Kiwis Might Fly:
Around New Zealand On Two Big Wheels

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Chapter 1

Rocking the Cradle

'So,' Siân, my neurologist friend, asked brightly, 'are you going to wear one of those motorcycle helmets that covers the back of your head up to your fourth cervical vertebra, so that if you crash you're left tetraplegic, or are you going to get one of those higher-cut ones so that you're killed outright instead?'

My stomach lurched. I was deeply afraid.

It had all started a few months earlier, when I'd read a survey that claimed the ordinary Kiwi bloke was about to turn up the toes of his gumboots. He was, apparently, hanging up his sheep shears and moving to the city. A new masculinity was rearing its pretty, hair-gelled head. Men were waxing their backs. In ten years, said the survey, the traditional, hirsute New Zealand man would be dead.

The early New Zealanders had been virile and vigorous. The Maori were fearless warriors. Then the Europeans had arrived after arduous journeys across thousands of miles of treacherous ocean. The life that awaited them was hard.

New Zealand men grew up to be strong. They slaughtered whales, panned for gold and felled timber. They learned to play rugby. Fearlessly, they drank home-brewed beer. Then something went wrong. The environment changed; the species had to mutate. Volcanic eruptions? Tectonic shifts? An overboiling of the primordial soup? No. It was none of these things. It had more to do with washing machines from Japan.

With the arrival of aeroplanes and domestic appliances, the fences came unstuck for the traditional New Zealand man. What did it matter if he could mend a tractor using three bits of old wire and a pot of distilled sheep dung when spare parts were lined up at the local Kawasaki store? The real Kiwi bloke was fast becoming redundant.

The curious thing was that nobody seemed to be making much of a fuss about his demise. When other creatures have faced extinction - when the tiger threatened to roar no more, or the red-legged frog looked fit to croak - the conservationists beat their chests like gorillas whose trees just got the chop. But when the Kiwi bloke, an almost-human species, began to shuffle off to the big brewery in the sky, nobody seemed much bothered. One or two insensitive souls even breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

There was nothing else for it. Somebody was going to have to travel to the other side of the globe, to delve deep into the New Zealand countryside, to sniff around on sheep farms and poke about in rural pubs and ask the question: is the Kiwi bloke really about to breathe his last?

It was cold and raining at home in London; in New Zealand it was summer, the perfect time to hunt out a shy species on the verge of extinction from its spectacular alpine hideaways and wave-swept beachside lairs. It looked as though that somebody might have to be me.

I thought I'd tour New Zealand on a motorbike. Kiwi men were known to be fond of machinery; these were the guys who were meant to be able to strip down the engine of their truck on a Sunday afternoon and have it working again by Monday. If I rode a motorbike, I thought, and, better still, if I shoehorned myself into the tightest set of black motorcycling leathers I could find, I should stand a greater chance of luring these timid men from their hunting grounds and watering holes. If I was really lucky, I might even persuade one or two of them to speak.

I enrolled in motorcycling classes. Working on the basis that there are fewer maniacal cars out to kill a learner motorcyclist in the countryside than in the town, I decided to take lessons in the depths of rural Derbyshire.

I shared my first day's training with two sixteen-year-old boys who had just been given their first mopeds. We learned that cool kids ride safely. The two boys set off round the traffic cones on their gloriously gearless scooters. I got less than a metre before the 125cc training bike coughed, gave a little shudder, and stalled. I tried again.

'You gotta treat the clutch gently,' Oz, the instructor, admonished me. He was a big, grizzled man with stubbly grey facial hair and well-worn leathers. 'Handle it like, well' - now he looked embarrassed - 'we always say like you'd handle a woman.'

He shuffled and grinned. I raised an eyebrow. Not only was I expected to ride this piece of killer machinery, now I was meant to build a meaningful relationship with it as well. I tried again. The bike hiccuped, coughed, and stopped.

I hired a 125cc bike - the largest I was allowed to ride without actually passing a test - for a week. My relationship with my clutch still had some way to go. On the first day, I dropped the bike on a roundabout, where I created an outraged, horn-tooting traffic jam. Half an hour later, I had some problem selecting a suitable gear as I turned right on a steep hill. I stalled - again. The bike teetered, toppled, and crashed to the ground. An elderly couple in a little red Peugeot 106 stopped at the junction, he in his flat cap, she with a woollen neck scarf. They peered with some distaste out of their window at the helmeted figure lying on the tarmac in distress and, quickly concluding they wanted nothing to do with such a creature, shot off leaving me there all alone.

No, wait, it's only me, I wanted to shout after them from beneath my helmeted disguise. I don't have tattoos. I have no idea how to do a wheelie. I don't batter old women at bus stops or boil their bones into soup . . .

But they had disappeared as fast as third gear could carry them.

I went back to Two-Wheel Training for more lessons. Two characters called John, who was very round, and Kieran, who was very skinny despite consuming a remarkable number of pies, put me through my paces.

'What do you think you're doing you're going to get yourself killed get out of the path of that oncoming lorry,' Kieran would bellow with some excitement through the radio earpiece.

'Get up to speed get up to speed get up to speed if you wimp out like this you'll fail your test,' John would counter as the headwind buffeted my leather-clad limbs at a quite terrifying forty miles an hour.

One day, I accidentally missed the road and drove up onto the pavement instead; another day I dropped the bike and snapped off the brake lever twice in one hour.

Test day dawned. I hadn't slept. My palms were clammy. I could scarcely eat. I had entirely forgotten that taking driving tests was quite so terrifying.

The examiner's name was Simon. He was a small, mild-mannered man with blond hair. He looked like the type of person who would be kind to small children and cats. In normal circumstances, he would have seemed pleasant and unassuming. As it was, I viewed him with the same warm feelings I would entertain for a hungry grizzly bear.

Simon strapped a radio to me. He relayed instructions through my earpiece; I gingerly turned left out of the test centre. Simon came behind in pursuit on his vast white steed of an examiner's bike. We turned left, we turned right, we turned right and we turned left. I remembered to stop at the red traffic light. I managed the hill start without sliding backwards into Simon's hulk of a machine. I U-turned without falling off the bike and executed a neat little emergency stop. We turned left and then, just when I had almost stopped shaking with fear, I noticed: my indicator was flashing. That last turn had been at least a minute or so back - and motorbike indicators don't cancel themselves when you turn as car ones do.

'Bugger bugger bugger bugger,' I muttered all the way back to the test centre.

I had failed.

I couldn't retake my test for three weeks and spent most of that time trying to come to terms with the horrible reality: I had to go through it all again. I started to have nightmares about the diminutive Simon, whose body took on grotesque, outlandish forms. His short limbs stretched to inhuman, entwining, entrapping proportions; his gentle blue eyes widened to become garish cobalt orbs with the piercing glare of a

wolf who thinks you've eaten his elk. The Simon of my dreams stood and snarled, orange lights flashing left and right about his diabolical, distended head.

'Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha,' he cackled demonically through my anguished subconscious. 'You left your indicator flashing, indicator flashing, indicator flashing . . .'

The problem was that I had already bought my ticket for New Zealand. I needed to pass this next test. I considered bribes, threats, body doubles; but had to conclude that Simon hadn't looked terribly susceptible to corruption. There was nothing else for it: I had to try, once more, to do a U-turn without falling off the bike. I had to attempt to ride on the road and not on the pavement. I had to remember to turn the indicator off. It was a tough call. Vowing never again to undertake a project so high-risk that I needed to pass an exam before I could embark upon it, I returned to the test centre.

John the instructor, usually a garrulous character, was strangely quiet as we rode there. As we waited for my turn to take to the tarmac, even he was looking faintly green. It was Simon's day off so another examiner took his place. We struck out for the country lanes, traffic-free. After ten minutes or so of winding, rural roads, I was almost enjoying myself. We came into the city, sat in a rush-hour traffic jam for a while, and then it was all over.

'I'm happy to tell you you've passed,' said the examiner.

John's entire, capacious body slumped with relief. I was so elated that I nearly - but not quite - hugged him.

To celebrate, I headed instead to the nearest Dainese kit shop and acquired a suitably fetching set of leathers and boots. I confirmed my rental of a 650cc Suzuki Freewind with Adventure New Zealand Motorcycle Tours on the other side of the globe. Clutching my licence, newly inscribed with a little picture of a motorbike, I packed my bags and boarded the plane.

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Motorbikes are like twitchy, thoroughbred racehorses or large dogs with big teeth: it's not a good idea to let them know that you're scared. They can sniff out fear at a hundred paces. At the merest hint of adrenalin they become frisky, jumpy, and prone to bolt.

When I arrived at Adventure New Zealand Motorcycle's depot just outside Auckland to pick up my motorbike, I was therefore determined to disguise the fact that I was consumed by terror. It wasn't just the bike; I didn't really want Ian and John, the two brothers who owned the company, to know how frightened I was either. I hadn't thought it circumspect to admit to them exactly how inexperienced a motorcyclist I really was. There was something about the way their website proclaimed 'We are fiercely proud of our range of bikes . . . all of our bikes are in as-new, showroom condition' that stopped me letting on that the day I picked up their glorious, gleaming blue-and-silver Suzuki was, well, the first day I'd ridden a

motorbike without L-plates. It was the first time I'd been on the road without an instructor in radio contact telling me how to stay alive. It was the first time I'd ridden a bike anything approaching this big.

I arrived in a taxi; as the driver headed off down the road, I felt my last link with the safe world of four wheels disappear. A man called Paul wheeled out the bike I was to ride for the next few months. I blinked. I let out a tiny squeak. I breathed a little faster. This bike was huge. It was a monster. It looked like the kind of beast that might just take umbrage with a bumbling novice motorcyclist and buck her from this world into the next. How on earth was I meant to build a meaningful relationship with that? It didn't look like a bike that would like to have its clutch gently squeezed or lovingly massaged. It looked like a machine that would be more into, wild animalistic pumping.