

Chapter Twenty

The Lungs of the Gobi

At 154 metres below sea level and at the centre of the second-lowest depression in the world after the Dead Sea, Turpan is the plug at the bottom of the Tarim Basin and uncomfortably hot even in mid-May. The road east follows a narrow valley of unexpectedly lush vineyards squeezed between converging mountain ranges before ascending steeply and levelling out on a barren, dusty plateau. A constant headwind has caused that tiresome ache in my lower back to flare up again and is keeping my speed down to single figures.

‘You have a good spirit,’ the Public Security Bureau (police) officer at the visa section in Turpan had said after I’d turned down his well meant advice to take the bus at least as far as Hami. Clearly enjoying the chance to practise his English, he had warned against heat, lack of food and water, and language problems (all of which hazards I’d successfully overcome during the ten-day ride from Kashgar) but he had never mentioned the wind. There’s nothing quite like a headwind to break your spirit. Klompjes called them *Kutwinds*.*

Just before I left home a thoughtful friend lent me *The Long Walk* by Slavomir Rawicz, a heroic and sometimes appalling account of the author’s escape in 1941 from a prison camp in Siberia and subsequent flight on foot to India. Whether my friend had intended the book to warn or to inspire I’m not entirely sure; only four out of the original party of eight fugitives made it to freedom in India, two of them succumbing to the ravages of thirst, starvation and exhaustion somewhere here in the Gobi, where they were obliged to hunt and eat snakes to survive.

Gobi is a Mongolian word meaning ‘waterless place’. The planet’s northernmost and second-largest desert after the Sahara covers half a million square miles of Northern China and Mongolia, much of it averaging less than three inches of rainfall a year.

*This is *not* the conventional Dutch word for ‘headwinds’.

Beyond India

We were heading into the desert (wrote Rawicz), the extent and character of which we did not know. Had we been fully forewarned of its formidable terrors, we might have made more prudent preparations. The word Gobi was just a word to us. We hardly discussed it. (...) We were striding into the burning wastes of the Gobi waterless and with little food. None of us then knew the hell we were to meet.

A little, but not a great deal better informed, I select a Coke and a mineral water from the fridge outside a village restaurant, where I'm given the inevitable bowl of noodles to eat.

'Where you from?' asks a Han Chinese girl of about fourteen.

'England.' I'm highly impressed by her unexpected fluency. 'Do you learn English at school?'

'Yes, very much!' she replies bashfully, not quite understanding the question.

A group of onlookers inevitably forms and clusters inquisitively around the loaded bicycle. A man picks it up experimentally and immediately drops it with an exclamation. Too heavy for him.

Too heavy for me.

The owner of the restaurant is lounging in an armchair, sagely surveying the quiet, sun-drenched road and the lines of white-tiled, single-storey buildings. Occasionally he fires a question at me and, not understanding a word, I reply with the help of sign language that I'm from *Yingguo* (England) and on my way to Beijing, but he seems happy enough with this explanation. Chickens scratch about in the dust by our feet while his wife snoozes contentedly on a nearby bed. An elderly gentleman sits down at my table and shows me his collection of coins. I think he wants to sell them to me, but I have no idea of their worth so how can I possibly make him an offer? Instead I examine them dutifully and nod appreciatively as I hand each one back.

Reinvigorated, I cycle on into the wind, straining at the pedals and missing Klompjes. She attached her Dutch key ring with its dangling pair of miniature wooden clogs (*klompjes*) to the zip on my bar-bag as a keepsake and the clacking noise they make, particularly when I stand on the pedals and the bicycle leans from side to side, are a constant reminder of her.

During a relaxing two days in Turpan we'd toasted the end of her cycling trip with bottles of chilled Chinese beer, traded emails with absent friends and dined under flashing neon signs at pavement cafés. Soothing female Chinese voices emanated from hidden loudspeakers in pedestrian arcades overhung with grapevine trellises, which were not only attractive but also provided welcome shade from the fierce sunshine in China's hottest city, a major producer of wine and raisins. After replacing the chain and cassette for what I hoped would be the last time, I returned to our room on the eve of my departure to

find Klompjes weeping silently. Ten unforgettable weeks together were about to come to an end. The Dutch Cycling Queen had been splendid, robust company and, humbled and considerably moved by her tears, I held her close. If love had any foundation in logic I'd surely be in love with her.

In the afternoon the wind eases and I manage to pick up some speed. Miniature dust cyclones are dancing across the powdery surface of the desert and a haze all but conceals the rugged brown mountain ranges to either side. Distant rows of poplars denote the presence of an oasis, and chimneys spouting flame and phalanxes of 'nodding donkeys' periodically bear witness to the reserves of oil and gas that lie beneath the sands. The friendly woman at a café in a small oasis town offers to cook me a meal but as I'm not particularly hungry and the wind has dropped, I resolve to carry on for a few more miles and eat out in the desert instead.

As I lay out my Karrimat and sleeping bag an hour later in a culvert beneath the road, weighting them with rocks to prevent them from being blown away, I reflect that the decision to press on wasn't one of my better ones. The sudden return of the wind reduced my speed to a paltry 5 mph for the final half hour of the day and a gale is now howling through the narrow culvert, covering the pages of my diary with sand and preventing me from writing. Had I accepted the woman's offer of food instead of deciding to squeeze some extra mileage out of the day, I could have eaten and written in comfort and probably found a cheap bed in a dormitory. It is impossible to eat without getting sand in my food and I'm concerned by my proximity to a tollbooth. Am I being paranoid in imagining that the police within had binoculars trained upon me as I manhandled the unwieldy bicycle down from the road into the culvert? I can only hope that the possibility that anyone might be daft enough to sleep in one of these places wouldn't have entered their heads, for what I'm doing is almost certainly against the law. When I spit to get some sand out of my mouth the wind carries the gobbet fully fifteen feet before it hits the concrete floor. Can't eat for sand, can't sleep for the wind. Unusually for one accustomed to solitude, I experience a stab of loneliness.

When I wake up at dawn there is sand everywhere. It is in my ears, nostrils and hair, inside the panniers (where it has found its way into the food) and it has stuck to the oil on the brand new chain I put on in Turpan, creating a corrosive grinding-paste certain to induce premature wear. The first job of the day is to change the inner tube in the rear tyre because the valve is faulty and can no longer be relied upon. Next I rummage in the toolbox for the superglue because the blasted trip computer has broken free from its mountings again. Then I eat one of my bananas for breakfast. The skin has split on the other and the sand has infiltrated it, so I throw it away, along with some bread I bought in Turpan that is stale and as hard as a brick.

Beyond India

After an hour of cycling in comparative calm, all hell breaks loose. A howling northerly buffets me from my left, my speed halves, and it is all I can do to stay on the bicycle and avoid being blown off the road. A further half hour of mighty effort yields minimal progress so I opt to shelter in another culvert in the hope that the gale will blow itself out. Deciding that I might as well wait in comfort, I wriggle into my sleeping bag. Listening to the storm outside, I ponder two questions: first, how long will the wind last, and second, how widespread is it? Is it a local phenomenon, an obstacle I can ride my way out of, or is it affecting the whole of Xinjiang, an immense dustbowl as big as Iran? During lulls I wonder whether to make a break for it, but they prove only to be temporary and I spend the time alternately snoozing and reading the copy of *The Lord of the Rings* I bought in Calcutta. I'd already read the book at least half a dozen times, but tales (fictional ones included) of heroic endurance, great suffering and perilous quests have become especially compelling now that I am engaged on my very own quest, and death-defying accounts like *The Long Walk* and Joe Simpson's *Touching The Void* have the advantage moreover of making my own difficulties appear encouragingly trivial by comparison. Reclining inside a culvert in the middle of Chinese Turkestan, I am absorbed by the ghastly fictitious predicament of, well, not a human exactly, but a hobbit.

But nothing of this evil which they had stirred up against them did poor Sam know, except that a fear was growing on him, a menace which he could not see; and such a weight did it become that it was a burden to him to run, and his feet seemed leaden.

Xinjiang shares several topographical features with Tolkein's evil land of Mordor, each being a desert enclosed on three sides (north, west and south) by mountain ranges. I might almost be cycling across the Plateau of Gorgoroth, but unlike Sam's, my mission (although not without risk) is entirely self-imposed and the fate of Middle Earth doesn't depend upon its successful outcome. And unlike Slavomir Rawicz and his friends I am no desperate fugitive from tyranny – dying of hunger or thirst in the Gobi isn't a serious prospect because I can end this ordeal any time I like. I won't pay the ultimate price if I don't in the end make it to Vladivostok and I'll get over the disappointment; I have only my pride to lose by hitching a lift or jumping onto a bus.

I leave the culvert just after midday during a lull which seems to be slightly longer than most, but twenty minutes later the schizophrenic wind picks up again and I have to dismount and walk, for I can no longer control the direction of the bicycle during the unpredictable gusts and on a number of occasions I've almost been blown off the road. Mercifully, I'm not being shot-blasted

and blinded by sand; the desert's surface, resembling an immense gravel pit, consists principally of pebbles, but even so it isn't hard to imagine that the evil genies of Uighur folklore are becoming annoyed by my impudence.

For the next four hours I alternate between riding and walking, stopping at the roadside from time to time in order to rest and eat dry bread and drink water from my bottles. Although riding doubles my speed it is much harder work, and passing lorries suck me towards them in the most alarming fashion before spitting me out again. Like the bottom of those bowls of noodles when I was feeling unwell in the Taklamakan, the horizon never seems to get any closer.

Thank God I'm not sick now.

I had expected headwinds, but never in my worst nightmares did I imagine that they'd reduce me to walking. Spurring me on as I lurch and stumble along as best I can is the thought that the next curve or brow of a hill (not that there are very many of these) might reveal a roadside teahouse or truckstop where I can sit out the storm with food and drink, but on each occasion I have to swallow my disappointment. Apart from a distant range of low, rugged hills on the left there is nothing but empty desert, stretching away in every direction as far as the eye can see. The road has been gradually gaining height for what seems like an age, but when it reaches a sort of low pass and begins a gentle descent through more barren mountains I get back on the bicycle and find that I'm able to increase my speed a little. At length I come to a few isolated, single-storey buildings on the side of the road where I'm able to get food and drink. An effervescent Han Chinese girl who speaks a smattering of English shows me to a small, unpretentious room with a bed in it.

The next day commences with a long descent between the mountains but I am unable to take advantage of gravity in my usual way because unpredictable gusts of intimidating power are threatening to knock me flat. The road eventually levels out and, turning broadside on to the wind, begins its long, slow climb towards another mountain range. Reduced to 5 mph by a hellish crosswind, I plough on, head down, legs pounding the pedals, and consumed by bitter hatred. The wind is by no means the only obstacle I've encountered since leaving home nearly a year ago, but my duels with it have never failed to take on a personal dimension. It is a powerful and fickle adversary, a callous, sly, ruthless and cynical bully, and yet one prey to occasional moods of abstracted largess during which I assume either that it has forgotten about me or that it has other fish to fry (or other cyclists to stew). It reminds me of a manager I once had the misfortune to work with.

A particularly brutal gust blows me off the road and I topple over onto a shallow embankment with my head pointing down and my feet pointing up and the bicycle lying on top of me. The fourth fall of the journey. It's as if I've just been swatted, like a fly, by a giant, invisible hand.

Beyond India

Undamaged, but raging at my antagonist, I pick myself up. ‘You haven’t finished me yet!’

Shouting is a release of pent-up fury, which having accumulated steadily during the past half hour, can no longer be contained. With nobody around to hear me I turn the turbulent air blue with my defiance, but my cries are faint and helpless, like the wailing of an abandoned child in a vast, empty cathedral.

Am I going mad?

I’ll know for sure when I hear the voices calling me from the desert.

The wind is merely amused. The ascent is painfully slow and further gusts threaten to toss the bicycle into the desert and deposit me once more onto my backside. It is having a little fun at my expense, mocking me, making me aware of my frailty like a small boy torturing an insect. At length, feeling as impotent as a mosquito caught in the turbulence of a giant ceiling fan, I decide to halve my speed and walk, if that’s the right word – the clubbing power of each gust is such that I stagger and lurch like a drunk. The climb shows no sign of coming to an end and there are no longer even any bends or brows of hills to instil hope. My destiny is apparently to follow a narrow black ribbon across this infinite, waterless, dun-coloured moonscape until the end of time, a punishment that might have been rejected by the Gods as being too harsh even for Sisyphus.

As I stumble along I consider my options. Slavomir Rawicz and Joe Simpson had stared death in the face and defied it to do its worst, but their brand of heroism isn’t for me and I hope never to find myself forced to make that kind of journey. Whereas their adventures were fuelled by terror, mine is sustained only by considerable pride and a natural stubbornness, and although these qualities have served me admirably thus far, starvation isn’t on the agenda. The first teahouse could be thirty or more miles away and, crucially, I haven’t got enough food or water to last me anything like that distance at the current rate of progress. Thumbing a lift has become justifiable since it is no longer physically possible to ride, but a lift might be a long time in coming as there is little traffic and the infrequently passing lorries are almost always fully laden, with no room for a bicycle. Nevertheless I have little doubt that sooner or later I’ll be able to flag down a vehicle because in Xinjiang, as everywhere else in Asia, I am an object of considerable curiosity. Curiosity nearly drove me insane in India, but here in the Gobi it might save my life.

Heroism must be so much easier in the absence of alternatives. I elect to continue walking but to keep an eye (and an ear) open for lorries travelling east and to wave one down if there appears to be space on board for a man and a bicycle.

A number of fully laden leviathans drone past before a lorry loaded with 45-gallon oil drums stops unbidden just ahead of me. The co-driver, a tall,

lean Chinaman, is offering me a ride. He clammers onto the drums and indicates that I should toss the loaded bicycle up to him, for he has no concept of its weight. With a sensation of mingled relief and regret I detach the panniers and pass them up first, and then the bicycle itself before joining him in the cab.

Buffeted by the wind, the lorry battles its way up the hill in low gear for over half an hour, its engine defiantly propelling twenty tonnes into a gale that had me on my knees. Although I have always been aware that the internal combustion engine is a miraculous invention, never before have I appreciated that fact quite as much as I do now – but then it is greedily slurping on a full tank of diesel and it was lack of food and water that did for me in the end rather than the wind itself.

Communication, as always, is difficult but we do our best. The lorry is going all the way to Lanzhou, which is more than halfway from the border to Beijing, but my objective is still to cycle as much of the route as I possibly can, so Hami, roughly a hundred miles away, will do. The driver makes signs that they'll be stopping there to eat. He and his co-driver are aged thirty-four and thirty respectively and are both Han Chinese from Lanzhou. They drive regularly between Lanzhou and Xinjiang, each round trip taking a week. The driver has a small mobile phone attached to his belt that rings three times during the journey, the boss presumably checking where the load is (something I can't imagine happening in India or Pakistan).

Beyond the mountains the horizons recede once more and a flat, slate-coloured surface of dried mud and gravel stretches away as far as the eye can see. Not a single teahouse or café. I inform my new acquaintances that I too used to drive lorries in England and ask them if I'm riding in a *Dong Feng*, the most common local marque and Chinese for 'East Wind'.

I am.

'Yufredden!' says the co-driver.

Does he mean 'friend'? I shake his hand. 'Thank you!'

He wants my address.

Fine. He can have it when we get to Hami. I'll send them postcards from Beijing or Moscow. They have helped me out of what might have become a very sticky situation.

We eat noodle soup and share a meat and vegetable dish at a truck stop next to a tyre repairer on the far side of Hami. Although my technique has come on in leaps and bounds since that first meal in Tashkurgan when I had to ask for a spoon, I'm still a little self-conscious when using chopsticks in front of the Chinese. I can manipulate them neatly enough, but to them I must still be painfully slow. Sitting hunched over their steaming bowls, shovelling in the food and slurping loudly as they vacuum up their noodles, they are fast and pragmatic eaters, unconstrained by extraneous western interpretations of 'table etiquette' or decorum.

Beyond India

After the meal my bicycle is passed down to me and we exchange addresses, shake hands, and bid each other good-bye. The wind seems either to have forgotten about me or, having demonstrated its power, is content to let me be for a while, and for the next three blissful hours I manage to average a brisk 15 mph before finishing the day under the road in a nice quiet culvert.

The dawn air is cold when the alarm sounds at 6 a.m. I decide to wait for half an hour in the hope that it'll get appreciably warmer when the sun comes up, but it doesn't and I need to relieve myself so I leave the warmth of my sleeping bag with reluctance. Shivering in the chill blast of the wind, I don fleece and jacket and replace my draughty Indian-made trousers with warmer thermal tights from home. It is too cold even to eat; I'll have to get on the bike and generate some warmth first.

The wind is strong and steady, and once more I have to ride directly into it. 'Why don't you take a day off?' I shout at it in frustration.

My morale has taken a beating over the last couple of days. If Beijing still seems a very long way away indeed, Vladivostok might as well be on the moon and I badly need some benign conditions to restore confidence. Starving and weary of the wind's sadism, I manage to beg food and drink at a ramshackle tyre place right in the middle of nowhere. They give me a huge plate loaded with an entire chicken, several potatoes, and a lot of garlic and red chilli peppers. I wash it down with a couple of cans of *Jianlibao*, an orange and honey flavoured fizz for which I've developed a craving in this thirsty place. The price, eighty yuan, is a shock, but worth paying perhaps for the subsequent lifting of my spirits.

The headwind persists, and cruelly, the road begins another long climb across more featureless desert. It's like attempting to cycle through molasses. When I dismount after two more backbreaking hours of attrition for a much-needed rest, leaning the bike against the parapet of another culvert, my average speed for the day has crept up to just over 8 mph.

Why the hell am I doing this?

Hungry once more, I sit down on the parapet and inspect the meagre rations inside the food bag, still full of sand from that stormy first night after I left Turpan. It is wet sand because one of the auxiliary water bottles has obligingly sprung a leak. Discarding the bottle and throwing away the cucumber I bought in Turpan, I turn the bag inside out to empty it of grit, and after attempting to wipe off the grains still clinging to the jars of Marmite and jam, I spread the remains of the jam on two halves of bread-roll and wolf them down with water.

For the rest of the day I mechanically churn out the miles, counting off the kilometres on the stone markers and taking frequent rests to ease my aching back. The wind has eased a little, but before long the road begins to climb

again. By now my crotch and feet have joined my back in the clamour for relief, but a mountain range will have to be crossed before I make it to Xingxingxia, where I hope to get a meal and a bed for the night.

Despite the imminent prospect of even more hard work, I can never bring myself to resent the mountains, not even now that I am drained of energy and aching. Unlike the maverick wind they are never capricious, or spiteful, or disingenuous; marked on maps and usually visible from some way off, they give you every opportunity to avoid them if you so wish and they don't unexpectedly change direction or ambush you or capsize you. What you see is what you get; they are simply there, indifferent rather than hostile, honest adversaries commanding respect rather than hatred. Indeed, finding their beauty and the challenge they represent irresistible, I have deliberately sought them out on several occasions during this journey.

I lie down next to the bicycle on the parapet of a culvert in a state of exhaustion, the blood still racing around veins and arteries and making me tingle from head to toe. Too debilitating to maintain for long, the anger has gone, to be replaced by a sense of wonder at where I am and what I'm doing. At such moments there is no longer any need to ask myself *why*. The sky is a lovely untainted blue and the late afternoon sun is making the rusty mountains glow. Apart from the drone and rattle of the occasional passing lorry, there is nothing to interrupt the desert's awesome hush.

Is this what they mean by Inner Peace? If so, I have found it not in the overcrowded cities or the teeming plains of India, but fleetingly on the lonely roads and in the remote desert and mountain landscapes of Iran, Northern Pakistan and China. Maybe God doesn't speak to us because we are always making too much noise (even in places of worship) to hear Him. If ever I come to acknowledge a divine presence the conversion will come at a moment and in a place like this, surrounded by silence and alone amidst a flawless natural beauty and grandeur that fill me with instinctive humility. My mind is uncluttered and receptive, alive to possibilities, a blank sheet of paper waiting to be filled.

Unlike the Uighurs I find the desert silence peaceful rather than overwhelming, and the knowledge that areas of such isolation still exist in the world is immensely reassuring. Nevertheless their number is steadily diminishing and a nightmare vision suddenly comes to me of the Gobi in a hundred years time, criss-crossed by six-lane highways connecting concrete playgrounds filled with casinos and neon, its silence rent by the hideous sound of wealthy Chinese disporting themselves on virgin sand with trial bikes and dune buggies. The idea is both obscene and sacrilegious, like urinating on an altar or breaking wind beneath the echoing dome of Esfahan's imposing Masjed-e Imam mosque.

I'd love to sleep out in this magical place, cradled by the mountains and



Beyond India

watched over by the stars, but I need food and water and Xingxingxia, where East Turkestan at last ends and Gansu Province begins, is only a matter of six or seven miles away, on the other side of the mountain range. I have become preoccupied solely by the essentials of survival and the simple, all-consuming objective of whittling away, kilometre by kilometre, the distance separating me from my destination. Having shorn life of complications, this extraordinary adventure has engaged me utterly, body and soul, demonstrating the gulf between existing and living. It has given me time to think and the space in which I can be myself. It has restored my pride. It has liberated me from cynicism and purged me of envy, and during those moments when my soul is fleetingly bathed in this fierce, sweet serenity, it has perhaps even brought me closer to God.