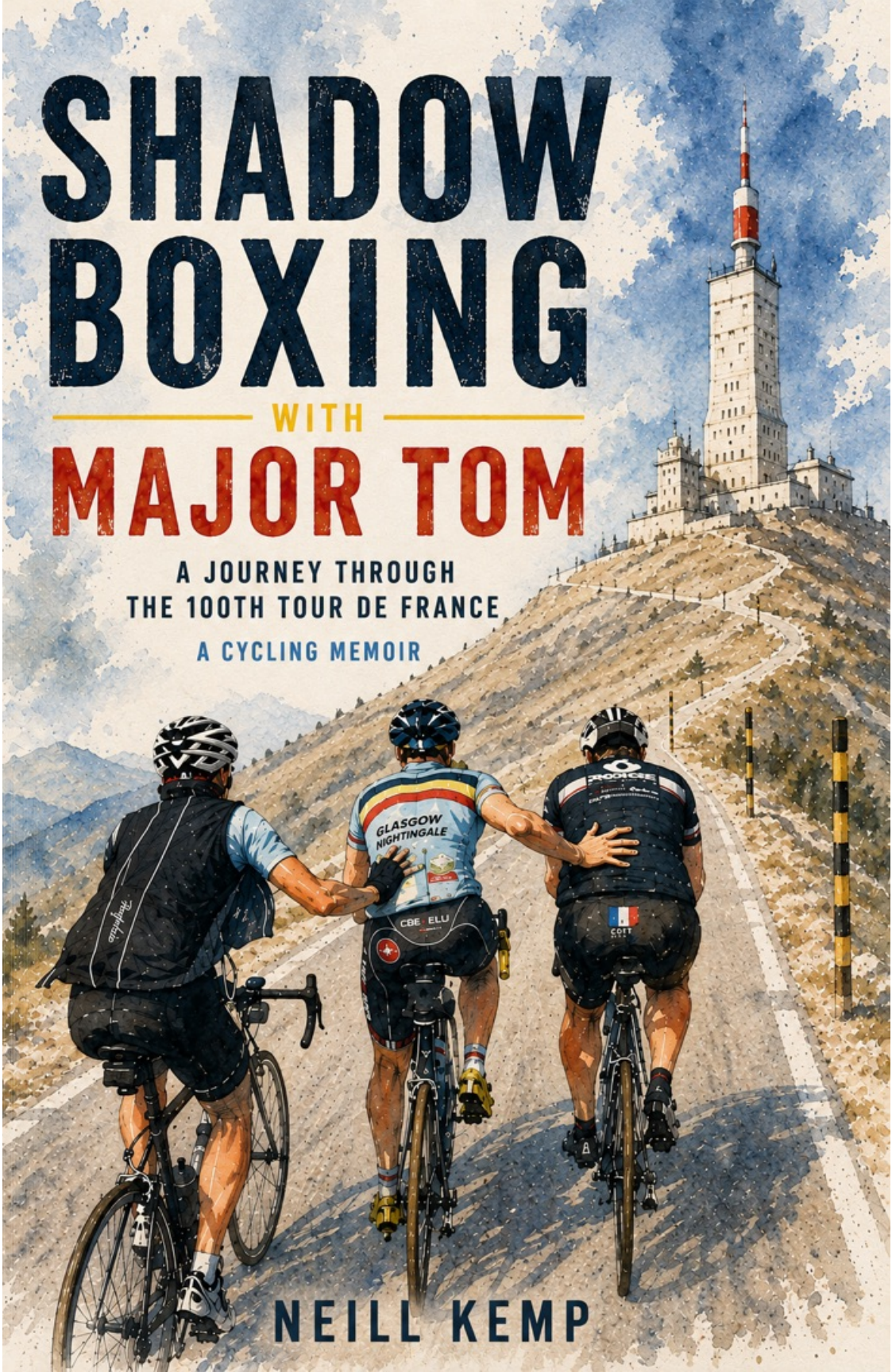
SHADOW BOXING

WITH

MAJOR TOM

A JOURNEY THROUGH
THE 100TH TOUR DE FRANCE

A CYCLING MEMOIR



NEILL KEMP

Welcome

Thank you for picking up this sample of *Shadow Boxing with Major Tom*.

Here is a complete chapter from the book: “The Kemper Van Has Landed”. I hope you enjoy it.

Put the kettle on, grab a biscuit, and come along for the ride.

Neill Kemp

The Kemper Van Has Landed

Mum—should you really be reading this? Surely you have something better to do with your time?

‘I don’t like your jacket.’

That was the rather abrupt welcome I received when I visited my parents recently.

‘Right. Thanks, Mum. Just as well I do. May I enquire as to why you have an issue with my new—and, may I add, very expensive—jacket?’

‘It doesn’t cover your bum.’

‘Right. I’m pretty sure it’s not supposed to.’

‘You’ll get piles. Mind you, the size of your bum, I’m not sure you could have afforded the excess material anyhow.’

That—from my own mother.

Some cheek, as it were.

It’s her fault. A fulsome posterior runs in the family, after all.

Her family.

Unlike most ladies of her age, she doesn’t shop at M&S for her underwear. She prefers Blacks of Greenock. For my sins, I have been blessed with a Bonellie Bum so massive that it comes with its own weather system and gravitational field.

There are two things my mother swears by: a silk vest, regardless of the weather, and a jacket that covers your arse. The cumulative effect will ward off piles—that and never sitting directly on concrete, apparently.

I’m not even sure what piles are.

I certainly know how to avoid getting them, though. A silk vest and a long jacket and you’ll never get the dreaded Emma Freuds. You will also be able to tackle all the vicissitudes of life.

It's all about being warm. In her eyes, if you're warm, you're happy.

And you won't get piles.

As I have written before, my father is not a guy who is quick to temper. In fact, he's not exactly quick to anything these days. He is, by nature, a very calm man.

He had an operation on his back a few years ago and, on occasion, has to take medication for the pain. We are not talking about a couple of paracetamol and a Radox bath here. No, Faither has been prescribed some pretty hardcore painkillers.

Hardcore in the sense that they would tranquillise the angriest of bull elephants.

As a result, he is even more laid-back than he ever was.

Panic is not a response I have ever witnessed in my dad. While most people's reaction to danger might be the typical 'fight or flight' response, his is more likely to consist of a 'wee-sit-down-with-a-cup-of-coffee-and-a-Kit-Kat-whilst-I-find-a-scrap-of-paper-to-work-this-out-now-where-did-I-put-my-glasses…?' response.

And that was when he was a thrusting young buck, with a spring in his step and a twinkle in his eye. Even during those halcyon days, his speed of reaction was more likely to be described as lethargic than electric.

In his dotage, if he were to witness an incident requiring swift action, his reaction time would probably be equal to that of someone reading about it in the paper the following morning—and that is assuming he could find his specs so that he could actually see what he was witnessing.

Many years ago, not long after I had passed my driving test, I was driving Dad home while he was dozing in the passenger seat. I might have been driving a little fast, but I was still within the speed limit.

Turning a corner, I lost control of the car and we started to spin, performing a perfect pirouette. We bounced off the far kerb with the car facing the way we had just come, then bounced across to the other

side of the road, hitting the opposite kerb. The car finally came to rest facing the correct way, with its front wheels up on the grass verge.

I shat myself.

Not literally, although it was a close-run thing.

Not because of the near-death experience, but because of the imminent hiding I was about to receive from Dad.

I turned to look at him and asked, in a tremulous voice a couple of octaves higher than it ought to have been, whether he was okay.

His eyes were only half-open, as though he had just been gently awakened from a slumber rather than narrowly escaped death. The only sign that his equilibrium had been disturbed was that his glasses were perched at something if a rakish angle on the end of his nose, making him look slightly more dishevelled than normal.

He snorted, rubbed his nose with the back of his hand, adjusted his glasses and said simply:

'Probably best not to tell your mother about this.'

He then went back to sleep, leaving me to drive home a mental wreck.

He has never spoken of it since. I sometimes wonder whether he thinks he dreamt it.

I owe my dad a lot. Almost 15 years on, my mother still doesn't know. He has never once cracked, even under the most intense interrogation.

I guess I'll find out soon enough if Ma reads this blog...

Regular readers of these missives will already know that my parents have blown my inheritance on a whimsy. (*Hail to the Chief.)*

Which is just as well, as after this blog I might be disinherited anyway.

They have decided that my suffering up the highest cols of the Alps is too good to miss. They have set their hearts on going on the 'Trip of a Lifetime' and following me around France.

My pain, seemingly, is the main attraction.

I can't say that I am entirely delighted by this prospect but, other than registering my disquiet with the management, there is little I can do.

To this end, they have pawned the family silver—i.e. sold the car—purchased a second-hand van from Japan and had it converted into a campervan.

Now, don't ask me why they had to get a van from Japan. It all sounds a little suss to me.

I raised this as a potential issue with my mother and poo-poohed the whole endeavour. However, my poo-poohing was promptly poo-poohed, and I was informed—rather patronisingly—that this arrangement is *de rigueur* when concluding these types of transactions.

I just won't be surprised if it is all a front for some Triad drug-smuggling ring and the tyres are actually stuffed with Class A narcotics.

What perfect cover: a couple of pensioners in a campervan on the trip of a lifetime, actually smuggling drugs into mainland Europe.

I'm just saying.

However, I digress.

It was some months ago that they ordered the Kemper Van, as it has cunningly been christened.

By me.

I thank you. I'm here all week.

It took a while to be shipped from Japan and arrived only a couple of weeks ago. The internal fit-out has now been completed, following an intense argument over the addition of a heater.

Mother insisted that, even in the south of France in the middle of summer, a heater would be necessary.

I spoke to Dad shortly after the van had been handed over and asked whether he was pleased with it.

‘Well, it’s a lot bigger on the outside than I had thought… and a lot smaller on the inside.’

Hardly the ringing endorsement I had been hoping for.

I asked Mum what she thought of the pop-up roof.

‘Oh, it’s smashing. The grandweans love it. There’s no way I’d sleep up there, though. Far too claustrophobic. And there’s no way your dad could ever get up there on account of his back. The weans love it, though.’

Excellent.

You’ve blown a few grand on a climbing frame with wheels, I thought.

On this occasion, however, I decided to keep my thoughts to myself.

They then took it on its maiden voyage. All was going swimmingly until they reached the dual carriageway outside Dundee.

Mum was barrelling along the A90 towards Perth—rather too fast, by all accounts—while my father, as always when disaster is about to strike, was snoring in the passenger seat.

There was a sudden roar. The cab filled with cold air and the van began to lurch across the carriageway.

Before she had realised what had happened, Mum heard my father unleash a stream of invective the like of which she had never heard before. The soliloquy ended with:

‘The bloody roof has bloody blown off!’

That’s how it was relayed to me.

I’m not convinced that ‘bloody’ was the word used.

My father has an enviable vocabulary and I simply refuse to believe that he used ‘bloody’ twice in the same sentence.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mum noticed Dad leaping, salmon-like, out of and over the back of his seat, displaying a nimbleness and speed of thought that had been singularly absent throughout the previous 40 years of their marriage.

In one movement, he grabbed hold of the roof before it had the chance to separate entirely from the body of the campervan.

There he was left dangling, his feet off the ground, desperately trying to hold on to my inheritance while my mother piloted the van back to safe harbour.

Thankfully, no white powder was released during the internal hurricane.

Mind you, that would explain Dad's sudden burst of speed.

So, the Kemper Van has landed.

However, I'm not sure the portents are altogether encouraging for their voyage.

Thank God they made the decision to get a heater. At least I won't need to worry about them being cold in the 40-degree heat of southern France.

I bet she still packs a silk vest, though.

And God help Dad if he doesn't have some method of covering his arse—or if he sits directly on concrete.

You'll be able to hear the 'telt you' from Mars.

From Glasgow,
21 May 2013

CONTINUE THE JOURNEY

Avoid the Bezos Tax

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Neill Kemp



It began with a biscuit and a spectacularly bad idea.

Could a resolutely ordinary cyclist ride the entire route of the Tour de France-every stage, every mountain and all 3,360 kilometres of it-just one week before the professionals?

In 2013, Neill Kemp decided there was only one way to find out.

From the sun-baked roads of Corsica to the merciless slopes of Mont Ventoux and the legendary hairpins of Alpe d'Huez, Neill battles atrocious weather, troublesome bicycles, rebellious legs and an increasingly tender undercarriage. It is a journey that sees him wrestle polar bears, flee Highland bulls, take on an Ashes-winning Australian cricket team and play starey-ootie with financial ruin. Following in the shadows of cycling's greatest champions-and confronting the haunting legacy of Major Tom Simpson-he discovers friendship, unexpected courage and the peculiar joy of attempting something he had already declared impossible.

Funny, candid and occasionally painful, *Shadow Boxing with Major Tom* is a story of ambition, suffering, self-doubt and the adventures that begin when common sense loses the argument.

You don't have to love cycling to enjoy the journey.

Put the kettle on, grab a biscuit and come along for the ride. Neill promises to do all the suffering.

ALL PROCEEDS FROM THIS BOOK GO TO THE WILLIAM WATES MEMORIAL TRUST.
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