

The Timbuk Two

It was a heart attack that inspired **Eugene Costello** to undertake a long road trip for charity, travelling with a less than compatible companion



With the cooling waters of the Bafing River enveloping me, a fiery African sun overhead and a glorious view of the Manantali Dam a few hundred yards upriver, I was transported by a swoon of relief, pleasure and contentment. I had survived a massive heart attack, driven more than 5,000 miles and passed through five dusty desert border crossings to reach this nirvana – a bougainvillea-clad paradise called Cool Camp Mali.

There was only one cloud on the horizon. On the river's bank I spotted Nick, my driving companion for the past month. We had taken turns at the wheel, slept most nights within inches of each other and fretted collectively over fuel shortages, broken axles and navigational cock-ups. The ambivalence I felt for him when first we met had now matured into unbearable intolerance.

In August, following a week of chest pains on holiday in the Pyrenees, I went straight from Stansted Airport to Bart's Hospital in central London. It turned out I was having a heart attack. Some time the next morning I had a massive coronary. The surgeons carried out an emergency triple bypass but my body shut down and I ended up on life support. After 10 days, thankfully, I recovered, but then had a week or more

of frightening delusions caused by postoperative delirium.

On my release a month later, I resolved to undertake a trip from London to Bamako, Mali, by 4x4 to donate to a local medical charity there – a journey of around four weeks. My partner would be travel writer Nick Redmayne, who I'd never met before...

Nick stayed at my house the night before departure and we set off early on the morning of December 28. We went via my GP's for an 8am appointment with the practice nurse to get my vaccinations. I'm a byword for preparedness.

By the time we reached Newhaven and boarded the ferry to Dieppe, I thought to myself, 'Houston – we have a problem.' I'd realised Nick and I were utterly incompatible, yet had 30 – count 'em – days and nights ahead of us where we would be inseparable for 24 hours a day – including sharing small, cramped rooms at l'Hotel la Fosse des Pouces.

So I found a tucked-away lounge hidden on the upper deck and snuck in there for a snooze, and to ponder how I would survive. Nick won't mind me being honest; he brilliantly and wittily told stories about me several times a day, on everything from running low on diesel to smashing a track rod on a tree stump in the bush in Mali.

From Dieppe, we drove into the

night to Le Mans and were virtually at our 'hotel' when Nick said 'next right' and I turned immediately right. It turned out he meant after this right. It took me onto another motorway and Nick said: "You'll have to continue down here for 27km, then turn back the same way." The last 54km, plus 2km, were done in utter silence. It was going to be a long 30 nights ...

That first night, we were in a Formule One. For those unfamiliar with the concept, it's like a cross between a Swedish prison and the set of Blake's 7, with all fixtures and furnishings being plastic as though there is a button to press to hose the place down rather than waste money on cleaners. Little did we know that our accommodation options would deteriorate significantly from then on.

But, doughty spirits with a mutual dislike of each other, we hardly survived days of driving wordlessly through the Atlas Mountains, the Sahara and Sahel deserts, through Morocco, Western Sahara and Mauritania until we finally made it to the fecundity of Mali, where we once again heard birdsong, and marvelled at mountains, rivers and lakes. It was like being reborn ...

We arrived back to a cold Gatwick on January 25. Nick rushed off to board a National Express coach to Leicester, where his mate was giving him a car. I haven't heard from him since ...

Funding drive

All funds raised are being split between British Heart Foundation and NUJ Extra. To donate, go to **gofundme.com** and search for 'UK to Bamako'.

Eugene is speaking about his trip at the NUJ's London office on March 26.

Tickets are £7 and can be reserved at **<http://tinyurl.com/y246v9zr>**