

CONTENTS

Prologue	1
PART 1: LONDON TO SYDNEY	
1 Wimpole Street: Early Adventures	7
2 What Becomes of the Broken-hearted: Making Plans	18
3 First Days on the Road: New York to New Mexico	35
4 Pretty Boys and Biker Gangs: New Mexico to California	52
5 Part of Me: New Zealand	63
PART 2: SYDNEY TO MADRAS	
6 Pit Stop in Sydney: Australia	75
7 Surviving the Outback: Sydney to Alice Springs	91
8 Laying Demons to Rest: Alice Springs to Perth	106
9 All is Lost: Bali to Singapore	119
10 It's a Dog's Life: Singapore to India	130
PART 3: MADRAS TO KATHMANDU	
11 Welcome to India!: Madras to Calcutta	155
12 Double Engine, Selfie Start: Calcutta to Kathmandu	170
13 On Top of the World: Nepal	181
PART 4: KATHMANDU TO HOME	
14 From Serenity to Chaos: Kathmandu to Varanasi	195
15 No More Lonely Girl: Agra to Rajasthan	205
16 Through the Storm: Delhi to Srinagar	216
17 Falling Again: Kashmir	229
18 No Exit: New Delhi	240

19	Road to Revolution: Pakistan to Iran	249
20	Bell Helmet For a Burka: Iran to Istanbul	261
21	Home Alone: Turkey to London	275

PART 5: THE AFTERMATH

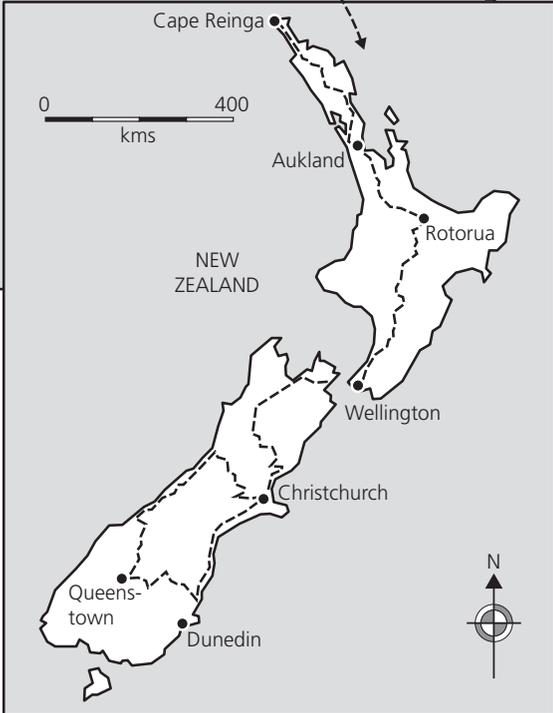
22	All Things Must Pass	287
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	Appendix: Excerpts from my Journal	305
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	Acknowledgements	311
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PART 1

LONDON TO SYDNEY



WIMPOLE STREET:
EARLY ADVENTURES

London, 3 October 1982

The beginning of my great adventure and I was sitting on a bench in a corner of Heathrow airport, face in hands, crying my eyes out. Three hours of tear tracks streaked across my face. After years of dreaming, months of preparation, weeks of longing to be gone, suddenly I knew what it really meant to feel totally alone.

Turn back, I told myself. *It's not too late.*

Go home, a persistent voice in my head insisted, *back to the family and friends who never wanted you to leave.*

I was tempted. So tempted I was giving serious consideration to reversing the events of a day for which I'd spent so long preparing.

Now, almost three years after I bought my BMW, the morning of my departure had finally arrived and all I could think was that I really wished it hadn't. I'd packed my few items of luggage into my mother's rusted, dented VW Polo before standing in the street outside my childhood home, feeling more awkward than thrilled, my parents either side of me as my brother snapped a last momentous picture of us before we crammed into the tiny car.

By the time we arrived at the airport, I was feeling no less apprehensive, only now my parents and brother looked as if they felt the same way. To one side stood Justin, his eyes flickering from departure board to passing passengers to the floor as my father and I racked our brains for something to say while we waited to hear

whether a standby seat was available on the next flight to New York and an uncertain life on the open road.

It's not too late, the voice in my head said again. *You can go back.*

Going back would mean a welcome return into the arms of my mother, who a few minutes earlier had for the last desperate time asked a question that had become a miserable mantra in our house.

'Do you really need to do this?'

I'd said nothing, just nodded as my mother burst into tears, hugged me quickly, then rushed, without a glance back at me, out of the terminal. And out of my life for the next three years, maybe longer.

But going back would also mean capitulating to all the detractors and cynics who had poured scorn on my ambition, including, at their head, Dave Calderwood, the editor of *Bike* magazine. Having sent him a letter and a photograph, I'd hoped for some publicity and advice, but received only mocking male chauvinism in return. Now, as I crouched, crying in the corner of the terminal, reflecting that Calderwood was one of only two correspondents who bothered to answer my many assistance-seeking letters, I wondered if he might have had a point. Maybe, like all the others – the potential sponsors who never replied, the bike manufacturers who shook their heads, the accessory makers who shrugged awkwardly, the shipping companies who patronized me, the officials who rejected my visa applications – he sensed that I was out of my depth.

After all, I was leaving with little more than a vague plan to fly to New York, where I intended to pick up my bike from the docks, ride to my aunt's home in Detroit, then continue west to California, where I hoped to ship my bike to New Zealand or Australia and see where the road took me next.

Apart from buying a standby ticket to New York and packing up my bike for its passage on a cargo ship, I'd done very little preparation, certainly none of the years of research, fund-raising, physical training and logistics planning that I'd noticed other serious travellers had undertaken. I'd spent the previous months working in a pub to amass some savings and when I wasn't working I'd practised repairing my bike using the instructions in a Haynes

manual. That was it. No wonder my friends laughed when I first told them I was going to ride my bike around the world.

In fact, I wasn't even sure why I was doing this trip, other than as a distraction from the heartbreak of being dumped by Alex, the guy I thought was going to be the love of my life. That, and a yearning for some adventure and unpredictability in my life after three years spent in stuffy classrooms studying for an architecture degree, had brought me to this place.

So maybe I shouldn't have been surprised that so few people had any faith in me to complete a journey that few men and even fewer women had ever undertaken. Maybe they were right to point out that a relatively privileged young woman from a comfortable home in the heart of the city was unlikely to survive a week in the outback of third-world roads, back in the days before satellite navigation and electronic communication. Back when even maps were sometimes hard to get.

It was a hell of a time to be having doubts.

I really don't know where I got the idea to ride my bike around the world, but it had been in the back of my mind for years. I think it first occurred to me soon after I learnt to ride a motorbike, which might never have happened if I hadn't been thrown out of school midway through my A-levels. By my mid-teens I had become quite disenchanted by my school and was relieved to be going.

I'd arrived at Roedean, a quintessential all-girls boarding school in a foreboding windswept building at the top of the cliffs on the outskirts of Brighton, shortly after my tenth birthday. Leaving home to start there was such a momentous event in my young life that I cannot remember anything before it, other than that I'd grown up in Finchley, north London, with an older sister, Poppy, and a younger brother, Justin.

My mother, who had studied medicine in Edinburgh in the late 1940s, was a bit of a pioneer in her own quiet way. Very few women were accepted into the medical profession back then and she attained the highest grades, qualifying when she was only twenty-four. Now working as a chest specialist at a nearby hospital, she