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## THE BREAKDOWN

It is the middle of the night, and I'm wandering around in the dark, alone on a mountain. It's freezing, but I'm enjoying the silence and the solitude. It is late November 2007. Together with the riders and staff from the cycling team, I'm on a team-building trip in Norway, which has been arranged by BS Christensen – a former soldier with the Danish Special Forces. As he's done for us in the past, he has put together a programme made up of the kinds of tasks that require the participants to work together. And while I'm stomping around in knee-deep snow on the mountain, the others are out on a night mission.

The trip has definitely been good for building camaraderie, morale and motivation within the team, but something is missing: me – as both a person and a leader. Physically, I am there, but mentally it is as though I am somewhere else entirely. I feel lethargic and don't seem to be able to concentrate on anything. When giving the riders my team talks, I feel as though I have plenty to say, but I just can't get the message across. Spending time out on the mountain is giving me the opportunity to try to get my head together and to work out how on earth it has all come to this.

As a rider, I used to spend hours in the saddle on training rides going through any problems I had in my head, coming up with solutions and forming plans to deal with it all. It's that same kind of isolation that I am craving now. The previous few months haven't gone quite as I'd expected them to. It is as though I don't know myself any more. All the happiness and energy seems to have disappeared.

It's only been six months since I stood up and admitted to having doped as a rider. The world had got its admission from me, while I was able to lay to rest the ghost that had haunted me for so long. Or so I thought. The truth is that it still hasn't given me peace of mind. And with every day that has passed since, I've felt more and more drained of energy.

There have been days at home in Switzerland when I have been so tired that all I have wanted to do is sleep, and have only managed to get out of bed once the kids have gone to school. Some days I'd even lie in bed all day, staring up at the ceiling, with the curtains drawn and the lights off. My wife, Anne Dorthe, would take care of everything that needed doing, like looking after the kids and running the house. But one day she'd had enough, and came storming into the darkened room. "Right – I think it's time you came out of here now. You've been lying in here for four days in a row. The rest of us live here with you too, you know," she said.

When I finally managed to pull myself out of bed to go into the office, I just sat in front of the computer. It didn't help at all – I just couldn't be bothered with anything. It felt like I had tunnel vision, and that the tunnel was getting narrower and narrower.

One evening in particular made me feel that I had finally lost it. I was in Denmark doing a talk for the managers at electronics company Siemens. I'd gone over my notes before starting my speech, but completely fell apart once I got up to talk. My thoughts were all over the place, and I couldn't remember anything that I'd written down. What actually came out wasn't very coherent at all. The speech was an absolute disaster. I was annoyed with myself for not being able to express myself properly, despite having prepared and written everything down beforehand. As I left, all I could think was, "What the hell is wrong with me?"

My team press officer, Brian Nygaard, could tell that something was up. He rang one day to discuss a few things, but then asked me, "How are you really feeling, Bjarne?"

"Okay," I replied.

"It just seems to me like you've been going through a hard time lately," he said.

His concern somehow pressed the right buttons, and suddenly

I couldn't hold back my feelings, or the tears, any more. "It has been hard," was all I was able to get out before I started crying. Hard to have to admit that I was wrong when I'd thought that admitting to my doping past would make everything all right. Deep down, I'd perhaps thought that coming clean would bring some sort of relief and closure, but instead I'd been left feeling as though it had just made things even worse.

Out there in the dark on that mountain in Norway, something didn't really feel right. I hoped that it was just the result of sheer exhaustion from BS's training programme. I felt a bit better the next morning, and gave Anne Dorthe a call back home.

"I'm not really feeling too great," I said, and told her about my night on the mountain.

"It sounds as though you're overly stressed. You've had a hard time lately," she said.

Maybe she was right, but if anyone wasn't going to admit to that being the case, it was me. Instead, what I needed to do was to get through to the end of this team-building trip in one piece.

On the last day, I stood up and made a farewell speech, during which I tried to appear inspirational and on top of things. Afterwards, I asked Brian how he thought it had gone.

"To be honest, although the trip has been great, your talk just then wasn't that fantastic," he replied.

That wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear, but we both knew that he was right.

"It's probably fair to say that you've never really been the sort of person who makes a big song and dance about things," he told me, "but you have always been able to motivate us all and give us the belief that we can go out there and have a fantastic season. That's what was missing this time.

"But listen," he continued. "You've always been able to bounce back from things. And there are not that many people out there who are capable of doing that. Maybe you just need to take a bit of time off, and then you'll come back feeling much better."

And with that, I headed back home to Switzerland, to where Anne Dorthe and the children were waiting for me.

In the days that followed, I tried to get hold of my dad, Preben.

He was looking after our other house back in Vejle, in Denmark, and was living in the house's annex, taking care of our dog, Oscar. Dad had always been the one constant in my life. It was with him that I had lived growing up, and it was him that I took after. He had lived a hard life, and it had taken its toll. But now, at 68, he could live a nice, peaceful life in Vejle. He'd look after our house and take care of the gardening for us, and just generally help to keep things in order. We might not have ever really spoken that much to each other, but then we didn't really need to: we were more than comfortable in each other's company and understood each other perfectly. He had always supported me and always trusted me to make my own decisions, and never judged me on those decisions, either in my private life or in my career. We'd talk regularly on the phone, although they weren't exactly deep and meaningful conversations. They were more chats that just showed that we were thinking of each other, and supported each other, keeping up with what each of us was up to. But this time, after finding that his phone was turned off for three days in a row while trying to call him, I was worried.

Anne Dorthe's dad, Peder, needed to go by the house to do something, so we asked him to make sure that my dad was all right. It felt like a long day, waiting for Peder to call us. He rang that evening, just as he was arriving at the house. He got out of his car, had a walk around the house, and looked in through the windows, but could see no sign of my dad, even though his car was there in the driveway.

"There's no one here," Peder told us.

"You'd better have another look," I said.

I stayed on the phone as he went and had a look through the windows of the annex.

"Oscar's here," he said.

I could immediately tell that something was wrong.

"You'll have to break in through the door," I told him.

The phone went silent while Peder tried to open the door.

And then he spoke again: "Your dad's lying on the floor."

He was dead.

"This can't be happening," I just about managed to say before breaking down in tears.

Dad had died from either a blood clot or a heart attack, and had collapsed in the kitchen. He had probably been there for a number of days while poor Oscar had wandered around wondering what the matter was.

Despite being more than 40 years old, I had never lost anyone close to me. I had never even been to a funeral, and yet suddenly there I was having lost the person who had had the biggest influence on my life. It's only when you lose someone so close to you that you truly realise just how much they meant to you. All of a sudden, I missed my dad so much that I could hardly bear it. It was just too much. I couldn't believe that I was never going to be able to speak to him again. There were just so many things that we hadn't finished talking about, things that we needed to still clear up. I just wasn't ready for this to happen.

Early the next morning, Anne Dorthe and I went back to Denmark. I hoped that, somehow, it was all just a bad dream, and that I'd soon wake up. On our way there, I realised that my dad may well have died on the same night that I was out on that mountain during the team-building trip in Norway. When we arrived at the house in Vejle, I couldn't bring myself to go to the annex. Oscar was being looked after by some friends as he wasn't in great shape after having gone so many days without food.

The thought of Oscar caused me to conjure up images of the last few minutes of my dad's life, and how poor Oscar must have felt, trapped inside for days without anything to eat or drink, with the body of someone he loved so much lying there on the floor. It was too much to bear thinking about, and I had to force myself not to.

My brother, Flemming, who lived in Jutland, in the west of Denmark, arrived at the house, and together we tried to help each other come to terms with what had happened. He had seen my dad's body, but I wasn't sure whether I wanted to, to say goodbye before the funeral. "If you're not sure that you want to, then don't," Flemming told me. "That way, you'll remember him as he was, not as he is now."

The sheer pain and sorrow of it all affected me physically. I felt tense, exhausted and my stomach was in knots at the thought of all the things that had never really been resolved between us.

When you've lived the life of a professional sportsman, with people watching your every move, looking for any little sign that you've pushed yourself too hard, then you know yourself how it feels to be so close to completely breaking down. That's how it felt for me while I was still at the house in Vejle. I was close to breaking point. It felt like I was barely functioning, and as though I'd been like that for a number of months. It was a constant battle to hold back the tears. I really wanted to say a few words at the funeral, but really wasn't sure whether I'd be able to do it without breaking down and crying. I decided to call my physiotherapist friend, Ole Kåre Føli. After talking for less than a minute, he could hear how bad things were. "I'm on my way," was all he said.

When he arrived at the house a couple of hours later, he set up his treatment table in the living room. We didn't say much to each other, but that was because we knew each other so well; we simply didn't need to say anything. After so many years of treatment, Ole knew everything about me and how I functioned, and after just a few prods and pushes, my body started to react. All those feelings I thought were hidden away, all of life's frustrations, all the pain I'd felt as a result of my dad's death – it all started to come out and, lying there on that treatment table, I cried and cried. But neither Ole, nor I, was finished. He put his hand on one of my knees, and gently held on.

"I'm freezing," I said, but his hand glowed with warmth.

As Ole continued to hold on, I broke down. "Let it out," he whispered, seemingly knowing what was to come.

My whole body cramped up, and I was completely out of control for almost a quarter of an hour, just sobbing. All my worries, pain and stress, which had built up and hidden itself away inside me, came out. My 15-year-old son, Thomas, was there with us in the living room. He sat completely still, but was clearly shocked at the sight of seeing me in that state.

"It's all been too much," said Ole. "You were on the brink of a nervous breakdown."

He and Thomas left me alone to recover and, while lying there on the treatment table, it suddenly seemed very clear what I wanted to say in the church at my dad's funeral – a way I could properly say goodbye to him.

In the few hours following Ole's treatment, I realised that I had just been living my life without ever confronting those things that needed to be confronted. For what felt like the first time in a long time, I felt calm and relaxed, and as though I was in control again. For months I had felt as though I wasn't in command of what was going on in my life – that other people were steering things, and at a pace I couldn't keep up with. It had felt like being a guest in my own life. But Ole's treatment was like flicking a switch. He'd switched off the immense pressure I'd been feeling, both in body and mind.

The day after Ole's visit, I was back to feeling on top of things, and felt that I could cope better with having to say goodbye to Dad. I needed to clear his things out of the annex and clean it. Up until then, I hadn't felt strong enough to go and see where he had died but, together with my sons, Jesper and Thomas, we went to the annex and let ourselves in. Every step inside was difficult to take, but having my sons there with me was a great help.

One of the first things we saw was a dried pool of blood on the floor in the kitchen, where Dad had collapsed. The sight of the blood was painful, reminding me that he had died in such lonely and undignified circumstances. No one deserves that. Thomas and Jesper could tell that this was hard for me, and that I might not be able to cope with clearing up. "We need to do this, Dad," they assured me.

Despite my sadness, I was very proud of them at that moment – that at such a young age they could stick with their decision to help their dad when he needed them most.

Silently, we got on with boxing up Dad's things, but every time we took a box outside, we had to go past the pool of blood. It was unbearable to think about how he had spent the last few minutes of his life. When I found his scrapbooks full of newspaper and magazine articles about my career as both a rider and a team manager that he'd cut out, it really hit me hard. He'd painstakingly cut them all out and glued them into the books in chronological order. He had been my biggest fan, following everything I did in cycling. He videoed everything I was involved in on television, too – the proud father, all the way to the end. He'd always defended

me, always stood up for me, whenever people criticised me or judged me – again, all the way to the end.

Clearing up the annex got me thinking even more about all the complicated feelings we'd had for each other. He had always done everything for me, always been there for me and looked after me, but the big question I asked myself was whether I had looked after him enough. He had lived a hard life, and that was mostly because he'd spent most of it trying to help others rather than himself.

When I married my ex-wife Mette in October 1989, my dad had struggled to get up and make a speech. That kind of thing really wasn't easy for him. The next day, Mette and I sat with her parents watching the wedding video, which included the speeches. Watching my dad's speech again, it was pretty clear that it was difficult for him to get the words out. But, showing off, I decided to commentate as we watched. "Come on, Dad – you can do it," I said as he struggled through it.

Mette's dad, Jørgen, however, wasn't impressed by my sarcasm.

"Don't make fun of your father, Bjarne," he told me. "It wasn't easy for him to do that, yet he did it for your sake. Think of everything he's gone through in life. Just because you've had it easy, it doesn't mean you can make fun of other people."

He'd certainly told me, and I felt highly ashamed. I'd only meant what I said for a bit of fun, but maybe there was something in what Jørgen had said. Maybe I'd not shown my dad enough respect, especially not to a man who had always done everything for me. It had been embarrassing for me that Mette's dad had felt he needed to say what he thought to his new son-in-law, but it had also served to remind me that I needed to show a lot more respect, thanks and care towards my own father.

"I think we're almost there," I heard Jesper and Thomas say to me, waking me from my thoughts.

We'd managed to clear up the annex, but it was mostly thanks to the boys, as I really hadn't been a great deal of help.

At my dad's funeral, I stood next to his coffin with his old stopwatch in my hand. That stopwatch had served him well during all the hours he'd spent training with me as a boy and a teenager.

"My dad always thought of others before himself," I said during

my speech. “I have a huge amount of respect for that, and think that it’s something the rest of us can all learn from.”

Everything went as my dad would have wanted it. Everyone whose lives he had touched, and who had appreciated the part he’d played in their lives, was there.

Later that evening, I went up to the annex alone to say my own goodbye. I imagined myself lifting his body up off the floor and taking him out into the garden – a place where he’d spent so much of his time, pottering about, getting stuff done. With its view out to the fjord – a place where you would catch glimpses of wild deer who, like Dad, would come to enjoy the quiet and stillness of the place – it was here that his soul would be buried.

And now, I decided, it was time for me to grab hold of life with both hands, and live it with the same values that my father had taught me. From now on, it was going to be easier for me to really be myself than it had been so far.