Riding Out

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RIDING OUT

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Riding Out

A JOURNEY OF LOVE, LOSS AND NEW BEGINNINGS

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SIMON PARKER

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riding out, **phrasal verb**

~ To survive or outlast

~ To come safely through a storm

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PART ONE:

LOST

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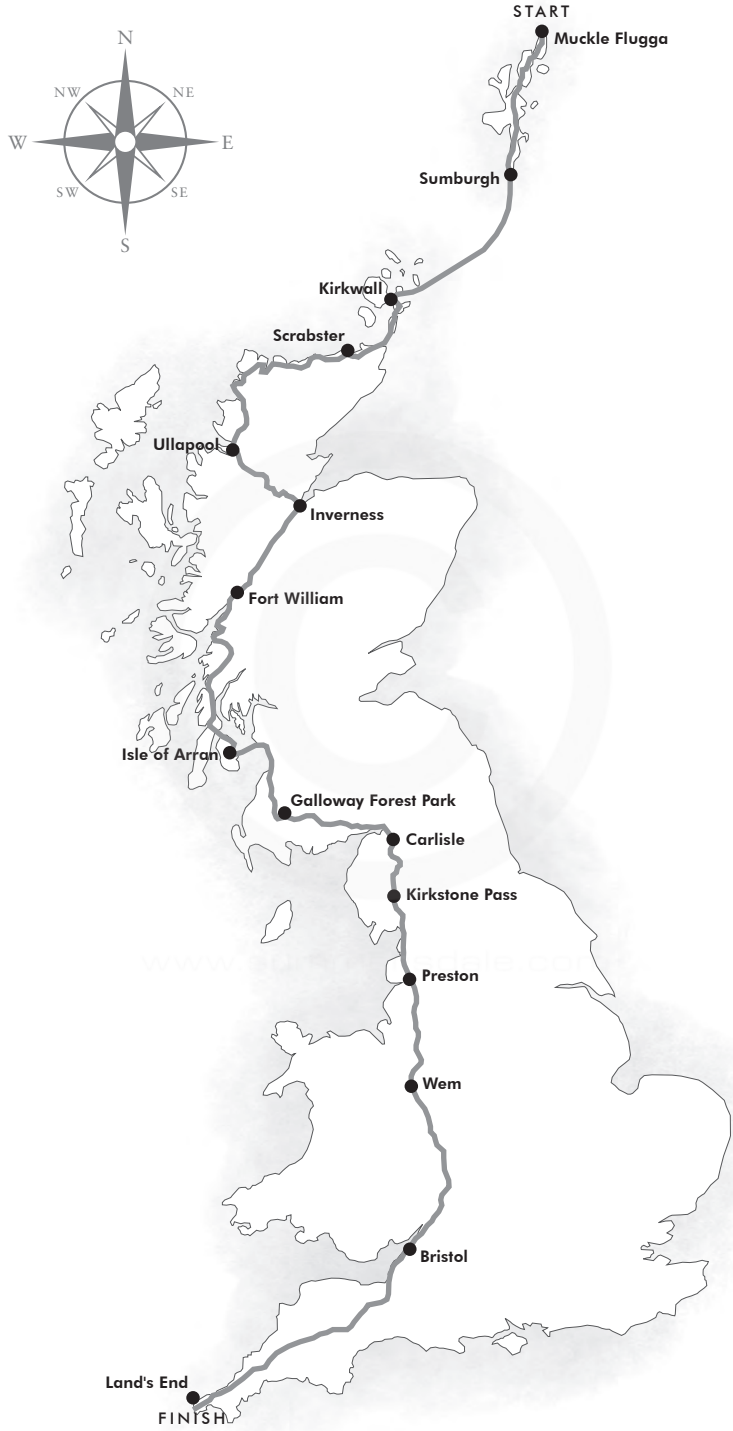
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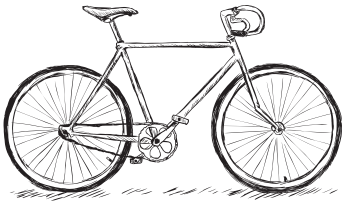

HOME: SIMPLY SURVIVING

I hadn't slept in almost 80 hours, showered in 90 or left my pokey two-bed flat in well over 100. I had puffy bruised bags under my eyes and an incessant throbbing in my aching temples. I drank strong black coffee to feel up. I downed cheap red wine to come down.

We knew it was coming. "Stay at home. Wash your filthy hands. Repent your dirty sins." What had started as a few footnotes on the international news channels had quickly arrived in our living rooms.

For those first few weeks of lockdown, I did little more than watch disaster movies on Netflix while following every macabre narrative twist on Twitter. "Just going to do some work," I'd say to my girlfriend, Alana, before locking myself in the spare bedroom and doomscrolling for hours on end.

Of course, I hid the fact I was living this pathetic existence. Just a month before, I'd been in Cape Town interviewing Roger Federer for the BBC. I could never admit to my friends and family that we were forced to take a mortgage holiday and sign on to Universal Credit. My ego was far too big for that. Instead, I smiled my way through virtual pub quizzes and family Zoom calls I secretly loathed. "So, how was your week?" my parents would ask, as I contemplated downing another drink. My life was in freefall. Hardly any money, hardly any work. Things couldn't get any worse, surely?

But they could, and they did. On 13 April 2020 – two days before my thirty-third birthday – I received a phone call out of the blue that would throw my imprisoned life into chaos. "Simon?" said a quivering voice I hadn't heard for a decade. "It's Will. Joseph's stepdad. Joseph's died."

Joseph – or Joe as he was known to me and the rest of his friends – wasn't a 90-year-old pensioner with underlying health conditions, but a handsome 33-year-old father with a clean bill of health. He'd gone to sleep the night before, but never stirred the next morning. Gone. Forever.

Joe and I had been inseparable from the moment we met at secondary school. We danced at festivals together. We double-dated together. We grew from spotty teenage boys into scraggly-bearded men together. And although we'd barely spoken in the past year – like many adult friendships that flit and drift – news of his death made me smell the creamy smoke of his rollie cigarettes and the sweet scent of his hair wax.

I was charged with the grim task of breaking the news to about a dozen of Joe's oldest friends. Not over a few beers in a pub – they were all shuttered up for the apocalypse – but on the phone. I opted for a clinical bedside manner; quick, with shock and brevity rather than sugar-coating. Who wants to pass idle small talk about the inconveniences of a pandemic before then being hit with the news of a friend's untimely death? "Hiya mate, long time no speak," I'd say. "There's no easy way to say this, but…"

We still don't know exactly what happened to Joe. I'm not sure I want or need to know. The coroner recorded his death as sudden adult death syndrome, like a cot death. But regardless of what it says on a piece of paper in a filing cabinet somewhere, the final outcome remains the same. He's never coming back, and I'll never be able to persuade him out for one last pint.

What I do know is that his passing, at that exact moment, exposed ginormous cracks in defences I'd been holding up for my entire adult life. When we were 17, three of our friends died in quick succession. Dave, one of our best friends, lost his battle with cancer. Soon after, we arrived at sixth form to learn that Tim, by far the brightest boy in school,

had been killed in an accident on his farm. Later that summer, as Joe and I sat together in camping chairs at Glastonbury Festival, we were told that Emma, a talented dancer with the world at her feet, had died suddenly of an asthma attack. Three young and ambitious teenagers gone, before their lives had really begun. Just a couple of months later, my sister's first baby, my first nephew, Joshua, was born prematurely and died within weeks. Not long after, my adoring godfather, Dennis, died of cancer.

At the time, I glossed over the pain and shunned the suggestion of therapy; choosing instead to anaesthetise those formative years with mountains of high-grade cannabis. Without it, I could neither sleep nor wake up. I left school with three terrible A levels, carrying a lump of raw, undigested grief deep in the pit of my stomach. Rather than starting life filled with hope and optimism, I couldn't shake the feeling that I had to live a handful of lives, as well as my own.

I blagged my way into university via clearing and then buried myself in books and films. I lived in the library. I would have slept there if I could. It became the longest and toughest slog of my life, but three years later, I staggered, wearily, out into the light with a first-class degree; a ticket to do more with my life than simply bum around north Oxfordshire smoking spliffs.

I gradually weaned myself off dope but the impulse to push myself, more and more, became so addictive that I made myself ill. I started to suffer panic attacks, a shortness of breath, insomnia and vivid nightmares about my friends and my nephew lying frail and helpless in hospital beds. I also became a hopeless hypochondriac. If I developed as much as a headache, I was convinced it was a brain tumour. A single bout of diarrhoea was always Crohn's disease. My GP notes became a thick ream of physical symptoms signed off as "overthinking". Eventually, I was diagnosed with generalised anxiety disorder but hid the shame from my friends and family.

In my early twenties I duped people into seeing me as a brave and intrepid travel journalist who sailed across oceans and visited dodgy

borders. I dashed around the newsrooms of central London, then whizzed off to cover stories on the other side of the planet. I would work day and night in a bid to become "successful" as quickly as possible. I'd sleep in the office showers, drink ten shots of coffee a day and take every shift I was offered. It was distracting and exciting but the adrenaline merely plastered over angry teenage wounds that still festered beneath the surface.

Over time, I found ways to cope. Namely, alcohol and extreme exercise – I cycled across the USA and Europe, ran marathons and took on month-long hiking expeditions. For the best part of a decade, I managed to live with my anxiety in the background, suppressing it with the thrill of travel and adventure.

But when Joe died, coronavirus hit and borders were slammed shut, all the pain came flooding back. I was faced, day after day, with the image of hundreds of people in hospital beds, accompanied by an overture of wheezes and bleeps. I washed my hands until the skin blistered and sprayed our letter box with bleach until the door's paint began to leach.

I became haunted by the vision of Joe's lifeless corpse and obsessed by my own fragile mortality. Locked away in my flat – motionless for the first time in my adult life, rather than bouncing from place to place – I couldn't escape a deep sense of guilt. I felt ashamed that I was still living, and my friends weren't.

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For a few socially distant summer months there were distractions, but life at home was far from perfect. One of my oldest friends, Nick, was supporting his fiancée, Sarah, through treatment for stage 4 bowel and liver cancer. She'd been diagnosed a few months before the pandemic struck, and at the age of just 37, with two young children, was fighting for her life behind a door we couldn't open.

All we could do was send our feeble love via WhatsApp and wait for updates on the outcome of her treatment. We didn't pray as such, but Alana and I would pause and hug, and hold her in our thoughts.

I found it impossible to come to terms with just how unfair life had quickly become. We were meant to be young and fit and in our prime,

but sickness and death had now returned to the centre of my life, rather than being banished to its fuzzy periphery.

To make things worse, confusion, discord and frustration filled the newspapers and airwaves. Britain was no longer a united kingdom, but a collection of feudal states. Cornwall had told outsiders to stay away. The Scottish Highlands had been vandalised by marauding louts in camper vans. Greater Manchester was the Covid ghetto of the North. We were a plague island. A nation divided.

Britain was broken and I was, too. With no end in sight, I found it impossible to sleep, think and breathe. It felt as though I was on the cusp of an actual, proper, adult breakdown. All the psychosomatic symptoms that I'd hidden in my past were now bubbling to the surface and ruining my life.

My heart would beat so hard that it threatened to burst through my ribcage. My lungs drowned in carbon dioxide, as though they were being squeezed by elastic bands. I snatched breaths into my shoulders, rather than the pit of my stomach. From the moment I woke up, I was aware of every laboured inhalation – a hunger for air that could seldom be sated.

I needed counselling, antidepressants or both. But I'm a cynical hack with an addictive nature. The idea of talking to a therapist I'd never met via a webcam – while off my head on Prozac – seemed even more tragic than the predicament I was already in.

What I really needed was to feel like I was living again, rather than simply surviving. Because I wasn't just a travel writer, grounded. I'd become a miserable boyfriend, brother, son and friend who felt like he'd been wronged by life.

Our mortgage holiday was due to end at the start of November and with Alana's public relations business all but folded, it was looking increasingly likely that we'd have to rent out the flat and move in with

our parents. I needed to try and make some quick money so we could keep a roof over our heads for the winter.

But by mid-September 2020 another national lockdown was being mooted and dozens of countries all over the world were shutting their borders to Britons. We were already climbing a new mountain of autumn infections, on course to look more like K2 than Scafell Pike. So, instead of setting my cross hairs on the far-flung islands, deserts and mountains where I usually plied my trade, I began fiddling around on Google Maps, waving a cursor over the squiggly contours at the edge of our isles.

I calculated that I could fly myself, my bicycle and a couple of panniers to the Shetland Islands for less than £200, then – at least in theory – cycle the length of the country before winter really set in. Rather than embark on a traditional John o'Groats to Land's End (JOGLE) route, which followed the most direct line from north to south, I liked the idea of seeing the fringes of Britain; the nooks and crannies of the country and the coasts and contours, where possible.

Beyond that, my plan was incredibly fuzzy; I still didn't know if I'd turn left or right when I made landfall at John o'Groats, or where I'd stay each night. I had less than £1,000 left to my name, meaning I had to be tight with my purse strings. I'd camp where possible but reward myself with a cheap hotel when the weather was really bad.

With the ten or so hours of autumnal daylight at my disposal, I figured I could cycle 40–70 miles a day, and do it all on my most expensive asset: a battered £2,000 titanium touring bicycle I'd been given to film a TV series four years before.

If all went to plan, I could sell enough articles to pay the mortgage for a few more months, and maybe have just enough money left over to fire up the central heating occasionally. But more importantly I'd get to feel rain on my face and wind in my hair. And instead of relying on the help of just one therapist once a week, I figured there were 67 million other people, out there, on Britain's beaches, in its small towns, on its farms and fishing boats, all with their own unique worries and

concerns. Each of these people, I hoped, might help me in their own little way.

I don't think I ever asked for Alana's permission to leave. I just emerged from the garage one evening with my bicycle tyres pumped up and a sheepish look on my face.

"I feel like this is something I have to do. Not just for me, but for both of us."

"And you're going to find that in Shetland? In the middle of a pandemic?"

"I don't know, but I need to try."

"You know, you could just sell the bike?" she said, with tears building in her eyes.

It would have been easy to just forget the idea there and then. To let the bike gather dust and for my heart to steer my gut. But something deep down, in the pit of my stomach, was telling me to go. It was about so much more than money. I was leaving broken so that I could return in one piece.

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