

# Spokes

A feature film by Gavin Boyter

Roger Meadows (35) arrives in Stromness, Orkney to discover that the offshore wind turbine project he was to manage has collapsed. His childhood friend Brian Meadows is also laid off. Brian is a natural engineer forced unnaturally into project management. Roger is an industrial architect with three empty weeks to kill before his next contract begins. They're surprised to see one another, having not spoken properly for years (Roger lives in Sheffield, Brian in Edinburgh) and drunkenly talk about revisiting a childhood dream - cycling from John O'Groats to Land's End.

For Brian this is a no-brainer - he has an expensive touring bike attached to the back of his 4x4. Roger, however, hasn't been on a bike for 15 years but Brian is persuasive. Three days later, Roger having bought an old bike from a local, the two men have their photograph taken by the famous John O'Groats sign. Roger gets out an old Super-8 camera, which Brian goggles at like a stone-age artefact. They set off. The first fifty miles are a breeze, although Roger struggles with the gears while lycra-clad Brian affects Tour de France nonchalance.

Having a pint at a remote Scottish inn, Roger calls his wife Nancy. They argue about her teenage daughter Rose (from a previous marriage). Roger and Rose do not get on and it's created a wedge between Roger and Nancy. Brian knew nothing about this and is surprised. Meanwhile, Brian has received a worrying voicemail from his GP. The test results of a routine heart check-up have come back and Dr Kundra urgently wants Brian to call back. Brian doesn't and says nothing to Roger.

In Inverness, the men experience Highland hospitality - a distillery tour followed by a ceilidh. It's a bad combination for Roger who looks close to death when they set off the next morning. Later Brian persuades Roger to leap naked into a Highland river. His scream can be heard from miles.

Brian suffers some heart palpitations climbing a fearsome hill. When Roger catches up with him he claims it's just a stitch.

The journey continues through stunning Highland scenery. They stop to admire the Bell Rock lighthouse (by nausea-inducing motorboat tour), the Forth Rail Bridge and the Falkirk Wheel. They argue about form versus function. Roger believes the two can be perfectly interlinked. Brian claims that something must be sacrificed: structural perfection necessitates some ugliness.

They reach the Scotland/England border and stop for a picnic, talking about their respective countries and what they love and hate about them. They finish a bottle of whiskey and celebrate the borderline by equally pathetic attempts at the Highland fling and Morris dancing. Later, Brian miscalculates a corner and ends up in a pond.

The next day, Roger, encouraged by Brian, calls his wife. He gets Rose instead and they have a furious row over nothing much until Nancy gets on the line. Roger says

he might drop in on the way down, in a few days' time. Nancy feigns noncommittal disinterest.

In the Pennines Brian springs another surprise on Roger as evening falls - they're spending a night under canvas. Roger argues against it but is beaten down as they're too far from the nearest town. They pitch a two-man tent on the edge of a dramatic crag. Brian spots smoke and hears music. He insists on investigating. Too spooked to remain alone, Roger goes with him. They encounter two female hikers, Bridget and Sandra, who invite them to join them round the campfire. Bridget, an Aussie, takes a shine to Brian's Scottish accent. Roger is gradually drawn out by her friend Sandra, a Geordie.

The men and women dance to music from a portable radio. Roger's trying hard to enjoy himself but Sandra's flirtation makes him uneasy. Over Bridget's shoulder, Brian mouths that it's okay to relax.

Later Brian and Bridget wander off for "a walk" leaving Roger and Sandra alone together. Sandra continues her flirting, which Roger ignores as he tells her about his marital problems. Sandra says she's cold and suggests they should get warm under canvas. Tempted, Roger resists, says goodbye and heads off in the direction of his tent. Only he can't find it so he's forced to return to the campfire until Sandra persuades him to come inside.

Post-coital, Brian and Bridget talk. Brian talks about Roger and worries that he might be pissed off that they've co-opted the tent. Bridget counters that he'll be fine, Sandra will look after him. She suggests that Roger should loosen up and that Sandra's an excellent masseuse. She asks if Roger is married; she didn't see a ring. Brian explains that Roger took it off as his hands were swelling from the cycling but that she needn't worry; Roger is not the adulterous type. Brian's argument does not sound entirely convincing.

Roger, reluctantly at first, receives a leg massage from Sandra. She eventually tells him to turn over. He says he can't. She laughs, realising why - he has an erection. He blurts out 'I'm married' and Sandra admits that she is too, kind of. Her partner, a rock band drummer, has been on tour for three months. Finally Sandra coaxes him over and the massage segues into oral sex. Roger murmurs 'no' unconvincingly but when Sandra makes to stop, he asks her to continue.

The next morning Roger emerges from the tent and bumps into Brian, who begins to apologise. Roger does too, running on automatic. Brian's suspicions are aroused but Roger denies everything. Sandra taps her number into Roger's phone while he films Bridget riding on Brian's handlebars. After saying goodbye, Roger and Brian ride off. A short way down the road Roger erases Sandra's number.

Cycling leafy country lanes, Roger asks Brian about the women in his life. Brian confesses that until the other night it's been six months since he slept with a woman. He explains that he's been in self-inflicted abstinence having made a terrible mistake

at Xmas. Roger's intrigued but Brian tells him he's not ready to reveal the full extent of his idiocy just yet. He tries to make light of it instead, racing off.

In Sheffield, they visit Nancy and Rose. Brian hugs his sister Nancy - there's an easy affection between them despite the fact that he hasn't seen her for years, in sharp contrast to Roger's awkwardness. Nancy and he have a brittle truce in the kitchen until Rose comes home and pointedly ignores him in favour of Uncle Brian. Roger tries to talk to her but she flees upstairs. Nancy follows her and tells her they're all going to go bowling. Rose is unimpressed.

Despite herself, Rose does seem to have fun especially when Roger sends the bowling ball down the gutter for the umpteenth time. When her mother's not looking, Roger lets Rose have a slurp of his beer. Rose and Roger have finally broken the ice.

That night, Roger and his wife make love. It's very different from Roger and Sandra. Next door, in Rose's room, she wraps the pillow round her head so as not to hear their noises. Afterwards, Roger considers telling Nancy about his adultery but finds he cannot. He doesn't want to spoil the mood.

Brian sleeps on a fold-out settee in the living room. He feels a stabbing pain in his chest, sees blood seeping through. Reaching inside he removes a bloody hand from inside his T-shirt. Then he wakes up. He's fallen asleep with a cup of cold tea and spilt it across his T-shirt. Rose appears to steal a beer from the fridge. They have a talk about Roger and Nancy. Rose admits she didn't like Roger at first but she's getting used to him. She doesn't want to make it too easy for him though.

The next day Roger and Nancy go for a walk. Guilt-stricken, Roger confesses his adultery but says that last night clarified the huge difference between sex and making love. Unimpressed, Nancy slaps him and walks away. She won't let him back in the house. Baffled, Brian asks what's up but Nancy won't talk to him either, blaming his influence. The men sheepishly take their leave. Only Rose, waving from an upstairs window, seems sorry to see them go.

While Brian buys provisions in a local shop, Roger answers his phone, which he's left behind. It's Dr Kundra, simply saying that Brian must call back. Roger relays the message and Brian is defensive and awkward. Roger asks if he's going to call back and Brian demurs, saying it's about a check-up he missed. Dr Kundra is probably just angry. He'll call him later.

In Shrewsbury, having visited Thomas Telford's famous Iron Bridge, the men let off a bit of steam with a small-town pub crawl. Brian tells Roger that it's okay if he slept with Sandra. Roger tries to deny the accusation at first before admitting it. Brian is angry and the men argue viciously. Roger stumbles off into some farmland and gets lost. Eventually Brian finds him unconscious under a tree.

At Bristol the friends endure punishing sports massages and then limp around admiring Brunel's Temple Mead railway station and the Clifton Suspension Bridge. Brian takes a call from Dr Kundra and Roger sneaks after him and overhears bits of the conversation. Brian is trying to downplay what seems like a serious condition. Brian eventually hangs up then catches Roger eavesdropping. Roger says they should abandon the trip but Brian won't be dissuaded.

They continue into Devon and Dartmoor. Rain begins to pour down and the men are miles from the nearest town. Brian puts his head down and cycles head on into the driving rain. As the light is fading, gets further and further ahead. Roger, reaching his limit, shouts after him to stop. Brian can't hear him. Roger hits a pothole and topples into a ditch. Dejected, he just lies there, weeping with frustration. Eventually Brian notices his absence and cycles back. Roger swings a punch. It misses. Brian pushes Roger back into the ditch. A pointless tussle ensues. Brian eventually calms Roger down and says he'll pay for dinner and a pint.

The men leave a local bar at last orders and sit on the beach. Brian confesses his affair with a 16 year old girl. He admits the whole experience has made him wary of his lustful impulses. Roger reminds him of the other night. Brian tells Roger he did nothing worse than Roger did. Roger tries to downplay it, saying it was a one-off then asks if Brian's angry. Brian says he would be if he thought Roger would ever do it again. Roger swears he wouldn't, the guilt is eating him up.

They reach the wild coastlines of Cornwall. The men try surfing, Brian with some success, Roger less so. It is a last idyll, overshadowed with darker emotions.

Brian has a small seizure attempting a steep hill just 50 miles from Land's End. He tries to hide it from Roger and rides on. Roger calls Nancy, but she's not answering. He chases after Brian, and then his bike collapses. They are now just a few miles from Land's End but Brian has taken them off-road. Running down the track, Roger sees Brian has collapsed and is having a heart attack. He calls an ambulance, directing it to the Land's End visitor centre. Strapping Brian to his back with bungee ropes, he cycles Brian's bike to the end of the line.

The ambulance arrives and Brian is revived. Before being sent away, he insists on a photo with Roger (on a stretcher trolley attended by paramedics) by the Land's End sign. Roger goes with him in the ambulance.

Later in the hospital, Brian has made a good recovery. Roger is about to show him his Super-8 footage of the trip when Nancy and Rose appear. A fragile truce is formed as the flickering images of the men's exploits play on the wall.