

LOVE: FIRST CONNECTION

Uncharted Territory by Nicki Glossop

WILF, 79 years old.

“When’s the last time you rode that old bike?” she says. And I know just where that’s leading.

We’re having breakfast. Two slices of toast and marmalade with a cup of milky coffee for me. Bowl of All-bran, sliced banana, cup of tea for Florrie. Sun’s coming in through the venetian blind and I’m watching the stripes it makes on the table. I’ve not been out on the bike since the heart attack and that’s ... five, five and a half ... maybe six years ...

“You haven’t ridden that bicycle since you had your knee replacement,” says Florrie. “That’s thirteen years ago.” She puts down her spoon and starts to clear the table.

Likes things neat and tidy, does my Florrie. And so do I. I do. We’re not hoarders. Neither of us is a hoarder. We’re the opposite of hoarders. We’ve planned to spend the week doing what Florrie calls a “scale down”. A big clear out is what it is. “Do we want the boys to have to sift through all this old tat when we’re gone?” No, we do not.

So I’m in the garage fitting a new back tyre. I’ve cleaned the frame, lubricated the chain. I’ve greased the gear cogs and checked the brake cable. The pads are still in good nick. There’s a chap coming round later on says he’ll give me two hundred quid for a 1957 Sun Manxman. More than double what I paid for it. Still. It’s not about the money.

The OS map’s in the pannier. Never went out without that! It’s worn to nothing at the folds, held together with sellotape. I get a cushion for my knees and spread it out in front of me on the garage floor. I’ve always loved maps. Full of possibility, aren’t they? All the journeys you could make, all the roads you might go down.

There’s a route marked out in blue biro. I trace the line of it with my finger.

June 1957. I’m seventeen years old. It’s a Saturday morning. Perfect weather for a bike ride! I’m up early. I’ve made myself a round of sandwiches, filled a bottle of water and I’ve nipped out the back door. Mum’s on the front step in her dressing gown. Cup of tea in one hand, cigarette in the other.

I’m on the bike and half way up the road before she’s spotted me.

“Where you off to?”

I put my head down and don't look back. She shouts after me, "Oy, where you going?"

"Aunty Gwen's," I yell. And I keep pedaling, hell for leather, up Stonefield Road. I reach the corner with Manor Drive and can't resist a glance over my shoulder.

That was a mistake. Mum's stood there, frozen in time, face like bloomin thunder.

It's a hundred and sixty mile round trip to Aunty Gwen's house. So, to be fair, it's no wonder she's a bit taken aback.

I power on up East Hill and don't stop for breath til I get to Sunray Avenue. The milkman's doing his rounds there and we get talking. I tell him I'm cycling to Ipswich. "You'll need a bit of sustenance, lad" he says and hands me a pint of milk. I glug it back while he watches. "That'll put hairs on your chest!" he says. I hand him the empty bottle. He won't take anything for it. Says it's on the house. "Make the most of the sunshine," he calls after me, "rain's forecast tomorrow."

I cut across Aberford Park and cycle out along Grantham Road. I go from streets lined with houses to fields and hedges. The air tastes crisp and clean. I breathe deep lungfuls of it.

It's nearly 10 o'clock by the time I reach Bishop's Stortford. I pal up with this lad from Stevenage. David his name is. He's nineteen. Tells me he just got back from National Service in Germany, on the Dutch border. David's heading for a campsite in Harwich. There's hardly anything on the road so we cycle side by side pretty much all the way to the A12 at Marks Tey. We don't talk much but I'm glad of his company. The day gets hotter. We take off our jackets and roll up our shirt sleeves. The sun warms our skin and the sky gets bigger and bigger.

David says there's a good spot for lunch in a field near East Bergholt. It's gone half two by the time we get there and we're both famished! We prop our bikes under a tree and I get out my ham sandwiches. Four neat, pink and white triangles in a Tupperware container. David sits beside me with a hunk of bread, some cheese and a brown paper bag. When he tears open the bag, cherries spill out onto the grass. I think it's the most beautiful lunch I've ever seen. "We can share," he says and hands me a bottle of beer. Double Diamond pale ale. It's warm but I don't care. I take a good long swig. David watches me with a smile. We eat the food and we pass the bottle back and forth til it's empty. Then we lie on our backs, elbows bent, heads resting in our hands and we watch the slow movement of the clouds.

It's unbelievably quiet. I can hear a bird singing in the distance. I can hear my heart beating. And it seems wonderful – it seems incredible - that following a line on a map has led me to this point. Here, now, in this field, lying down beside a boy who I just met. I turn to look at David.

"Why don't you come with me to Harwich?" he says.

I want to say yes. It sounds mad, I know it sounds mad, but right in that moment I want to follow him to the ends of the earth. I want to see the whole world with him! When I open my mouth to speak, the field around us recedes and I'm back on Stonefield Road looking over my shoulder.

I stand up and brush myself down. David rolls onto his back and looks up at me. He's got his hand on his forehead, shading the sun from his eyes.

"I've had a lovely time," I tell him. "But I best get back on track."

"Right you are," he says.

And that was that.

We wheeled our bikes back to the road. David headed off to Harwich and I carried on my way to Ipswich. I got there just in time for tea at Aunty Gwen's. She made a big fuss of me. 'Course she did. I stayed the night. Next day she did a big cooked breakfast and I set off for home. Just outside Colchester the skies opened; it didn't stop raining the whole way. I got back Sunday evening, tired, saddle sore and soaked to the skin. Mum said it served me right and the next time I decided to pull a stunt like that she'd like a bit of warning. But I heard her telling our next door neighbour I'd cycled all the way to Ipswich and back. I think she was secretly a bit proud.

'Course I've been on other bike rides over the years. But that's the only one I've marked on the map.

It was two weeks after that I met a girl in a red skirt at the Telephone Exchange Dance. My Flo, my brown-eyed girl. When I got back from National Service I did the decent thing and asked her to marry me. Got a little two up two down on Derwent Grove. We've three children, six grandchildren. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just what you'd expect, really.

When I stand up my knees are stiff and cold. I fold the map carefully and put it back in the pannier. Smell of baking's wafting in from the kitchen. We usually have a cup of something around half eleven. So I wander in. There's tea and lemon cake, warm from the oven.

"What've you been up to?" says Florrie.

"Been on a bike ride," I tell her.

She laughs. Florrie's got one of those laughs makes you want to laugh with her. You have to join in. I start laughing, can't help it. I laugh and laugh and the tears roll down my cheeks.