

ONE MAN AND HIS BIKE

A life-changing journey all the way
around the coast of Britain

MIKE CARTER



EBURY
PRESS





Chapter 1

'I thought of that while riding my bike.'

Albert Einstein on the Theory of Relativity

'*Eres un imbécil,*' said Simon. '*Eres demasiado viejo para hacer algo como esto.*'

'Eh?' I answered.

'You can't even speak Spanish!' he said.

'I'm learning. Tapes.'

'How long? How long have you been learning?'

'A few months,' I said. This was a lie. It had been a couple of weeks.

'And you're moving to Buenos Aires next month?'

'*Si.* No going back now.'

He took a sip of his pint. 'Okay. Seeing as we're in a pub, and seeing as you're on your sixth pint, how would you say "I am pissed" in Spanish?'

'Easy. "*Soy un borracho*".'

'That means "I am a drunk". In Spanish, there's a distinction between the permanent and the impermanent. Kinda important. Pretty basic.'

Simon turned away to see what was happening in the match on TV. 'Pretty basic,' I muttered under my breath.

'What?' he said.

'Nothing.'

'You've never even been to Buenos Aires,' he said.

'So?'

'Why there?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I've heard it's a great place to live. Got to be better than here. Is that a good enough reason?'

'Aren't you worried you'll get lonely? Won't you miss Britain, friends?'

'Miss Britain!' I said. 'You kidding me? Have you taken a look around lately?'

4 • *Mike Carter*

We both took a drink of our pints. Silence.

‘Got anywhere to live?’ Simon said eventually.

‘No.’

‘Know anybody? Contacts?’

‘No.’

‘Job lined up?’

I shook my head.

‘You’re skint. What will you do for money?’

‘I’ll work in a bar. Be a waiter. Something will come up. It always does.’

‘Mike,’ said Simon, his voice taking on the concerned tone of a father telling his son that Santa doesn’t exist. ‘You’re 45. Taking off to another country on the other side of the world where you don’t speak the language and don’t know anybody would be hard at 25. But 45? Madness! Don’t you think it’s time you stopped, well...?’

‘Well, what?’

‘...running away.’



Chapter 2

'It would not be at all strange if history came to the conclusion that the perfection of the bicycle was the greatest incident of the nineteenth century.'

Anonymous

I pulled up at a red light on the Embankment, on my usual bicycle commute to work.

'Me llamo Michel,' said language guru Michel Thomas through my earphones. *'Cómo te llamas?'*

'Me llamo Mike,' I said.

'Todavía quieres hacerlo?' asked Thomas.

'No quiero hacerlo ahora,' I said.

'Por qué no?' Thomas asked.

I turned off my iPod.

A woman crossed the road, giving me the look reserved in London for people talking to themselves on bicycles in bad Spanish: fear, contempt.

The lights went green. I pedalled on.

Simon's comments had touched a nerve. Not the bits about being a dreamer or my rubbish Spanish – they were indisputably true – but about running away.

Riding a bicycle is made for thinking. I thought about my life. When I was young, my family had always been on the move: different cities, different houses. By the time I was 11, I'd been to four different schools. I remember being upset about it at first, but losing friends and teachers and a base became so routine that somewhere along the line I must have developed an indifference to everything.

I was 13 when my parents split up. I took to the railways, sleeping on trains and station platforms, sometimes staying away from home for several days at a time. If it wasn't trains, I'd get on my bicycle and just ride for hours and hours. Where I went wasn't important, as long as I was moving.

When my mum died a few years later, I travelled the world, working odd jobs, always looking for the next thing. When my short marriage broke down, I took off on a motorbike. Movement seemed to be my hardwired response when life delivered a blow. It's not hard to see patterns when we look back.

And when I thought about other areas of my life, the same thing kept appearing. Work? Hardly had a full-time job in my life, always freelance, always needing to know the door was unlocked. Relationships? Only had one that was serious. I married her, and look where that got me. I'd never had kids. Homes? Always moving or, if not actually moving, thinking about moving. Security and commitment were fine for other people, just not for me, thank you very much. And for years, all this seemed to work just dandy. Or at least I thought it did.

But I was getting tired. Not just tired of the constant physical movement, but tired of the isolation I'd created for myself, the very thing I'd meticulously cultivated and preserved. The adrenaline rush of being alone, relying solely on my own resources, of not belonging anywhere was, frankly, exhausting.

I stopped at the lights at the north side end of Blackfriars Bridge. Every day I came this way and every day I turned left onto New Bridge Street and, 10 minutes later, would arrive at work. As I waited, I looked through the snarled-up traffic to the road opposite, leading east. Queen Victoria Street.

Intuition and instinct are funny things. They're nearly always right and we nearly always ignore them. A thought arrived from nowhere: We live on an island. If I carried on straight, instead of turning left, and followed the Thames out to the sea, as long as I kept the water to my right I would eventually have to arrive back at Blackfriars Bridge, only on the other side of the river. I tried to calculate how far that would be – four or five thousand miles, perhaps – and thought about the places that bike ride would take me: the Northumberland coast; Cape Wrath; the Gower Peninsula; Land's End; through Hull and Edinburgh, Ullapool and Liverpool, Swansea and Portsmouth. And all just by carrying on pedalling up Queen Victoria Street. The simplicity and beauty of the idea made me laugh out loud. The man in the car next to me wound his window up.



I arrived at work. Things had changed a lot at the *Guardian* and *Observer* over the past few years. For one, we'd moved from our tired offices in Farringdon Road to a flash new building overlooking the canal in King's Cross: all glass atriums, and lurid-coloured chairs that looked like giant puckered lips, and 'breakout areas' and 'think-pods', within which we were encouraged to think in the 'blue sky' sense. Old-school hacks stumbled around looking lost, like they'd wandered into a dystopian nightmare.

There were bigger rumblings afoot. The recession was biting. Sales figures were bad. Advertising revenue had plummeted. A cull of staff loomed. There was talk of a ban on freelancers (of which, naturally, I was one). Nobody could see it getting better any time soon. There was an air of restlessness, uncertainty, as there seemed to be in wider society. Was this fuelling the restiveness I was feeling? Was this just the way modern life was? No security? No permanence? People were edgy. Morale was very low.

We went through that day's schedule for the Comment pages. There were six pieces: the MPs' expenses scandal; the news that bankers were to award themselves huge bonuses after being bailed out by the taxpayer to the tune of £80 billion; an analysis of the latest social attitudes survey that revealed 80 per cent of Britons now blamed the poor for being poor, a massive increase from just 20 years earlier; a piece about probable savage public-spending cuts under an increasingly likely-looking Tory government; an editorial on the exponential rise of CCTV; and, finally, a piece about binge drinking and 'broken Britain'.

I met up with my colleague Charlie in the canteen for lunch.

'How are the plans for Argentina going?' he asked.

'Oh, okay.'

'When are you leaving?' he asked.

'Not sure. I'm having second thoughts.'

'Are you mad?' he said. 'Last time I spoke to you, you were full of it. Just going to pack a bag, jump on a plane and see what happened. What's changed?'

'Maybe I'm just getting too old for it all.'

'This country's finished,' he said. 'Look around you. Britain is a toilet.'

'A friend reckons I spend my life running away.'

‘He sounds jealous,’ Charlie said. ‘If I didn’t have a family and commitments, I’d be on the next plane out of here. Nobody depends on you. There’s nothing keeping you here.’

‘Maybe that’s part of the problem,’ I said. ‘So, a year or two in Argentina. Then what?’

‘Maybe you’ll meet somebody there, settle down...’

‘But why would that be any different to doing it here? It’s not really about meeting somebody anyway. If that were the case, I’d be on the Internet lying about my height and income. I think it’s more about, well... at risk of sounding like a tosser, having roots, belonging somewhere.’

‘Belonging?’

‘I think so.’

‘Tosser.’

‘Thank you.’

The truth was, as far as I could fathom, that I really wanted to love Britain. Wanted to love being here. I wanted this to feel like home. I hated the fact that I always thought life would be better if I could be somewhere else – because that never worked out. All this had started to grow in importance in my head since I made the decision to leave.

But Britain was increasingly a hard place to hold much affection for. And things seemed like they were only going to get worse.

I grew up in inner-city areas alongside crime and poverty. But I can’t ever remember Britain feeling as squalid as now, as divided, as uncaring, as ‘broken’. Could a country have changed so much in such a short time? But as much as I wanted to leave, the very thought felt like an infidelity.

‘On the way to work this morning I had an idea. Instead of turning left at Blackfriars Bridge, what would happen if I just kept cycling straight on and followed the coast?’

‘You’d get to Middlesbrough,’ Charlie said. ‘Not quite Buenos Aires.’

‘A full circuit of the island. An exotic adventure in my own backyard. The kindness of strangers and all that.’

‘There’s nothing exotic about moaning Brits. It would be like cycling through the *Daily Mail*. The roads are vile. And as for the kindness of strangers, this is Britain we’re talking about.’



‘It’s not that bad.’ I suddenly felt quite protective.

‘Remember that old German guy a couple of years back?’ Charlie said. ‘Cycled round the world for 10 years or something, through Afghanistan, Iraq, the lot. Never had any problems. Arrives off the ferry in Portsmouth, pitches his tent, wakes up the next day and his bike’s been nicked.’

‘I’m supposed to be leaving in a month’s time,’ I said. ‘I’ve bought my ticket.’

‘I know. Sunshine. Tango. Argentinian women. Adventure. Lucky bastard.’

‘But imagine, just riding my bike every day, camping at night, living simply. When I got back in six months, I could always still go to Argentina.’

After work, I cycled through King’s Cross, then past the old *Guardian* building in Farringdon Road, all dark now. It was raining hard, the water sitting on the road in oily slicks, reflecting the spectral tungsten glow of the streetlights. In the distance, the skyscrapers of the City burned brightly.

A motorbike flashed past me. Followed by a car. They both screeched to a halt at the lights just before Blackfriars Bridge. A middle-aged man jumped out of the car. Something in his hand glinted, caught in the headlights. The biker jumped off and raised both hands above his head. While the man from the car waved his blade about in wild slashes, a young girl, around seven years old, got out of the passenger seat. She ran towards the biker and, jumping up to reach, started punching him in the helmet, landing one punch each time at the top of her parabola. This was simultaneously so depressing and so funny that I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

I jumped off my bicycle and let it drop to the ground. My hands were trembling. Calmly, though I’m not sure where the calm came from, I asked the man with the knife whether anything was worth this.

He looked at me with eyes as dead as a fish on a slab. Then he waved his knife at the biker once more, called him a cunt, ushered the girl back to the car and drove off.

‘Cheers for that,’ said the biker through his open visor. ‘That guy was mental. This country’s gone mad.’ He mounted his bike and rode off into the night.

All was quiet again. I was alone. To my left was Queen Victoria Street. I looked at it. On that grim, wet night, it suddenly seemed as magical as Professor Kirke's wardrobe or the fancy-dress shop's changing room in Mr Benn. A portal.

I got out my phone and sent a text to Simon.

'I'm not going to Buenos Aires,' it read. 'I'm off to Basildon.'