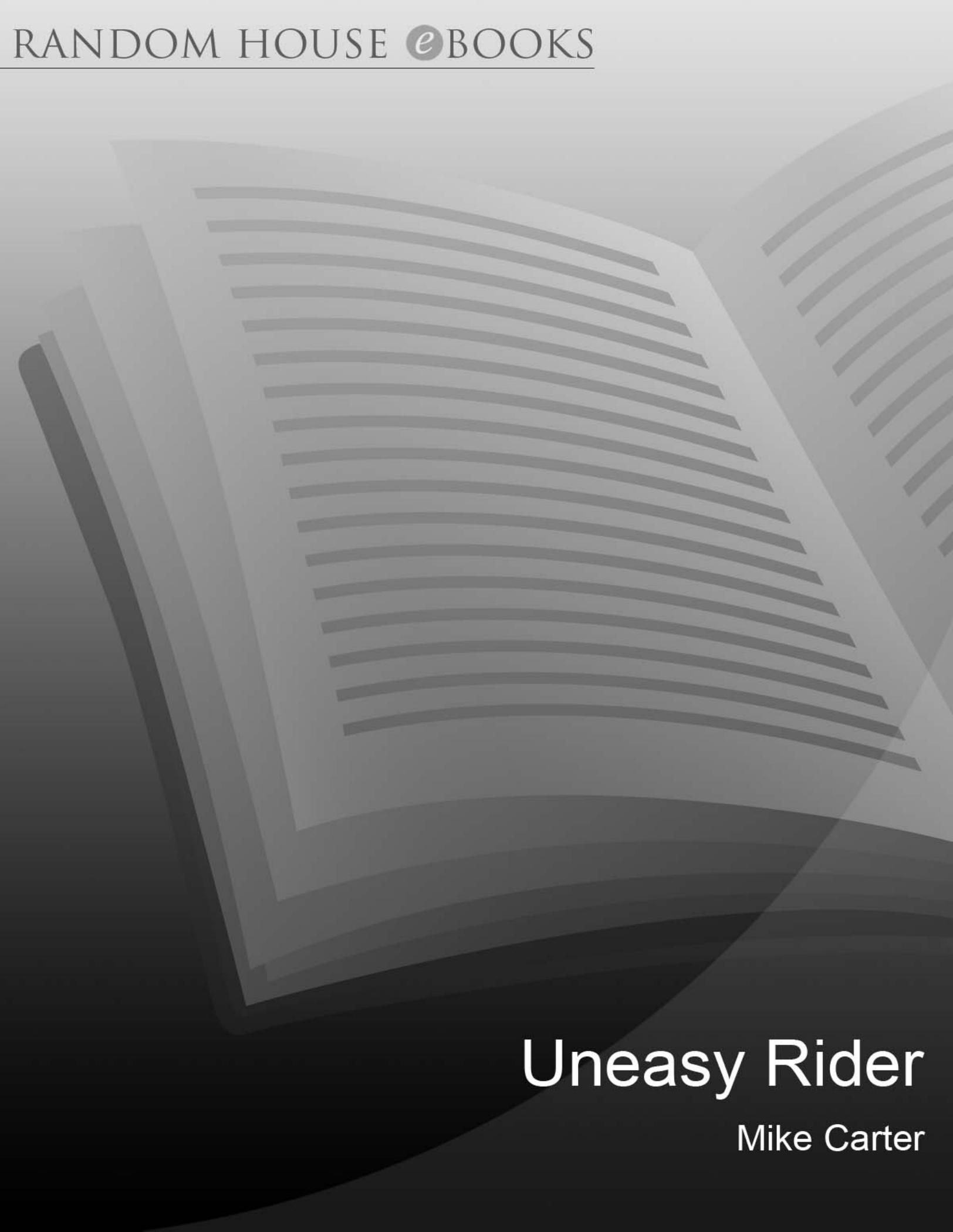


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# Uneasy Rider

Mike Carter

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# Uneasy Rider

Mike Carter



For Norma

## SPECIAL THANKS

To my editor Andrew Goodfellow, for approaching me in the first place and for having blind faith. To Simon Shore, for your patience, insight and encouragement - and for the Borough Market Scotch eggs. I owe you much. To Joanne O'Connor, who commissioned the original weekly column in the *Observer* and actually ran it, as opposed to just pretending to and not telling me until I got back. To Carole Cadwalladr, for refusing to let me back out. To Isabel Tamarit, for giving me a quiet place to work when I needed it most. To Wendy, Gordon and Paul - your capacity for love and support never ceases to amaze me. To all the bikers I met on my trip. You really are the nicest bunch of people in the world. To the Aussie Honeymooners, for restoring my faith in coupledness. To Kevin and the gang at BMW's rider training centre in Wales for all your help. To Mrs Chrysanthi, for Ilias and for taking me in. Rest in peace. And finally, to Pete. I hope we are at last getting to know one another.

## PROLOGUE

42

The nadir of a man's life is 42. I don't know why, exactly. The frustrating thing about a nadir is that you cannot know precisely when you have reached it. That only comes later.

There are plenty of surveys that confirm it to be true, though. You can find them if you're looking for them. I was coming across them everywhere: magazines in doctors' waiting rooms, newspapers discarded on trains, television, radio; all concluding that the absolute rock bottom, the pit of despair, the precise moment when a man runs out of steam, suffers a catastrophic crisis of confidence, hits ground zero, call it what you will, occurs at age 42.

It's amazing when I started looking more personally how much misery I found attached to men and the number 42. It was the age my dad walked away from my mum and his family. A teetotal uncle started drinking heavily in his 42nd year. A good friend had a heart attack aged 42. An acquaintance shot himself at, yes, 42. Elvis. He was 42. Nearly all my male fortysomething friends and colleagues appeared to be going up the wall, tearing out what was left of their hair. None of them seemed particularly happy. Most reported a slow, creeping sense of futility to their lives.

From my completely unscientific analysis, it seemed to me that men might reach some kind of crossroads at aged 42. There were no signposts at this junction, no clues as to where to go, just a terrible restlessness and a desire to be

somewhere else. One night men go to bed and all is well with the world. Then they wake up and everything has gone to shit.

In April 2006, I turned 42.

# 1 Party

THE MORNING AFTER the *Observer* newspaper Christmas party seemed different from previous years. Lying in bed, head throbbing, I replayed sequentially the evening's events, frame by frame, waiting for the frame that would bring the replay grinding to a halt; the frame that would have to be analysed closely, stared at in horror.

Twelve months earlier, the frozen frame had involved me calling a Cabinet minister a name that Dennis Skinner would have balked at; a frame that contained, apart from me and the minister, obviously, a dozen of my colleagues doing a good impersonation of Munch's *The Scream*.

And then there was the do a few years back, when my colleagues were invited to present their party pieces, and we had recitations of Kipling and polished light opera pieces and, if I recall correctly, a rather good mime. And then we had the bloke who hadn't prepared anything but who didn't want to miss out, who blew a condom up on his head while attempting to juggle three limes. This had failed to capture the audience's imagination quite as much as the Gilbert and Sullivan.

But each frame flickered by and the people were laughing with me, and nobody stormed off in a huff, nor did I try to shag a work-experience girl, nor throw up, nor attempt to dance. I appeared not to have told anybody about fictitious awards or trophies I'd never won nor, indeed, pull a prophylactic over my head and reach for the bar fruit.

There was a scuffle, a few hands straying over backsides inappropriately, animated returnees from the toilet with the sniffles. But, glory be to God, I was never in those scenes.

Maybe I was becoming the sophisticate I always suspected I might be.

There was a section missing between midnight and the taxi ride home, of course, but no alarm bells were ringing. I could walk into work safe in the knowledge that, if there was somebody at the party who'd set the bar for idiocy, a giant sozzled prat against whose antics we could all offset our own misdemeanours, for once it wasn't going to be me.

So later that day, in the office, when my editor walked up to me and asked when I would be leaving, accompanied by a little twist of the right wrist, those hitherto silent bells started to tinkle like windchimes on a gentle breeze.

When another male colleague approached, eyes like saucers, shook my hand and slapped my back in the wildly heterosexual manner of a beer commercial, I had a full Westminster-Abbey-after-a-coronation going on. The motoring editor was next to present himself. 'Sensational stuff,' he said, also twisting his right wrist. 'Dangerous, sure, but what a trip! I only wish I could come with you.'

But where exactly was I going? I urgently needed to sit down and probe once more the Stella-fuelled fog swirling round, crawl back through that tape. Oh, God. What had I said? What had I done?

Young people of an idealistic nature are generally attracted to a career in newspapers by the spirit of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. What they find are Lord Copper and William Boot. Rumour and drunken misunderstandings are as likely to shape the paper's content as a leak from the Treasury or the outbreak of war in some distant former colony. When an editor has an idea they think is worthwhile, or is presented with such an idea at morning conference, say, from where my colleagues had just emerged, it becomes utterly inviolable. As I searched for some Nurofen, the word Ishmaelia bounced around my addled brain.

I didn't have to wait too long to find out what was going on. Apparently, in that drink-fuelled witching hour, where everything is possible and the world is just one big casserole of love and opportunity, I had announced that in a few months' time I was going to take a motorcycle on a six-month road trip. (And not just any old motorcycle, but a big one, specifically a BMW R1200GS. This had required zero imagination on my part: I had just read *Long Way Round* and this was as near as dammit to the bikes that Ewan McGregor and Charley Boorman had ridden.)

I was going to take off around the world, give up the grind of London life, go where the road took me. Oh, how glorious it would be, I'd said, a sentiment shared by my sober and enthusiastic travel editor who had declared, in front of many equally enthused witnesses, that I was to write a column about my travels.

'Thassh fugging great thassh is,' I'd replied, apparently. 'More Stella, anyone?'

Alas, what I had neglected to share with my colleagues was that I hadn't been on two wheels since an inglorious three-month teenage chapter involving a Lambretta, four crashes and an 18-month ban for drunk-driving.

So, I was in a pickle and no mistake. The last thing a man having a midlife crisis wants to do is admit that he's been writing cheques with his drunken mouth that he has no means of cashing.

The type of person who just takes off into the unknown for six months on a large motorcycle would surely otherwise be found performing emergency heart surgery with a coat hanger on an aeroplane over the Atlantic, or hacking off their own foot with a biro in a rockfall. They tend not to consistently get on the Circle Line going the wrong way. This was the sort of thing that Other People did: Better People, Braver People and, ultimately, Deader People.

However, interestingly, as word started getting around of my proposed trip, my stock seemed to rise, especially with

men and women of a certain vintage, as if I'd become a poster boy for the middle-aged and disaffected. They'd stop me by the water cooler, chat to me in the lift, come over to me in the canteen. Even the editor now knew my name. 'So, Carter, when are you leaving on this shagathon?' he'd bellowed across the office.

But if I was now some kind of proxy for the projected fantasies of others, I was also the recipient of their fears and frustrations. A typical exchange ran thus:

Friend/colleague/stranger at bus stop: 'Wow, that sounds amazing. I'm jealous. I'd love to come with you.'

A beat.

F/C/SABS: 'I had a good friend, about your age. He bought a motorcycle, did something similar.'

Me: 'Oh, yeah. How'd they get on?'

F/C/SABS: 'Killed.'

Always dead. Usually decapitated, the head still in the helmet found in a nearby field, the story told with such relish and in such gruesome detail that it would be easy to conclude they were enjoying the telling. I had no idea that every single person in the entire world had lost a good friend to a foreign motorcycle adventure.

I'd be lying if I claimed that such constant warnings of impending decapitation didn't unnerve me. But, if *in lager veritas*, I'd been attempting to reclaim a waning virility, trying to spice up a life that had become little more than a sleepwalk through the shadows, then how to backtrack with any dignity? I might as well have knocked up a sandwich board that read: 'Loser, with hairy nostrils, a broken marriage, no kids, brittle confidence, stagnating career, bad back and, now, no bottle.' As Tim from *The Office* said so eloquently: 'Form an orderly queue, ladies.'

As providence would have it, at the time I was reading *The Scottish Himalayan Expedition* by W. H. Murray, written in 1951. Talking about the doubts he'd had prior to departure,

he'd written: 'The moment one commits oneself, then providence moves too.'

Of course, Mr Murray would have had to rely on the traditional form of providence, all cosmic forces and serendipity. Whereas all I had to do was key a few words into Google. And so it was that I discovered that BMW had a residential rider training school just outside Neath, South Wales, where, in the space of five days, they take you through your compulsory basic training on a 125cc Honda, then on to BMW 650s for your Direct Access course. This would lead, on day six, to your full motorcycle test.

My hand hovered over the phone for a few seconds. Then I picked it up and dialled the number. A few weeks later I was on a train heading west away from Paddington.

## 2 It came to Pass

KEVIN SANDERS RAN the training school. He was 42. But if he was currently at the lowest ebb of his life, he was doing a good job of putting on a brave face. This man loved motorcycles. He spent six months of the year sharing his passion with pupils at the school, and the other six months on the road, guiding two-wheeled expeditions through the Americas.

Kevin's assistant was called Emmett. A year or two previously, Emmett had taken a sabbatical from a well-paid job in the City to join one of Kevin's tours. On his return to the UK, Emmett quit his job and moved to Wales to work with Kevin. They had the perma-smile of evangelists.

The school's training routes took in the Brecon Beacons, with the headquarters in the former mining town of Ystradgynlais, light on vowels but heavy on pensioners crossing the road without looking, thus very handy for practising those emergency stops.

During the week, I learned about the correct line to take around corners, how nearly all braking on a motorbike is done with the front brake, and I practised until I was dizzy doing tight-circled U-turns, the inability to complete one of these without putting your foot on the ground was the prime reason for failing the test.

'Head up!' Kevin would shout, following another failed U-turn. 'You have to look where you want to go. The bike will follow you round. It's a natural law. Have faith.'

But most of all, Kevin and Emmett drummed into me time and again the vital importance of using what is known as the 'lifesaver', the last-second glance over your shoulder

before making a turn to check the mirror's blind spots. Did Steve McQueen have to go through all this? Would Jack Nicholson have refused to jump on the pillion seat until Peter Fonda had demonstrated his emergency stop? I doubted it.

After five days of whizzing around the Welsh countryside, it was time for the test. My fellow learner Derek (about my age, if you're asking) and I pulled on our Day-Glo gilets and, like a couple of chicks, followed mother-hen Kevin towards the glitz and glamour of Neath on a wet Thursday morning.

Over a pre-match coffee in Burger King, sitting next to some hooded youths, Kevin went through his final pep talk. My mouth was parched with nerves. I considered how the next hour would decide one of two very different directions my immediate life could take. If, on the one hand, I failed my test, as nearly half of entrants do, I could invoke providence and abandon my trip. 'Damn those U-turns. I guess it just wasn't meant to be. Now, where's the Circle Line?'

However, the prospect of having to go back to the office as a failure who tripped over his laces before the first hurdle even arrived was not particularly enticing.

On the other hand, if I passed, within a few weeks I would be hitting the road and heading into the unknown. I wasn't sure, at that moment, which outcome I'd have preferred.

I sat in the examiner's office, listening to the muffled sound of a phone conversation next door through the thin Portakabin walls. Five minutes passed. Then 10. Fear filled my heart. Sweat filled my riding suit. I read and reread the various safety and community messages on the noticeboard. Motorcyclists make up five per cent of road traffic, yet account for 21 per cent of fatalities, apparently. Thanks for that. Also, the local youth orchestra was on the lookout for a new French horn player owing to the incumbent moving abroad. Fifteen minutes. Twenty-one per cent, tsk, tsk.

I started thinking about the possibility of failing again. I don't like to fail, but for some reason I'm completely ambivalent about success. The result is a perpetual stasis. A no-win situation. It is a curious perversion that for years I was convinced was mine, and mine alone. But then I read Groucho Marx's line about not wanting to be a member of a club that would have him as a member, and I realised that there were at least two of us. It's a conundrum, all right, but put into some perspective that morning by the travails of the local youth orchestra.

The muffled talking next door stopped and a large man of military bearing dressed in full leather creaked into the room wearing an unfeasibly big helmet complete with call-centre mouthpiece.

'Mr Carter?' he enquired, looking at his clipboard, then scanning the otherwise empty room.

'That's me,' I tried to say, stumbling to my feet, but actually said something like 'haaaaashme' in the style of an asthmatic drunk, owing to the fact that my legs were no longer working and my tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth.

'I am your examiner. Mr Pass,' he said, offering his leather-gauntleted hand. The words of W. H. Murray flickered once more across my mind.

'Is that really your name?' I asked, looking for the cameras.

'Yes,' came a voice, deadpan, from somewhere beneath the helmet, in the manner of a man who hadn't heard anybody point out the absurdity of his name. Well, not for 10 minutes anyway. 'Shall we start?'

I managed to dodge the souped-up Novas and weekday shoppers of Neath, and when we eventually pulled back into the riding school, Mr Pass went through the litany of cock-ups that I'd managed to squeeze into 30 minutes of riding.

These included failure to indicate, failure to execute lifesaver and failure to resist taking the piss out of his name.

Though the latter was not officially listed on the charge sheet.

I was braced for 'You're a disgrace, Carter, what are you? Drop and give me 20.' But instead he said, 'You've passed' and I thanked Mr Pass for passing me and uttered something about being happy that I'd avoided Mr Fail's shift, which went down about as well as my original comment.

I wanted to do something girly like squeal or leap into the air or kiss Mr Pass on the helmet, but instead settled on a restrained, gloved manly handshake.

We wandered back to the Portakabin for the debrief, where, having allowed me to wallow for at least five minutes in naked self-congratulation, the voice of Groucho piped up to say 'big deal' and the local youth orchestra was still mourning the loss of its French horn.

Kevin was waiting by the gates like a concerned parent after the first day of big school, full of praise and pride in his pupil. Derek roared up after his test and, so excited was he that he'd also passed, forgot some of the fundamentals of riding and physics - and only having had four days' worth of lessons.

He removed both hands from the handlebars at 30 mph and, punching the air in triumph - which, fair enough, Evel Knievel used to do, but usually after leaping over 3,000 buses, or the Straits of Gibraltar - first wobbled, then crashed the school's brand-new hitherto unscratched BMW spectacularly in the gravel at our feet.

Thus came the final lesson of the day: motorcycles make one hell of a noise when they crash. It was a racket I would be hearing again a few times in the not-too-distant future.

### 3 The bike

LATE APRIL, TWO months later, and I was back on a train again heading west out of Paddington. My bike and luggage were ready and I'd arranged for them to be delivered to Kevin's place so that he could help me fit the panniers and familiarise me with the bike. I'd never actually seen a BMW R1200GS up close before. It was gun-metal grey and extraordinarily beautiful, with a front mudguard sticking out like the tongue of an exotic palm, and exposed engine parts strapped on to a criss-cross frame that made it look like it belonged to Mad Max or a Power Ranger. I peered at the speedometer. It went up to 140 mph.

It was also huge. So tall in fact that I had to do 20 minutes of astanga yoga before my hamstrings were supple enough to even contemplate getting my leg over.

Once in the saddle, I had a flashback to sitting on a camel as a youngster at Dudley Zoo. I couldn't wait to get off that camel. And it only went about 5 mph.

Kevin and I headed off into the Brecon Beacons and he went ahead to show me some advanced riding lines around corners. He was like an artist, effortlessly making smooth, flowing shapes and curves like a Michelangelo or a Picasso. Kevin and the bike seemed like one and the same thing. I followed, twitching and stuttering, making shapes and curves in the manner of Rolf Harris with the DTs, the bike and me as awkward as if on a first date.

After a few hours, we stopped at a petrol station for a coffee and I felt like a dog who'd just picked up in the air that its owners were about to leave for a holiday without it. I knew that any minute Kevin was going to put down his cup,

yawn or stretch, look at his watch and say, 'Is that the time?' and announce that he had to get back to the school. He would put on his helmet and his gloves and shake my hand and disappear past the mucky mags and the bags of dolly mixtures and I would be alone for the first time with an enormous motorcycle, a full set of luggage and the awfully long 200-mile road home to London.

Kevin duly looked at his watch and stretched. As he disappeared, the rain arrived, first in apologetic streaks, then in fat two-fingered torrents. For the first time, this all felt very real. I considered staying in the garage, perhaps for ever, getting a job ordering the dolly mixtures and stacking the mucky mags and perhaps marrying the woman behind the till, who was about 65, but comely from a certain angle, all things considered.

Eventually, I wobbled away along the A roads, pizza-delivery boys and milkfloats whizzing past, a queue of farmers in their tractors getting frustrated behind me.

I felt terrified and euphoric in equal measure as I started to grasp the bikers' saying that Kevin had told me: 'Only a motorcyclist knows why a dog sticks its head out of a car window.'

During training, I had always been with somebody, and although this hadn't made me less vulnerable, it had certainly made me feel more capable, more confident, less alone. That was the overwhelming thing I felt right then. Alone.

On that rain-soaked journey, I had plenty of time to reflect on what had brought me to this point.

Okay, I've previously told you that life seemed dull, monotone, and that I had been gripped by midlife onset grumpy syndrome, as random as if it were a plague that had descended unbidden from the sky. But there were specifics to my particular strain of midlife crisis. If, to simultaneously paraphrase and murder a famous Russian grumpy, all happy

middle-aged people are alike, then all unhappy middle-aged people are unhappy after their own fashion.

Ten years previously, I had met a woman and fallen in love for the first and only time. Within days, we moved in together and for the next seven years I'd lived in unmitigated bliss. She was the best friend I'd ever had, the person who - ready, cliché fans? - made me feel wonderfully, completely whole. I was fearless, reborn. That she was stunningly beautiful only added to the peachy sense of self-satisfaction that life wasn't treating me too badly.

Sometimes I used to watch her sleeping and will her to wake up, as if any time away from her was a waste of something rare and precious. Reading back those words now, it's probably just as well she hadn't woken up, lest she'd screamed and brought the neighbours running. We got married. We were going to start a family. I had the perfect life.

Then she left me. What's that about giving the gods a good old laugh by telling them your plans? There weren't really any rows, no slow decay, just a flick of a switch and a relationship consigned to the rubbish bin in perfect time with the cadences of disposable modern life: memories of my marriage frozen for rose-tinted eternity like an untimely death.

In desperation, I gave her a copy of Yeats's 'He Wishes For The Cloths of Heaven', but I might as well have given her the instructions for the dishwasher to read. She didn't tread softly on my dreams, she riverdanced. I learned then that when a woman has fallen out of love with you, there is no way back.

But where could I go while I was waiting to fall out of love with her? Well, there was Threshers, and I thank them very much for all their support during that difficult time. Then there were the marathons to run, the endless hours lifting weights in the gym, the big Himalayan peak to scale;

anything to try and eradicate the creeping sense of emasculation, the feeling that, as a man, I had failed.

There was a new-found sense of delight I got poring over the car-crash relationships of the tabloid fodder. There were the messy fumbblings with other women that always, frustratingly, felt like an infidelity. And there was a terrifying trip to the Land of Misogyny – and, boy, is there a big old gang of guys living there willing to radicalise you to the cause.

I didn't recognise myself any more. The values and views I'd held my entire life – about loyalty, commitment, women – had been turned upside down. Somebody had stolen my script and replaced it with this piece of shit. I was 40 and stuck, watching as my friends had babies. I aged overnight. My courage was gone, my shoulders were hunched. I knew that tomorrow would be just like today. Bitterness had me by the throat; there was a joyless, corrosive futility about everything I did. Oh, happy days.

But most of all, I filled that time with reading. I read about relationship breakdowns, trying to find some peace, some answers. Then, slowly, as a year's separation turned into two, it started to dawn on me that what was keeping me stuck was not just the failure of my marriage, but the fact that it had happened as I hit middle age.

One day, when the sun was shining and the birds were singing and I was inside a dark room googling 'middle-aged', I came across this quote from Saki: 'The young have aspirations that never come to pass, the old have reminiscences of what never happened. It's only the middle-aged who are really conscious of their limitations.'

It hit me like a thunderbolt. It was true. I had lost all of the idealism and optimism that had driven the first 20 years of my adult life. I had stopped dreaming, fantasising about what was possible in the future.

Weirdly, I had also suddenly become very sensitive to noise, and smells, and annoyed by everything anybody did.

And I mean everything and anybody. I started agreeing with Peter Hitchens and Melanie Phillips, watched *Grumpy Old Men* for its lucid and sage commentary on contemporary life, and everything I ever read that postulated that the world was going to shit in a handcart would only confirm my views. Hoodies? National Service would sort them out. Footballers? Bunch of overpaid tossers. Terrorists? Forget that 'other people's freedom fighters' bollocks. String'em all up.

At the same time as I was turning into a Tory, it had also become suddenly very important that younger women found me attractive, as if invisibility and undesirability to them would effectively mean I had ceased to exist.

With this new turbo-charged libido, I tried to catch their eye in pubs or on the street, and actually felt myself sucking in my stomach and puffing out my chest.

During that beat when sexual possibilities are considered, a young woman might once have returned my gaze for three seconds. Now it was down to one or less. It was the spirit of Groucho again: when once I might have attracted their attention, it wasn't that important. Now I rarely could, it was life or death. It wasn't even that I wanted to sleep with them. Honestly. I just wanted to think I might be able to.

One night I went to bed the picture of physical health. When I woke up the next morning, my hairline had receded an inch and my back and right knee had gone. In the surgery's waiting room, I flicked through the men's magazines and for the first time noticed the ads for trichology clinics. The 'before' shots, with the follically challenged model sitting alone and pensive and staring at the floor, looked like the new me. The 'after' shots looked like the old me: full-beam smile and getting jiggy with some attractive young filly. I punched the number into my mobile.

The doctor's diagnosis about my back and knee was blunt as she wrote out a prescription for diclofenac.

‘This is very normal for somebody your age,’ she’d said.

My age? It was the first time that anybody had linked something that was happening to me physically as age-related since my balls had dropped. Really, I had no idea. I had always paid as much attention to moaning middle-agers as I had to ads for Stannah Stairlifts or walk-in bathtubs. Surely the midlife crisis was just an excuse that men used to justify shagging the Lithuanian au pair and getting a Harley, and women to go to Harley Street for a face lift before heading off to Naxos to shag a waiter with a big moustache and a predilection for stretch marks. It was all one big joke, right?

But a quick google of ‘midlife crisis’ threw up an entire cyberverses of misery and advice, not to mention countless support groups whose members submitted heartbreaking posts of families ripped asunder by some truly outrageous spousal behaviour. When I say spousal, most of the posts were from women. ‘He’s gone mad,’ they’d distil down to. ‘Become a stranger overnight.’

I did a quick audit of my male friends, all of whom were roughly the same age as me. One, K.D., had recently given up his high-powered, well-paying job at a national newspaper and was heading for the States. He had no work permit, and was planning to drag his wife and family with him.

‘Mike, I feel like it’s my last chance to do something with my life,’ he’d said when I asked him why he was doing it.

‘Last chance!’ I’d replied. ‘You’re only 40, at the top of your game.’

‘I can’t explain. It’s like a switch has flicked, feels like time’s running out.’

Another friend had recently walked away from his family and was living alone with no electricity or running water in a hut in a Welsh forest.

A few had decided to give their rugby/football careers another go after a break of a decade and were spending

Saturday evenings they'd previously devoted to their families in various A&E departments.

There were affairs with younger women and ridiculous physical challenges (and often a combination of the two), and new bleach-blond hair and punishing gym routines and tight T-shirts to display the punishing gym routines. One or two of the most pitiable figures had even gone out and bought large motorcycles.

As for the others, they seemed to report the joyless, corrosive futility in their lives that I had been experiencing. Marriage and parenthood, after the initial euphoria, had often become suffocating, routinised, dull, they said. Rather than the isolation I'd been feeling post-divorce, the married people talked of suffocation.

Some of them were taking industrial quantities of cocaine or drinking like crazy men in the last-chance saloon. All reported detesting their jobs with a passion. Many were simply sitting out the storm, confident that one day it would pass.

But one thing everybody seemed to agree about was that something had changed for them, inside of them, that, like K.D., there was this intense pressure to try and become the man you'd always imagined you'd be at 40. As if once you passed that notional landmark, the opportunity for reinvention, to be somebody else, the glittering star you always thought you were, is gone for ever.

But why now? What was this pressure and where had it come from? There was nothing really wrong with my life. Nor the lives of my friends. We had nothing to complain about. But sitting down and telling ourselves that didn't seem to help.

'It's not about having what you want,' one friend told me, 'it's wanting what you've got.'

'That's very profound,' I'd said.

'Sheryl Crow,' he'd replied.

Another talked about the start of the movie *Fight Club*.

‘I can really relate to that now,’ he said. ‘That deadness, that numbness. That sense of trying to walk up the down escalator. When I first saw it a few years ago, I didn’t understand. But I watched it again the other night. I totally get it now. Why Edward Norton would want to hang out with the dying, how it was the only way he could feel alive.’

‘I’m not going to punch you.’

‘I’m not asking you to.’

I carried on with my research. I became a misery magnet.

‘The second half of a man’s life is made up of nothing but the habits he has acquired during the first half,’ wrote Fyodor Dostoevsky. And, as I don’t personally know anybody as smart as old Fyodor, I think I’ll give him the last word.

Actually, there’s Carl Jung, who my money would be on in a pub quiz. ‘Wholly unprepared, we embark on the second half of adult life . . . worse still, we take this step with the false assumption that our truths and ideals will serve us hitherto,’ Jung said, when the correct answer was in fact Kevin Bacon. ‘But we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life’s morning: for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.’ Quite. Whatever that means.

The answer was as clear to me as the hairs sprouting out of my ears. I had lost my way. Reached the end of something, stuck in that tricky lunchtime period reflecting back on a glorious morning’s studying with no idea how to find out where the afternoon’s lessons were being held.

Ultimately, of course, I had an inkling that the afternoon would find me if I just sat still long enough, but what fun would that be?

No, what I needed to do was travel again. Not with the naivety of youth, when, as a young man, I was genuinely surprised to see my own reflection staring back at me in the loo at JFK. Nor with the safety of a package holiday. But by exposing myself to risk and failure (and possibly a punch in

the face), to set myself challenges and put myself into situations that would test me on emotional and physical levels. In short, to stop existing and stop moaning and start living again.

Obviously all that latent desire had needed was the requisite combination of Stella Artois and a bunch of witnesses.

Now I just needed to work out where I was going.

## 4 Planning

I EVENTUALLY MADE it home to London on that sodden late April day. Exhausted from the concentration and the driving rain and the hell that is the M25 in rush hour, I pulled up outside my flat, dismounted and made to heave the gargantuan 250-kilogram beast up and over on to its centre stand.

My foot slipped off the wet metal pedal, the bike twitched momentarily towards me and then began to fall away as surely and as smoothly as a felled oak. Applying Canute's theory of natural law, and eschewing the upstart Newton, I tried to hold it but the next second there was a violent, ungodly noise of crunching metal on concrete, a wrenching of some unspecified lower vertebra and me spreadeagled prostrate on the dead bike, tangled up in the wheels and the bungee cords and holding down the handlebars for the count of three.

A passing group of young women stopped.

'Are you okay?' one of them asked, holding my gaze back for just a second, or maybe less. 'Would you like some help?'

I refused her offer with a cheery, dismissive wave and lay there for a moment or two longer until they had disappeared around the corner.

I set my departure date for 5 June. This would leave a month for planning. Well, I say planning but, in truth, this was never my strong suit. I once prepared for a Caribbean holiday by getting steaming drunk the night before, collapsing into a coma, and then randomly stuffing things into a bag as the cab for the airport tooted outside my flat. I cannot recall whether my Aran sweater, the rubber Margaret

Thatcher mask or my West Bromwich Albion scarf ever made it to the beach.

On another occasion, and it would seem that drink was involved here as well, I agreed to go sailing the next day with a man I'd only just met in a Queensland bar. Never mind that I'd not sailed before in my life. Never mind that 'going sailing' involved a two-week voyage of 1,000 miles across the notorious Tasman Sea to New Zealand, with me the only crew and the skipper a certified lunatic (who, come to think about it, had just turned 40 and had recently left his wife). Never mind the fact that I didn't even want to go to New Zealand.

I digress. For some people, the planning element would be a glorious stage: all that poring over maps, flicking through guidebooks, deciding on routes, finding out about visas, reading motorcycle maintenance books. For me, and I hang my head in shame here, I couldn't be arsed.

I tried for a short while to contrive some route, some shtick, some structure to my trip. Most journeys seemed to have a hook, a *raison d'être*, a goal, something that the traveller could respond with when asked the inevitable question: why? Somehow the response 'because I'm a miserable old fart and bored shitless with my life' lacked the punch of 'because it's there'.

I thought about the great historic journeys, to the Poles, along the Silk Road, around the world in 80 days or across the Alps on an elephant. And I thought about the classic modern journeys, to the Poles, along the Silk Road, around the world in 80 days, and round Ireland with a fridge.

But the more I tried to create some kind of shape, a framework, the more it seemed rather apposite for a man in his early forties who may or may not be having a midlife crisis to set out on a journey uncluttered by appointments with monuments and landmarks, free of itineraries and goals. A map can be a useful tool if you know where you

are. Otherwise you might as well just start walking in any direction.

Besides, I reasoned, it's no use just warming your hands on the idea of providence. Surely it can only work when we let go completely.

So finally, I had a plan, which was no plan, which seemed as good a plan as any. I would go to Calais - which to the more pedantically minded is a plan, I grant you, but so is getting out of bed in the morning and that much structure I would need, else I'd spend the next six months in my pyjamas in Wandsworth - and turn left and then just keep going till I ran out of land in the north.

Afterwards, I would head south and east as far as I could without needing visas, which by my reckoning was Mount Ararat on the Turkey/Iran border, then west again until the sea, which was the Iberian peninsula, and then north and home.

A rough calculation had this journey at around 20,000 miles. I gave myself permission to stop if I fell in love, got a job, joined a cult, or got killed. But within that loose framework, I would navigate by instinct, listening to people's recommendations, being open to suggestions.

There was only one definite place I needed to go. An island in the Mediterranean where I wanted to meet up with an old friend. He was flexible on dates, though. He'd been waiting for me to come and see him for a few years now. A few more months wouldn't make much difference.

I released a wedge of equity from my apartment so money shouldn't be an issue. Soon after, I rented it out for six months, so if I bottled it and came home early, I'd have nowhere to live, an incentive of sorts to keep going when the going got tough.

I systematically dismantled my life in London and disentangled myself from the standing orders, gym memberships and commitments that meant I belonged somewhere.

I could feel myself putting some distance between myself and my friends and family. It felt like I was severing the guy ropes that had been keeping me tethered. I was floating free. It was terrifying. Just like the point on the runway when the pilot announces V1, the speed after which aborting the take-off is impossible without crashing, I was past the point of no return.