

LAND OF SECOND CHANCES

THE IMPOSSIBLE RISE OF
RWANDA'S CYCLING TEAM

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Boulder, Colorado

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PROLOGUE

A LONG RIDE

“You can’t know where you’re going unless you know where you’ve come from.”

– RWANDAN PROVERB

There had been a lot of odd moments in Adrien Niyonshuti’s life recently. Most of them started when a group of Americans arrived in Rwanda in 2006 and put on a bicycle race in September. Adrien won and, as his prize, was allowed to keep the mountain bike he had borrowed from the visitors for the event. It was a Schwinn, nothing special by Western standards, which meant it was exponentially more advanced than anything that little, landlocked Rwanda—about the size of Massachusetts, but with twice as many inhabitants—had ever seen. He actually didn’t ride it very much. He was nineteen years old, and no one else in the country had a mountain bike, so it was dull riding on his own. But the bike was definitely the start of something.

From this point on, new experiences started arriving rapidly for Adrien. Not long after, he flew on an airplane for the first time. In South Africa, he slept on a bed between sheets after a couple of nights of just lying on the top because he did not dare to disturb them. He learned to use flush toilets,

again after some initial confusion. He raced on his road bike against Lance Armstrong. He saw snow for the first time, high in the Colorado Rockies.

But, for those who have followed Adrien's life for a few years, one Friday lunchtime in London in August 2012 set a new bar for incongruity. The Criterion Theatre, a Victorian-era West End playhouse that usually hosts a long-running production of *The 39 Steps*, had been commandeered for a salon called "When Clive Met Adrien." Adrien was Adrien, who in exactly forty-eight hours would become the first Rwandan to compete in the men's mountain bike event at the Olympic Games. Clive was Clive Owen, the glowering British film star who had a Golden Globe and a BAFTA award on his shelves at home.

Adrien knew next to nothing about Clive, but it quickly emerged that Clive knew pretty much everything about Adrien. The actor strode on stage, wearing a crisp slate-grey suit and open-necked shirt, and immediately broached the question we'd all been chewing on: What was the guy from *Closer and Children of Men* doing hosting a talk with a Rwandan cyclist? He was, he explained, an ambassador for the Aegis Trust, a UK-based charity that raises awareness of genocide and has particularly strong links with Rwanda. More than that, though: Clive was a sports fan.

"There are thousands of athletes who have come here to compete in the Olympic Games, and all of them will have extraordinary stories of dedication and commitment to their sport," he said, glancing at diligently prepared notes. "But I really think that Adrien Niyonshuti's story is one of the most extraordinary."

Adrien was seven years old during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, when at least 800,000 of his compatriots—one in ten of the population—were slaughtered in a hundred days. He escaped death only by running and hiding from the Hutu mobs that were assigned to kill every last Tutsi. Sixty members of his family, including six of his siblings, were brutally hacked down in those three months.

But now, just two days before the biggest moment of Adrien's life, wasn't the time to dwell on those tales of horror. The week before, Adrien had carried his country's flag at the London 2012 opening ceremony, nervously but proudly leading a delegation of seven athletes. And, as he often said, one of his dreams was that cycling would finally give the world a reference point for Rwanda that was not the genocide.

Adrien joined Clive on the stage. He was a quiet, gentle presence, and he walked stiffly, as though he had forgotten to remove the coat hanger from his clothes. He was not quite five and a half feet tall and slim, full of sharp angles. His hair was shaved to a stubble, as Rwandan men invariably have it, and he had finely drawn features with precipitous cheekbones. He wore a Team Rwanda sleeveless jacket in the national colors of sky blue, green, and yellow; black tracksuit trousers; and running shoes. He didn't look out at the audience as he took his seat.

Adrien's voice was soft, and he spoke rapidly; the audience leaned forward as one to catch what he said. He ran through the creation of Team Rwanda, the racing squad that had been formed not long after he had won that first race in 2006. It started with five riders but in five years had grown to nearly twenty; the country now had its own professional road race, the weeklong Tour of Rwanda; and Rwanda had become one of the strongest cycling nations in all of Africa. The inspiration for the project initially had come from a Californian named Tom Ritchey, one of the inventors of the mountain bike back in the mid-1970s. It had then been taken on and knocked into shape by a former professional road racer named Jonathan Boyer—"Jock" to all who knew him—who in the early 1980s had become the first American to ride the Tour de France. Both men had complicated—some would say compromised—reasons for becoming involved in Rwanda.

Adrien first heard of the Olympics in 2007, when he was twenty years old and just starting out as a bike racer. "I asked Jock, 'What means the

Olympics?” he said. Few Rwandans had a television, and there was only one station, but the following year he managed to find a screen and watched the opening ceremony from Beijing and some of the events. Adrien half smiled. “I say, ‘One day I’d like to be there.’”

He spent two years training, pushing, fixating on his goal. He found out that there were three cycling events for which he could qualify: the men’s individual time trial, the road race, and the cross-country mountain bike race. His first opportunity came in the African Continental Championships in November 2010, which doubled as a selection competition for the Olympics. By coincidence, the event was being staged in Kigali, the capital city of Rwanda, and the time trial course was an undulating twenty-mile loop around streets that Adrien used to ride on to get to his secondary school. He was competing against the best riders in Africa—the top guys from South Africa, the champion from the unlikely cycling powerhouse of Eritrea, a Namibian contracted to a team in Europe; riders from twenty countries in all. The racers set off one by one, riding alone against the stopwatch. Adrien knew that a top-three finish would send him to London. He came in fourth. He shrugged: “The rider from Algeria beat me by one second.” Adrien was exaggerating; in fact, it was only 0.11 of a second.

The next opportunity came in the road race qualification two days later. Over a hundred African riders lined up in Kigali, the range of abilities and equipment quite something to behold, from the sleek titanium bicycles of the leading contenders to the jalopies of the riders from Burundi, which were held together by wire, tape, and prayers. Before the start, a minute’s silence was observed to commemorate the death of a Rwandan boy who had wandered onto the road in front of the Ivory Coast team car. Then the competitors were off for fourteen laps of a seven-mile circuit, knowing again that the top three riders would book their tickets to London.

Everyone knew this was Adrien's best chance. Weighing just sixty-eight kilograms—about 150 pounds—he was not really built for a sustained power effort like the time trial, and his inexperience on a mountain bike would be a daunting handicap in that discipline. On a road bike, however, he was smooth and powerful, and his capacity for self-punishment when the going was really tough had become legendary. He started well, and when a group of twelve favorites broke clear after ten laps he was perfectly placed among them. Then, suddenly, as he attempted to attack on a steep slope, he stood on his pedals and his chain broke. It didn't just slip off; it shattered. It was inexplicable: Cyclists could ride for years, a lifetime even, without this fate befalling them. For it to happen in the most important race of Adrien's life was freakishly unlucky.

His rivals disappeared into the distance, and Adrien stood on the side of the road, hopping from leg to leg as if he needed to pee, waiting for one of his Rwandan teammates to catch up. A minute passed, then ninety seconds—it felt like hours, he said afterward—and finally he switched bikes. His new ride wasn't the right size, but he adjusted the seat with a wrench as he pedaled, and he raced wildly, impulsively, to make up lost time. It was to no avail: He finished eighth, exactly one minute, thirty-one seconds behind the winner, the Eritrean champion Daniel Teklehaimanot.

As Adrien told this story, there were audible gasps in the theater despite the fact that it was in London and he was in London; we all knew there was a happy ending to this part of the story. Still, somehow, his dream remained an outrageous long shot.

It was actually two weeks after this pair of disappointments that I met Adrien for the first time, during the 2010 Tour of Rwanda. He explained that his last chance to qualify for the London Olympics was the African Continental Championships for mountain biking in Stellenbosch, South Africa, in February 2011. At the time, I mistook his quietness for lack of

confidence, even vulnerability. I wouldn't have bet someone else's money on his making it. But the more time I spent with Adrien, the more I appreciated his resilience. He neither got too high when the going was good nor too low when it wasn't, which had presumably been a useful trait throughout his life.

In Stellenbosch, the first three nationalities, rather than just the first three riders, would be allocated places in the Olympics. In the days before, Adrien, a devout Muslim, spent a lot of time in prayer. "I say, 'God, you know everything, tell me what to do,'" he recalled. Race day itself was almost anticlimactic after what he had been through before. He rode hard, there were no mechanical dramas, and he finished fourth behind two South Africans and a Namibian. "You did it!" exclaimed Clive Owen. Impromptu cheers filled the auditorium.

During the question-and-answer session, conversation turned to the race on Sunday; one woman asked Adrien if he thought he might win a medal. "My goal for this Olympics is to finish the race," he replied. Everyone laughed, but for the first time Adrien looked out into the stage lights, confused. He was serious.

To the Western audience, there was something unsatisfying, even defeatist, about this modest goal. Adrien's story was a fairy tale, after all, the kind that only the Olympics could produce, and it demanded an iconic ending. Adrien's answer was partly a statement of uncompromising fact: Mountain bike races are run on short loops of a track barely wider than a set of handlebars; if a competitor lags far behind the leaders, the organizers do not hesitate to yank him off the course.

But Adrien's response revealed much about the psyche of his nation, too. Nearly two decades after the genocide, Rwanda was still synonymous with death. That was often the only thing that anyone on the outside knew. Geographically, the country was a tiny pebble dropped on the

equator in the center of Africa, the continent that the rest of the world finds easiest to ignore. Adrien's homeland had not been blessed with natural resources, which had made it even less essential to external interests. It didn't produce iconic writers, musicians, or sportspeople. Rwanda was, in short, a land desperate for heroes. It craved a new identity.

Adrien could not be blamed for being cautious. Experience told him that success did not come easily to people from Rwanda. But the country was also changing faster than anyone believed possible, and Adrien had become a conspicuous part of that change. From being ranked by the World Bank as the poorest country on earth after the genocide, Rwanda was refashioning itself under its ambitious leader, President Paul Kagame, as a progressive, middle-income hub determined to work its way out of poverty. It would be an African gorilla to take on those Asian tigers. These developments were driven by an unwavering faith in technology and a twenty-first-century belief in entrepreneurialism, the Internet, and environmentalism.

Rwanda was not just embracing whiz-bang developments; public resources, including aid money, had been effectively directed toward providing services, reducing inequality, and keeping corruption low. In 2012, the World Bank returned to Rwanda and found that in the previous five years a million of its eleven million citizens—one in five of those considered “poor”—had been lifted out of poverty. Paul Collier, an economist who is the director of the Centre for the Study of African Economies at Oxford University, noted, “This rate of poverty reduction is the fastest ever achieved in Africa and equals the best achieved globally.”

But while the country had started to buzz with talk of biotech investments and Java programming, there was one object, more than any other, that encapsulated Rwanda's past, present, and future. It had a long history in the country, from the colonial days onward, but also retained a dynamic modern relevance. It symbolized hope, unity, and prosperity for

many; it represented progress, though not fast enough for some people's tastes, and often favored men more than women. Still, its fortunes mirrored Rwanda's own; its story shone a light on the lives of all its citizens. It was the bicycle.