors, only 80 remained after independence. On top of the difficulties faced by the new left-wing, single party government, they were also fighting against a rebel group, backed by South Africa and Rhodesia. Up to a million people were killed in the latest civil war, many millions more were displaced, and the already fragile infrastructure of the country was totally destroyed. Coming on top of the war years, drought then led to famine for millions. The country, staggering and collapsing, saw peace at last only in 1992. Vast floods at the turn of the millennium then further damaged Mozambique’s attempts to stand back on her own feet. People do not expect to outlive their forties and, for most, the future is bleak. The gold beaches, warm sapphire shallows and pearl-like islands of the tourist-loved coast seem incongruous against the brutally tough interior. A beautiful necklace sparkling on the throat of a dying woman. It was yet another nation that had only really drifted across the periphery of my consciousness, a whiff of pity and guilt before I turned back to my supper with the heavy feeling that “there is nothing to do about anything, and now it is nearly time for the news. We must listen to the weather report, and the international catastrophes.”

Choosing a campsite was difficult in Mozambique with the lurking threat of a million landmines. Mosquitoes whined and dined and sweat stung our eyes as we searched for somewhere to sleep in the dusk. Nights in Mozambique were all stewing humidity and torturing choruses of mosquitoes as grating as Primary school recorder recitals. We decided that fire probably blows up landmines and so camped on the blackened remains of bush fires. (Writing this chapter I asked a friend of mine working for a landmine charity, the HALO Trust, about our theory. He just laughed.)

Riding ahead of me Arno was a dusty silhouette in the sunset as we arrived in Caia, an unusual looking town for Africa, showing its Portuguese influences with a plaza and walled *mercado*. We stocked up on bread and oranges. The town wore the heavy label of ‘faded glory’, which was the over-riding impression of most of Mozambique. Uncleared landmines had made parts of the town potentially lethal; trees grew from the shells of houses. Two hundred metres from the sunny spot where we sat eating oranges a child had been blown up recently.

Further into Mozambique we rode a remote road through scrubby bush with no traffic, no villages and worryingly little water. It was hot, too hot. The sunny sky was aqua blue. We were pushing deeper into the bush, a giant, inhospitable expanse of nothingness. To an Englishman, relatively unaccustomed to the enormous wilds of Africa, it was a grim, unwelcoming, ugly land. And yet, for the few people who lived there, it was home, it was familiar normality. Occasionally we passed three or four huts on stilts. A few pigs and chickens shuffled around. It looked one of the most grinding lifestyles I have ever seen. It was just plain survival. We stopped occasionally to ask for water but only accepted a single litre at a time: we did not know how far people had to walk or how deep they had to dig to find water. Our communication attempts failed apart from understanding their shy smiles of welcome. We crouched down beside the naked people sitting outside their hut and politely proffered our water bottle. Three young boys ran off to fill it, fighting each other to carry it.

We were beginning to suspect that Bob Dylan had had more fun in Mozambique than us as we trudged through the days and miles. We discussed the perfect pizza to pass the time. Arno suggested toppings and I awarded a ring of my bell and a point for every suggestion I approved of.

“Olives!”

“Black or green?”

“Both?” Ding!

“Mushrooms and sweet peppers!” Ding!

“How do you say.... Les artichaut? And Parma ham?”

“Monsieur, you are a genius!” Ding! Ding!

“‘Ow about ze salmon and feta cheese?” Ding! Ding!

The miles rolled by...

Later we competed to see who could cycle for the longest with their eyes closed.

We were going at impressive speed through the approaching darkness towards Chimoio. I was relishing my superb level of fitness to be able to ride as fast as this on a heavy bike after such a long day's ride. It was hard for me to remember what it was like being a person with merely ordinary fitness standards. Or so I was smugly thinking until a heavily-set, middle-aged gentleman pulled alongside us on his old single-speed bike on his ride home from work, dressed in spectacles and a suit, carrying a briefcase and full of questions. "Is that a motorised machine, sir?" he asked before grilling us about life on the road.

The lights of Chimoio signalled the return to modern civilization. We were there because that morning a man in a passing car had stopped, given us his phone number, and offered us beds for the night. Unfortunately the number turned out to be incorrect so we were stuck in town, after dark, with nowhere to sleep. We could not find anywhere to camp. We ended up in the cheapest hotel in town after an argument with the owner because we wanted to share a single room to save money and he did not want to let us stay as he thought that we were gay. Word obviously got around because when I went to the toilet in the night I found the way back to the room blocked by a leering guy in tiny blue underpants, massaging his crotch and licking his lips at me. I slammed him against the wall, darted into the room and bolted the door behind me, not knowing whether to be revolted or amused.

It was fortunate that we hadn't camped as a powerful storm lashed the night. We emerged into a morning of grey mist, cold fingers, tall sweet pine trees and fresh wet grass. After thousands of miles of Africa it was a beautiful change.

Stage 18: “Large problems in Zimbabwe”

“Africa’s large problems are largely large Africans.”

- PJ O’Rourke

Vervet monkeys at the border post tried to steal a stick of sugarcane from my bike. I chased them off with my catapult, our new toys purchased in Malawi. Arno was an excellent shot with his but I only ever managed to hit a cow’s backside and, twice, my own hand. I still have the scar. In no-man’s land between Mozambique and Zimbabwe I had somehow managed to get the rear derailleur jammed in the wheel, even bending the frame of the bike in the process. So whilst Arno rode ahead into Mutare I had to walk for 10km pushing Rita, striding out into the golden late afternoon sun, winding up the mountain pass through verdant forest, listening to Verdi at full volume on the music player a friend had sent me. Over that pass lay Zimbabwe: the beginning of the end of the beginning. For so long I had been looking forward to arriving in Zim and I was not to be disappointed by its initial impression of ease and convenience. Mutare had paved roads and street signs and shops and restaurants and everyone spoke English and my bike was mended efficiently and there was a cricket pitch and they even had ice cream! I was so excited. After the rest of Africa, unable to drag itself out of poverty, Zimbabwe’s infrastructure was a shining example.

Leaving Mutare there was a long, steep climb but I managed to grab the back of a passing lorry for a nice tow. Arno grabbed on too as the lorry overtook him and we bartered with the passenger in the back of the lorry over a price for being hauled up the pass. His insistence on an absurd fee backfired on him as in the end we simply let go at the top of the pass, and waved goodbye to him as the oblivious driver chugged on towards Harare.

The land was covered in *koppies*, huge round boulders jumbled on top of each other into improbable, conical, eye-catching hills. As the first stars pierced the evening light we climbed one of the *koppies*, the warmth of the day still radiating from the rocks like the memory of a dream. The rocks were decorated with ancient

San Bushman rock paintings. Simple shapes of animals, the same animals of Africa that delight tourists today but that meant so much more to the person who created those paintings, who depended on those animals for life and for spiritual succour. I tried to imagine the delicate, light-skinned man who had sat on this same rock so long ago. His life had been a simple circle of seasons and a steady procession of years from childhood to adolescence to fatherhood and old age, unfettered by bills, borders or bureaucracy. A hard but simple life, I thought, a little enviously. Yet his life contained more than hunting, surviving and reproducing. For his art expressed an appreciation of beauty and a quest for meaning and fulfillment, an acknowledgement that there was more to life than mundane existing. And that aspect of his life is what has powerfully lived on, connecting with me through so many forgotten generations to my gently tracing, wondering fingers.

We passed neat farms on a smooth paved road with white lines and kilometre markers. Blue skies, a fresh breeze and shaded picnic spots. People waved at us from their cars. On the outside Zimbabwe still looked shiny and healthy. But the veneer of successful tranquility was no longer very deep in Zimbabwe. The farcical, guilt-inducing black market rate of exchange meant that everything was absurdly cheap for us as we changed our money on the streets at ten times the official bank rate. This was the first sign to us that things were not as rosy as they used to be. The terrible slide into anarchy, racism, corruption, starvation and collapse was well on the way. We were in a country imploding in the hands of just one man.

It was not always this way. A fertile land for agriculture and mining, Zimbabwe was, until recent years, one of the most prosperous countries in Africa. Following a long civil war, the first free elections were held in 1980. Robert Mugabe won the election by a landslide, and optimism abounded for the future of Zimbabwe.

The 1% of the population that was white no longer held power, but they did still hold the purse strings, owning 70% of the country's arable land. But since 1999 land redistribution has been at the top of the political agenda as Mugabe began to rave and rage, blaming Colonial days for all his woes as old age turned his mind and he showed no inclination to hand on power. As government racism flipped 180° after two peaceful decades, white

farmers began being forcibly removed from their land and productivity crashed. Debt spiralled uncontrollably and famine scoured a country that was once an exporter of food. Zimbabwe was thrown out of the Commonwealth of Nations for election rigging and human rights abuses as the government eliminated opponents and silenced dissidents.

I was pessimistic about the future of Zimbabwe. The farmers I met agreed that land distribution amongst the people was indeed necessary, but that being thrown illegally from your family home to make way for one of the president's cronies was not the way to do it. Mugabe's campaign is causing famine because food was no longer being produced locally. People in Matabeleland were so desperate that they were beginning to cook and eat cow dung. I wonder how they felt about 'land liberation'? I was, yet again in Africa, riding through a land whose people were dying every day because of their corrupt rulers. Here is a single example to generalise Zimbabwe's woes: Mugabe's wife allegedly holds the record for the most money spent during a shopping visit to Harrods. Robert Mugabe is killing Zimbabwe.

General wisdom amongst people emailing me over the past few months had been that Zimbabwe was currently too dangerous to ride through:

"Don't push your luck, Al."

"Things have changed since you were last there."

"You've been before- don't risk it now. Go through Zambia."

"Go through Mozambique instead."

"The country is nuts. Being white is the only excuse they need to do you over."

But I never felt threatened in Zimbabwe. The people that I encountered were like the majority of people in Africa: hard done by yet stoical, hard up yet generous. Ordinary people who wanted only the freedom to get on with their lives. They wanted jobs not land. You do not learn much about the people of a country by looking at its leaders.

The focal issue for all Zimbabwe's woes was the ejection of white farmers from their land and on Heroes Day (August 12th), a day celebrating victory over the old white regime, President Robert Mugabe had this to say as he insisted that all whites must leave their land by the end of the month:

"Zimbabwe is for Zimbabweans... we are not for the British bidder... This is the land which, until now, was being held by sons

of our colonial oppressors at our expense. This is the land which our victorious heroes could never desire to see remaining in the hands of the people they defeated... Colonialism came from the European Union... the wielders of those arms were Europeans, we now call farmers... Today, as we take our land, in the process settling the grievance of all grievances... we ask the so-called Free World these questions: do democracies enslave; do democracies colonise; do democracies discriminate, massacre, plunder and expropriate?... Britain, Europe and America can impose sanctions, or do worse devilish things... But we shall not budge; we shall not be deterred on this one question. The land is ours! Shame to them!... We know that our quarrel is with the former colonial power Britain and the British Government... We set for ourselves the deadline of end of August by which distribution of land ... resettlement should have been completed."

One evening we approached a farm to ask if we could camp somewhere safe on their land. The owner was not home so the gardener phoned him. He said, with the spontaneous hospitality so typical of Africa, that we could certainly camp and that he would be home in a few hours. We relaxed on the lawn playing with his Rhodesian Ridgeback dogs. When Janie returned he invited us into his home and, over dinner, he spoke about the situation. Over years of hard work he had built his business up and bought, openly and legally, three farms. He had now been evicted from two of them without compensation, and was due to be kicked out of his remaining one. He spoke about the game parks, one of Zimbabwe's treasures, where the army were now wiping out whole herds of buffalo with machine guns to make a few quick bucks from selling the meat. He told of forests being felled on reclaimed farms for the quick cash boost of selling the timber. He talked of violence and intimidation.

Local thugs had prevented Janie from voting in the recent farcical Presidential elections which nearly all international inspectors decried. As the South African delegate took the stand and gave his verdict of 'a free and fair election' the hall erupted in disgusted laughter and many inspectors walked out. It is to South Africa's shame that they have shown support for Mugabe's actions simply by refusing to denounce them. More than any other country, South Africa should be alert to the implications of this slippery slope.

Janie was an honest, hard-working man, and entertaining company. However Arno asked him what was the solution for Africa. Why was the majority of this wonderful continent mired in poverty, disease and corruption. Janie replied, wearily, “You guys are going to think I’m a bloody racist, but when I get up there [points to Heaven], I will say to the good Lord “*why on earth did you make the African?*””

I was sorry to hear this response and, over the next few months, sadly came to realise that it was not just the likes of Robert Mugabe and right wing white extremist Eugene Terreblanche who still saw things in simple black and white.

Stage 19: “Behind the boerewors curtain”

*“We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started,
And to know the place for the first time.”*

- TS Eliot

South Africa immediately felt different to the rest of the continent. It was wealthy, developed, dangerous and fascinating. My first concern was that finding places to sleep rough was difficult: unlike everywhere else the land was privately fenced off and staked with bold warning pictures of rifles and dogs and handcuffs. Stealth and a bit of cheeky fence jumping was in order for me. Alone once more, and in the new atmosphere I sensed in South Africa, I felt more scared about camping than I had for months. I was disgusted at myself as I realised that even just a few days in South Africa had given me, despite all my time in Africa, an us-and-them mentality. I felt vulnerable and I felt white. So I hid carefully in the thorny bush where nobody could see me. Piebald clouds ran across the full moon reminding me of a similar night back in Ethiopia on the way to Lalibela. I wondered whether perhaps Sarah was also looking at the moon.

A pick-up truck (*bakkie*) pulled over one day and a couple invited me to their home for lunch. Hennie Kruger was about thirty years old, huge, blond, sun-weathered and wearing very, very tight khaki shorts, a khaki shirt and knee length socks. His wife, Margie, had a blow dry perm with cheap highlights, gold stud earrings and the ample signs of enjoying five barbecues, *braais* a week. They were classic Afrikaners. Afrikaners are the ‘white tribe’ of South Africa, descendants of the Dutch, and integral to the life and history of South Africa. I gratefully accepted the invitation. Hennie told his wife to make us some lunch and she obediently toddled off towards the kitchen. Smiling in anticipation he told me he had just made a fresh batch of *boerewors*, the long curly sausage ubiquitous to outdoor eating in

South Africa. He happily talked me through the ingredients to whet our appetites.

Boerewors

Ingredients:

2 kg chuck beef (fat and gristle removed)
1 kg thick pork rib
200g pork fat
1 tablespoon ground coriander
2 tablespoons salt and pepper
1 tablespoon nutmeg
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup vinegar
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup white wine
pork casings

Method:

Mince all the meat and fat. Mix together with the other ingredients and leave for an hour. Soak the casings in water during this period. Fry a little of the mixture to try the taste. Stuff the casings with the mixture. Cook outdoors on hot coals.

We were sitting on the veranda, sheltered from the sun and wind by a row of tall poplar trees. Their child, a solid six-year-old replica of Hennie, ran barefoot round the garden shouting and fighting whole armies of imaginary foes. Hennie spoke in thickly accented English (he rarely had to speak English: Afrikaans and Sotho were his dominant languages) of his deep love for the farming life and the peace and quiet of the bush. He had not been into town for three months. He spoke about rugby, *braais* and blue skies, the passions of virtually all white South African men. Our twenty minutes of idle chat before lunch incorporated a biblical explanation of why black people are lower than white people and how therefore it is wrong that blacks and whites should mix.

Today South Africa is working very hard to rebalance itself. White South Africans have been brought up for generations ignoring the obvious unpleasantness and unfairness of their country and it is hard to change engrained dogma. But I encountered little racism amongst the younger generations of urban whites and I barely ever encountered racist blacks.

Mandela's dignified forgiveness set the benchmark for his Rainbow Nation to aim for in the early 1990's when violent revolution was a very real possibility. Archbishop Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation hearings provided amnesty and a new beginning in exchange for honesty and repentance of apartheid-era crimes. The emphasis was on forgiveness and working together for a happier future.

Today Affirmative Action is fast-tracking blacks in all walks of life, a necessary phase on the long walk to establishing justice in South Africa. That the population is predominantly black means that the best person for a job will usually be black anyway. But this period of redressing the balance is hard on young whites looking for jobs and promotion and many have left South Africa. But, after a decade of democracy there is now something of a homecoming revolution. People are returning to South Africa, trying to make it work and focusing on the good news of which there is a great deal. South Africa has had to wash her dirty laundry in public, yet all countries have race issues. South Africa is dealing with hers more openly than most. Crime and violence felt more tangible in South Africa than most other countries in Africa, yet it is one of the few African examples of a functioning government, infrastructure and economy. South Africa has its problems, but every other country on the continent would enjoy its democracy, economy and potential.

Reaching South Africa was special for me not only because it was the final country in Africa, but also because it was a country I knew. After leaving school I had come to teach in a little rural school for a year before going to University. Nelson Mandela had just become President, South Africa had just won the rugby World Cup; the country was awash with optimism and hopes were deliriously high for the future. It was a good time to be in South Africa.

I had lived in Lebowa, one of the 'Homelands' of the apartheid era. The apartheid governments ("half-baked dreamers with a nasty streak," as John Simpson described them) turfed countless black families out of their homes in fertile 'white areas' and crammed them together in arid, barren wastelands rebranded as semi-autonomous Homelands. Despite its aridity, Lebowa was beautiful. The land was covered with *koppies* and the earth was red and dry. Like tomatoes on a market stall the vast red boulders of the *koppies* were piled into enormous pyramids. Amongst them

leathery green aloes grew. Skinny cattle wandered the balding earth. Burned out carcasses of vehicles were dotted around, relics of the vicious ‘taxi wars’ of the mid 1990’s between rival groups of minibus taxi owners. When I arrived in the village of Jane Furse, fresh from school, in 1995, the walls of the market were scarred with bullet holes and angry graffiti shouted *‘Welcome to Beirut’*. Now, after six years, I was riding back to Jane Furse.

I passed through the town of Lebowakomo and was delighted to see that the fellow who used to run a public call booth by tapping into the main phone line had still not been arrested. A panel beater seemed to be branching out: his rough hand-painted sign read ‘penile biter’. I was an impatient rider: the distances had never seemed so great when I was travelling round by minibus. But eventually I arrived back in the village of Jane Furse. ‘Mokoko’s Fried Chicken’ was still there, the dirty fast food place I had never dared enter in my Gap year but which now looked quite appealing. There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered. I was back on familiar ground for the first time since Yorkshire!

I dismounted and walked down the hill to the school, partly to savour the moment and partly because my brakes didn’t work. I smiled and smiled. Past the minibus taxi rank, still pumping with deafening music distorted through cheap speakers. Big ladies were still sitting by the road selling bananas and cool drinks to the taxi passengers. As usual my passing generated hilarity and curiosity. But in Jane Furse I was not quite so much of a stranger. I knew where I was going. I surprised people as I wheeled my bicycle through the busy street by greeting them in Sotho, “*Dumela, Ma! Agee? Legae! Rekona legae!*” “Hello, Ma! Good morning, how are you? I’m very, very well!” It was good to be back: I felt comfortable. That village did so much for me. It was there that I fell in love with Africa, there that I first dreamed of seeing some of the world. I had wanted to return for years and finally I was back.

Riding south I camped in the garden of an Afrikaans farming family. Their bungalow was simply furnished with fading furniture. The walls were flaking and needed a coat of paint. The parents were not very well educated but the nine-year-old daughter was a precocious ‘new’ South African, happy to chatter in Afrikaans, English or Zulu. She helped her parents with some of the English words as they asked me many questions about life

in England. The Afrikaans farmers are tough folk, working extremely hard to keep themselves afloat and casting increasingly anxious glances in the direction of Zimbabwe's lunacy. They were good people and they filled me up on *pap* (the latest name for the dense corn-meal porridge resembling mashed potato that had been the staple diet since it was called *ugali* back in Kenya), fried eggs and cups of tea. I spent about an hour in the night chasing around the garden trying to stop their Jack Russell from throttling the cat who squealed in anguish every time the dog got her by the windpipe only to be told in the morning that they always played like that. In South Africa even the pets are tough.

The Free State region is notorious for long, flat monotonous roads. In my experience though they are long, *hilly* and monotonous. In a car you wouldn't even notice the gradients as you zoomed along half asleep, steering wheel gripped between your knees and pie crumbs scattered over your lap. But on a bike each climb hurts. I enjoyed the Free State. It was a province of massive skies, yellow grass, creaking old irrigation windmills, roll after roll of pale fields and occasional farms snuggled inside clusters of dark green trees. Nelson Mandela loved it too for its big skies and calm. The farmers were reserved but kind and the days and miles rolled by. I asked a man leaving his home for directions. After setting me right he called back into the house in Afrikaans then departed in his car. His wife emerged with a plate of ice cream cake for me, smiled and returned inside. I left the licked-clean plate by the gate and a note with my limited Afrikaans: "*Dankie! Lekker!*" ("Thanks! Excellent!")

One evening I still had not found a camping spot by nightfall. I didn't want to knock on someone's door after dark but there was no wild land nearby where I could camp. Stealthily then I entered a small private wood close to a farmhouse, silently pitched my tent, ate and settled down for the night, hiding from two potential foes: wild, rampaging axe murderers whose sheer improbability did not deter me from hiding carefully from them each night, and irate, shotgun-wielding landowners. I was back on the road again before dawn. Finding a safe, hidden campsite was a daily challenge on my journey. I rarely worried once I was settled in whatever hideout I found for myself each night, unless I heard voices or a slamming car door nearby. Then I would lie tense, alert and wide awake, listening for heavy breathing, creeping footsteps approaching, and the sharpening of blood-crusted axe blades. I

always made sure that nobody saw me sneak from the road into the wood or ditch where I intended to sleep. I kept quiet, kept my head down and my ears open. I kept my (laughably small) knife beside my head, as a last desperate resort. Writing this now, with Mozart playing and pork chop aromas sizzling their way up the stairs, I find it hard to remember that this constant caution and potential risk was normality for me, that I saw no alternative, and so I just got on with it and rarely worried.

I began to see the flat-topped Drakensberg mountain range far ahead, made small by the hand of distance. My band of tarmac seemed intent on leading me straight towards the highest of the peaks. I had turned down a generous invitation of accommodation from a luxury hotel received through my website in order to make a detour for my final challenge: riding over the highest road in Africa. Foolhardy? Perhaps. But as Eddy Merckx said, “there are no laws that govern the will.” Sometimes “the heart has its reasons that the head knows nothing of.” So the climbs grew ever more severe as I approached Lesotho. The officials were friendly at the border but painful looking mountains waited ahead. Far across the fields a shepherd, swathed in blanket, wellington boots and a conical straw hat to fight the cold, sang to himself and the tune carried gently through the still air.

The light was seeping from the pale sky as I pitched camp outside a small electricity substation. Camping there ensured that I had my own personal guard for the night. In true African style the night watchman of the station, Simon, was not doing much guarding and was busy listening to a lot of static and not much music on his radio. I gave him some batteries to tide him through the long night. He had been trying to recharge his old batteries by heating them on a gas ring. I lay in the cold tent awaiting the explosion.

Lesotho is a high mountainous land, far from any ocean. The climbs never stop and the gradients can be up to 35%, so steep that even pushing the bike turned me into a sweaty, collapsed heap lying beside the road. Day after day of extraordinary mountain passes. Each climb took a few hours of hard effort, clawing higher metre by precious metre, knowing that as soon as the summit was reached then gravity would continue its punishment, laughing evilly, as it whisked me all the way back down to the valley floor to start again. The descents were lethally steep hairpin bends that I had to slalom zigzags on to try to keep my speed down as my

brakes no longer worked. I wore a hole through the sole of my left shoe dragging it along the ground. Up, down, up, down, up, up, up. My bike was in a terrible state with broken spokes and no brakes. I had to manually change gear with an old toothbrush, my rack was spliced with string and a spoon and the inner tube stuck out through a tear in the tyre. My back wheel was so wobbly that Rita could no longer freewheel. Each day I endured punctures through my tired tyres and my worn chain kept snapping. With Cape Town only weeks away I no longer cared about the bike, just so long as it got me there. My clothes were as tattered as my bike and I must have appeared like a tramp on wheels to the people I encountered. My mind and my spirit were running almost on empty too. Tiny incidents would waft me to tears or triumph. My thoughts disappeared into an empty black void of confusion if I tried to contemplate anything beyond Cape Town, so I didn't bother. I just thought all the time of getting to Cape Town.

I had hoped to spend a night in a diamond mine. But I arrived after the gates had closed for the night so I ended up in Anthony's backroom instead. It was dark when I pushed open the creaking corrugated tin door of the *shebeen* in a windswept shanty village of furtive shadows and pariah dogs. I saw drunken silhouettes outlined in the dim light from smoky paraffin wicks burning in old beer bottles. The air inside was warm, smoky, alcoholic and sweat tainted, a thick contrast to the sharp and cold night. Despite his astonishment at my appearance, owner Anthony was more than happy to assist. He showed me to a metal shed. Outside prowled a pack of growling guard-dogs and Anthony advised me to stay inside until daylight. He returned to his customers and I peed in a pot and left it steaming on the floor. Even in all my clothes, sleeping bag and three borrowed blankets I was cold throughout the night. Yet when I woke in the morning I felt for the first time that in fact I *didn't* want to arrive in Cape Town. My life was so settled: I knew my routine. I knew what I was doing today and tomorrow and next week. Cape Town meant uncertainty and big decisions. In Cape Town I had to think whether or not to continue the ride. And if I did continue then I needed to find a way to get across the Atlantic. I had no idea how to even begin figuring that one out. So I tried to just enjoy today.

A sure sign that I was not the first foreigner to pass this way was every small child yelling at me for sweets. I shouted

“SWEEEEEEETS!” back at them and confused them. Happy mayhem: this felt like good old Africa again after the quietness of South Africa. Poverty and barefoot begging and pandemonium in the markets. *Mealie* (corn-on-the-cob) sellers wafted small piles of glowing charcoal with squares of cardboard. Pulses of blue smoke mingled with the crowd as the yellow cobs slowly browned. I realised how quickly the wealth and infrastructure of South Africa had made me forget what most of Africa was like; wonderful but exhausting. Minibus taxis swerved amongst shoppers whilst stall owners sat quietly waiting for business beside their wares.

A teenager played a guitar made from a cooking oil tin. His tune was upbeat as I pedaled through his village heading towards ever tougher mountains. It was good to realise that I hadn’t totally lost my enjoyment of the ridiculous. I was 3200 metres above sea level by mid-afternoon and I still had another two mountain passes before I reached the highest. I rode up towards the source of a sprightly trout stream, its cool water a delicious temptation and in a grove of willows I submerged my hot, throbbing head. “Clear, clean chill currents coursing and spuming through the sour and stale compartments of the brain, bleared eyesockets, filmed tongue.” The air was awash with a heady fragrance. Was it rosemary? Perhaps thyme? I would have liked to have had somebody with me to ask. The valleys far below me blushed with pink blossom. Outside every small round home grew a bright pink cherry tree. Blankets were hung outside to air in the sun, heavy lurid squares depicting teddy bears, kitsch flower arrangements or improbable mountain-scapes. Blue mountain ranges flowed over each other, an ocean of incredible beauty in all directions. As Paul Theroux appreciated, the silence was so great that it was nearly visible.

I could barely push the bike up the roads, let alone cycle. My arms and my legs and my back hurt. I listened to *Pie Jesu* on my headphones. The only disturbance to its languid grace was my rapid, ragged breathing flecked with saliva and exhortations to myself of “come on, Al, just a little farther, Al, always a little farther.” Every pedal stroke improved the view but diminished how much I cared. There was an overwhelming sunset as I eventually crested the summit of the Tlaeeng Pass. At 3275 metres this was, at last, the Highest Road in Africa. It was all downhill from here. A jackal darted across the road. It would soon be dark. It was very cold. I was hungry. I was racing along alone with

absolutely no idea of where I would sleep, no idea where I would find something to eat and no idea who I would meet next. A slow sunset silhouetted all before me, ridge after ridge of wild, empty mountains. Below me the hills were a hundred shades of green, with the exception of one hillside glowing with red heather.

If the journey needs defining snapshots, that pass epitomised why I began the ride. Douglas Coupland's *Generation X* asks, "What one moment for you defines what it's like to be alive on this planet? What's your 'takeaway'?" I began because England was too easy. "The days were not full enough, and the nights were not full enough, and life slipped by like a field mouse not shaking the grass." I wanted something that I did not know that I was capable of. I would never know unless I tried. I wanted unpredictability. I wanted to demand more of myself than I could demand from others. I wanted open space. I wanted anxiety and insecurity, storm and strife, even if I did not always have the courage to cope with them. I wanted to strive, to seek and to see whether or not I would yield. I wanted to overload my senses. I felt that I would only know my strength if I took the strain, that I needed to taste blood to know I was hurt, needed to be thrashed by a gale to accept it was windy, needed to taste lung to believe I had pushed myself hard. I needed to confirm that I was alive. That day all Africa lay beneath me. When Edmund Hillary summited Mount Everest he declared, "Well, we knocked the bastard off!" Now I knew a fragment of how he felt.

Ordinarily with sporting events and expeditions there are defining moments, celebrations and opportunities to reflect. The Tour de France is three weeks long, climbing Everest or sailing round the world may take three months. But I had been on the road for over a year and had not even made it through Africa yet. I had years more of all this ahead of me. So I found it hard to grasp a sense of perspective because I had little idea of what lay ahead of me, of how long the journey would take, or how difficult the challenges ahead may be. I never knew what would be the overall significance of each particular milestone I reached. There was never time to relax and bask because as soon one peak was reached a whole new horizon of challenges, obstacles and logistics opened up in front of me. So I climbed back on my bike and free-wheeled down the road.

Stage 20: “Indifference or Despair”

“Despair is a narcotic. It lulls the mind into indifference.”
- Charlie Chaplin

I dropped down the Sani pass from Lesotho back into South Africa. Descending the pass was frightening: a series of tight hairpin bends with carcasses of careless vehicles sprawled on their backs in the gorge below, a grisly reminder to keep concentrating. Only 4WD vehicles could attempt the road. Tourists are driven up the pass in special tour groups and I grinned smugly at their surprise when they saw me. I am so vain sometimes. The distinctive peaks of the Drakensberg with names like Giant’s Cup and Devil’s Knuckles stood tall above the quaint old towns of Underberg and Himeville. I rode across Kwa Zulu Natal amongst prosperous, English-speaking farms. Leaving Kokstad I climbed a pass and on the far side was the Transkei, another of the former semi-autonomous Homelands of the old South Africa.

There were no smart farmhouses in the Transkei. The landscape was instantly much poorer. Mud huts, potholes, cows on the road, trampled fences. Women sold individual cigarettes and matches to passers-by. Clusters of youths loafed around with nothing to do today or tomorrow: no work, no escape. There was an air of surliness that I had not felt in most of Africa. Unemployment was almost absolute in the Transkei. The only hope was to seek work in the big cities. Often men would not return home to their families for a whole year. A whole year saving pennies. Lines of young men sitting on the pavements in cities, hoping to be picked up for a day’s unofficial labour here and there. Boys standing on streets at all hours guarding cars or begging at traffic lights in the hope of a small reward.

I had been bombarded with warnings about theft, murder and the general nastiness of the Transkei. Nobody had a good word to say about the area, which was often described as ‘cruel’. A few people thought that I should take a bus or arrange a police escort through the area. Some white people would not drive through the region let alone cycle. I didn’t know whether it was white paranoia, genuine

danger or a bit of both, but I would soon find out. To be on the safe side, I made a point of staying with village chiefs each night.

One night I stayed in the chief's office in a small village near Qumba (pronounced in two syllables as “*click*-umba’). His village was a cluster of conical, thatched mud huts painted turquoise. Only half of each house was painted so that the sun would heat the unpainted area and keep the home warm into the night. After apologising for not speaking Xhosa, I explained my journey, as so often before, through a squirming, embarrassed teenager who could speak English. I explained that I was completely self-sufficient: everything that I needed was in my panniers. I did not need anything except the chief's permission to stay and his assistance to find me somewhere safe to pitch my tent for the night. “Of course you can stay!” he replied, “You can stay right here!” And he spread his hands wide to encompass the very hut we were talking in. Despite my protests of self-sufficiency I spotted four ladies pooling their money to buy a small square of margarine for my supper.

In the morning the Chief's youngest son came to my hut with a basin of hot water for me to wash with. He walked carefully across the dew-pearled grass, tongue out and concentrating hard not to spill the water. I ate breakfast with the chief at his desk. His wife served us bowls of sour brown porridge. I had never acquired much of a taste for the various breakfast porridges of Africa but I was at least well practised by now in the art of politely eating anything I was served. Porridge is, as HW Tilman wisely noted, at least a convenient way of conveying to your mouth large quantities of sugar. Over bread, margarine and tea from chipped cups he told me about his busy day ahead rectifying a cornucopia of local disputes. The chief was caring, welcoming and sensible. What else should you expect from Nelson Mandela's own people?

Despite the safe havens I was welcomed into each night, I was still on edge, tendon tight, a quivering rope beyond its safe strain limit. Perhaps it was the stark warnings I had been battered with. Perhaps it was the underlying hopelessness I sensed in the region. Perhaps it was my body and mind crying out for a break, my heart and nerve and sinew almost gone. I was determined not to grow indifferent but after almost a year of Africa's struggles I could not bear any more. Despite the positive evenings I spent the days riding with a denial of music in my headphones (“...Doctor what is happening to me? Palpitations, my mind is diseased...” sang

James). I just wanted to get to the end. I set about learning the Xhosa for “Sod this, I want to go home.” (“rha ndifuna ukugoduka”: easier done than said.)

I felt more attached to South Africa than any other country and I cared about its future. I wanted to fill myself with positive images of the country but I could not do it in the Transkei. I was tired, numb and, though I don’t think I realised it, scared by the potential savagery. There was no way I was carrying on after Cape Town, I resolved. The emotional oscillations were still in full swing. England to Cape Town. England to Cape Town. England to Cape Town. There was a nice ring to that. Yes, I was definitely packing it all in at Cape Town.

Stage 21: “The end of the beginning”

*“This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end.
But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.”*
- Winston Churchill

The brown hills were once more dotted with green aloes and bushes. The land grew less barren: the end of the Transkei was approaching. I was weaving amongst wide, winding rivers closing in on the sea after their long journeys. I passed a signpost for Coffee Bay. Back in Malawi I had met a German on a motorbike on a bridge. He had told me that Coffee Bay was his favourite place in Africa. I suddenly remembered his advice and decided to take a left and check it out. It was a beautiful, windy, winding ride to Coffee Bay up and down steep-edged river valleys, the landscape crumpled like a screwed ball of paper. Angry black clouds highlighted the lush green of the hills. Splashes of blue hung in the sky. A spear of sunlight struck a field, gilding it. The wind gripped and dragged the grinding, churning clouds across the sky. I had not seen the ocean since Tanzania. Reaching the clifftops I hid my bike in some bushes and went for a walk. The wet, shining grass was warm under my bare feet and I breathed in the smell of the sea and the moist green hills of the gorgeous Wild Coast. I climbed higher, up a steep, grassy slope on the edge of a cliff. It was good to be alone once again, away from the endless watching eyes of the crowded Transkei, away from having to watch my own back. The green sea stirred milky as waves crept in and crashed. Dolphins gently rose and fell, their shape clear below the green water. Massive waves boomed as cows daintily nibbled the very edge of the bluff. I felt my mind relax, the knots and tightness massaged free by the lonely sea and the sky with the white clouds flying. You cannot find silence beside the sea. After the Transkei and my vagrant gypsy’s life it was just what I needed.

Leering youths in Butterworth made throat-slashing gestures at me as darkness fell and I struggled to repair a puncture. Stupidly I

gave them the finger and then pedaled like mad to get out of town and find somewhere to hide and camp. The next day I rode through King William's Town, the home of one of my first South African heroes, Steve Biko. Biko was the founder of the Black Consciousness movement and one of Apartheid's most famous martyrs. He was the subject of the film *Cry Freedom*. I enjoyed his feistiness, for example his famous argument with a judge in one of his many court appearances: "Mr. Biko," asked the judge, wearily, "Why do your people insist on calling yourselves 'black'?" To my eye you are more brown than black?" "Your Honour," Biko replied, "why do your people call yourselves 'white'?" To my eyes you are more pink than white." The judge was not amused.

I camped in a grove of aloe trees. Yellow and purple flowers, aloes, cacti and a winding brown river spread across the wide depths of the Great Fish River Gorge. This was the river described in Rian Malan's book *My Traitor's Heart* as the old white man's frontier. The land from the Cape to here was well known to early European settlers but beyond this river lay the dark, frightening unknown stretching on endlessly towards Cairo. I was on the finishing straight now.

Grahamstown had the feel of an English Market Town. It is famous for its churches, schools, university and an annual arts festival. Streets were edged with puddles and trees blowing in the mad, random wind. It felt like home. I had come to Grahamstown to talk about my ride at some schools. I was walking through town with my bike one morning thinking how something as ordinary and familiar as a High Street becomes fascinating when seen out of context when I was startled by somebody sprinting across the road at me, waving his arms and shouting "Al! Al! Al!" The excited stranger set about calming my rather alarmed face. I was happily surprised as Simon Schoon explained that he had been following my progress down Africa on my website and had been thinking just that morning that I was now probably somewhere close to Grahamstown. We had coffee in a café and chatted.

I quickly liked Simon: he had a great enthusiasm for life and an appreciation of the ridiculous. He was really eager to help me, especially after looking in horror at the terrible state poor Rita was in. The bike shop he took me to was also excited by my journey and incredulous about my bike, insisting on repairing the brakes and changing the tyres free of charge. While the mechanic worked Simon took me to Rhodes University, where he was studying, so

that I could use the internet. The internet was an invaluable tool during my journey, allowing me to email my family regularly to reassure them (or remind them) that I was still alive, to research and plan my route, to keep up to date with Leeds United and other key global issues, and to update my website. My website was useful for promoting '*Hope and Homes for Children*' and for telling a wider audience about my journey which brought me assistance from strangers in many parts of the world. The website also added a veneer of professionalism and focus to my ride, which otherwise may have appeared to be rather bumbling. This helped at times where people needed to be impressed by hard evidence and facts rather than by word of mouth, trust or imagination, for example when I was trying to arrange speaking engagements or interviews or to wangle free passage across oceans. Finally, updating my website was something that I enjoyed for my own pleasure, spending large amounts of time on the road pondering how I would try to portray a particular country in just a few brief sentences.

Bike fixed, website done. Pub beckoned.

We sat in the 'Rat and Parrot' pub with some of Simon's friends, Vicky, Kirsty and Paul. As the table slowly disappeared beneath empty glasses I felt a deep melancholic happiness, enjoying the reminder of nights of laughter with like-minded, adventurous friends. Alcohol and chaste months combined to turn every woman into a beautiful Siren and I grinned stupidly at the world until the bar staff had wiped down the last table and booted us out into the night.

After all the recent rain the hills were lushly green and clouds scudded high in the warm wind. A group of boys from St. Andrew's school accompanied me on their bikes for 5 miles out of Grahamstown and Simon, Kirsty and Paul continued another 25 miles with me. They waved me off after we had all written our names on a road sign, inspired presumably by similar sentiments to David Livingstone carving his initials on trees during his travels.

A wearing side to my ride was being asked exactly the same questions every single day by every single new person I met. I always enjoyed being able to stay with a family for more than a couple of days because then I was able to chat about things other than my bike ride. People's curiosity was always on similar lines,

“Did you get sick? What was the worst thing that happened to you? What was your favourite place? Wasn’t the ride dangerous? Doesn’t your bum hurt?”

I always tried to remind myself that for everyone I met it was the first time they had asked ‘The Questions’ and that they were perfectly normal questions to ask. I remembered Ffyona Campbell’s rude attitude to the drip torture of ‘The Questions’ in her books and promised myself that I must be courteous. The urge to become sarcastic grew ever stronger though as the days, weeks and months piled up. At times I would go through phases of deliberately avoiding people as I could not bear to explain myself yet again. The Questions came thick and fast, often with no greeting to begin the process, giving me no time to escape or to ask any questions of my own.

“Where have you come from?”

“England.”

“That is your country. Where have you come from on your bike?”

“England.”

“No, that is too far. Where have you come from on your bike?”

“England.”

Sceptical looks and a change of tack.

“But how do you cross the oceans? Do you pedal very fast over the water?” (*Ha! Ha!* How I laughed at this annoyingly regular favourite. It wasn’t even funny the first time.)

“Why are you alone?”

“I have no friends.”

“What is your job?”

“This is my job.”

Many questions revolved around my perceived wealth. I became good at fending these off, though I dreaded them more than any others and my heart would sink when a newly made friend started to care only about my bank balance.

“How much does this cost, my friend? And this? And this? And this? Perhaps you will be giving me your sunglasses?”

When questions focused solely on money I felt like an outsider, a circus show, a freakish demonstration of outrageous Western wealth. The people I liked most were the people who did not care how much my shoes cost and had deeper interests in my life and my journey and the coincidental brief crossing of our lives.

“How much do you earn in England?”

“Well, a packet of cigarettes in England costs the same as twenty packets here, and a room in London costs £500 a month so it is a very expensive country to live in.”

“How did you afford your journey? Are you very rich?”

“I saved some money and now I live very cheap. I spend less everyday than a sandwich costs at home. I sleep in my tent and I eat lots of bananas.”

“How much is your bike?”

“About 50kg.” (A great deflection)

“Where are you going to?”

“Today I am going to the next town, about 100km away.”

“You are going *there*, on a *bicycle*! You are crazy! Do you realise how far that is? It is 100km from here! You are crazy! It is not possible!”

“Bye bye.”

After another bruising battle with the wind, so brunt it seemed to dent the balls of my eyes, I made it to Jeffrey’s Bay. J-Bay is the surf Mecca of South Africa. I had wanted to go there ever since I discovered that the perfect wave immortalised in the film *Endless Summer* was just around the corner. Disappointingly J-Bay had none of the wandering, dream-chasing spirit of that endless summer and had contented itself with becoming a shoppers’ paradise for out of shape Brits on their fortnight’s break from office routine. In their new *Billabong* and *Quiksilver* clothes they at least looked the part. I propped up a beach bar and marvelled with the barmen, in that unattractive male way, at one of the most captivating bikini girls that we had ever (in our collective wisdoms) had the good fortune to set eyes on. She was so stunning that none of us dared to even go and say hello as she sat alone and bored. Oh, the unspeakable tortures of being a tongue-tied, average-looking male.

I do not know what provoked me, but for some reason I decided to thrash out over a hundred miles into the wind to the village of Plettenberg Bay. The thrill of pushing hard, the joy of realising that you can do it, of knowing that you have taken something on and pushed against your personal barriers to achieve it is electric. My legs and body were weak and feeble but my mind was fired with life. With the sun close to the black hills and angling into my eyes I rounded a corner and below lay Plettenberg Bay. I had a rush of pride, “I’ve done it! I’ve beaten this damn continent!” I

screamed down the pass, adrenalin roaring through my body as I slashed the corners tighter and faster and shouted and shouted in triumph. Tired yet smiling I pulled into the village. Offshore, Southern Right Whales broached to shrieks of delight from binocular clutching admirers. This suited me as I could lie in the grass, eyes closed against the sun, and just sit up and enjoy the whales' appearances whenever the whooping started.

But the real bonus of reaching Plett was that I bumped into the bikini girl once again. To my complete surprise she approached me and even spoke to me. She was travelling along the Garden Route for a few weeks holiday and was going to stay in Plettenberg Bay for a few days. Suddenly I was not quite so desperate to reach Cape Town. What difference does a few days make, I reasoned.

“Where have you come from?” she asked.

“England!” I beamed heroically.

“That is your country. Where have you come from on your bike?”

“England!” flashed from my most charming smile.

“No, that is too far. Where have you come from on your bike?”

“What a superb question! Would you like to have a coffee whilst we discuss it?”

“But how do you cross the oceans? Do you pedal very fast over the water?”

Once I had calmed down from my waves of delighted laughter at this most hilarious and original joke, I explained modestly how I had swum the channel in only my briefest of Speedos, wrestling sharks and rescuing a young child or two along the way.

“Why are you alone?”

“Travelling alone is a chance to look deep into my soul and to write poetry, because long distance cycling is not just about having muscular thighs and sculpted buttocks.” (I flexed my legs to demonstrate that, despite being sensitive and thoughtful, I was also well honed.) “But above all, I chose to travel alone because maybe, just maybe, I would meet a special and wonderful soul mate somewhere along the road. Perhaps you would like to try on my sunglasses?”

And on and on rolled my nonsense, and my head spun with the delirious novelty of flirtation and the waiter was exhausted as he brought coffee after coffee and piles of cakes that I didn’t want

and couldn't afford but I didn't care just so long as I could keep this girl beside me.

The final question came: "Where are you going to now?"

"I thought I might hang around here for a few days: I hear they have a fascinating village museum..."

"Oh I am so glad. I am staying by the beach. Why don't you come with me?"

At times I loved the attention that my bike got me.

"Surely the Franschhoek pass must be the final pass in Africa?" I panted to myself some days later. Around me the hills were covered in *fynbos* heather, looking like a sunny day in Scotland. Rocky outcrops separated noisy brown streams. I clung to a scrap of shade beneath an overhang to write my diary. I enjoyed my final piece of chewing gum, fastidiously rationed since Ethiopia. Up a final bend and there below me lay Franschhoek. Winding out of the valley bottom was a single road, the road to Cape Town. I drank in the cool smell of pine as I swooped down the winding road. This was just silly, I thought: immaculate vineyards combed along the lower slopes, vertical craggy heights, dazzling Cape Dutch wineries, a perfect blue sky and only two days to go till Cape Town. What on earth had I been whining (not wining) for all year? It was a sign of how close I was now that topping the pass I had hoped that I may see Table Mountain for the first time. Not yet, my friend. Not yet.

My first view of Table Mountain came just before Stellenbosch. One of my main motivations through all the tough times had been the thought of how I would feel the moment I eventually rounded that last corner or crested that last hill and for the first time gazed in wild surmise on Table Mountain and the end of Africa. But, like Mandela, "I did not linger, for my long ride was not yet ended." I had imagined myself weeping with joy or leaping in the air but I just smiled within myself and pedaled on. Harold Pinter said that the more acute the experience, the less articulate the expression. In the circumstances then I think that I did pretty well with a quiet "Bugger me."

I rendezvoused with Adam Alexander in Stellenbosch. A Botswanan student at the University of Cape Town, Adam had found my website many months ago and followed my progress. He was a friend of Simon in Grahamstown. As I neared Cape Town he had made contact with me, invited me to stay, been

incredibly helpful organising media coverage and was now going to ride the final two days with me. I was a little concerned when I saw the sleekness of his shiny yellow triathlon bicycle and eager grin. I looked down at my sun-bleached panniers and solid mountain bike frame and feared that I was in for a painful high speed ride. Fortunately, he was more than happy to trundle along at my heavily laden pace and to join me in my regular pauses to rest, take in the view and reflect that there was just one day more. What's more, Adam had a backpack full of muffins and pies. I nearly tore his arm off as he offered me the choice of “‘spinach and feta’ or ‘chicken and mushroom’?”

We paused on the coast near Khayelitsha, Cape Town’s largest township. Three white men stopped their vehicle beside us, their *bakkie* festooned with fishing rods.

“If you *okes* hang about here the bloody *kaffirs* will rob you for certain.”

The word ‘*kaffir*’ encapsulates apartheid and has now acquired the status of the most offensive word in South Africa. People only ever say ‘*kaffir*’ to make a statement and even then it is usually only uttered in hushed tones, except by unpleasant men stinking of brandy and Coke. I told them that I had just cycled the length of Africa, that I felt safe and that I had talked with, eaten with, enjoyed the company of and shared the homes of Africans throughout the continent. They looked at me as though I was insane and drove away. Signs along the beautiful beach warned that automatic rifles were forbidden on the beach.

Adam and I gently cruised the last few miles through the Cape Point National Park, down the peninsula that grew narrower and narrower until finally there was no further left to ride. Cape Point. Horace wrote, “here is the end of the map; and of the road.” The end of Africa. The end of my road.

But to pull up in a crowded car park and say ‘THE END’ just did not feel right. Adam shook my hand but he looked embarrassed at what a non-event the whole thing was. Like me Adam was a sucker for sporting high drama and emotional defining moments and he recognised a non-one when he saw it. Japanese tourists were literally queuing up to take photos, squashed together at the viewpoints, and they shuffled around me as I stood trying to gather my thoughts.

Cape Point is a magnificent lick of land striking boldly out towards Antarctica as Africa refuses to surrender softly to the

ocean. Looking down from the cliff top lighthouse I watched birds flying below me and in the glass green rolling waves seals cavorted, as oblivious to the turmoil in my head as the next damn person who was going to nudge me aside so that they could take a photo of someone with white, knobbly knees, varicose veins and a tour group badge saying “Hi! I’m Bubba.”

I hadn’t spoken to Sarah since England but now it was time to make the call. I had often dreamed of calling her first to tell her that I had done it. I really wanted to share this moment with her. But the pay phone wouldn’t do International Calls. I hung up disappointed. I could not muster any excitement at all. And the ice cream shop was closed.

The celebration needed rescuing. So, as Adam returned to Cape Town for the night (he decided reluctantly that he really should do a little bit of revision for his finals exams next week) I hid at the Cape of Good Hope and waited for the tourists to leave and the full moon to rise. I sat on a sand dune and enjoyed a piece of KFC chicken that a couple had given me earlier back in the carpark. A gale was blowing and the daylight was ebbing. This was how my journey should end: standing alone on the beach in a feisty wind, the Southern Cross hanging bright above me, dappled clouds scurrying across the moon and shining yellow-blue waves rolling home from Antarctica around my feet. I snuggled into my sleeping bag feeling much better now that I had the end of the road all to myself. It was my road and this was my end.

I woke late with the sun already gleaming on the ocean: a perfect smiling morning. Zebras, Elands and Blesbok were surprised to see my head popping out from underneath a bush. False Bay was calm. All that remained was the ride into Cape Town. There was not long to go now: the final puncture, the final shady tree, the final banana sandwich, the final drink of water, the final turn of the pedals, the final beat of the heart. Along the coasts of the Misty Cliffs cyclists were out enjoying their Sunday morning cruise along one of the most beautiful roads in the world. Adam pedaled out to ride the last stretch with me. There was a final steep climb up Kloofnek hill from Camp’s Bay. Behind me Adam called out that it was the Last Hill in Africa. It seemed to reach halfway up Table Mountain. In the hot sunshine we rode it hard and fast. Adam told me “only 500 metres to go!” I turned back to him and grinned, “Let’s go!”

I stood up on the pedals and hammered hard towards the summit. I wanted a final reminder of the pain, of screaming legs and rasping lungs. It was the last hill in Africa. I sprinted with everything I had. I knew beyond doubt that nothing could stop me now. 300 metres to go. A car hooted in support. 200 metres. Just a little further. Go, go, go! For the hard times and for all the good times: GO! 100 metres. Ride, ride, ride! With every drop of heart and soul. Ride! Taste the pain! Reach deep.

Below me lay Cape Town. It was my one-man winning line.

To be Continued

*Breathe, breathe in the air.
Don't be afraid to care.
Leave, but don't leave me.
Look around and choose your own ground.*

*Long you'll live and high you'll fly,
And smiles you'll give and tears you'll cry.
And all you touch and all you see
Is all your life will ever be.*

*For long you'll live and high you'll fly
But only if you ride the tide.
And, balanced on the biggest wave,
You race towards an early grave.*
- Pink Floyd

To an English Friend in Africa

- Ben Okri

Be grateful for the freedom
To see other dreams.
Bless your loneliness as much as you drank
Of your former companionships.
All that you are experiencing now
Will become moods of future joys
So bless it all.
Do not think your ways superior
To another's.
Do not venture to judge,
But see things with fresh and open eyes.
Do not condemn,
But praise what you can,
And when you can't, be silent.

Time is now a gift for you,
A gift of freedom
To think and remember and understand
The ever perplexing past,
And to re-create yourself anew
In order to transform time.

Live while you are alive.
Learn the ways of silence and wisdom.
Learn to act, learn a new speech.
Learn to be what you are in the seed of your spirit.
Learn to free yourself
from all things that have moulded you
And which limit your secret and undiscovered road.
Remember that all things which happen
To you are raw materials,
Endlessly fertile,
Endlessly yielding of thoughts that could change
Your life and go on doing for ever.

Never forget to pray and be thankful
For all the things good or bad on the rich road;

For everything is changeable
So long as you live while you are alive.
Fear not, but be full of light and love.
Fear not, but be alert and receptive.
Fear not, but act decisively when you should.
Fear not, but know when to stop.
Fear not, for you are loved by me.
Fear not, for death is not the real terror,
But life -magically- is.
Be joyful in your silence,
Be strong in your patience,
Do not try to wrestle with the universe,
But be sometimes like water or air,
Sometimes like fire.

Live slowly, think slowly, for time is a mystery.
Never forget that love
Requires that you be
The greatest person you are capable of being,
Self-generating and strong and gentle-
Your own hero and star.
Love demands the best in us,
To always and in time overcome the worst
And lowest in our souls.
Love the world wisely.
It is love alone that is the greatest weapon
And the deepest and hardest secret.
So fear not, my friend.
The darkness is gentler than you think.
Be grateful for the manifold
Dreams of creation
And the many ways of unnumbered peoples.

Be grateful for life as you live it.
And may a wonderful light
Always guide you on the unfolding road.

If you enjoyed this book perhaps you will be interested to read two excerpts from *Blue Mountains*, Alastair Humphreys' second book. *Blue Mountains* describes the next three years of his journey round the world, riding home via South America, North America and Asia.

Blue Mountains will be available for sale soon at www.alastairhumphreys.com. The book begins with Alastair crossing the Atlantic Ocean, under sail...

