Long Way Down

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& Charley Boorman

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Extract

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Prologue

EWAN: I said goodbye to Charley and left the workshop around 4.30 p.m. It was a Friday afternoon in the middle of February and we were heading out with our families for a joint skiing trip the next morning. We were both looking forward to the break: things had been so hectic lately with the move to the new premises, and preparations for our Africa trip really beginning in earnest.

I was on my BSA Lightning, the roads choked with rush hour traffic. I've lived in London for years, though, and I'm well used to it. It's only traffic, after all; it isn't sand or deep gravel; it's not 'The Road of Bones'.

Charley and I had crossed Kazakhstan on our motorbikes, we'd negotiated the steppes of Russia and the wilderness of Siberia. Only a couple of weeks ago the GS1150 I'd ridden round the world had been delivered to our workshop. It was now standing next to a dramatic-looking Mongolian Warrior's costume that we'd bid for in an auction at their embassy. An armoured breastplate, the bike's patched and resewn leather seat – they were a reminder of all we'd achieved.

February had been a morbid month in many ways. I'd had surgery to test a mole and more surgery to remove a hint of skin cancer. Then I'd fallen sick while we were on a hostile training exercise. But I was chilled out now – the date of departure had finally been set and I was really looking forward to not thinking about work for a while and riding again with Charley. Just a

couple of months now and we'd be gone, the two of us riding through Africa, relying on each other the way we did before. The start of another adventure. It made me tingle just to think about it.

The traffic was at a standstill. I was filtering up to the lights thinking about getting home and helping my wife Eve with the packing; it would be great to spend some quality time with the family. I couldn't wait to get on the slopes and watch my three gorgeous daughters learning to ski.

Suddenly without warning a pedestrian stepped between the vehicles right in front of me.

He wasn't looking my way.

And he was close, he was way too close.

My God, I was going to hit him.

Instinct took over and I grabbed everything; front brake, back brake; I grabbed the clutch. Shit, now I had no engine braking.

It was all happening so fast. I knew I wasn't going to stop and could only wait for the impact. Brakes on, I was into a skid and shouting, 'Watch out! Watch out mate!' But he didn't see me.

There was no time and I had no choice but to throw the bike away from him. I was off, chucking the machine to my right, flying through the air. I clattered into him and he was down but at least the bike hadn't hit him. I was still flailing forwards, the road coming up to meet me with sickening speed.

There was nothing I could do. I was going to hit the tarmac way too fast and the bike was still revving above me.

The holiday – Eve and the kids waiting for me at home. Charley and all the team – everything we'd planned together. My body slammed into the road. Was it all over before we'd even begun?

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Where's Charley?

CHARLEY: I remember the moment it started. It was October 2004, very late one Friday night. We were in the old office in Bulwer Street with boxes all around us, bits of paper, all the office equipment gone. For a few minutes we just stood there reflecting. This is where Long Way Round had all begun, where we'd planned everything, checked and re-checked the maps: it's where we'd first seen the bikes.

It was over, finished: we'd ridden around the world, a mammoth journey; an epic adventure. But it was over now.

The maps were still on the wall and we stood before them once more. Ewan glanced at me.

'What do you reckon, Charley?'

'I don't know.'

'South America, India maybe?'

I looked up at him. 'What about riding through Africa?'

Ewan and I first met on a film set in County Clare more than a dozen years ago, our friendship born out of our passion for

motorbikes. We've been best mates ever since. We'd always talked about riding together; France maybe, Spain. But then Ewan walked into a map shop, and over dinner that night we decided to forget France or Spain, we'd go the whole hog and ride around the world. The adventure of a lifetime, the two of us off on a couple of bikes. I wasn't sure we could pull it off; I wasn't sure it would even happen.

But it did. A late-night conversation became a dream, the dream became an adventure and that adventure proved to be a pivotal point in my life.

I grew up in the movie business, but I'm dyslexic . . . and I mean badly: if it hadn't been for my dad taking a year out to teach me to read, life could've been very hard. Even so, reading for acting parts could be difficult sometimes. Historically I'd enjoyed success in movies like *The Emerald Forest*, but after Long Way Round the direction of my life altered completely. I found myself in places like the pit lane of Moto GP circuits with heroes like Kenny Roberts grabbing my arm and telling me how much he'd enjoyed watching our journey.

I was no longer just John Boorman's son – in fact my dad rang me up the other day to tell me he'd introduced himself to someone and they'd said, 'Oh, Charley Boorman's dad'.

My career was now in motorcycling – albeit not in a conventional way – and the success of *Long Way Round* enabled me to live another dream. Ever since I can remember I'd always wanted to race bikes, so together with Russ Malkin, a very good friend and producer/director of *Long Way Round*, I entered the world's most dangerous race: the 2006 Dakar rally – five days in January where I rode ridiculous distances at ridiculous speeds before an innocuous crash tipped me off and I broke both my hands. (I never made it to the sand dunes and I've unfinished business there.) That dream was over for now, but another was just beginning.

Ewan flew in for the end of the Dakar to congratulate us all (my fellow teammate Simon Pavey had made it all the way to the

finishing line). He was joined by film maker David Alexanian, the fourth member of the team that created *Long Way Round*. There we were in Dakar – all together again. And there in the scorching sun we confirmed what we had first mapped out over a year before in Bulwer Street. The adventure was on again – John O'Groats to Cape Town: we would ride the Long Way Down.

Once my hands were healed, the first thing Ewan and I did was return to the Royal Geographical Society in London, the place where we'd mapped out the first trip. Our bikes parked outside, I took my helmet off. The old red brick building seemed very familiar.

'So here we are again, Ewan. What do we say to them this time?'

He laughed. 'How about: Hi, remember us? We're back for more.'

Inside I quickly recalled how solemn the place felt; the arched windows, blue carpets and the magnificent ancient maps that decked the walls. One in particular dated from 1920 and at the bottom it was engraved with images of the old continent, names and places going back to colonial days when just about every European country fought for a share of the spoils. Ewan pointed to a picture of a guy in a pith helmet in a pretty compromising position with a tribesman. 'Hey, Charley,' he said. 'Here's how you made friends with the natives back then. See, you grabbed a man by his willy.'

In the journey-planning office we met the same assistant we'd spoken to before and she had yet more large-scale maps spread on a mahogany table.

'Have you decided on a route?' she asked us.

I shook my head. 'Nothing definite yet, but we're going to ride down through Europe, I think, probably cross from Sicily.'

'We'd like to follow the Nile,' Ewan added. 'It's one of those journeys, you know; one of the great trips of the world.'

She nodded. 'Sudan is pretty unstable and so are parts of Ethiopia. You'll need to be up on your paperwork.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Jesus, paperwork. The Ukraine, Ewan. Remember?'

'You mean when we waited nine hours to get in – how could I possibly forget?'

'Ethiopia is absolutely beautiful though,' the assistant went on, 'and despite the problems they're really trying to build up tourism. Sudan is full of open spaces, the Africa of the movies, if you like.' She smiled then, a little warily. 'There are security issues, however.'

I cast a glance at Ewan. She was right, as we knew only too well. We'd only just started investigating the route and already knew we'd need armed guards to get us through places like northern Kenya. We were thinking about going into the Democratic Republic of Congo, and weren't sure whether we'd have to go through Zimbabwe. This was going to be a very different journey from Long Way Round, and I think we were only just beginning to realise how different.

Having reacquainted ourselves with the Royal Geographical Society we headed for the wilds of Devon and a weekend's survival course. The weather was shit, a cold, drizzling rain, and to make things even more miserable, Ewan had his tent up before me. He was crowing about it. I mean, he *never* gets his tent up before me. It was galling. There was some consolation however: he'd put it up at the bottom of a hill and it was raining, which meant there was every chance he'd have a river running through it before long.

After that, we got lost in the 'wild wood' whilst hunting for strategically placed survival rations, and then we had to build shelters from fallen branches and bits of foliage.

Not that we're competitive or anything, but my A-frame and ridge was up, the sides constructed and I was already onto the roof whilst Ewan was still going on about a 'long ridge pole' and the 'bell end' being big enough. After making a wall of branch and fern, the last layer was leaves. Lying inside I could still see

daylight and my feet stuck out, though I only discovered that when the instructor kicked them. He proceeded to tell us about a friend of his who went to sleep with his head sticking out of a similar shelter in Africa, only to be woken by a hyena ripping off his face. Our instructor liked telling those kinds of stories: he liked to tell them a lot.

He was complimentary about my shelter, however, testing the structural quality by climbing right over it while I was lying inside. In his own words, it didn't budge an inch.

Ewan was arranging leaves and ferns and other bits and pieces; like a boy scout he was, having a whale of a time. 'Colour coding confuses your enemy,' I heard him mutter.

Finally he was finished, the branches covered with sprays of fern and leaf. He was stretched out inside and the instructor asked him if he felt confident that it was structurally sound.

Ewan replied that he did.

'Good,' the instructor said, 'because I'm going to walk on it.'

He'd barely shifted his weight when the 'bell end' Ewan had been so proud of collapsed, showering our Jedi Knight in broken branches.

For a moment there was silence. Then from the depths we heard him: 'Yeah, well, I think obviously there's room for improvement. But generally . . .' We could see his hands, gesticulating from under the crushed ridge. 'I was quite happy with its . . . you know, I liked the feel of it and it smelled really nice.'

On cue and not without a certain sense of ceremony, the rest of the shelter collapsed; a few moments later Ewan emerged: half a beard, his woollen hat askew.

'Shame,' he said. 'I put a lot of love into that.'

EWAN: What Charley didn't mention was that his A-frame was put together by the instructor. That's why it was so solid. I did mine myself. Not quite the same thing, is it?

The instructor really did like his tales of horror: hyenas eating people; elephants trampling our campsite; not to mention the machete-wielding madmen lurking outside every bar. Having said that, he also told us that despite our laid-back attitude, I was 'wily' and Charley was really 'industrious'.

From Devon, hyenas and elephants, it was Essex and a replica of the border between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda. Driving down a track in a 4x4 we had the feeling we were about to be ambushed. We were right – just as we were considering potential escape routes a mine exploded in front of the truck.

David Alexanian, who would be joining us on the real trip, was driving. He immediately started backing up. More flash bangs went off, mines, or grenades maybe, exploding behind us.

Now we heard the rattle of gunfire and a man appeared on our right. Heavily built, he approached the vehicle at a crouch, wearing camouflage and carrying an AK-47. We dived for the doors on the passenger side only to find another guy bellowing at us and brandishing not a gun, but a couple of vicious-looking axes.

We piled out of the vehicle. Hands in the air, we tried to talk to the gunmen – a whole gang of them now. We tried to explain about UNICEF, and what we were doing. They weren't listening or didn't understand: they didn't care. Before we knew it we were forced away from the vehicles, our captors demanding money, jackets, our watches.

We'd discussed such a situation with our instructors and they had advised us that in really dangerous areas, convoys of vehicles were put together under armed guard. Our trip was high profile and we knew we were potential targets. On the bikes, Charley and I had decided that if we were attacked we'd just try to get the hell out of there and double back to the last town we'd been through where we could raise the alarm. We would have no idea what lay ahead but we'd know what was in the towns we'd been through – if there were medical centres or police stations.

During the exercise however, with explosions going off and

gunfire ringing out, we had no time to do anything except put our hands above our heads and try to explain what we were doing.

'Watch!' One AK-wielding guy pointed at my wrist. I took off my watch and gave it to him. Not just my watch; he wanted my wedding ring, my wallet, all my money. It was the same with the others: watches, wallets, jewellery. In the briefing we'd been told that if a ring didn't come off the likelihood was the finger would come with it.

Every now and then our captors made their intentions all the clearer by firing warning shots over our heads. I was on my knees with my head down but my gaze was dragged to the dumped body of some other victim they'd already executed. If they had shot him they would just as easily shoot us and we had no option but to cooperate. They fired yet more warning shots – pistols now – rapidly into the air. My captor demanded my jacket and made me take my trousers off.

From the corner of my eye I saw another man wearing a black ski mask marching Charley away. For a split second I imagined how I'd feel if this wasn't Essex and an exercise, but the real border. I didn't know what was going to happen but Charley's captor pressed him onto his knees some twenty yards from the rest of us. Whether this was just a scare tactic or not I have no idea, but we'd all been told to keep our heads down and avoid eye contact. For a moment the masked man stood over him then came back to the main group leaving Charley on his own.

The others were being stripped of their possessions, the gunmen moving around us and talking rapidly. Every now and then they fired their guns in the air, and looking up again I noticed Charley was gone.

Without thinking I opened my mouth. 'Where's Charley?' I said. He must have made a run for it.

Of course our captors heard me and the next thing I knew the man in the ski mask stalked over to the trees at the edge of the clearing. We couldn't see anything but moments later a single shot rang out.

We were on our knees, hunched forward, elbows on the ground and our hands on our heads.

'Is Charley dead?' someone whispered.

'Yes,' I said. 'Charley's dead.'

The exercise over, Charley appeared alive and well and grinning from ear to ear. I wagged my head at him. 'Charley,' I said. 'You stupid fucking bastard.'

It was only an exercise, but given the times we live in not unrealistic. It was very dramatic, very believable and also very sobering: one of us being marched away and the sound of a single gunshot.

Charley felt a bit guilty, but then he reckoned he'd had the chance and took it. He told us that in a real situation he wouldn't have been caught behind a tree, he'd have kept going until he could raise the alarm. Later we found out that there had been a real kidnap, involving British Embassy staff in Afar, where that's pretty much exactly what happened.

CHARLEY: The hostile training exercises were hugely constructive. In the next one we arrived at a checkpoint to be confronted by a couple of armed men standing beside a massive lorry. I left the engine running and another Kalashnikov-toting guard came up to the vehicle. He wore a machete at his side and I thought about the horror stories.

'ID.' The guard was peering at me out of cold and humourless eyes.

Ewan, David and I were in a twin cab pickup with Russ perched on the flatbed. Ewan passed me the polythene bag containing all our papers and permits.

'We're tourists,' I told the guard. 'We're going to Cape Town.'

He wanted to see our passports and made me switch off the engine. He told us we couldn't film and insisted we get out of the

car. Two more guards arrived and with them a white guy in sunglasses wearing a folded Arab keffiyeh around his head. He told us the road was closed, but I assured him we were working with UNICEF helping children, and his government had issued us with the requisite travel permit. He demanded to see it and Ewan dug it out before another guard took him off a few paces and made him kneel down.

He didn't say why, he just made Ewan drop to his knees. Even in an exercise it's hard to keep smiling and the tone of the conversation agreeable, when your mate is on his knees with a pistol pointed at his head.

The man with the headgear kept asking us where we'd come from and where we were going. He was interested in our truck and our gear, which the other guards spilled out on the ground. He was really interested in the fact that neither Ewan nor I could get the back seat on the crew cab folded forward. We told him we'd never used it, but it only made him suspicious. We had the right papers but it was clear he thought we'd stolen the truck. He wanted to know what we were doing with hand-held radios and we tried to explain about filming and staying in contact with our other vehicle. What other vehicle? It hadn't turned up yet and now he was even more suspicious.

I tried to lead the conversation, offering him cigarettes, and all the time he was looking at the camera and asking me what it was worth. Foolishly, I told him about $400, which is roughly what it cost from new. With hindsight I know I'd just set the amount he needed to be bribed otherwise he'd confiscate it.

Ewan was still on his knees and he was trying to explain that we had to have the camera because we were filming in order to help the children in their country. Finally he was allowed to get up and we bribed our way back into the truck, being very polite and friendly, smiling a lot, the nerves all too real even in role play.

They lifted the barrier and we crawled through, travelling all of ten or twelve paces before they stopped us again and insisted we

switch off the engine. And all the while these other armed men were watching us from the big truck.

'Fuck this,' Ewan muttered. 'If we ever get going again – just drive, Charley.'

This was only an exercise, but we found ourselves jabbering away, saying all the things we probably would say if it was real. There's nothing quite like being confronted by a bunch of testosterone-fuelled warriors sporting Kalashnikovs.

Finally we were allowed to move on but just a few hundred yards down the track we came across a wrecked car. An old Fiat had flipped on its side and we saw an injured girl – a tourist – lying on the ground. She was bleeding heavily from her thigh, and we could hear her terrified screams even before we stopped. Again it seemed very real; the car, the way she was lying, her cries of pain and fear. Grabbing the medical bag Ewan was at her side in a flash.

'All right, my darling, you're going to be all right.' He set about staunching the wound. 'We're going to help you. You've had quite a turn, but you'll be all right now.'

David helped him while Russ and I took a look at the car. Inside we found another girl unconscious and trapped in her seat. I was instantly reminded of the time my wife Ollie and I spent in Australia before we were married. We were driving in the mountains somewhere and we came across just such an incident. A car had flipped off a bridge and a woman was trapped upside down inside. She was screaming about her children. At the time I could see no sign of any children and I didn't know whether she might have banged her head or something. But fuel was dripping and I knew that if I was going to get her out of there I had to keep her calm. I told her the children were safe, that they were up the road with my girlfriend. She calmed down and I managed to cut her out of the seatbelt.

We discovered that she did have children and they'd been thrown from the car in the crash. They were all right, thank God, and were up the road with another passer-by. It had really shaken

us up and even though this was just an exercise, it brought it all flooding back.

Our victim was unconscious: her lips were blue and she was bleeding from a wound in her back. Though the screaming girl had drawn our attention, this woman was much more seriously injured. We decided we had no choice but to lift her into the pickup and turn back for the checkpoint.

When the training was over we returned to London with an even stronger sense of the dangers we would be facing on the trip. There was no doubt this was going to be an adventure of a lifetime, but with every adventure there is always an element of risk, and we would be facing more than we'd ever known before. But little did we know that the first genuine accident would take place not at some remote African border, but on a busy street in west London. And it was an accident that could put the whole trip in jeopardy.